

## FROM THE MESOAMERICAN WORLDVIEW TO CONTEMPORARY "NEW AGE" BELIEFS

### *Teotihuacan, a Paradigmatic Case.*

ILAN VIT-SUZAN,

School of Architecture, University of Texas at Austin

1 University Station B7500, Austin, TX 78712-0222, USA

ilanvit@yahoo.com

**Abstract.** The "Spirit of Place" in Mesoamerica seems to have been generated by a strong inter-connection between landscape, the built environment, pilgrimage, and rituals performed on key dates of a religious cycle. Even though this complex was transposed to Christianity; today, there is a new socio-cultural phenomenon generating a different "Spirit of Place." Understanding this evolution through interpretation will enable its dissemination as a preservation enhancing the protection of cultural landscapes and built environments, as well as, maintaining its intangible nature and potentiality for change.

The study of Mesoamerica in the last decades produced a vast corpus of knowledge enhancing its understanding through advancements in archaeology, epigraphy, and iconography—among other relevant fields. Serious research, surrounded by controversial interpretations and far-fetched hypotheses, swarm the academic realm and popular media. Such increment of data and speculation fuel several cultural phenomena—mainly, among urban middle classes—devoted to restore prehispanic beliefs into modern life. The recovery of this heritage responds to historical needs unfulfilled by the wars of Independence and Revolution, as well as the more recent stages of technological modernization.

This paper explores the "Spirit of Place's" intangible nature and strong potentiality for change in Mexico. The concepts supporting it during prehispanic times, seem to have continued to a certain degree within its present manifestations; although, there are alien influences producing an entirely new phenomenon. The presentation of such transformation introduces the question:

how can we preserve a concept that has such potentiality for change? The answer deals with a high level of complexity, since it deals with belief-systems profoundly rooted in ideological, socio-cultural, and economic idiosyncrasies. It requires an on-going communication process conducted by an interpretation methodology that will enable the "Spirit of Place" to be used as a tool for preservation.

### **1. The Mesoamerican Worldview**

One of the advances in Mesoamerican studies concerns their settlements. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Teotihuacan, Monte Alban, or Tikal's archaeological remains were interpreted as isolated ceremonial centers inhabited only by small groups of elderly priests. By shifting the attention from exploring monumental remains towards their surrounding areas, a new generation of scholars discovered that these sites were "real" urban environments, inhabited by thousands of people. The uncovering of residential units reflecting diverse socio-economic origins unveiled a high level of cultural complexity (Millon 1992).

By the end of the century, the understanding of Mesoamerica's evolution—in a period of nearly three thousand years—recognized the generation of complex cultural traits shared by many ethnic groups. Some of them are "a common calendar based on the permutation of a 260-day sacred round cycle... a 365-day solar year count... hieroglyphic writing systems, bark-paper or deerskin screen-fold manuscripts... extensive astronomical knowledge based on horizon observation, a sacred ritual game played with a rubber ball... and a complex pantheon of gods and goddesses personifying natural forces (Kowalski, 1999:3-4)." One of the current discussions concerned with these traits focuses on their transmission and levels of cultural influence. Many scholars recognize a shared ideology, tradition, and most of all, worldview. The works of Alfredo López-Austin study the way in which these manifestations merged into a common tradition. For him: "The intensity of the connections... produced a shared cultural creation, where ideology, in its widest expression, provided the protection for interests in agreement or confrontation. In this way, a common Mesoamerican culture was built... A common history and several local histories acted dialectically in the formation of a Mesoamerican cosmovision where the diverse variations acquire shades of extraordinary peculiarity (1990:30)."

An astonishing surprise, while visiting any Mesoamerican site, is their powerful connection with the landscape. Their reading of the natural environment as a divine realm propelled them to locate their urban settlements

and shape their public buildings—aligning them to the main topographic "characters"—to generate a powerful link with it. The natural environment's symbolic value, interlocked with their urban settlements, constituted a semiotic system. A few years ago I presented a series of arguments supporting a set of principles that could have been employed in Mesoamerican urbanism. Such arguments came from the study of archaeological reports and ethnohistorical works, as well as, epigraphic and iconographic interpretations. The principles employed to interlock the natural and urban environments, could have been enunciated as: representation of the universe, astronomical observation, recreation of the environment, and materialization of power (Vit 2005). They constituted the physical foundations for a semiotic system in which human participation, through ritual, generated the "Spirit of Place."

Many scholars emphasize religion's role, through ritual engagement, in the consolidation of power, the consolidation of a meaningful existence, and providing hope for divine intervention (Eliade 1954; Jung 1964; Benson 1981; Kowalski 1999). Mircea Eliade identifies in many ancient civilizations—as well as in "primitive" groups—the recreation of "celestial archetypes" in their environments. He describes ceremonies that constituted a "repetition of the cosmogony" and the reenactment of "divine models of rituals"(Eliade 1954). These cultural manifestations are essential components for creating a semiotic code that connects human experience with the divine; such connection in Mesoamerica represents the essence for the "Spirit of Place."

