THE CHALLENGE OF CHANGE: ETHNIC IDENTITY AND BUILT FORM AMONG MEXICAN PUREPECHAS

M A R I - J O S E A M E R L I N C K

This paper attempts to interpret current changes in built form among Mexican Purepechas by relating them to changes in the expression of ethnic identity, following Guillermo Bonfil's proposal for studying the cultures of ethnic groups. A consideration of how Purepecha ethnic identity is reflected not only in the dwelling but also in other characteristic Purepecha built forms and space usages shows that such changes in patterns of living occur at different rates. These differential rates of change shed light on how changes may either be derived from the natural development of Purepecha building tradition or imposed from the outside by the larger social system. The current trend for globalization has increased both internal and external pressures on groups such as the Purepechas to modernize. However, the paper also draws attention to the fact that the loss of vernacular built environments may not be inevitable if outside interests can be made to respect a group's power to control and decide their own cultural development.

The Purepechas and their ancestors (also known in the ethnographic literature as Tarascans) have lived for at least eight centuries in traditional rural settlements located in the mountains, valleys, and lake basins formed as Mexico's volcanic axis crosses central and northwestern Michoacan state (FIG. 1). The Purepechas share with other Mexican peasants, and with other ethnic groups, structural and cultural characteristics related to a self-sufficient agricultural economy. These imprint themselves on every aspect of Purepecha life, from the low level of economic accumulation and the absence of consumerism, to the ability to perform diverse activities and rely on the family as a source of labor. Reciprocal exchange of goods and services,
consensual agreement, and a high valuation of land, group and territory are outstanding elements of the Purepecha world view. In the last decades, however, a decline of agricultural activities and a growth in population have forced Purepecha men and women to search for wages in Mexican cities or in the United States. The resultant increase in acquisitive power and the modification of consumer patterns have led to a decline in self-sufficiency. As a result, trends toward modernization now run alongside ancestral practices within Purepecha culture.

In relation to the Purepecha built environment, most recent changes have concerned the introduction of new materials and new shapes for dwellings. Characteristic patterns of domestic spatial organization — as well as other built forms, such as the firewood hearth, and spatial patterns, such as the use of the ground — are changing more slowly. These differential rates of change in Purepecha culture and built form show that changes derived from within the ethnic group add to changes imposed from beyond its boundaries. They also indicate that different rates of change can occur in the expression of ethnic identity.

CULTURE, ETHNICITY, AND THE THEORY OF CULTURAL CONTROL

The relations of ethnic and peasant features to architecture, constructive activities, and the use of space have been little studied in Mexico, and practically nothing is known about the opposition between traditional built forms and the forms of the larger national society. Mainstream architecture has not appreciated, beyond rhetoric, the wealth of knowledge accumulated in the architecture of native Mexicans, nor has it fostered the practice and development of native traditions. Instead, ignorance and neglect by mainstream architecture in Mexico are exacerbated by a lack of respect that actively seeks to change, substitute, and even destroy the architecture and built forms of different ethnic groups. In the particular case of the Purepechas, government, institutions and individuals have all imposed changes on Purepecha dwellings and settlements without prior knowledge or discernment.

It is often stated that the disappearance of traditional dwellings and settlements is practically inevitable in the face of modernization — as inevitable as the disappearance of the way of life that creates them and gives them meaning. Consequently, studies of vernacular architectures are often undertaken with a sense of urgency, driven by a desire to document accumulated knowledge before it disappears. Scholars worry this disappearance will aggravate the current scarcity of urban dwellings for rural migrants — already a world problem, given the inability of governments and planners to cope with demand. The cultural study of built environments has thus grown into an influential field since it was introduced as a scientific endeavor some twenty years ago.

