

WORLD HERITAGE LIST

Tlacotalpan (Mexico)

No 862

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	The historic monuments zone of Tlacotalpan
<i>Location</i>	State of Veracruz, Tlacotalpan Municipality
<i>State Party</i>	Mexico
<i>Date</i>	26 June 1997

Justification by State Party

Tlacotalpan is a river port close to the coast of the Gulf of Mexico, only accessible by means of the Papaloapan river. It is a unique example of a type of town and architecture characteristic of the Caribbean region. Elsewhere these survive only fragmentarily, but Tlacotalpan has been preserved to an exceptional degree, with all the wealth of its authenticity.

Criterion ii

The universal value of Tlacotalpan is demonstrated by the selection and development of a form of architecture determined by special climatic conditions, such as light and shade, rain, and wind. This has resulted in solutions concerning roof coverings, the disposition of internal spaces with their courtyards and gardens, and above all the porticoes on the facades of each house which make this the highest expression of an architecture and an urban fabric already used elsewhere during the 19th century.

Criterion iv

Tlacotalpan is an outstanding example of a traditional human settlement. It has been preserved to a remarkable degree because it has been excluded from the main communication routes established in the course of the last century and from the contraction of economic activities during the present century. In addition to the originality and the wealth of colour in its architecture, the town has also preserved its character as a cultural centre by means of its open spaces for music, dancing, and poetry and its customs and traditional festivals, which make up the cultural tradition known as *jarocha*, now vulnerable to external influences and intrusions.

Criterion v

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

The ethnic origins of the prehispanic people inhabiting the region to the north and north-east of Tlacotalpan are not fully understood. However, the names of the river Papaloapan (Butterfly River) and other settlements nearby are Nahuatl, which suggests that it was under Aztec domination. The present name of the town is a Spanish version of *Tlaxcotliapan* ("Land between the Waters), the name of the island where the initial settlement was established; following modification of the north bank of the river, it was joined to the mainland.

The mouth of the Papaloapan river was discovered by Juan de Grijalba in 1518. Pedro de Alvarado sailed up it and in 1521 Cortés sent Gonzalo de Sandoval to find gold.

The site of Tlacotalpan formed part of an enormous grant of land made around 1550 by the Spanish King to Gaspar Rivadeneyra, on which he kept livestock. He was unable to prevent the establishment of a village of fishermen on the site of the present-day town, but he obliged them to build a chapel dedicated to La Virgen de la Candelaria.

This was a region that was slow to be colonized by the Spanish. Census returns show that there were only twelve Spaniards there in 1544 and the figure had not risen above 320 by 1777. There is less precise information on the growth of the non-Spanish population, but in 1808 there were 1156 Indians and 1616 *pardos* (mixed-race descendants of Indians and blacks).

The town was largely destroyed by fire in 1698, 1788, and 1790, and the last of these fires led to local government to impose controls that were to change its character radically. The roofs of the houses had to be tiled and they had to be separated by open spaces planted with trees. For those who did not possess the means for costly reconstruction in conformity with these regulations, plots were made available for purchase "at reasonable prices" in the eastern part of the village on which they could build cottages.

It was around this time at the turn of the 18th century that French, German, and Italian immigrants settled in the area to plant and weave cotton, which was despised by the Spanish but prized by the English.

It was not until 1821 that Tlacotalpan experienced any economic expansion. It became the port for the products of Oaxaca and Puebla destined for Veracruz and beyond to New Orleans, Havana, and Bordeaux. By 1855 its fleet had grown to eighteen steam-ships and one large sailing ship, used to transport timber, tobacco, cotton, grain, sugar, brandy, leather, salt meat, crocodiles, heron feathers, furniture, and soap.

The year 1849 saw the building of the Nezahuacoyotl Theatre and the Municipal Palace, the latter one of only ten two-storeyed buildings at that time. Tlacotalpan was granted the status of a town by the central government in 1865, and other public buildings, such as the Hospital and the New Market were completed as the century continued. By the opening years of the 20th century it was a thriving town with eight schools, three hotels,

nine factories, 100 houses with a single storey, 25 with two, and one with three storey, as well as 54 cottages. However, economic activities declined during the first half of the century and the town has been relatively stagnant in this respect ever since. Its population, which was 5613 in 1859, was only little larger in 1950. It now stands at 8850, a level that it has maintained since 1980.

Although its economic role has diminished, Tlacotalpan is an important cultural centre. It is especially renowned for the way in which it celebrates the feast of its patron, the Virgen de la Candelaria: whilst the official feast day is 2 February, the celebrations begin at the end of January and continue with dancing and other spectacles in the plazas and streets for a whole week.

