

# Damage to the Cultural Heritage and Community Life of Hueyapan



▲ The Popocatepetl Volcano.

Indigenous communities in the state of Morelos suffered great loss of human life and family property in the most recent earthquakes. But in addition to that, they also suffered damage to their public buildings and monuments, many of which are catalogued as part of our nation's cultural heritage by the National Institute for Anthropology and History (INAH) or even as World Cultural Heritage Treasures by the United Nations Education, Science, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Most of these buildings are of enormous historical and artistic value for the Mexican state, but, above all, they are invaluable to Morelos's traditional communities. From time immemorial, they have lived their lives in

these buildings, the architectural landscape that accompanies them in their daily lives and are the venues for significant life events. These buildings, then, are the framework for the community lives of natives and visitors alike.

This seriously damaged cultural heritage includes churches and former monasteries, which from the standpoint of identity and symbolism play a fundamental role

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\* Guest professor-researcher at the Autonomous University of the State of Morelos Center for Research in Social Sciences and Regional Studies; riclaupacheco@yahoo.com.mx.

All photos are by the author.

in local religious and community life. This is where many of people's life events take place in religious ceremonies like baptisms, confirmations, first communions, weddings, and funerals. Other kinds of activities no less important for local residents also take place there: community festivities like patron saints' day fiestas, Holy Week, celebrations for the Day of the Dead, and an endless number of collective events on the religious calendar throughout the year that bring the faithful together.

According to the INAH, in Morelos and other states like Oaxaca, Puebla, and the State of Mexico, as well as Mexico City itself, a large number of these kinds of buildings were gravely damaged. In Morelos, at least 300 of the existing 400 cultural heritage buildings, or 75 percent, were damaged.



▲ Saint Domingo, patron saint of Hueyapan.

The damage ranges from simple things, like plaster falling off walls, to complicated structural damage like the collapse of whole parts of buildings, like bell-towers, domes, and vaults. INAH specialists have stated that the colonial heritage, particularly from the sixteenth century, was fairly resistant, but that additions to the buildings made in later centuries could not withstand the sharp movement of the September 19 earthquake.

The catalogue of Morelos's historic monuments includes pre-Hispanic and colonial buildings, in addition to constructions from the period around the time of Independence and the Mexican Revolution. Most of the damage was to religious buildings, some from the colonial period. These venues are still used for worship today and, as mentioned above, are the center for social activities, with enormous significance for the population because they are symbols of unity, identity, pride, and festivity, where a large part of local traditions and beliefs are sheltered. They are home to images of virgins, Christ statues, and saints, effigies, and relics, which for community residents have a much more profound value than that recognized by anthropology, history, and culture: for them they take on the dimension of divinities that are venerated and respected, and to which they dedicate a large part of their lives.

For all these reasons and because they are the home to their deities, it was local residents themselves who rescued from beneath the rubble of the damaged buildings the images of "their" saints and all manner of religious furnishings. In some cases, the collapse affected altarpieces and niches, which in addition to affecting the material cultural heritage, injured one of the community's most heartfelt heritages, their popular religiosity.

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▲ Municipal office building after the quake.

In the days and weeks after the earthquake, I tried to contact people I knew and friends in the state's rural areas, particularly after what had happened began to go viral on social media.

One of the people I was able to speak to from the community of Coatetelco in the southern part of the state, after telling me that fortunately her family was well, asked, to my surprise, if I knew anyone who could help them rebuild their church. In the midst of such an unusual event, even for them, this shows the importance religious spaces have for these communities.

Among the religious buildings and architecture damaged in Morelos are the 11 sixteenth-century former monasteries declared Cultural Heritage Treasures by the UNESCO. They are icons of culture and bastions of tourism in the state. The most seriously damaged monasteries are Our Lady of the Nativity in Tepoztlán; Saint John the

Baptist in Tlayacapan, and Santo Domingo in Hueyapan. All are located in the northern part of the state and are part of the monastery tourist route.