However, a cultural approach alone cannot fully explain the process of change and destruction of traditional environments, because the appeal to modernize does not necessarily (or even usually) rise from endogenous causes. The drive to modernize is not the result of society's natural evolution; nor is it the consequence of an innocent acculturation process, where a certain dwelling or settlement, labeled as traditional, is freely replaced by a modern one. Furthermore, simple cultural factors cannot explain why the built environments of societies in the underdeveloped world, despite their lesser wealth, have undergone a more widespread process of destruction and substitution than have the built environments of more advanced societies. Nor can they explain why conservation policies related to traditional built environments have been better observed in wealthy, developed countries, despite the fact that such countries have been better able to afford the losses. The economic and moral cost of destroying rural traditional dwellings and settlements for the sake of change thus has been
which the dominant society, related to the West, regarded the Spanish conquest of Indian groups in the region had two society, differences between the Indians and the Westernized system. Ethnicity thus became a cognitive category in terms and distinctive culture. This concept of ethnicity, where culture of Indian groups in Mexico. In Mexico, interethnic relationships have a colonial origin. The sixteenth-century concept of "ethnic cleansing," which is causing so much pain and complexity societies, where groups sharing a common culture were related to and formed the parts of a larger social system. Ethnicity thus became a cognitive category in terms of which groups structure their experience and are classified in terms of basic identity determined by origin, background and distinctive culture. This concept of ethnicity, where "Membership in an ethnic group is a matter of social definition, an interplay of the self-definition of members and the definition of other groups," should not be confused with the concept of "ethnic cleansing," which is causing so much pain in the world today.

In this paper I apply to the study of Purepecha built forms the proposal on "cultural control" developed by Guillermo Bonfil, who has aimed to understand the role ethnicity plays in the culture of Indian groups in Mexico. In Mexico, interethnic relationships have a colonial origin. The sixteenth-century Spanish conquest of Indian groups in the region had two important effects: it interrupted the development of Mesoamerican civilization; and it created a colonial situation in which the dominant society, related to the West, regarded the dominated peoples as inferior, and imposed acculturation on them. Even in this century, when awareness has grown as to the need to include Indian peoples in a national Mexican society, differences between the Indians and the Westernized populace have been interpreted as poverty to be subsidized and ignorance to be remedied, never as difference to be respected. As a consequence of the policy of respect for equality but denial of difference, every proposal for the advancement of ethnic peoples and for their integration into national development has triggered a process of cultural loss, of "de-indianization."

Bonfil equates ethnicity to cultural control because a group's ethnicity is defined by two conditions: the possession of an autonomous and distinctive culture, and the power to make decisions about it. An "owned" culture is defined as the repertoire of cultural elements produced by a group or kept as its preexisting heritage, plus those elements the group has not produced or reproduced, but which are used by the group in actions and activities that respond to its own decisions. According to this notion, ethnicity is the "acting of one's own culture" — the practice of determining cultural elements that are not imposed, but which are owned by the group. Such cultural elements may either have been created by the group, by other ethnic groups, or by the larger society; but in all cases they have become the property of the ethnic group. The accompanying diagram represents the relationship between cultural elements and the power to decide (FIG. 2). It defines a gradient of what is considered a group's own culture (whether this has risen from within the group or not), what is alienated culture, and what is imposed culture.

Bonfil stresses that in situations of colonial origin, such as Mexico's, ethnic identity is deemed to be undesirable by the dominant society. The stigmatization that results plays a major role in the system of interethnic relationships because members of the subordinate group either internalize the conviction of being inferior or conceal their identity.

The analysis of architecture and built forms in terms of an ethnic group's cultural control over them, as proposed by Bonfil, avoids some of the limitations of a cultural approach. For example, causal relationships may be established by ranking cultural elements in terms of their autonomous generation or appropriation by the group and of the group's power of decision over them. In this way a diachronic dimension, which a purely cultural approach ignores, may be introduced. Furthermore, an approach based on ethnicity calls attention to the fact that building according to ethnic traditions may become a stigma, and that changes to the tradition may be favored, not for the sake of modernization, but as a way to avoid discrimination. Finally, the approach based on ethnicity shows it is not enough simply to describe cultural elements as if they were neutral; the group's relationship to them must also be defined.
ETHNIC IDENTITY AND BUILT FORMS

