

# Connecting People with Architecture

## Architecture's new role in developing countries

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### **Abstract**

*Architecture is part of everyone's daily life, we live in buildings, and our life is an ongoing transit between open and enclosed spaces. One of the main attractions for a tourist is definitely architecture. Architecture, urbanism and tourism involve several players. Among them are travel agencies and organizations that promote specialized trips. Arquexplora is the result of my background as an architect, twenty five years as an independent traveler, and my experience as a product manager in Tarannà, an Adventure Travel Company.*

*We created a new concept of specialized trips, focused on vernacular architecture, heritage and culture, which supports a tourism based on a sustainability model that may benefit the local dwellers. Our trips are geared to the general public and professionals, so that architecture will act as a window to discover culture as whole.*

*Arquexplora connects people with architecture, drawing a special attention to rural areas where locals keep their traditional ways of living. We aim to create awareness of the value of an outstanding material and intangible heritage, its potential as a tool for development and the need to preserve it.*

*I want to share my experience and highlight some concepts and ideas towards creating new models of travelling and understanding the interaction between architecture and people. Arquexplora looks forward to become a platform to develop sustainable tourism projects of easy access for communities in developing countries and explore a new approach to tourism while minimizing its impact.*

### **Key words**

Vernacular architecture, traditional cultures, heritage, sustainable tourism

### **Introduction**

I have always been interested in the relationship between architecture, people and their traditions. Even before being an architect I travelled focusing my interest in those small villages sometimes lost along a lonely beach, in the jungle, or hidden in a high mountain valley.

The capacity of human beings to live and create shelters and houses even in harsh and isolated conditions, adapting themselves to the imperatives of the territory and other circumstances is really surprising. They are able to create buildings with an immense beauty and harmony as well as applying intelligent and sustainable solutions in an environment with little available building materials.

As Dan Cruickshank mentions, "architecture defines and reflects the aspirations of a community". In his book and BBC series Adventures in Architecture, he highlights "architecture is one of mankind's most creative achievements or endeavors".

Even though architecture is part of our daily lives, we sometimes forget about it, and are not aware of its richness and beauty, its language, and the lessons that can be drawn from understanding it in a proper way, that is: understanding the relationship of architecture and people, and of architecture as

the built expression of a culture that reveals how humans build as a result of a number of forces which take part in its creation.

We know the benefits that UNESCO World Heritage nomination brings to a site and for tourism, such as economic support or international cooperation and assistance, yet we also are aware how difficult it is for a site as for an intangible cultural heritage to meet the demanding criteria to be nominated. Yet, smaller scale buildings where rich traditions are present and cannot meet the necessary criteria to reach this status, receive a small share of the benefits of tourism.

## **Aims**

This paper is based mainly on a professional experience in the overseas Spanish tourism market. It is in this context that the paper highlights a series of subjects and aims:

1- Explain about my personal experience as an architect and independent traveler researching on *vernacular architecture*. Introduce Arquexplora: its offers, its spirit, its goals, and two model itineraries.

2- Discuss the role that architecture and specifically *vernacular architecture* and urbanism, in all its scales and diverse expressions, can occupy in the world of tourism and why it can become a tool and resource which contributes to the development of smaller scale communities.

3- Reflect on the impact of tourism on the fragile material and intangible heritage of small towns, villages and remote rural areas. Explain some examples and the impact of tourism, and their evolution as tourist destinations through the years.

4- Briefly describe examples of best practice projects which could be models to implement in other regions.

5- Identify risks and problems in actual visited sites and future potentially interesting ones.

*1- Explain about my personal experience as an architect and independent traveler researching on vernacular architecture. Introduce Arquexplora: its offers, its spirit, its goals, and two model itineraries.*

It is relevant to mention that I am an architect with a vast experience as a long time independent traveler and researcher with a high interest and passion for the field being treated, a tourist product manager and tour organizer.

I would like to highlight my experience as an expatriate in different international cooperation projects with the Spanish Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) Architects without Borders (Arquitectos sin Fronteras España; ASFÉ). Working in traditional African villages enabled me to have a closer approach to architecture and its environment.

