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SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, TOURISM, AND PRESERVATION An International Project in Copan, Honduras

For one week in the fall of 2005, a team of CRP and LARCH professors and students from the City and Regional Planning and Landscape Architecture departments traveled to Copan, Honduras to collaborate with university students, professionals, government officials, and community members in a concept plan for the sustainable development of the Copan River Valley Region. Within this valley is the modern town of Copan Ruinas and an archaeological park containing Mayan ruins that is designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.

In a program initiated by City and Regional Planning (CRP) Department Head Bill Siembieda, Landscape Architecture (LARCH) professors Joe Donaldson and Stratton Semmes organized a group of students to work in cooperation with the Center of Design, Architecture and Construction (CEDAC), a university in Tegucigalpa, Honduras, to work on a planning and design project for the Honduran Ministry of Tourism and Institute of Archaeology.¹ This unique international opportunity was made possible thanks to a grant from the World Bank.

As the client for the project, the Ministry of Tourism had special concerns about the project area, the Copan River Valley and its surroundings. The area is a mountainous and lush landscape that contains rainforests, numerous streams and rivers, and precious cultural resources. At the heart of the Valley, and the focal point of concern, is the Copan archaeological park and fragmented archaeological sites containing ancient Mayan Ruins. As the southernmost region of the historic Mayan Empire, this Valley has been heralded as a place of national and worldwide interest. In fact, this area holds the distinction as a UNESCO-designated World Heritage Site.

The Mayan ruins within this Valley are popular tourist attractions and one of the main tourist destinations in Honduras. With this increase in tourism has come the pressure for more development - visitor-serving commercial, residential, and infrastructure development. However, there is no plan for how the area should be developed. Thus, the development that has taken place is haphazard. The reaction

from the Honduran government is to draft a plan to preserve, protect, and restore the Copan Valley while allowing for a limited amount of development that will enable tourism to continue to flourish and support the local economy.

Cal Poly Preparation

For Cal Poly participants, this project took many months of careful preparation to come to realization. In early 2005, Cal Poly and CEDAC submitted a work proposal to the Honduran government through the Ministry of Tourism. This plan was accepted and funded through a World Bank community development grant. Once funding was secured, Cal Poly and CEDAC maintained close correspondence. As the details became finalized, the two universities arranged to meet in October to conduct field research and host a design charette.

Here at Cal Poly, 10 CRP and LARCH students and professors eagerly awaited departure for Honduras. We prepared for the trip by educating ourselves as best we could about the history,



Figure 1: The Mayan temple at Copan.

¹ Cal Poly participants in this project: from City and Regional Planning: William Siembieda (faculty), Richard Rojas (grad student), Mike Austin (undergrad student); from Landscape Architecture: Joe Donaldson and Stratton Semmes (faculty), Margaret Nash, Holly Kuljian, Rudy Castro, Seth Wilson, and Julia Durringer (undergrad students); university volunteer: Margaret Nash.

culture, and natural environment of the Copan Valley. This included watching a presentation from Stratton Semmes, who spent the summer in Copan as part of a Spanish language immersion program. Thanks to her visit, we became better acquainted with the remarkable countryside and the type of customs, people and places we would encounter in Honduras. This and other preparations made in advance helped each of us become properly equipped to learn from the experience that awaited us.

Our Travels

As we met at the parking lot outside of Dexter Hall to embark for Honduras, most of us were filled with excitement. There were so many unknowns before us – the country, the land, the people, and even each other. The only thing most of us knew about each other was that we had some connection to City Planning or Landscape Architecture. Our lack of prior acquaintance soon faded as we exchanged stories of prior travels, school assignments, and future expectations from our studies. Within a matter of hours, we were a cohesive unit that banded together to make the most of our trip.

This camaraderie was tested early in our trip. After a long flight from Los Angeles to Houston to San Pedro Sula, we packed into a small van for a long ride into the remote countryside to our destination of Copan. We had nearly reached the end of our 20-hour travel journey when we were abruptly stopped by traffic. What lay ahead was something none of us had prepared for – a landslide. The recent downpour saturated the steep banks alongside the road to the point where the hill gave way. What was left was a deep and messy wall of mud and rock that completely shut down the road. Unfortunately for us, this was the only road for hundreds of miles that led to Copan and a clean up crew was nowhere in sight. As a group, we gave the situation a quick look, talked it over, realized we were within minutes of our hotel, and made the executive decision to hike through the slide. One by one, we slopped through the mud that came up to our knees. Once we made it through, we didn't look back and afterwards we had plenty of mud-caked shoes and laughs to go around.

