



The Architecture of the Missions in the Sierra Gorda of Querétaro, México

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Abstract. The Franciscan missions are composed of five architectural complexes, located in the Sierra Gorda, a protected natural belonging to the Biosphere Reserve, located in the north of the Mexican state of Querétaro. These buildings, from the 18th century, are representative for being an example of the Mexican baroque architectural values. They are also a reference in the history and social formation of México.

This work focuses on the study of the architecture of the missions, through documentary research and in-situ graphic study of the historical and architectural values that characterize these buildings. The graphic survey, as an instrument of analysis and understanding of the architecture and its natural environment, confirms the importance of generating the appropriate keys for the restoration process, incorporating the necessary and sustainable methodologies, for the future conservation of the heritage value of these unique architectures.

Keywords: Architecture · Heritage · Franciscan missions · Querétaro

1 Introduction

The missions founded by the mendicant orders that arrived in New Spain at the time of the conquest had the objective of evangelizing the settlers and congregating them to form organized settlements under the laws of the Crown. In the beginning, the missions consisted of an ephemeral assembly improvised by the friars and the soldiers, who traveled together, to have contact with the settlers to teach them the Christian religion (Fig. 1).

Over the years, the missions became an architectural complex composed of a temple to which were added various annexes such as the cloister, classrooms, workshops, the orchard, and the atrium (Fig. 2). In addition to being a religious center, these complexes assumed part of the population's education, training, and organization (Fig. 3).

The teaching method and the constitution of the mission depended on the mendicant order, Augustinians, Dominicans, Jesuits, or Franciscans, who were in charge of the missionary group. The order of Franciscan missionaries “relied on a scheme of social cooperatives of mutual aid, inspired by the principles (...) of St. Francis (Prieto 2006, pp. 54)”. With these principles, Friar Junípero Serra, a Majorcan Franciscan,



Fig. 1. View of the mission of Santa María del Agua de Landa. 2023. Dorantes, M.A.

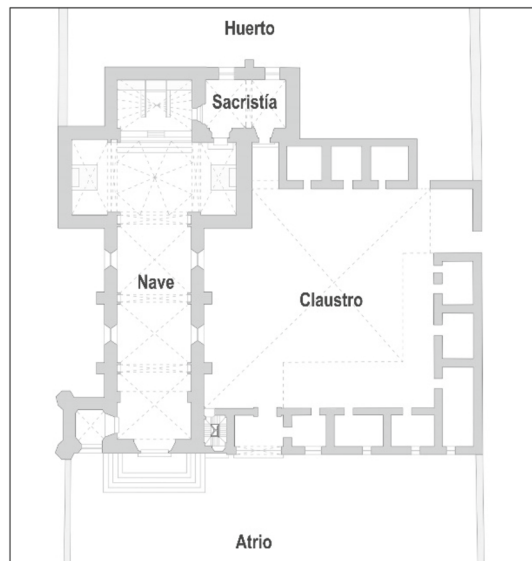


Fig. 2. Architectural plan of the mission of Nuestra Señora de la Luz de Tancoyol. 2023. Dorantes, M.A.

achieved the foundation of several missions that formed the Franciscan evangelizing route, which began in central México and extended northward until reaching what is now Baja California.



Fig. 3. Aerial view of the mission of Santa María del Agua del Landa. 2019. Ochoa, A. Source: www.iStock.com

Santiago de Jalpan, San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco, San Miguel Conzá, Santa María del Agua de Landa, and Nuestra Señora de Tancoyol are the five Franciscan missions in the Sierra Gorda, a protected natural area in the state of Querétaro, in central México. These buildings are the first missions founded under the direction of Friar Junípero during the second half of the 18th century.

In 2003, these five missions were declared UNESCO World Heritage Sites. These mission complexes meet the criteria of authenticity and integrity based on eight factors that characterize the missions (Government of the State of Querétaro 2003, pp.122), five of which are listed below:

The selection of the site where each of the missions were founded has abundant natural resources to favor the formation of self-sufficient populations (Fig. 4). The urban layout was adapted to the existing topography, around the mission, and this urban composition is preserved to this day.

The conception and design of these missionary complexes are understood not only as religious centers but also as centers of integration and exchange of two cultures rich in history and tradition. This allowed the construction of these complexes with the idea of solidity and permanence, which can be seen in the use of local materials such as stone and lime.

The workmanship, the result of the joint work of friars and indigenous people who contributed their constructive experience, is reflected not only in the constructions but also in the decoration of the facades, in a Mexican baroque style, in which a plastic discourse rich in iconography can be appreciated (Fig. 5). These facades present organic ornamental motifs, such as corn cobs and bunches of grapes, coexisting with figures and hagiographic motifs, such as angels, mermaids, and the images of the Virgin of Guadalupe and the Virgin of Pilar.



Fig. 4. View of the atrium of the mission of San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco. 2023. Dorantes, M.A.



Fig. 5. Decoration detail of the façade of the mission of San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco. 2023. Dorantes, M.A.

The function for which the missions were created is still preserved today, constituting a living heritage and a symbol of identity. The people who live in these localities celebrate the traditional rites and festivities of the mountainous region.

The conservation and restoration interventions have respected the use of traditional procedures and materials. A restoration and conservation project is currently underway on the occasion of the 20th anniversary of its declaration as a World Heritage Site. The works of this program began in the year 2022 with the façade of the Santa María del Agua de Landa Mission.