For the past 25 years I have travelled focusing my interest in exploring and experiencing other cultures, their vernacular architecture and its environment, as a way to understand people, its traditions and lifestyles. Travelling around the world helped me to value and love local traditions and architecture.

Eight years of experience as a product manager for an adventure travel company made me understand the traveler's dimension and the tourism business. As a result of bringing together my personal experience my passion for architecture and travelling, I created a project which brings closer people to architecture and particularly vernacular architecture and small scale heritage –which has not yet been considered to be a key player in tourism. Thus Arquexplora was born.

Arquexplora is an innovative idea of travelling. It is an initiative that develops a new concept of specialized trips, focused on architecture, heritage and culture, oriented both to a general public and professionals. Since 2008 we create itineraries where architecture – both vernacular and contemporary, in urban and rural areas – form the main core of a trip, but with a broad cultural immersion, as we also explore history, art or gastronomy, which helps people experience the different expressions of other cultures. We visit cities, towns, villages and singular buildings; going into people's houses to learn about different lifestyles and reflect about our own reality.

Architecture acts as a window to other cultures and our aim is to bring it closer to people through a different way of travelling. Our trips do not mean to have an exclusive intellectual or academic approach. We want to share our own experience and the sheer enjoyment of the beauty of architectural creations, whether it is a house, a temple, a bridge a palace or a skyscraper.

We want people to rediscover and appreciate architecture in general terms and especially the architecture of the people, which is referred in many ways, as: architecture without architects, vernacular, traditional, indigenous or folk architecture. Yet our concern is not only to appreciate architecture as isolated objects but to understand it within a context and in relation with people. It is about discovering and learning different ways people live, build and create spaces and culture. As in any tourist trip, leisure and tourists attractions are included.

Among our contributions, we help the smaller scale built heritage come alive and visible to other people as well as attractive for the tourism world. We support preserving heritage sites while developing sustainable tourism. We aspire and hope to contribute to raise local awareness of the value of their architecture and lifestyles, its potential as a tool for development and the need and benefits of preserving their living heritage. We want to stimulate the reflection about other realities and our own as well as to appreciate and learn from old age traditions. Arquexplora wants to act as a bridge between different cultures, ultimately, connecting people.

### *The professional approach*

Besides attracting the general public to architecture, Arquexplora also has a professional approach. There is actually no substitute to touching the textures, perceiving the dimensions and experiencing the space of buildings.

In our trips we visit architectural studios and universities, to promote networking between professionals, which hopefully - why not? - establish future partnerships. We want to contribute to create awareness among academics and professionals, as understanding and learning from vernacular architecture has a professional value. "We must value 'the architecture of the people' if we are to meet the accelerating global demand for housing", asserts Dr. Paul Oliver and Dr. Marcel Vellinga, both of the Center for Vernacular Architecture Studies, Oxford Brookes University.

Local building traditions, skills and resources that would have enabled the development of culturally appropriate houses were ignored. Nevertheless, with respect to non-western building traditions, associations with the past conjure up the stigma of backwardness and poverty. Images of mud huts and thatched roofs represent the poor and conflict-ridden state in which many developing countries find themselves.

Recognition of the potential contribution of vernacular architecture is slow, not just among policy makers, politicians and the media, but also among academics and professionals involved in the fields of planning, architecture, and related disciplines.

### *What Arquexplora offers*

We organize small group itineraries from 12 to 25 integrants. Each tour counts with a specialized architect from Spain who acts as a tour leader. At a local level a tour guide and local architects act as guides. Trips are directed both to professionals and to a general public interested in discovering architecture and cultures with a different approach. Architecture, culture and knowledge are mixed with leisure and tourists attractions.

The following are two itineraries designed for the Colegio de Arquitectos de Catalunya, COAC.

