

## **VERNACULAR ARCHITECTURE AND INTANGIBLE HERITAGE IN MEXICO** **Valeria PRIETO\*, Mexique / Mexico**

Over the past decade, important vernacular heritage buildings have increasingly disappeared due to the absence of laws to protect them as well as to the impact of urban culture, which is seen by the population as the paradigm of progress. In spite of the destruction of a significant part of this heritage, examples still exist of the close link between built heritage and the broad mosaic of traditions and customs that shape intangible heritage and which to a great extent have defined the architectural spaces of houses, neighborhoods and towns. Mayan houses are just one example: inside, altars devoted to the local patron or family saint are placed in the most venerated part of the dwelling.

In Mexico, the greater presence of intangible heritage in rural areas is tied to religious practice. Syncretism plays an increasingly important role in it, especially in indigenous communities. An example is San Juan Chamula in the State of Chiapas: there, Christian representations venerated in the local church are dressed up in native costumes similar to those worn by the men and women of the region. Their rites thus manifest the presence of their own indigenous culture before the arrival of the Spaniards. A close link exists between religious ceremonies and open spaces: in the spacious atrium in front of the church, an ancient ritual takes place during which modern-day Indians ride horses around the main plaza, its size and orientation obeying profoundly indigenous religious symbols. Even though many of these expressions have lost strength under the impact of tourism, the core of these rituals and traditions goes back to pre-Columbian times.

One of the most outstanding examples of the transformation of intangible heritage into a tourist product is the cult of the dead during the Day of the Dead celebration on the island of Imitzio on Lake Pátzcuaro, Michoacán. The festivity takes place on the night of November second, when family and friends gather to mourn their dead in the cemetery. To honor their ancestors, highly ornamented altars, decorated with colorful paper cutouts, are set up in tombs and houses. Traditional dishes and beverages are placed as offerings on the altars to honor the spirits that "visit the world of the living for one night every year." The next day friends and family savor the delicious dishes; people from the town and neighboring areas come to the celebration, as well as many foreign and national visitors. In this case, because of the way in which the tradition of the Day of the Dead has been upheld, the houses, streets and landscape—which make up the vernacular heritage of the small island and the town of Pátzcuaro—have been preserved to a great degree.

In every rural community in the country, popular religious festivities are celebrated in which the dances and music also recall pre-Columbian tradition. The dances—accompanied by fireworks, colorful dresses and masks—take place in the atriums of old Christian convents, many of which are historical monuments that date from the 16<sup>th</sup> century. In rural communities that still preserve their vernacular architecture, pilgrimages are made to places where certain religious images are venerated. Such is the case of Ixhuacan de los Reyes in the State of Veracruz, where the Virgin of the Calvary is venerated, attracting many pilgrims every year. The pilgrim route is determined by this tradition and is reflected by the preservation of the traditional road and the disposition of the facades. In this case, intangible heritage has promoted the preservation of vernacular heritage and the pleasure in its maintenance.

In the calendar of rural communities, religious festivities are a cultural high point. The community is organized in different groups that prepare the celebration of the festivity: pilgrimages, music, dance, beverages, food and traditional costumes once again come out of kitchens and wardrobes.

Another example of intangible heritage is evident in the parks and gardens of vernacular towns where the music of the local band can be heard playing traditional tunes in the kiosk in the park on Sundays.

Diverse dishes are still prepared in vernacular kitchens according to each region's culinary traditions. These kitchens have preserved clay ovens to cook bread, the *tlecuil* to prepare food for the family, the *comal* for the obligatory tortillas, big pots for the *mole* and the rice, the *metates* and *molcajetes* for the sauces, the *cuexcomate* or granary to store maize, indispensable in the Mexican diet. These utensils and culinary traditions have both been preserved thanks to the pleasure they provide.

However, the impact of urban growth, economic resources provided by migrant workers in the city or abroad, and the use of industrial materials foreign to the local environment are destroying a large part of the built heritage, which is the framework of intangible heritage, therefore endangering both.

Even though these immaterial manifestations of culture are preserved, the impact of globalization and of completely foreign cultures is reaching even the most remote towns of the country, slowly destroying ancestral Mexican traditions. Here are some examples:

### Food

The large-scale introduction of prepared food products from the United States, such as hamburgers and Coke (fast food), has taken root in various cities and even in vernacular communities, gradually substituting traditional dishes like the famous *tacos*, *sopes*, *quesadillas* and other culinary delicacies that are part of the Mexican heritage. Eating-places that are alien to the inhabitants' cultural context become "junk" buildings that destroy the landscape and threaten built and intangible heritage.

