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# The experience of the Mayan architectural heritage and its influence on architecture

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**Abstract:** This article seeks to raise awareness about the value of preserving the pre-Hispanic Mayan heritage for the development of art, for which it accounts for the influence that pre-Hispanic art had in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries at a national and international level, and reflects on how the experience and the language of pre-Hispanic Mayan architecture influenced international architects such as Frank Lloyd Wright and Jorn Utzon.

**Key words:** architecture; Mayas; restoration; pre-Hispanic heritage; architectural language; learning of architecture; sacred space; Frank Lloyd Wright; Jorn Utzon

## 1 Introduction

This article stems from a desire to highlight other values inherent in pre-Hispanic Mayan architectural works, beyond their well-known historical, symbolic, and identity-defining value, as well as the economic value they represent for the tourism sector. What value does the preservation of pre-Hispanic heritage hold for art and, specifically, for an architect? This paper seeks to highlight the richness of the architectural language of pre-Hispanic heritage, which has even inspired the creation of 20th-century architectural works.

The approach taken here is to examine what constitutes the lived experience of architecture, as well as to identify some of the architectural elements that make up this experience, drawing on the reflections of architectural theorists Rasmussen and Carlos Mijares, who explain how the architectural language of spaces should be interpreted. Next, the architectural language of arches is illustrated the Mayas, the architectural lessons drawn from Mayan architecture evident in the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, and the language of landscape in pre-Hispanic Mayan architecture that served as a source of inspiration for Utzon's Sydney Opera House. Thus, through the experience and lived reality of pre-Hispanic Mayan architecture and landscape, the aim was to restore an experience of dwelling that has been lost in modernity.

## 2 Heritage as a source of inspiration

Interpreting architectural heritage through the language of architecture has allowed many artists to develop their own language based on the predecessors who inspire them—from whom they draw ideas to bring into the present, whether for figurative and aesthetic purposes or for functional as well as aesthetic ones. Pre-Hispanic art served as a source of inspiration both nationally and internationally during the 19th and 20th centuries. Few people today know, for example, that Moore's sculptures were inspired by the Chac Mool, or that some architectural works of international stature drew their

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inspiration from pre-Hispanic architecture (Carranza, Luis E.: 2021 ). This teaches us that the artistic works of the past are texts we must revisit to rediscover values within them that must be interpreted and, in this way, bring them into the present to reveal enduring values that transcend individual works of art.



Figure 1. Reclining Figure, by Henry Moore. Photograph, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=248747

## 3 Pre-Hispanic architectural language

Learning about architecture is not achieved solely through books; it requires on-site immersion, an experience that emerges through guided tours. Thanks to the preservation of this heritage and its surrounding environment, it is possible to visit these architectural sites; to have an experience that helps us understand architecture through walking tours, to appreciate the smells, colors, and textures of the space, as well as the sounds that accompany them, along with the temperature. The movement of air—which helps us grasp part of the reason these structures were built in this way—also offers the opportunity to appreciate spatial dimensions, proportions, scales, volumetric forms, and visual focal points; in short, it is what allows us to generate the experience and lived sense of architecture.

Architectural heritage is a classroom that teaches anyone seeking a particular way to interpret it. Architects engage with it to learn more than just history, construction techniques, or the uses and functions of spaces. They also engage with it to appreciate a language that emerges through the sensations evoked by these spaces, allowing them to gain a deeper understanding of how people lived in the past and the spatial metaphors used to express those ways of living. By this we mean that architecture has different ways of expressing hierarchies, of marking the distinction between the public and the private, of showing what is open and what is closed—the intimate, the public, and the sacred—to distinguish it from the profane. It also has different ways of conveying rhythms, transitions, and boundaries. This is because architecture is a language, and "Every language has its own way of saying things," as Carlos Mijares once said. In the case of pre-Hispanic architecture, its language exerted an international influence due to the very nature of the architectural language to which Mijares refers, since architecture has no pre-assigned meanings, and "undoubtedly one of the great advantages of having no pre-assigned meanings is the potential for its expression to be universal and to render translations unnecessary. It does, however—like all forms of expression—require disciplined study and the cultivation of sensitivity to perceive its means and be able to understand it" (Mijares, Carlos, p. 40).

