

Mesoamerican
Open Spaces
and Mural Paintings
as Statements
of Cultural Identity

Mesoamerican Open Spaces and Mural Paintings as Statements of Cultural Identity

By

Celina B. Barrios de Senisterra

Cambridge
Scholars
Publishing



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This book first published 2019

Cambridge Scholars Publishing

Lady Stephenson Library, Newcastle upon Tyne, NE6 2PA, UK

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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ISBN (10): 1-5275-3731-5

ISBN (13): 978-1-5275-3731-6

This book is dedicated to all the Mesoamerican artists and architects,
from the first rock wall painter in prehistory,
to the brilliant contemporary architect Ricardo Legorreta,
for sensitively listening to the voice of their land,
and expressing it with much pride, dignity, and eloquence,
thus preserving the cultural legacy of their civilisation,
while interpreting it to the world,
and facilitating a meaningful and positive communication
between human societies.

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FOREWORD

This book presents the dissertation submitted to the Art History and Interdisciplinary Studies Faculty, Warnborough College, in candidacy for the doctoral degree in Cultural Art History, which was awarded in July 2017 in Canterbury, England.

The thesis tested in this study stands on the belief that the sensitive perception of other societies' expressions facilitates our comprehension of their cultural ethos, enabling the effective communication between individuals and communities, which is the fundamental link that connects human beings.

Hence the present research aims to interpret the metaphors encoded in the architectural legacy of Mesoamerica—both in the planned environments of its central communal open spaces, and in the art integrated into the structural design, exemplified by its mural paintings—identifying the cultural values of its society throughout all of its remarkable and eventful history, in the hope of enlightening the foreign awareness of the spirit of this civilisation, and thus facilitating meaningful contacts and exchanges among members of the human community.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book could not have been authored without the excellent advice of my doctoral supervisor, Dr. Jill Kiefer. She captured my ideas and guided me along my research and writing processes with a vast knowledge of the subject and a great respect for my work. My gratitude goes also to Dr. Julian Ng and the Warnborough College, for their constant assistance.

My appreciation extends to McMaster University in Hamilton, Canada, and in particular, to its Mills Memorial Library, from where I conducted most of my research.

The General Consulate of México in Toronto provided me with invaluable direction in the search of the copyright holders of the works of art and architecture in Mesoamerica. The process of obtaining permissions to include the illustrations in this book was assisted by the authorities at the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (INAH) and the Secretaría de Cultura in México. I am deeply grateful to the generous support from the cultural administrations and permission departments at Legorreta Architects (Legorreta®) and the Polyforum Siqueiros in México; Harvard University Press in the US; Penguin Random House in the UK; and Verlag der Kunst and Hauptstaatsarchiv Dresden in Germany.

Cambridge Scholars Publishing in England has been extremely helpful and instrumental in publishing this book, through its Commissioning Editor Adam Rummens, and Designers Courtney Blades and Sophie Edminson.

I could not have been able to pursue this project without the loving support and motivating encouragement of my husband Guillermo Senisterra, my children Juan Ignacio, Sarah, and Felipe Senisterra, my mother Beatriz Carrozzi de Barrios, as well as the inspiring joy of my grand-daughter Joanna Senisterra.

And a big ‘thank you’ to my dogs Cosmo and Benji, who loyally sat beside me while I was writing each word.

To all of them, my immense gratitude!

GENERAL INTRODUCTION

“Firmitas, Utilitas, Venustas,” the three Vitruvian virtues of being solid, useful, and graceful, are the essential qualities that any architectural work should exhibit, as asserted by the Roman architect Marcus Vitruvius Pollio, around the year 15 BCE.¹ His treatise, *De Architectura* (known today as *The Ten Books on Architecture*), written in Latin, and dedicated to the Emperor Augustus, is the only surviving book on architecture from Greco-Roman antiquity. It not only brilliantly summarizes the essence of Classical architecture, it was also the theoretical and practical guide for the Renaissance architects, until Leon Battista Alberti absorbed Vitruvius’s legacy and interpreted it into the new cultural dynamics of 1452 CE, in his own treatise *De re aedificatoria* (On the Art of Building).²

