

MEXICAN VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AND THE SPIRIT OF PLACE. CASE OF STUDY: TLACOTALPAN

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Abstract. In 1998 the city of Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, was selected by UNESCO to become part of the World Heritage List. However, the spirit of place has been exposed to many threats, such as the destruction of some of the traditional buildings and changes in cultural behavior. We have been identifying the causes for the abandoning or deterioration of the heritage and proposed several measures to the local authorities to prevent more destruction and to recover the heritage as a whole with all its immaterial expressions. In this proposal we are seeks ways for people to recover their pride in their cultural expressions and built heritage.

Tlacotalpan is on the bank of the Papaloapan River—the "river of butterflies"—on the plains on the lee side of Veracruz, where the sun runs its course from east to west, moving from the Ixtlán de Juárez mountain chain—where the river's majestic current is born—to its mouth on the Alvarado Bar, in the Gulf of Mexico.

Chronicles claim that many of the Spaniards that came to Mexico were originally from the Canaries. The cult of the Virgin of Candelaria can be traced back to those times; an old Spanish family that settled in the region donated it when the first Catholic Church curate was established in the church in Tlacotalpan. The cult of the Virgin of Candelaria subsisted syncretically with the pre-Hispanic rites to the indigenous Chalchiuhtlicue, goddess of the waters, venerated in a large part of Mesoamerica during the post-Classic period. (Aguirre, 1972)

The life of Tlacotalpan's inhabitants has been secularly linked to the river, which have been both a means of subsistence for them and the source of their afflictions when its waters overflow. This is one of the reasons why we insist that it is where the spirit of the place lies: it is the

link between all activities, traditions and customs developed by this society over centuries in its riverbed and its surrounding areas.

The urban grid responds to Spanish norms established in the Laws of the Indies [*Leyes de Indias*]: there is a main square, or *Plaza de Armas*—now called *Plaza Zaragoza*—, where the Council Hall [*Casa Consistorial*] was built and which today holds the Municipal Palace; and the Casa Mata, where gunpowder was stored and which was later used as a municipal jail, and currently serves as a handicraft shop. Also next to the plaza, alongside the stately homes, the temple dedicated to the Virgin of Candelaria was built in the 18th century. On another corner of the Plaza, the Parish of San Cristóbal, patron saint of the city, was completed in 1851.

As well as the main square, the foundational grid includes the religious plaza, called Parque Hidalgo, which is delimited by the above mentioned sanctuary to the Virgin of Candelaria, as well as the relevant facades and their porticos of the city houses.

Tlacotalpan's architecture is distinctive; it derives from Caribbean forms and climate, and from the customs of this historic community related to the river's deep currents, which provided it with a livelihood and an origin. Arcades, roofs, eaves, balconies, corridors and narrow, grass-covered streets which follow the meandering river captivate the visitor that explores plazas and open spaces which subtly intertwine. The spontaneous use of contrasting colors that characterizes the city was perhaps the result of the intense tropical luminosity and the brilliant tones of the nature around it.

All these compositional elements of its architecture, urbanism and nature are an indissoluble part of the Tlacotalpan spirit of place; it emerges in the expressions that make up the old city's context, which in turn are the result of this society's interaction with its natural environment.

However, it is important to recognize that this interaction is based on an incredibly fragile balance in which any alteration of its components and relationships would surely have an impact on the whole. There is a delicate organic relation between each part of the city, its community, nature and the traditions that needs to be preserved so that the spirit of place remains.

Life in the early 21st century in our country is certainly different to the way it took place in 19th century Tlacotalpan. Although the city remained unaltered in the decades after its economic displacement, it couldn't escape the impact of urban growth in other towns in the state and the country as a whole, as well as the influence of the mass media. These phenomena have been reflected in the loss of a substantial part of their urban cultural heritage: the grass streets, for example, have given way in many areas of the city to concrete paving, adocret or asphalt, losing not only their attractiveness but also their profound relationship to nature.

Traditional architecture has been partly affected by the introduction of unrelated elements to the old mansions. The indiscriminate introduction of urban furniture in accordance with the personal tastes of different mayors and authorities has resulted in the loss of the simple unity provided by the old street lighting, the early 20th-century brickwork benches in the parks and other elements associated to the history of the city. When the vernacular architecture of the surroundings and the general environment of the city are affected, the true spirit of place is endangered.

The following text includes a proposal for reintegrating cultural heritage with the close participation of the city and its authorities, for the recovery of the riverbank, and the description of some of the values that give a sense to the spirit of Tlacotalpan, all of these as the basis for its safeguard and transcendence to future generations.