Although interest in the prehispanic Purepechas goes back to the late nineteenth century, intensive ethnographic research on the group was only initiated half a century later, in the late thirties and forties. Historical conditions at that time favored the idea that all native Mexicans could be incorporated into national, modern development with the help of scientific research. The ethnocentrism of the first Purepecha study was, however, tempered by the Tarascan Project, a joint United States-Mexico research endeavor that, among other valuable contributions, produced the first and only monograph on vernacular housing in Mexico. It must be stressed that this initial interest on Purepecha houses stemmed from applied anthropology, nor from any direct interest in Purepecha architecture or use of space. One of the goals of the Tarascan Project was "to provide specific and accurate data on which any successful action programs affecting the peoples concerned must be based." Information on housing conditions was important at the time because housing was considered in programs of social welfare. Among other housing issues the study pretended to investigate were the suitability of houses for the needs of their inhabitants, potential ways of improving present houses, and ways in which Tarascans might be induced to change to a better type of house.

It is significant that one conclusion of the Tarascan Project was that, since the Purepechas kept few prehispanic cultural patterns, they were among the most acculturated native Mexicans. It is also significant that the project director and leading ethnographer, Ralph L. Beals, took architecture, along with language and the use of native place names, as the principal criteria to delimit Tarascan territory. He wrote that "Aspects of colonial and modern Tarascan architecture appear in many of the Mestizo towns of the area, and in places Tarascan architecture terminates with a fairly sharp boundary, for example, along the south shore of Lake Chapala." He also asserted that "Characteristic of both Mestizo and Tarascan architecture in central Michoacan are wide overhanging eaves. It seems unlikely that this feature is aboriginal, but its distribution appears to coincide approximately with the former limits of Tarascan speech." Unfortunately, Beals never defined "Tarascan architecture," nor did he develop his hypotheses concerning the relation between the ethnic group's territorial boundaries and its architecture, thus he left the impression that house types were mostly of Spanish (Mestizo) inspiration. However, this is not the case. By appropriating foreign forms and adapting them to their own use, Purepechas created their own built tradition. And they not only expressed their ethnic identity in the external shape of dwellings but in the spatial organization and form of their entire built environment. A joint research project on these constructed products, as cultural elements owned by the group and upon which decisions are exerted, is in process. I will only describe here some of that study's considerations in regard to the dwelling, the hearth, and the use of the ground as these cultural elements are related to ethnic identity.

THE DWELLING

The visual unity of house shape, as noted by Beals in relation to Tarascan areas, is a common feature in the vernacular-architecture design process. In this process, a model or architectural type, made of certain traits, is copied and adapted to each individual case. This leads to the creation of characteristic "cultural landscapes." Looking back, it is possible to realize that, in his description of the boundaries of Purepecha architecture, Beals was searching for the boundaries of the Purepecha cultural landscape. The external shape of the common Purepecha house has led ethnographers to classify Purepecha dwellings into two types: one built with adobes, with a pitched roof covered with tiles (FIG. 3); the other, known as the traje, built with hinged wooden planks, with a hipped roof covered with shakes (FIGS. 4-5). A recent study shows that this classification overemphasizes the importance of visual shape and the use of different materials, and it proposes instead to consider both house types as variations of a single model. It argues that this model probably originated in a prehispanic form of the traje, since both variants of it share a common spatial organization which features a room, a porch, and a storage loft.

Unfortunately, Beals never defined "Tarascan architecture," nor did he develop his hypotheses concerning the relation between the ethnic group's territorial boundaries and its architecture, thus he left the impression that house types were mostly of Spanish (Mestizo) inspiration. However, this is not the case. By appropriating foreign forms and adapting them to their own use, Purepechas created their own built tradition. And they not only expressed their ethnic identity in the

**FIGURE 2.** Chart showing the status of cultural elements in relation to a group's control over them.
Ethnographic research has left unexplored the question of whether such a dwelling type may, in fact, be a diagnostic trait of Purepecha culture. And, in terms of ethnic identity, there also seems to be a paradox relating to it. On the one hand, it has been said that the Purepechas abandoned their prehispanic dwellings, and that the formal traits of their present buildings (such as pitched roofs and some materials such as adobes and tiles) are of Spanish origin, and hence elements of alien culture. On the other hand, the public perception of the troje is that it is a token of an autonomous Purepecha culture, like the Navajo hogan. The troje is even exhibited in some museums, unfortunately more as a mere object than for the constructive knowledge it represents. But even this interest is most unusual in Mexico, where vernacular architecture is little known and not generally considered as part of the cultural heritage.