Description

As an interior riverine port, Tlacotalpan is a somewhat rare form of urban settlement in Latin America. It is laid out on a checkerboard pattern, covering an area of c 1550m by 520m. The historic zone nominated for inscription on the World Heritage List covers 75ha, comprising 153 individual blocks. The town is divided into two distinct sectors, each laid out in checkerboard form. The larger of these, to the west, is the "Spanish" quarter and the smaller, to the east, is the "native" quarter. At their junction there is an irregularly shaped area, on the site of a dried-up river bed, which constitutes the "public" sector, and where the public open spaces and official and commercial buildings are located.

The plan of the western part of the town is orientated on seven main streets (*calles*) running east-west parallel to the right bank of the river, and these are intersected by narrow lanes (*callejones*). Four of these follow the curve of the river into the eastern part of the town, three of them being broken in the centre by the "public" area.

The exceptional character of Tlacotalpan, in addition to the unusual density of high-quality historic buildings that survive, derives from its architectural harmony and homogeneity, coupled with its striking mixture of colours. It is outstanding because its houses, of a Caribbean type known elsewhere on the Mexican Gulf Coast, exhibit a richly imaginative variety in the solutions that are applied than in comparable settlements.

The principal streets in the checkerboard layout have a special quality that is unique to Tlacotalpan. This results from the three elements of which they are composed, in addition to the central roadway: the narrow stretch of pavements formed by the colonnaded porticoes of each house, an open pavement, and a stretch of greenery 1-2m broad, formerly planted with plants and shrubs but now mostly grassed over. By contrast, the narrow cross-lanes are often without pavements and in some cases without paved roadways, the open space being given over to grass.

The porticoes are mostly arched, though in some places they are formed of wooden lintel beams supported on plastered wooden columns or pillars. These two forms permit a great variety in decoration, ranging from simple upright beams to fluted columns with elaborately ornamented bases and capitals and moulded cornices. The arcading is equally eclectic in its inspiration, utilizing round, ogival, multi-lobed, and even more

fantastic forms. The overall appearance is given even greater variety by the lavish use of colour.

The greater proportion of the houses in Tlacotalpan are single-storey and most of them retain their internal layouts and structural features intact, and in many cases also their original internal furnishings and decoration. A special characteristic is the fact that the dining room is usually to be found in the second row of rooms away from the street, one side being open to internal gardens or courtyards. Like the public open spaces, these contain trees of various species, especially palms, whose branches spread over the roofs of the houses. Those roofs are another special feature of Tlacotalpan since, unlike those in other similar towns, they are still preponderantly composed of curved terracotta tiles.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The historic centre of Tlacotalpan was declared an Historic Monuments Zone by Presidential Decree in December 1986. It is therefore protected by the 1972 Federal Law on Archaeological, Artistic, and Historical Monuments and Zones, which imposes strict control over any form of intervention that may change the qualities for which the property was designated.

The State of Veracruz designated Tlacotalpan a "Typical Conservation Town" under the provisions of the relevant State Law of 31 December 1969.

Management

Ownership of the properties included within the nominated site is for the most part private. The religious and public buildings are Federal-owned, and certain others belong to the State of Veracruz and the Municipality of Tlacotalpan.

Overall responsibility for conservation of the historic centre is vested in the National Institutes for Anthropology and History (INAH) and for Fine Arts (INBA), which are agencies of the National Council for Culture and the Arts (CNCA) of the Ministry of Public Education (SEP).

The INAH Regional Centre in Veracruz has a staff of 161 people, including professional architects, planners, conservators, and archaeologists.

The Ministry of Social Development (SEDESOL) is concerned with the conservation of the Federal-owned properties, with urban development issues, and with ecological protection. Its Veracruz section has over 200 professional and other staff.

The Veracruz State Government and the Municipality of Tlacotalpan are actively associated with all aspects of planning and conservation projects within the nominated area.

The Veracruz Cultural Institute, established in 1976, the Agustín Lara House of Culture, and the Salvador Ferrando Museum also play important roles in conservation and presentation work in the historic town.

An Urban Development Plan was established in 1985 and was revised and approved in 1997. This complements and develops the conservation measures prescribed when the historic town was designated an

Historic Monuments Zone in 1986. It lays down detailed regulations for all forms of intervention within the protected area. It also defines a “transition zone,” which extends to the opposite bank of the Papaloapan river, which fulfils the requirements for a buffer zone.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

Active measures have been taken since the 1950s to protect the historic centre and improve the living standards of its inhabitants since the 1950s. These have involved defences against flooding from the river, an effective system of drainage, and cleaning of adjacent areas of marshland.

Within the town itself, the first restoration campaign at the 19th century Nezahualcoyotl Theatre was carried out in the 1960s; in 1965 a restored historic building was opened as the Salvador Ferrando Community Museum of Arts and Traditions, and the Agustín Lara House of Culture opened in another in 1977. The Plaza de Santa Marta was restored in the 1970s.

