

GUATEMALA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

After many years of restoration and reconstruction the great tourist attraction of Tikal does not seem to be in immediate danger. However, there are about 200 Maya sites in the jungle of Petén, most of which still have visible traces of architecture that need at least to be consolidated. Exemplary consolidation measures have so far only been carried out in the course of the “Triangle Project” in Yaxhá, Nakún and Naranjo, where the archaeological remains were restored for “soft tourism”, following the modern principles of “sustainable conservation”. This project could be an example for a number of similar measures in comparable regions.

The abandoned Maya sites are not only being destroyed by the forces of nature (tree roots, earthquakes, storms), but also by illegal excavations (sometimes also by unnecessary archaeological investigations), which can endanger the structure of the buildings. The practices of illegal excavators, who are encouraged by the international antique trade, have therefore also resulted in a permanent loss of historic remains in Guatemala.

A risk for the Maya sites could also be possible disruptions in connection with mass tourism. Instead, the aim should be community-based soft tourism, which encourages the local population to take responsibility in order to protect the surrounding areas of archaeological sites. Dangers such as created clearings by burning down forests in nature reserves could thus be prevented.

Apart from that, the entire cultural heritage in Guatemala is threatened by earthquakes, the most famous example being Antigua Guatemala, which was destroyed several times. In this town, which is on the World Heritage List, it is not enough to consolidate the ruins of important monuments. Instead, in the



Tikal, Temple I



Excavation and consolidation of a pyramid in the jungle (Yaxhá)



San Francisco El Alto, market place. Almost all the traditional houses have been replaced by new reinforced concrete buildings.



Petén, rain forest area, traditional houses threatened by use of industrial building materials

Antigua Guatemala, partial reconstruction of the cathedral, damaged by an earthquake



case of modern alterations to mostly private buildings (eg by adding extra storeys) greater care should be taken to ensure that construction laws are being observed. For some particularly well preserved historic districts in smaller towns, eg on the island of Flores, and in small market towns, which are constantly being spoilt by new buildings, some sort of urban preservation project would be highly desirable.

Everywhere in the high and low lands of Guatemala the old tradition of vernacular architecture is gradually being lost as too little repair is being done and too many old buildings and their traditional indigenous materials are being replaced by standardised concrete structures.

Cultural heritage is furthermore being threatened to a considerable degree by thieves who steal sculptures, paintings and other decorative items from churches. As in most parts of Latin America, there is hardly any money for the restoration of the interiors and the altarpieces of the churches. In addition there is a lack of qualified restorers able to take proper care of such works of art.

So far no plans have been developed to establish a department of industrial archaeology which would look after historic coffee and sugar-cane plantations.

ICOMOS Guatemala