

# San Miguel de Allende, Point of No Return



by Alberto Aveleyra

San Miguel de Allende is one of the ten World Heritage Mexican cities. It was inscribed on the UNESCO List in

2008. It, along with Tlacotalpan, Veracruz, are the only three that are not capitals.

What does it mean today to be a World Heritage Site?

The patrimony of San Miguel is unique, authentic and unrepeatable. Its loss would mean an irreparable loss, not only for San Miguel, but for humanity in general. The Centro Histórico is an architectural jewel of the XVIII century, the golden age for the viceregal city.

We cannot forget that just two hundred years ago it was here that a group of citizens dared to deliberate, discuss and imagine a different country, and then acted accordingly. Here the revolution of the Independence of Mexico was forged. From this people came the voices and the men who changed the sociocultural dynamics that had prevailed in these homes for almost three hundred years.

Today, San Miguel de Allende is in a delicate situation, the outcome of an economic and cultural process that began almost eighty years ago. Since that golden eighteenth century, that saw most of the buildings of the Centro Histórico rise, there has been no other time when the city has grown as much as in the last 40 years. Our time is a constructive milestone in the region, a milestone that unfortunately has reached an unfortunate outcome with a project that forever altered the cultural landscape of the city and will generate conditions that will remove the balance of the current dynamics of mobility and quality of life in the city.

What is the main attraction of San Miguel today? Its main attraction, I dare say, is the atmosphere of the place, what the British call the "sense of place". This atmosphere of the place is generated mainly by the interaction of the community with the territory, architecture and landscape, through traditions and multiple economic and cultural processes.

San Miguel still feels like a small town or city. It retains a powerful human dimension thanks, among other factors, to the relatively small size of its population. Every time you go out to the street you will find someone you know. Social networks (real ones, not Facebook) are powerful, precisely because of the size of the population. If it continues to grow, the time will come when this type of interaction, vital to the health and good living of the city, will be lost.

In the last two years, the intensity of tourist flows, their volume and spatial and temporal concentration, have transformed the dynamics and vital rhythm of the city, especially during weekends, when the capacity of the Centro has been surpassed on innumerable occasions, generating crisis processes and congestion in the matter of mobility and saturation in the perception of space.

There are many signs that show that the city lives a very delicate and sensitive moment in its historical development, I will refer to one of them: this is the real estate complex called Capilla de Piedra, located in the Cañada del Atascadero in Santo Domingo, just 700 meters from the Parish.

I will begin by saying that in the Cañada we find one of the two living springs of the city. We remember that El Chorro, the source by which San Miguel was founded here almost four centuries ago, the legendary Itzcuinapan, was extinguished twenty-five years ago.

That is, the Cañada del Atascadero is a sanctuary of water, water that is life, water that today is threatened by multiple human activities, water, without which, our daily life would be impossible, water, whose management implies one of the main challenges of the present.

This project, Capilla de Piedra, has almost completely destroyed the gorge, putting in imminent risk one of the last sanctuaries of water in San Miguel. But not only that, they have built more than a dozen buildings that will house about 300 apartments. These buildings have been built on the Cerro de la Cruz del Pueblo and unfortunately have forever altered the cultural landscape of San Miguel de Allende, something that is no small thing in a World Heritage City.

Now, that cultural landscape has changed forever, and a greater damage has been inflicted to it. Now from the Jardín,

in front of the Parish, one looks east and instead of looking at the Hill of La Cruz del Pueblo, one looks at a conglomeration of buildings that modify and alter negatively the architectural set of the city, altering the physiognomy that gave the designation Patrimony of the Humanity to San Miguel, causing it to miss an important element that gave it a substantial part of that singularity for which it was inscribed in the list of the UNESCO.

We have two similar cases in two World Heritage sites in Mexico. One is the Sculpture Space in Ciudad Universitaria. The other is that of the sister city of Guanajuato, where a huge hotel was being built on Cerro de San Miguel, which dominates the entire city. However, there the voices were raised and the work is suspended. Technically we are talking about two very similar cases. In Guanajuato, a heritage city, actions were taken to avoid affecting the landscape. Here in San Miguel de Allende nothing was done.

But, of course, this is not the only, if profound, effect on the city's heritage, on the part of the Capilla de Piedra project. Water is another of the effects, as I said earlier. Water is a problem that the colonias and neighborhoods already suffered in the surroundings of the complex. This problem has worsened since the complex began its construction. We can expect worse when the three hundred departments are fully occupied.

