

2009

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Recommended Citation

Morley, Alexander, "Cohousing in Cuenca" (2009). *Volume 17 - 2009*. Paper 5.
<http://preserve.lehigh.edu/cas-lehighreview-vol-17/5>

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Cohousing in Cuenca

“It has always proved hard to adapt European doctrines to an entirely different context.”

Halperín Donghi, Argentine Historian

Architectural theory, planning, and design are imperative global issues. Space dictates the manner in which people live their lives and in few other fields can cultural sensitivity have such an important role in the safety, security, livelihood, and happiness of a community. Local philosophies and approaches to architectural design are as globally diverse as the countries in which they originate: they are direct, immediate reactions and reflections to a particular society. This article brings to light the concepts of a remarkably successful design method from Northern Europe and attempts to translate it to a South American country that is very much in need of the solutions it promises: social equality and sense of community. This transition is much more complicated, unfortunately, than simply procuring a bilingual; an in-depth understanding of the political, social, and economic histories, local values, traditions, ecologies, topographies, and heritages of both locations are essential to gain a proper sense of the context. Good

design requires a broad range of study. Only through understanding this information and finding key relationships between the Denmark, in Northern Europe, and Ecuador, in South America, can one properly localize this architectural concept and make it successful.

The idea for this enterprise is now over five years in the developing. I lived in Ecuador for four summers and I studied in Denmark for nine months. While both countries are equally rich in diversity, culture, and natural beauty, they are nearly opposite in wealth distribution, public infrastructure, social equality, and public well-being. Denmark has one of the world's most generous social welfare systems, as it believes all citizens should have access to education and healthcare. This starkly contrasts with Ecuador, which, like most countries in South America, was developed most drastically by Spanish Conquistadors and their culture of corruption, social inequality, and exploitation. It was rare to see a homeless Dane in Copenhagen and it was safe to walk the streets and parks at night. The minimum wage is roughly 18 USD an hour. In Cuenca, virtually every street had at least one local beggar and to walk anywhere after dark, even in groups,

was extremely dangerous. In 2004, the average monthly salary in Ecuador was 100 USD, the equivalent of what a typical Dane will make after working for five hours at a local kiosk.

Ecuador suffers from seemingly countless social problems. In addition to high levels of racism towards the indigenous population and tension between the few rich and many poor, a more recent social issue has come about because millions of Ecuadorians who currently live in the United States (both legally and illegally) are sending cash back home to their families. Many Ecuadorian children are now growing up with a constant flow of money that is relatively high compared to the local standard of living. Because many of the Ecuadorian expatriates are fathers working away from their families, many Ecuadorian children are left with no authoritative father-figure to guide them in a country where machismo is one of the highest in the world, the levels of gang memberships and violence has increased among the youth.

While studying architecture in Denmark, I learned about the fascinating concept of cohousing. It is a community design movement that began in Denmark in the 1960's as a reaction to dissatisfaction with



existing housing options. The result is a varied number of families, of all sizes and economical backgrounds, living in planned communities in which extensive common facilities are shared among the group. Each family has its own private house and there is no set ideology or values holding the unit together, allowing for total freedom of individuality. The sites are designed to maximize social activity, sustainable living, and security. While the social and economic benefits of the system are many, the most important aspect is the fact that children are brought up in a safe environment where they have companions to play with and a safe environment to grow up in. A child who lives in cohousing with a single mother now has thirty fathers to look after him. Applied in both the urban and rural context, there are hundreds

proposals for a housing community in the quiet town of Hareskov. Fully expecting to complete and occupy the newly purchased site within a few years, the cohort was shocked to find local neighbors opposed the plan in apprehension that its proposal for collective living was too radically leftist. After a year of negotiations and attempts of compromise, the once visionary group of Danes became discouraged and was forced to sell the property. While most of the twelve families gave up, Gudmand-Høyer refused to submit to what he saw as a complete failure in modern living situations.

His frustrations had arisen two years prior to the incident at Hareskov. Eager to begin a family, Gudmand-Høyer and his wife, a psychologist, had become disillusioned with the potential housing options in Denmark.

environment with social and economic benefits not available to a traditional single-family household, multi-storied apartment buildings, or row housing that existed in Denmark at the time. The plan for Hareskov called for twelve terraced houses set around a common house and a swimming pool. This first attempt at what today in Danish is known as *bofælleskaber* (directly translated as ‘living communities’) would serve as a model for all future efforts.

Jan Gudmand-Høyer’s shortcoming at Hareskov were short lived; the late sixties brought a drastic shift in values to Western society. Student anti-war demonstrations exploded at major universities in the United States and Europe, including Copenhagen. “Collectives,” or shared households with an underlying ideology, became popular housing

Underlying Ecuador’s beauty, however, is a confusing muddle of corruption, economic failure, political disunity, and callow racism that is profoundly engrained in nearly every aspect of Ecuador’s continuously conflicted history.

of cohousing communities in Denmark and Northern Europe. Attention to cohousing has recently reached the United States, with over eighty communities currently existing and over a hundred in the planning process. I feel that cohousing could bring positive social changes to Ecuador if applied in its proper context.

