

Restoring Acoma

The Pueblo Revitalization Projects

Cornerstones Community Partnerships has been engaged for over a decade in assisting communities in the restoration of their traditional buildings and in the cultivation of leadership among younger people. The restoration process focuses on the retention of skills and the conservation of cultural values. The Acoma project will restore the vast adobe church and convento, and some significant cultural “houses.” Cornerstones is also engaged at Acoma in the construction preparation of new houses to be built in traditional ways. Far from a one-sided partnership, the immense exchange of learning taking place through this endeavor underlines the need for leadership from a culturally rooted people in an increasingly placeless world.

Acoma

The Pueblo of Acoma in New Mexico is notably among the oldest urban settlements in the United States. Continuously inhabited for at least a millennium, “Sky City” (7,000 feet above sea level) retains its original architecture of houses built on top of a mesa, isolated and defensible in the magnificent arid landscape. To the northeast of the mesa is the equally magnificent “Enchanted Mesa” or *K'atzim*, thought to have once been a place of occupation by the Acomas. Oral history describes the migration of the Acoma people in search of *HaK'u*. Acoma (pronounced either Eh-Ko-Ma or Ah-Ko-Ma) is derived from the Keresan word *Hak'u*. It was prophesized from the beginning that there existed a place ready for the people to occupy. *Hak'u* means, in one sense, to prepare or to plan. However, there remains a great difference of opinion about the age of the Acoma Nation. While traditional Acoma oral history reflects on a time far beyond our imagination, a time of creation and emergence on to this world, the Acoma people have always known of a special place called “*Hak'u*,” a spiritual homeland prepared for their eternal settlement. Recent excavations on Acoma Mesa tend to suggest that Acoma was inhabited before the time of Christ. Archeologists agree that it has been continuously

occupied from at least A.D. 1200. The Acomas claim always to have lived on their mesa, hospitably receiving wandering tribes to share their valley, which at one time, had plenty of water and was excellent for farming. Acoma remains today a part of the continuum that originated its settlement. The deep cultural meaning of the city remains unaltered in the context of the altered daily lives of its 21st-century inhabitants. The anchors that bind this society to its place were forged, in great part, through the act of settling—a process that is integral with Acoma cosmology and social organization. Evolving with this process is the presence of the earth as a part of the people, both living and dead, the place of origin. Embodied in the land and its earthen structures are the histories and traditions of a people.

Today, approximately 5,200 people live on the Acoma lands. These lands are owned collectively by the people. The people are governed by an interdependent system of authorities wherein no particular body can be considered dominant, except in its specific field of authority. The people, therefore, have a large degree of individual responsibility in the rulings of the tribe. The Caciques (or Antelope Clan) are the highest-ranking body within the tribe having responsibilities that include the assigning of land and houses. There is little distinction between “religious” and “secular” matters. The most prominent bodies that represent the law are the tribal council and the tribal administration.

The contiguously formed settlement, 20 miles east of the Continental Divide, was constructed of earth and stone from the surrounding lands and with logs from the sacred Mount Taylor to the north. The earliest European contact¹ with Acoma in the 16th century provided descriptions of a rock called “*Acuco*.” They reported seeing “a village of about 200 houses, from two to four stories high, situated on inaccessible mesa almost 400 feet high: with cornfields and cisterns on the summit; with cotton, deerskin and buffalo hide garments; with domesticated turkeys, quantities of turquoise, etc.”² The stepped houses were set



View of Acoma.

in continuous rows facing slightly east of south. Built of an aggregate of stone and mud and plastered with straw reinforced mud, these buildings are remarkable examples of an “energy efficient” architecture.³ The stepped houses exactly conform themselves to the movement of the sun and the prevailing winds from the west. The entire complex, appearing to be much like the rocky mesa, is virtually invisible from any distance away. Food crops of corn, squash, and beans were grown in the fields below. Water cisterns are located in the open, on top of the mesa. No other water or source of electrical power now exists here. The kivas (ceremonial chambers) are a part of the contiguous architecture, accessible only by ladders to rooftop doors. By the early 17th century, the Spanish missionaries had established the massive adobe San Esteban del Rey⁴ church and convento.