The City in Time and Space

The area has been populated since pre-Hispanic times, and slightly before the European conquest its people depended on the Mexica Empire. It is said that Emperor Moctezuma sent his right-hand men to rule the place and collect tributes. (Del Paso, 1961: 4)

The mouth of the Papaloapan River was discovered by Juan de Grijalva in 1518; later, Pedro de Alvarado explored its waters in an attempt to find inland routes after a small community had been established in the preexisting native village. (Malpica, 1974: XIV)

In the beginning the village was built predominantly by natives and black slaves brought by the Spaniards who fished for a living. It took Tlacotalpan many years to be populated by Spaniards: in 1544 there were only 12 of them; in 1667, 30 were registered; by 1727 the number had grown to 240, and in 1777 there were already 320. In terms of the indigenous and black populations, demographic data are scarce and even contradictory. (Blázquez, 1989, 21)

Tlacotalpan was an island surrounded by the Papaloapan and the Chiquito rivers. However, as the years went by, the Chiquito's sediment transformed Tlacotalpan into a peninsula. Since the beginning the urban structure was guided by a grid formed by three streets, parallel to the river, which were crossed by narrow, perpendicular streets in a way that adapted to the topography. (César, 1973: 25-27)

In the early 19th century, its singular image began to take shape around one-storey houses, continuous arcades with semicircular arches, and tiled roofs. On different occasions the high attics, designed as livable spaces, served as shelter for their inhabitants when they needed to protect themselves from the sporadic floods produced by the river.

Tlacotalpan became the commercial center for the region due to its privileged location near the port of Veracruz, and was connected to the Gulf of Mexico by the wide and navigable Papaloapan River, which was the region's means of communication.

The 19th century represented a moment of splendor for the city due to economic development attained from its success in fishing and cattle, but above all because of its center for trade activities at a national and international level. Products were exchanged with Havana, Cadiz, Malaga, Flanders, Genoa and Granada; later their mercantile dealings included Caracas, Marseille, New Orleans and other ports in the United States.

Towards the mid-19th century, the development of sugar cane and its rapid industrialization had great effect on the construction of haciendas. Simultaneously, the local society's culture developed.

The construction of arcades belongs to this period, as well as the tile roofs and the balconies with iron or wood bars. Many public buildings and roads, as well as the park with its kiosk and large mansions, resulted from the economic growth of the area, and have a European influence.

In these times of early 20th-century bonanza the city had 300 oil street-lamps, eight offices, six public schools and four private ones, three hotels, nine factories, a parish, two churches, one hospital, one jail, 54 huts, 1201 one-storey houses, 25 two-storey ones and one 3-storey house. (Alafita, 1989: 61)

As opposed to other populations that perceived the railroad's arrival as their source of progress, for Tlacotalpan it meant the beginning of its decline, since the transport of goods through the river became unnecessary with time. With the crisis of the sugar mills and the Revolution of 1910, the city slowly began to slip into oblivion.

In the 1940s, the typical character of the village and the fact that its architectural features had persisted, its urban grid and grass-covered streets made it attractive to tourism, and Mexican film stars began to visit it. In 1968 the Mexican government declared it a Typical City, and in 1986 it became a Historic Monument Zone, considering among other things that the "formal features of the city's constructions, the relationship between spaces, the urban structure formed by its neighborhoods and its natural environment, just as they are preserved today, are an eloquent testimonial which is of exceptional value for the social, political and art history of Mexico". (Diario Oficial, 1986)

However, it was not until a bridge over the Papaloapan was built in the seventies that Tlacotalpan began to be rediscovered by many visitors.

In 1998, because of its distinctive features and its outstanding universal values, Tlacotalpan was declared Heritage of Humanity by UNESCO.

Tlacotalpan: The Spirit of its Vernacular Architecture

A distinctive symbol of local architecture is the presence of arcade facades that create semiprivate spaces that are an extension of the house onto the street. These spaces also provide shade and protection, and cool the air that goes inside the house.

Sometimes the sidewalk protrudes beyond the arcade and pedestrians walk on it. In the middle of the street—opening a space for vegetation—is a zone where cars can circulate. This model for the streets and the way they are used is an urban quality that has survived from the Colonial period to our days.

It is worthy of note that the values of greatest importance for the creation of the World Heritage dossier were precisely the singularity of Tlacotalpan's vernacular architecture and its striking degree of conservation.

This document considered that the heritage city "met the second, fourth and fifth criteria of the Convention's Operational Guidelines, due to its architectural and urban singularity, its link to Caribbean culture, its communion with the natural environment and the impact it has on a traditional culture's identity, which is threatened by the myth of modernity increasingly more. (...) The acknowledgement of Tlacotalpan as cultural heritage of humanity means the recognition of the exceptional universal value of anonymous architecture, the simplicity and economy of the construction, of vernacular urbanism, traditional 19th- and 20th-century buildings, cultural plurality and the popular character of its inhabitants." (Guerrero, 2000: 49)

Unfortunately, in our country not only does vernacular architecture have no legal protection whatsoever; it is also undervalued by its own creators and by its inhabitants, who consider it to be part of a past that is linked to economic backwardness.

