Liberia, the 'White City' lies in Costa Rica's north-western Guanacaste savannah, surrounded by four volcanoes, Orosi, Tenorio, Rincón de la Vieja and Miravalles, that give the local soil its characteristic white colour. Its whitewashed adobe houses, which use the traditional bahareque technique of building in mud and bamboo, reveal colonial Spain's urban architectural influence.

Like most colonial towns in Latin America, the grid of narrow streets that defines the town has as its core a central square. This has its music pavilion where the municipal band performs at recreos (rests or breaks) on Sunday afternoons and retretas (from the French retrait, or retreat) on Thursday and Sunday nights. The square is also home to a vast, shady guanacaste tree (Enterolobium cyclocarpum), which gives its name to this north-western province and is Costa Rica's national tree.

On the southern side of the square, King's Road, the colonial highway to the city, runs toward the country's highlands. At its outset, the road flanks the adobe building of the former Governor's mansion, which has been proclaimed a historical and architectural heritage site as has the Zúñiga-Clachar house, also along this road. Both have been honoured with the Ministry of Culture's Save Our Heritage Award, the former in 2002, and the latter in 1995.

The Copa de Oro restaurant is further south along King's Road. On some moonlit evening in the 1930s, the composer and band leader Jesús Bonilla, a regular customer, was there when inspiration struck. Luna liberiana ('Liberian Moon'), one of Costa Rica's best-loved romantic ballads, describes the full moon over Liberia as 'a moon for loving', and calls the town itself 'a paradise granted us by God above, whose beautiful women know how to love'

Continuing past the restaurant, several magnificent structures display Liberia's distinctive 'sun doors', or corner double doors.

This beautiful parade of heritage sites does not stop until King's Bridge, a historic landmark once marking the city's southernmost limits that now delineates its historic sector. Near King's Bridge, the local camarilla brass bands provide slightly out-of-tune yet joyful accomplishment to the annual town fiesta each year as the run of the bulls takes place along King's Road. They are herded by sabaneros, Guanacaste's cowboys, who ride haughty paso-fino horses to a rodeo where crowds of cheering spectators applaud feats of riding, lassoing and bullfighting.

Liberia has preserved a significant share of its original urban structures in what is known as the 'Old Quarter', an architecturally homogeneous and largely unaltered area that has garnered the appreciation of Liberians and the desire to protect it. Liberia is a town with a consolidated spatial-cultural form.

In 1989, the Liberian municipal government and the town's residents asked the Ministry of Culture and the University of Costa Rica to sponsor a cultural inventory of Liberia's built environment, one of the first in the country. The report, presented to the local authorities, proposed a series of guidelines on how to interpret the city, to understand and respect its uniqueness.

On 18 April 1997, ICOMOS Costa Rica organised a symposium on adobe architecture in Liberia. Co-sponsored by the City Council and the local Cultural Committee, the event drew not only local participants but also national and international experts. These all unanimously signed the 'Liberian Charter on Heritage Preservation', committing all parties to the preservation and enhancement of Liberia's architectural legacy for the benefit of future generations.

In spite of all these efforts, educational and promotion activities have yet to produce sufficient numbers of people set on conservation. At the request of the local Cultural Committee and the Municipality, ICOMOS Costa Rica produced a scathing report in 1994 on the uncontrolled demolition taking place in Liberia. It also issued recommendations to the Municipality, the Costa Rican Housing and Urban Development, and the Ministry of Health on the need to put an end to such destruction.

No local building codes, or urban development and land-use plans, exist to encourage a holistic approach to sustainable development, one that reconciles the demands of modernity with the conservation of the town's built heritage. Like any other historical heritage site, Liberia is subject daily to the degradation caused by a misunderstood notion of modernity and progress.

The town has also suffered very high rates of immigration in recent years, leading to extreme urbanisation and the rise of shanty-towns at its outskirts. As the provincial capital of Guanacaste and its political and administrative hub, it has grown in response to the need to house an ever-increasing number of government officials and the tradespeople and others who have followed.

Breathtaking tropical beaches, national parks, conservation areas, volcanoes (some of them very active) and other attractions have drawn ever-increasing plane-loads of tourists from around the world to Liberia and nearby locations. This is putting increasing pressure on accommodation, basic services, and the availability of affordable land, incurring real estate prices.

Multinationals have jumped into the fray, building identical modern hotels, apartment blocks, and other facilities that undermine the cultural foundations of the region. Sometimes they do not even take into account the local climate when designing their facilities, causing a waste of energy and other resources, even as they callously break with the existing architectural integrity of the surrounding community.

The siren calls of so-called modernity continue to whisper comfort and beauty, blinding the local citizenry to the value of their own heritage, as they rid themselves of buildings that were constructed in harmony with local environmental conditions and customs over generations.

Government officials, enfeebled by lethargy about conserving the town's heritage, have shown remarkable zeal in promoting and facilitating the construction of these new structures. It is unlikely that they are motivated by destruction for destruction's sake or selfish desires. The reason may well be a lack of foresight and the absence of a systematic approach to urban development. Whatever the reason, it has led to a confrontation between these officials and a significant proportion of the local population that is deeply attached to its roots.

King's Bridge, a narrow, one-way metal structure dating back to the early 20th century, impedes high-volume vehicle movement along King's Road. Some local groups would like to see it demolished and replaced by a modern, multi-lane structure that can accommodate a much greater density of traffic. Should this happen, King's Road would lose its soul. The rather intimate charm of this historical and architecturally significant street would be lost to engine noise, exhaust fumes and honking horns. Cars and trucks would travel at high speed, pedestrians would hesitate before crossing the road, and the leisure embodied in the road's benches and trees would be disrupted for ever.