The tenants of the complex will contribute significantly to disrupt the sociocultural and mobility dynamics of the Centro of San Miguel. The accesses of this real estate project are located: one in the street of Santo Domingo, which ends directly in the Centro Histórico and the other at the Salida a Querétaro, another of the arteries of access to the Centro.

You do not need to be a mobility expert to realize that Capilla de Piedra will seriously affect the vehicular flow in the Centro. Its entrances and exits will negatively impact the already saturated capacity of load of Centro Histórico. It will literally be a funnel, a bottleneck in the most sensitive area of the city.

Capilla de Piedra rises imposing on all the Sanmiguelenses. Whenever they look up to the east, they remember the before and the after, of which was San Miguel and in what it is becoming.

I believe that Capilla de Piedra is a sad symbol, which reminds us every day, every time we look up from the Jardín, that the San Miguel we have known, which has brought so many delighted travelers, is at risk. That we can not continue in this process where investments like this project are negatively impacting the heritage, the quality of life of the Sanmiguelenses, their future and that of their children, completely detached from the bio-cultural identity of the place.

One of the strengths of San Miguel de Allende is the quality of life, the good life. This is one of the aspects that we have to defend with more force. A fundamental part of this quality of life and good living lies in the relatively small urban area of the municipality and its relatively harmonious interaction with the rural environment. It is key to preserve this relationship and balance between urban and rural.

It is fundamental to preserve rural San Miguel. So it is worrying to hear about the different "projects" that intend to urbanize the Picachos area, one of the most sensitive and relevant areas of the municipality at an ecological level.

I will say something that many will not like: we can not continue to grow as we have been doing with these projects. These projects that do not follow the excellent Plan of Ecological and Territorial Ordering of the Municipality, generated from an inclusive participatory planning process.

In some parts of the planet, we begin to talk and discuss ways and means of entering a regenerative development. We, here in San Miguel, however, are not even on the road to sustainable development. On the contrary, these development projects and prospects pull us apart from sustainability, which should be the axis of municipal management and decision-making by governments and companies.



Groups of businessmen argue that the project of Protected Natural Area of the Picachos and Presa Allende is an obstacle for progress and tourism development and here I want to pause to clarify several issues.

Practically everyone in San Miguel has benefited, directly or indirectly, from the tourist flows. These began in 1938, with the foundation of the Escuela Universitaria de Bellas Artes by the Peruvian Felipe Cossío del Pomar. Also, all have suffered the negative effects of these flows. Some of the most important are: the gentrification of the Centro Histórico and real estate speculation.

That is, tourism is a multidimensional phenomenon, with both positive and negative effects. The important thing today in San Miguel is to ask what kind of tourism and travelers we want in the city, and to lead the management and promotion of the destination as a result.

The bet of the typical investor will be the massification of tourism in pursuit of the maximum economic benefit in the shortest time and space. This type of territorial and tourist management is putting at serious risk what has made San Miguel de Allende a leading tourist destination in the country: its atmosphere, its sense of place, its local identity.

It is not a matter of stigmatizing or condemning tourism. That is a childish thing, to say the least, given the importance of the phenomenon in contemporary societies and in the economy of San Miguel in a particular way.

It is a question of managing it by using broader knowledge on planning, management and promotion of sustainable tourism, in a governance that integrates the environmental, economic and socio-cultural vectors, beyond maximizing profits in an accelerated way for small groups of entrepreneurs. It is a participatory management between government, business and civil society.

The anthropological view on the territory of San Miguel and its economic and socio-cultural dynamics tells me that we are at risk of losing the hen that lays the golden eggs. We are about to reach a point in the development of the territory and the community that will profoundly and negatively modify the environment, cultures, quality and way of

life.

At the same time, San Miguel de Allende is a great cultural experiment where the necessary conditions exist to become an alternative model of local development. In San Miguel today, as two hundred years ago, we are in a position to imagine and do things differently. In San Miguel, many are trying to think and make another Mexico.

The foundation for this different San Miguel and Mexico, its priority, has to be the protection of nature, the strengthening of life forms close to it and the development of a strong local economy with a commitment to self-sustaining food in the region.

However, it depends on how we manage the destination; we, the community, the tourist entrepreneurs, the rulers. I ask again, what kind of travelers do we want to visit San Miguel de Allende? In principle, the responsible traveler comes to mind, who is motivated by aspects of the natural and cultural landscape of the region, a traveler aware of his impact on the destination and the importance of his decision to consume the various products and services offered in the city.