Tlacotalpan has not escaped that national phenomenon and suffers its consequences. In addition to this sentiment there is the influence held nowadays by large urban areas in the country which have apparent economic success, and the successful publicity that is given to industrialized construction systems that are totally foreign to traditional locations.

The Tlacotalpan cultural heritage is threatened by alterations due to the presence of buildings that are not quite authentic, as well as the introduction of materials to their streets that do not belong to the original setting, which for esthetic, historic, functional and even ecological reasons have an impact on this valuable heritage that has been preserved for nearly three centuries.

Some of the urban spaces where the spirit of place is particularly present are the ancient streets, which are planted with grass from Tlacotalpan and provide tranquility and freshness in face of the city's hot

sun. Other elements that speak of this spirit are the arcades and the balconies, the tiled roofing and the facades with battlements and mouldings.

Without a doubt the use of color that the people from Tlacotalpan have spontaneously employed for various centuries is perhaps the best example of the way in which the spirit of place is kept alive, despite the threats that contemporary changes have posed for the city.

That spirit is also present in the famous wood and wicker rocking chairs; in the fabric used for women's white dresses; in the typical drink, *toritos*, a mixture of sugarcane liquor, milk, tropical fruits and sugar; in the music, through its famous *sones* and *cantares jarochos*, during which the singer improvises one verse after another, alluding to the people present or to some noteworthy event. These *sones*, vibrant and very cheerful music, also inspire something in *Jarocho* dancers and their companions, who dance in the fandangos, the popular fiestas that they celebrate in the outside plazas, taking advantage of the evening's fresh air.

The city's major fiesta is the one celebrated in honor of the Virgin of Candelaria, in which not only does the entire village participate, but also thousands of people from the entire region. The main attraction is the Bull Run, where they chase people through the narrow streets, in the best Pamplona style.

The spirit of place is also present in Tlacotalpan through its entire intangible heritage: its legends, recipes, music, verses and, of course, in the framework that encloses it—tangible heritage and zones of natural beauty.

Research and Proposal for the Reintegration of Heritage

As a city that is included in the List of World Heritage, Tlacotalpan receives financial support from the Mexican government for the rehabilitation and conservation of its built heritage. For this reason the Social Development Secretariat, which is in charge of providing consulting and support to the municipal government, requested a study from us on the current state of built heritage and the necessary means for its reintegration and conservation.

In order to analyze the situation of built heritage to date in the city of Tlacotalpan, the study included both fieldwork and documentary office-work. During fieldwork, buildings were analyzed as well as the physical elements of the surroundings included in the area that forms the Historic Monument Zone (HMZ).

In order to facilitate the analysis of buildings as well as the different interventions which over the years have taken place in the HMZ, a conventional classification was adopted in the buildings and land, which we quote here:

Monumental: heritage composed of buildings defined in the Federal Law on Archeological, Artistic and Historic Monuments and Zones as "buildings constructed from the 16th- to the 19th-century inclusive (...)" It also notes that it considers "artistic monuments to be those built in the 20th century with relevant esthetic value." The religious monuments are the Candelaria, San Cristóbal and San Miguel temples; the civil monuments are the Netzahualcóyotl theatre, the municipal market, the cultural center and the library.

Preserved Heritage: buildings that have been maintained without being altered, preserving their original characteristics.

Modified Heritage: heritage buildings that were later intervened and altered.

Contextual Non-Heritage: recent buildings that have attempted to maintain a harmonious relationship with the context.

Out-of-context: buildings that have not taken into account the architectural and urban characteristics of the heritage city.

Precarious Settlements: housing built with scarce resources.

Empty lots: lands without buildings of any sort.

An examination of the results indicates that more than 70% of the structures that make up the city can be considered to be heritage architecture, despite the fact that a part of this percentage refers to buildings that have been altered, but which can be feasibly recovered.

In terms of other aspects of the urban context, such as the street and sidewalk pavements, we indicate in the study that there are several materials that do not preserve the unity of the whole; the same happens with urban furnishings.

One of the most serious problems the current population faces in the city is the lack of jobs. For this reason many young people have migrated to other cities or countries. However, the city is appropriate for investments related to the tourist and agricultural industries, as well as small industries for restoration materials for the buildings.

In terms of the infrastructure, we saw that due to the floods experienced by the city when the river overflows, it is necessary to separate pluvial drainage from residual waters and build a treatment plant. On the other hand, in order to prevent trucks from circulating within the patrimonial city it is fundamental that a bypass be built from the access road.