The construction of a shared symbolic realm, within the collective mind, as explored by Ernst Jung stems from the notion that: "Man... never perceives anything fully or comprehends anything completely... No matter what instruments he uses, at some point he reaches the edge of certainty beyond which conscious knowledge cannot pass... even when our senses react to real phenomena, sights, and sounds, they are somehow translated from the realm of reality to that of the mind. Within the mind they become psychic events, whose ultimate nature is unknowable... the unconscious aspect of any event is revealed to us in dreams, where it appears not as a rational thought but as a symbolic image (Jung 1964: 21-3)." Jung's approach constitutes a stronghold for understanding the generation of symbolic systems as a natural consequence to our constant experience of dreaming.

The concepts of these two scholars coincide with the Mesoamerican worldview perfectly. For present-day *Raramuris*—isolated autochthonous groups in Mexico's northern state of Chihuahua, known to the Spaniards as *Tarahumaras*—the dream world constitutes the realm of reality; while being

awake, is merely a pause from it, resting before we return to it the following night. Images of bird-headed humans, or having a crab's head and pincers, engaged in unknown rituals—represented in the murals of Cholula and Bonampak—suggest the coexistence of the dream-world and reality through a dilution of their boundaries. The iconographic programs of many public buildings in several classic sites coincide with some accounts of Mesoamerican "philosophy," revealing a high tendency for a symbolic, lyrical, perception of reality. These are some of the issues propelling me to present a hypothesis of what the "Spirit of Place" could have meant for the Mesoamerican peoples.

The case of Teotihuacan is paradigmatic for this hypothesis. The site is located in a valley where its main three mountains are clearly interlocked with the city's public buildings. The "Avenue of the Dead" aligns the northern "Pyramid of the Moon" with the big mountain behind it and, in the south, with a series of lower hills surrounding a second mountain. Near the Avenue's half, the giant "Pyramid of the Sun" aligns perpendicularly with a small mountain in front of it. From this point, the building and mountain seem to be equal in mass and shape. These alignments recreate the Mesoamerican universe's shape, i.e., four regions and a center. Underneath this Pyramid archaeologists discovered a tunnel stretching from the main façade to its center, where a natural cave was carved as a four-chambered-space (Millon 1992; Doris Heyden in Benson 1981). Hypotheses on the purpose of these alignments are very controversial. Vincent Malmström claims they were conceived to make the Pyramid face the 13th of August sunset (Malmström 1997). This hypothesis is highly provocative when juxtaposed to Rene Millon and Doris Heyden's interpretations of Teotihuacan as the most important Mesoamerican sanctuary during the classic period; identified as the site where time began. For the Mesoamerican worldview, the setting Sun enters the earth's vowels through a volcano or a cave, resurrecting the next morning as it comes out of the underworld. At the time of the Spaniards' arrival to the New World—eight centuries after the mysterious abandonment of Teotihuacan—the Aztec and Maya peoples were still commemorating the 13th of August as the day when all calendars came back to zero; when the Sun, Moon, and Venus' cycles coincided in their completion every fifty two years and could to start simultaneously a new count. The possibility of such hypotheses juxtaposed with Teotihuacan's wide cultural influence, for over half a millennium, could have made it the pilgrimage center par excellence. Attracting thousands of people to participate in a ritual performance that re-enacted the creation of the Sun by the Gods; hence, the birth of time.

Assuming these conditions, when the heavenly bodies reached certain positions, bringing high numbers of pilgrims, and the ceremonies began, then,

the "Spirit of Place" reached its full expression. At that moment, the ritual's performance established its powerful connection between the divine landscape and the built environment reflecting it, in the minds of the pilgrims engaged in full religious ecstasy. In this way, the "Spirit of Place" resided in the collective imagination of a people possessing a common code that unlocked these juxtaposed layers of meaning. It was during those moments that the "Spirit of Place" blossomed; the rest of the time, the "place" remained dormant, waiting for the ritual to awaken its "spirit." An essential component in this experience is pilgrimage's liminal process of spiritual enhancement, through the journey's self-sacrifice (Kaebler 2002).

## **2. Contemporary Mexican "New Age" Beliefs**

Since the mid 1990s, every 21st of March—a date associated with the Spring Equinox—thousands of people swarm Mexico's archaeological sites. Their socioeconomic background is highly heterogeneous, ranging from the educated upper crust of the middle class to very poor indigenous people. However, most of them seem to aim for a common goal: to receive the Sun's "good vibes" transmitted on this day. For some of them such radiation has the "power" to cleanse their spirits and bring "good fortune" for the next year; while, for others it has the "strength" to cure complicated illnesses. By standing atop any Mesoamerican pyramid during this date, the Sun's rays are directly channeled to their bodies.