Hueyapan is especially important to me. It is a town of Nahua indigenous tradition located on the slopes of the Popocatepetl Volcano, where I did ethnographic research in 2012. This was one of the towns most affected by the earthquake due to its proximity to the epicenter, located in the southeastern part of the Axochiapan, Morelos, municipality, on the border with the state of Puebla. Many homes were damaged, as well as the monastery, founded in 1529.

Hueyapan and its people are accustomed to living with a certain degree of risk because of their proximity to the Popocatepetl Volcano and its constant activity, which increased toward the end of the last century—in fact, in 1994, the town was evacuated. But the day of the



▲ Homes that disappeared after the quake.

**The destruction of the church or Santo Domingo Monastery has become a symbol and distillation of the harsh blow dealt the town by the earthquake.**

earthquake, they experienced something new, which severely impacted most of the houses in the town and caused serious damage to the monastery:<sup>1</sup> its dome collapsed and the bell tower suffered severe damage.

The material damage to the religious building was shocking for the town; but, in addition, inside the church, a vigil was being held for a recently deceased person, which constituted that individual's "double death," seen as a bad omen by the townspeople. Although Hueyapan

did not suffer any loss of life, the morning of that day, there was activity in the church, as one inhabitant describes:

Nothing like that had ever happened before. Take, for example, the churches. Never in all my 60 years had I seen anything like it: the dome collapsed and so did the bell tower. That day there was a vigil for a dead person; it was a miracle because the church was full of people and only two or three of them got hit on the head, but not the rest. The funeral mass was scheduled and the body was under the dome, and when the earth started to shake, the dome came down on him; all those stones fell on him. They didn't even buy him a coffin after that; the Coroner's Service came and

they just put him in a bag. They're the ones who picked him up because they wouldn't let anyone back into the church. He died for a second time because he had died early in the morning that same day, like around 8 a.m. Two women did fall down, and everybody just went right over them running out of the church, but fortunately no one died. This is our second life; we've been reborn. Everybody's time comes, and that was today for all of us; that's how we react, everybody the same; nobody is bigger or less important than anybody else: we're all worth the same. Well, with regard to material things, maybe some have more than others; but those things are secondary. They get left behind, while we don't. If we work as a team, we're more.



Four months after the earthquake, the unofficial figures state that 90 percent of the houses in the town were damaged in some way. Many of the neighborhoods changed the way they look; they're unrecognizable because a large number of adobe constructions just disappeared and the rubble has been removed. The neighborhoods look a little desolate, if we add to that a landscape of tents and blue shelters donated by the Chinese government, where some families have fended off a harsh winter in an area 2 300 meters above sea level on the slopes of the Popocatepetl Volcano.

In addition to the material losses and the damage to homes, the destruction of the church or Santo Domingo Monastery has become a symbol and distillation of the harsh blow dealt the town by the earthquake. Even now, it remains closed, although, like in the majority of the towns, religious activities have been transferred to improvised spaces in their atria. This masks somewhat the generalized feeling of irreparable loss, despite government policies to safeguard, protect, and restore the cultural heritage that the earthquake hit so hard.

One of the INAH's first tasks has been to strengthen the structures that did not fall down, shoring up damaged towers, domes, or walls that are standing but still at risk of collapse. This is a huge undertaking, and later, reconstruction and restoration activities will be added, none of which will be easy and in the best of cases will take years, postponing the return to normal religious and community life, rituals, and fiestas in these towns.

It is difficult for the communities to understand or even accept that buildings as old as these have been gravely damaged since they are colossal structures with thick walls that down through the centuries have accompanied the lives of many generations, silent witnesses to history. In the face of these unfortunate events, the processes of resilience and adaptation have begun, like in Coatetelco, where, even with a church in ruins, the dances of the Tecuanes were carried out during the fiesta of Our Lady of Candelaria, and in several other towns where people say "the fiesta and Carnival will go on." **NMM**

## Notes

**1** Declared a World Heritage Treasure in 1994, the Santo Domingo Monastery was one of the first built in sixteenth-century Mexico; its flat tile roof and austere lines make it stand out.