

San Cristóbal de la Laguna (Spain)

No 929

Identification

<i>Nomination</i>	San Cristóbal de la Laguna
<i>Location</i>	District of Santa Cruz de Tenerife, Autonomous Community of the Canaries
<i>State Party</i>	Spain
<i>Date</i>	30 June 1998

Justification by State Party

The historic ensemble of San Cristóbal de la Laguna has outstanding universal value as an urban design. It is an historic ensemble which represents the concept of the “town-territory” as the first example of an unfortified town laid out and built according to a complete plan based on navigation, the science of the time, and as the organized space of a new peaceful social order inspired by the millenary religious concepts of the year 1500.

According to this, verifications of measurements and processes used are fundamental elements, together with the meanings implicit in the selected dimensions and in the formal relationships established between the urban spaces and elements.

The formal image of this structure corresponds with a constellation of points which marks the special positions of the urban plan and the relationships between certain of them and the whole so as to produce a symbolic structure which should be interpreted in a manner similar to that of the marine charts of the period or the celestial constellations.

Note by ICOMOS The nomination dossier follows this “Statement of Significance” with 27 pages of “Justification.” For reasons of economy, it is not proposed to set these out in full in this evaluation. The sixteen headings under which the justification is set out are as follows:

1. A town of the time of the Catholic Monarchs (*Los Reyes Católicos*), 1500.
2. The town of a single overlord, the Captain General Alonso Fernandez de Lugo.
3. A colonial town representative of the mission of colonists in a city-republic in a new land.
4. An administrative town which illustrates urban thinking, where the civil powers and the decisions of the Town Council (*Cabildo*) are elements in the process of building the town.

5. The first town of “peace” – an unfortified town.
6. The first example of a city-territory: the predecessor of the American towns.
7. The town as project.
8. Two towns and two times of foundation: the Upper and Lower towns.
9. Form derived from navigation: a circular sphere of impact and a square layout based on axes.
10. A town completely controlled by regulatory measures.
11. The street layout as the basis for the social structure: balanced distribution of all the social classes within the urban fabric.
12. The millenary religious ideas of 1500: reform of the clergy and its expression through the urban fabric.
13. Measurements as symbols: the resurrection and the end of time.
14. A religious axis linking the parish churches.
15. The meaning of San Cristóbal and of La Laguna.
16. The image of the town: the constellation of the points of a navigation chart as the constellation of the heavens.

[**Note** The State Party does not make any proposals in the nomination dossier concerning the criteria under which it considers this property should be inscribed on the World Heritage List.]

Category of property

In terms of the categories of cultural property set out in Article 1 of the 1972 World Heritage Convention, this is a *group of buildings*.

History and Description

History

San Cristóbal de la Laguna was founded in 1497 by Alonso Fernandez de Lugo. The last town to be established in the Canary Islands (which was the first Spanish overseas territory) takes its name from a shallow lake or marshy area (La Laguna), which was not drained until 1837.

The original settlers, who were almost all soldiers, were not allocated building plots; the non-fortified urban area that was defined was considered to be a public space where anyone could build. As a result small houses were erected around the church of La Concepción in a haphazard fashion, without any overall plan, in the Upper Town (*Villa de Arriba*). However, this situation was regularized in 1502, when a regular town plan based on Leonardo da Vinci’s model for Imola was drawn up by the Captain General (*Adelantado*) for the area between his official residence and the church. Wide major streets (*calles reales*) linked the public open spaces and formed the grid on which smaller streets were superimposed.

The resulting Lower Town (*Villa de Abajo*) expanded rapidly, attracting the island’s ruling classes, and by 1515 had more than a thousand inhabitants. Monastic communities began building early in the 16th century – the

Church of Nuestra Señora de los Remedios (1511), the Hermitage of San Miguel (1506), and the Hospitals of San Sebastián (1506) and Los Dolores (1515).

A piped water supply was installed at the expense of the Town Council (*Cabildo*) in 1521, and the first public buildings were constructed in 1525. The town began to seek official urban status as early as 1514, but this was not granted until 1531. In 1554 the Town Council ordained that any buildings in straw were to be demolished, to lessen the risk of fire, an important precaution, because by that time the population had risen to six thousand, making it the largest town in the Canaries.

San Cristóbal retained this pre-eminent position as the main political, religious, and commercial centre throughout the 17th and 18th centuries, and the prosperity that this brought is to be seen in the buildings from that period. However, the political and economic centre was progressively transferred to Santa Cruz during the 18th century, and as a result San Cristóbal declined, only retaining a significant role in religious and cultural life. A brief political revival following the establishment of the Supreme Council (*Junta Suprema*) of the Canary Islands with its seat in San Cristóbal in 1808 came to an abrupt end when that body fell foul of the Provincial Council (*Diputación Provincial*) based in Santa Cruz de Tenerife five years later and was disbanded.

The 20th century has seen San Cristóbal recovering something of its former role, thanks notably to the prestige of its university.