Cohousing: Beginnings

“I know I live in a community because on a Friday night it takes me forty-five minutes and two beers to get from the parking lot to my front door.” Danish Cohousing Resident

The story begins at the end of 1964 in the outskirts of Copenhagen. After nearly a year of careful planning and collective organization, Danish architect Jan Gudmand-Høyer and a group of close friends confidently submitted a

proposal for a housing community in the quiet town of Hareskov. Fully expecting to complete and occupy the newly purchased site within a few years, the cohort was shocked to find local neighbors opposed the plan in apprehension that its proposal for collective living was too radically leftist. After a year of negotiations and attempts of compromise, the once visionary group of Danes became discouraged and was forced to sell the property. While most of the twelve families gave up, Gudmand-Høyer refused to submit to what he saw as a complete failure in modern living situations.

Concerned that the notion of ‘community’ was becoming less and less authentic as urban and suburban planning gave preference to designs that isolated its members from one another, the couple was uneasy about the environment in which their kids would grow up. Realizing they were not the only ones who shared the dissatisfaction, the duo gathered a group of friends to discuss the conditions that might provide a more supportive living environment. Influenced heavily by Charles Moore’s 1967 book *Utopia*, the assembly envisioned a housing complex reminiscent of a traditional country village; they sought to maximize interaction with one another, both spontaneous and organized, through increased use of common spaces. This, combined with shared common facilities, would provide an

options among young people at this time. Jan Gudmand-Høyer began writing articles promoting the idea of cohousing as a long-term housing equivalent to a collective, offering a greater network of support to the needs of the nuclear family. This, accompanied by Danish author Bodil Graae’s 1967 publication of *Children Should Have One Hundred Parents*, aroused a much broader interest in the idea of cohousing. Graae called for a housing collective with a common denominator for children. By 1968, Graae, Gudmand-Høyer, and a few of the original families from the Hareskov project had joined forces with others now interested for another attempt at a cohousing community. After years of relentless dedication and work, two cohousing communities had been realized by 1973. Cohousing was born.

As a result of the undeniable successes and benefits, the idea of cohousing spread across Denmark like wildfire. Today, hundreds of these communities exist not only in Denmark but all across Northern Europe, and only recently has it become a trend in the United States. Because each community is planned with careful attention to the context, the site, and the future inhabitants, cohousing can be applied to nearly any setting and in a variety of ways, be it urban, suburban, or rural. It addresses the fact that the majority of today's population lives in planned isolation. Amidst the incredible diversity offered from this system, cohousing is held together by the fundamental belief that it is necessary to focus on the housing of the community rather than the individual house, where community and sustainable living are stressed above all things.

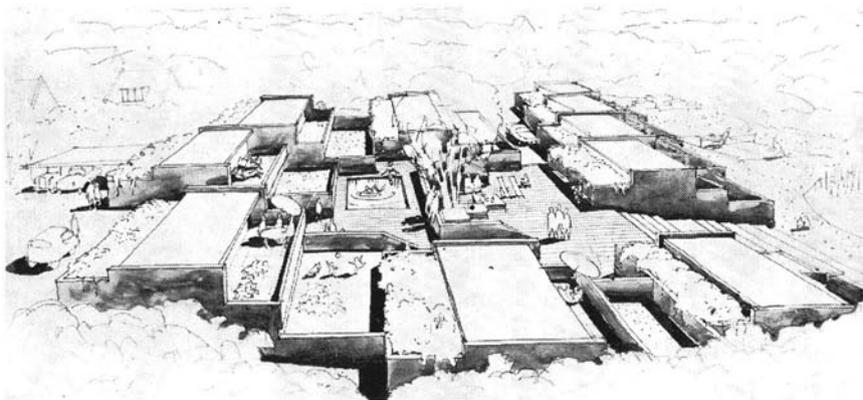
Ecuador: Continuity & Contradiction

"To rule in Ecuador makes enlightened despotism necessary."

Vicente Rocafuerte, Second Ecuadorian President (1834-1839)

Slightly smaller than the state of Nevada and with a population nearing fourteen million, The Republic of Ecuador is as culturally rich as a country can get. Ecuador's ancestral heritage consists of over eighteen different ethnic groups, almost as many dialects, and nearly

five centuries of racial mixing. Distinguished as the smallest of the 17 megadiverse countries by Conservation International, the nation lies directly atop the equator (for which it was named) and is intersected from north to south by the stunning Andean mountain chain. This 40 million-year-old warped backbone of snowcapped volcanoes and highlands descends onto a relatively wide coastal zone to the west and into the Amazon Basin to the east. The unlikely landscape graciously sustains thousands of flora and fauna species and it has the highest concentration of species on Earth, including fifteen percent of the world's known birds. Just over 600 miles west of the coastline, Ecuador claims ownership to the Galápagos Islands. Geographically, ecologically, and culturally, Ecuador is a model of diversity. Underlying Ecuador's beauty, however, is a confusing muddle of corruption, economic failure, political disunity, and callow racism that is profoundly engrained in nearly every aspect of Ecuador's continuously conflicted history. For even a basic understanding of the complexity of Ecuador's contemporary social context, it is necessary to closely scrutinize several key driving forces: the Incan Empire and Spanish colonial heritage, fierce topographical regionalism, and heightened political conflict upon independence combined with boom and bust economic cycles.



