

Vernacular Architecture in Guatemala

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The need for understanding what is vernacular architecture in Guatemala is becoming more important every day.

The lack of systematic methods to record the special characteristics of this architecture and also not promoting its values at a regional level is allowing "modern" constructions substitute what is a vernacular heritage. The misunderstanding of what is modern in connection with the development of low cost habitat projects is changing the graphic vocabulary of the typical architecture in different regions of the country.

Defining typologies and preserving the continuous use of traditional building systems is part of protecting the vernacular architecture. But an important part that is missing is that it is not possible to protect this "continuously developing architecture" without considering the people who create it.

Understanding vernacular architecture as architecture which responds to the needs of the family groups, that is built with natural and semi-industrial materials, with the direct participation of the user adapted to the environment and with volumes shaped by handicraft techniques, will help to understand the wide variety of similar but not vernacular architecture.

Many works have been published dealing with appropriate technology, appropriate use of materials, habitat deficit, etc. but not one of them has considered the

values of the vernacular dwelling and its people. The study and understanding of history and development of society, considering the difference between urban and a rural society, and the qualities of life that this different pattern create.

Counting also that it is not possible to protect vernacular architecture without considering the importance of the surroundings, landscape is directly related to the vernacular value.

It is the lack of cultural roots that allows the "misunderstood development" take over the qualities and values of the vernacular architecture.

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Guatemala is a tropical country located in Central America. Three tectonic plates gather in this small country creating impressive volumes and volcanoes that make the landscape remarkable.

Guatemala is the centre of the ancient *Maya* civilization. The *Mayas* of today are divided into seven ethnic groups: *Quiché*, *Cackchiquel*, *Tzutuhil*, *Mam*, *Pocoman*, *Pocomchí*, and *Lacandón*. Each group is located in different parts of the country. Each one of these groups has a different dialect, tradition, dwelling and sub-climate, having in common only the past and the concept of a natural and simple life style where religious traditions are important for the cultural development of society.

There is an eighth ethnic group called “*garifunas*”. An African settlement located in the coast of the Atlantic Ocean which has an independent development compared to the rest of the traditional groups. The “*garifunas*” originally came from “*St. Vincent*” in the Caribbean and subsequently were freed from slavery and became independent. Initially one could identify 48 different “*garifuna*” settlements in Central America but only two of them were situated in Guatemala’s Coast: “*Livingston*” and “*Puerto Barrios*” both in the department of “*Izabal*”.

Interesting about their constructions is that they developed the system of “*palafitos*” to be able to build on top of water surfaces.

In general the typical architecture on the country side of Guatemala is earth construction. Adobe and “*bajareque*” are very common for the construction of walls, rounded wood is used for beams and depending on the design, truss is employed for roof structures. In some areas the constructions are made of stone and cane and the interior floor of the house is earth due to thermal characteristics. Other combinations can be found for walls; some walls have stone in the lower part and corn cane in the top part but this is not necessarily the only combination of materials used.

The materials used to cover the structure can vary from straw, palm leaves to ceramic tiles. Ceramic tiles called “*tejas*” are made in a semi-industrial technique, fired on kilns by using wood. Straw is used in the mountains and different kinds of palm leaves are used along the coast. Many methods of threading can be found and this differs between villages. Palm leaves and straw have very good thermal qualities and this is one reason why the use of these natural

materials is more appropriate than concrete and metal shields.

The inclination of roofs is defined by taking into account the following factors temperature, volume of air and percentage of rain water. Tiles need less inclination than straw which needs more to be able to resist weather.

For the construction of the roofs, nails are not used as it is more common to use natural fibres and tie them in a way that the constructions becomes a handicraft. The proportions of the space and the way of using it varies depending also on the ethnic group. All the factors become interrelated and an answer to the needs are developed.

Houses are not necessarily a single piece structure; in many cases it is a group of structures that make up a family house. Some of these spaces could be the sleeping area, the cooking area, the working area, the services, etc. The development of the traditional home depends on such factors as climate, orientation, wind direction, use of land, economy and the growing family.

Different walls finishes give each village a different identity. Some in general have a white wash, others use color, others leave the natural earth color visible.

Villages are usually in a reticular tissue, the plaza in the middle, the church and the governmental institutions represented around the main public space. The plaza is the area where usually commerce and cultural interchange take place. Some plazas are being destroyed and that is why it is important to understand the limits of intervention. In some cases by adding new structures that do not correspond to the space like urban furniture, gazebos and phone booths, the volume of the plaza changes. In other cases, the plazas are treated in such a way that they become unlivable, without trees benches, spaces to relax, forgetting for whom plazas are

created for. They look so nice that no one passes through them. The public "*pilas*" are also a part of the cultural interchange; women go to wash either there or at the river side but unfortunately this tradition is disappearing and the public "*pilas*" are being abandoned.