It is not quite clear how this cultural phenomenon started. One of the events that triggered it was a ceremony by the Dalai Lama to "awaken" Mexico's spirituality, performed at Teotihuacan on such a date. For many cultural organizations, based in Mexico City's popular neighborhoods, the event was perceived as an imposition by members of the high class educated elite. The event became a political confrontation between several groups trying to determine the rightful ownership of the site's cultural and symbolic vocation. Many groups asked their members to come dressed all in white with red belts and bandanas. Since then, this combination has become the official attire used on this date. The cultural clash between these groups in 1990 and 1992 was widely publicized, transforming it into a pop-phenomenon that triggered the high levels of attendance during the rest of the decade.

By the end of the decade, the National Institute of Anthropology and History (INAH, for its initials in Spanish) was dealing with highly relevant preservation,

management, and organization challenges trying to solve such massive attendances in Teotihuacan, Chichen Itza, and El Tajin. At these sites, the 21st of March had become a cultural and religious festival of a National scale, with several activities, vendors, and "pilgrims" carrying out activities in extremely fragile archaeological reservoirs. The main attractions were the big monuments, i.e., the "pyramids." Since many people are convinced that in their summits at mid-day, the Sun's cosmic rays, enhanced by the pyramids power to connect them to their bodies, acting like "super-conductors," cleanses their deeds and illnesses, conveying a spiritual sphere of protection.

Many of these accounts and descriptions were gathered by a team of anthropology, ethnography, and preservation students conducting a series of surveys, interviews and observations during the Spring Equinoxes of 2006 and 2007. Throughout these two years, I was part of Rogelio Rivero's management team at Teotihuacan; as Technical Sub-director I was responsible for all the academic endeavors at the site. On any given Sunday during this period, small groups of people would come to the site dressed with the same red and white attire and bringing along candles, conch shells, and incense, as well as crucifixes and acrylic pyramids—abstract Platonic forms resembling the Egyptian pyramids—to perform cleansing and meditation ceremonies. In one of these ceremonies, the *curandero* or shaman, while guiding the meditation asking for help to heal the family's sick members, said: "...just as our ancestors, the Aryans, did it, we now..." The combination of artifacts and the historical incongruity of this comment made me think of truly Post-modern notions underlying a new beliefs-system forged with so many diverse sources. While there were traditional components stretching forward from ancient times, others clearly showed a high level of confusion that seemed to be transfused from popular media and "spiritual" merchandizing.

We shall need more serious studies to identify the process that generated such a fascinating transformation of Mexico's beliefs-system. The most interesting component is the presence of so many elements, from the Mesoamerican worldview, through Christianity's influence, into a "New Age." Given the scope of this paper and of my scholarship, I will only trace some of the main issues that seem to underlie such process. In a certain way, many of the essential components of these cultural manifestations were present in Mesoamerica; they were ingeniously transposed into Christianity by the Spanish theologians of the early sixteenth century. In Octavio Paz lyric study of the Mexican character, *The Labyrinth of Solitude*, he identifies this heterogeneous constitution: "In our territory not only different races and languages live with each other, but, several historical levels as well. There are those who live in a

state prior to history; others, like the otomies, displaced by successive invasions, live on the verge of it (1950: 13)." The indigenous group, known to the Spaniards as *Otomies*, represents one of the most enduring cases of cultural resistance. For some scholars their ancestors could have been one of Teotihuacan's main ethnic groups. Their present-day condition testifies the neglect and abandonment of half a millennium. They also represent the way in which Christianity transformed Mesoamerica. They embraced it as an effort to find protection from abusive *conquistadores*, as well as hoping that this new religion might save them from the terrible epidemics taking the lives of nearly 90% of the Mesoamerican population, in less than forty years. These were the conditions in which the process of *mestizaje*—the mix of Indians and Spaniards—began to shape the contemporary Mexican people.

López-Austin has devoted many years of study to determine the dissolution or continuity of Mesoamerican beliefs within Christianity. He believes that "...the present Indian religions of Mexico are not contemporary versions of the Mesoamerican religion... however, to a high degree, they do stem from it... they proceed equally from the Mesoamerican religion and Christianity; but, the Colony's history separated considerably both sources, which, by the way, are so different (1990: 38)." For centuries, the indigenous cultures of Mexico have been set aside from the Nation's advancement. During the *Zapatista* uprising of 1994 in Chiapas, "*Sub-comandante* Marcos" demanded, in the name of all the Indian peoples: equality, autonomy, and respect for their own beliefs-system. These claims remained unanswered since "the long night of five hundred years." The wars of Independence and Revolution promised a new, more inclusive, social organization. But, neither fulfilled such promises. This profound inequality has been ubiquitous throughout Mexican history. By the end of the 1960s, the student demonstrations, tragically ending via institutionalized repression, materialized again the hope for equality and freedom. The end of that social and political movement, fueled by a generation of middle-class students from the two great public institutions—Mexico's National Autonomous University (UNAM) and National Polytechnic Institute—, slowly produced this new cultural phenomenon manifested by the massive attendance to archaeological sites during the 21st of March.

