

A television but no walls on the outskirts of paradise

by Juliette Patterson

One evening I'm at the top of the slope, drawing the settlement below and the virgin mountain across the highway. A woman comes out of a neighbouring shack, sits down beside me, and studies my drawing critically. I'm racing against the short tropical sunset.

"My neighbour told me that a group of you drew her house," she says. "Why didn't you come to mine?" I try to explain that hers wasn't one of the thirty-three houses chosen at random, but don't know how to say it in Spanish. "It doesn't matter" she answers. "I did a few drawings of what I want my dream-house to look like. Could you look at them? My husband promised me he'd build



us a new house when he comes back from Texas." By now there's not enough light to draw, so I close my sketchbook and walk over to her house.

She lives with her mother in a cedar plank house with a tar-soaked cardboard roof. Her husband has gone to work in Texas and they haven't heard from him since. Like most houses, the single room is divided into two by a curtain: the back of the room holds a double bed, the front of the room is furnished with a table and chairs. I sit down at the table. She takes out a yellow pad and after much hesitation, shows me a drawing of a concrete house with disproportionately large arches. "I want the arches to be closed in with glass." I look at her and wonder where she found her inspiration for this neo-colonial house, so far from everyday reality. I prefer the soft cedar planks and pebbled floor of her present house. I tell her that according to my limited knowledge of construction, such large panes would be very expensive, even in Canada. Why have window panes at all? You don't need them in this climate. Not a single house

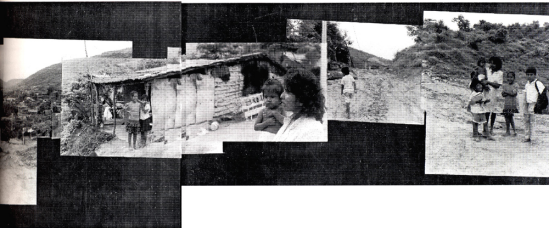
in the settlement has a window pane. She tells me that she has seen a house that had large arches of this kind in Ixtapa, the luxury resort town situated nearby.

I'm struck by the strength of her desire to own such a house, even if I might see it as a ludicrous dream. She's typical of many people here: they want a future outside of rural poverty and it is the strength of this desire which made them overcome the many obstacles in their way. In La Esperanza, any small initiative rapidly runs into obstacles: no running water, no roads, no telephone, no money... Being practical and reasonable in your desires achieves nothing. The strength

climb up the hill to the woods in the meantime. They would rather have nothing at all than mar the perfection of their new house by keeping the outhouse. "The things people do for social status!" I think. Then I realize that my conception of a bathroom, a utilitarian room I forget about as soon as I close the door, is just that, my own. Practicality has little to do with her appreciation of a bathroom. So what if it doesn't work. It's a commitment to a modern future.

Other situations contradict my belief that basic needs are the same everywhere. For example, a house might lack the bare

Dans un premier temps, j'explique comment notre séjour à La Esperanza m'a permis de réviser l'idée selon laquelle les besoins primaires sont universellement les mêmes. Ici, les gens ont besoin de se créer une identité culturelle avant tout. Une maison n'aura pas de murs, ni de toit imperméable, mais toujours une télévision en couleur. La Esperanza est une société qui cherche à se distancer de ses racines rurales en gardant les yeux fixés sur le style de vie et les images diffusés par les médias américaines. La maison traditionnelle de bois ou de terre



of their will and their dogged persistence can truly move mountains. I have no doubt this young woman will one day own that house of her dreams.

Down the street, Juana Chavarria-Torres and her husband recently completed their concrete house. They first built a house of *bojareque*, a simple timber frame and walls made of mud packed inside a frame of wood sticks. As soon as they could afford to, Juana and her husband started building concrete walls around the *bojareque* house. Eventually, they moved into the finished concrete house and tore down the *bojareque* one. Juana is very proud of it. It has an entrance hall, a separate living-room, dining-room, kitchen, bedroom and...a bathroom! When I want to locate the outhouse on the site plan, Juana tells me that they pulled it down when they finished the house. I nod, then realize the bathroom cannot be functional because there is no sewer in La Esperanza. The couple pulled down the septic tank betting on the sewer's imminent arrival; but since many things remain imminent in La Esperanza, they must

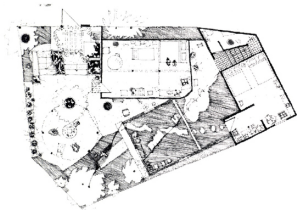
necessities of running water and a waterproof roof, but it always has a colour TV. One of the houses measured is primitive even by La Esperanza standards: a wood frame covered with two blankets, on the least desirable of all plots, at the edge of the pine forest above the settlement. The room's only furniture is a double bed, a few chairs, and the colour television. The family sits on the bed while we take measurements, mesmerized by an animated cartoon. It needs entertainment more than it needs walls.

