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Persistence of the Jesuit Missions of Chiquitos

Francisco José Sánchez Medrano
Universidad Católica San Antonio de Murcia
SPAIN
fjsanchez@ucam.edu

Abstract: Of the set of Jesuit Missions located in the Amazon borderlands, between the old domains of Spain and Portugal, there are only six magnificent examples in the Chiquitano territory of Bolivia. They are a paradigm of the architectural fusion between European models and native constructive forms, which have also overcome periods of abandonment due to the important identity burden they bring to the population.

Key – Words: sustainability – heritage – Jesuit Missions – architectural fusion – sustainable building

1 Introduction

The Jesuit Missions of Chiquitos, land of plains and light tributary hills of the Amazon basin, with enclaves of San Javier, Concepción, Santa Ana, San Miguel, San Rafael, and San José, constitute the only architectural example preserved standing from the XVIII, so they were added to the World Heritage List of UNESCO in 1990 [1].

2 Problem Formulation

This region, known since 1537, was populated by semi-nomadic tribes that, forming part of the Guaraní ethnic group, would be qualified by the Spaniards with this place name due to the small size of the doors of their huts (access provision conditioned by security and to avoid mosquito entry).

The crown's interest in protecting the eastern flank of "Alto Peru" (with deposits such as the rich hill of Potosí), securing the Asuncion-Lima trips and seeking the safeguarding of natives against the incursions of bandeirantes, added to the expansive impetus of the Company of Jesus, crystallizing in the expeditions of SJ José de Arce, who in December 1691, founded in these lands the first mission of San Xavier (Fig. 1), also driven by the urgency of helping the Indians of an epidemic of smallpox [2].

Then they founded nine other reductions: San Rafael (1696), San José (1698), San Juan Bautista (1699), Concepción (1709), San Miguel (1721), San Ignacio (1748), Santiago (1754), Santa Ana (1755) and Sacred Heart (1760), under the protection of an Ordinance of 1573 of Felipe II that guaranteed the independence of the settlements.

Although Spanish Jesuits were in charge of carrying out the foundational acts of population, it corresponded mostly to Central European SJ (Swiss, Germans), the constructive task: planning, layout, provision of materials, while the workforce was exclusively indigenous. The Jesuit Martin Schmid (Baar, Switzerland 1694-1774), luthier and musician of formation built the churches of San Rafael (1747-1749), San Javier (1749-52), Concepción (1752-1761), San Juan Bautista (1755) -1759), and participated in the altarpiece of the San Miguel (1750); he organized polyphonic choirs with the natives and an enormous production of instruments (harps, violins, organs), as well as numerous scores. Julián Knogler (1717-1775) planned the temple of Santa Ana (raised in 1768, that is to say after the expulsion). Johann Messner designed the church of San Miguel (built between 1748-1760), with typological elements of those built by Schmid.

Adalbert Martereer (1691-1775) and Father Borinie (1663-1722) also intervened in different mission buildings. Finally, the church of San José (1740-48), the only one executed with masonry and brick, is attributed its construction to Father Bernabé Domínguez [3].



Figure 1. Church and set of religious buildings of the mission of San Javier. Facade to the square.

The porticoed atriums and galleries stand out. Source: author.

3 Problem Solution

Khüne and other researchers have tried to find formal and compositional references of these Chiquitanian churches in Europe, resulting in scarce and forced examples. Other authors are inclined to affirm that we are facing the only type of temple not imported from the old continent. The formal kinship with haciendas and American constructions is evident, as is the introduction of figurative elements and proportions owing to European culture and treaties. After having done Portugal and France, the Jesuits were expelled from Spanish dominions in 1767 on the basis of the Pragmatic Sanction of Carlos III. While in what is now Argentina, Brazil and northern Bolivia disappeared or were left in ruins the 46 Jesuit missions (for very diverse reasons, including armed conflicts as recorded in the movie "The Mission"), the populations founded in Chiquitos remain all, having resisted, not without help, six temples of missionary complexes.

This example of persistence, which is not alien to the conditions of isolation and slow progress of an eminently rural area, we can say that it is based on the identification of the settlers with the ways of life and physical frameworks established by its founders, exercising a fruitful cultural miscegenation. We are facing a "constructive fusion" (between Europe and the jungle), which respects the environment, takes advantage of natural contributions for its material provision, and adopts native concepts of shelter. It is a voluntary assumption of criteria for sustainable building.