### Music

Even in rural communities that are far from the cities, recordings of American music played by foreign bands can be heard. Although Mexican popular music has for years reached countries as far away from us as Japan, the influence of North American music has eliminated the use of *chirimías* (indigenous flute) and Spanish guitar. However, certain local musical traditions such as "*ranchera*" music and the *corrido* that arose from the 1910 revolution are still being listened to in many regions of the country.

### Dance

Throughout history, several tendencies have enriched traditional dance heritage in different areas of the country. For example, *danzón*, which came from Cuba and was first adopted in the port of Veracruz and later in Mexico City, is still danced in popular dance halls and is a rich Mexican tradition. Other dances that became symbols of Mexican nationality since 1900, such as the Jarabe Tapatio, are rarely performed and then only at folk festivals. Dance and music are part of Mexican festivities, but many are not native or do not correspond to those adopted centuries ago, and instead are rhythms that are completely foreign to our identity. Until a few years ago, festivities took place in the parks of small rural communities. Today, on the other hand, huge dance halls are built, contributing to the destruction of urban fabric and negatively affecting the locality's vernacular landscape heritage.

### Trade

In rural communities traditional trade takes place in the markets or *tianguis* that are set up weekly in every medium-sized community and which attract not only the local inhabitants but also people from smaller neighboring towns. There, often barter is still used instead of money, and the units of measure—for example for the sale of corn—are very old, predating the current system of weights and measures. The Indian tradition of selling livestock such as mules, turkeys, rabbits, and hens, is kept alive in these markets, but supermarkets and large convenience stores in urban areas are making the old marketplace seem outdated. Supermarket buildings also contribute to the destruction of landscape and buildings of vernacular heritage.

From this brief analysis, we can conclude that immaterial heritage is closely linked to built heritage, both in a historical and a vernacular sense. Therefore, in view of the changes brought by the economy and technology that have led to an accelerated 'trans-culturation', ICOMOS and its members should undertake serious educational and legislative efforts to preserve intangible heritage and the material spaces where it is performed.

## ABSTRACT

The architectonic vernacular heritage in Mexico of both urban and rural villages has very strong links with the intangible culture of villages and towns throughout the country. Traditions and ways of life that were present even before the Spaniards arrival adds importance to consider this as a significant cultural building heritage.

There are many ways to recognize this invisible heritage: the Christian holidays, where the ancient indigenous rites are mixed with the catholic religion; in the music and dances that have been preserved for many centuries, and in the meaning that some sites represent to them, for instance, the main plaza where many of the "fiestas" take place or small but miraculous churches where principal saints are venerated. Intangible heritage is part of the built architectural spaces in Mexico nowadays.

In rural villages and even in many popular urban areas pilgrim ceremonies are made towards the sites where a saint is venerated. Such is the case of Ixhuacán de los Reyes in Veracruz where the Virgen de los Remedios, believed to be miraculous, once a year attracts a large number of faithful believers. The route that pilgrims follow has a special meaning represented both in the traditional pavement and in the facades ornamentation.

However many of these traditions and material heritage are threatened by the quick expansion of the way of life globalization transmits. Global culture influence reaches the smallest and the most outer villages in Mexico. Negative social transformations and lost of quality of life result from this cultural impact. Among others, the ancient streets and shapes of the original *traza* of the villages, the community buildings and open spaces like the market places which exist since the indigenous times, experience deterioration that changes the surrounding landscape and natural context of an entire village.

The relations between the material and immaterial heritage are broken and foreign ways of life replace the local ones. As a consequence local people loose an important part of their identity; the one linked to the soil. Part of their regional values becomes mixed with a wrongly understood modernity. This cultural phenomena puts in serious risk to vernacular architecture and natural heritage.

**\*Valeria PRIETO**

Valeria Prieto has occupied official positions for the Mexican Government such as the Ministry of Human Settlements and Public Works. She has been involved in preservation of vernacular Mexican architecture through "Vernacular Architecture and Heritage", a civil association founded by herself in 1995. She has written several articles and presented papers on a broad range of subjects related to the preservation of the vernacular built environment.

Graduated from Mexico National Autonomous University, Valeria Prieto has been teaching at the Faculty of Architecture during the last years.

Well known as the pioneer on the vernacular architecture in Mexico, among published works of hers are *Vivienda campesina en México* (Rural housing in Mexico) and *Arquitectura Popular Mexicana* (Mexican Popular Architecture).

Valeria Prieto is member of the National Academy of Architecture, the Mexican Society of Geography and Statistics, the Executive Committee of ICOMOS Mexico, and the International Committee of Vernacular Architecture, CIAV.