Introduction

by David Covo and Vikram Bhatt

Detail of *bajareque* construction

It all started in the summer of 1995, when a seminar on popular housing in the developing world was held in the coastal town of Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, Mexico. Organized conjointly by the Minimum Cost Housing Group of the McGill University School of Architecture, the College of Architects of the State of Guerrero and the municipal government in Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo, it addressed problems of informal and low-income settlements and examined strategies for their upgrading.

During the fall of 1995, graduate students in the Minimum Cost Housing Program developed a preliminary proposal for the upgrading of La Esperanza, which, at ten years old, is one of Zihuatanejo's newer informal settlements, and which had been identified by the municipal government as requiring upgrading. This first exercise was based on data provided by the local chapter of the College of Architects, but more extensive information on the settlement would be required for the preparation of a comprehensive upgrading proposal - socioeconomic data, graphic and photographic documentation of the site and buildings, and details of infrastructure, including water and power supply, as well as drainage and waste disposal systems. Since resources were not available for the social and physical survey which was now deemed essential by both the College and the municipal government, it was proposed that a team of McGill students do the field research to document the living patterns, the social and physical environment and the service infrastructure of La Esperanza.

The aim of the RAIC/CIDA Youth Program in Architecture, which is funded by the Canadian International Development Agency and administered by the Royal Architectural Institute of Canada, is the development of linkages in architecture and community development between Canadian Schools of Architecture and host institutions in developing countries. This program had previously funded three very successful projects involving McGill students in actual housing situations in the developing world, two in India and one in the Peoples' Republic of China. It seemed appropriate to launch a new research project in La Esperanza in order to capitalize on the collaboration initiated in 1995 with the College of Architects of Guerrero. The new project would generate the information required for the development and implementation of a new upgrading proposal and, at the same time, provide an ideal opportunity for Canadian students of architecture to participate in activities leading to the improvement of housing in an existing community.

The project was originally proposed by Mr. Manuel Lara and Ms. Sarwat Viquar, two graduate students in our Minimum Cost Housing Program, who were assigned roles as Project Coordinators. Involving them in this way allowed us to implicate more students in the program and would be seen, we hoped, as consistent with the objectives of both the RAIC and CIDA. A team of six students, four women and two men, were selected, the result of a short competition based on an assessment of work and travel experience, a portfolio and a written expression of intent regarding the project. A seventh participant, Aitor Iturralde, was added by Professor Jeanne Wolfe, Director of McGill's School of Urban Planning, who provided additional funding for one of her graduate students to participate in the study; Aitor would be involved with the project from its inception and for the entire period of the field research.

The team of seven students left Montreal in early June and worked on site in Zihuatanejo and La Esperanza from June 10 to August 2. Initial setup and orientation in the field was provided by the Project Coordinators, Manuel and Sarwat, who arrived with the group and worked on site with them for the first two weeks of the project. Following their departure, Aitor assumed responsibility for the coordination of the work on site and acted as liaison with the College and the municipal authorities. General assistance and additional monitoring of activity in the field was carried out on a continuous basis by Architects David López, José Navarrete, Valdemar Rentería, José Priani and Anita Bucio of the College of Architects; their many contributions to the project - as advisors, guides and collaborators - were invaluable.

On arrival in Zihuatanejo, the group was installed in an apartment provided by the College of Architects; within walking distance of the beach and town centre, and only a few minutes from the study area in one of the small vans that served as the community's main public transportation. The apartment functioned as both a dwelling and a drafting room. The students immediately fell into routines that would serve them for the eight weeks of the project, and which are eloquently and colourfully described in the twelve essays that follow.

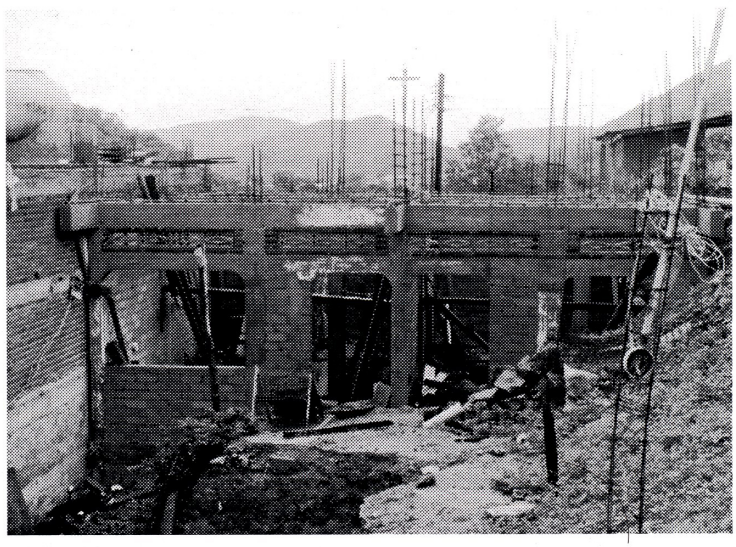
The material that they have collected and assembled presents a snapshot - a time exposure, to be more accurate - of the community. It includes large-scale measured drawings of a selection of houses, hundreds of photographs and slides, eight hours of video, and a comprehensive portfolio of sketches and watercolours. It describes the topography of the site and how living patterns acknowledge the landscape; it documents local building traditions and built form in relation to climate and to material and human resources; and it examines infrastructure and site services and the extraordinary extent to which the residents, particularly the women, are able to provide for their families under adverse conditions.

A selection of this material was exhibited at the 1996 RAIC/CIDA Youth Program Workshop, which was held at McGill University in October, 1996, and most of the material prepared for that exhibition has been included in this publication.

One highly significant but unanticipated component of the project was the identification by the residents and College of Architects of the need for a small community centre and plaza. The design proposal developed by the students was simple and elegant, and placed them at the centre of a serious debate on the importance of the town square, or *zócalo*, to La Esperanza, as both a social catalyst and a symbol of the community's maturity.

The eventual impact of the work of the students on the actual upgrading proposal to be developed for La Esperanza remains to be seen. However, the impact on the residents themselves, considered individually and collectively, has been significant. The daily presence of the students over the period of eight weeks in La Esperanza was in itself a measure of their commitment to the project and of the value attached to the community. The passion and professionalism with which they approached this challenging study was both recognised and returned in kind by the community leaders and by all who opened their homes to the group for the duration of the study.

Los dedos de la esperanza: reinforcing bars left uncut for future construction, and referred to as the fingers of hope.



A l'automne 1995, des étudiants de maîtrise au programme Minimum Cost Housing *développèrent des propositions préliminaires pour améliorer les infrastructures existantes dans la colonie de La Esperanza, une des plus récentes communautés informelles de Zihuatanejo. Afin de créer une base de données sur le site étudié, un groupe de sept étudiants de l'Université McGill fut envoyé au Mexique durant l'été 1996 pour effectuer les travaux nécessaires de documentation. Pendant deux mois ils étudièrent sur place l'environment physique et social de la colonie, les infrastructures existantes et les moeurs adoptées par les habitants de cette colonie.*

Durante el otoño de 1995, estudiantes de la maestría en Arquitectura del programa de vivienda de costo mínimo desarrollaron una propuesta para el mejoramiento urbano de la comunidad de La Esperanza.
Este es un asentamiento de los más nuevos en Zihuatanejo.
Debido a que no existían recursos disponibles para el estudio social y físico, se propuso que un grupo de estudiantes de McGill realizaran la investigación de campo necesaria para la documentación de los patrones y condiciones de vida, así como de la infraestructura de servicios en la comunidad. El equipo, compuesto por siete estudiantes, trabajó en el sitio durante el verano de 1996.