

MEXICO

San Juan Cuauhtinchan, Puebla

Pre-hispanic Cuauhtinchan

The Cuauhtinchan culture is much older than those of the Toltecs and Aztecs. It goes back to the formative epoch, when small groups of gatherers and incipient farmers settled at the site to form small villages, around 1200 BC; even before this the Olmecs had spread from the coast of the Gulf towards Puebla, Morelos and the Cuenca del Mexico between 1500 and 1200 BC. The earliest historical references to Cuauhtinchan are mostly in the Chichimeca Toltec History, the annals of Cuauhtinchan, and the Cuauhtinchan maps, documents written and painted by the 'tlacuilos', which preserve the cultural traditions of this area.

Colonial Cuauhtinchan

The Spanish Conquest took place at the end of July 1520, before that of Tenochtitlan. The religious conversion of the population was carried out from 1527 to 1528. Several buildings were constructed to house the Franciscans, until, in 1554, the construction of the present church began, as part of an assemblage consisting of a porch, the church, the monastery, the pilgrims' gate, the vegetable garden and the churchyard.

The church consists of a single nave divided into five sections, with a semi-circular apse containing the high altar.

The high altar of the church of San Juan Bautista, Cuauhtinchan

In Latin America there are three wall-mounted altarpieces that are complete and datable to the 16th century: Huejotzingo, San Bernardino de Xochimilco, and San Juan de Cuauhtinchan, Puebla. The Cuauhtinchan altarpiece is probably the oldest wall-mounted one in America that preserves all of its integral elements. Its maker is unknown, although in 1597 Juan de Arrue was contracted to replace the altarpiece of San Francisco de Puebla, renovated and with a new sacrarium. The artist stamps it, to a high degree, with the Italianate style of the age, but does not omit the strong Flemish touch that characterises much Spanish painting of the time.

It must be noted that the Cuauhtinchan altarpiece is the oldest still existing in Mexico. It is a large triptych, which gives it an archaic appearance. It consists of three main sections and three rows, despite the ornamentation of its surround. It is of reticular composition based on ionic columns, these being fluted in the first section and balustraded in the others, with the timber boarding decorated with charming cherubs. The subjects illustrated in the eleven paintings of the altarpiece are the central themes of the Christian doctrine, which are found, with some variations, in the Renaissance altarpieces of New Spain.

According to the studies made to determine the state of conservation of the principal altarpiece of the 16th century church of San Juan Bautista Cuauhtinchan, part of the monastic grouping at the site in the state of Puebla, the chief threats to the altarpiece are the following:

Changes in Humidity

- Parts of the structure are seen to be out of place, preventing the paintings from being properly fixed in place, with gaps of up to 3 or 4 cm from the frames;
- Joints between sections have been separated by the accumulation of dust, which attracts damp, causing movements in the timber and growth of micro-organisms;
- Absence of mouldings and coats of pictorial paint;
- Cracks in the timber and coats of pictorial paint;
- Fissures in the undercoat and pictorial paint;
- Cracks, ridges, cracking and flaking in the pictorial paint;
- Inconsistencies in the restoration work of 1986;
- The column on the left of the crucifixion has come away at the top and is fastened to the body of the altarpiece with plastic cable;
- Changes in humidity cause the severe shrinking of the painted panels and the animal-fibre fabric that covers the panels, which, on reducing in size, are insufficient for the area covered by the pictorial paint and the undercoat, materials which are not as drastically affected as timber and fibre;
- It can be seen that all the boards placed as an emergency measure in 2000 no longer have the required effect, having broken away from the pictorial coating;
- The absence or loss of undercoat and pictorial coating;
- Bulging or hollowing, consistent with the separation of the undercoat from the supporting structure over fairly large areas, forming bubbles up to 40 cm across. This threat is not visible to the naked eye, and cannot be seen in the photographs;
- Fissures, splits in the undercoat and pictorial paint;
- Cracks, ridges and flaking in the pictorial paint.

Dirt

- Accumulation of dust and bird droppings.

Presence of woodworm

- During the restoration of 1986 the altarpiece was fumigated, which aided in its conservation. At present the beginning of an infestation can be seen in the boards of the first section.

