

THE SPIRIT OF THE HISTORICAL DOWNTOWN OF THE CITY OF QUITO

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Abstract. Finding, knowing and defining the spirit of a place has always been a challenge for the men of culture since the time of the Roman Empire: “the Genius Locis”. This essay tries to tackle this complex and cunning subject. Because this is the first time someone tries to tackle it in our realm or environment, I will consider of great value any suggestions regarding its focus, methodology and conclusion.

The Andes in Ecuador form two mountain chains from north to south with snow peaks and volcanoes that join transversally at certain intervals forming enormous pits or “hoyas” that contain fertile valleys footed from 2,000 metres above sea level and up, right in the middle of the Torrid Zone. Each hoya valley has its own spring-like micro-climate with little variation all year round. Frequently the sky is deep blue spotted with white clouds that circle around the snow peaked summits that touch the sky here and there at over 4,600 metres above sea level. The sloped and crevassed land is crossed by clear water trenches that are formed in the wetlands covered with straw and the resilient thick carpet-like vegetation, similar in appearance to the Tundra or Taigue landscapes that are found close to the polar circle, or from placid lakes or lagoons in the higher plains. When those water sources come together they form fast running rivers that cut through the mountains to reach the lower lands in the coast towards the Pacific Ocean side, or the Amazon basin.

In ancient times the volcanic activity was more intense. This could have been an added attraction for the early peoples that came to America and settled in the valleys. Here they could live in a neighborhood surrounded by “giant beings” filled with supernatural energy that made them think of themselves, as relatives to the clouds, the wind, the bolt, the thunder and the thunderbolt, the condor nest, the sun, the moon, and the stars. In other words, they considered themselves neighbors of heaven. In each of the big pits or hoyas the peoples that settled there created a culture that felt protected by mythological giants. When their population grew, they tried to expand preferably to the neighboring valleys along the Andean mountain chain, but also towards the east and west slopes of the “cordillera” where the landscape and the environment change. There they found a flatter and unlimited horizons, warmer tropical climate with frequent haziness, variegated jungle vegetation, and a great fauna variety including tapir, puma, bear, deer, snakes, amphibians, fish, numerous types of birds and insects. The different environment beyond the slopes of the “cordillera” was considered hostile or not friendly because of the biting insects, carnivores and other dangerous fauna as well as poisonous plants. It was a probable cause that explains why the people preferred the relationships between the valleys along the highlands. There was a basic familiarity between man and environment. Even physiological adaptations: The Andean peoples have bigger lungs and rib cages and also more red cells in their blood. With this reasons it is possible to explain why there was an Andean culture that shared its experiences from north to south and that expanded its influence towards determined zones or areas in the lower lands where foot travel was feasible, reaching certain beaches on the Pacific Ocean or the big, slow, and warm water rivers in the Amazon basin.

Leaving the Andean Pits (Hoyas) is not easy, not only because of the topography but also and mainly on account of the frigid temperature that dominates the open plains in between the summits, and the prevalent strong wind all over the high mountains. If a person follows the creeks and rivers, the sloping land generally becomes rustic with steep precipices. The Andean man preferred to live in those huge natural cloisters that were for him the Andean Pits or Hoyas. The few ones that traveled beyond, upon their return were the source of tales or testimonies that aroused the curiosity and stimulated the imagination of the residing peoples. And even more, those adventures that went far and through the mist or haze of the Andean lower slopes, helped to introduce an imaginary world of phantoms or ghosts in the credulous minds. The clouds that generally cover the mountains at night fall frequently enter the valleys, creating a closed, cold, humid and mysterious environment.

From time to time the near-by volcanoes have been the source of tremors or earthquakes and their ashes periodically have clouded the valleys. These telluric phenomena were considered punishment from the gods in order to make the men rectify their behavior. But, if there was enough rain, normal wind and a rainbow appeared, it was interpreted that everything was in concord and harmony with the higher beings. And when in the dark of the night, the lighting flashes filled with light the tops of the mountains it was interpreted that the “apus” or gods were having a peaceful chat among themselves.

The original settlers, clans and families that occupied the Andean Hoyas were sedentary. They toiled the soil for grains like corn and quinoa, legumes like chochos and habas, tubercles like potato, melloco, oca and sweet potato. They domesticated turkey, cuy, llama, vicuña and alpaca. They learned to make liquor out of the maguey or penco plants they called chaguar and used the fibers from their thick and thorned leaves, threading very strong and durable strings and ropes. They were also able weavers of the native cotton and wool from the thick furred Andean members of the camel species. In their limited environments they were practically self-sufficient. Thus their main behavioral characteristics were peacefulness and hospitality. The high reams of the Hoyas were the realm of deer, chinchilla, Andean bear (oso de anteojos), foxes and pumas that shared their space with condors, falcons, vultures and other smaller game and fowl. All were naturally kept in ecological balance that had little or no influence in the human inhabitants below. From time to time, hunting excursions were organized to catch deer, bright feathered birds, or poultry delicacies like pheasant or turtledoves in order to underline the importance of a celebration. Eventually, a migrating bird could become a priced catch.

