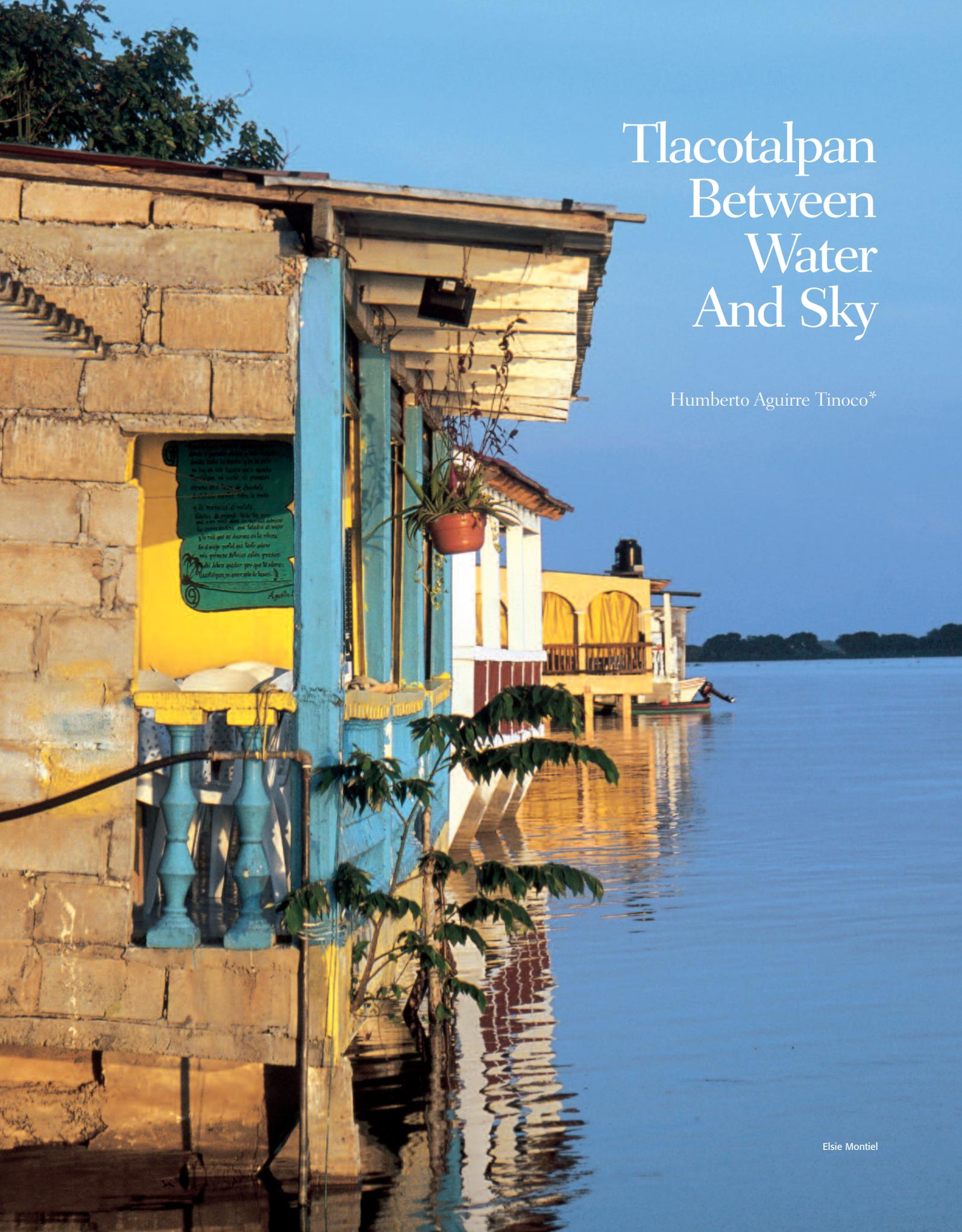


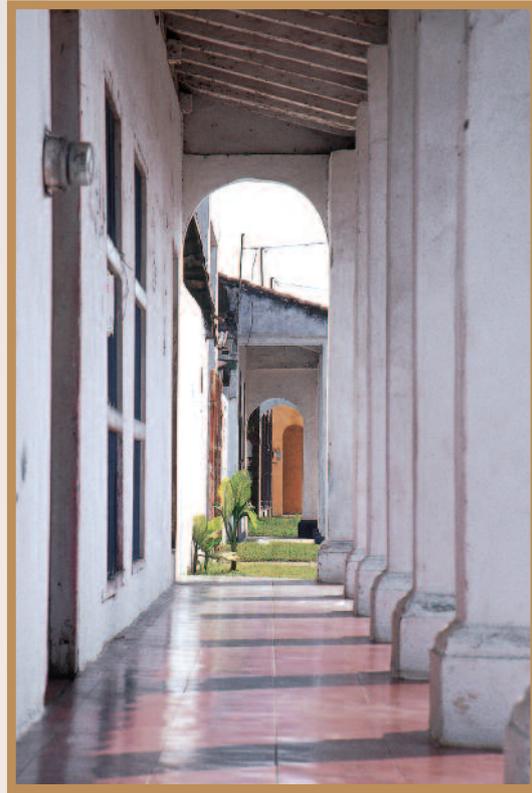
Tlacotalpan Between Water And Sky

Humberto Aguirre Tinoco*





Daniel Munguia



Daniel Munguia

On the left bank of the flowing Papaloapan River, just across from the point where the San Michapan River tributary feeds into it from Oaxaca's Mije area and that simultaneously drains an important part of the Tuxtla lands, is Tlacotalpan. Other tributaries flowing from Oaxaca's Sierra Madre, from the Puebla Mountains and from the Citlaltépetl or Orizaba Volcano, as well as the Blanco River, which empties out into Alvarado's large salt water lagoon right where the Papaloapan spills into the Gulf of Mexico, all made this place a tranquil internal port. Both river and sea-going vessels came here from places in the Caribbean, North America and also Europe, like Havana, New Orleans, and the United States' Eastern Seaboard, as well as Cadiz, Guinea, the Canary Islands, Cartagena de Indias and Cabo Verde.

Tlacotalpan soon became a comfortable port enclave whose territory included the Papaloapan River basin that covers part of Veracruz, Oaxaca and Puebla, connected by the flow of their rivers into the majestic Papaloapan.

* Mexican architect.

