

ICOMOS

INTERNATIONAL COUNCIL ON MONUMENTS AND SITES
CONSEIL INTERNATIONAL DES MONUMENTS ET DES SITES
CONSEJO INTERNACIONAL DE MONUMENTOS Y SITIOS
МЕЖДУНАРОДНЫЙ СОВЕТ ПО ВОПРОСАМ ПАМЯТНИКОВ И ДОСТОПРИМЕЧАТЕЛЬНЫХ МЕСТ
WORLD HERITAGE LIST N° 415

A) IDENTIFICATION

Nomination : The city of Oaxaca, the archaeological site of Monte Alban and the site of Cuilapan

Location : State of Oaxaca de Juárez

State Party : Mexico

Date : December 2, 1986

B) ICOMOS RECOMMENDATION

That the city of Oaxaca and the site of Monte Alban be included on the World Heritage List on the basis of criteria I, II, III and IV.

C) JUSTIFICATION

A single proposal concerning three distinct cultural properties located in the valley of Oaxaca has been submitted. They are the historic centre of the city founded in 1529 by the Spanish, the pre-Hispanic archaeological site of Monte Alban, which is 4 kms southwest of the town, and the village of Cuilapan, 12 kms away, where the Dominicans undertook, in the middle of the 16th century, to build a vast monastery. In 1570, work was definitely suspended because the seignorial lands of the marquisate of the valley of Oaxaca were conceded to Cortés and his heirs by Charles the Fifth.

This nomination is deliberately diachronic, playing on the historical complementarity of cultural properties geographically proximate to each other. ICOMOS wishes, first and foremost, to point out the universal value of two of these properties : Monte Alban and Oaxaca.

Among the some 200 pre-Hispanic archaeological sites inventoried in the valley of Oaxaca, the Monte Alban complex is the one which best represents the singular evolution of a region inhabited by a succession of peoples : the Olmecs, Zapotecs and Mixtecs. The protected zone covers 40 km² to the west of Oaxaca and includes three principal ensembles : Atzompa, El Gallo and Monte Alban. The latter, built on a 500-meter elevation overlooking the valley, gave its name to a remarkable civilization which some archaeologists would credit with being the first urban civilization in the Americas.

Olmec cultural influences from the "Monte Alban I" phase can be found in the 140 engraved stone slabs of the monument Los Danzantes, and reused in several later edifices built on the northeast side of the central esplanade.

The main part of this impressive ceremonial centre which forms a 300 - meter esplanade running north-south with a platform at either end, was constructed during the Monte Alban II (c. 300 B.C. to 100 A.D.) and the Monte Alban III phases. Phase II corresponds to the urbanization of the site and the domination of the environment by the construction of terraces on the sides of the hills, and the development of a system of dams and conduits. In 800 A.D. the town had more than 50,000 inhabitants.

The influences of the Teotihuacan culture - which the Zapotecs began to assimilate around 200 A.D. - can be felt in the superhuman, abstract aspect of a massive architectural style which used great volumes combined in a grandiose fashion with immense open spaces. However, unlike Teotihuacan, whose valley location facilitated its layout, Monte Alban was literally carved out from solid mountain, in various stages spanning 1500 years. Manmade terraces and esplanades (more than 2200 have been counted) thus replaced the natural unevenness of the site with a whole new sacred topography of pyramids, and artificial knolls and mounds.

The ensemble began to decline around 800 A.D., when the Mixtecs, descending from the mountains, threatened the Zapotecs living in the valley. The ultimate phases of Monte Alban IV and V were marked by the transformation of the sacred Olmec city into a fortified town. Towards 1400, the Mixtec chiefs ordained that they be buried in the ancient tombs of the ceremonial centre. Tomb No.7 at Monte Alban, explored in 1932, is the most famous example of this practice of reuse. It was there that the "Treasure of Monte Alban" - a fabulous collection of 500 objects - was found. The collection is now housed in the State Museum of Oaxaca.

A short time before the arrival of the conquistadores, the Aztecs took over control of the valley and founded, in 1486, the stronghold of Huaxyacac (the name means "near the acacia grove"). This place name survived, in 1521, when the Spanish erected the fort of Antequera de Oaxaca on the same site.

The city itself, established by decree of Charles the Fifth on September 14, 1526, was not actually laid out until 1529. Alonso Garcia Bravo based his plan for Oaxaca on Mexico City, adopting a rectangular grid pattern with blocks measuring 84 m on a side.

This checkerboard layout has remained intact at Oaxaca, where halfway between the Atoyac and Jalatlaco rivers, there is a principal plaza -the Zocalo - which soon was lined with great edifices, such as the Cathedral. Oaxaca became a diocese in 1535 and its first bishop was named in 1537. Construction work was supervised by the Dominicans and began in 1544.

The present city, with just over 120,000 inhabitants, has fortunately retained its historic centre which is composed of 172 blocks classified in Zone A and 55 in Zone B. A total of 1200 historic monuments, spared by the evolution of the city, have been inventoried and listed. The important religious monuments (the Cathedral, Santo Domingo, San Francisco, San Agustin, San Filipo

Neri, the Soledad, etc.), the superb patrician town houses (the home of Cortés), and whole streets lined with other dwellings combine to create a harmonious cityscape, and reconstitute the image of a former colonial city whose monumental aspect has been kept intact. Fine architectural quality also characterizes the 19th-century buildings in this city that was the birthplace of Benito Juárez and which, in 1872, adopted the name of Oaxaca de Juárez.

ICOMOS is in favor of nominating Monte Alban and Oaxaca to the World Heritage List, on the basis of criteria I, II, III and IV.

- Criterion I. The ceremonial centre of Monte Alban created a grandiose architectural landscape which, like that of Machu Picchu (nominated in 1983 to the World Heritage List), represents a unique artistic achievement.

- Criterion II. For more than a millenium, Monte Alban exerted considerable influence on the whole cultural area of Oaxaca.

- Criterion III. With its pelota court, magnificent temples, tombs and bas reliefs with hieroglyphic inscriptions, Monte Alban bears unique testimony to the successive civilizations occupying the region during the pre-Classic and Classic periods.

- Criterion IV. Monte Alban is an outstanding example of a pre-Columbian ceremonial centre in the middle zone of present-day Mexico, which was subjected to influences from the north - first from Teotihuacan, later the Aztecs - and from the south - the Maya. Oaxaca is a perfect example of a 16th-century colonial town. Its monumental heritage is one of the richest and most coherent in the area that was known as New Spain.

In conclusion, ICOMOS should like to underscore the original and wholly satisfactory character of the nomination for Oaxaca and Monte Alban. These two properties, situated within close proximity of one to the other, are historically complementary. On the other hand, it would appear unnecessarily redundant to include Cuilapan, which is located at some distance from the others, in a nomination to the World Heritage List.

ICOMOS should like to obtain from the Government of Mexico full assurance with regard to the protection of the land that separates the historic centre of Oaxaca from the archaeological zone of Monte Alban. Although the topographical features ensure that one area is not visible from the other, it would, nevertheless, be suitable to create, whatever the cost, a zone non aedificandi between the colonial city and the archaeological park.

ICOMOS furthermore would like to receive more complete information concerning the updated masterplan for Oaxaca de Juárez. Given the distinguished monumental quality of the city, the preservation of peripheral areas and undeveloped zones is a legitimate requirement.