However, the above paradox is only superficial. The Spanish conquest and colonization undoubtedly did exert influence on Purepecha built forms, particularly on the shape of dwellings. Within this influence there probably was a good amount of initial imposition. But teaching and acculturation probably also contributed to the spread of the new technologies and tools that transformed the way stone, timber and mud were employed and how they looked. In particular, new techniques and formal traits were adopted and adapted from other buildings, such as churches and gentry houses. With these alien formal features and techniques of Spanish origin, in a long process of appropriation and through the exertion of their own freedom of cultural choice, the Purepechas developed their own brand of architecture and a distinct tradition of building and using space.

Until a few years ago this tradition was alive, because alien elements were appropriated by the group, who could decide their course. The Purepecha tradition had not yet reached the end of its vital cycle or completed its development. But the introduction of industrial materials and technology, with the attendant structures of labor organization, has interrupted this evolution. The Purepechas, no longer satisfied with their traditional dwellings, have now begun replacing them with new ones. It is important to ask whether this substitution is being achieved with alien cultural elements in order to create a new tradition through appropriation, as in the past; or whether it is the result of an imposition, involving neither teaching nor acculturation, which will eventually lead to a loss of cultural control. Unfortunately, the latter seems to be the case, because, to the extent that new industrial materials and building systems radically differ from traditional ones, the Purepechas are being deprived of the ability to control the complete process of change.

There are a number of conditions that have contributed to the growing rupture between past and present conditions of Purepecha house construction. One is that fully developed trees, required for good troje construction, no longer grow, so the new structures that are being built are of poor quality. Furthermore, many owners of old trojes have begun to sell them for their value as timber, and these sales are not to fellow villagers, but to outsiders, who use the trojes as extra rooms in their houses, hotels or stores. The sellers have then replaced the traditional structures with cement and brick dwellings. No vehicle presently exists to encourage troje preservation as a part of the Purepecha cultural heritage. And the popularity of trojes within their new uses is probably less related to their being a representation of Purepecha culture than to the ability of the purchased trojes to solve space needs at low cost while introducing folk ambiance. The sale of trojes had once been a pattern of autonomous Purepecha culture. Because their hinged wooden planks and other parts could be disassembled and moved, they could become an asset for sale — like other peasant possessions — in times of need. But the conditions under which present sales are taking place differ from traditional conditions. This represents the culmination of a process by which the troje has become an element of alienated culture, and is being substituted for with a different building.
The other type of Purepecha dwelling, the adobe house, is also undergoing a process of substitution. The building of the traditional adobe dwelling is related to the agricultural cycle. Specifically, such a dwelling can only be built during the three to four months of the dry season, after the harvest of corn and wheat, from February to April; and it must be completed in two distinct stages. In the first, adobes are made and walls are erected, while in the second, the roof timber and tiles are prepared and positioned. This building process is also related to the domestic group’s life cycle, since newlyweds traditionally reside patrilocal for two or three years before constructing their own house on a piece of land received from the husband’s parents.

At present most young Purepecha couples are building their new houses out of industrial materials such as brick and cement, employing techniques such as reinforced concrete to produce a flat roof (FIG. 6). This practice relegates the use of adobe for bearing walls to ancillary buildings, and it introduces important structural changes. Spatial organization has changed, too, since the flat roof means the disappearance of the storage loft. The changes in adobe construction are not limited to younger Purepechas; some older people are also changing their adobe houses. Modification may concern only the appearance of facades by substitution of mud wall finish with plaster finish and the introduction of windows. Or it may involve the outright demolition of the adobe house and its substitution with a concrete and brick dwelling.