However, the definition of these virtues extends its relevance beyond the Classical world, as it precisely points to the universal purpose of architecture, throughout history and across the globe. The importance of Vitruvius’s identification of the theoretical pillars of the constructed artistic expression is paramount. Indeed, the analysis of these timeless principles evidenced in the built environment provides a framework that can enlighten and facilitate the human pursuit of understanding and communication between cultures, as the materialization of the three tenets bears testimony of the innermost identity of a particular society.

The ideal unity and balanced ratio between the three Vitruvian essential components of architectural values (solidity, usefulness, and gracefulness) has not always been achieved. As an example, the Beaux-Arts Academicism of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries placed a dominant importance on sculptural decoration to achieve gracefulness, or *venustas*, at the expense of usefulness. On the other hand, twentieth century Modernism and the International Style sustained that form should

¹ Vitruvius, *The Ten Books On Architecture*. Translated by Morris Hicky Morgan. New York: Dover Publications, Inc., 1960. Book I, Ch.3, Pt.2

² Benevolo, Leonardo. *The Architecture of the Renaissance*. London and Henley: Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978. Volume I, pg. 6.

follow function, or *utilitas*, denying any interest in ornamentation that did not support the main purpose of practicality in architecture.

Nevertheless, the three principles of architecture have been present in all responsible and sensible architectural works—and the art integrated into them—not only in the linear development of Western architecture, but also in cultures such as the Mesoamerican societies, which have grown from independent origins. As George Kubler explains, separate arguments by F. Kugler in Germany and J. L. Stephens in the United States, starting in the 1840s, supported the thesis of “autonomous and self-contained” artistic traditions, in opposition to the claim of diffusion of culture—from Europe to the New World—that had prevailed since the sixteenth century.³ The new independent Americanist statement attributed any similar characteristic or attitude to other world cultures, to the convergence of a common human nature, and it regarded any “small-scale intermittent European migration” that might have occurred, as inconsequential.⁴

Still, the Vitruvian virtues—even though completely unknown in the new world as a formal statement before the Mesoamerican contact with the European conquerors—are present in all significant works of architecture and architectural art, since the beginning of the American region’s settled development, before 6000 BCE. Thus, Vitruvius’s genius perceived the universal principles of architecture that are equally found in independently developed cultures, throughout time, providing an invaluable basis for the research of human emotions and expressions through architecture and its incorporated art.

These three virtues, when balanced in their inter-relationship, reveal a deeper understanding of the culture that expresses itself through its architectural work, both in synchronic and diachronic analyses. Certainly, when an architect strives to achieve a harmonious relationship between the solidity, the functionality, and the perceptual pleasurableness of a work of architecture, in its cultural and temporal context, there is evidence that the artist-architect fulfills the privilege and, at the same time, the enormous responsibility of interpreting the spirit of the social entity—whose needs require address—as well as its cultural legacy. The built answer to this programme of necessities is translated into an illusionary

³ Kubler, George. *The Art and Architecture of Ancient America*. Harmondsworth, Middlesex, Great Britain: Penguin Books Ltd., 1962, pg. 11.

⁴ *ibid*

architectural language which, when constructed, guides the perceiving community to decode its collective reality, materializing its cultural ethos.

The process by which the artist-architect translates the essence of a society into a work of architecture starts with the artist's gift for perceiving and identifying collective experiences and emotions from all aspects of human reality: religious beliefs; social dynamics; family life; community interaction; economic forces; administrative structures; political hierarchies; everyday routines; and artistic expressions. These factors are collected, synthesized, codified, and metaphorically expressed by the artist in an illusion that employs culturally conventional signs, the same signs that the society has previously used to inform the architect of its needs, in terms of building programmes. The artist, in response, emphasizes the elements that are substantial for the perceiver's comprehension. When the recipient society recognizes the encoded elements of its culture, it discerns the essential meaning of its life—whether individual or collective—and adds more experiences and emotions to the architectural product, creating and re-creating the social reality, and thus perpetuating its heritage.