Hence the importance of experiencing architecture and the sensations it evokes in our senses; this is why we are invited to experience and live it, not just to see it. Experiencing an architectural space means walking through it, appreciating how it opens up or closes in, how the pathways guide us; it means learning to appreciate the materials from which buildings are constructed, the play of light, the colors and textures, and the visual finishes; it means knowing how to

listen to spaces and perceive the scents of a place—all of this constitutes the experience of architecture. In Rasmussen's words:

> "It is not enough to see architecture; one must experience it. One must live in the spaces, feel how they close in around us, observe how naturally we are guided from one to another. One must be aware of the effects of texture, discover why precisely those colors were used, and how the choice depended on the orientation of those spaces in relation to the windows and the sun... One must experience the enormous difference that acoustics makes in our conception of space: the way sound propagates in a vast cathedral, with its echoes and prolonged reverberations, compared to a small room lined with wood paneling, well-padded with tapestries, rugs, and cushions" (Rasmussen, Steen Eiler: p. 31).

Experiencing architecture allows us to understand the distinctiveness and uniqueness of each work; it offers the opportunity to realize that architectural forms speak in different languages (such as the language of solids or voids). It is also possible to highlight the effects of contrasts in volume, color, rhythm, scale and proportion, texture, light, sound, or planes. For when a space is intervened upon, its character is transformed; places become "sites" that open up a field of experience to values and feelings, ways of expressing spiritual life.

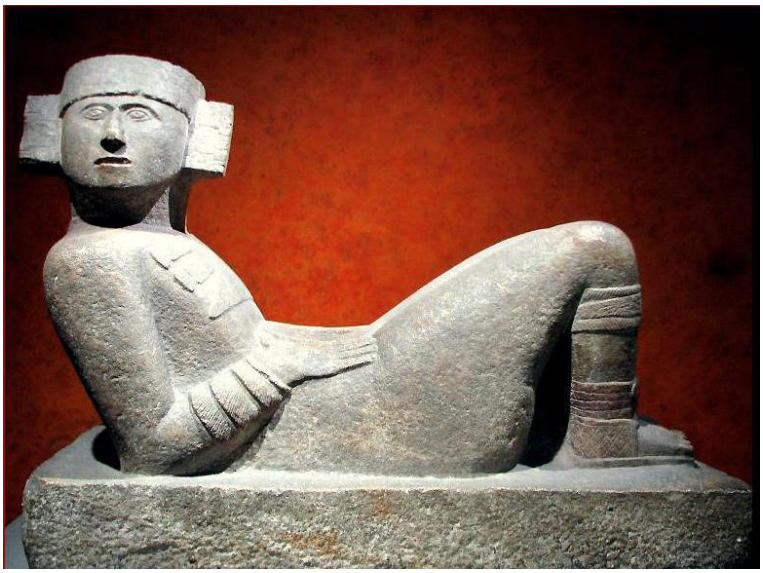


Figure 2. Chack Mool (Chichen Itzá). Photograph by Luis Alberto Lecuna/Melograna. https://www.flickr.com/photos/lecuna/1 803450903/, CC BY-SA 2.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=7079842

In pre-Hispanic Maya architecture, there is a richness in the architectural language achieved through the interplay of volumes—its esplanades, open spaces, and pathways. What at first glance might seem the same across all pre-Hispanic architectural complexes reveals its distinctiveness and uniqueness as we become more aware of and attuned to it. Take, for example, the architectural language of arches, which at first glance appear quite similar and which we rarely understand beyond their general use in architecture. The arch defines a site and establishes a new space:

> "The urban arch is an architectural solution that the Maya used to mark entrances and transitions between spaces. They have a marked symbolic character as an entrance or gateway, particularly in freestanding arches. They function as urban landmarks and were undoubtedly taken into account in the urban design of cities" (Gilabert: p. 64).

