

Photos by Fidel Ugarte

LAND USE AND THE RESTORATION OF THE EX-CONVENT OF SANTO DOMINGO DE GUZMÁN, OAXACA

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After the conquistadors subdued the indigenous population militarily and the so-called spiritual conquest of what is now Mexico began, a town for Spaniards was founded in Oaxaca which affected the interests of

Hernán Cortés, the Marquis del Valle. In 1526, the inhabitants of newly founded Antequera petitioned King Charles V successfully for a decree giving Villa de Antequera the status of a town. However, it was not until April

1553 that it was recognized as a city.¹

This established a division between the city of Oaxaca del Marqués for the indigenous inhabitants and Antequera del Rey for the Spaniards,

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¹ Carlos Velasco Pérez, *La conquista armada y espiritual de la Nueva Antequera (1532-1982)*, Mexico, Progreso, 1982.

which lasted until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The city was originally planned by the geometrician Alonso García Bravo who had also laid out Mexico City and Veracruz. For Oaxaca, he drew a checker-board with 80-vara blocks² spreading out from a central module. To the north of this center, the cathedral was built, to the south, the government palace, and on the sides, the most important homes with portals for stores.

The original use of the land and buildings changed considerably with time, affecting many important buildings: among others, the Government Palace, the Cathedral, the Municipal Palace, the Palace of the ex-Bishopric, the San Juan de Dios and San Francisco Churches, the Church and ex-Convent of San Agustín, the ex-Convent of the Seven Princes or Santa María de los Ángeles Convent, the La Merced Church and ex-Convent, the Santa Catalina ex-Convent, the Carmen el Alto Church, what is today the Museum-Home of Benito Juárez, the La Soledad Church, the ex-convent adjacent to the ex-Convent of San José, the El Carmen Bajo Church, the colonial home located at 503 Morelos Street and, of course, the Church and ex-Convent of Santo Domingo, which is our topic in this article.

Throughout its history, Oaxaca “had to adapt not only to topographic conditions, but also to a

great extent to the conditions of the subsoil. This made the city and its buildings constantly adapt and rebuild.”³ From the sixteenth century on, after the design of its main downtown area, it continued to expand in the checker-board pattern. By the eighteenth century, the city had established itself as strategic and became the third most important in New Spain. Its economic growth was matched by a great capacity for construction and remodeling of religious and public buildings, an upsurge which continued until

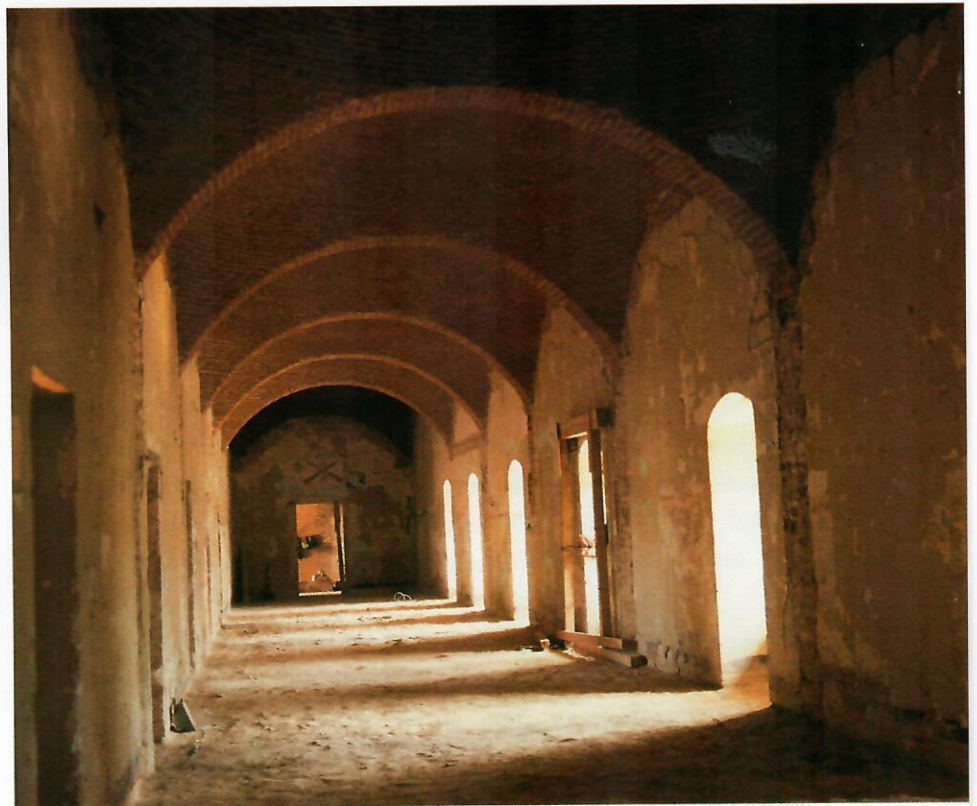
the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Toward the end of the eighteenth century, the city of Oaxaca had about 26 neighborhoods populated by guilds. The specific functions of each guild determined the use and cost of the land and buildings.

