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A Cross Section in Time: Transitions [Forum]

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The year is 1779. The thriving colonial village of Bellhaven is incorporating as the town of Alexandria. Streets in a simple grid are alive with activity and from an amorphous tidal river. In the new order emerging after the storm of the revolution, ambitious and enveloping new capital will be conceived in the safety of the marshy confluence upstream. L’Enfant, his visionary plan palpably near, shares with Jefferson an inkling of the burgeoning giant’s continental horizons and history to come.

In Paris, the message of Voltaire and Rousseau has caught up with the ancient regime. The Louis, left behind by the monarchy for safer Versailles, stands grandly complete in its second stylistic iteration. Sainte-Chapelle is a five-hundred-year-old delight. Much grand urbanism has shaped this city: the Marais district is a mash fully transformed; the Place de Vosges is an established, accomplished residential square. The river, flowing around ancient Roman beginnings under lle de la Cite, convects and separates a mature metropolis of half a million on the threshold of a great upheaval.

Across the Atlantic, the ruins of an equally sized city on Lake Texcoco have, for two cruel centuries, provided building materials and foundations for an expansive new capital emerging in a foreign-language and European mold. The Catedral Metropolitana, begun in 1570, rises ambitiously atop still-luquayent soils. We are in the golden age of Baroque architecture in the center of New Spain. Though events of North America and France will soon disrupt the world of the Spanish Bourbons as well, the colonial empire’s northern strongholds still extend to California and Florida.

Only forty kilometers away from bustling Mexico City, Teotihuacan is nevertheless stunningly removed from the world of change. The Pyramids of the Sun and of the Moon stand splendid and immutable over the great expanse of this ancient and ultimate grand axis: the Avenue of the Dead, immense, monumental and dry. Created under a harsh order and by half a millennium of unthinkable toil, they have been strangely deserted for a thousand years.