Another characteristic that is changing is the original treatment of floors not only in the plazas but in the streets. The original stone work is being substituted by concrete or "*adoquin*" changing the configuration of the village and also bringing new problems of maintenance that did not exist before.

As important as the vernacular housing is the religious architecture. Interventions have been done to these structures because of the damage caused by earthquakes and time, but proper recordings of this kind of architecture is still missing. Proper technology is needed to maintain these monumental structures but it is important to get the community involved so they can preserve the monument in a proper way. It is the "*cofradia*" who takes continuous care of these religious structures. This "*cofradia*" is formed by the oldest important persons of the village. They organize together with the community and religious participants all the activities related to the Saint to whom the church is dedicated. So the "*cofradias*" adopt the name of the Saint to be different from other "*cofradias*" of another church in the same village. Sometimes with the participation of the priest and the city hall, activities are organized like painting and decorating the church, the plaza or organizing all kinds of typical dances and celebrations related to the traditional customs.

Some years ago the government decided to give every main village a percentage of money so that they could build whatever they needed, but no proper instructions were given to the people who received the funds so this money was used

to make "modern renovations" and this is the largest problem vernacular architecture faces in Guatemala.

Another serious problem is that being in a seismic zone, vernacular architecture is always in danger. After the earthquake of 1976 in which many people lost their lives, some villages disappeared completely and no trace is found of their history since no records existed. The after shock of dealing with an earthquake is difficult especially when as a result of international aid, new techniques and materials are introduced and the original image of villages is completely altered like in the country side of Guatemala.

Religious architecture is full of color, forms and decorations. The seismic baroque gives a complete new vocabulary to architecture. This style developed from the Baroque style that Spanish conquerors brought to the new world. This style developed as we appreciate it now because of two important elements: the need to face a seismic area which resulted in walls being more thick and the ethnic handicrafts which contributed to the architecture with decorations and richness.

"*Capillas posas*" for example, are spaces that were used originally by the Spanish priests to convince the Indians to come close to the church and then convert them to catholicism. These "*capillas posas*" are small volumetric spaces painted with bright colors usually located around the plazas close to the church for example in "*Santiago Atitlan, Solola*". "*Capillas posas*" are very simple and form part of ensemble of the plaza and the church.

Some other small churches have characteristics and proportions that make them special for example in the village of "*Salcaja, Quezaltenango*". In the main plaza of "*Salcaja*" one finds a very small church with large "*contrafuertes*" which

are part of the façade combined with a very simple decoration, white wash and impressive volumes which make it a very important sample of 17th century religious vernacular architecture.

Guatemalan modern *Mayas* have a natural way of combining forms, materials and colors. Not only in textiles but also in architecture. Combining very strong bright colors in a majestic way is a regional characteristic. "*San Andres Xecul* is a village that has a church that is constantly re-painted. Time after time the community chooses a different combination of colors and applies natural painting media that washes out with rain and weather.

To really get to know a village is important, also to visit the cemetery. Cemeteries are tale tellers of traditions and costumes. The house of the dead had to be special so it is full of color and decoration. The cemetery of "*Chichicastenango*" in Quiché is an example of this important architecture. Many traditional events take place in the cemetery: celebrations of all kinds, flying kites to communicate with the dead like in "*Santiago Sacatepequez*", shared ceremonies with candle lights etc. all very fragile characteristics but strong in tradition.

Other typical volumetric structures that can be found are the kilns to make the daily bread, to make tiles and ceramics or steam baths called "temascal" normally found in the area of "Atitlan". Some villages that base their economy on the traditional making of ceramics have a special configuration with all these volumetric structures. "*El Tejar*" is the village located close to Guatemala City where they produce the majority of the brick and "*teja*" of the country.

Conclusion

As a result of all this richness in traditions and costumes combined with

different materials and sub-climates in Guatemala, many different solutions have developed and adapted through an historic process. There is a very big variety of typologies, styles and building processes and these are all combinations that make each one special and unique. The complexity of these traditional processes should be recorded and protected and it would be very useful to show to the people who still have traditions alive that what they do is important to the community, and valuable to the historic evolution.

The need to understand what progress means is becoming urgent and one answer could be to use the existing traditional building systems and materials by improving them with the appropriate technology, considering in this process that the participation of the community is of vital importance.

In order to understand vernacular architecture one must realize that it emerged as a symptom of reality of a particular well defined group representing their historical evolution, the cultural circumstances and a synthesis of its origins and influences.

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