Description

San Cristóbal de la Laguna consists of two distinct parts – the Upper Town (*Villa de Arriba*) of 1497 and the Lower Town (*Villa de Abajo*) of 1502. The main street (Calle de la Carrera) forms the axis of the planned town, linking the first parish church with the Plaza del Adelantado. Parallel with it runs the Calle de San Agustín, which forms the geometric centre of the town; it is lined with large houses built by the early merchants in the town. A number of squares open out of it in the regular form derived from Mudéjar models.

The first church, dedicated to the *Conception*, was completely demolished and rebuilt, starting in 1511. It underwent a series of modifications and additions in the succeeding centuries, and its present form reflects that long history in its mixture of styles and uncoordinated structures – tower, baptistery, nave with two side-aisles, chapels, etc. Nearby is what remains of the *Monastery of San Agustín*, founded at the beginning of the 16th century. It has a fine two-storey cloister.

Construction of the new parish church for the Upper Town proceeded slowly, since the Captain General was concentrating on the development of the Lower Town, where work began in 1515 on building its parish church, dedicated to *Los Remedios*. A single-aisled building in Mudéjar style, with a tower added in the 17th century, it later became the cathedral of the new bishopric of Tenerife, established in 1813. The original façade had collapsed and was replaced in Neo-Classical form; extensive remodelling took place in the early 20th century. In its present form it has three aisles with a number of side chapels.

The Dominican *Convent of Santa Catalina de Siena* was inaugurated in 1611 and became so influential that it absorbed a number of adjoining buildings. The exteriors of the church and other buildings are plain and severe, but the internal decoration is sumptuous.

The small *Ermita de San Miguel* declined sadly after its foundation by the first Adelantado, and was used as a store until in the 1970s the Tenerife Island Council restored it for use as a cultural centre. What remains of the once prosperous mid 16th century *Convent of Santa Clara*, largely destroyed by fire in 1697, is used for a similar purpose.

There is a number of fine former *private residences* in San Cristóbal de la Laguna. Oldest is the Casa del Corregidor (although only the façade in dressed red stone is original), from 1545. It is now used as municipal offices. From the end of the 16th century comes the Casa de Lercaro, with an especially fine Mannerist façade, now the Tenerife historical museum.

The Casa de Alvarado Bracamonte, also known as the House of the Captains General, was built in 1624-31 and was used by successive governors as an office and residence until the 19th century. It has a red stone portal with pilasters, a wrought-iron balcony, and a broken pediment. It now houses the municipal historical and artistic heritage section.

The 17th century Casa de Salazar is very well preserved. Built in 1682, it has a handsome portal in eclectic style, principally Baroque but with some Mannerist and Neo-Classical elements. It now belongs to the bishopric of Tenerife. The Casa de Ossuna is contemporary with the Casa de Salazar; its most striking feature is the long balcony on the first floor of the façade. It is used for the enormous archival collection of San Cristóbal.

Among the fine 18th century buildings are the elegant Casa de Montañés, built as a private residence and now the seat of the Consultative Council of the Autonomous Government of the Canaries, and the L-plan Casa de los Jesuitas, occupied by the Society of Jesus until its expulsion from the Canaries in 1767, when it was taken over by the Royal Society of the Friends of Tenerife (*Sociedad Real Económica de Amigos del País de Tenerife*), which still occupies the premises. The Casa de la Alhóndiga was built at the beginning of the 18th century as a corn market. In the early 19th century it was a French military barracks and it became a district court in the 19th century; it is now used for municipal offices. Of special interest is its monumental portal.

San Cristóbal also has some good 20th century architecture, such as the Palace of Rodríguez de Azero and the Leal Theatre, both fine examples of Eclecticism (the former is now the Casino).

Management and Protection

Legal status

The Historical Ensemble of San Cristóbal de la Laguna was declared by the Province (*Comunidad Autónoma*) of the Canaries on 28 December 1985 to be a Site of Cultural Interest (*Bien de Interés Cultural*), as defined in the 1985 Law of the Spanish Historical Heritage.

The town has had an Urban Plan (*Plan de Ordenación Urbana* – POU) since 1947, and this was further defined by the General Plan of 1965. A Special Plan for the Internal Reform of the Historic District (*Plan Spécial de Reforma Interior del Casco Histórico* – PERI) was adopted in 1977. However, these were only partially implemented, and so they have been replaced by two recent measures, the Special Plan for Protection and Internal Reform (*Plan Spécial de Protección y Reforma Interior* – PEPRI) and the General Urban Plan (*Plan General de Ordenación Urbana* – PGOU), both of which came into force in 1996. The former deals specifically with the historic core, which is the subject of this nomination, and the latter covers the remainder of the municipality.

The effect of this national, regional, and local legislation is to exercise strict control on all forms of development within the historic core and its buffer zone.