One could add even more and point out that the arches were not all the same, but rather served different purposes:

they were used to "connect two spaces in the city (public or private), or as interior passageways between rooms, or as so-called half-arches beneath staircases" (Gilabert: p. 48). The differences among the arches become even more apparent when we observe how each one addresses the treatment of space in a distinct way. Let's take the iconic examples of the arches at Kabah, Ek Balam, the Arch of the Nuns' Quadrangle at Uxmal, and the monumental Arch of Labná, which allow architects and scholars to understand the various ways in which these architectural elements mark entrances, transitions between one space and another, the manner in which they accentuate the boundary between the public and the private, and the way they either open up communication toward a new environment where different activities take place or close it off. Thus, it also demonstrates how the same arch can serve as a landmark, a reference point, or a meeting place, depending on its height, the grandeur of its details, its location, and the way paths converge toward it. This is achieved not only through openings in walls but also through ascents and descents; through the height of the arches and the visual focal points toward which the entrances are oriented—to mention just a few of the elements that help us understand the language, meaning, and use of arches.

The Mayan architectural language transcended the boundaries of its own space and time and was appreciated by architects around the world. It became a source of inspiration for architects of the stature of Frank Lloyd Wright and Jon Utzon. Each of them knew how to interpret the Mayan language, which inspired them to reinterpret this experience and enabled them to create works of great aesthetic value.

Frank Lloyd Wright designed several works influenced by the language of pre-Hispanic architecture, specifically Mayan architecture. Notable examples of pre-Columbian motifs can be seen at the Kehl Dance Academy in Madison, Wisconsin, and at the complex Aline Barnsdall's residence in Hollywood, California (which represents a particularly significant work of pre-Hispanic influence). Wright's works influenced by pre-Columbian art extended, for example, to the Gordon Strong Planetarium on Sugar Loaf Mountain, Maryland, inspired by the Chichén Itzá Observatory." (Carranza, Luis E.: 2021 ), and even architect Alvar Carrillo Gil asserts that the Guggenheim (1959) was inspired by the "El Caracol" observatory at Chichén Itzá (López, Alejandro: 2020).



Figure 3. Arch of the Nuns' Quadrangle, Uxmal. "It is the clearest example of the transition from an open public space to a bounded, more private space", Gilabert, p. 57. Photograph by Juan Carlos Mansur Garda



Figure 4. The Monumental Arch of Labná. "The arch magnifies the access and acts as a privacy filter between a public space such as the plaza and the interior courtyard of the complex, which has a more private character. To enter, one must climb onto the arch's platform and then descend via stairs, thereby emphasizing the act of entering the enclosure", Gilabert, p. 59. Photograph by Juan Carlos Mansur Garda

Similarly, the Hollyhock House (1919–1921) draws inspiration from the spatial and volumetric layout of Mayan architecture; in it, "the boundaries between interior and exterior are tested amid stairways and terraces." (López, Alejandro: (2020). The Ennis House (1924) is also inspired by the architecture itself, particularly through the use of fretwork-like textures on the facades and the similarity to Maya architecture in the arrangement of geometric blocks and the organization of spaces.



Figures 5,6. The use of arches within Maya architecture allowed permeability in its geometric volumes, alongside improved accessibility and circulation, as well as lending greater lightness to the space. Above: an arch piercing the stairway at Kabah, Puuk Route. Photograph by Juan Carlos Mansur. Below: the same spatial approach at Edzná. Photograph by Juan Carlos Mansur Garda

The third example regarding the language of pre-Hispanic architecture incorporates a description of the lived experience of the spaces at the pre-Hispanic Maya architecture as seen by two architects, Carlos Mijares and Jorn Utzón, and how it served as inspiration for the creation of Utzón's architectural works. In this way, the aim is to clarify, through example, how an architect perceives architecture and interprets spaces, and how this interpretation leads him to improve his architectural design.



Figure 7. Grand Palace of Sayil. Photograph by Juan Carlos Mansur Garda

In his book, *Tránsitos y Demoras*, architect Carlos Mijares describes the experience evoked by the architectural spaces of Tikal, where one feels a sense of proximity to the objects and a closeness in one's field of vision due to being surrounded by the jungle environment and the vegetation that envelops us and, at times, makes us feel trapped. This jungle confinement is accompanied by diffused light filtering through the branches, causing us to perceive the jungle as a vault of permanent foliage that the city dweller—says Mijares—experiences as disorientation, anxiety, a loss of direction, and an inability to interpret nature. The Maya, on the other hand, find in nature a way of daily life that is easy to interpret. In other words, they have learned to read the language of nature—the sounds made by animals, the smells, the clouds.