The Andean Man integrated its life to its environment, and became part of it. The variety and fruitfulness of the recourses at hand, the climate and the quality of the landscape were and are captivating. Thus, love to the generous Pachamama or Mother Earth became transcendent and remains vigorous.

The Historical Downtown of the city of Quito occupies a small valley of 320 hectares, at 2.860 meters above sea level and about only 25 km. south the equator line, characterized by an uneven topography at the eastern crevassed slopes of its tutelary volcano, the majestic Pichincha Mountain which has two summits, called: Guagua (child) and Rucu (adult). The first one also has an active crater that 8 years ago spewed a spectacular mushroom shaped cloud of ashes 400 metres high and 2 kilometres in diameter. Entering this small valley on foot is not easy. On its east side it is practically

impossible because of the steep walls on both sides of the Machángara River that runs east and north. In the western side there are the commanding slopes of the volcano. At the southern side, there are deep creeks and a beautiful rounded hill 200 metres above the floor of the valley. It is a perfect balcony for admiring the wide and extraordinary landscape beyond. Towards the northern end, there is a slight mound that has a lagoon on its top, actually called La Alameda. It offers the least complicated access to the valley. These geographical accidents determined a natural condition of privacy, privilege and security that characterize the area.

Only after 1908, when the railroad reached the valley overcoming the incredible obstacles of the Andean “cordillera”, the city of Quito started to integrate with relative normality to the rest of the continent; and furthermore, since 1914, when the Panama Canal opened the shipping routes from South America to the Atlantic ocean, Europe, its western countries and the rest of the world. These events marked a time similar to the youngster who is introduced in society: New relations and friendships start activities typical of adulthood. Thus they gave way to an era of initial timidity, then curiosity and finally comparison with others. As a consequence, identification became a habit, self-value was found to be a relevant characteristic, and projection within and beyond, took place.

The valley was crossed from west to east by deep creeks formed on the slopes and crevasses of the Pichincha Mountain. The contrast between the creeks and the slightly inclined central area with the other more dramatic slopes surrounding the valley, created a moving, changing landscape that was definitively surprising. Today most of those water courses run underground on account of the urban transformation. The mounds close to the creeks made it easier to regularize the topography. By carving the sides of the mounds and filling the trenches, new public open-air flat areas and roads were built. The telluric phenomenon and the irregular topography have challenged the local ingenuity. Anti-seismic architecture integrated to multilevel atria and squares, bridges, contention walls, reinforcements, zigzagging stairs, tunnels, etc. have been erected close to one another or blended together.

The beautiful dominant rounded hill in the southern flank of the valley was named Yavirac by the natives. On its top they built a platform and a temple dedicated to Pachamama and the Sun. When the Spanish arrived in 1534 they renamed the hill Panecillo (little roll of bread). In 1975 a colossal statue of the Virgin Mary was erected over the platform where once was the temple to the Sun. The statue of the Virgin is 30 metres high and is an enlarged copy of a famous image highly representative of the Art School of Quito developed by Spanish instructors during Colonial times, who trained local artisans in painting and sculpting. The advocacy of this Virgin is known as “the Virgin of Quito”. She stands above the representation of a crescent moon and one of her feet steps over the head of a serpent that is trying to swallow an apple (obviously a symbol of evil). This is a tangible example of the religious syncretism that has taken place widely and with great strength between the indigenous and the transplanted cultures. The physical superposition of relevant and identifying elements of the imposed presence of a new culture in key places or locations has always been the practical result when a conquering nation overcomes the conquered one.

The physical and ideological syncretism found in the Historical Downtown of the city of Quito received important influences that have produced big changes in a relatively