### *Tour to China*

The goal of this trip is to explore Chinese architecture in its historical context, from antiquity to the actual times. We visit two of the most important cities and three rural areas with outstanding examples of vernacular architecture. The highlights of the trip are the visit to: Beijing, its World Heritage sites, its grid structure of hutongs and traditional courtyard houses “Siheyuan” and its contemporary architecture; Shanghai, its old districts, the historical colonial buildings of the Bund sector, the Lilong typologies of the international concessions and the Pudong sector and its contemporary architecture.

In the rural areas of the Fujian province, we visit the unique raw earth residential buildings of the Hakka people; in Anhui province we visit villages dating back to the Ming and Qing dynasties which are among the best preserved examples of Huizhou style architecture, and finally Xitang, an interesting example of an ancient water town in the Jiannang district.



Figure 1 Tien lo keng



Figure 2 Chengqilou



Figure 3 Chengqilou

### *Tour to India*

The goal of this trip is to discover India’s architecture and urbanism along its history, covering a wide variety of periods, styles and buildings along a route that will take us all the way from Chandigarh to the medieval city of Ahmedabad. We will visit the Old city of Delhi with its traditional quarters, the New Delhi of the British colonial period and the contemporary one in Gurgaon.

We will appreciate the Muslim influence in the Moghul architecture of outstanding buildings such as palaces, tombs and mausoleums, the Rajput architecture of the province of Rajasthan where the highlights are: The extraordinary step wells at Abaneri, the Haveli’s of Shekawati with its lively frescoes, Jaipur, a town planned under the ancient rules of the Vaastu Shastra, the various palaces of the Maharaja in the city of Udaipur, the impressive fort at Chittorgarh, the rural town of Bijapur inhabited mostly by the Bhil tribal people and different Nagara style Hindu temples along the road.

We will also visit the city of Chandigarh, planned by Le Corbusier, the renowned Swiss architect and his collaborators, to learn about its urbanism and appreciate some of the best pieces of architecture designed by him. We will finally discover Ahmedabad, an Islamic medieval city with an extraordinary urban structure, which contains one of the richest vernacular heritages of all Asia, where architects such as Le Corbusier and Louis Khan have designed unique buildings.



Figure 4 Haveli, Ahmedabad

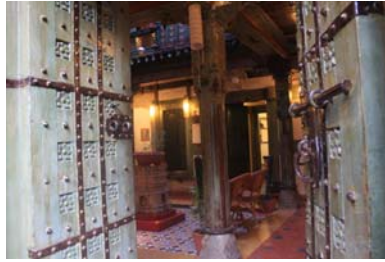


Figure 5 Haveli, Ahmedabad



Figure 6 Haveli, Shekawati



Figure 7 Haveli, Shekawati



Figure 8 Rural house, Bijapur



Figure 9 Rural house, Bijapur

2- Discuss the role that architecture and specifically *vernacular architecture* and urbanism, in all its scales and diverse expressions, can occupy in the world of tourism and why it can become a tool and resource which contributes to the development of smaller scale communities.

A full understanding of the term vernacular architecture, not widely comprehended even amongst architects, is clearly explained by architect Paul Oliver who quotes that “The architecture of the people, also known as “vernacular architecture,” refers to those buildings not designed by architects but built by the owners and inhabitants of the houses themselves often with the help of family or community members, using locally available materials such as: earth, stone, bamboo, wood and other non industrialized materials. In all its diversity of forms, technologies and building materials, vernacular architecture is conservatively estimated to comprise above 80 per cent of the world’s housing stock”.

Even though we may recognize the existence of this immense treasure, the domain of vernacular architecture is still a comparatively unexplored field in rural areas and still less in its relation to tourism.

*Why visit vernacular architecture?*

There are many lessons to draw from vernacular architecture as it is a source of great wisdom, and probably reveals us about an innate human basic instinct to build and domesticate space. There are some excellent examples of ecologically sustainable building designs which can stimulate our reflection both as professionals and as plain individuals. Preserving historical sites helps to preserve ancestral traditions and wisdom while developing sustainable tourism.

We generally tend to understand life, our existence and the world in a material way so we believe in what can be measured. Architecture is not only about the dimensions of buildings, weather we are talking about the surface, the texture, the proportion or the spaces, but about the spirit of the people who build it and live in it, as it is through them that they acquire their qualities and character.