With this natural gate of access, Tlacotalpan was an inland port that offered excellent shelter from the piracy that proliferated in the Caribbean and permanently threatened Gulf of Mexico coasts. This made it important as a lookout point and a center for storing goods and the construction materials needed to build a wall around Veracruz, gun carriages for canon and a ship yard. The local militia mounted permanent guard against possible raids by pirates who arrived on the coast and used the Sontecomapa natural bay as a hideout. For years, piracy also plagued the neighboring port of Alvarado; thus in both places, residents developed a hard-working, vigilant attitude.

Coastal residents were made up of the descendants of Spanish sailors, mestizos, indigenous and freed blacks; all together they formed the so-called "Jarocho" clan, known for their sharp, extroverted characters, men on horseback who experienced the privilege of being and feeling free in their vast territory of the Sotavento Coast under a shimmering tropical sun. Its people, of light blue eyes and tanned skin, inherited the tradition of playing the harp and tambourines. And, emulating gypsy airs and dances and Andalusian fandangos,



Seeing Tlacotalpan is returning to bygone days, not carried by nostalgia, but by the desire to enter into a reality in a retrospective dimension.



Daniel Munguía



Daniel Munguía



Daniel Munguia



Daniel Munguia



Susana Casarin

they spent their time in “*areytos*,” or festivities, always gay and wild under the glimmering starry night.