It is a priority to consider the recovery of the river zone, which is of great natural beauty, and this demands an improvement in the services offered by the small fish and seafood restaurants as well as the restructuring of businesses. Also, fishermen that live in precarious houses by the riverside should be relocated; at the same time, this zone should be provided with a duly planned area for fishing and for selling fish.

We have been in contact with some of city dwellers who sound skeptical with regards to the advantages presented by their cultural heritage, composed as it is by the buildings and its urban context. Many people do not consider their quality of life to have improved at all as a result of the site being declared World Heritage.

It is necessary to promote the development of jobs so the population can relate the conservation of the city to an increase in their well-being. Also, it is convenient to broadcast the concept of “heritage city” and its landscape attractions beyond the city's own borders, so that its inhabitants regain pride in their city, their customs and their exceptional traditions.

It is necessary to begin the rehabilitation, conservation and reintegration of buildings, as well as the progressive unification of pavements on all the roads and the adequate design of urban furnishings. The study also proposes a slow modification of pavements and the conservation of grass, typical of the traditional town.

A rehabilitation program was proposed in parallel for properties that require conservation (they are for the most part examples of vernacular architecture) and those that should be recovered to their original character.

The program must also include the simple transmission of knowledge about what needs to be done in each case and a stimulus that holds the interest of building owners. This process of reintegration should be fostered by granting one part of the work's cost as a stimulus to neighbors that decide to carry out these modifications. In terms of which architectural elements should be preserved and which should be eliminated, a simple graphic manual for conservation and reintegration of buildings was put together. Here we show some images of the manual, which will be published this year and distributed among the city's inhabitants.

In light of the fact that financial needs influence the deterioration and abandonment of architectural heritage, and in order to improve the general conditions of the population and create more jobs, a tourist development program has been proposed that includes some of the old mansions as hotels with few rooms and good service.

It is fundamental to include the city in tourist circuits that include other nearby sites, such as the archeological zones and other places of natural beauty, and ecological tourism. Also, boat tours can be offered on the river to eat baked fish in one of the many palm groves nearby.

We have also suggested that advantage be taken of the magnificent 20th-century theatre to offer music and dance spectacles, as well as rehabilitating the small local museum established in an old, traditional house in the city, with the aim of attracting visitors.

But as well as tourism, other kinds of financial activities bring with them the preservation of the city, such as the development of a production workshop for baked clay tiles, which would not only generates jobs, but

also produce materials for restoring roofs in the area and could then sell tiles throughout the entire region.

Finally, it is necessary to fortify the municipal technical areas responsible for Tlacotalpan's conservation by providing specialized training workshops and a larger number of technicians.

Conclusions

The city of Tlacotalpan is a unique example in Mexico of the presence of many cultural values associated to a particular site and a historic community that has maintained its presence and customs through time. It is evident that notable efforts have been made to safeguard it and to preserve its tangible and intangible heritage.

For this reason, Mexico cannot allow for the distinctive spirit of place to be lost, for it has been created over a long time and has been captured in all artistic and historic expressions of the city and its inhabitants.

It is necessary to continue with these efforts in order to keep on listening to Tlacotalpan music and enjoy *Jarocho* dances and tunes, to maintain the coolness of its arcades and corridors, to continue to contemplate the Papaloapan riverbank, to maintain the authentic festivities of Tlacotalpan's inhabitants and reintegrate to its authentic heritage all the architectural values that characterize it.

However, vernacular architecture is a type of heritage that is difficult to conserve, since among its main qualities are spontaneous manifestations and, above all, dynamism.

It is evidently not enough to merely identify the values of this urban whole to achieve its conservation. It is necessary, as it happens in many other cities in the country, to try to find a balance between uncontrolled growth and the abandoning of buildings, between real estate speculation and a lack of interest in the lands, between the artificiality generated by tourism and the isolation that has achieved its preservation to date, between development and stagnation.

Tlacotalpan as heritage, just like the other Mexican natural and cultural sites that are registered in the UNESCO's list, must have a much greater impact on a local and regional level than on an international one.

The first step in safeguarding the site depends on its own inhabitants. The authorities can establish guidelines for its balanced growth and even regulate actions that preserve the city just as it is today. But the value provided by the wealth of its popular vitality cannot be granted by decree. It is not enough for people to know their city; they have to *recognize* it, that is to say, to *value* it as heritage that makes them proud and they wish to bequeath to future generations in better conditions than those they received it in.

With these thoughts we have sought to show how, despite the danger that threatens this exceptional place, the effort that the city and its

authorities are making to preserve their historic roots intact, its valuable tangible and intangible cultural heritage and its spirit of place will have to culminate in the integral revitalization and preservation of Tlacotalpan.

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