The importance of this process of cultural interpretation through the works of architecture and architectural art lies in the reciprocal inter-relationship between the aspects of human existence that define the artist-architect's construction, and the created work which, in turn, defines those same dimensions of human life that informed its conception. These mutual two-way dynamics of influence and inter-dependence confer to the work of artistic architecture a metaphorical value that stands as a testimony of the cultural legacy of a society. By discerning the constants and variables in these metaphors, both synchronically—within the cultural context at each stage of the society's development—and diachronically—along the course of history, we would better interpret the conveyed intrinsic values of a civilisation through the evidence of its art works.

The study of Mesoamerican art and architecture offers a valuable counter-example to the conventional thought of a linear European development, as it can be treated as an independent integral phenomenon up to the sixteenth century. The clear definition of a certain moment of contact with the European culture provides the significant possibility to evaluate the impact and consequences of this encounter, and the subsequent search for a local identity. The two explored examples—the Mesoamerican central open spaces and mural paintings—reveal the sensitive and meaningful proficiency of the native culture to express their essence through the arts with a timeless and universal scale.

PART 1

THE MESOAMERICAN OPEN SPACE AS ILLUSION OF TRADITIONAL IDENTITY

Introduction

Believing that the problematic confrontations, antagonisms, and disagreements between societies and individuals—with all their negative and terrible consequences—are due to misunderstanding, misinterpretation—in sum—miscommunication, more than to the actual difference in values or ideas, it is imperative to exhaust our efforts both in using an eloquent and clear language, and at the same time, in learning how to comprehend by listening, reading, and interpreting other idioms with a sensitive perception. By establishing a positive understanding and connection, all differences could be addressed and respected, and a constructive cultural communication could be created.

Architecture, as an art form, is a powerfully expressive language. A sensible architect must be receptive to, and perceptive about, the information received from the society regarding its needs and, in turn, must create a response, using codes that can be understood by the public. Therefore, architecture is a very unique work of art that assumes an enormous responsibility. Indeed, it is not only defined by all aspects of human life—such as religion, health, art, economics, politics, administration, education, social dynamics, family living, recreation—and their requirements, but its spatial reply, in turn, shapes those same aspects of human existence, by supporting the optimal and constructive development of those activities.

This responsibility calls for the best use of its language. The architect must be capable of perceiving and interpreting the language of the society—which might be encoded—then translating it into a response that is conveyed in a vocabulary of signs that can be easily recognised by the community, so they can appropriate the architectural work and incorporate it into their lives, thus forming and preserving their traditional personality.

These linguistic dynamics confer to architecture the extraordinary attribute of being a spatial expression of a particular society and, thus, an excellent source for discerning its cultural identity, as its structures of representation reflect the spirit of a civilization.

The Mesoamerican architectural open space is a remarkable example of cultural expression that presents the extraordinary characteristic of having developed across different traditions and throughout distinct times. Therefore, it opens the discussion to a multitude of dimensions and dynamics that define the architectural product. The comprehensive exploration of this human society's open space, which is defined by significantly symbolic architecture, reveals the local manifestations, emotions, and values, not only at each of the successive chronological stages, but also incorporating our twenty-first century point of view, by virtue of our sensible reading of it.

The interpretation of the metaphors encoded in the architectural legacy of the Mesoamerican central open space, enables the identification of the cultural principles of its society throughout all of its notable and eventful history, enlightening the outsiders' awareness of the spirit of this civilization, and, thus, facilitating meaningful links and exchanges among members of the human community.

The Role of Architecture

The architect has both the privilege and the onus of interpreting the ethos of a social entity, and translating it into an illusionary language that guides the perceiving population to decode its collective reality and to materialize it. Thus, the work of architecture is defined by the shared experiences and emotions of its human existence, but also, in turn, it influences the human life in those same dimensions with a powerful metaphor of its culture. The architectural creation is an open-ended work that starts with the individuals and their community; it is then processed by the architect, who responds by returning it to the society, which gives significance to the work and preserves it as a cultural legacy.