A number of restoration projects were initiated at the beginning of the 1990s. Further work was undertaken at the Theatre, and this is still in progress, and other projects have been carried out on the Kiosk in the main square, the cemetery, the municipal archives building, and the Teodoro Dehesa Market. Some of this work has been made possible as a result of a Spanish financial assistance programme.

Authenticity

It is the urban fabric of Tlacotalpan as a whole rather than individual buildings that is the subject of this nomination. In this respect the authenticity is high, since the street pattern and the overall appearance of the town faithfully preserve the original form. Since this is a town that has been occupied continuously since its foundation it is inevitable that there will have been modifications over time.

However, designation as an Historic Monuments Zone in 1986 has ensured that Tlacotalpan has been spared unsightly and inappropriate interventions, so that the outstanding domestic architecture survives virtually intact, both externally and internally. Restoration projects have also greatly improved the appearance of some important public buildings.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Tlacotalpan in January 1998. The International Committee on Historic Towns and Villages also commented on the nomination.

Qualities

Tlacotalpan is an exceptionally well preserved example of an unusual type of Spanish colonial settlement in the Caribbean, a river port. It retains its original urban fabric to a very high degree, and the quality of its buildings, which belong to the Caribbean vernacular tradition rather than to the more general Spanish colonial style, is exceptional in its exuberant variety of

form, decoration, and colour. The presence of many trees in public spaces and in private gardens and courtyards lends a special appeal to the townscape.

Comparative analysis

The only Spanish colonial town in the Caribbean region that may be compared with Tlacotalpan is Santa Cruz de Mompo (Colombia), which was inscribed on the World Heritage List in 1995. Superficially the two towns are very similar in their situation, function, and plan. There are, however, significant differences. Tlacotalpan is exceptional among Spanish colonial towns for the fact that it does not possess the wealth of churches, monasteries, and other religious foundations that are such a prominent feature elsewhere in Latin America: it possesses only three relatively modest churches. It is also exceptional by virtue of its unique townscape of wide streets and many trees, which is not to be found elsewhere. Finally, there is the exuberant ornamentation and use of colour in its many domestic buildings which sets it apart from other Spanish towns.

The comparative study on *The urban architectural heritage of Latin America* (1998) prepared for ICOMOS by Arq. Ramón Gutiérrez does not include a detailed treatment of Tlacotalpan. It is, however, in the handlist of key sites in the Annex to that study, where it is considered to be a site on the tentative lists of the Latin-American countries considered to be worthy of consideration for the World Heritage List.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The ICOMOS expert mission report stressed the need for the approval and implementation of the Regional Plan for the Development and Conservation of Tlacotalpan as a matter of urgency, with the establishment of a coordinating team for conservation within the town. It also recommended the preparation of a specific detailed plan for cultural and ecological tourism. Proposals were made for the extension of the buffer zone so as to include part of the river, which is an essential part of the setting of the nominated site.

At its meeting in June 1998 the Bureau referred this nomination back to the State Party, requesting adjustment of the buffer zone, as proposed by ICOMOS. New maps were provided which met the ICOMOS requirements.

Brief description

Tlacotalpan is a Spanish colonial river port on the Gulf coast of Mexico, founded in the mid 16th century, which has preserved its original urban fabric to an exceptional degree. Its qualities are to be found in its outstanding townscape of wide streets, colonnaded houses in an exuberant variety of styles and colours, and many mature trees in public open spaces and private gardens.