The Hareskov project: Designed by Jan Gudmand-Høyer, the community consisted of 12 houses around a common house.

Photo Credit: McCamant & Durrett

A Nation of the Conquerors and the Conquered

Like many South American countries, the Republic of Ecuador suffers from a deep history of repeated invasions and conquests. Beginning with the Incan Empire's expansion to the northwest side of the continent and followed by the conquest of the Spaniards in the 16th Century, present day Ecuador's two primary cultural heritages have stemmed from foundations of violence and the assertion of dominance over subordinate peoples. With the latter invasion, the Spaniards, driven by the martial qualities and culture acquired during the seven hundred-year Reconquista, combined techniques equivalent to modern day terrorism with the entrepreneurial spirit of capitalism. They stormed into South America and brutally overthrew virtually all Incan and native resistance within a mere forty years. From colonization and onward through independence, every effort was made to eliminate Andean culture.

Contemporary Ecuadorian class structure is so strongly tied to a Spanish colonial system of classification that was never fully implemented to begin with. Known as the Régimen de Castas, the system was adopted from the hierarchical, estate-based, corporate society of medieval Castile (Present day Spain). A socio-racial hierarchy that addressed a classification of the conquerors and the conquered, it did not address the reality that these two groups would remain in place and that miscegenation between the two would ensue. With each new generation, the complex mixture of legal status, ethnicity, racial (or physical) categorization, and economic roles became progressively more difficult to apply, particularly in Ecuador. Proportionately, Ecuador's Amerindian population is one of the largest in South America. Roughly 65% of today's population is mestizo, or mixed Amerindian and white. About 25% are purely Amerindian, 7% white (typically claiming descent from Spanish colonizers), and 3% black. The complex social and economic organization became a ridiculously tangled web as it tried to adapt

to the growing ethnic groups with various measures of status and social ranking. The Régimen de Castas system essentially ensured social arrogance, divide, and tension as Ecuador grew and changed. Despite the fact that nearly two thirds of the population is racially mixed, today's Ecuadorian society still maintains its self-definition in terms of essentially two classes: the elite white, and the large Indian underclass.

Topographical Regionalism

The differences that come with climate, natural dangers, and economies between coastal and highland living in Ecuador are stark, and they have led to a fierce regionalism that has unfortunately been a great detriment to Ecuadorian unity. Only until recently, geographic barriers have severely crippled communication and trade between the nation's two largest and powerful cities: coastal traders of Guayaquil and the highland textile-based capital of Quito. A 1960s United States Minister to Ecuador once stated, "Guayaquil monopolizes at present the business of importation, because its roads to the interior are

mule paths ... It is common saying in Ecuador that 'Our roads are roads for the birds, but not for men.'"

Even as late as 1920 it took over five days to travel a critical 140-mile pass in the highlands from Quito. During the rainy winter season, roads in the mountains washed out and the roads in the coastal lowlands became partly underwater, making any movement impossible. Unlike the commercially international-minded highland wool districts in Southern Peru, isolation of the Ecuadorian highlands from the outside world concocted strong regionalist sentiment in the mountain cities and fostered a bitter rivalry with the coast. Loyalties in Ecuador lie first with the region and second, if at all, with the nation. These tensions only heightened with the nation's struggle for independence in the early 1800's.

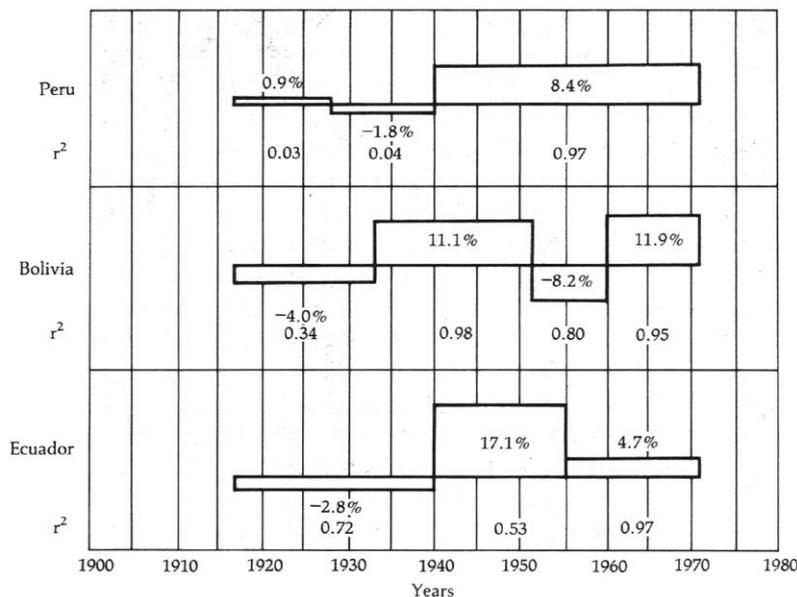
War of Independence for a Land of Disunity