BETWEEN WATER AND SKY

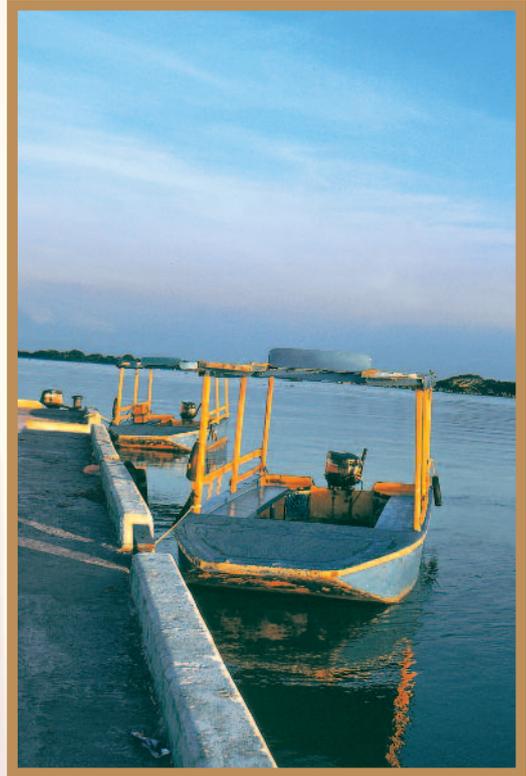
“Just by standing on this land, you become my brother!” says a Tlacotalpan proverb. And, in effect, Tlacotalpan is hospitality, smiles and good living. Julio Sesto, a romantic Spanish poet who visited the town, wrote, “Oh, my brother, if you are weary of suffering, go to the Papaloapan, take the air of the Sotavento; everything is cured in Tlacotalpan, everything forgotten. The soul that when injured is incurable is cured!” And Mexican writer Elena Poniatowska says, “When I want to smile, I remember Tlacotalpan; when you pronounce the word Tla-co-tal-pan, it’s as though you wash your face and laughter comes in!”

And this is because seeing Tlacotalpan on the banks of Mexico’s most beautiful river, the broad Papaloapan (meaning River of the Sun Butterfly), is returning to bygone days, not carried by nostalgia, but by the desire to enter into a reality in a retrospective dimension, to live, feel and move through a city placid by definition. Full of affection for visitors, all the city’s inhabitants greet each other, converse out loud, report, invent, smile and enjoy the scene their city offers. It became a “villa” in 1846 when it began to stand out as a deep-water port and commercial hub, a center of attraction for industrious colonizers. Fifty years later, it already had parks, churches, a theater, a Moorish kiosk, a hospital, tram lines, a children’s park, a five-nave market with products from the air, the land and the sea on sale for the tumultuous crowds visiting it; balloons were launched from there and a band played for the “market dances.”

Later, the steam boats, sailboats and canoes stopped appearing and were replaced by the access by highway. Tlacotalpan changed its means of communication but not its life: there you wander through the streets of an evening; beautiful sunsets color with all the hues of the spectrum the arched walkways and buildings along



Susana Casarin



Elsie Montiel

Enjoying a boat ride is a must in this river city, as is strolling on the arch-covered walkways and listening to jarana and harp music.

the river, tranquil in the dry season, but raging and swelling in the floods that make Tlacotalpan a little Venice; and that is how it looks from its river between the sky and the water.

Enjoying a boat ride is a must in this river city, as is strolling on the arch-covered walkways, as legendary a tradition as those of Veracruz, and visiting the Salvador Ferrando Museum, with its paintings, furniture, costumes and Jarocho literature. Listening to jarana and harp music at the fandango festivities, visiting the House of Culture with its important stock of symbolist painting and its space “Lara for Lara Lovers,” with objects that belonged to the poet-musician Agustín Lara, a recalcitrant Tlacotalpan native, are all *de rigueur*, as is visiting the bar where Agustín chatted with his friends and relatives.