Living in poverty in this coastal resort town is not defined by hunger, crime, or stultifying work. It is about complete boredom. During the lull in tourism, half of the community stays at home in their hammocks. There are no books or magazines, even though most people are literate. La Esperanza has a small school, a lovely new building of interlocking hexagonal classrooms built by the Ford Foundation. But its rooms are depressingly bare. Outside of the Saturday evening dance and other (albeit frequent) celebrations, television provides the

disparaît peu à peu au profit de la maison moderne en béton. Aussi, les nouveaux arrivants préfèrent vivre en banlieue qu'en ville, ce qui accélère le processus de déforestation et crée un défi énorme en matière d'infrastructure. La volonté de ces familles déracinées d'améliorer leur condition sociale est cependant extraordinaire, et viendra à bout des difficultés matérielles et politiques qui entravent leur progression. Dans un deuxième temps je relate le processus de notre conception d'une place publique pour la communauté. Quant elle sera construite, cette place offrira d'abord une aire de jeux aux enfants et un bâtiment public pour les mariages. Mais ce sera aussi un endroit d'échange et de ralliement qui jettera les bases d'une communauté démocratique et engagée.

sole entertainment. Since parents and other keepers of tradition have been left behind, it is a way of anchoring oneself; of being connected to community and world at large.

La Esperanza is a society in the process of defining its identity somewhere between a rural past and a Western future. In an uprooted society where traditional values have been left behind for a better life, modernization is the way to go. Traditional building methods are disappearing, cinderblock architecture and laissez-faire urban planning is enthusiastically adopted, and the surrounding tropical forest is being slated for development. No-one here wants



to live in a mid-rise building, buy their groceries on the ground floor, and walk to work. They would rather commute. People would have to give up their pigs, chickens and dogs to go into an apartment.

Carlos for example owns an apartment in the government subsidized housing project but prefers to live in La Esperanza, without running water. We sit under a thatched roof in his garden (a tropical jungle, an oasis amidst the cardboard roofs and mud streets) eating a delicious salad of octopus, raw fish, hot chilli peppers, and crackers. "I don't want people living below me and above me," he explains. "I want my own house and garden." The apartments in the housing project are not big, but quite comfortable. European city-dwellers live in similar apartments all their life. Unlike Europe though, there still is a lot of

undeveloped land in Mexico. Why shouldn't they build horizontally rather than vertically? Still, I can imagine this town in a few years: a congested, tentacular metropolis.

La Esperanza is spread linearly along the highway, not around a focal point. All houses look towards the road rather than the community. The residents want us to design a public square in an empty lot at the entrance of the community. At present, it is a dumping ground for the president's wife's dishwasher, a muddy creek the pigs greatly enjoy. The community wants a paved playground and a multipurpose building. "We want a place where our children can play and weddings

wait. Finally the director arrives, and after more introductions, we sit and listen to his speech. He speaks convincingly of "justice for the campesino" and the Mexican soul's deep-rooted desire for land ownership; but he shows no signs of acting upon his words. Afterwards, we take a group photo and go back to the apartment.

Any effort to organize La Esperanza politically struggles against the deeply entrenched belief that officials are not responsible to their constituents¹. The one-party system is kept in place through bribes; our stay in La Esperanza coincided with a municipal pre-election campaign. Suddenly,

Este artículo intenta mostrar las diferencias culturales que el grupo de estudio encontró durante nuestra estancia en 'La Esperanza', las cuales cuestionaron mi creencia acerca del significado de las necesidades básicas en diferentes partes del mundo. En 'La Esperanza' una casa puede no tener agua corriente y un techo impermeable, pero siempre tendrá una televisión a color. Inicialmente tuve dificultades de comprender la adopción entusiasta de la arquitectura del concreto y la vida suburbana de los residentes, así como también de la desaparición de los métodos tradicionales de construcción. Sin embargo, después me di cuenta que para estas personas que han dejado atrás la pobreza rural, la modernización es el único camino a seguir. La fuerza de su iniciativa puede empujar la inercia política y crear una infraestructura en la comunidad.



Plan and section of Carlos's house

be celebrated" says Humberto who lives in front of the plaza. (Humberto is our great friend. Whenever we draw or measure near his house, he brings us chairs to sit on and mangoes to eat). As a friend in Mexico City put it, they want a *zócalo*. Any self-respecting town in Mexico has a *zócalo*, or a town square.

We spend three days and a night making drawings and a model to show the president of the government housing and development office. The housing corporation owns the vacant lot; we are hoping they will lend their support to the project. After an unfortunate experiment with blueish paint in which La Esperanza became a snow-covered Inuit settlement, we are ready to go. We are ushered with great pomp into heavily guarded and air-conditioned precincts. Six or seven of the director's assistants arrive. After elaborate introductions, we sit down, and

doctors were roaming up and down the slopes testing children for malaria. Construction workers and big trucks materialized in large numbers to install the much-awaited sewer.

Effective institutions, from basic property rights to incorrupt bureaucracies, are weak in Zihuatanejo. The issue of the square opened my eyes to its crucial role in the creation of civic-mindedness. Is the square not the first step towards democracy, which first prospered in the open climate of the agora? When it is built, the square in La Esperanza will provide a play area for children, a basketball court, and a shelter. But it will be much more than that; it will provide the opportunity for discussion and debate, the foundation of democratic institutions. It will be architecture at its best, an agent of social change.

¹Current development theory believes in strengthening effective institutions in developing nations. In view of the square's potential to organize the community into some sort of political activity, RAIC-CIDA's continuing involvement is crucial.