Many constructions were affected by the seismic activity common to Southern Mexico, as well as by the constant battles for independence and later social movements associated with the Reform period, the *Porfiriato*⁴ and the Rev-

³ Francisco Haroldo Alfaro, “Oaxaca. Ciudad histórica y presente: la conservación del Centro Histórico,” *Revista Síntesis*, UAM Xochimilco/Síntesis Creativa, Mexico, 1993.

⁴ The Porfiriato was the period in which Mexico was ruled by Porfirio Díaz (1880-1910), generally considered a dictatorship and the immediate cause of the Mexican Revolution. [Translator’s Note.]



Arched walkway around the main patio.

² A vara is about 33 inches long. [Translator’s Note.]



The belltowers.

olution. One of the results of these social and economic movements was the change in land tenure systems and therefore, in the use given the land. At the time, the clergy was the direct or indirect owner of slightly more than half the buildings in the city.

During the entire nineteenth century, important public buildings were constructed in the neo-classical style, which did not break with the city's architectural unity.

However, according to Hugo Altamirano Ramírez⁵ and Dr. Juan

I. Bustamante,⁶ several streets in the historic downtown area were changed at the end of the nineteenth and the beginning of the twentieth centuries as a result of increasing urbanization. The changes in some cases destroyed and in others covered up public utilities and defenses which still existed in 1812, like trenches with moats, watchtowers, parapets, drainage canals, drains and stone paving. It is important to note that the stone paving had the ecological advantage of allowing water to seep into the subsoil and replenishing the underground water sources, currently very depleted.

Today, tourism has an impact on the changes in the uses of the land. The importance of tourism to both the country and the state of Oaxaca is indisputable. However, the increase in tourist services over the last 10 years has caused irreversible damage to the facades and other parts of the buildings in the Historic Center.

Conservation of the buildings in the Historic Center should be considered a vital goal for all the residents of Oaxaca for two basic reasons: 1) knowledge and respect for our past helps us strengthen our identity; and 2) it makes the city more attractive for tourists.

We believe that the modern use of a historic building should be compatible with the original archi-

tectural purpose for which it was built, and its owners and the authorities should be committed to its conservation and restoration. Integral conservation is not possible if, because of the use to which buildings are put, they are changed, mutilated or destroyed to satisfy supposed needs of modernity or functionality. In the case of historic monuments whose use has changed over time, it is important to understand that regardless of those changes, the architecture of historic buildings should be conserved. This is the true challenge, one which few are ready to meet.

The 227 blocks and 500 hectares of land of the Historic Center of Oaxaca are covered with religious constructions and 1,200 buildings catalogued as Historic Treasures.⁷ The variation in the use of the land is so great that there are no fewer than 300 different uses, which in general fall in the following categories: housing, parks, services, mixed uses and non-inhabited spaces. The deterioration of the buildings is due to the changes in land use over time.

This information allows us to view the proposal for restoring the ex-Convent of Santo Domingo de Guzmán—which we will deal with further on—in its proper context.

The theoretical concepts of conservation and restoration are

⁵ Hugo Altamirano Ramírez, *La ciudad de Oaxaca que conoció Morelos*, Láser Plus, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1992.

⁶ Juan I. Bustamante, personal conversation, 1994.

⁷ Francisco Haroldo Alfaro *et al*, *Taller de Restauración Urbana II, Maestría en Restauración Arquitectónica de Monumentos*, UABJO, Oaxaca, Mexico, 1992.

linked to the value placed on historic buildings as the common property of society. However, these concepts constantly collide with the legal concept of private ownership of historic buildings and their conservation, as conceived in the 1972 Federal Law on Archeological, Artistic and Historic Monuments and Regions as well as its regulatory legislation passed in 1975.