Management

Responsibility for the protection, control, and inspection of the historic district is shared by the General Directorate of Historic Heritage of the Government of the Canaries (*Dirección General de Patrimonio Histórico del Gobierno de Canarias*) and the Island Council of Tenerife (*Excmo Cabildo Insular de Tenerife*), whilst at the local level this function is exercised by the Town Hall of San Cristóbal de la Laguna (*Excmo Ayuntamiento de San Cristóbal de la Laguna*).

There are management plans in force for three aspects of the work – conservation, restoration and rehabilitation, and promotion. These have resulted in twenty-five projects on major historic buildings in recent years. There is an active promotional programme aimed at heightening community awareness and involvement and improvement of tourist facilities, as part of the celebrations of the town's quinqucentenary.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

During the early decades of the 20th century many of the traditional buildings underwent significant morphological transformations, especially to roofs and facades. In the 1960s a number of buildings were demolished and replaced by higher modern structures. However, this process was brought to an end by the strict enforcement of the regulations, which had hitherto been largely disregarded. More difficult has been reversal of the degradation of buildings due to neglect on the part of their owners, though the municipality is making vigorous efforts to reverse this trend. It currently has a catalogue of protected monuments and buildings, according to which 71.4% of the buildings are classified as being in a “good” state of repair and preservation.

The regulations and plans currently in force are now being applied rigorously. This policy is greatly assisted by two island-wide programmes. One is a complete survey and inventory of all real estate on Tenerife, which provides data on the desiderata for restoration and rehabilitation. The second is a set of practical recommendations relating to the preservation of movable heritage. Both programmes are being carried out with the support of local non-governmental organizations.

Authenticity

A living town has a dynamic which results in a continuing process of modification, and this dynamic is in itself an aspect of authenticity. This is well illustrated in San Cristóbal de la Laguna, which has evolved continuously since its foundation five hundred years ago. This can be “read” in its street pattern, its open spaces, and its monuments, which preserve a visible continuity. This results, somewhat paradoxically, from its relative economic backwardness over the past two hundred years, which has prevented the wholesale destruction of much of its designed and built urban fabric. The town therefore has an unassailable authenticity in this respect.

In terms of detail, the authenticity is high. Original facades survive in large numbers, providing an authentic historic streetscape which demonstrates the diverse origins of the town's architecture. Its “transmitted architecture,” combining Islamic and European elements, is original and authentic; it also played a very significant role in the development of architecture in the Spanish New World.

Finally, San Cristóbal de la Laguna has conserved to an unusual degree the authenticity of function of some of its traditional craft quarters. There are concentrations of blacksmiths, shoemakers, braziers, and barbers, for example, to be found in quarters that these trades have occupied since the earliest years of the town.

Evaluation

Action by ICOMOS

An ICOMOS expert mission visited San Cristóbal de la Laguna in March 1999.

Qualities

The historic district of San Cristóbal de la Laguna is an example of innovative urban planning. It is universal testimony to the concept of a “city-territory” and of the design of a city as a project, preserved in its two components, the Upper and Lower Towns.

It is also directly related to a cultural tradition, the surviving tangible and intangible components of which are being preserved by the use of relevant planning and management instruments.

The significance of San Cristóbal de la Laguna in the later development of Spanish colonial towns in Central and South America and their planning is of great cultural significance.

Comparative analysis

The concept of the “ideal city” developed in Spain in the Middle Ages. It took as its starting point the checkerboard layout attributed to Hippodamos of Miletus, which dominated urban design in the Hellenistic and Roman periods and was extensively described by Vitruvius. This was refined and extended, to include the place of the church in the social and political structure of the late medieval period and the elaborate class structures that developed with feudalism and feudal law.

This concept was formalized and codified from the 14th century onwards. The first opportunity for it to be applied to an entirely new foundation came with the beginning of the Spanish colonial empire, in the 15th century. Because of the

military situation, the first towns to be established on the Canaries were strongly, and it was only with the pacification of the islands that it became possible to realize the ideal unfortified town.

In view of the innovative and unique nature of San Cristóbal de la Laguna, it would seem to be inappropriate to view this nomination in a comparative context.

ICOMOS recommendations for future action

The ICOMOS mission report made proposals for the slight modification of the boundaries of the nominated property, which have been accepted by the competent authorities. Other proposals that have been accepted relate to the creation of an integrated system for handling infrastructural services (eg electricity cables), pedestrianization of some of the main streets (accompanied by the provision of parking facilities), and investigation of earlier paving systems, now covered, with the object of restoring them.

Brief description

San Cristóbal de la Laguna has two nuclei, the original unplanned Upper Town and the Lower Town, the first ideal “city-territory,” laid out according to philosophical principles. Its wide streets and open spaces contain a number of fine churches and public and private buildings from the 16th to 18th centuries.

Recommendation

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

Criteria ii and iv San Cristóbal de la Laguna was the first non-fortified Spanish colonial town, and its layout provided the model for many colonial towns in the Americas.

ICOMOS, September 1999