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Flags and architecture from vexillology

Alfonso Alfonso González[1,2]*

1. University of Havana 2. Faculty of Architecture, José Antonio Echeverría Havana Technological University (CUJAE), Havana, Cuba
*Corresponding Author:
Email address: alfonsoalfonsog@gmail.com

Abstract: The contemporary expansion of flags to various uses and on various supports has generated new challenges to legal instruments and to vexillology, a relatively recent scientific discipline. Giant images of national flags painted over buildings surfaces and sculptures have been quite questionable The present work had as objectives, to elucidate, from vexillology, the relevance of stamping permanent images of national flags on buildings, and the conflict when using them as artistic criteria in architectural forms and sculptural works. Theoretical methods of bibliographic searches and historical analysis of previous cases were used. Research results have revealed that there are not vexillological rules, nor legal requirements, to govern the use of national flags images over solid supports. It is concluded that appropriate regulations should be elaborated to avoid undesirable results in architecture and other solid surfaces.

Key words: flags; flag on architectural support; vexillology; vexillo-logical standards

1 Introduction

Today, flags are one of the most widespread means of symbolic representation and identification. Even the oldest versions of the Bible mention the use of cloth for representation, and today they have become excellent ways to identify countries, armies, companies, associations, political parties, sports teams, and various institutions in society.

Originally made of canvas, taffeta, or other fabrics [2], they have expanded to numerous uses on other types of media to distinguish trademarks, fashion trends, and various objects; to serve as identification or simple ornamentation, including architectural facades and built surfaces—which have occasionally raised objections [3].

The primary objective of this study is to assess vexillology's actual capacity to regulate and control matters related to flags and to determine whether or not it is inappropriate to incorporate images of national emblems—or their symbolic components—onto the surfaces of architectural and three-dimensional artistic works. The historical analysis method is applied based on a literature review, an examination of vexillological principles, and current legal instruments. Several existing cases are studied to evaluate the drawbacks of superimposing or using giant-scale images of national flags in architecture.

2 Development

Due to their representative and expressive qualities, flags convey identity, origin, associations, and symbolism. They signify a sense of belonging and are generally displayed during popular street events on notable dates and during significa-

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-nt celebrations to express joy, solemnity, mourning, celebration, commemoration, remembrance, historicity, or other occasional expressions of emotional content.

National emblems give rise to certain protocols involving ritual, reverence, and respect, as well as restrictions, procedures for handling and use, and so on. Due to their iconic significance and widespread recognition, national symbols have, in recent decades, been incorporated into uses that imbue them with an identity, a message, and a meaning—ranging from their presence on clothing and various physical objects (Figure 1) (Figure 2) to individuals "dressed as flags" [3].



Figure 1. The image of the flag on the guitar identifies the performer's origin. Source: author, 2022



Figure 2. The flag wrapped around the pencil adds an additional symbolic connotation. Source: author, 2022

It has been customary during military confrontations to identify the contending parties with flags, and these are also frequently displayed on building facades, streets, and in urban spaces during national or local public events. It has also been common to use them at sporting events and parades, in award ceremony protocols, and on the uniforms of participating athletes. It is customary to display them at international conferences, congresses, cultural events, and scientific, technical, or other types of meetings.

There is evidence of a tradition in construction—still practiced today in some countries—dating back to the early Middle Ages: the practice of hoisting a banner on the roof of a building upon its completion, before the keys are handed over. Placing it on the roof of the building was a task performed by the youngest laborer and signified the completion of the structure, which was generally celebrated with a meal [4].

National emblems have also gained widespread recognition as transcendent symbols representing communities; this has even led to the erection of a monument to commemorate the site where a country's flag was first raised—for example, in Argentina.

2.1 Vexillology

The scientific study of flags, banners, and standards is currently the focus of one of the auxiliary disciplines of history, which in relatively recent decades branched off from traditional heraldry. This discipline is vexillology [5], whose rules encompass the parts, components, signs, icons, shapes, proportions, images, names, designs, symbolism, and colors [2].

