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## **REPORT**

**on the ICOMOS Reactive Monitoring Mission  
to World Heritage Site**

**Antigua Guatemala  
(Guatemala)**

**9-13 February 2004**

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## **Introduction:**

Architect Isabel Rigol Savio, on behalf of ICOMOS, undertook from February 9<sup>th</sup> to 13<sup>th</sup> the second reactive monitoring mission to Antigua Guatemala.

The reason for this mission was that the World Heritage Committee, during its 27<sup>th</sup> meeting in Paris 2003, had discussed the current factors that are a threat to Antigua Guatemala, such as urban pressure, pressures from tourism, lack of management and updated legislation, inexistent monitoring, inadequate institutional coordination and other difficulties. The Committee, also concerned about the construction of a new and huge shopping centre in the Old Town as well as the reconstruction of the Cathedral and of the Compañía de Jesús Third Cloister, asked the Guatemalan authorities for the reformulation of the Law and a detailed report on the conservation of the historic town. (1)

Arch. Rigol Savio carried out the first ICOMOS mission to Antigua in 2001 in order to evaluate the impacts of the construction of the shopping centre in this historic town.

## **Conclusions from the 2001 mission:**

In 2001, the consultant arrived to several conclusions and recommendations (2), most of which she considers currently valid. Among them:

- Lack of a strong authority due, on one hand, to the weakness of the Law or its eventual inobservance.
- Insufficient and not updated regulations concerning the preservation and harmonious development of the town. Generally, works undertaken are not clearly based on a territorial and urban analysis.
- Insufficient funds to undertake all the necessary interventions on public areas and buildings.
- Excessive exploitation of the town for tourism, meanwhile it gets little benefits out of this prosperous and increasing industry. For example, even though Antigua is one of the main receptors of tourism in the country, the *Instituto Guatemalteco de Turismo* (INGUAT) collects most of the profit, leaving a minimum to the Municipality.
- A strong speculation related to the very high prices of land and buildings has for a long time stimulated many Antiguan families to sell their properties. This process which currently keeps taking place means a growing gentrification and will end in a definitive change of the spiritual linkages between the inhabitants and their town.
- A growing tendency to build in neocolonial style (the so called Antigua Style) promoting confusion and lack of authenticity.

- Due to the lack of a circumvallating highway, there are very serious traffic problems. The circulation of trucks and buses which drive through the town 's narrow pebbled streets produce vibrations and other physical impacts; produce environmental pollution and general deterioration.
- There does not seem to be a clear policy or plan concerning the growth of the town. As a result, some uncontrolled urban development is taking place on empty areas surrounding Antigua.
- When Antigua was inscribed in the World Heritage List in 1979, a buffer zone was not defined. This means, among other dangers, that the valuable natural components of the Antiguan territory as a whole, like volcanoes, hills, river, fauna, flora and others are not protected at all. Another fact to take into consideration is that these natural values belong to four different municipalities.

Though a considerable amount of illegal constructions was then reported, new mechanisms have been applied in the last three years in order to better control these matters.

With relation to the public disorders produced by uncontrolled night life, the situation has greatly improved due to the action of the Municipality.

In spite of the many difficulties found in Antigua Guatemala in 2001, the consultant also mentioned several achievements. Among them the creation of a technical unit under the Mayor 's office to reinforce their role and responsibilities towards the safeguarding of the town, regarding the preservation of Antigua, the existence of the Civic Association "Salvemos Antigua" ( Save Antigua) composed by relevant members of the community and professionals as an active and efficient tool for promoting communal awareness and participation, financial support of the historic centre 's cleansing by some tourism entities as an important contribution to the municipal efforts, international support from Spanish Collaboration Agency (AECI) and other sources, the vast documentation work done by the Council for the Protection of Antigua (CPAG) by means of data and photographs on all Antigua landmarks and its interventions, installation of a modern laboratory for audiovisual products donated by Japan and the development of a public education campaign, a research on the original colors of Antigua and public orientation to residents, control, orientation and design of advertisements, the public works undertaken by the Municipality in order to hide electrical and telephone installations, the approval of new Municipal regulations, fines and taxes for parking.

Another achievement mentioned was the significant group of Antiguans that have remained or either returned to their birthplace keeping a strong sense of belonging to the town. Many foreigners who have definitely settled here also share the same feeling.

A large number of attractions, hotels, shops, crafts workshops, restaurants, cafes and other facilities for leisure have prevailed in this town providing its constant animation.

Several recommendations were then proposed concerning the urgent updating and approval of the Protection Law for Antigua, the conclusion and legal approval of Antigua 's new Regulations and Master Plan, including a territorial approach, a management plan and proper control of visitors, definition of a buffer zone, more benefits for preservation from the profits made out of tourism, search for international assistance, control of the high prices of immovable properties, elimination of heavy traffic in Antigua, systematic training and education programs.

As some necessary topics of debate "the treatment of ruins" or how to deal with "new and old" were proposed.

She also suggested to provide the Guatemalan Government and the Antiguan authorities with a systematic support on monitoring by the World Heritage Center.