For Mijares, the description of the environment is already a description of architecture, because an architect reads and speaks of architectural spaces based on their surroundings; this is why he describes the sounds of the jungle, "intense, enveloping, and varied"—the song of birds, the cry of monkeys, the sound of rain and wind, the "deep, high-pitched, persistent sensual sounds"; as well as its aromas and smells—the wet earth, the flowers, the fruits, the occasional dead animal—the visual perception of the terrain, the details, the confusion, the colors, the mud, the intense greens of the vegetation. The sensation of heat, humidity, the coolness of the shade, the intensity of the sun. It is this sensation of enclosure and the jungle's enveloping presence that gives Tikal its greater power, standing as a work that conquers space.

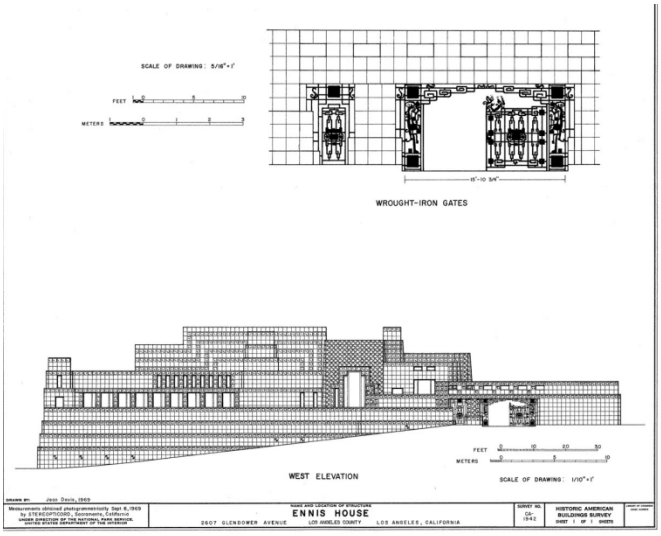



Figure 8. Plan of the Ennis House. By Jean Davis. This image is available from the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, United States, digital ID hhh.ca0227. This tag does not indicate the copyright status of the attached work; a standard copyright notice is still required. See Commons:Licensing for further information. Public Domain. https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=1281414



Figure 9. El Caracol. Observatory. Source: Juan Carlos Mansur



Figure 10. Guggenheim Museum New York. By Emilio Luque – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=68737246

It is said of this work that, without disrupting the jungle, the materials of the pyramids are in harmony with the environment, because they came from it, and the Maya made them speak through a humanized language; similarly, Mijares describes how Mayan architecture was erected "responding wisely to the natural conditions of the climate," something that is lacking in the city, where in contrast to Maya architecture, which is in harmony with nature, people now inhabit buildings made of materials no longer found in the natural environment ─ because that environment has disappeared, having been urbanized through the use of asphalt; the natural environment has been banished, and the artificial elements themselves are alien to natural forms.