An important fact to keep in mind when studying the great push for liberation from Spain is that it was a civil war in just as many ways as it was a war for independence. Freedom

from the Spanish Crown in the Andean region, as Latin American historian Magnus Mörner explains, "Had been imposed from the outside rather than achieved from within ... Against this background, the concepts of 'patria' and 'freedom.' So abundantly used, deserve keen critical scrutiny. The cultural dimension of patria may have been more determined than its geographical limits."

The international trade exposed enlightened ideas under Bourbon central reformism, and many prosperous Creoles were growing tired of paying tribute and taxes to an ever distant King. Coinciding with Napoleon's invasions across Europe and his occupation of the Spanish Crown, the only political link between Spain and Spanish America was broken and the two nations seized the opportunity to break free, with Venezuelan Simon Bolivar leading the movement from the north, and Argentinean Jose San Martin from the South.

As a result of the imposed war against Spain and the loyalists, there was absolutely no sense of national unity in Ecuador upon Independence. With an economically depressed textile industry, Quito and its isolated region in northern Ecuador had long favored a break from the Crown, as they saw opportunity for increased upward mobility for its city's large Creole population that was bureaucratically dominated by Peninsular Spaniards. They saw independence as an economic interest; tribute payments burdened an already impoverished region and hopes of redistribution of coastal wealth into the sierra. For this reason, coastal skepticism of independence grew. With a protected harborage and an abundant supply of high quality hardwoods, Guayaquil claimed ownership to the principal shipyard of the Pacific Coast and a lucrative cacao export industry. In addition, its coastal proximity made Guayaquil as a likely target for invasion and attack by the Spanish fleet, so independence was generally disregarded until Bolivar and San Martin's armies had taken most of the Andean region.



A boom and bust export economy: Growth rates of Andean exports
Photo Credit: Mörner

Eminent Instability

Dr. David W. Schodt has described the Ecuadorian political landscape to be “as bewildering as its topography... one government has followed another as if on some sort of political merry-go-round, driven by recurrent economic crises and constantly shifting political alliances.” From its very beginnings as an autonomous nation, the bitter disunity and regional economic rivalry that smoldered between the sierra and coast gave little incentive for collaboration, and as a result has always hindered Ecuadorian rulers’ attempts to govern the country. Ridden with an uneasy relationship between populist politics and democracy, leaders had to attempt to please the masses with regional public works, and more and more had to assert themselves as authoritarian figures to maintain control. Having established a formal presidential democracy in 1830, Ecuador had 86 governments and 17 constitutions in its first 159 years of independence. If you could control your military, you had a promising future. Towards the end of the 20th Century, Ecuador found itself in one of its worst states of emergency in its Republican history. Rising debts, irresponsible banking, and a volatile oil export economy put the nation on the verge of hyperinflation and amidst a governance crisis, Ecuador adopted the U.S. dollar as a “policy of last resort.”

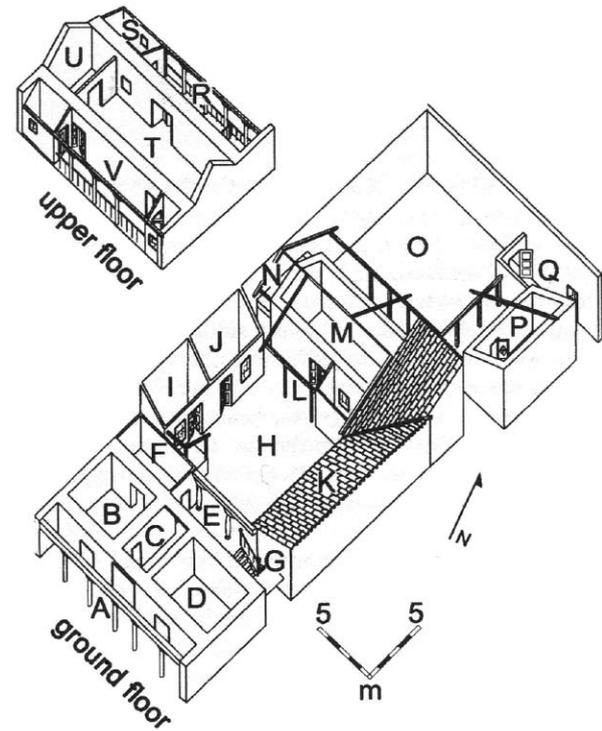
As a nation defined by competing regions due to geographical isolation combined with a lasting dependency on a notoriously volatile export economy, Ecuador has been one of the least politically stable South American republics for most of its history. The only thing that seems certain about Ecuador’s future is a continued trend in polarizing politics. While dollarization in January 2000 brought some relative economic stability, there have already been four different presidents since that time. The current, a left-wing populist, Raphael Correa, won the 2007 election in a landslide after popular opinion turned heavily against the conservative Congress in Quito. In the fall of 2008, Correa passed a sweeping