When the 2001 mission took place, the idea of the shopping center was finally abandoned. Apparently, its lack of correspondence with the scale and traditions of the old town and all the alterations and difficulties it would produce in relation to parking, overcrowding and other conflicts, was understood.

### **Current Situation of Antigua Guatemala:**

After this new visit to Antigua, the consultant realized that almost three years later, most of the above mentioned problems are still threatening Antigua Guatemala:

- The tensions and pressures imposed by growth, on one hand, and speculation, on the other, are dangerously increasing.
- Several municipalities coincide on the territory of Antigua without the necessary territorial regional organization, distribution of functions, decentralization of activities, coordination which should be implemented and strictly supported by governmental levels above the municipalities.
- The value of land and buildings continues rising due to different reasons, among them, the prestige of a World Heritage status, the successful and profitable tourism activities developed, the many leisure and commercial facilities Antigua provides, the vicinity to the Capital and others. This fact, besides threatening the built stock, by attempts of additions, transformations and so, are also promoting a desire for building on any empty lots in or around the town. Not only the town 's original shape could be dramatically and soon modified but also the surrounding landscapes of hills, volcanoes, forests and fauna among its outstanding values.
- The updating of the legal instruments has not yet been properly done. Several projects with the aim of improving the Protection Law have been worked out in the last years. One of them, without any consensus or sponsorship from the conservation authorities (Ministry of Culture, Conservation Council, ICOMOS; etc) is now, contradictorily, under a process for approval by the Congress.

- Though a project for a Regulatory Plan has been undertaken in 2003 by the Municipality, a Regional plan to coordinate the needs of the whole territory and its municipalities, has not been yet approved.
- Due to discrepancies between the foreign and local parts, the Master Plan for Antigua has not been concluded, though it was started with the assistance of the Spanish Cooperation Agency and a large amount of work was done years ago.
- The contribution of the successful tourism profits to Antigua continues being small in comparison with the benefits it gets out from the town 's values and the deterioration it produces.

It is important to point out that the increasing need of growth and adaptation to contemporary life 's requirements is normal but needs an adequate response related with both development and preservation of the natural and cultural values of the Region and the town.

Since most buildings and empty lots or portions of land are privately owned, there is a logic interest of the owners on getting profits from these properties. But, private interests should not determine the land use in detriment of the preservation of heritage values. A case like that of the huge shopping center should have never been admitted by any of the authorities.

### **On the shopping center and other new projects:**

All the authorities and decision makers now agree on not building the projected shopping center of the Paiz Chain in the Old Town. The discussion is now focused on the development of the twenty two hectares of *Finca Retana*, a former plantation in the surroundings of Antigua. In 2002 a project for building a new commercial center and parking facilities in *Finca Retana* was discussed. For months it has been debated that the new facilities be located on the empty lots of Antigua 's outskirts and, at the same time, preserve the landmarks and landscapes remaining around the historic town, like the former hospital of La Recolecti3n and forests nearby. Also the need to keep a green strip of trees between the town and any new development is under discussion. Once again the idea of a big commercial center was rejected and, instead, a convention center and related facilities were proposed for *Finca Retana*.

It is evident that the development of Antigua under a certain admissible rate of growth of the population and its living demands cannot be avoided. But it is absolutely necessary to control and orient it properly and according to the obligation to preserve the World Heritage site and its natural landscapes.

Projects like the one proposed for *Finca Retana* can be authorized if their high quality of design is proved and it means a valuable contemporary addition to Antigua. And primarily if they do not interfere with the preservation of any historic value. Since this topic is a quite subjective one, a careful analysis is required.

The consultant could not see the project for Finca Retana and, therefore, cannot give any opinion on its quality. Supposedly, it is a good one considering that it is being managed by Architect José María Magaña, who is a highly qualified conservator and designer.

### **On the reconstruction of Cathedral and the Third Cloister of the Compañía de Jesús Convent:**

According to Architect Antonio Tovar, Conservator of Antigua, the intended reconstruction of the Cathedral was to consolidate its structures in order to better resist any seismic event. Though consolidation could be necessary, it should never comprise the total reconstruction of the building. Only the reinforcement of the remaining structures and perhaps, if indispensable, the carefully designed addition of some new structural elements.

Right now the reconstruction has been paralyzed. Architect Tovar and the conservation officers have understood that it is, by no means, recommendable, to continue such an intervention. According to the most disseminated principles, the ruins of Antigua churches are testimonies of the seismic events which long ago destroyed them and it is nonsense to rebuild them in order to produce dubious replicas of the past.

Regarding the Convent of the Jesuits, the Compañía de Jesús, this complex from the 17<sup>th</sup> century, had been mostly destroyed due to an earthquake in 1773 and furtherly adapted to a public market in the nineteenth century. In 1912 the complex was turned into a public market and for this purpose severe demolitions and transformations took place. A new earthquake in 1976 produced great damage to the remaining structures. In spite of this, the walls on its perimeter did not fall down. From this date on, the place was used as storage for construction materials.