It is easy to perceive the built object with our senses: house, building, village or town, but what really makes them complete for our lives is their soul, a powerful message that lies beyond the building itself. Men charge their built environment with their culture, their way of thinking, their sets of values, the way of relating to each other and the way they share, organize, appropriate and live the space. Buildings are imbued with symbolisms and express the social structure and gender relations of its inhabitants.



*3- Reflect on the impact of tourism on the fragile material and intangible heritage of small towns, villages and remote rural areas. Provide some examples of the impact of tourism, and their evolution as tourist destinations through the years.*

It is a well known fact that tourism is one of the largest industries in the world's economy yet developing nations have a small share of it. As never before these nations are making big efforts towards developing their tourist business with their available scant resources.

My reflections are a result of personal experience, as I have been in many places before and after the arrival of massive tourism. These opinions are the independent traveler's and the travel agent's point of view.

The impact of tourism is relative to many causes; amongst them are the location's scale and the ratio between the number of tourists it receives and what its infrastructure can receive. It is also relative to the planning, adequate training of the professionals and locals involved in tourism. Another factor to evaluate is the tourists themselves, as some countries have a long history both of inbound and outbound tourism while others are starting to develop it.

With the growing middle class in developing nations there is a consequent growth of their domestic tourism; China and India with their immense populations are good examples. The access to the media, documentaries about their own country, new travel magazines, easier access to travel and a growing number of local travel agencies have also helped in the growth of their domestic tourism. And it's growing very fast. Another key factor on the impact of tourism is the effect of a site being nominated World Heritage Monument. The result is an avalanche of tourists, especially in the case of China, where the impact is clear.

Small towns which for a long time were left behind from development, have the desire to come out of their poverty and see in tourism the opportunity of a source of fresh cash. Anyhow they are not aware of the consequences of a fast and not planned development.

The intrusion in the local's private life, is just one example of the negative impact tourism can have. Traditional local activities such as agriculture, crafts and commerce are abandoned and replaced by tourism activities which render fast revenues, generating negative side effects as over exploration of resources, environmental damage, decay of cultural heritage and loss of identity and authenticity which cause what I call "The Disneyland Effect".

When places lose their character they become a fake experience, get oversaturated with services, and run the risk of turning into amusement parks, while losing its charm and soul. The obvious good effect for the locals is the growth of their economy and progress at least in a material way such as better roads, better access to services, health, education and housing among many others. Benefits are not always evenly shared by all the community.

Among the foreign tourism there is a growing segment of people with a history of travel experience, which has a more conscious attitude, who not merely travel as a consuming act, but are in search of real life experience, culture and knowledge, and who are aware of issues such as ecology, sustainability, preservation.

The examples given below, will clearly illustrate the difference between domestic and International tourism, as culturally people have different needs, enjoy in different ways and have different goals. I would like to mention some sites which have undergone unfortunate negative transformations, as a result of their evolution into tourist destinations. I will also briefly describe some examples of best practice projects that could become benchmarks to be adapted and implemented in other regions.

I visited the ancient town of Dayan, mostly known as *Lijiang*, in Yunnan province in China, for the first time in 1995. At that time, visitors to the city were mainly backpackers, some tourists and very few local ones. The town had an authentic atmosphere: locals dressed in typical Naxi outfits; small markets were held inside the town; men could be seen with their hawks by the main bridge and the ancient water supplying system that ran along the roads and inside the houses worked. Lodging was only possible outside the old town and few small hotels accepted foreign tourist. Besides, contact with locals was easy, as you could visit their houses and share their life.

In May, 1996, after the earthquake, the city was rebuilt, and one year later nominated UNESCO World Heritage. The change since then has been dramatic. The town has experienced an invasion of mass tourism and hundreds of souvenir shops, guest houses, hotels and restaurants have popped like mushrooms. The authentic Lijiang was refurbished into a Chinese tourist amusement park, crowded, sterile and acquired a fake atmosphere; what is known as a tourist trap. Lijiang is just one of the many cases of negative effects that occur in small towns in China, a country which is going through a unique developing process.