The rows and clusters of houses have been built to also incorporate plazas—meeting places, both formal and informal, private and public. Thus, upon closer inspection, the settlement possesses many attributes of a world city, having the elements and relationships seen in city building throughout history. Primary among these is the existence of its public institutions, civic and religious buildings, and communal spaces. As in the typology of medieval cities, its defenses and boundaries (the mesa) are a major representation of its architectural character. (See below a description of the meeting house.)

San Esteban del Rey

As one of the first of the Pueblo churches of New Mexico, San Esteban remains the largest, and, some would argue, the most architecturally

perfect of the group. Considering the 1629 beginnings of the San Esteban del Rey mission at Acoma, the enormity of the construction task can only amaze the modern builder. The 21,000-square-foot mission complex, with church and convento, was constructed over a period of about 14 years. Its architecture, typical of the region, is clearly traceable to its European origins. The church itself is a massive 275,000-cubic-foot edifice, one of the largest of its kind in North America. All materials, clays, stone, wood, nails, grasses, yucca, water, and selenium were carried by the Acoma and their pack animals to the top of the 350-foot-high mesa; some materials, such as the high timbers for the 35-foot-long vigas were transported,⁵ without touching the ground, from Mount Taylor, 30 miles away.

The problem of transporting not only materials, tools, and hardware, some all the way from Mexico City,⁶ was superseded by the problem of the control of the design and the occupation of the land. Missionary activity was a form of land occupation in the Americas in the sense that European values of land use were imposed in much the same way as had been carried out in Europe over the centuries. The origins of hegemony were in this sense often primarily constructive acts, as was the perceived mission of the church. This hegemonic approach to saving souls had its origins in the age-old practice of “superposition.”⁷ Historically, it is those societies that managed to assimilate this form of domination that would best survive over time.

San Esteban del Rey was built as a mission compound comprising a church building and adjoining convento, or priests’ living quarters. It was situated on the south side of the mesa, facing due east, separated in both position and orientation from the stepped houses on the north rim. The church itself is an adobe structure consisting, typically, of a single nave space, choir and sanctuary, sacristy, and baptistery. The walls were in places over 7 feet thick at the base and rising 34 feet vertically, diminishing to approximately 18 inches at the parapets. Flanked by two adobe and stone towers, rising another 15 feet above the parapets, the east façade belongs to an architectural typology imported from Rome. The raised altar, *reredos* (altar screen), and *guarda polvo* (altar canopy) were lit by a clerestory window. Two windows on the south side of the nave lit the main interior. The adjoining convento was a cloister with a predominantly closed ambulatory, priests’

rooms, and a schoolroom/mirador on the second floor. Up to 20 priests could be housed here. Significantly, the placita was used for the planting of corn and fruit trees.

Counter-Reformation rules of church design were consistently applied throughout the Americas and brought to North America via New Spain. These include Renaissance systems of proportion, and in the case of San Esteban, a superbly faithful application of Humanist proportional methods for achieving mathematical perfection in architecture. Its nave, from the narthex to the sanctuary (i.e., the high volume perceived upon entry), is proportioned in a 1:1:3 ratio, an equilibrium that is intuitively understood by anyone standing at its entrance. The generating measurements⁸ are 50 varas (one cordel) long and approximately 16 varas wide. The height of the towers is 16 varas. The use of the inclined earthen floor rising toward the altar completes the typology. These simple architectures of the missions retain the purity of the Renaissance ideal, subsequently obscured during the 17th century in Europe.⁹

The hegemony in the Americas of this European invention has, over the centuries, been beautifully assimilated and overlaid by the Acoma culture. The building of the church complex, initially under the direction of architect priest Fray Juan Ramirez of Oaxaca, is still told of as a time of domination and hardship for the people of Acoma. Many deaths are reported during construction, and those who perished were buried in the walls and floor of the church. The severity of

their methods bred much resentment and remains today a part of the oral history of the Acoma people. Little recognized in America, however, are the underlying principles of the Italian Humanist effort to equate architectural meaning and mathematical perfection on Earth with God.¹⁰ By basing the design of churches on this formula, the hidden meaning of this construction was designed to influence those who encountered it.