Prospective builders often express their own ambiguity about their decision to introduce changes to the traditional model, even after having decided to modernize. Nevertheless, innovations are clearly related to the ability to pay in cash, to leave self-sufficiency behind. There may still be a reluctance to do this, as shown by some people’s decision to make adobes instead of buying bricks. And traditional builders are well aware that they possess a valuable knowledge, and that they are respected for it. What seems to be changing is that not everyone still takes pride in such knowledge. Current changes in dwellings, then, may be interpreted as a search, particularly among men, for a new image, one removed from Purepecha society, like many agricultural societies, is male oriented and has a strong patriarchal bias. In the established sexual division of labor it is a man’s role to control and produce the whole process of building, from bread oven (FIG. 7) and pottery kilns to dwellings. It is a man’s task to make adobes, quarry and fetch stones, fell and haul trees for timber, and perform the actual construction and maintenance of walls and roofs. Most recent changes in dwellings, which can be explained by changes in men’s economic activities, have also been introduced and conducted by men. Ethnographers have, however, overlooked women’s role in one key area: as builders of firewood hearths. When the hearth is taken as more than just an object of material culture, but is considered the result of a significant constructive activity owned and controlled by women, new insights may be gained about Purepecha culture. In particular, this and other feminine building activities—such as forms of semantic architecture, reed weaving, embroidering and pottery making (whose description is omitted here)—are not restricted, as are men’s, by the rhythms of the agricultural cycle.

In Purepecha society it is a woman’s role to cook and to build two kinds of cooking place: the parangtua (Pur.), and the chimiteocc (Sp., chipinaotkua, Pur.). The former, dating from preconquest times, is shared with all native Mexicans. It is made with three or more stones disposed on the ground, or partly dug into it, to contain the firewood and hold the cooking pots (FIGS. 8, 9). The parangtua is found in every Purepecha kitchen, but it can also be installed anywhere and reproduced in any quantity when cooking for a crowd. Such multiple construction is a fairly common occurrence, since food is lavishlly distributed as part of the observance of every happy or sad event. Construction of the parangtua may seem an insignificant task, but its
proper working requires specific knowledge and experience to obtain the right amount of ventilation, in order to reach adequate cooking temperatures while saving firewood and avoid overheating and breaking the clay pots.

The simple built form of the *paranguas* comes in a number of variations, which probably developed a long time ago, and which are geared to concentrate heat for the clay griddle pan in which maize tortillas, the main daily food staple, are cooked. One variation involves a more complex structure, shaped like a horseshoe, made with standing bricks or adobes bonded with mud, which hardens with the heat (FIG. 10).

Even more complex is the taller *chimeneas*, also specialized for tortilla baking, but made with adobes and stones bonded with mud and hand-coated with a mixture of mud, straw and donkey dung. Women also apply this mixture as a finish to the kitchen walls when they become overblackened by smoke (FIG. 11). The tortilla griddle pan is fitted into the structure with mud. The more elaborate *chimeneas* have level surfaces at different heights to hold a grinding stone and other objects (FIG. 12). A refinement in design is the incorporation of an excavated shaft to draw away the smoke from the cook (FIG. 13). *Chimeneas* may rise some 30 cm. (12 in.) when they are used by a woman sitting on the floor, or they may rise higher to fit their owner's height when she stands up.

The technique of building the *chimeneas* is similar to that employed by men to build the bread oven — although the latter also employs bricks. Such information is of interest to ethno-archaeologists, as it shows that women have been building hearths from prehispanic times when the bread oven was introduced along with wheat by the Spaniards. *Chimeneas* are
of alien origin too, and as such they are not an element of autonomous Purepecha culture to the same extent as parangtta. Nevertheless, through adaptations, chimeneas have become an element of appropriated culture. To see how the form has been adapted, one can compare the Purepecha chimeneas to that of Mestizos, which is similarly built, but which differs in shape, finish and function. Mestizo chimeneas also lack built-in steps, and only have a top surface (often covered with tiles), with one or more iron grill to support either the pots or the griddle pan, giving them a more nonspecialized function.