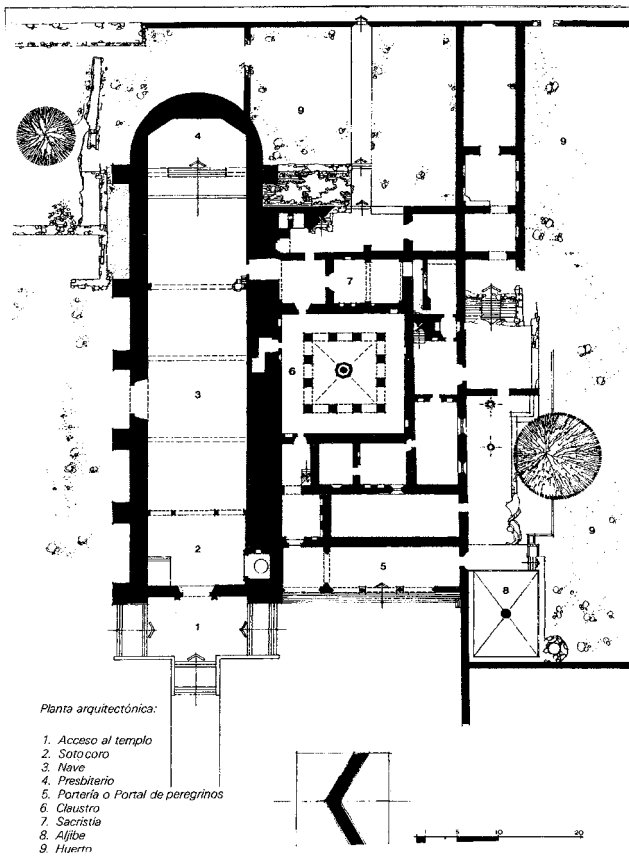
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References

'Restoration work at the Monastery of San Juan Cuauhtinchan', Office of Urban development and Ecology. April 25th 1987
Tovar de Teresa, Guillermo 'The Altarpieces of Cuauhtinchan', Ediciones Luis Lagarto, Mexico 1988.



General view and ground-plan of San Juan Cuauhtinchan ▲ ▶



Major retablo of San Juan Bautista Cuauhtinchan after the restoration in 1986

Retablo mayor de San Juan Bautista Cuauhtinchan, Puebla después de la restauración de 1986



Structural cracks caused by changing humidity

Grietas en estructura por cambios de humedad



MEXICO

San Juan Cuauhtinchan, Puebla

Cuauhtinchan Pre Hispánico

“La cultura de Cuauhtinchán precede en milenios a la Tolteca y Azteca. Se remonta a la época formativa, en que pequeños grupos de recolectores y agricultores incipientes se establecen en el sitio para formar pequeñas aldeas, hacia 1200 AC, y aún antes los Olmecas se dispersaron de la costa del Golfo hacia Puebla, Morelos y la Cuenca de México entre 1500 y 1200 AC. Las noticias históricas más lejanas referentes a Cuauhtinchán proceden en su mayoría de la *Historia Tolteca Chichimeca* de los anales de Cuauhtinchan y finalmente de los *Mapas de Cuauhtinchán*, documentos que conservan la tradición cultural de esta zona y que fueron escritos y pintados por los *tlacuilos*.¹”

Cuauhtinchan Colonial

La conquista española se realizó en finales de julio de 1520, incluso antes de Tenochtitlan. La conversión religiosa de la población se llevó a cabo entre 1527 y 1528. Se construyeron diversas edificaciones para albergar a los Franciscanos hasta que en 1554 se inició la construcción de la actual Iglesia parte del conjunto compuesto por un atrio, el templo, el convento, el portal de peregrinos, la huerta y el camposanto.

El templo se compone de una sola nave dividida en cinco tramos de un ábside de planta semicircular que aloja al altar mayor.