It would be entirely feasible to build a new bridge on any number of parallel sites that would not put Liberia's heritage at risk.

COSTA RICA

The case of Liberia, Costa Rica: preservation or progress?

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It would be entirely feasible to build a new bridge on any number of parallel sites that would not put Liberia's heritage at risk.
Conflict is unnecessary. Progress need not turn a blind eye to the virtues of conservation. Development need not entail the destruction of Liberia’s architectural heritage. The town’s extraordinary adobe houses, its characteristic ‘sun doors’, its whitewashed façades and red tiled roofs, need not fall victim to the juggernaut of modernity.

Erick Chaves Chaves and Miguel Chaves Fernández
ICOMOS Costa Rica

COSTA RICA
El caso de Liberia, Costa Rica: ¿patrimonio o progreso?

Situada al norte de Costa Rica y en medio de la planicie guanacasteca, con terrenos blancos de origen volcánico, rodeada de los volcanes Orosi, Tenorio, Rincón de la Vieja y Miravalles, se encuentra la “Ciudad Blanca”: Liberia, la que con sus blancas casas de bahareque encalado nos muestra su particular fisonomía urbano-arquitectónica de influencia colonial española. En medio de ella está el Parque Central, y en él, encontramos el quiosco donde la banda municipal ejecuta los recreos los domingos por la tarde y las retretas los jueves y domingos por la noche. También ahí se ubica el gran árbol de Guanacaste (Enterolobium cyclocarpum), símbolo nacional y monumento a la génesis de la ciudad.

Hacia el sur de ese parque y de ese Guanacaste, se encuentra la Calle Real, antigua vía de acceso al pueblo primigenio, que inicia con el edificio de adobes de la otrora Gobernación. A partir de él, continúa una serie de excelentes exponentes arquitectónicos como la casa de la familia Zúñiga Clachar, ambos declarados patrimonio histórico-arquitectónico y ganadores del premio “Salvemos nuestro patrimonio”, otorgado por el Ministerio de Cultura de Costa Rica, en los años 2002 y 1995, respectivamente. Un poco más al sur encontramos el restaurante “La Copa de Oro” donde se inspiró don Jesús Bonilla para componer “Luna Liberiana”, himno a la sensibilidad de los pobladores. Le siguen una serie de magníficos ejemplos caracterizados por la particular ‘puerta del sol’ o doble puerta esquinera. La hermosa secuencia remata en su extremo sur con el Puente Real: una angosta estructura metálica de comienzos del siglo XX y pocas cuadras al sur, precisamente donde se encuentra el Puente Real: una angosta estructura metálica de comienzos del siglo XX y de un solo carril. Algunas fuerzas locales pretenden su demolición para dar paso franco a la modernidad, es decir, pretenden ampliar-

1 The song was even recorded by the Caracas Academic Octet as part of a collection of 15 ‘Latin American popular classics’ from such countries as Argentina, Brazil, Cuba, and Mexico. More information is at www.sincopa.com/ethnic/cdinfo1/octet_elasiclatin.htm.
lo a varias vías para que se produzca un alto tránsito vehicular. Si esto se diera, la Calle Real perdería su espíritu: los automóviles transitarían a alta velocidad, los peatones no tendrían su espacio, sus bancas, sus arboledas y el ritmo vital de la calle se vería trastocado completamente. A todas luces, es innecesario perder la Calle Real por un puente que es perfectamente factible ubicar en alguno de muchos otros sitios paralelos.

En el año 1989 – y a solicitud del pueblo y del Municipio liberiano – se lleva a cabo el inventario de bienes inmuebles de la ciudad de Liberia, quizás uno de los primeros que se hicieron en el país. Fue patrocinado por el Ministerio de Cultura y la Universidad de Costa Rica y se entregó a las autoridades ofreciendo también una serie de valoraciones como medio para leer la ciudad, para comprenderla y respetarla. Posteriormente, en 1994, a solicitud del Comité de Cultura local y de la Municipalidad, el ICOMOS de Costa Rica brinda un revelador informe acerca de las demoliciones que acontecen en la ciudad y se brinda además una serie de consejos al Municipio, al Instituto de Vivienda y Urbanismo y al Ministerio de Salud para detenerlas. El 18 de abril de 1997, el ICOMOS de Costa Rica realiza el Simposium sobre Arquitectura de Tierra en Liberia, a solicitud del Consejo Municipal y del Comité de Cultura, con la asistencia mayoritaria de los ciudadanos locales pero también con la de expertos nacionales y extranjeros. Al final del evento se redactaría la “Carta de Liberia”. Todas estas acciones han coadyuvado a fortalecer aquella sólida estructura espacio-social que mencionamos párrafos arriba, pero, aún así, la labor educativa y divulgativa nunca es suficiente.

La mal entendida ‘modernidad’ pregona confort y estética, subvalorando lo propio, lo tradicional, dada la adopción de patrones constructivos exógenos que se abren paso a punta de la demolición de la arquitectura bien adaptada y del modo de vida ancestral. Sumado a esta complejidad de alto impacto, tenemos la inexistencia de normativas urbano-arquitectónicas que ayuden a poder implementar un modelo de desarrollo integral que lleve de la mano a esa modernidad con el patrimonio construido. He ahí el punto central: armonía y no antagonismo. Es necesario evitar que al paso de un malentendido progreso sigan haciendo desaparecer al panorama edilicio liberiano con sus extraordinarias casas de adobe y bahareque, con sus características puertas del sol, sus blancas fachadas y sus cubiertas de teja. El progreso debe ser cabal.

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