Figure 10 Lijiang



Figure 11 Lijiang before



Figure 12 Lijiang today

In 1992, I visited the *Hakka* earthen buildings, or *Tulou*, in Fujian province, China. Before its nomination as a World Heritage Monument, there was no tourism and the rural environment and life was authentic. Close to the towns there were no hotels, and you could sleep inside a *Tulou*. After the nomination, tourism sparked and grew at a very fast speed.

The effects are easily visible today. The area is been invaded by tourism and buildings are becoming showcases rather than dwellings. Large parking places are been built in the surroundings to admit a huge number of buses and tourist infrastructure imitates the *Tulou* style with a doubtful result. All the houses have turned their ground floors into souvenir shops, and though locals continue to live inside, they had to adapt to their new reality. It's a fact that life is not the same. Do the benefits counterbalance the loss?



Figure 13 Chengqilou



Figure 14 Chengqilou



Figure 15 New infrastructures

4- Briefly describe examples of best practice projects which could be models to implement in other regions.

*Ahmedabad* is a medieval city in the State of Gujarat, India, which has an immense architectural heritage and has not yet been discovered by tourism. The Ahmedabad Heritage Center, since 2001, with the support of the Ahmedabad Municipal Corporation (AMC) and the Government of France, created a program which focuses on the conservation and the adaptive enrichment of the cities urban

heritage. Their goals have a wide scope of actions which include local awareness of the heritage, preservation, restoration of historical buildings and public spaces.

A special feature is the plan of the old city, comprising numerous pols (self-contained neighborhoods) along narrow streets, containing squares, community wells and traditional houses called Haveli, which probably form the biggest wood house heritage architecture in all Asia.

The program follows a few guiding principles: Alter and add with least possible disturbance to the original environment, avoid demolition as much as possible, ensure maximum structural stability without displacing the original ornamental features, conserve and reapply original elements for economy and to preserve integrity.

Among the many activities involving the local population they have created the “Heritage Walks” to appreciate this rich legacy and create awareness among the population and the tourists. It is a project whose concept and model could be extrapolated to other cities with a similar context.

*Bhaktaphur* is a medieval city in Nepal with 78,000 inhabitants which lies 18 kilometers east of the capital Kathmandu. It is a World Heritage Site and the best preserved city in the country. An urban development project by GTZ, the German Cooperation Agency, which concluded in 1986, supported the city in restoring historically significant buildings and other infrastructure. Before that, the city was in a dramatic condition. Bhaktaphur, which receives many tourists, keeps alive its traditions and is a model of sustainability. Visitors to Bhaktaphur have to pay an access fee which is directed to finance the future restorations and maintenance of the city.

The city of *Walata*, in Mauritania, nominated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, with its extraordinary cultural heritage and natural surroundings, makes up an enormously attractive and interesting enclave for the visitor. In the framework of a project for the all-round development of the city, Cooperación Española (Spanish Cooperation), through the NGO M6n-3, has carried out an experiment in sustainable tourism respecting the environment and giving special importance to cultural aspects, with the object of contributing to the region's socio-economic recovery and the rediscovery of this splendid forgotten city.

*Taquile* is an island that lies in the Titicaca Lake in Peru, which has been declared an intangible World Heritage by its textiles, yet there are many attractive features in the island, among them its vernacular dwellings. Since many years, the islanders took control of the tourism activities becoming the main actors. They created an unusual sustainable project to protect their culture and traditions, which limits the number of visitors and prohibits the construction of hotels. Through a tourist cooperative visitors are directed to families who lodge them during their stay. The project has been very successful, although as expected problems have arrived, but have also been faced. The island receives 50.000 tourists per year and the income generated helps the families' economies and finances the infrastructure of the island.

##### *5- Identify risks and problems in actual visited sites and future potentially interesting ones.*

As mentioned before, risks increase with numbers, thus the smaller scale places are more exposed to the negative impact of tourism and of an uncontrolled development. Abandoning isolation increases the exposure both to external influences and a fast modernizing reality.