Retablo Testero del Altar Mayor en el Templo de San Juan Bautista de Cuauhtinchan: Patrimonio en Peligro

“En América Latina existen tres retablos de testero, completos y datables del siglo XVI: Huejotzingo, San Bernardino de Xochimilco y San Juan de Cuauhtinchan, Puebla²”. Probablemente el de Cuauhtinchan es el más antiguo retablo de testero de América que conserva todos sus elementos integrantes. Se desconoce quien fue el autor del retablo aunque “en 1597 Juan de Arrúe celebró un contrato para colocar, remozado y con un sagrario nuevo, el retablo que estuvo en San Francisco de Puebla...³”. El autor “imprime en grado sumo el arte italianizante de la época, sin embargo, no por ello deja de lado el fuerte acento flamenco que caracteriza a mucha de la pintura española de esa época⁴”.

“... es preciso señalar que el retablo de Cuauhtinchan es el más antiguo que aún se conserva en México. ... es un gran tríptico, lo cual le confiere un aspecto más arcaizante. Constituido por tres cuerpos y tres hileras, su aspecto es muy sobrio, a pesar de los grandes rizos del remate. Su arquitectura ofrece una composición reticular a base de columnas jónicas estriadas las del primer cuerpo, abalaustradas las del resto del conjunto, y entablamentos decorados con simpáticos querubines.⁵”

Según los dictámenes realizados para determinar el estado de conservación del retablo principal del templo de San Juan Bautista Cuauhtinchan, correspondiente al siglo XVI y perteneciente al conjunto conventual de la localidad en el estado de Puebla, las principales amenazas al retablo son:

Cambios de humedad

En la estructura:

- se han observado elementos de la estructura que están fuera de lugar y que no permite que las pinturas estén fijas en el lugar que les corresponde, con separaciones hasta de 3 ó 4 cms de su marco;
- uniones entre elementos, separadas con la acumulación de polvo lo cual atrae la humedad provocando movimientos en la madera, así como la proliferación de micro organismos;
- faltantes de molduras y capa pictórica;
- grietas en la madera y capa pictórica;
- fisuras de la base de preparación y capa pictórica;
- grietas, caballetes, craqueladuras y escamas en la capa pictórica;
- resanes de la intervención de 1986 con poca consistencia;
- columna del lado izquierdo de la Crucifixión separada del extremo superior y amarrada con cable de plástico al cuerpo del retablo;
- Los cambios en la humedad causan el encogimiento severo de los paneles pintados y de las fibras animales que cubren los paneles que al disminuir su tamaño resultan insuficientes para las dimensiones de la capa pictórica y base de preparación, materiales que no son tan drásticamente afectados como la madera y las fibras;
- velados en todas las tablas que se colocaron como medida de emergencia en el 2000 y que han perdido su efecto ya que se han roto junto con la capa pictórica;
- faltantes o pérdidas de base de preparación y capa pictórica;
- abombamiento u oquedades, consistentes en la separación de la base de preparación al soporte en áreas relativamente grandes, formándose bolsas de aire de hasta 40 cms. Esta amenaza no es perceptible a simple vista por lo que en las fotografías no se puede apreciar;
- fisuras de la base de preparación y la capa pictórica;
- grietas, caballetes y escamas en la capa pictórica.

Suciedad

En la estructura y pinturas:

- Acumulación de polvo y excrementos de aves.

Presencia de xilófagos

- En la restauración de 1986 se fumigó el retablo lo cual ha ayudado su conservación. En la actualidad se detectó un incipiente ataque en las tablas del primer cuerpo.

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¹ “San Juan Bautista Cuauhtinchán. Restauración 1987”. Jorge Olvera. Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología, 1988.

² “Obras de Restauración al Convento de San Juan Cuauhtinchan” Secretaría de Desarrollo Urbano y Ecología. Abril 25, 1987

³ Tovar de Teresa, Guillermo “Los Retablos de Cuauhtinchán”, Ediciones Luis Lagarto. México, 1988

⁴ Ídem.

⁵ Ídem.

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Vernacular Mexican Architecture in Danger

Mexican vernacular architecture is among one of the types of built cultural heritage in danger and its destruction is accelerating the most. Vernacular buildings are found either scattered in the countryside, beside villages that had a rural character only a few decades ago, or else are forming groups of houses in some historic cities.

