

CONTEXTS SPEAKING: THE EARTHEN ARCHITECTURE OF TWO VILLAGES

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The 2007 AIA RFP grant awarded for “Pilot Project to Aid in the Development of a Preservation Plan for Old Acoma Village” was directed at the particular context of Old Acoma, but also addressed facets of cultural heritage preservation that are important in the global context of the 21st century. Old Acoma, located about 50 miles west of Albuquerque in New Mexico is the cultural center of the Acoma Tribe. A sovereign nation within the United States, Acoma strives to maintain its cultural identity in a changing world. This is not a new condition at Acoma. Since the 17th century the tribe is known for its protection of its culture and place. But with the rapidly changing world landscape of the 21st century, Acoma, similarly to other societies who hold traditional values as central and sacred to their engagement in the world, has a more intense battle for cultural identity. Factors such as accessibility through rapid transportation and instant communication have increased pressure for connectivity in remote and protected places like Acoma. In the current day, pressures from the outside world are felt more intensely than they have been in the past. This has become apparent in the built environment. Although there is a desire to maintain the environment of the Old Acoma settlement according to cultural traditions, there is very little time to carry out building-related activities that were part of the daily life cycles in the past. Furthermore, there is pressure to live according to current ideas of universal culture. Decisions of maintenance and repair have for some also included decisions about building style. With availability of materials mass-produced and meant for mass-distribution, houses at Old Acoma have started to look like houses in urban and suburban settings across the southwest. This is a direct reversal from the past when Acoma was a prime model for southwestern style of building.

Our work in 2007 was to find ways to pass on knowledge about building in a society where the oral tradition is the primary means of communicating information of this sort. Central in our conclusions about cultural heritage preservation of the Old Acoma Village was the connection between the use of materials and methods of construction with cultural identity. Making and maintaining the architecture of a place is a form of cultural identity. Even though there is a desire to ‘be modern’ there is also a desire to hold on to longstanding cultural identity. Even with outside pressures, at Acoma the oral tradition is still present and a primary method of communication for many activities including building and maintenance of structures. The oral tradition is accompanied by respect for learning across generations and knowledge is taught along with cultural identity.

Contexts Speaking: the Earthen Architecture of Two Villages

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The maintenance of earthen structures requires a specialized knowledge attuned to the place, passed down through generations, and thus the focus on materials and methods is a clear cultural direction. Where the built environment is concerned, this method of preservation might require guidance and expertise from outsiders to initiate the process and draw out important aspects of the context, but at its root it requires knowledge from within a culture. The guidance we provided was to advocate for attention to understanding the architecture of the context. This allows knowledge about the village to include the architecture as part of the oral tradition. The Old Acoma Village was built in balance with the local environment, thus the architecture was at one time part of the local knowledge passed on through generations. Our advocacy was not so much to teach about the architecture as to help remember it through stories that were part of the oral tradition. Information passed orally included an understanding of the context along with information about maintenance of the structures. A direct link between the methods proposed for Acoma in 2007 and work done since is seen in a project carried out in the summer of 2009. Similar methods of working to build a community-based form of preservation are being used in Wanla, Ladakh, India, sponsored by the Aceh Institute and supported by the Fulbright Senior Specialist Program to bring Dennis Playdon to Wanla to work with the Buddhist community to build local knowledge about the earthen architecture (Figure 1). The ongoing work in Wanla is to secure and maintain the ancient monastery. The work carried out over the summer of 2009 was focused on training young Buddhist monks and nuns in methods to care for their buildings. The summer's work was training in measurement and recording of the site. Wanla, a site with limited access to services – running water, electricity, etc. – required an approach to preservation that was sustainable on that particular site over the long term. Focus on training the community's youth to know their architecture through survey of the site and building is the first of many steps of community-based maintenance, a core need for preservation in traditional societies. The Ladakh region is remote and the Buddhist traditions are securely intact. Teaching about architecture and building maintenance to youth in the region has a high chance of continued attention and success. But the region is not without impact from the outside world. The Indian government is very rapidly building a road through the Indus Valley region of Ladakh that has the potential to drastically change the area. Addressing the core need of community-based maintenance and knowledge about the architecture is timely as it allows reflective understanding of a context and environment that could be impacted by the outside world in the future.





Figure 1: Working to build a community-based form of preservation in Wanla, Ladakh, India.



Although our work at Old Acoma Village has been carried out over a number of years, the work of the past was focused on the public buildings of the village – the Acoma Meetinghouse and the San Esteban del Rey Mission. The more recent work carried out for the AIA RFP program in 2007 gave us a chance to focus on the private houses of the village. The technical problems in the village buildings brought on by a lack of attention to maintenance over the years have been of concern for some time. The technical problems can be resolved, however, they are framed by cultural conditions of collective vs. individual identity and ownership. The role of the outside consultant in this context is limited by the cultural needs of the tribe. But the application is also not limited to only the context of Acoma or the Southwest United States. The article, *Acoma in Transition*, published in *Digest of South African Architecture*, 2007/2008 explained the dilemmas of cultural heritage preservation at Acoma. The multicultural context of South Africa has many of the same dilemmas of culture and maintenance that arise in cultural heritage preservation in the 21st century.

Importantly, the focus on many cultures is a focus on a broad definition of architectures. In South Africa, the problems of cultural heritage preservation are vast - the maintenance of traditional societies includes structures and settlements that were not considered ‘architecture’ until recently. The maintenance of a fragile and ancient landscape is kept in balance with living cultures. The dilemma for cultural heritage preservation in the southern African context is that the vast array of evidence of human occupation in between ancient landscapes and living cultures is all important. The work at Acoma parallels this, yet at a scale that is small by comparison. The South African Heritage Resource Agency (SAHRA) has an enlightened view of sites, heritage and cultural continuities that includes both its physical and cultural environments spanning billions of years (for sites) millions of years (for human occupation) and hundreds or tens of years (for cultures that are still alive).

In theory, all of these can dwell together. As a result of the article we wrote for SA Digest, we have begun to look more closely at the South African context based on our findings at Acoma. Central to the thinking expressed by SAHRA is the thought of sites and cultures, places and people as having equal value. In SAHRA's guidelines, no one culture is favored over another, this very much reflects the current laws and culture of the country yet is not yet present in the design and cultural practices. Nevertheless, the lessons of the country's cultural problems along with what we have learned working here in the US provide a promising direction for furthering this investigation.

Although the work carried out in 2007 at Acoma was focused on cultural heritage preservation, we see the root as being about professional attitudes towards the built environment in general. In our current global culture the universal issues need to be kept in balance with attention to local conditions. This research is not only pertinent in the practice world, but also in education for future practitioners in built environment disciplines. The methods of observation and research into local needs that was employed here are also used in the teaching of architecture students. A base in teaching includes the ability for students to objectively understand inherent qualities of sites - both physical qualities and social/cultural qualities. This requires knowledge that is both broad and focused. Ultimately it requires a method of 'seeing' both the physical site and information about it. The broader application of this work, therefore, is in finding methods of focusing on a locale and its inherent needs, both universal and local.