Besides being an eloquently communicative expression, the architectural language evolves and develops throughout history and, in order to interpret it thoroughly and meaningfully, we need to study it over time and across cultures. Only when identifying the constants—as defined along the ages—and the variables—beyond cultures—will we stand in a better position to understand its timeless vocabulary.

Mesoamerica

The inclusion of the study of Mesoamerican societies, in the comprehensive development of the area's cultural expression, offers a counter-example—a challenge to the conventional progressive linear model of the Eurocentric perspective. It forces our thinking into a very valuable intercultural appreciation.

Mesoamerica is a term coined by Paul Kirchhoff, in 1943, to describe the area of Middle America with specific cultural traits in common that were not found in other areas of the American continent. It extends, in the present, approximately from central México to Belize, Guatemala, El Salvador, Honduras, Nicaragua, and northern Costa Rica (illustration 1.1). Among the shared characteristics, we find that the groups living in the region transitioned around 7000 BCE from being nomadic gatherers and hunters, to developing a sedentary agriculture, domesticating maize, beans, and squash; they all had complex mythological and religious traditions, vigesimal numerical systems, ritual and solar calendars, pictographic and hieroglyphic writing systems, linguistic grammatical similarities, and a distinct architecture with stepped pyramids and ceremonial centres.¹



Illustration 1.1: Map of Mesoamerica

¹ Kirchhoff, Paul. "Mesoamérica. Sus Límites Geográficos, Composición Étnica y Caracteres Culturales". *Acta Americana*. 1943 (1): 92–107.

At the time of the brutal encounter of the American and European societies, both the Mesoamerican and the Andean regions had very complex and developed cultures, while the populations in other areas of the continent were still nomadic or not socially organized to survive the new imposed colonial order. Unfortunately, those other cultures eventually disappeared or blended with the new European one, to a point of leaving only a thin trace of what had preceded it.

But the strong Mesoamerican and Andean civilizations, even though being brutally silenced, kept their spirits alive. In the case of Mesoamerica, the new order was superimposed on top of the ashes of the destroyed created environment, and not built in parallel, like the Spanish new settlements in the Andean region.² Perhaps this mode of development was an influential cause in the fact that the crushed native-built spirit has surfaced time and again throughout the more than five-hundred years since the conquest. Therefore, this unique culture offers the possibility of researching its dynamics, which bear characteristics of both native and European traditions that constantly struggle and are in tension with each other, while—at the same time—reciprocally reinforce their essential values.

Place-Making Illusion in Mesoamerican Culture

“The American architect was restricted by technology to the assembling of solid masses, but in the operations of design, he was infinitely more attentive to their harmonious combination than the Europeans. This special field in which the Americans excelled was the achievement of large rhythmically ordered open volumes.”³ George Kubler’s statement identifies the importance of the Mesoamerican open centre in terms of the quality of its spatial design.

However, the Mesoamerican plaza’s significance goes beyond its spatial harmony, as it also comprehensively articulates the region’s multi-layered heritage. Indeed, it is the physical space that provides the central organizing setting for the human activity, which in turn activates the space when it is experienced, perceived, and spatially owned and, thus,

² Wagner, Logan, Hal Box, and Susan Kline Morehead. *Ancient Origins of the Mexican Plaza: from Primordial Sea to Public Space*. (Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 2013), 62.

³ George Kubler, “The Design of Space in Maya Architecture,” 1958, quoted in Wagner, 3.

transformed into a meaningful place. Throughout the complex history of the region, it has always been the open-air soul of the community.