Visiting in the Copan Valley

The Copan Valley is a place of incredible natural beauty. Two places with a comparable setting include Hawaii and Costa Rica. The vivid green landscape was striking and kept our cameras busy as we traversed the valley by foot and bus. The countless waterways and forested hilltops tempted our best efforts to keep our time spent casually exploring to a minimum. The lush and exotic environment was a stark but



Figure 2: Closeup of intricate carving at the Mayan Temple that depict human figures, gods, and animals adorn many of the Mayan pyramids.



Figure 3: The group in a field trip to the city. In the town center, narrow cobblestone streets are bordered with buildings, most of them built with simple yet sufficient techniques.

welcomed contrast to the arid and familiar surroundings of San Luis Obispo.

In order to become better acquainted with the region, we spent the first half of our week investigating points of interest throughout the area. Our primary navigator was Ben Feldman, an alumnus of the LARCH program at Cal Poly. For the past year, Ben had been working as a lecturer at CEDAC and called the busy streets of Tegucigalpa his home. For our week in Honduras, Ben took us under his wing and allowed the teacher in him to shine through. He shared with us his unique perspective of Honduran culture and customs and patiently taught us a variety of things such as proper terminology for technical Spanish terms. It was great to have him in our group, as he was an invaluable asset to us.

One of our first stops was the impressive Mayan Archaeological Park. At arrival, we were greeted by a local guide with Mayan heritage and extensive knowledge of Mayan culture and religion. He carefully explained the significance of the many features of the park. Everything about the park - the grounds, the trails, and the temples - was in remarkable condition. A dense forest buffer surrounding the immediate park boundary helped create a sense of enclosure in the middle of a pristine natural setting. One aspect of the park that was especially memorable was the abundant carved stone figures. The ornate detail of the animal statues, cultural monuments, and other carvings was like nothing any of us had ever seen.

The modern-day town of Copan Ruinas was the place where we began and ended each day. Copan Ruinas is an incredibly distinctive place. Though quite small in size, the town draws people from all over the world. The international collection of tourists, artists, craftspeople and locals thrives in this unique community. This may partially be attributed to the sense of safety fostered by the grid layout of the town and arrangement of buildings. At the center of the grid is the town square, which serves as a recognizable landmark to orient pedestrians. In conjunction, the narrow cobblestone roads and sidewalks and close placement of buildings to the street's edge create a sense of enclosure. This feature also slows vehicle traffic and makes pedestrian navigation of the roadways safe and easy.

Perhaps our most thorough educational experience came during the afternoon that we visited Hacienda San Lucas. The hacienda is a lodge catering to eco-tourists and contains extensive grounds with a diversity of native plants and Mayan artifacts. It is owned and operated by Flavia Cueva, who is also an advocate for locally-led improvement of the community. We learned a great deal from her about some of the larger issues at stake in the region. According to her account, although much of the valley retains its original feel, in recent years, it has experienced the impacts of expanded development. These include impacts to the natural resources such as deforestation, loss in rare and unique biological habitat, and pollution to water sources; social impacts such

Figure 4: The town of Copan. Just beyond, the forest and agricultural lands dominate the landscape.



as growing poverty and insufficient healthcare facilities and schools; and economic impacts such as insufficient infrastructure development and maintenance of utilities. Involvement and input from locals like Flavia is the reason the Honduran government has initiated a process for change.

The Government of Honduras has recognized the impacts that people like Flavia are concerned about and has taken the first step in evaluating what can be done about them. They recognize the need for expanded development in order to improve the economic and social conditions of the area. At the same time, they recognize the need to balance this development in a manner that can protect, preserve, and restore the quality and condition of the environment. Striving for balance between social, economic, and environmental needs is commonly referred to as sustainable development and was central to the plan that we helped create for Copan.

Design Charette

After a few days of site visits, preliminary analysis, and meeting with locals, we were prepared to begin the three-day design charette. This charette brought many together in Copan including students from CEDAC and professionals from Copan and beyond. These professionals included archaeologists, planners, government representatives, architects and community members. Once everyone arrived, the exercise began with all participants dividing into groups based on interest and expertise. Each group was responsible for analyzing one of five areas of concentration. These areas were planning standards, environmental systems, infrastructure and social resources, archeological resources, and design guidelines. For each area, groups engaged in conversations and devised their own work path.

Most groups devoted much of their time completing a series of tasks. For example, the environmental systems group needed maps of environmental resources. Unfortunately, digital map production programs such as ArcGIS were unavailable. As a result, the group recruited some of the most skilled drafts people to produce hand-drawn elevation, slope, streams and rivers, and watershed maps to aid their environmental constraints analysis. For other groups, these tasks ranged from making detailed conceptual maps to interpreting and rewriting existing guidelines and regulations. At the end of each day, the groups would present their work products for the day. These presentations prompted many spirited debates over topics such as whether to include the opportunity for golf resorts and where to plan any future highway expansion. Nonetheless, all were dedicated to making the process work



Figure 5: Hanging bridge crossing. Footpaths and trails span the valley and link people to agricultural fields, rural residential areas, and tourist attractions.