Survival is also a consequence of having overcome a certain aversion to the colonial stage, discovering and accepting an inheritance whose examples were worthy of study, conservation and valuation.

After the expulsion of the Jesuits, the diocesan clergy took charge of the facilities and the missions of young children descended in a third of population until the entrance of the s. XIX. Some European travellers, like the French naturalist Alcide d'Orbigny [4], began to give news of this experience to the advanced world, although they did not become part of the romantic and exotic imaginaries.

In 1930 the Franciscans took charge of these missions. In that decade, architects and historians activated interest in the construction of the area. The intervention of the Argentine Mario J. Buschiazzi in 1938 was decisive [5], for the authentic knowledge of the architectural values of these complexes, although this did not prevent some process of ruin, substitutions of distinctive character and demolitions. Plácido Molina Barbery arrived in San Ignacio de Velasco in 1943, being impressed by the beauty of the temple, but the deterioration led to its demise in 1948; nevertheless he contributed in a decisive way to spread the merit of these works through

the photographic documentation that he produced in collaboration with the German Hans Ertl during the period 1944-1954.

The Bolivian State in January 1950 declared the temples of the National Monuments missions. In that decade, the publication of Buschiazzi's studies was followed by the visits of the Jesuit missionary Félix Alfred Plattner, in 1957-58, who at the expense of Swiss parishioners commissioned the first restoration project for San Rafael in 1971, to the German architects Georg and Ingrid Küttinger, for whose direction was designated Hans Roth (architect and also Swiss Jesuit Priest, 1933-1999).

Once arrived in Bolivia for six months of work, Roth was hooked on Chiquitos to the point of abandoning the order and remains the rest of his life recovering the missions and serving as ecclesiastical technician. New churches, research on construction systems and rescue musical scores made this character a reflection of Schmid redivivo, culminated his efforts with the creation since 1996 of the "International Festival of Renaissance and Baroque music." Roth also restored the temples of Concepción (church and cloisters from 1975 to 1982), San Miguel (in parallel from 1979 to 1983, with the collaboration of carpenter Alois Falkinger, San Javier (started in 1987 and completed in 1991), and made the action projects in San José and Santa Ana. In the latter, already in 1996, the architects Eckart Khüne, Patrick Walter, José Luis Cabezas and Javier Mendoza joined.

The Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID), since 1997, was involved in the recovery of heritage of the missions of young children, beginning with the comprehensive rehabilitation of Santa Ana de Velasco. And work has continued on social involvement in the area through the architectural intervention and the enhancement of these cultural groups as an instrument for sustainable development, establishing the Missions Plan in 2001 [6], with a duration of ten years, and covering religious buildings, public elements, improvement of the housing envelope and the regeneration of the social fabric (craft schools, handicrafts).

4 Conclusion

The assignment to the UNESCO World Heritage list gave great visibility to this legacy that today presents strengths (cultural tourism, investments of development aid, music and flower festivals, workshops), and threats (alterations derived from the reforms agrarian, import of livestock or intensive forest uses, influence of other social referents).

In small towns, it is possible to continue recognizing the urban layout of the missionary reductions while the religious buildings that formed the backbone of their beginnings remain outstanding. Architecture, and music, have endured in an attractive way thanks to the skilful fusion of European culture and native exuberance, and, above all, to the ability of a society to maintain an identity strongly linked to the landscape and nature while still being fragile and vulnerable. The cultural imprint and the visual potency of these temples has become an image of an emerging regionalism proud of its historical past [7], with imitations and reinterpretations of this wooden missionary architecture in churches of Santa Cruz neighbourhoods and other towns of its extensive Department.

This process of resignification (*the cultivation of the common identity, of a history that is preserved and transmitted* [8].), Refers us to the origins of the foundations and to the values of respect towards the other and the environment: After the forms and the structures remain the search for that exemplary, utopian and harmonized society with the environment, which seems to be lacking only to cross the *porta coeli* (Fig. 2).



Figure 2. Door of the Church of San Javier. (Source: author)

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