referendum for a new constitution (Ecuador’s 20th since Independence), which allows him the possibility to remain in power until as late as 2017 as a way to ‘consolidate power’, and bring political stability back to the country. Is this yet turning into another Chavez-style left-wing autocracy? It is too early to tell... what is certainly clear is a definite growing identity crisis in Ecuador.

Cohousing to Address the Issues

“Societies are about people, and how we organize ourselves in relation to one another is an issue that every culture must sort out for itself.” Dean Foster

The modern day social problems that Ecuadorian society has inherited are many, if they are not addressed they could have lasting negative affects on the rising generation of Ecuadorian youth. I believe that these very issues are incredibly similar to those that Jan



Isometric Drawing of the Posadas House in Cuenca: The House is an attempt to create a microcosm of the larger urban society, with its centralized meeting place for more “public” activities. Photo Credit: Jamieson

Gudmand-Høyer spearheaded against with his concept of living communities in the late sixties. This is by no means an attempt to claim that cohousing is the can-all and do-all solution for Ecuador’s immensely complicated situation; I argue instead that cohousing has the capacity to significantly help many Ecuadorian families confront the burden of current socioeconomic and political problems.

Transnational Migration

The American Dream Transplanted Transcending from the muddled and confusing class system that grossly generalizes its diverse peoples as either white elite or poor Indian, racial mixing will inevitably continue. Ecuador is suffering from a serious identity crisis. As politics continue to move into the unknown and the economy remains uneasy, transnational migration is an increasing phenomenon that is

adding a dangerously complicated dynamic to an already convoluted issue.

Ecuadorian migration to the United States first occurred on a larger scale just after Guayaquil's coastal banana boom in the late 1950's. There was a modest amount of migration flow throughout the 80's and by the time the economy began to plummet, mass migration occurred, this time primarily from the south-central highlands of the country. A sample survey of the Azuay and Cañar provinces in the 90's indicated that 39% of the households had at least one member in the United States, most undocumented, and most living in New York City. Indeed, the New York Metropolitan area now has the third largest concentration of Ecuadorians in the world, after Guayaquil and Quito. What makes the Ecuadorian mass migration so extraordinary, however, is the fact that the majority does not come to the United States with an intention

to live the 'American Dream' and remain permanently. The migrants, most often young men, acquire cheap service and labor jobs that pay much higher than anything available to them in Ecuador. Through intricate networks of friends and family they live in the United States for as cheap as possible, sending remittances back to Ecuador to sustain their family, and saving money to someday return to Ecuador with enough cash to jumpstart a new life. Dollarization has only facilitated this process, and it is turning the lower income nuclear family in Ecuador on its head.

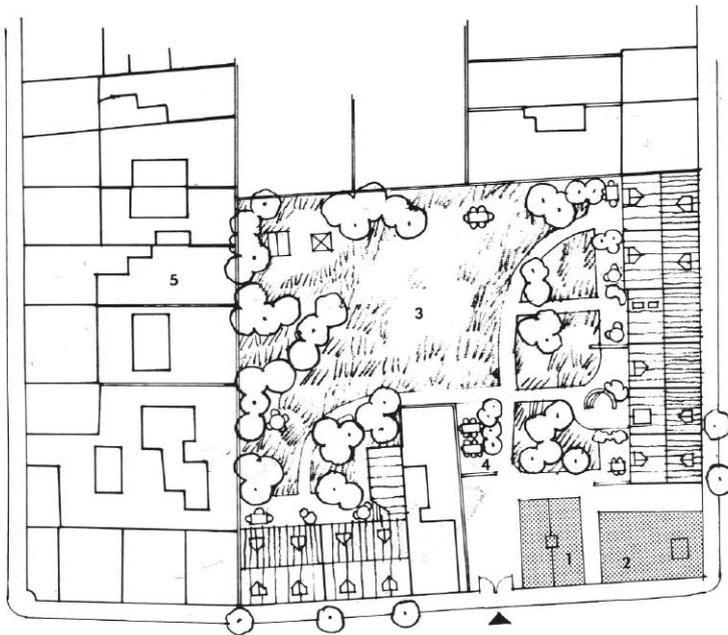
Ecuadorian migration is essentially the American Dream transplanted without any sensitivity as to how it will affect the families in the long run. After sixteen months of dissertation field research, Jason Pribilsky of Syracuse University observed that "young men feel tremendous pressures to both migrate to the United States and to marry women and

start families before they leave. Thus, many migrants head to the United States as husbands and, in many cases, as fathers."