Figure 6: The Cal Poly group (with Joe Donaldson standing up) at work in an improvised studio in a hotel room.

despite the language barrier, condensed work period, and conflicting ideologies. Everyone involved was committed to producing a plan that contained well-considered and carefully crafted proposals.

At the end of the charette, the final product was a plan containing design and planning standards to promote sustainable development. Standards addressed approaches such as protection of riparian areas, limited expansion of visitor-serving development, and relocation of traffic away from the most well preserved areas of the archaeological park. In total, the design charette produced the foundation of what is intended to become the master plan for the region.

Reflections

Engaging in planning and environmental design in Honduras was eye-opening, challenging, exhilarating and humbling. The place amazed us with its visually stunning scenery and accommodating hospitality. It challenged us to focus on how we could maximize our efforts and the technical application of our learned knowledge. It gave us a series of adventures that we will always look back on with good memories. And it helped provide us with a look at planning from a perspective that is very different from what we are accustomed to here

in California with our comparably limitless resources and corresponding mountain of bureaucracy.

Most of us returned to Cal Poly in a fog of enchantment over what we had just taken part in. Sadly, the sting of the daily grind demanded our full attention once we entered the halls of Dexter. Occasionally, those of us still at Cal Poly will run into each other as we rush to meetings or try to finish one of the many assignments that we have committed ourselves to. Sometimes we exchange the usual small talk of a familiar acquaintance. More often though, one of us will bring up some reflection of Copan. Something that is usually pretty vivid, like a craving for one of our tortillas, beans, fresh fruit and chocolate breakfasts or a thought of a hilarious botched Spanish phrase that one of us made. It's the kind of thing we will probably reflect on long after we've left the friendly confines of Cal Poly. It is a welcomed feeling though, one we hope future students from our disciplines can experience during their time at Cal Poly.

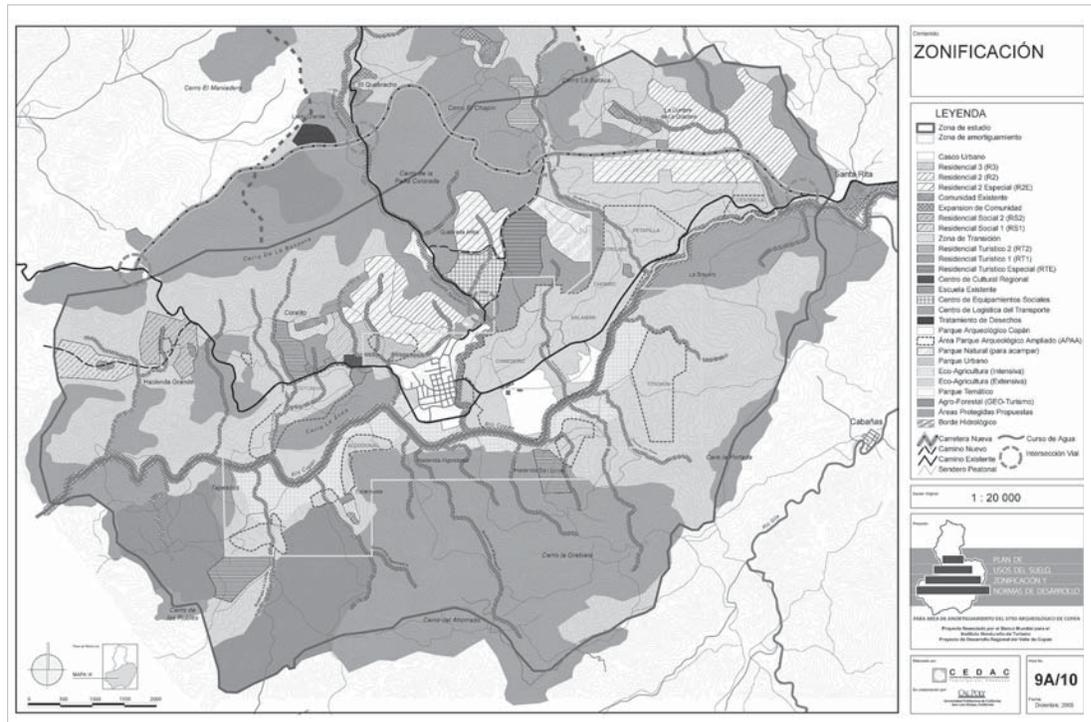


Figure 7: Final Zoning Map proposed for the Copan area.