Based on the study of the historical and architectural values of the Franciscan missions in the Sierra Gorda, as well as the natural environment where they are located, it is proposed to develop and implement methodologies aimed at the conservation and enhancement of this architectural heritage representative of México.

2 Methodology

As mentioned in the previous paragraph, the study of the historical and architectural values of the missions was the starting point for the preliminary phase of research. To this end, a previous sweep of relevant bibliography has been carried out, such as the Technical Dossier presented to UNESCO in 2002, the 2008 Mission Management Plan, and the book *Baroque in the Sierra Gorda* by Monique Gustin, among other related articles.

In the state of Querétaro, several key archival collections were visited to study these missionary complexes, such as the library of the Ex-convent de la Santa Cruz, the History Museum of the Sierra Gorda, and the Center of the Instituto Nacional de Antropología e Historia (National Institute of Anthropology and History). The architects Liliana Álvarez Villegas and Concepción de la Vega, experts on the subject, were also interviewed.

In this first stage, a trip was made to the State of Querétaro in January 2023, with the purpose of having a first face-to-face approach to the Franciscan missions. As Báez (1994, pp.42) mentions “The in-situ knowledge of the buildings provides the memory with information that imprints a lasting impression that is difficult to achieve by others means, since allows us to receive multiple levels of knowledge that can only be accessed through the actual visit to the work”.

The visit to the missions was carried out in conjunction with the architects in charge of the conservation and restoration project. A perceptual analysis of each of the buildings, sketches, and freehand drawings was made (Fig. 6). These preliminary data will make it possible to study the architecture of these complexes, taking as a reference the natural context, the urban layout, and the architectural complex, three elements that distinguish them as World Heritage Sites.



Fig. 6. Freehand sketch of the mission of Nuestra Señora de la Luz de Tancoyol. 2023. Dorantes, M.A.

3 Results

In the first phase, a preliminary theoretical and practical knowledge of the Franciscan missions was achieved by gathering information from the collections, interviews with professionals, and sketches drawn in situ.

The visit to the missions has allowed us to appreciate the natural context, a mountain range that surrounds the missions, which is integrated in a harmonious way creating unique landscapes. Likewise, it has been recognized that these are places with abundant resources that at the time allowed the development of populations that are preserved to this day.

It has been observed that the complexes respected the natural terrain and adapted to the topography, examples of this, are the mission of Valle de Tilaco and the mission of San Miguel Concá, whose architectural plan is longitudinal, and the urban layout has followed this disposition.

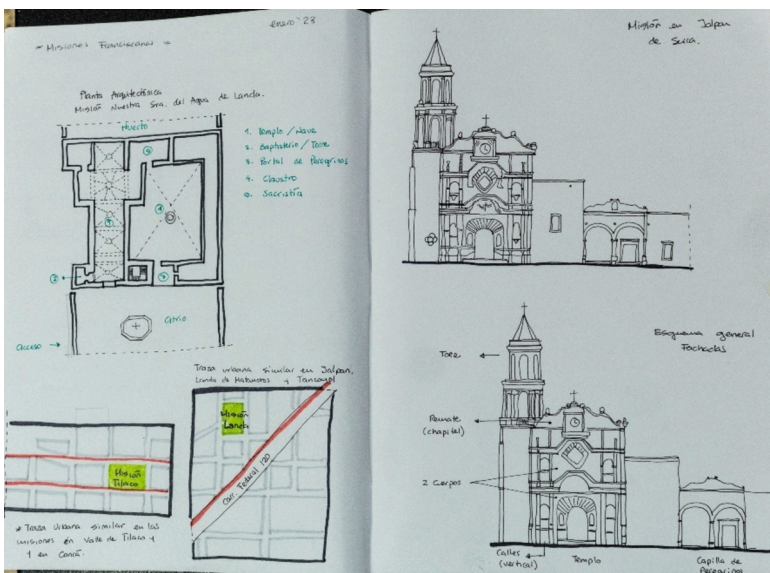


Fig. 7. Image of the logbook of the visit to the mission with freehand sketches. Dorantes, M.A.

With the sketches made, the architectural complexes have been studied, analyzing the architectural program shown in Fig. 2, as well as the facades, which respond to an architectural composition of “bodies” (horizontal way) and “streets” (vertical way) separated by bands and columns, in the upper part a top crown the façade (Fig. 7). The tower is attached on the left side, except for the mission of the Valle de Tilaco Valley, where the composition varies (Fig. 8).

With the information gathered, work is being done on a document in which theoretical data, sketches, and photographs are integrated to be studied and analyzed in depth.



Fig. 8. Façade of the mission San Francisco del Valle de Tilaco. 2023. Dorantes, M.A.

4 Conclusions

The visit to these complexes has contributed to raising awareness in situ of the architectural values and the natural environment that surrounds them, allowing an approach to architecture as a means of studying the history of the region. In particular, the facades, stuccoed with artistic elements, are the physical support of an iconography rich in symbolism that resembles a document that narrates this episode in the history of Querétaro. On the other hand, during the tour, it was possible to appreciate the criteria of authenticity and integrity that made possible the inscription of the mission to the UNESCO list as a World Heritage, the five missions are integrated with each other without losing their individuality.

Thus, this first phase of the study, which integrates bibliographic analysis, graphic analysis, and on-site experience, has made it possible to confirm the value of these unique complexes, as well as the importance of contributing and implementing the necessary and sustainable methodologies for the conservation of this representative heritage of Mexican missionary architecture.

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