During the Equinox of 2006, one of the student surveyors reported a conversation with a sixty year old woman of humble origins that brought her mentally-sick granddaughter to see if the "pyramid" could heal her. This case is quite illuminating, because it reveals a Mesoamerican belief, absorbed by Christianity, re-emerging in a "New Age" version. This notion of divine healing power is inherent to many saints and different manifestations of the Virgin Mary.

Most of them are confluences of Mesoamerican Gods and rites into the Christian religious complex. The clearest example is the Virgin of Guadalupe as an incarnation of *Tonantzin*, the Aztec earth-mother Goddess. During the last half millennium she has been Mexico's healer and protector. Every 12th of December more than a million pilgrims cross the country to worship her at one of the oldest Christianized Mesoamerican shrines. The belief that such healing power resides as well in Mesoamerican pyramids seems completely new. It constitutes a revalorization and restoration of a neglected past; even though such phenomenon is more persistent in urban middle-classes, the heterogeneity of people attending the sites during the Spring Equinox reflects a deeper set of circumstances. Among them, many indigenous people, less influenced by media pressure, seem to be searching for "...effective participation in structuring ecclesiastic experiences and spaces for a wider creativity and autonomy," needs that Christianity has not been able to provide in the last half century (Puentes-Lutteroth, 1994: 241). This new exploration for spirituality seems to emanate from the recognition that Christianity no longer provides the answers, comfort, and needs for people that need to restore their spiritual heritage. A tradition devaluated during the "long night" mentioned by Marcos that is looking for ways in which to materialize a new spiritual path for Mexico's contemporary society.

### **3. How to protect the "Spirit of Place" in this context**

The questions lingering in my mind at this point are: how can we protect a concept with such potentiality for change? Should we re-evaluate our preservation standards and allow this level of transformation? And finally, the most interesting question: By exposing this fascinating process of transformation, can we use it to enhance the protection of sites where it seems to reside? The answer to this question could be the seed for interpretation programs aiming to protect the complex as a whole, i.e., cultural landscape + built environment + ritual. If we explain the way in which semiotic codes have evolved through time, transforming a site that used to be perceived as "the place where time began" to an extremely powerful healing center, we should be able to enhance the sensibility for protecting such a place. The process needing to be preserved is the one enabling the transformation of such codes. Donald Preziosi recognizes: "One of the most striking aspects of architectonic codes induced by their formative media is a property of *object-permanence*... [they] manifest a permanence of 'broadcast' *relative* to other systems of signing... [they] will



continue to broadcast long after the more ephemeral transmissions of a speech act" (1979: 6). This capability allows future generations to generate new layers of meaning within an already inter-connected system. Teotihuacan is the best example of this re-utilization. Exposing this process should enable the preservation of these sites and maintain its "Spirit of Place."

The material components of these sites—natural landscape and built environment—have their own preservation tools; most of all, the legal frameworks conceived for the protection of cultural landscapes, as they have evolved from the World Heritage Convention of 1972 (Eidsvik 1993). The protection of built environments has a long history and vast legal corpus stretching back to the Venice Charter. Unfortunately, the real challenge begins with their implementation and enactment. Mexico's legal and political environment, at the local level, lacks the sensibility or propensity for heritage's protection, much less for the intangible. Preservation's everyday practice ends up cornered by economic and political interests; these conditions disable a real implementation of preservation goals.

However, the use of this highly poetic concept, "Spirit of Place," touching the "chords" of this new beliefs-system promises to raise the sensibility for preservation. In 2006 INAH's first attempt to diminish the high attendance to these sites, claimed that there was no "scientific data" showing that the Pyramids had such power. The next year we convinced our superiors to attempt a more direct message within the concepts of this new beliefs-system, suggesting that such power was present all year; so, there was no need to attend in a specific date. Accepting this condition would help the sites' preservation. That year we had the lowest attendance in the last fifteen years. There were other reasons behind it as well, but it proved that a better understanding of the socio-cultural phenomenon underlying it and communicating within its concepts had a strong "resonance" on the visitors. This kind of experiences encourages the employment of "Interpretation" to awaken such sensibilities. Since Freeman Tilden's foundational study up to the most recent "ICOMOS Charter for the Interpretation and Presentation of Cultural Heritage Sites" (ICOMOS-Ename, 2008), its potentiality to generate a powerful connection with heritage through understanding, seems to be the "Spirit of Place's" strongest ally.

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