

Cultural Heritage in Costa Rica: Networking in Disaster Preparedness and Response

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Resumen

El patrimonio cultural de Costa Rica - Creación de una red para prevención y planes de urgencia

Costa Rica cuenta con una biodiversidad extraordinaria y un emplazamiento geográfico excepcional. Sin embargo, al estar el país situado en una región donde se dan fenómenos sísmicos importantes (tectónica de placas), su patrimonio natural y cultural padece las consecuencias de esta intensa actividad geológica de la corteza terrestre, que se traduce en erupciones volcánicas, terremotos, etc. A esto vienen a sumarse los nuevos fenómenos urbanos generados por la expansión de las ciudades, que tienen como consecuencia alterar y desfigurar los paisajes naturales.

Las principales medidas para luchar contra las catástrofes naturales se basan en la prevención. A este respecto, Costa Rica ha adoptado un "código sísmico" que es objeto de actualizaciones muy frecuentes. Por otra parte, el patrimonio cultural es objeto de una atención especial gracias a una red de Comisiones Nacionales de Emergencia implantadas en distintos lugares del territorio, si bien el instrumento básico de conservación preventiva sigue siendo la documentación de referencia (inventarios, informes y evaluaciones de profesionales de museos, etc.).

Résumé

Le patrimoine culturel du Costa Rica : création d'un réseau pour la prévention des risques et les plans d'urgence

Le Costa Rica est riche d'une biodiversité exceptionnelle et d'une localisation géographique unique. Cependant, situé dans une zone sismique intense (tectonique des plaques), le patrimoine culturel costaricain souffre de cette grande activité géologique de la croûte terrestre (éruptions volcaniques, tremblements de terres, etc.). A cela, s'ajoutent de nouveaux phénomènes urbains, comme l'expansion des villes, qui désorganisent et défigurent le paysage naturel.

La préservation constitue la principale mesure de lutte contre les catastrophes naturelles grâce à un "code sismique" actualisé très régulièrement. Fort d'un réseau de "Commissions Nationales des Urgences" implantées en différents endroits du territoire, le patrimoine culturel fait l'objet d'une attention particulière bien que les documents de base de conservation préventive restent les outils de référence (inventaire, rapport et évaluation de professionnels des musées, etc.).

The country of Costa Rica has an area of 51,000 km² and is located in Central America. When the land of Costa Rica emerged a million years ago, it united the continental masses of North and South America, providing a passage for many plant and animal species. With its mountainous topography, latitude and position between the Pacific and Atlantic oceans, the country has a concentrated 5% of the biological diversity of the planet.

Historic Review

Despite the name, the Spanish did not find the precious metals they were looking for here, or even the native population that could have helped generate wealth. Perhaps because of this, it became the most isolated province of the Spanish empire.

In the early days of the colony, Costa Ricans lived in isolation; they were free and land owners, factors which slowed down the development of our cities. The population density was low and this may have stopped relations of social subordination developing; these would have meant that wealth was generated and solid stone buildings constructed to stand up to the tropical conditions and seismic movements.

Poverty did not lead to any major trade relationships with other countries and therefore while European architectural movements had reached the rest of the continent, they were not adopted here. The few contacts that did exist with the other Central American countries and Panama (many of them of religious in character) produced some buildings reflecting styles or trends from Europe and the rest of America, e.g. baroque. Stone was only rarely used for construction and when it was, the mortar was packed with soil. Sometimes clay bricks were used, but most constructions were made with mud bricks that we call adobe, with wood and straw or tiles for roofing. These were perishable materials that have not survived to the present day, and we therefore have very few buildings over one hundred years old, and only four known to date from before Independence (1821), and these have undergone changes and often misguided work.

Our Heritage Represents us

We Costa Ricans are proud of our past with honest farm workers, a history with almost no bloodshed and few social differences; this is particularly striking when compared to the experiences of other nations, although we have not managed to overcome the barrier of poverty.

Today we realize that our architecture reflects us in its simplicity and dimensions. With the exception of a few cases of ostentatious design, our architecture has been dominated by lack of money and the threat of earthquakes.

Disasters Affecting us

Costa Rica is located at one end of the Caribbean tectonic plate which is introduced by the phenomenon of subduction on the Cocos tectonic plate. In the past this has caused major earthquakes and a great deal of volcanic activity. Other constant threats include floods and land or

mud slides which have killed and still kill many people. This is partly because of the mountainous topography and high rainfall causing rivers to overflow and transforming mountain slopes. But man is also responsible. We now have to contend with disorganised growth of cities, occurring without any planning of the possible consequences of new urban developments near the hills, and with the drainage and channelling of water which previously seeped into the ground sometimes causing rivers to overflow into areas where the communities had never had problems with the nearby river.

Seismic records have been kept in Costa Rica for just over one hundred years, but reports by past governors date back to 1609 and tell tales of poor constructions suffering the effects of earthquakes. There have been historic earthquakes that have destroyed cities, for example, in 1910 a violent earthquake almost completely destroyed a city and killed more than 700.

Legislation

After the 1910 earthquake, the president introduced a law banning the use of adobe as a construction material; this has been respected since then and has, we believe, saved many lives. However, the main measure for avoiding disasters is prevention through seismic references which are constantly being reviewed and upgraded. Municipal authorities have recently developed regulations and plans for optimal land use, designating certain mountain slopes and rivers as danger areas. While the legislation requires a space between rivers and constructions to be left unimproved, mainly to protect hydrographic river basins, these areas are frequently taken over by poor people who cannot afford safe land; they are then victims of flooding, invariably with tragic consequences.

Organisation Against Disasters

The main measure for the moment has been the establishment of the National Commission for the Prevention of Risks and Mitigation of Disasters (*Comisión Nacional para la Prevención de Riesgos y Mitigación de Desastres*) known as the National Commission of Emergencies (*Comisión Nacional de Emergencias*). This commission has set up local committees all over the country, analysing specific situations for forward planning in each locality. So far the different committees have taken measures to protect their cultural heritage, although I must admit that we have only advised (strictly speaking) representatives of two communes where monuments are located.

With the establishment of a team in Costa Rica for the protection of our cultural heritage in the event of disasters, different measures have been considered. Cultural inventories have been drawn up and updated so as to check illicit trade in art works, archaeological pieces and documents. We have worked on many inventories and the police and border control authorities frequently confiscate property. We know that inventories can play an important role in the control and recovery of historic material.

Over the past few months in Costa Rica we have been implementing additional measures: we have asked cultural heritage institutions,

museums, libraries and the National Archives to have reports drawn up by qualified professionals assessing the vulnerability of the structure of the buildings and of the power systems. They will also make directories in hierarchical order listing authorized staff with delegation to make decisions, of staff teams set up to assist the institution (if need be), of authorized equipment to be used for handling collections, equipment used to monitor or support the buildings, plus monitoring and security equipment. The report should also include a study of adjacent constructions which could be a threat in the event of fire, e.g. factories, gas (petrol) stations. To date, the personnel lists have been submitted and the vulnerability reports have been requested for January, 2004.

The Cultural Heritage Conservation and Research Centre
(El Centro de Investigación y Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural)

This institution comes under the Ministry of Culture, Youth and Sport which is in charge of preserving, restoring and presenting architectural heritage, as well as investigating and documenting intangible heritage, these being elements of national identity, and, as is the case in all countries, there is the threat of globalisation and natural disasters.

We have an investment programme for conservation with a modest budget for us to reinforce the structures of certain important buildings as preventive measures to counter the effects of earthquakes.