In Oaxaca an enormous number of old houses conserve their original facades, but behind the facade, they have been subdivided, and in the process, the original architectural design mutilated. A considerable number of these houses are *vecindades* (tenement-like apartment houses) inhabited by people who work in the service sector who live there because of the different uses given to the land in the building.

Speaking strictly architectural—and not in allusion to the emotional memory that Proust sought—there are three ways of recovering a building. The first is through conservation; the second is restoration, which requires research to discover what the original design was like. The goal of restoration is to return the building to its original state, even though in some cases some details of the construction are freely interpreted or actually remodeled, whether this involve details on the windows or the amplification or reduction of some spaces. The third way is “intervention,” which means including elements of

modern architecture in a historic context.⁸

All these were taken into consideration both in designing and in carrying out all the stages of development of the project to restore the ex-Convent of Santo Domingo de Guzmán from its incep-

⁸ Alvaro Quijano, “Recuperación del patrimonio arquitectónico: diálogo de tiempos,” in *Memoria de papel*, Year 4, No. 10, CNCA, Mexico, 1992.



Working the stone.

tion in January 1994. Working on the Santo Domingo project is a multidisciplinary group of researchers from the National Institute of Anthropology and History, with the firm support of the National Council for Culture and the Arts.

The project includes the restoration of all the architectural features of the building used during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eigh-

teenth centuries. This recovery of features and spaces has revealed a face of the ex-convent unknown to most.

Several different sources have guided the restoration project: a reading of the original building, the data from archeological exploration, the geometric conceptual analysis of the spaces, an analysis of its content and historic documents stored in different archives.

Numerous historic archives have been consulted, like the General Archive of the State Executive Branch, the Library of the Santo Domingo Church, the archives of the Oaxaca State Association of Notary Publics and the Municipality of the City of Oaxaca, the National Archives and the Historic Archives of the Secretariat of Social Development. Interviews were also conducted, as well as an analysis



The restoration process.

of the context of all the architectural features and the collections found by Archeological Recovery.

The work of archeological recovery allows us for the first time to understand and document the relationship between the ex-convent and the city of Oaxaca in the colonial period, in a diversity of topics found heretofore only in formal historic studies: construction systems of the ex-convent during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries; changes made in the building during the military occupation from the nineteenth

century on; the economic dominance of the Dominican order due to both its evangelical and economic organization; the relationships with different haciendas and encomiendas which were peripheral suppliers of human and material resources; conflicts over water and with the town council; and the importation of consumer goods from the cities of Mexico, Puebla and Veracruz and from Peru and Asia (through China's Nao).


The ex-Convent of Santo Domingo is beginning to reveal the role it played in New Spain's society. More than 20,000 square meters of archeological digs have allowed us to establish the characteristics of the different parts of the building: the original factory, installations and architectural details of the different periods it has been in use. By January 1994, this had also permitted us to establish its state of deterioration and therefore, formulate a strategy for its restoration and consolidation.

The information gathered offers both questions and answers about the construction itself and its diverse modifications and uses, as well as about patterns of consumption of

material, about the economy and trade in colonial society and particularly the city of Antequera. We know now, for example, that in the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries the ceramic dishes used in Santo Domingo were both made locally and imported from Europe, Panama and Southeast Asia, specifically China. The hydraulic engineering of the convent—directly tied to the system of aqueducts and drainage of old Antequera—has also been documented.

The archeological recovery project has already yielded a collection of about 600 items, which will be exhibited in Oaxaca's Regional Museum once they have been mounted. Other important discoveries include the location of the Dominican vegetable garden, the novices' laundry and the buildings added in the period of Independence.

The building will be used for cultural purposes: once restored, it will house an extension of the National Institute of Anthropology and History's Oaxaca Regional Museum, the Santo Domingo Institute for the Plastic Arts and the Ethno-Botanical Historical Garden, all of which will undoubtedly be of great benefit to the inhabitants of Oaxaca.

Lastly, the integral restoration of the ex-Convent of Santo Domingo de Guzmán should be a model for the restoration of historic monuments in the state of Oaxaca and elsewhere. 

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