Well known among the Acoma people, however, are long established methods of building intrinsic to the people, and an expertise with materials that continues unchanged today. The unparalleled beauty of the Acoma pottery is evidence of a people gifted with a particularly highly developed spatial sense, ability to finely craft materials, and an unerring visual acuity. Perhaps little recognized today are the ancient building forms that predate the European systems brought to Acoma, whose orderly architectural systems formed the basis for an easy assimilation of the mathematically perfect orthogonal plan.¹¹

The Acoma People and Cornerstones Community Partnerships

In the spring of 1998, the Pueblo of Acoma approached Cornerstones with a request for a comprehensive conditions assessment of the San Esteban del Rey. Conducted under a grant from the Andy Warhol Foundation, the assessment¹² re-appraised the present condition of the building through several months of testing and detailed observation. The 1934 Historic American Buildings Survey drawings were amended to reflect present conditions. The collection of data was done in partnership with the *gaugashiti* (caretakers of the church). In presenting findings and recommendations for a comprehensive restoration, the report emphasized the need for a community-based effort together with a youth training program in earthen conservation. Much emphasis is placed on the teaching of the young by the experienced. The exercise of their talents is an intrinsic part of conserving traditional structures and is the major focus of the partnership now formed between the tribe and Cornerstones. One of the primary emphases of the current tribal administration is the retention of the Acoma language. The Language Retention Program within the schools has been a huge success over the past year. The desire to restore Keres as a primary language within the community has engaged the children and helped them focus

Houses in the Pueblo of Acoma.



upon their own traditions. In the near future, these students will also participate in some building restoration work, thereby connecting the preservation of their own language with the overall goals of preservation at Acoma.

A major event in 1999, the initiative by the White House Millennium Council in conjunction with the Save Americas Treasures program and the National Trust for Historic Preservation, spearheaded an effort to plan a major restoration of San Esteban. First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton's visit to Acoma in April of that year, assisted by Cornerstones, generated a momentum for the project that is being carried forward daily. Documentation for the restoration work, based on the Cornerstones conditions assessment report, is under way with a planning grant, again from the Save Americas Treasures program.



From left, Richard Moe, president, National Trust for Historic Preservation, First Lady Hillary Rodham Clinton, and Governor Lloyd Tortalita in the Pueblo of Acoma during the Save Americas Treasures visit in April 1999.

In the interim, however, Cornerstones has joined the tribal administration in several emergency repairs that will become a part of the comprehensive restoration work. Carried out together with the *gaugashiti*, this work has included major repairs to the schoolroom/mirador in the convento. Because of the severe deterioration of walls, floors, and roof, all parts of the fabric required restoration, now nearing completion. Mud plastering and wood restoration carried out with traditional methods will complete this work.

In 1999, Cornerstones received a grant from the Environmental Protection Agency for the construction of "sustainable" buildings using traditional methods and materials. These proposed sites included both ancient and new structures. A primary aim is to engage both young and old in the restoration of traditional methods of

building, a process that is quickly vanishing in the face of inexpensive, quick frame construction. The grant included a third partner, the Department of Architecture at the University of Pennsylvania, also a strong contributor in Cornerstones' work at the Zuni Pueblo. This exchange has enriched the discussion and outcome of traditional building methods applied to restoration and new design. Joined now by the Department of Landscape Architecture at Cornell University, the design for new housing, under the guidance of the Pueblo of Acoma Housing Authority, is proceeding toward construction. Piloting this construction will be two adobe model houses on the new site—a demonstration of the quality that can be attained through traditional methods.

Parallel with this effort, the EPA grant targeted two structures on the mesa itself for restoration. Emergency roof work has been completed on the meeting house; a civic building largely used for ceremonial purposes. At a period in the late-19th century, the meeting house stood isolated as the nearest structure to the church. Its nave-transept configuration is clearly derived from the Christian architectural type and, therefore, from the ancient civic basilica. It is reputed to have been built by the missionaries as a meeting place with visitors from afar. Over time, the meeting house has been used as a courthouse by the Acoma people, and as a place of inauguration of Acoma officials. In many senses, the meeting house is a place where both cultures have come together. Further repair and restoration will continue with Cornerstones' assistance. A second structure for restoration has yet to be identified under the terms of the EPA grant.