The effects of a young father leaving his wife and newborn children behind while he is migrating abroad prove to be disastrous. With separations averaging from two to six years, there are definite psychological and social stresses within the family as well as major health concerns. Due to the prolonged separation of couples, male infidelity in Ecuador is relatively common, and some migrants are returning to Ecuador infected with the HIV virus. Divorce rates have risen. In addition, children, especially boys, are now growing up in an environment without any authoritative father figure to raise them in a culture that is "machismo" oriented. The mothers, being completely overburdened by various roles around the household, including work, must often leave the child alone completely for most of the day. Young kids are more and more lured to the influences of Western entertainment, grooming, dress, and values, further expanding the generation gap. This has resulted in an increase in violence, gang activity, joblessness, and inadequate housing. In short term attempts to improve the lives of their families, the complex system is detrimentally caving in on itself.

Begin Translation

Just as cohousing has helped thousands of Danes to raise their kids in a safe, healthy environment and created affordable housing that promotes maximum social interaction and a stimulating intellectual atmosphere, it can readdress the disastrous familial whiplash of transnational migration and be applied in its own Ecuadorian model. It may seem highly unlikely that a community system from socially minded Denmark--who for the past thirty years has always been ranked on top by social scientists as the happiest place on earth is homogenous in demographics, and has had virtually no national turmoil for more than half a century--could be applied successfully in Ecuador. But these differences are not as important as the similarities of these two countries. What matters is the fact that there



Site Plan of Jerngarden: A former junkyard, this cohousing community in Arhus, Denmark, is lined with houses around the block that share a park-like backyard and a common house in the middle of the city.

Photo Credit: McCamant & Durret

is a problem to which cohousing can be the solution. What makes it even more viable, however, is the fact that Ecuadorians share very similar deep cultural values with Denmark when it comes to community. This will make all the difference in implementation.

Bodil Graaë's 1967 publication of *Children Should Have One Hundred Parents* is just as relevant to Ecuadorian society today as it was to Denmark in the sixties. The cohousing model, adaptable in essentially any rural or urban context, would address these very issues of slum living, gang activity, and violence. The communal living aspect of cohousing would provide a viable model for thousands of families who are suffering from migration issues, from both economic and sociable standpoints.

beyond the student community. Describing both countries as "other-dependent" in the way people relate to one another, Foster stresses the fact that both countries have a strong emphasis on the individual that depends heavily on the benefit of a common group. In discussing North Andean cultures, he writes that "individuals are simply not part of society unless they can claim membership to or affiliation with some group, neighborhood or town ... every individual is unique and has the right to advance in his or her own way in the world, as long as it is done with consideration for others."

Foster also describes both countries similarly in that they are both "future and past-oriented." Although the Ecuadorian people have seen their world turned upside down

for development of communities – while they "are influenced by facts and logic, persuasion is best when it confirms already existing beliefs" – the exact ideology upon which it began in Denmark. That being said, finding an appropriate location to start is absolutely critical.

Cuenca: A Hidden Gem of Hope

"First we shape our buildings. Then our buildings start shaping us."

Sir Winston Churchill

With a population of over 400,000 inhabitants, Cuenca is Ecuador's third largest city. Nestled among the clouds in the southern highlands and regarded as one of the best-preserved, richest examples of Spanish colonial

This paper is not about how Cohousing will save Ecuadorian society: the future of Ecuador is an open book. This paper does, however, bring to light serious and neglected issues of which I have experienced first hand, and offers the best possible remedy through my observation and experience of other cultures addressing similar concerns in extremely different contexts.

Tracing back to the strong regionalist trends since the nation's earliest history, Ecuador has a strong local communal mentality embedded within its culture that will prove fundamental in realizing cohousing. In a 2003 study of family therapy in Ecuador, Ingeborg Haug observed that Ecuadorian students "in day-to-day situations tend to place a higher value on the sanctity of relationship bonds over individual recognition, even when the issue is framed as one of ethics." The students explained it as a way to "show solidarity with those less capable or fortunate."

Dean Foster, one of the world's leading cross-cultural experts, observes a promising web of common cultural orientations between and Ecuador and Denmark that extends

on numerous occasions with no immediate control over the events, they maintain an optimistic confidence and a desire to work for change. Denmark, on the other hand, maintains both strong notions of past ideology and future progress in its attempt to harmonize its utopian notion of social welfare.