This illusion-creating pattern was repeatedly developed in Mesoamerican open spaces by architects throughout the region's approximately ten-thousand-year-old history. Indeed, the Mexican plaza is one of the most substantial expressions of this distinct social entity, shaped by the surrounding architecture and enlivened by the human experience.⁴

The history of the creation of this symbolic space can be traced back to the hunter-gatherers who selected a stopping and meeting location that had mystic or spiritual significance for their group gatherings.⁵ If there was no natural identifiable topographic feature, such as a source of water or a mountain cave, they marked it with some recognizable elements—most often, stones—and they transformed it into a communal open place to where they could return to and reunite. In time, the human experiences collected in this physical space transformed it into a meaningful place that provided food, trade, safety, and more importantly, a setting for spiritual manifestation and personal interaction.

With the development of agriculture, these groups settled in areas surrounding this evocative open place, which became defined by the architectural volumes constructed around it for ceremonial purposes (rituals, processions).⁶ For Mesoamerica, the ideal settlement layout was oriented around a sacred centre that replicated a cosmological space in a symbolic relationship between nature and architecture, where the built masses were considered sacred mountains, trees, or landscape. Both Maya and Mexica (rulers of the Aztec empire) populations replicated the supernatural world in the designs of their cities, which were oriented towards the ceremonial core.⁷ The creation myth was re-enacted in the central open space from as early as 1200 BCE at Teopantecuanitlán (oldest known example) until 1521 CE at Tenochtitlán, when the Spanish conquerors arrived at this Aztec capital, and destroyed it.⁸ For almost three-thousand years, the open plaza re-established the primordial sea of

⁴ Wagner, 1.

⁵ Wagner, 3.

⁶ Wagner, 3.

⁷ Low, Setha M. "Indigenous Architecture and the Spanish American Plaza in Mesoamerica and the Caribbean." *American Anthropologist*. No. 97, 4 (December 1995): 750-751.

⁸ Wagner, 5.

the creation myth, from which the sky and later the earth with the mountains were lifted.⁹ There is a linguistic support for the symbolic illusion of the plaza as the primordial sea, because the Mayan word for “watery place” (lake, ocean) is “naab”, also used for plaza.¹⁰

Recreating the illusion of the myth, the ceremonial centre was designed in sequence by the Mesoamerican architects.¹¹ First, the symbolic sea was revived by clearing and levelling the elevated platform, and paving it with limestone. Then, the mountains rose from the sea represented by pyramids that connected the underworld, the terrestrial plane, and the celestial domain, with their cave-like portals in the temples atop these pyramids, many of them portraying an open mouth, in painting or relief.¹² The stone stelae were illusions of the trees, also rising from the sea. The layout of the horizontal sea-plaza had four directions, four cardinal points, and at the centre of this quadrangle, there was an axis mundi that connected the terrestrial level with the nine levels of the underworld and the thirteen levels of the heaven above (illustration 1.2). Very often, it was the “world tree.”¹³

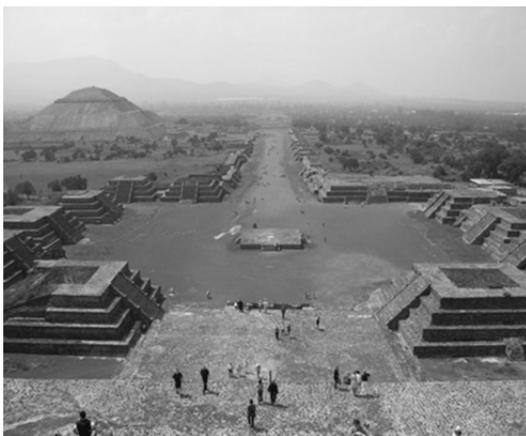


Illustration 1.2: Teotihuacán c.450 CE

⁹ The Maya sacred book *Popol Vuh* expressed the myth of creation, by which all nature was lifted from a primordial sea. Wagner, 6-8.

¹⁰ Wagner, 7.

¹¹ Wagner, 7.

¹² Low, 751.

¹³ Wagner, 26.

Here we can find the “embryonic” illusion of the Mesoamerican plaza, where the perceiving society involved all senses and emotions in the awareness and experience of the space.¹⁴ The culturally shared perceptions and feelings of this place by the recipient society allowed them to understand the codes embedded in the metaphorical space, and thus to add symbolic importance to this illusion. The space was then enlivened by the place-making human activity, which fulfilled the essential process for the creation and preservation of each society’s cultural identity.

