

# PANAMA Demolition of Historic Façades in Casco Antiguo World Heritage Site

## Historic Context

The Isthmus of Panama was first discovered by Europeans in 1501. Shortly after, Panama City, the American continent's first city on the Pacific Ocean side, was founded on 1519. During 1671, British corsair Sir Henry Morgan sacked and burned the city. As a consequence, in 1673 the new Panama City, this time a fortified ramparted Spanish colonial *recint*, had to be built on an entirely new peninsula, following the tradition of military engineers working for the Crown. The Casco Antiguo de Panamá, as it is now called, became a national historic district in 1976. In 1997 and more recently with extensions in 2003, it was included in the World Heritage List by UNESCO, primarily for its universal and exceptional significance and value.

## Local Legal Context

Panama's historic landmarks (MH – *Monumentos Históricos*) and national historic districts (CMH – *Conjuntos Monumentales Históricos*) are legally protected and ruled by the following local historic preservation laws: No. 91 Law of 1976, No. 14 Law of 1982, and the No. 9 Law of 1997.

The local official body that, among other capacities, has the legal power and authority to preserve, protect, promote for rehabilitation/restoration, safeguard, inspect during construction, and classify, is the Dirección Nacional de Patrimonio Histórico (DNPH). This body, however, is always advised by the Comisión Nacional de Arqueología y Monumentos Históricos (CONAMOH – the national commission of archaeology and historic buildings

Mapa de Materiales de los Edificios  
Buildings Materials Map



Project location in Panama City old quarter



Ave. Eloy Alfaro, facade (demolished)



8th Street, facade (demolished)



9th Street, facade (demolished)



The demolished facades covered in plastic



Demolition process

Demolition completed



and sites). This interdisciplinary commission representing several cultural institutions, basically oversees, technically recommends, and approves or rejects any rehabilitation/restoration project on any historic landmark (MH) and historic district (CMH).

## Report on Recent Demolition

The ICOMOS National Committee of Panama urgently calls for international attention and support because of a recent case of the demolition of a historic building that took place in the Casco Viejo, which is the result of the lack of commitment, significance and responsibility of the local heritage authorities.

On 27 February 2004, a historic building located on the corner of 4<sup>th</sup> Street and A Avenue partially collapsed due to the owner's lack of maintenance. However, a substantial part of the structure survived. Unexpectedly, during the clean-up of the collapsed material, the entire property was razed to ground level. Immediately, the ICOMOS National Committee approached the authorities to call their attention to this matter and remind them of scientific shoring and structural support techniques and to give them a copy of the recent report 'Recommendations of the Analysis, Conservation and Structural Restoration of Architectural Heritage'.

In spite of our calls for consideration, an unfortunate situation recently took place. In a current 'rehabilitation' project, consisting of four historic buildings located in and formerly part of the Hospital and Convent of San Juan de Dios, demolition took place of the historic façades and a new internal structure was built that considerably altered the scale and size of the original buildings as well as being visible externally. This sensitive project is located right in the block between 8<sup>th</sup> and 9<sup>th</sup> Streets and Eloy Alvaro Avenue, that is right on one of Casco Antiguo's only two entrances, encompassing a group of buildings that once formed a unique historical complex that was an important part of the site.

During our research into the case, our committee was informed that this project had fully approved plans. However, the demolition of façades and the alteration of the building scale was not considered in these plans, and apparently took place during construction without undergoing necessary previous approval procedures. It is our understanding that the DNPB authority gave permissions for the demolition without previously consulting the CONAMOH commission. Moreover, it is clear that there were no appropriate supervision controls to prevent and avoid the alteration of scale.

As we write this report, the demolished façades have been covered in plastic and are in the process of reconstruction, giving way to a possible historically false record. The obvious scale and size alteration has been submitted for approval, yet the construction has not been stopped nor stayed.



9th Street and Eloy Alfaro (demolished)



9th Street, facade (demolished)

The demolished facades covered in plastic



## Call for International Support

We therefore urgently call for international support so that these sad cases do not happen again and proper measures and action may be taken against local conservation authorities that permit these activities and against developers that propose such procedures.

Our committee has protested publicly to local newspapers, television news and in written reports sent to both the DNPH authority and CONAMOH commission. However, we still have not been informed of what will happen further on this case. We will continue to do all we can to safeguard and supervise these and other situations, but we cannot achieve any success if we are left alone by the international heritage conservation community.

ICOMOS Panama