TAPACHULA, MEXICO—Kneeling in the cacao tree–shaded ruins of a 2000-year-old house, Rebecca Mendelsohn carefully scrapes soil off the fractured edge of a red ceramic plate and into a plastic bag. The archaeology graduate student from the University at Albany, State University of New York (SUNY), will bring hundreds of such samples to a lab in the mountain city of San Cristóbal de las Casas, where she will analyze them for traces of the food that the mysterious residents of Izapa, one of Mesoamerica’s earliest cities, prepared and ate.

Izapa, 10 kilometers outside of the modern city of Tapachula in the Soconusco region of Chiapas state, arose around 850 B.C.E., possibly as people moved north from the Guatemalan coast to take advantage of a better climate for growing maize. Over at least the next 800 years, Izapa became the major economic and cultural hub along a trade route linking Olmec cities of the Gulf Coast and Maya strongholds in Central America.

Why Izapa flowered and who its inhabitants were are riddles that Mendelsohn hopes to solve from the bottom up. By excavating in several places around Izapa’s periphery, she aims to compare the jobs, possessions, diet, and economic well-being of the city’s residents, and how those patterns changed over time. And by plotting that information on a map that she and her adviser, Robert Rosenswig, created by surveying the site with an airborne laser, Mendelsohn hopes to uncover something that past archaeologists never expected to find in the region’s ancient settlements: neighborhoods.

Turning pyramids and deciphering cryptic writing systems have helped archaeologists piece together the political, cultural, and religious characteristics of many Mesoamerican civilizations. But ceremonial architecture and official records may not reveal how societies actually work. “Tell me what the normal people were doing,” Mendelsohn says. “That won’t be on your monuments.” Mapping lost neighborhoods can help archaeologists see an ancient city through the eyes of its residents, rather than through its leaders. What Mendelsohn and others are discovering through their

Beyond the Temples
Turning their backs on spectacular monuments, archaeologists are studying ordinary households to uncover the daily rhythms of long-lost cities
Heart of the city. Mexico’s Teotihuacan had distinct neighborhoods outside its majestic downtown.

But many other settlements in the ancient world don’t fit the high-density, modern sense of a city. The Maya capitals Tikal and Copán, for example, were long thought to consist of unoccupied temples and administrative buildings surrounded by a haphazard smattering of villages spread across vast swaths of landscape. But as archaeologists studied sprawling ancient cities in Africa and in Southeast Asia, including Cambodia’s Angkor Wat, they developed a concept of low-density urbanism, which defines a city not by size or density, but by what Smith calls its “urban function”: the economic, political, or religious effect it has on a hinterland, or what is today known as a metropolitan area. A city, in other words, casts a spell over an entire region.

This idea raised a tantalizing possibility for Mayanists and other Mesoamerican archaeologists working at sites other than Teotihuacan: What if the landscape around a ceremonial center were not wasteland, but hinterland? What if the clusters of households weren’t independent, self-governing villages, but rather interconnected nodes in a complex network of neighborhoods—one that was just as urban as high-density Teotihuacan?

Hidden patterns
At Izapa, Mendelsohn is looking for signs of those neighborhoods. On a map, she points to a cluster of small structures near a larger mound far to the southeast of downtown. These are the households she’s excavating in the cacao field. Another of her field teams is excavating a mound a few hundred meters to the west. Mendelsohn hopes to discern, 2000 years later, whether these were separate neighborhoods.

Preliminary findings hint at a major lifestyle gap. The ceramics and grinding stones found in the cacao-shaded dwellings suggest an abode of commoners. The pits at the mound to the west have yielded valuable jade beads, imported obsidian, and high-status pottery. Quite simply, Mendelsohn says, it “seems like rich people were here.” That may not mean, however, that all their neighbors were well-to-do. In Teotihuacan, for example, neighborhoods were economically mixed, says Ian Robertson, an archaeologist who studied Teotihuacan at Stanford University in California. Elite residences, temples, and administrative buildings were scattered throughout the ancient city, and the poor lived alongside the wealthy.

Some archaeologists believe Teotihuacan’s economic mosaic offers a clue to its political structure. Based on 8 years of excavations in the center of an economically diverse neighborhood dubbed Teopancazco, Linda Manzanilla, an archaeologist at the National Autonomous University of Mexico in Mexico City, has proposed that Teotihuacan operated as a collection of “house societies,” in which neighborhood leaders commanded the labor and loyalty of nearby lower status residents. This relationship resembled the feudal system of medieval Europe, she explains.

