A Television but No Walls on the Outskirts of Paradise

Juliette Patterson

One evening I am at the top of a slope, drawing the settlement below and the virgin mountain across the highway. I am working in Zihuatanejo, Mexico, with six other students from the McGill School of Architecture. We are studying an informal settlement called La Esperanza, which has grown up on the outskirts of Zihuatanejo as a result of the demand for cheap labor in the tourist industry.[1] (Ixtapa is the nearby artificial tourist town which sustains the economy of the whole region.) A woman comes out of a neighboring shack, sits down beside me and studies my drawing critically. I'm racing against the short tropical sunset. "My neighbor told me that a group of you drew her house," she finally says. "Why didn't you come to mine?" I try to explain that hers isn't one of the fifty houses chosen at random, but don't know how to say it in Spanish. "It doesn't matter," she answers. "I did a few drawings of what I want my dream-house to look like. Could you look at them? My husband promised me he'd build us a new house when he comes back from Texas." By now there's not enough light to draw, so I close my sketchbook and walk over to her house.

She lives with her mother in a cedar plank house under a tar-soaked cardboard roof. Her husband has gone to work in Texas and they haven't heard from him since. Like most houses here, the single room is divided in two by a curtain; the back of the room holds a double bed; the front of the room is furnished with a table and chairs. I sit down at the table. She takes out a yellow pad and, after much hesitation, shows me a drawing of a concrete house with disproportionately large arches. "I want the arches to be closed in with glass." I look at her and wonder where she found her inspiration for this neo-colonial house, so far from everyday life. I prefer the soft cedar planks and pebbled floor of her present house. I tell her that according to my limited knowledge of construction such large panes would be very expensive, even in Canada. Why have window panes at all? You don't need them in this climate. In fact, not a single house in the settlement has a window pane. She tells me that she has seen a house in Ixtapa that had large arches of this kind.

I'm struck by the strength of her desire to own such a house. She's typical of many people here: they want a future outside of rural poverty and it is the strength of this desire which makes them overcome the many obstacles in their way. For in La Esperanza, any small initiative rapidly runs into obstacles: no

running water, no roads, no telephone, no money. Practical and reasonable desires lead you nowhere. The strength of their will and their dogged persistence can truly move mountains. I'm quite sure this young woman shall one day own that house of her dreams.

Down the street, Juana Chavarrìa-Torres and her husband recently completed their concrete house. They first built a house of *bajareque*, a simple timber frame with walls made of mud packed inside a frame of wood sticks. As soon as they could afford it, Juana and her husband started building concrete walls around the *bajareque* house. Eventually, they moved into the finished concrete house and tore down the *bajareque* one. *Bajareque* withstands the heat better than concrete; but a concrete house is considered secure and modern.

Juana is very proud of her concrete house. It has an entrance hall, a separate living-room, dining-room, kitchen, bedroom and...a *bathroom!* When I ask about the outhouse in order to locate it on the site plan, Juana tells me that they pulled it down when they finished the house. I nod, then realize the bathroom cannot be functional because there is no sewer in La Esperanza. The couple, betting on the sewer's imminent arrival, pulled down the septic tank; but since many things remain forever imminent in La Esperanza, in the mean time they must climb up the hill to the woods. They would rather have nothing at all than mar the perfection of their new house by keeping the outhouse. The things people do for social status! I think. Then I realize that my conception of a bathroom—a utilitarian room I forget about as soon as I close the door—is just my own. Practicality has little to do with her appreciation of a bathroom. So what if it doesn't work? It's a commitment to a modern future.

Other situations bring me up against my preconceptions about basic needs. For example, a house might lack running water and a water-proof roof, but it always has a colour TV. One of the houses we measured was primitive even by La Esperanza standards: a wood frame covered with two blankets, on the least desirable of all plots at the edge of the pine forest above the settlement. The room's furniture was a double bed, a few chairs, and the color television. The family sat on the bed, mesmerized by an animated cartoon.

Poverty in this coastal resort town is not a story about hunger, crime, or stultifying work. It's about complete boredom. Half of the community stays at home swinging in their hamacs. They watch us work in the heat. We do not see any books or magazines, although most people are literate. La Esperanza has a small school built by the Ford Foundation—a lovely new building of interlocking hexagonal classrooms. But its rooms are depressingly bare: no books, no drawings. Outside of the Saturday evening dance and other (albeit frequent) celebrations, television provides the sole entertainment. And since grandparents and other keepers-of-tradition have been left behind, it also provides an easy opportunity to anchor oneself, to connect to the community and to the world outside.

La Esperanza is a society in the process of defining its identity. Right now it is somewhere between the rural past of its inhabitants and the North-American suburbia of its future. I can't understand its enthusiastic adoption of cinderblock architecture and laissez-faire urban planning. Traditional building methods are disappearing, and the surrounding tropical forest is slated for development. But in an uprooted society where traditional values have been left behind in the search for a better life, modernization is the easiest or at least most obvious next move.