Tlacotalpan is still a trip to a good meal of exquisite shellfish, delicious almond and walnut sweets and traditional beverages like *refinos* or *toritos*. The Candlemas fiestas are exceptional, the splendid gallop of 300 pairs of horses entering the town in the late-nineteenth-century style, the bulls that run wild through the streets like in ancient Crete’s labyrinth, the triumphal procession of the Virgin Mary sailing like the brotherhoods used to when

it was done by sailboat in the waters of the Caribbean in the stories of writer Germán Arciniegas.

Now as in the past, a new generation of pretty young Tlacotalpan girls graces attendance at Sunday mass as can only be seen in the provinces... “Oh, my adored homeland!” said Josefa Murillo, the last romantic poet, in the nineteenth century. “When I see you, my soul is pleased and rises up, grateful. Who should conquer laurels to leave you as an offering at life’s end!”

Tlacotalpan, as opposed to big cities, is quiet, spiritual expansion, the delight in leisurely living, and facing vicissitudes with wise philosophy strengthened by integrity. Does nature not glitter like the first day in paradise?

This is a city in which even today, something hidden remains to be discovered. Many, after visiting it, return home with the sadness that comes from not having been born there.

TLACOTALPAN AND THE GREAT CARIBBEAN

This small city has been classified as such since May 9, 1865, when the government of the republic bestowed upon it this honor in recognition of

the patriotism of its sons and citizens, who defended it for three years against Napoleon III's French imperialist hosts, who invaded our country in the times of republican President Benito Juárez. Tlacotalpan is the fifth largest city in the state of Veracruz. When peace came to Mexico, Tlacotalpan entered a very important stage of its development as a community, both economically and culturally. Its port opened up to ships to establish foreign trade with the United States and France when the Mexico-Veracruz railroad was inaugurated in 1872. Soon the economic impact of the railroad became clear: the port of Tlacotalpan was called upon to be Mexico's New Orleans due to the number of ships that anchored there. By that time, the town had a hotel and a bath house, a photographer's studio and a local bi-weekly newspaper.

Its historic downtown area has maintained the Renaissance layout "for the foundation and establishment of towns" dictated by Felipe II of Spain in the so-called "Laws of the Indies." With its Plaza de Armas, municipal building and royal jail, as well as the blocks reserved for dwellings laid out as on a chess board fanning out from the downtown area and the royal house.

Given that in the beginning access was mainly by the Papaloapan River, on the left shore to the south of the city center, the edge of the river was deep enough to accommodate ships and had a

dock that still exists on the same site; there was also a dry dock with shipyards for repairing ships, and a beach for mooring river boats.

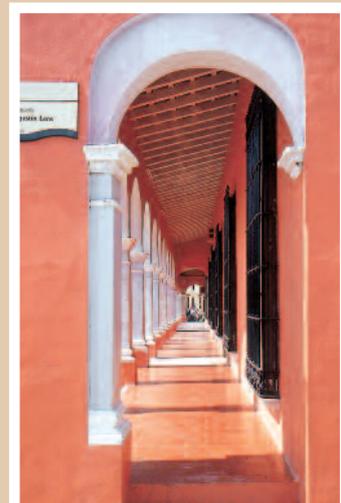
Tlacotalpan was also connected by the royal road to the west with the haciendas and ranches sprinkled around it that still exist in both the river areas.

Aside from the Patron Saint Cristóbal parish church, facing east in the *villa's* historic downtown, the city has another religious center in the San Miguel Archangel Neighborhood, which belonged to the indigenous community and their Republic of Natives, located outside the town itself, where the Spanish and mestizo subjects, or "the people of reason" as they were called then, lived. They got away with this kind of nomenclature in the times of New Spain.

It only remains to succinctly refer to the imponderable values of Tlacotalpan architecture, which corresponds to the great growth of architecture in the so-called Grand Caribbean, with metropolises in Santo Domingo, Cartagena de Indias, San Cristóbal de la Habana, Santiago de Cuba and many more that drank from the same well of architectural and urban concepts. The important vernacular construction that identifies it is based on Leonardo da Vinci's canons using auric proportions. It is an architecture that developed for over 400 years in our America. **MM**



Daniel Munguía



Daniel Munguía