At the heart of this work is the engagement of people in the traditions of the past. In a sense, the buildings themselves are a by-product of this central focus. This effort is not limited to building only, but also to the connective role played by education in general. To this end, the connection between the Keresan language and the Acoma people is seen as not separate from other traditional ways, such as building. The restoration process is not first about monuments, but rather about preserving the past as a present condition. The annual preparation for the feast of San Esteban del Rey was preceded by a flurry of preparation known as "church work." In the past, many people came with their families to prepare the mission for the feast day. This year, a great



The gaugashti (caretaker of the church) with Acoma crew restoring the meeting house.

effort was put forward to re-mud the mission. San Esteban del Rey was a great spectacle on September 3, a reminder of the process that has engaged the community for centuries.

Notes

- 1 Captain Alvarado, dispatched from Zuni by Coronado in 1540.
- 2 White, Leslie, *The Acoma Indians, Bureau of American Ethnology*, Annual Report 47, 1929-30
- 3 Knowles, R. *Energy and Form*, MIT Press 1978
- 4 Garcia-Mason, V., *Acoma Pueblo*, A. Ortiz, ed. *Handbook of North American Indians* Vol.9 Smithsonian, 1979. "As the seat of a Spanish mission the Pueblo is called San Esteban de Acoma: the original patron saint appears to have been the Protomartyr Saint Stephen, but the Pueblo's saint's day is now celebrated on September 2, the feast of Saint Stephen, King of Hungary (Dominguez 1956:188-191)"
- 5 Acoma oral history.
- 6 The Supply and Service of the New Mexico Missions in the Seventeenth Century, *New Mexico Historical Review*, 5(1): 93-116;(2):186-210;(4):386-404

- 7 For a discussion of "superposition," see Ivey, James, *New Mexico Historical Review*, 73(2):122-152
- 8 The principal means of measurement was the vara (approximately 33 in.), as determined by standard measuring instruments (the vara stick, as well as the cordel which was 50 varas in length or approximately 140 ft). The friars designed their buildings originally in plan, and with the use of these units of measurement were apt to proportion various parts of the structure to one another. Pratt, Boyd C., *The Religious Structures of New Mexico: A Historical and Architectural Review*, 1993
- 9 Playdon, D.G: based on current proportional studies connecting the New Mexico Mission churches with the mathematical ideals of the Italian Renaissance.
- 10 Wittkower, Rudolf. *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, Alec Tiranti, 1962
- 11 Crouch, D. "Santa Fe," *Spanish Borderlands Sourcebooks*, Garr, D., ed., Garland Publishing Inc., 1991 (ref. Kubler, J. 1972) "At Santa Fe as elsewhere in Spanish America, Italian Renaissance ideas of city layout, expressed as early as 1554 in the rebuilt urban fabric of Mexico City, were imposed upon an 'Indian Civic armature which was found to be highly suitable' and in fact more easily acceptable to these ideals than contemporary European models." p. 399. Orthogonal systems are those based upon right angles.
- 12 Cornerstones Community Partnerships, San Esteban del Rey Church and Convento, *Conditions Assessment Report*, July 1999.

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Photos by Dennis G. Playdon.

Grants

The National Park Service awards grants to assist federally recognized tribes in preserving and protecting their significant cultural resources and traditions. The long-term goal of the Historic Preservation Fund grants to Indian Tribes, Alaska Natives, and Native Hawaiians is to assist tribes in building sustainable preservation programs.

For information concerning this program, contact Bob Ruff at the Tribal Preservation Program, Heritage Preservation Services, 1849 C Street, NW, NC200, Washington, DC 20240, telephone 202-343-9572, e-mail bob_ruff@nps.gov. Information is also available off the web site at <www2.cr.nps.gov>.

Other sources: Nonprofits may seek grant information from the Foundation Center headquarters in New York City at 1-800-424-9836 or 212-620-4230, web address <http://fndcenter.org>.