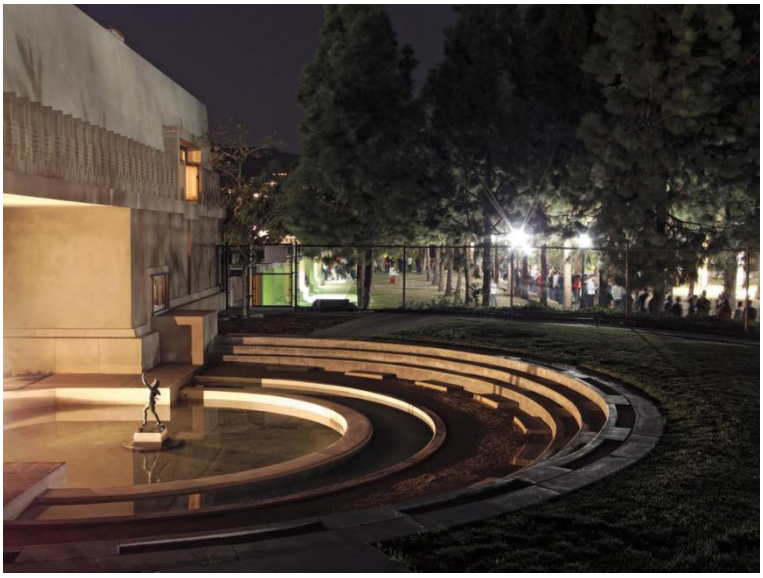


Figure 11. Hollyhock House. By Junkyardsparkle – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=38415736

In describing the Mayan architectural language, Mijares emphasizes that the Maya spoke the language of the clearings in the jungle, and from there they erected their platforms; and thus began the language of stairways, courtyards, and plazas—the language of "superimposed structures"—because the ascent was worth the effort. An interpretation of the closed and the open, the hidden and the clear, leads him to describe Maya architecture as an architecture of height, which is evident in the elevation of the pyramid that rises above the treetops and which, unlike other architectural forms found in the forests, seeks to rise above them, thereby acquiring a special dignity. Thus, "When one rises above the trees, the impact is decisive; a new and distinct world appears that resembles the inverse of the everyday world" (Mijares, Carlos, p. 92), from which one experiences the cycles of the seasons, the agricultural cycles, the drawing near to higher powers, the appearance of the gods, and their relationship with humankind, in this world, up there, another world appears that allows us to orient ourselves, and the center of the universe emerges: "A whole experience and a wealth of wisdom open to the attentive and awestruck observer" (Mijares, Carlos, p. 92), which speaks to us of the conquest of space. (Mijares, Carlos, p. 92). Mijares' description allows us to enter into the experience of architecture:

> "The foliage, which served as a canopy—a permanent 'above'—now appears below, transformed into a floor. The distance is revealed; the horizon appears all around the viewer, vast, continuous, incredibly and surprisingly distant. Space expands to unsuspected dimensions. The light, now full, includes the perception of its source—the sun. One can observe that this light moves, disappearing below the horizon only to reappear later. One senses the forceful rhythm of days and nights. One discovers the moon, the stars, and the relationships between them—

some constant and permanent, others variable; some detectable and reassuringly persistent, others wandering, elusive, and surprising, like comets or meteor showers" (Mijares, Carlos, p. 92).



Figure 12. The jungle setting, vegetation, and a clear, unpolluted sky frame the architecture and enable an understanding of its formal language. Avoiding urbanisation around these architectural centres and respecting their surroundings is essential to grasp their original language and inhabitation experience. Tikal. By Peter Andersen – Own work, CC BY 2.5, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=452260

The above illustrates how architectural heritage is a rich source of learning for those who know how to interpret spaces; these spaces can even help us appreciate the meaning behind ways of living. This was demonstrated by Jorn Utzon, who acknowledges himself as, to a large extent, an heir to the Mayan heritage. Drawing on his experience with this architecture, he was able to express a sense of lightness through horizontal planes in his works:

"The platform, used as an architectural element, is a fascinating concept. It first captivated me in Mexico during a study trip I took in 1949. There I encountered a wide variety of platforms, differing both in size and design. Many of them stand isolated, surrounded only by nature" (Utzon: 193).



Figure 13: Sydney Opera House. Source: No machine-readable author provided. Roybb95~commonswiki assumed (based on copyright claims). No machine-readable source provided. Own work assumed (based on copyright claims), CC BY-SA 3.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=89643

Utzon acknowledges the influence of these platforms. "Some of my projects from recent years," he says, "are based on the use of this element: the platform," (Utzon: 195), which is reflected in works such as the Crystal Palace in London (1946); and the most famous and iconic would be the Sydney Opera House (1956/73).