The Mesoamerican Open Space at the Time of the Conquest

When the Spanish conquistador Hernán Cortés entered the Mexica capital Tenochtitlán in 1519, he was impressed.¹⁵ It was probably one of the largest cities in the world, with a population of over two-hundred thousand, from where Moctezuma II ruled over an empire of almost five-million people. At that time, the Maya civilization of the Yucatán was in decline, while the Mexica had settled in lakes of the central plateau, forming a triple alliance of Tenochtitlán, Texcoco and Tlacopán—together the Aztec empire—speaking the Náhuatl language. Therefore, the Mexica capital of Tenochtitlán, founded in c.1325 CE, represented the common Mesoamerican myths and traditions, albeit centralized in the Aztec history.¹⁶

One of the few sixteenth-century illustrations of this city (illustration 1.3) that provides a graphic interpretation of its conceptual importance and the significance of its centre is the map of Tenochtitlán published in Nuremberg in February, 1524, with a Latin translation of the letters Hernán Cortés had written to King Charles V of Spain, soon after his arrival in México and his destruction of the capital.¹⁷ Although this woodcut was definitely carved by a craftsman in Europe—since it shows European drawing conventions, such as “houses rendered in perspective, medieval towers, and Renaissance domes”—it evidences an indigenous conceptual background.¹⁸ Indeed, the idealized geometry of a circular island in a circular lake indicates the influence of symbolic

¹⁴ Wagner, 3.

¹⁵ Low, 756.

¹⁶ Wagner, 35.

¹⁷ Mundy, Barbara E., “Mapping the Aztec Capital: The 1524 Nuremberg Map of Tenochtitlan, Its Sources and Meanings.” *Imago Mundi*. Vol. 50. 1998, 11.

¹⁸ Mundy, 14.

prototypes in native mapping practices, where the capital city recreated the cyclical time history.¹⁹

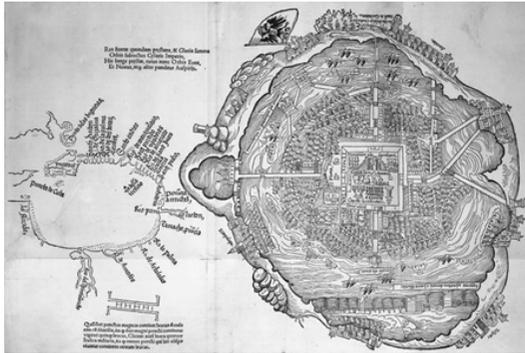


Illustration 1.3: Map of Tenochtitlán published in Nuremberg in February, 1524

This monumental urban centre was reached by causeways that ran directly from the lake's shore into the central ceremonial open space, which stood on an island in a lake that filled the Basin of México.²⁰ The central design was organized by the four cardinal points of the Mexica cosmology, with a colossal scale not seen in the European cities of that time. The order of the cosmos was re-created by the architectural symbolism of the central civic power that coincided with the centre of the universe.²¹ In this centre, there was a large walled precinct, the focus of religious ceremonies, containing the main temples dedicated to the patron god Huitzilopochtli, Tláloc the Rain god, and the feathered serpent god, Quetzalcóatl. The priests' quarters and a court for the ritual ballgame, as well as symbolic sculptures were also included. According to some research accounts, this plaza could hold around 100,000 persons.²² Just outside this walled area, there were the palaces of Moctezuma II and earlier rulers. The above-mentioned Nuremberg map, published in 1524, stresses the religious significance of the central precinct, revealing its replication of the cosmic order of Aztec history.²³ Thus, the oversized temples are shown deliberately aligned with the rising sun of the equinox,

¹⁹ Mundy, 15.

²⁰ Low, 751.

²¹ Low, 752.

²² Wagner, 47.

²³ Mundy, 16.