What we can not continue to do is "more of the same". The circumstances of the present, the evident civilizational crisis, linked dramatically with the degradation of the environment and the increasing risk that this implies for the communities, require a strong dose of collective creativity.

The critical circumstances of the development of our San Miguel de Allende still offer a fertile ocean for innovation in several fields and a path to sustainability. In the city there are the capacities for this. We have to dare to do things differently, if we are to change the course and the unsustainable tendency of our habitat.

The positive transformation of our environment will not come from the big institutions. It will emerge from people's projects at the local level. It will emerge from real social networks (not Facebook), networks that foster face-to-face discussion of key issues, networks that foster the play of differences from collaboration, enhancing diversity as a growth factor, strengthening local economies through creative project mix, forming assemblies production-consumption that strengthen and amplify local consumption, on a scale that allows the emergence of a system with a high degree of internal interactions that take advantage of, put into motion and efficiently distribute, in the local population, the capital injected into the territory by the thousands of travelers who visit the city.

Investments per se do not generate positive effects in the community and the territory. What we need are smart investments, investments that base their decision making on the awareness of the interrelationship and interdependence with the city and its rural area, with the environment, with the communities inhabitants San Miguel and its forms of life, with the awareness of the need to develop sustainable projects and, if possible, regenerate aspects of the triple environment-socio-cultural-economic propeller.

It is necessary to stop doing things as we have been doing in the last decades. If we achieve this, transcending corruption and ignorance, San Miguel de Allende can become a social space for innovation at an ecological, economic, tourism and cultural level.

The State of Guanajuato has been promoted in recent years as the cultural destination of Mexico. We have to assume the responsibility that this implies, making clear that today cultural tourism is has a responsible relationship with the environment and the local community. This is a traveler who strengthens the local economy and whose economic resources are left and redistributed in the locality.

To be a cultural destination, to be a World Heritage City, implies that the conservation and preservation of heritage, understood in broad terms as a natural and cultural landscape. It also implies a local economy strengthened through projects of micro and small enterprises. These have to be the vectors of the strategy of municipal development at the level of government, business, academia and organized civil society.

Residential tourism has shown its weaknesses and negative effects in multiple destinations in the world. We have to

be very careful about it. At the same time, given the transformation of the dynamics of the city by the increase in tourist flows in recent times, it would be very important that the municipality at this time limit the opening of new accommodation establishments until the city and the flows have entered a new dynamic harmony.

On the other hand, this analysis and deep exploration in the subject of urban mobility, must include a more efficient system of public transportation, one that works both for residents and tourists.

A strategy of the Tourism Council of San Miguel de Allende is necessary to provide information to its members and to its clients, the tourists, about the new dynamics and rules of mobility: restrictions on cars, closure of main entrances to the Centro Histórico, etc.. Additionally we need recommendations to travelers arriving in San Miguel by road of these new guidelines, as well as the basic driving rules in the city (1x1, pedestrian priority, etc.).

At the same time, promotional strategies can be generated that benefit the traveler who arrives in the city through tourist transportation and penalize the one arriving by car. Indispensable is also an intense communication campaign between the population and the local tourist agents on the days, schedules and places of traffic restriction. The supply of products to establishments in the Centro Histórico, as well as garbage collection and gas supply, will have to adapt their schedules to minimize their impact on the mobility of the city. But for all this it is necessary to have an integral study that emphasizes the sustainability of the city and the region.

If we are at this point of saturation of the capacity of load now, imagine when the apartments and the multiple house developments that are being constructed in the surroundings are inhabited.

That is why, although it is something that we will never hear a politician say, it is important to slow down the urban growth of San Miguel. This is especially due to growths link with real estate speculation and the sale of second homes, for so-called residential tourism, of which we already know sufficiently the negative effects and consequences that it has had for the territories in which it has already happened.

It is essential to follow the Ecological and Territorial Ordering Plan exactly to the letter. However, its provisions have already been violated several times, including the case of the new industrial zone of the municipality.

There is still no awareness of the dimensions of the challenge we face. The environment is saturated and overloaded with stupidity, ignorance and human greed. In San Miguel we have the possibility to transform this.

We cannot do nothing under the circumstances. Two hundred years ago the inhabitants of this city dared to think and feel differently, then they organized and acted accordingly... this country was never the same after that.

Today, the land and water, the ancestors and traditions inherited, ask the same to the inhabitants of San Miguel de Allende of the present.

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