The experience of Mayan architecture, especially during tours of Uxmal and Chichen Itza, is perceived in a unique way. In these cases, the architect associates it with the sensation of elevation and lightness conveyed by the platforms. Mayan architecture evoked a special feeling in Utzon due to the jungle environment that surrounds it. These are plains covered by an impenetrable jungle, of uniform and defined height, where the hot and humid jungle served as a ceiling and, consequently, movement up or down was not possible (Utzon: 193). However, thanks to the platform, the Maya managed to break through this sense of confinement and move into the open. In Utzon's words:

> "By introducing the use of platforms with their upper level situated at the same height as the treetops, the Maya surprisingly discovered a new dimension of life, in harmony with their devotion to the gods. On these high platforms—many of which are one hundred meters long—they built their temples. From there, they had access to the sky, the clouds, the breeze, and that vast open plain into which the former tedium of the jungle had suddenly transformed. Thanks to this architectural device, they completely transformed the landscape and endowed their visual experience with a grandeur comparable only to the grandeur of their gods" (Utzon: 193).

The Maya's understanding of the use of space, and the lessons Utzon learned through his experience and immersion in architecture, goes beyond the formal plane and volumetric design when it comes to the experience of an environment and landscape free of cars, covered by the jungle and the sky, which captivated him to the point of seeking to incorporate this approach into his own projects. The architect puts it this way:

> "Many of our beautiful European squares are being ruined by cars. Buildings that once conversed with one another across a plaza—whether arranged in axial systems or balanced compositions—can no longer do so, because the flow of traffic separates them. The speed and surprisingly noisy behavior of vehicles drive us away from the plazas, places we once used for peaceful strolls" (Utzon: 195).

Utzon, upon contemplating the terraces, elevations, and lightness of Mayan architecture, which allow for a broader view of the surroundings, comes up with some very interesting urban solutions thanks to what he has learned. The experience of this culture's architectural space leads both characters to rethink their place in modern city life; and in Utzon's case, it leads him to propose transforming his urban planning; for this reason, he states that "In addition to its architectural strength, the platform provides a valuable resource for solving current traffic problems. The simple fact that cars can pass beneath a surface reserved for pedestrian traffic offers many possibilities for use" (Utzon: 195). These reflections would not have been possible had he not been able to draw inspiration from the Maya heritage and bring into the present a way of living from which the modern world has strayed; this raises the valid question: What would have become of contemporary architecture if the Maya architectural heritage had not been preserved? If the work of Frank Lloyd Wright and Jorn Utzon is worthwhile, then the pre-Hispanic architectural heritage, and in particular, the Maya heritage, is also worthwhile and deserves to continue being preserved.



Figure 14. Uxmal. By Adrián Hernández – Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=71192285

This lesson, which we could learn through the preservation of pre-Hispanic heritage, has not yet been encroached upon by urbanization, and it should be respected from within that urban environment so that we may learn and reconnect with our essence of living in harmony with nature. Architect Carlos Mijares reflects on this experience for the urban dweller (and most of us are), where entering a space like the Petén jungle in Guatemala is an unusual event, because it confronts our urban way of life with another way of life—one that is intense and meaningful. "We modern city dwellers—who are, unfortunately, distant from nature—find that all places in the jungle are very similar and, to our eyes, indistinguishable from one another. We suffer from an inability to appreciate nuances, which is a widespread characteristic of cultural insensitivity, ignorance, and foreignness" (Mijares, Carlos: 91).

## 3 Conclusion

In conclusion, we can affirm that pre-Hispanic Maya architecture continues to inspire admiration for its construction techniques and masonry structures. Furthermore, it helps us understand material stress and fatigue, the designs of channels for carrying rainwater, food storage methods, water collection systems, the preservation of frescoes, and acoustic techniques with their sound ranges and orientations. Similarly, it allows for a spatial understanding rooted in the daily life that defined these spaces, as well as an appreciation of spaces that conveyed a cosmological and religious significance through stelae and astronomical orientations (and which provided a cosmological and theological framework that enables us to understand the relationship between astronomy and urban planning). In the case of architectural layout, with its interplay of light and shadow, it is also possible to determine solar or astronomical orientations.