While it is clear that cohousing is applicable, finding an appropriate location to start is absolutely critical. While Ecuadorians are eager to create a better future, Foster also claims that change and movement can be seen as "destabilizing and unwelcome to the status quo". He categorizes both nations being "process-oriented" over "result-oriented." This is key similarity for translating cohousing, in that Ecuadorians will rely heavily on the rationale

architecture in South America, Cuenca's urban core is listed as a UNESCO World Heritage Trust site. Cuenca has unique historical contexts in both its societal evolution and the development of its built-environment. These discrepancies are an exception to the regional mindsets and intolerant notions of identity that have plagued Ecuadorian politics, economics, and development. At the same time, Cuenca is by far the largest major urban center experiencing the massively devastating social consequences of transnational migration. Because the city is regarded as a 'university town' and sustainable approaches to preserving and restoring the landscapes have become popular, Cuenca seems to be the absolute ideal place to introduce the cohousing model to

Ecuador that can serve as a sustainable and localized example for the rest of the country to follow.

The incessant rivalry and lack of cooperation between the highlands and the coast that create the vicious cycle in inhibiting Ecuadorian national unity are not the rule in Cuenca. While most of the sierra cities “developed as bastions of conservative Spanish culture” with limited contact with the outside world, Cuenca’s proximity to Guayaquil in the southern sierra created a socially moderate intermediate of a city. Linked economically to Guayaquil but sharing a similar social structure of Quito, Cuenca’s support was vied for by the two polarizing cities in populist and partisan disagreements. In 1859, known by historians as the “terrible year,” Ecuador reached its bursting point: the country split itself into self-declared autonomous regions. Cuenca curiously enough entered an alliance with Guayaquil. In one of these instances of high tension disagreements (dealing with the relationship between church and state), Cuenca chose to side with neither Guayaquil nor Quito and organized the Progresista party in 1888 as a middle ground between the Radical Liberal party to the south and the Conservative party to the north. This compromising attitude demonstrates that ‘Cuencanos’ have the capacity to go beyond dogmatic core values and act upon what they feel is right at the time. I believe this bodes well for something as bold as cohousing.

As the capital of the Azuay province, Cuenca naturally suffers from some of the highest amounts of transnational migration in the country. Following an Ecuadorian family who moved from a rural town to Cuenca, author Anne Miles describes the Quitasacas, who, while searching for economic advancement, could never seem to flourish. Miles describes a dismal reality in that:

Sometimes it seems to them that transnational migration is the only choice. Moreover loss of [a] favored son under these circumstances has set in motion a series of shifts in family relationships and brought to the fore emotions that have provoked

them to think about their lives in new and sometimes troubling ways.

The urban fabric in which the remaining and impoverished families live has seemingly become even more dangerous. Miles recounts that everyone has at least one or two stories of being robbed at gunpoint. It is in an environment like this that the supportive network of a cohousing community can really do wonders for a community. If transnational migration is inevitably going to happen, cohousing can at least offer a therapeutic atmosphere for the families that are enduring these separations.

The Athens of Ecuador

Whereas Guayaquil today is seen as a crude port town and Quito as a chaotic, bustling capital city, Cuenca’s rich intellectual, architectural, and artistic histories cause Cuencanos to boast that their city is the “Athens of Ecuador.” Its quiet, yet vibrant cobblestone streets that are lined with two-to-three-story adobe and stucco buildings with tile roofs have a charm to them that gives the city a strong sense of time and place. In fact, Cuenca’s urban history goes back over a thousand years to a Cañari settlement called Tumipampa. In the late 15th Century, after more than 500 years of occupation, the Incan Empire conquered the Cañari and Tumipampa. The Incan ruler modeled the city after Cuzco and wanted to make Tumipampa the capital of the northern kingdom. Tumipampa itself was destroyed in the Incan War of Succession just prior to the Spaniards’ arrival, and the first written record of modern day Cuenca dates back to 1547 when the European chronicler, Pedro de Cieza de Leon, stated that “all is cast down in ruins, but still it can be seen how great they were.” Cuenca was formally founded in 1557, and was laid out with the conventional Spanish colonial gridiron plan, allowing for plenty of room for orderly geometrical expansion with a plaza at the center. Cuencanos have a rich appreciation for the City’s history, and many of those large Incan blocks still remain as cornerstones to standing buildings in the colonial core.

There is a key factor in the historical development of Cuencano domestic architecture that shows great promise for a localized adaptation of the cohousing model. From its earliest beginnings as a Spanish colony, ongoing tensions between the church and private property owners in the city have indirectly shaped the way the urban elite planned their houses. As was the case throughout all the Spanish colonial cities, Cuenca was “conceived and executed as a propaganda vehicle, symbolizing and incarnating civilization.” With the Church being the unquestionable central figure in Andean society, it constantly maintained efforts to acquire and demonstrate maximum authority. Royal ordinances in 1573 restricted private property from being located on the main plazas and enforced uniformity in the facades and roofs of residential housing. While these measures to keep the local elite subordinate in creating grand gestures of prominence within the colonial city were successful, it influenced a manner of domestic living that created an important emphasis on outdoor spaces located within the interior of the dwelling.