Purepechas say that only in a very poor woman’s kitchen will one find a parangtta but not a taller chimenea. This fact not only shows which is the older form of hearth, but indicates that chimeneas are of a higher status because they are tall. Actual differences in economic levels have not been substantiated in fieldwork, but it is a common feature of Purepecha space perception to associate height to status. In some villages people will point out that the taller houses were built by the wealthy. And they will single out examples where a roof was actually removed so the walls could be raised by a few extra rows of adobes.

The fact that women build hearths in Purepecha society indicates that the dwelling is a feminine domain, and that women spend most of their time in the kitchen, close to the hearth. Men build the dwelling, but they must use it sparingly, practically just to eat, rest, and maintain it. To achieve a sense of well-being while in the kitchen, women’s cooking places follow a characteristic pattern of Purepecha space use, involving constant experimentation in the moving of things from one place to the other. While it is less problematic to move parangtta around, women may also change the location of their chimeneas every year (or more), until they feel comfortable. There also seems to be a strong symbolic meaning attached to a woman’s sense of well-being by the hearth. In one case, disease attributed to witchcraft disappeared after a woman followed the advice of a healer to destroy the existing chimenea, dump the rubble, and build a new one elsewhere. Women who cannot build chimeneas feel embarrassed, while skillful builders show great pride in keeping the tradition of chimeneas building alive and passing it, along with the ability to cook, to their daughters.

In contrast to this continuity of tradition, men’s activities may have changed more and faster than women’s. One reason may be that when Purepechas migrate to urban centers women usually earn wages doing domestic work as maids. Changes in Purepecha spatial organization, such as the loss of the loft in dwellings, are also mostly related to the fact that agriculture is no longer the only occupation of Purepecha men — particularly those who leave the village temporarily. Fertilizers, farm tractors, and pesticides have further increased the productivity of agricultural labor, while there have been no comparative advances related to domestic chores. Women’s labor is still hard, and while men are more than willing to change work habits related to their own trades, they will shiver at the thought of eating machine-made tortillas, except under extreme circumstances. Women agree, and as a result parangtta and chimeneas are still built in the traditional style, even in new houses of cement and brick.

Such cultural vitality in the midst of current change in dwelling patterns shows how women preserve their gender-specific activities better than men (the same is true of ethnic clothing and attire, and of many rituals). It also shows that there is only a slow pace of change in relation to food preparation. But most important is that neither of these cultural practices, either parangtta or chimenea building, have been opposed, nor forced to change, by the larger society. In some cases they may even have been incorporated into it.

**THE USE OF THE GROUND AS PLACE**

In addition to their neglect for traditional Purepecha hearth-building activities, ethnographic studies have neglected the importance of the ground for the Purepechas and the use they make of it not only as the surface of the earth, the horizontal plane of their lives, but as a concrete object much like a piece of furniture. For the Purepechas, the ground is an object that may actually be constructed and defined or transformed into an activity setting. A minimum of resources may be required to accomplish this: a reed mat, a stone, a coiled rope, a basket. The ground may become a place to sleep, to play, to cook, to do all sorts of chores, or simply to be (FIG. 14). As a result, for the Purepechas there is a clear difference between things “fallen to the ground” and things “stored in the ground” (although they might look the same to outsiders). The preference to use the ground as a built place is an element of Purepecha autonomous culture. Such constant deliberate use is an indication of the extent that furniture such as beds, tables and chairs (which have been slowly introduced) are elements of imposed culture. In fact, furniture is often bought and kept by the Purepechas merely as a status symbol — as proof of purchasing power — and it is not really used in everyday life (FIG. 15). This is also the case with gas stoves, which have been unable to displace the centuries-old practice of cooking with firewood at ground level, as described above.