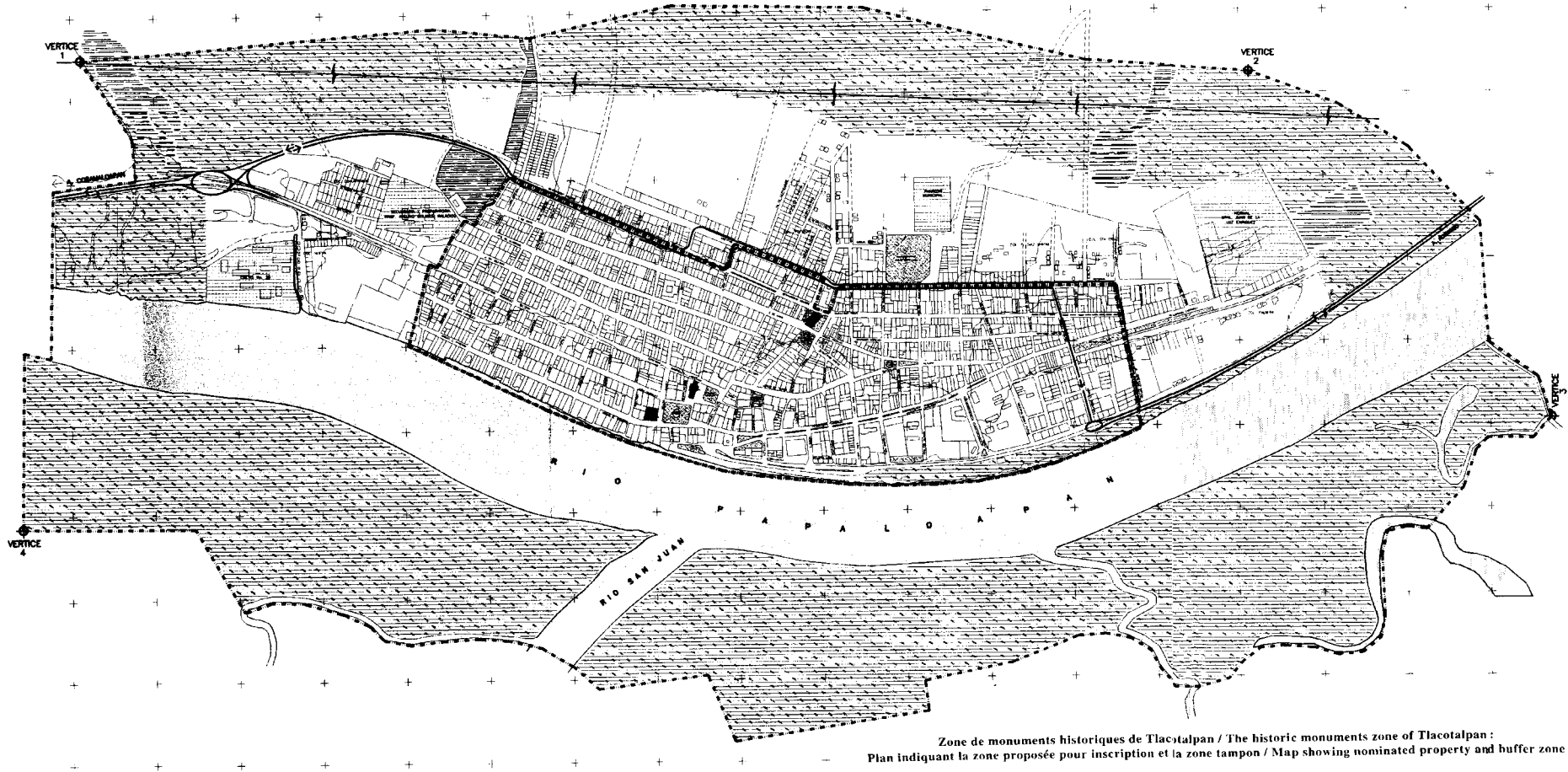
Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the World Heritage List on the basis of *criteria ii and iv*:



Criterion ii: The urban layout and architecture of Tlacotalpan represent a fusion of Spanish and Caribbean traditions of exceptional importance and quality.

Criterion iv: Tlacotalpan is a Spanish colonial river port on the Gulf coast of Mexico which has preserved its original urban fabric to an exceptional degree. Its outstanding character lies in its townscape of wide streets, modest houses in an exuberant variety of styles and colours, and many mature trees in public and private open spaces.

ICOMOS, October 1998



Zone de monuments historiques de Tlacotalpan / The historic monuments zone of Tlacotalpan :
 Plan indiquant la zone proposée pour inscription et la zone tampon / Map showing nominated property and buffer zone

GOBIERNO DE MEXICO
 SECRETARÍA DE DESARROLLO URBANO Y CONSTRUCCIÓN

A. GOBIERNO MUNICIPAL, COMISIÓN DE PLANEACIÓN Y DESARROLLO URBANO Y CONSTRUCCIÓN

SÍMBOLOS
LIMITES
 - - - - - LIMITE DE CENTRO DE POBLACION PATRIOMONIAL
 - - - - - LIMITE DE ZONA DE MONUMENTOS

AREA URBANA
 CONSOLIDADA
 EQUIPAMIENTO
 ESPACIOS ABIERTOS

AREA DE NUEVO DESARROLLO
 HABITACIONAL A CONSOLIDAR

ENTORNO URBANO
 ZONAS DE DESARROLLO ACOMPLETADO
 NUEVO

LEGENDA COMPLEMENTARIA
 - - - - - RIO
 - - - - - CARRILLO
 - - - - - CARRILLO
 - - - - - CARRILLO

PLAN REGIONAL DE DESARROLLO URBANO Y CONSERVACION DE LA CD. DE TLACOTALPAN, MEX.
LIMITE DEL CENTRO DE POBLACION PATRIOMONIAL E-1
 ESCALA: 1:5000
 FECHA: 1985