The grandeur of Maya architecture cannot be fully grasped by relying solely on written and documentary sources; one must explore its spaces and its language. Like any experience, architecture is learned through the lived experience of space. "The experience of the ruins is a good way to learn to listen, and then to read the space." This is yet another reason to care for and preserve this heritage—not only the architectural structures but also the vast jungle landscape that surrounds them—to prevent all forms of visual and auditory pollution; this allows us to understand the site where it was built and its context, since architectural works "facilitate the ability to focus attention on the proposed designs, on the methods of constructing the elements, on the relationships between the work and its context, on the ways of generating space, and on the structure of the sequences" (Mijares, Carlos: 40); that is where the values of architectural language are revealed.

Throughout these pages, an effort has been made to advocate for the preservation of the Maya architectural heritage, which holds not only a value of identity for communities through their heritage but also an economic value as a tourist

destination. Maya art has been a source of inspiration for 19th- and 20th-century art, and will surely continue to be so for centuries to come. The Maya architectural language has been highlighted as an artistic value of the architectural heritage and as an expression of hierarchies of the enclosed, the open, or the private. This is evident throughout their architecture, and the architect must approach it through the experience and lived reality of these spaces to understand this language in general—and the Maya's specific way of expressing it, in particular.

Three examples were presented to help understand this language: first, the language of Mayan arches and how they express the inside and outside, the enclosed and the open; second, Frank Lloyd Wright's architecture was mentioned as having developed from the experience and understanding of the Mayan architectural language; and third, an example was given of how the experience and lived reality of pre-Hispanic Maya architecture inspired Jorn Utzon in the design of several of his architectural works, and how this architect explicitly stated that the natural and built environment of Maya architecture inspired him to break with the modern way of life and thereby recover an original perception of dwelling.

## Conflicts of interest

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

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## Note

1. For a deeper understanding of the influence of pre-Hispanic art on modern American art, and specifically on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright, see Braun, Barbara, *Pre-Columbian art and the post-Columbian world: ancient American sources of modern art*, New York: Harry N. Abrams Inc., 1993.

2. Cf. Herbert Spinden, "A Study of Maya Art: Its Subject Matter and Historical Development", Dover Publications, 1975.

3. Besides the influence of Maya culture, Utzon was also influenced by the Zapotec architecture of Monte Albán. He highlights the sense of lightness conveyed to him: "By building stairways and buildings set upon the edge of the platform, while keeping its central section at a lower level, the mountain summit became something entirely independent, floating in the air, detached from the earth. From above one sees nothing but the sky and drifting clouds: a new planet." https://proyectandoleyendo.files.wordpress.com/2011/01/plataformas-y-mesetas-jorn-utzon.pdf, pp. 194-195.

4. On this topic see chapter 3, pp. 99-122, "Everyday Life of the Maya during the Classic Period", by Erik Velásquez García. Cf. Gonzalbo, Pilar (2004), *History of Daily Life in Mexico*, Volume I: *Mesoamerica and the Indigenous Spheres of New Spain* (edited by Pablo Escalante), Mexico City: FCE and El Colegio de México.

5. For instance, research by Anne Dowd and Susan Milbrath examines the relationship between hierophany and Maya architecture. They highlight the need to preserve ancient architectural heritage in order to understand how these elements interconnect, as well as to grasp the meaning of hierophany and how it permeated all spheres of society. Their studies focus on architectural hierophanies, offering interpretations concerning their function and purpose of construction. They cite the religious hierophanies at Uaxactún (Group E) and Calakmul as case studies, analysing the architectural effects these sites may have produced. "Sunlight on architectural façades illuminated temple entrances or sculptured wall panels and manifested patterns of light in temple interiors on days or times of the day that were key solar events in the seasonal cycle, such as the summer or winter solstices, spring or fall equinoxes, and zenith or nadir passages. These astronomical-architectural displays held agricultural, calendrical, political, and religious meaning for the Maya. Through performance, art and architecture amplified social power." Anne Dowd and Susan Milbrath (2015), *Cosmology, Calendars, and Horizon-Based Astronomy in Ancient Mesoamerica*, USA: University Press of Colorado, p. 38.

6. Mijares, Carlos (2002), *Tránsitos y demoras*, Mexico, Instituto Superior de Arquitectura y Diseño (ISAD), p. 40.