Reconstruction, according to the Charter of Venice and the most advanced contemporary principles, should only be practiced under exceptional circumstances, and under a strict research of the testimonies remaining as well as documents, etc. If the Compañía de Jesús is or not a case of exception, is a matter of debate. Perhaps it is, if we consider its former historic role, its didactic value, and the potential use of such a large complex for contemporary functions. On the other hand, according to Architect Irma Yolanda de León, its intervention recently undertaken by the Spanish Cooperation Agency, was based on photographs from the building 's last stage in 1886 as well as a careful archaeological research on the site. The archaeological research allowed to discover many components of the original foundations, walls, windows, doors, columns, latrines or floors that served for their reconstruction. In all cases an evidence of the new intervention has been left.

The consultant would have preferred a more modern intervention, perhaps combining ruins and new elements. But this kind of intervention is always a risk unless it responds to a very good design. Anyway, the reconstruction works done in the Jesuit cloister can be assumed within the admissible range of interventions in cases like this. Every body knows that, besides the paradigmatic case of Warsaw, reconstructions have often taken place world wide. For example the Colonial City of Santo Domingo, even prior to its inscription in the World Heritage List.

The place has been turned into a very modern information and training center which highly contributes to the academic and cultural life of Antigua. It also houses a trade school related to conservation and restoration (Escuela Taller) as part of the very efficient Spanish Program for the Americas.

After visiting and analyzing these two cases of reconstruction that called the World Heritage Committee 's attention, the consultant thinks they do not represent such a big problem and there are other more challenging problems to address with regard to the integrity of Antigua. What is now important is to make it clear, among the conservation professionals and officers from Antigua, that these kind of interventions have to be strictly exceptional.

### **General conclusions:**

The town 's current status could be defined in the following terms:

- In spite of many threats Antigua, almost miraculously, retains, in general, the values for which it was inscribed in the World Heritage List.
- Many of Antigua 's values could be and definitely spoiled soon if the national and local authorities do not take urgent measures to stop or alleviate the factors affecting the integrity of the historic town.
- It is an obligation of the State Party to urgently start giving proper solutions to the different difficulties currently faced by Antigua Guatemala and to guarantee a systematic action to preserve its integrity.
- The recently designated authorities of the Ministry of Culture, aware of these perils and in order to avoid the inclusion of Antigua in the World Heritage List in Danger, promised to urgently develop an Action Plan that would start giving proper solutions to each of the difficulties detected.

### **Recommendations:**

Summarizing the problems found in 2001 plus the ones observed in February 2004, an action plan should urgently guarantee the following aspects:

- A prioritized attention to Antigua, as a World Heritage site, by the Government of Guatemala calling for the permanent support of the top levels of the Nation.
- A more active participation from the side of the Ministry of Culture as a national rector of cultural heritage preservation and full acceptance of this role by the Council for the Protection of Antigua. A better coordination among all parts must be sought.
- The urgent updating of the legislation to protect Antigua and immediate approval by the Congress. The different projects existent must be analyzed in order to propose a

definitive and proper one. Among other relevant issues it has to include the World Heritage requirements.

- Completion, approval and application of a Regional Regulatory Plan, a Master Plan for Antigua, management plans as well as risk preparedness programs. Establishment of a buffer zone, including the valuable natural landscapes around the town.
- Better funding by means of partnerships, international and national assistance, grants and other sources. Above all, the authorization of proper financial status that allows Antigua to retain at least an acceptable portion of the profits from tourism and invest it on the preservation of its values.
- Provision of higher budgets for the incorporation of all the professionals needed or to contract specialized entities. For instance, to work out the Regulatory, Master or management plans, risk preparedness programs, to analyze the different projects for legislation, etc.
- Capacity building by means of reinforcing the existent preservation services in order to be efficient at different scales of conservation and restoration preservation, urban or architectural, movable or immovable. Also by systematic training and Continuation of educational campaigns addressing all sectors, mainly the younger generations, by the Council for the protection of Antigua.
- Continuation of all the coordination efforts in order to avoid any public disorder related to nightlife.
- Continuation of regulatory measures for parking within the old town.
- Construction of the peripheral highway in order to eliminate heavy traffic in Antigua.
- Hold a consultation, competition or workshop with national and international experts on the projects for *Finca Retana* , in order for this complex to be a paradigm on the insertion of contemporary design within a historic context.
- Revitalization of projects like *Panchoy 2010* (for the natural heritage of Panchoy Valley), with France, or the completion of the Master Plan of Antigua with the Spanish Cooperation Agency. In general, stimulate international assistance and exchange.
- The idea of ecological tourism should be promoted among potential investors on the natural territory of Antigua in order to induce a wiser use of land.



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- Members of the Association "Salvemos Antigua".
- Members of ICOMOS Guatemala.
- Members of the Antigua Protection Council.

## **Notes:**

(1) Communication from Mr. Antonio Pallarés Buonafina, Guatemalan Ambassador to UNESCO, to Mr. Edgar Gutiérrez, Minister of Foreign Affairs, Paris, July 17<sup>th</sup>, 2003.

(2) Monitoring Mission to Antigua Guatemala. Report by Isabel Rigol-Savio, Havana, June 24. 2001

Isabel Rigol Savio  
Havana, 15 March 2004