Etymologically, the Latin word "bandum" or "bandus", which derives from the Germanic "banda" or "bandra", means "banner." In ancient Roman documents, banners consisting of a square piece of cloth hanging from a pole were called "vexillum", a term used by Whitney Smith in 1957 to coin the word "vexillology" as an expression combining "flag" and "knowledge"[1] [6]. Later described by Cárdenas and Vincent[2] as the science of flags [7] and as an art by other authors, this term was included in 1985 in the handbook dictionary of the Royal Spanish Academy[3] and remains in use today. The First Congress of Vexillology in 1965, held in Muiderberg, the Netherlands, helped spread this newly structured discipline to various countries around the world and led to the founding of several centers dedicated to the scientific study of flags. Currently, this discipline is still not well established in international databases, and its level of development varies from country to country where it is present.

3 Regularities

The emergence of vexillology as an independent discipline made it possible to identify the specific patterns of these emblems; to examine related customs and practices; to establish methods of analysis and design; and to conduct historical research. It incorporated five basic principles: simplicity, symbolism, the use of few colors, the absence of inscriptions, coats of arms, or seals, and distinctiveness from other flags; these can be summarized into just three: clarity, simplicity, and uniqueness. Additionally, the visual qualities of unmistakability, legibility from a distance, and chromatic vividness were included [8].

According to these principles, designs must remain true to the insignia's meaning, use no more than three colors, and stand out from others without being confusing or complicated, without text that is difficult to read from a distance, or images that are hard to recognize [2]. One limitation has been the tendency for images to fade and the material to deteriorate over time. Rectangular shapes are the most common, but square shapes are also abundant, and triangular ones are less common.

The colors differ in a wider variety of shades compared to those in heraldry; for example, sky blue, Prussian blue, navy blue, and turquoise. The terms also differ; in vexillology, they are more common—for example, "yellow" is used instead of "gold"; "white" instead of "silver"; "red" instead of "gules"; "blue" instead of "azure"; and "black" instead of "sable" [5]. The most frequently used colors are reds, followed by whites and blues, but the predominant colors vary by region. Thus, red is common in Asia, Europe, and South America; blue in Oceania; and green in Africa. Only eight countries do not include shades of red and blue in their flags. The rules of vexillology do not recommend the use of violet or brown, among other colors. However, some of these rules have not been clearly defined.

3.1 Curiosities

Several national flags share similarities, such as those of Colombia and Ecuador; Indonesia and Monaco; Jordan and Palestine; and Romania and Chad, since there is no prohibition against them being identical, similar, or alike; while similar geometric shapes may feature different colors, as in the flags of Sweden and Finland. A simple reciprocal inversion of the component colors in identical geometric designs is enough to differentiate them, as is the case with those of Cuba and Puerto Rico; Ireland and Ivory Coast; Costa Rica and Thailand; and Indonesia and Poland [9].

Certain icons and symbolic elements often give rise to epithets used to identify the national emblems of countries or institutions. Thus, those identified by meaningful nicknames—such as "the rising sun," "the red cross," or "the red crescent"—are easily recognizable. However, it is less common for distinct flags to be assigned an analogous nickname, as

is the case with "the flag of the lone star," which is the same nickname by which the flags of several states are simultaneously recognized [10,11,12,13]—a similarity that leads to confusion regarding their identities, although it is tolerated because, as in other cases, it is not regulated by vexillology (Figure 3).

Although the symbolic icons incorporated into the designs of various national flags are highly varied—geometric shapes, traditional representations, heraldic icons, and various figures—architectural images are almost nonexistent, with the sole exception of the Cambodian flag, which features the image of Angkor Wat, the country's national symbol (Figure 4).