Although there are many initiatives of sustainable tourism projects, there seems to be a distance between theory and practice. There is a lack of awareness among local authorities and the habitants of the value of their living heritage and traditions and their potential as tools for development, as well as a lack of understanding of local travel agents of the same concepts. Often there are no professional tourist guides with the necessary language skills and knowledge on urbanism and architecture capable of explaining a city or a building, be it contemporary or vernacular. It is the same mistake to preserve



heritage only to attract tourism than to apply the concept of demolition instead of rebuilding and conservation.

### ***Conclusions***

There are some factors in life and in the nature of the planet, which can be applied in any area. The first of these factors is change. Life, culture and all its expressions are in constant movement, thus it is impossible to have fixed answers or conclusions, as realities change. We cannot avoid change. Our most intelligent approach is to be prepared for change, flow and adapt to it.

The second factor is exchange. The world has always existed on the basis of exchange. Nations and cultures influence each other, borrow from each other, adopt and adapt. Cultures get richer through exchange and by adapting the new influences.

The third factor is oneness. Culture is an integrated structure modeled by different forces and expressions of human beings such as lifestyle, religion, social structure, productive structure, art, architecture, and all of them in relation to a context and time as mentioned before. Thus it is necessary to understand culture as a whole through a holistic approach, and not as fragmented pieces of reality.

Focusing on our theme subject, we can minimize the impact and negative effects of tourism but we will not be able to avoid them completely. As we will not stop tourism, our best approach is to make it better through an integral and sustainable approach. This may mean less economical benefits for rural areas and weaker institutional contexts, yet more overall benefits for the community as its culture, heritage and identity will be better preserved, while committed to its development and progress.

As Jorg Ostrowski quotes, “The biggest message that comes from Fujian rammed earth architecture is that a genuine practitioner of environmental and social sustainability relies on simplicity of approach, a respect for nature.” There is a need for essential good practices to be implemented which are not new, as many have researched and raised their voices.

### ***Remarks, questions and ideas***

Arquexplora organizes specialized trips and supports sustainability but it does not take part in creating strategies or policy making. Besides our main goal, we hope to inspire others and contribute in creating a consciousness about the threats of uncontrolled tourism and development. In answer to my conclusions I ask myself some questions and put forward some ideas, emphasizing on many that have been already researched. I group them in 6 points:

1- Recognition: The question is: Is it possible to encourage a different level of recognition for smaller sites, first as National Heritage and then as World Heritage with an easy to access criteria, which could help small scale heritage sites appear in the tourism map, even if this nomination does not mean financial support, but a step forward for future mayor recognition?

We support recognition as a whole, which includes the material and intangible heritage together and not as fragmented realities, as both habitat and habitants together form part of the same indivisible heritage.

2- Be part of the process. Much of the success of a sustainable tourism development relies in the involvement of the community and its people in the creation and the decision making of a project. Local people together with authorities should be the key players with a shared view of their future.

To achieve involvement it is fundamental to support all kinds of actions with the inhabitants which can develop a consciousness of their cultural identity, traditions, heritage and the benefits of keeping them alive, beyond the goal of attracting tourism. Actions should also aid to build a sense of belonging, self-esteem and pride for what represents them, not as associated with poverty but with richness.

3- Support. Communities need more and better opportunities as financial support by government and non government institutions to reinforce education, capacity build-up, training, management, communication, promotion, etc.

4- Share. Create a space to share and exchange information and experiences of research and projects that have been implemented in different parts of the world, which can be adapted and put into practice in other regions.

5- Minimize the negative effects. There is a lot of theory in this area, as controlled tourism in terms of numbers of incoming tourists and infrastructure, creation of buffer zones, promotion of partnerships and cooperation with mainstream tour operators and many more. Anyhow, theory must be put into practice and monitoring to prove their efficiency.

6- Innovative ideas. Create free download software available for any community around the world, to help them develop their own sustainable tourism projects, based on essential concepts and with no need of special skills and resources.

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