Contrasting greatly with Quito, the Cuenca elite was in constant contact with Guayaquil merchants, causing doors to open to European creature comforts and styles. Because riches and sophistication could not be openly flaunted as much in the public, the local aristocracy lived on lots of land within the city grid that were, essentially, small-scale villages: it is in these dwellings of the elite, oddly enough, that a fully functioning community of Ecuadorians from all social tiers worked, ate, slept, and lived in a relative harmony. Through a subconscious, reactionary development over time, separation of the house interior from the outside of the houses of the wealthy became less and less distinct, resulting in a series of rooms and outdoor courtyards that are remarkably applicable to the cohousing model. Unlike common urban trends to polarize living quarters and segregate the wealthy from the poor, these urban houses depended on natives to sustain themselves. Taking this model and

adapting it to urban communities in which everyone sustains each other will, I believe, prove very attractive to Cuenicanos.

A Planner's Dream

Sustainability is not just a fundamental underlying value in cohousing communities, but a major concern that needs to be stressed in Ecuador as a whole. Morner puts Ecuador's environmental sensitivity into brutal context by describing that "in the cosmic version of the ancient Andeans, the Earth Mother, Pachamama, played a crucial role ... the sad truth is, however, that the Andean Earth Mother of today has been crudely exploited and raped."

Cuenca once again takes a central role on this issue, as sustainable land preservation tactics among its university students have been recently employed. "Third World cities experiencing rapid population growth usually results in the form of spontaneous and illegal solutions," states Stella Lowder of the University of Glasgow in regards to Cuenca, "but not in this case." Lowder explains that Cuenca's isolation has allowed the power of architects to shape modern land development to a higher degree; in 1978 every plan for development and construction had to be signed by an architect, and every architect had to be registered with the University of Cuenca. As early as 1993, landscape architecture students from Washington State University and the University of Azuay took the first steps to analyze and map Cuenca's regional resources to guide the city's growth. These early initiatives have laid solid foundations upon which valuable information can be drawn during future "best-practice" land development.

As a city that has continuously compromised ideologies when others refused to budge, Cuenca's residents have a strong sense of pride and love for their city that transcends mere architectural heritage and looks to the future in order to sustain its development through responsible, high quality, and smart design. Even more apparent is Cuenca's transnational migratory problems, which further calls for something to address the

resulting damage to the social fabric of its lower income residents. Past failures in state attempts at 'social interest' housing projects were largely the consequence of the communities not being located within easy access of employment within the old city. Adapting cohousing communities to the urban context and taking design cues from the traditional domestic house will not only address the access-issue (Cuenca is an exemplary example of a pedestrian-friendly city), but will take the idea of 'elite housing with servants' and flip it on its head for a community-based purpose that maintains the very program the house layouts were intended for in the first place. Cohousing in Cuenca is the viable solution.

The Future

An unusual house in a street attracts attention but no impression remains of the street in its entirety. For though it is easy to discover a particular detail, it is very difficult to grasp the whole, no matter how simple it is.

-Steen Eiler Rasmussen

Cities are born and thrive off the basic principal that humans need a certain level of proximity to one another in which to sustain themselves and grow as a civilization. The creations of money, property, writing, and mass transport of trade jump started urban life in cities, and established this very requirement for interdependency. Wider communication, the exchange of ideas, and long-term cultural seepage of materials have crystallized the importance of the city, in that it offers these benefits to society with the strongest dialogues. In its purest form, the community takes the embryonic social structure of the city, and it is here that the greatest influence on an individual can be applied.

This paper is not about how Cohousing will save Ecuadorian society: the future of Ecuador is unwritten. This paper does, however, bring to light serious and neglected issues that I have experienced first-hand and offers the best possible remedy through my observation and experience of other cultures addressing similar concerns in extremely different contexts.

There is still much to do before Cohousing can be applied, and it is absolutely critical that Ecuadorians themselves take the central role in the design process and implementation. Cohousing requires a communal effort; to simply design and build a neighborhood without local input is fundamentally contradictory to the idea of cohousing in its own right. Now widely popular and successful throughout Northern Europe and parts of the United States, cohousing spreads because of common discontent in living options. Kathryn McCamant and Charles Durrett, the pioneers who are largely responsible for introducing cohousing to the United States, describe this dissatisfaction in that "traditional forms of housing no longer address the needs of many people ... Things that people once took for granted – family, community, a sense of belonging – most now be actively sought out. Many people are mis-housed, ill-housed, or unhoused because of lack of appropriate options."

The cohousing concept reestablishes many of the advantages of traditional villages within the concept of our contemporary lives. For this reason I feel that cohousing is something that can make a significant difference in Ecuador, and in no other context can it be more appropriately applied and localized to the existing climate in the city of Cuenca.

by Alexander Morley