Little research has been undertaken on the use of the ground as an element of autonomous Purepecha culture. But this
FIGURE 14. (TOP) Women sleeping, partly hidden by their shawls, while others rest, embroider and sit, waiting to sell their pottery and sewings in the crafts market of the town of Patzcuaro.

FIGURE 15. (BOTTOM) These women use the public stone bench in the Patzcuaro square for storage, while they sit on the floor behind a display of their embroideries.

research is important because, like hearth building, ground use has been little opposed by mainstream society, and so it remains a well-rooted cultural element. Once the importance of ground use is acknowledged, it gives new meaning to certain distinctive Purepecha body postures, gestures and proxemics, which in turn can be seen as sources of ethnic differentiation that have been resilient to change. It also helps explain certain Purepecha spatial, hygienic and aesthetic practices and perceptions that differ from those of Western society. For example, to the Purepechas, normal activities and regular things are located on the lower, ground plane; while on the upper planes are located nonordinary activities. Among other things this explains the hierarchy of objects arranged around the domestic altar, where holy images hang from the highest part of the wall. It also provides an explanation for that element of Purepecha etiquette that prescribes that visitors sit in a regular chair, while Purepechas sit either on a low seat or on the floor. Thus, when there are few chairs available, their distribution to visitors and men first replicates the prescribed social hierarchy. Seating practice of this kind is also an element of autonomous Purepecha culture, probably dating from prehispanic times. Indeed, the sixteenth-century drawings of the most important ethnohistoric Purepecha source depict the Purepecha king, priests, and other important men either sitting on or next to low stools, while commoners crouch on the ground.

It is important to note in relation to this aspect of Purepecha culture that Purepechas do not consider the ground as being intrinsically dirty, as Westerners often do. For the Purepechas it is the use the ground is put to that turns a certain spot into a dirty or clean place (domestic animals, such as dogs, may have a hard time with these subtle nuances). Storage of goods is also not as incoherent as it may first seem. There is an orderly front, and a back where disorder is permitted; and there is an interest in defining limits and center in very subtle, almost imperceptible ways. This spatial positioning explains the orderly display of goods in Indian markets, where taller items are always placed toward the rear where they can hide the carrying gear, the cooking pots, and the sleeping baby. Understanding this general spatial principle may help explain other Purepecha cultural elements, from the aesthetic patterns of the ritual display of food, candles and flowers on the tombs of the dead on All Saints Day (which have made Purepechas famous worldwide), to the overall spatial organization of dwellings where there is a gradient of order and cleanliness from the front to the back.

THE IMPOSITION TO CHANGE TRADITIONAL BUILT FORMS

Bonfil complained that the extension of medical services to Indian populations was not paralleled by a similar effort to understand and develop Mesoamerican ethnomedicine. This complaint could be similarly applied to the introduction of
modem engineering and architectural facilities, and to the imposition of new industrial materials and techniques by government, individuals and organizations without any attempt to understand the distinctive patterns of ethnoarchitecture. Studies of Purepecha dwellings have introduced objective evaluations in an effort to determine the adequacy of housing to people's needs, but they have not questioned the right of outsiders to impose changes on some or all of Purepecha tradition before understanding it. This colonizing approach has characterized all relations between the larger society and the Purepecha ethnic group. From the time the Spaniards tore down Purepecha towns and temples, and forced the people from their original dispersed settlements into newly founded communities, the Purepecha built environment has been an object of disrespect by the dominant society.

Recently, explicit disqualifications of traditional built forms have been advanced by well-intentioned community development programs, sponsored by the government or international agencies. Such efforts have encouraged, and even imposed, the abandonment and substitution of traditional built forms and building traditions for such objective hygiene reasons as the unhealthiness of earth floors, inadequate disposal of refuse, and proximity to animals. But subjective opinions have prevailed as well. For example, bricks are said to be "a better material" than adobe, and it is argued that the hearth should be raised from floor level "because it is better for women." Fortunately, the wider practices of ground usage have gone mostly unnoticed. But such out-of-hand disqualification of the low hearth by a development agency shows an unmistakable ethnocentrism. According to this view, to be better implies being more like "us" — for your own good.