short span of time. First, around the XI century a conquering foreign nation, the Caras, chose the place to build a great ceremonial center. It was so, because they detected the central position of the sun rays at midday that occurs two times in a year. Today we call the occasions “the equinox day”. Second, in the middle of the XIV century, the Incas, who originated in the high lands of the Andes at the Titicaca Lake, conquered and occupied the important ceremonial center of the Historical Quito and started to develop it as the new capital city of what they called the Tahuantinsuyo. Third, when the Spanish conquerors arrived in the XV century they brought along the Catholic Religion which was the unifying factor for the multiplicity of races, languages and cultures under the Spanish Crown; at that time the most important in Europe. The Spanish also brought Moslems and Jews converted and baptized, a few mulattoes or negroes (now called Africans) improved in social status by baptism, and thousands of Centralamerican Mayas also baptized before traveling south. All of them found a welcoming environment. The long previous conflict between the Caras and the Incas, left a sequel of native widows and women in general, unable to find partners or husbands on account of the deeply decimated male population. The Spanish village founded at the foot of the Yavirac or Panecillo hill became an important administrative center for the Andean territories and a main base for the propagation of the Catholic Faith in South America. Fourth, since 1830 when the Republic of Ecuador was established, Quito was chosen as its Capital City, thus assimilating the presence of foreign embassies, consulates and official representatives of overseas nations. These new external influences became an added catalyst to the strong mixture of cultures and races. Thus the original valley of the Historical Downtown of the city of Quito, at a quick pace, became the fulcrum of a present day commanding metropolis that expands and covers all of the neighboring valleys.

All of the successive invasions and influences have modeled the Quito inhabitants to be tolerant: Living and sharing with aliens no matter how different they may be. The Quito inhabitant has learned to be hospitable and values living in peace but is also alert to curb any intention to alter it. The Quito inhabitant values freedom and mutual respect; solidarity and willingness of improvement, even by great personal sacrifice or even more, not fearing the risk of death, as is the case of the millions of migrants that are now settled in Europe or North America, after traveling and living in precarious conditions. The migrants work in foreign countries doing all they can to save money, so they can send it to their relatives helping them to improve their ways of living or their quality of life.

In the Historical Downtown of the city of Quito we find a welcoming ambiance of **deep or profound mixture** because of the human scale of its spaces, their quality and variety. There is not luxury but the accent is in humility, austerity and even solemnity that complements and subsists altogether. The landscape that surrounds the area is dominant and assimilates everything. The cultural aspect is welcomed and it is incorporated to the conditions of the area or place in a sensible and rational dialog modeled by the requirements and by the activities that man has implemented for better usefulness. Thus it adjusts a living zone or habitat that allows the sustenance and permanence of its traditions and customs, along with enough flexibility for adapting and adopting the new ones that demand the global world in which we live now.

The permanent effort that the Quito inhabitants employs to dominate the topography, fitting it with creative ingenuity to solve problems and attain an improved habitat,

without forgetting the permanent threat of an eventual awakening of the volcanoes, has forged a stout spirit, untamed and even arrogant that is positioned to defy the telluric will. When a conquest demands more effort, it is cherished and loved more. The persons born and raised in Quito love their city. When they leave town, they maintain and nurture an inner desire to return.

The Catholic Faith influence has grown very deep roots in the feelings of the Quito inhabitant. Even though the content of the original philosophy changed and evolved from the early principles based in myth and magical rites to the present day Catholicism, the Quito inhabitant has always depended on the permanent sustenance from the axial cosmic vision.

The peoples and cultures that conquered Quito felt, accepted, and increased that close dominating fondness towards the mystic that runs in the air and which is active and is present today in the Historical Downtown. It is the result of the growth and development of the “Art School of Quito” so well appreciated during the Spanish colonial times, that outspreaded beyond the limits of the Andean Region, and reached the Rio de la Plata zone at the other side of the South American continent. In the Historical Downtown one can be marveled by the voluptuous treatment of the form full of dynamism complemented by variegated, brilliant, sharp colors. The chosen themes: mainly religious and of traditional habits, exulting alienation as well as what is mundane, touching the maternal and sublime.

In short, the diversity of variables, natural and cultural, is the transcendental characteristic of the city of Quito. Her Spirit is the aggregation of cultural and racial mixtures: Old and new syncretism that coexist in a permanent symbiosis. All of these become a wide funnel that allows the Spirit to be easily accepted because it offers thousand of facets: from the illogical to the sapient or cunning; from the comic to the tragic; from the profane to the holy.

Quito has been always characterized like a center of culture generation, of freedom, of respect, and mainly, of spirituality. This essay has mentioned 4 stages of the development of its history. The following questions arise: Has the spirit of the Historical Downtown of Quito stayed the same all the time? Has the spirit evolved or develop? If it has evolved, in what has changed? I consider that the answers to these questions are basic to understand the essence of the spirit of a place.

My point of view is the following: On the one hand, the natural factors which determine an atmosphere are the main aspects that define the primary qualities of the spirit of the place. On the other hand, the type of culture, which is reflected in the civilization level of the human group that inhabits it, is the factor that mostly evolves and influences directly in the spirit of the place. As general consequence, I conclude: **The spirit of the place is the result of a permanent arrangement or conditioning to the evolution of factors and phenomena that affects the natural and cultural atmosphere of the site.**

PICTURES OF HISTORICAL DOWNTOWN OF QUITO