We are invited for lunch by Carlos, his wife Paula, their five daughters, and Paula's mother, who bore sixteen children and outlived twelve. We sit under a thatched roof in their garden (a tropical jungle, an oasis amidst the cardboard roofs and mud streets) eating a delicious salad of octopus, hot chili peppers and crackers. Carlos owns an apartment in the government-subsidized housing project but prefers to live in La Esperanza, without running water. "I don't want people living below me and above me," he argues. "I want my own house and garden." I've seen these housing projects. Europeans happily live in similar apartments all their life. The apartments are not big, but what's wrong with them?

Carlos is not alone; no-one here wants to live in a mid-rise building, buy their groceries on the ground floor, and walk to work. They would rather commute. It comes quite naturally from their rural background. They would have to give up their chickens and dogs and pigs to go into an apartment. Besides, unlike Europe, there still is a lot of undeveloped land in Mexico. Why shouldn't they build horizontally rather than vertically? Still, I can imagine this town in a few years: a congested, tentacular metropolis, a mini Mexico City.

One of the reasons we are here is to contest this vision. The neighbouring colony of CTM is on two opposing faces of a ravine; all houses therefore look towards its centre. It is much more tightly-knit and politically active than La Esperanza. La Esperanza developed on a slope along the highway which runs from downtown Zihuatanejo to the airport. All houses look towards the road rather than the community. To create a sense of identity, the residents wanted us to design a public space in an empty lot at the entrance to the community, optimistically called *la plaza* . The community wants a paved playground and perhaps a multipurpose building. "I see," a friend in Mexico City says later, "they want a *zòcalo*." Any self-respecting town in Mexico has a *zòcalo*, that is, a main square. At present, *la plaza* is a dumping ground for the president's wife's dishwater, which makes a muddy creek the pigs greatly enjoy.

We spend three days and a night making drawings and a model to show to the president of the housing and development corporation. Since the housing corporation owns the vacant lot, we are hoping they will lend their support to the project. After an unfortunate experiment with blueish paint in which La Esperanza became a snow-covered Inuit settlement, we are ready to go. We are ushered with great pomp through heavily guarded and air-conditioned precincts. Six or seven of the director's assistants arrive. After elaborate introductions, we sit down, and—wait. Finally the great man arrives, and after standing for more introductions, we sit and listen to his speech. He speaks convincingly of "justice for the *campesino*" and of the Mexican soul's deep-rooted desire for private land ownership. But he shows no signs of acting on his words. Afterwards, we take a group photo and go back to our apartment.

Any effort at organizing La Esperanza struggles against similar problems: public officials are not responsible to their constituents. Civic institutions, including those protecting basic property rights, or legal rights or even equal access to bureaucrats, are weak in Zihuatanejo. The one-party system is kept in place through bribes. For example, our stay in La Esperanza coincided with a municipal pre-election campaign. Suddenly, doctors were roaming up and down the slopes testing children for malaria. Construction workers and large trucks materialized in large numbers to install the much-awaited sewer.

Nevertheless, the issue of the square opened my eyes to the crucial role the square will play in the creation of civic-mindedness. Isn't it a necessary condition for the development of effective civic institutions? "We want a place where our children can play and weddings be celebrated," says Humberto, who lives in front of the *plaza*. Humberto is our great friend. Whenever we draw or measure near his house, he brings us chairs to sit on and mangoes to eat. Through these gestures Humberto inaugurates the square as a kind of agora, a specific civic space that encourages the exchange of goods and ideas. He draws us into the life of the community, civilizing us, making us see the place his way.

When it is built, the square in La Esperanza will provide a play area for children, a basketball court, and a shelter. But it will be much more than that; it will provide the opportunity for discussion and debate, and for communication and exchange, and for the grounding of the foundation of democratic institutions. It will be architecture at its best, visible as form and agent of social life.[2]

1. In the summer of 1996, six students of McGill University and I went to Zihuatanejo, Mexico, under the auspices of the RAIC-CIDA Youth Program. We surveyed the settlement and drew a geographic map of it, made measured drawings of 30 dwellings, and conducted a sociological study of the families they house. The six other students who went to La Esperanza, Mexico were Laurel Miles, Jean-Maxime Dufresne, Serge Gascon, Sukaina Kubba, Sandra Haefelfinger, and Aitor Itorralde. Our co-ordinators in the Minimum Cost Housing Graduate Program were Manuel Lara and Sarwat Viquar. In view of the square's potential to organize the community's political activity, I believe CIDA's continuing involvement is crucial. Canadian commitment is a necessary condition to the square's realization.

2. For more about our work in La Esperanza, see *Fingers of Hope* (Montreal: McGill School of Architecture, 1997).

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