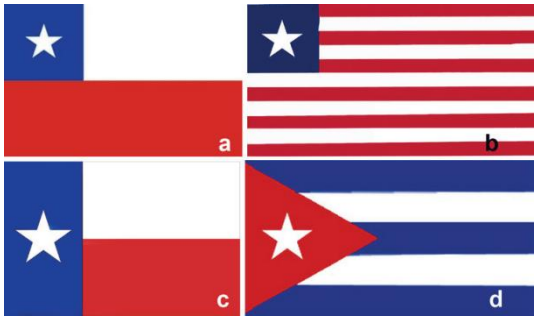


Figure 3. Countries that agree that their national emblem is known as the "Lone Star Flag": a) Chile, b) Liberia, c) the State of Texas (USA), and d) Cuba. Source: author's archive, 2022



Figure 4. The flag of Cambodia is the only one that includes an architectural image on its field. Source: https://flagcdn.com/w2560/kh.png

National flags require considerations of respect, reverence, and ritual practices, which are typically enshrined in legally binding regulatory instruments. These instruments establish the flags' characteristics, as well as the formalities of homage, handling, display, and acts of reverence they require, among other aspects. Each country generally has regulations that specify how to display them correctly—when, where, and how they should be raised—as well as the procedures to follow when they are accompanied by other flags; when they are flown at half-staff; when they are stored; or when they are displayed under specific circumstances [14]. The legal instruments of numerous countries, such as Chile [15], Panama [16], etc., specify actions, prohibitions, and procedures to be applied in cases of deterioration; although in others, such as Cuba, these are not specified [13].

3.2 Buildings and flags

With few exceptions, it has not been common practice for any of the specific symbolic components of national emblems to serve as a reference model for architectural design, as was the case with the monument to José Martí in Havana (Figure 5). During the period of Spanish rule in Cuba, official Spanish buildings were predominantly painted in shades of ochre, which were associated with the flag of the colonial power; meanwhile, Creoles generally preferred to use light blue

tones on their properties, which evoked the Cuban flag. However, today there is an excessive presence of the color blue in buildings.

The common contemporary practice of adding giant-scale advertising images and street art to the unused surfaces of buildings to capture visual attention for commercial purposes (Figure 6) has contributed to the use, in certain cases, of images of national flags on building facades as well.



Figure 5. (Top) The floor plan of the José Martí monument in Havana was inspired by a star, an iconic element of the Cuban flag. Source: https://images.app.goo.gl/sAdBgY8iXUSoKxiQ6



Figure 6. (Below) Commercial graphic gigantism in Santiago, Chile, a practice in which certain countries have used the image of their flag. Source: author, 2022

Displaying giant images of national emblems on building facades aims to increase their visibility from greater distances, highlight their presence, and exalt their symbolism. This practice is observed in various countries; for example, the Great Flag of South Africa was affixed to a building in downtown Cape Town. A giant image of the national flag was also placed on the facade of the Habana Libre Hotel in Havana (Figure 7) to reflect its Cuban identity and enhance its visibility. However, covering a building with a flag sometimes makes it difficult to see and perceive the image, as is the case in Figure 8.

Such practices do not comply with the rules of design, handling, ritual, restrictions, or other guidelines established in the current legal regulations governing each country's national symbols. Nor are they governed by the criteria defined by traditional vexillology, which has primarily dealt with images on textile media [6].



Figure 7. Hotel Habana Libre, with the giant Cuban flag affixed to its facade to make it visible from a distance and emphasise the symbol. Source: author, 2022



Figure 8. Only from above is it possible to make out the image of the Puerto Rican flag in the figure. Source: RT. UDAU, La Lista de Erick, August 2022

3.3 Drawbacks

By using an existing building as a direct medium to represent national symbols, an alien expressive language is superimposed—one that is not in harmony with the architectural styles and color palettes characteristic of the structures that support them. This is not merely a visual conflict of forms, but rather a symbolic antagonism stemming from the concepts embodied by two expressive systems when they converge. The visual inconsistency between the formal design features of the building and those of the flag becomes evident, reinforcing a marked difference between their symbolic and conceptual essences. The superimposition reflects disparate expressive qualities—dissimilar, incompatible, and competing visual interpretations—that generally confuse and disorient [6]. At times, they do not even offer a sufficiently perceptible formal interpretation, as seen at the Utuado restaurant in Puerto Rico (Figure 9) or at the controversial La Placita restaurant in Miami, where a ruling was issued to remove the image of the flag.