If it holds up under future excavations, the house society model may explain how Teotihuacan first formed, Robertson says. “Compared to most other cities, the new urbanism

Cities, and therefore neighborhoods, were once considered a rarity in ancient Mesoamerica. Scholars have long defined cities as places with large, densely packed populations, intertwined economic activities—trades such as tailors, jewelers, soldiers, or manual laborers—and, often, a splash of cultural diversity, says Michael Smith, an archaeologist at Arizona State University, Tempe. “That definition makes sense because it fits our preconceptions of what cities are like today.”

Teotihuacan, which lies 50 kilometers northeast of Mexico City and was occupied from roughly 100 B.C.E. to 650 C.E., was one of the few Mesoamerican cities that conformed to those expectations. Centered on the imposing Pyramids of the Sun and the Moon, it was laid out on a grid, and its more than 100,000 residents, many living in apartment buildings, were crammed into just 20 square kilometers.

[Teotihuacan] was there very fast”—faster than the city’s birthrate could account for. That means that people must have been migrating to the new city in droves. “I imagine that sometimes what you had were whole towns pulling up stakes, moving into Teotihuacan, and reproducing their own social structure in the new urban center,” he proposes. As time went on, those uprooted towns likely morphed into neighborhoods.

Marilyn Masson, an archaeologist at the University at Albany, SUNY, sees a similar...
Kuchnicki unearthing high-status ceramics in Izapa.

pattern in Mayapán, an ancient city in the dry interior of the Yucatán Peninsula. From the early 1200s C.E. to its collapse in the 1400s, Mayapán was the political and economic capital of the Maya area. Spanish accounts of Mayapán’s history suggest that as the city consolidated, its rulers—who came from all over the peninsula—“forcibly relocated” people to populate the new center, Masson says. Mayapán’s first neighborhoods, therefore, probably would have resembled the uprooted villages.

Masson believes she’s found the primary way order was imposed on Mayapán’s unruly melting pot: walls. Walls were everywhere in the city, and after years of fieldwork and a laser mapping survey in 2013, Masson and Timothy Hare, an anthropologist at Morehead State University in Kentucky, have mapped every single one. “With the walls, [the city] starts making sense,” Hare says.

Not only did Mayapán boast a defensive wall surrounding a dense 4-square-kilometer downtown, but smaller walls also separated houses from one another, demarcated roads, and, overall, organized how people moved through the city. They also dictated how buildings were oriented, a key feature of neighborhoods. “When people walk out of the front door of their houses, what do they see?” Masson asks. Likely, the dwellings would be facing their neighborhood’s “most important symbol.” Downtown, she says, that would be the temples and administrative buildings in Mayapán’s ceremonial center.

But farther out—and especially in low-density areas beyond the city’s defensive wall—the buildings tend to be oriented toward complexes of elite residences and smaller ritual buildings. According to Masson, those secondary centers probably played a role in knitting the surrounding households into neighborhood communities, and perhaps served as landmarks to help residents navigate the city.

**Ethnic diversity**

Back in the cacao field, Mendelsohn points out an odd feature of the mound she’s excavating: The dwellings here are arranged around a shared patio. This architectural pattern is more common in the Maya area to the south and east. She wonders if she might be looking at an ethnic enclave. Izapa’s location along a major trade route meant that Maya and Olmec people probably passed through frequently, and it’s possible some of them stayed. “It would be completely reasonable to find a Maya neighborhood or an Olmec neighborhood” in Izapa, Mendelsohn says.

Although most archaeologists, including Mendelsohn, doubt that artifacts can reliably distinguish their owners’ ethnicity thousands of years later, at least two ethnic enclaves have been identified at Teotihuacan. A cluster of apartment compounds on the city’s western edge contained ceramics resembling those made by the Zapotecs, who lived 500 kilometers to the south in modern-day Oaxaca. These out-of-place cooking tools and ritual objects were made of local clay but fired using an Oaxacan technique that darkened the pottery. Later excavations of the area uncovered an ornate Zapotec-style tomb and a temple clearly modeled after its cousins in Oaxaca—structures that, according to Michael Spence, an archaeologist at the University of Western Ontario in London, Canada, have “got no business being in Teotihuacan.” Meanwhile, a separate cluster of similarly anomalous pottery styles from the Gulf Coast and the Maya region was found in apartment compounds on the other side of the city. The two enclaves were the first neighborhoods identified in Teotihuacan.

At Izapa, neighborhood outlines are more elusive. Its city plan is still coming into view; Rosenswig’s laser survey doubled the early city’s estimated size, revealing dozens of hidden mounds. And now Mendelsohn’s excavations hint that Izapa may have been occupied far longer than anyone thought. Its neighborhoods had centuries to shift borders and change character, adding texture to the city—and intrigue to its ruins.

—LIZZIE WADE