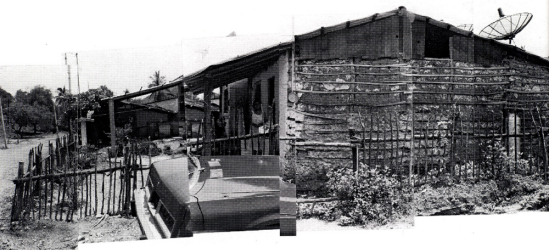


Material culture in La Esperanza

by Sarwat Viquar

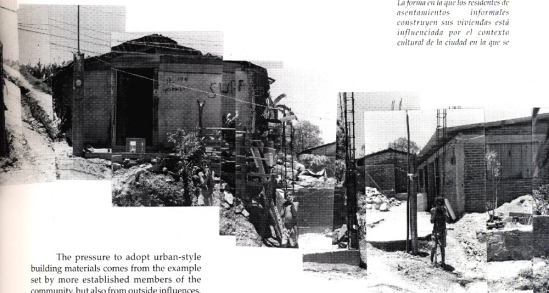
The built environment of popular settlements in developing countries presents many contradictions in terms of the cultural images and icons it projects. Settlements on the periphery, inhabited by migrants from a wide variety of backgrounds, adopt features from the urbanity that neighbours them. They need to integrate, not only economically, but socially and culturally, into the surrounding urban network. The result is an attempt at visual integration with the adjoining, established urban culture.



The initial impression of La Esperanza is that of a sea of satellite dishes atop houses built of a hybrid mixture of materials. The choice of materials is dictated by the rural background of its inhabitants, and the influence of the surrounding tourist town of Ixtapa. Side by side with the houses built of *bajareque*¹ and *huesito* wood, are concrete-block houses, with plastered and painted walls and impressive fenestration.

The need for upward mobility usually dictates the way housing develops. To most people in La Esperanza, the ultimate consolidated house is one built of concrete beams and columns, with concrete block walls. One of the requirements is to have a maximum built area on the plot, and to build with concrete and steel. Early in the life of the settlement, houses are rudimentary shacks of wood, palm leaves, *huesito* wood and *bajareque*. As the residents become more established, an increasingly common site is the concrete, urban-style bungalow. Higher

income families with contacts within the local government are able to manoeuvre themselves into positions of advantage, obtaining services, facilities and outward signs of upward mobility (concrete houses, televisions, and satellite dishes). Those with more modest incomes lack basic services and infrastructure, but their houses still represent the beginnings of the urbanity they aspire to. In some cases, people with very few resources have still managed to install a television and even build a four-sided concrete-block wall around their wooden shack.



The pressure to adopt urban-style building materials comes from the example set by more established members of the community, but also from outside influences. Many work in Ixtapa as security guards, maintenance workers, bus drivers, chambermaids, etc. Others have family working abroad in Texas and California. Residents in La Esperanza are particularly exposed to the material culture and wealth of affluent North America.

Tourism is one of the major forces in the race to urbanize and suburbanize. According to American anthropologist Anita Cowan², migration from rural areas was encouraged by the government and local business interests to provide labour and services for the tourist industry. Rural migrants underwent training programs in which they were shown images of mass housing from the United States and Japan, as ideal models of urban living. They were

Les méthodes de construction utilisées dans les communautés informelles dépendent beaucoup du climat culturel de la ville dans laquelle elles se situent. Les matériaux utilisés, ainsi que la décoration intérieure, répondent à des pressions externes, autant sociales qu'économiques. La population d'Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo qui vit en situation irrégulière à l'extérieur du centre urbain doit s'adapter au milieu urbain, et ceci à l'intérieur de budgets très restreints. L'expression architecturale de ces banlieues s'inspire aussi de la force motrice de l'économie locale, le tourisme.

La forma en la que los residentes de asentamientos informales construyen sus viviendas está influenciada por el contexto cultural de la ciudad en la que se

encuentran ubicados. Los materiales con los cuales está construida la casa, los colores con los que está pintada, la forma en la que está amueblada y presentada ante los ojos de los demás responden a presiones externas tanto económicas como sociales. En Zihuatanejo la población que habita en asentamientos informales experimenta un proceso de adaptación urbana dentro de sus limitados recursos económicos. Estas expresiones están tomadas del entorno, el cual ha sido conformado por una de las fuerzas motoras de la economía local: El turismo. Dentro de este contexto destaca la observación de la forma en la cual el entorno físico en la comunidad de La Esperanza ha evolucionado.

also encouraged to abandon customs from their rural backgrounds, such as raising pigs and chicken in their backyards.

The needs and priorities of the tourism industry have played a consequential role in shaping the urban culture of Zihuatanejo and its new migrant communities. Ixtapa's high-rise skyline along the Pacific coast turns its back to the hilltop settlements of neighbouring Zihuatanejo, where illegal electrical connections (*diablitos*, as they are called locally), are strung over the hillside. The contrast is striking, but not unusual; it is an expression of the inequality prevalent in much of Mexico. The high-



The essential piece of furniture of any La Esperanza home



Continuing modes to the settlements in Zihuatanejo

rise apartment blocks, five-star hotels, and sun-splashed villas of Ixtapa is the future La Esperanza dreams of. But the present environment is being shaped by tourism and commercialization, not by concerns for meeting basic infrastructure and employment needs. It seems inevitable that Ixtapa-Zihuatanejo is destined to have the fate of many other high-class tourist resorts on the coast where the existing infrastructure and services cannot provide for the influx of population.³

¹ A mixture of earth and straw applied on a wood frame, for walls.

² The group had an informal seminar meeting with Ms. Cowan. Discussion centred around how tourism had developed in Ixtapa and affected the local people. This was based on Ms. Ruth Anita Cowan's Ph.D Thesis *Tourism Development in Mexican Coastal Community*, Southern Methodist University, USA, 1987.

³ Acapulco is a case in point.