Another no less significant and difficult-to-avoid problem stems from the natural deterioration of surfaces, paints, stains, or colored coatings on the exteriors of buildings, due to the difficulties of performing preventive maintenance with the frequency required to properly safeguard the physical and visual characteristics of the physical medium and the image of the national emblem (Figure 10). The legal instruments of various countries stipulate the application of respectful and appropriate treatment [17] and establish how to proceed in cases of deterioration of the national flag [12,15,16,17]. The high-quality maintenance required to ensure the flag remains in good condition is difficult to achieve when the graphic emblem is permanently integrated into a structural element. In such cases, similar restrictions and guidelines do not apply, nor do the same rules govern as they do for flags mounted on fabric supports. There are no specific guidelines for the former cases.



Figure 9. Formal and conceptual inconsistency of the Puerto Rican flag at the Utuado restaurant in San Juan. Source: https://rutaventurapr22.com/destino/bandera-de-puerto-pico-en-utuado/



Figure 10. Example of the deterioration of a flag's image due to damage to the support and discoloration. Source: author's archive, 2022

3.4 In works of art

The aforementioned discrepancy is accentuated when the affixed image is regarded as a mural artwork and is attributed artistic value[4], as is the case with the murals by Jesús Alberto Mederos in Matanzas (Figure 11), which also share some of the aforementioned shortcomings. Other cases introduce a formal-creative component that alters the image of national emblems and occasionally distorts them. By attributing an artistic interpretation to this type of graphic representation, there is a tendency to exempt such works from compliance with existing legal rules or regulations and to circumvent the principles established by vexillology, with the aim of facilitating freedom of expression and artistic creation.

Something similar occurs with the creation of monumental sculptures and symbolic-commemorative architecture, when national flags—or some of their constituent symbols—are allegorically manipulated for artistic purposes, such as the reinforced concrete sculpture inspired by the Cuban flag, installed in front of the U.S. Embassy in Havana (Figure 12), a work that has raised objections [3].

There is a clear need to develop principles, procedures, rules, regulations, and other legal and ethical instruments that ensure the protection of the decorum and dignity of national emblems in various uses, circumstances, and media, including architecture and other artistic expressions. Ways to resolve the conflict between the freedom demanded by artistic creation and the protocols of reverence, ritual, respect, and solemnity that the community accords to national emblems.



Figure 11. Mural in the city of Matanzas by Jesús A. Mederos, which is recognized for its artistic value but has been overshadowed by a commercial advertisement for a restaurant at the top. Source: courtesy of Aimée Montero



Figure 12. A sculptural project inspired by the Cuban flag in front of the U.S. Embassy in Havana.

Source: author's archive

4 Conclusion

Due to their qualities of representation, identification, and symbolism, flags have recently been extended to various media and uses. The rules, current legal provisions, and vexillological principles governing national emblems on textile materials do not apply to images affixed directly to the surfaces of architectural works and other solid media, as there are no established regulatory criteria for such cases that deviate from traditional textile media.

The meanings and symbolism of flags are neither consistent with nor compatible with those of buildings, as they possess distinct formal and conceptual qualities that cannot be reconciled. Their superimposition results in visibly incoherent, discordant, and confusing interpretations.

Furthermore, difficulties in regularly carrying out conservation maintenance on supports and national emblems printed onto built surfaces hinder the prevention of their deterioration, which undermines the dignity and propriety of these images.

Artistic murals, sculptural creations, and architectural works that use symbols of national emblems as formal motifs also present drawbacks and concerns, therefore requiring the study and development of principles, regulations, and other

legal and ethical instruments of vexillology aimed at maintaining the integrity and good physical condition of national emblems affixed to solid supports—including architectural structures—as well as taking into account the interactive influence between reverent respect and the desired freedom of creation in art.

Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Note

[1] Whitney Smith coined the terms: vexillology for the discipline; vexillologist for the practising specialist; vexillophile for flag enthusiasts; and vexillographer for flag designers [8].

[2] According to Vicente de Cárdenas y Vicent, in Manual de Vexicología, Nociones y términos propios de la Ciencia de las Banderas, Madrid: Hidalguía, 1976, cited in [8].

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[4] Plastic artist Jesús Alberto Mederos incorporates giant flags as works of art on buildings (Figure. 11).