Today unlike twenty years ago, these buildings represent very poor value both to owners and local authorities. They are often destroyed or severely altered for several reasons. One reason lies in the federal government's indifference and ignorance, especially that of the department responsible for national heritage. Users and builders of vernacular architecture have a mistaken notion of progress and modernity that considerably influences the loss of this cultural architectural heritage throughout the country. On the other hand, the excessive introduction of industrial building materials, such as cement blocks, zinc and asbestos sheets or asphalt cardboard, has contributed to the radical alteration of areas. Because people feel they are climbing the socio-economic scale,

they use these materials as a substitute to traditional elements in their houses.

One way to support the preservation of the existing most representative examples is to denounce what is happening. This must be at the highest international level relevant to threatened built heritage until Mexican authorities understand that they should undertake educational campaigns to promote such values both in the local as well as the academic and government spheres.

With this aim in mind, two case studies follow:

Angahuan, Michoacan

Angahuan is located on the foothills of Paricutin Volcano, on the Purepecha Plateau in the state of Michoacan. It is a group of villages founded by Vasco de Quiroga, a Spanish priest who in the 16th century became known for his defence of the Indians and for teaching them several arts and crafts, that until now remain a precious heritage for the entire state of Michoacan. Quiroga was inspired by the *Utopia* of Thomas More based on establishing 'hospital-villages' called *huataperas* in *Purepecha* language.

Local people, who call themselves *purepechas* and who have an indigenous origin, kept their building tradition until several years ago. Their houses are built completely in wood, once abundant in the surroundings, although nowadays it is a scarce resource. Wood construction in Michoacan is one of the techniques that goes back several years as a craft taught to the Indians by Vasco de Quiroga. It consists of wooden joints without any nails, the buildings being based on a plank and beam system. The roof is covered with tiles and pronounced, strongly sloping eaves, with an attic built into it and used as grain storage as well as helping to insulate the house against the winter cold and the rainy season. This type of traditional house is known as *troje*, meaning grain storage.

Recently, traditional *trojes* have been destroyed in Angahuan. The demolition has several causes, among which the increasing number of visitors attracted to Angahuan's great sixteenth-century temple has had a considerable economic impact because of the impossibility of planned and ordered development. *Trojes* are being replaced by buildings that not only force an improvement in the inhabitants' quality of life but also devastate the landscape and the harmony present in the natural surroundings of the village because of the new buildings' incongruous and exceedingly inferior quality.

Currently, Mexico ICOMOS, headed by their Scientific Committee of Vernacular Architecture, Michoacan ICOMOS and the Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, are uniting their efforts to rescue two or three areas on the Purepecha Plateau, hoping that these first experiences are taken as examples in the future for sites such as Angahuan that need rescuing.

Hueyapan, Morelos

Similar situations are occurring throughout the country. The small town of Hueyapan, on the foothills of the Popocatepetl Volcano, is



Wooden construction in Angahuan (Michoacan)

Destruction of adobe buildings in Hueyapan (Morelos)





Houses in Angahuan (Michoacan)

Adobe buildings in Hueyapan (Morelos)

mentioned as it represents an extraordinary example of two and three storey adobe buildings in Mexico. These are tiled-roof houses that include a grain storage attic as does the *troje*. They are well adapted to the uneven terrain of the area. Built from a very good quality of clay naturally improved with volcanic ash, as well as using the expertise of local craftsmen, these houses have lasted in fairly good condition for about a hundred years. In vernacular architecture they represent a good response to the need for shelter against winter cold and the long rainy season.

As in the above case of the *troje*, the reasons relating to the destruction of this built heritage have a cultural background. They are also a result of the impact of the influence of the cement industry, poor housing programs and an absence of policy on preserving and improving the traditional vernacular houses of rural communities.

In fact, only 30% of the houses that existed ten years ago survive. They are quickly being replaced. Yet while local people accept that their adobe houses are much more comfortable to insulate against extreme temperatures, they claim: "But we need to feel modern".

A program carried out by a professor of the Faculty of Architecture at the National Independent University of Mexico focuses on offering the community the possibility of having modern, comfortable, clean and inexpensive houses built in adobe. This is a genuine challenge with strong forces against it, but it is certainly an effort worth making on behalf of this significant adobe heritage and of this local community.

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