Another implicit disqualification of the Purepecha built environment concerns the example set by official buildings such as schools, hospitals and offices, which express the larger society's presence in rural communities. In particular, formal education has shown contempt for ethnic culture by forbidding first, and avoiding later, the transmission of knowledge in native languages. Syllabi are designed in the city by urban teachers alien to the local situation, who do not care to learn from traditional knowledge. Even so, when formal education was introduced in the thirties, schools employed architectural features (such as porticoes and columns) and building materials (such as adobe, tiles and timber) that were related to local building traditions (FIG. 16). Today even this practice has been abandoned, and a single school design is now being used throughout Mexico.

In another example of how official building projects ignore local influences, some sixteenth-century adobe communal religious houses (Hospital) were recently torn down to be replaced by a new public facility built with alien elements (FIG. 17). Finally, and perhaps most characteristically, the Instituto Nacional Indigenista (INI)'s local headquarters in Cherán in the heart of Purepecha territory was built with concrete pointed arches and paraboloids. Nothing could have been more alien to local built shapes and materials.

The contempt for traditional forms has only increased in the last five years with modernization projects that pretend to introduce the country into a global economy and respond to the recently signed North American Free Trade Agreement. And to the government's appeal to modernize following urban patterns — trading cobblestones for pavement and introducing sewer systems before running water — has now been added a new and contradictory message: to preserve traditional environments. But the reason behind this concern has not been to maintain an alternate way of life, let ethnic groups decide their own cultural course, or preserve the country's cultural heritage. Rather, it is for the sake of tourism. Despite the fact that tourist brochures and coffee-table books mention the high quality of Purepecha craftsmanship in textiles, pottery, reed weaving, and feather and silver work, a process of Disneyfication is currently being imposed on certain Purepecha villages around lake Patzcuaro. The hope is to attract UNESCO's patronage to declare the area a World Cultural Heritage site. These imposed modifications, paid for by the government, follow patterns developed in local Meszizo towns that probably fit the bureaucrat's ideal of what a "typical Purepecha village" should look like. Adobe walls are plastered and painted either in adobe brown or white and copper — but only along main streets. The possibility for Purepecha architecture to express and reinforce ethnic identity is thus denied, and it is rather forced to undergo a further
process of alienation to satisfy the needs of the larger society. Despite the care the government shows toward the traditional built environment, the prevailing, not-so-hidden message is that even if traditional villages are beautiful, they are not appropriate for visitors unless they undergo cosmetic changes.

CONCLUSIONS

Purepechas seem to share, as do peasants in many other areas of the underdeveloped world, the situation described by Hassan Fathy in relation to Egyptian peasants, in which modern shanty-town architecture comes to substitute for traditional rural dwellings without there being a full understanding of new styles and materials. As in all processes of conquest, part of the old knowledge is lost, while new ways are introduced before they can be completely mastered. Change becomes an end in itself, and tradition — the only safeguard peasants and ethnic groups have against the loss of their culture — disappears. In the end, it is only the poorest who continue with traditional design. Fathy describes how a loss of tradition implies a loss of knowledge, of craftsmanship. But he also explains how people can be receptive to the rescue of local forms and can regain their pride in them, because the fine craftsman has a discriminating eye and can judge fairly the merits of different designs. Fathy also explains how abilities may remain latent, making it unnecessary to reteach the techniques once their lost prestige has been recovered.

I have argued that this loss of tradition and prestige has been a guided process, not a natural one, and that it now threatens the Purepecha building tradition with extinction. When the Purepecha dwelling, the Purepecha firewood hearths, and the Purepecha use of the ground — expressions of ethnic identity, defined in terms of cultural control — are analyzed according to the chart in Figure 2, a differential rate of alienation and imposition emerges, and is shown in the accompanying chart (FIG. 18). This analysis substantiates the assertion that the differential rate of change in Purepecha built forms cannot be explained by internal factors such as the aspiration to modernize, but must also be the result of external factors and outright imposition as well.

It is impossible to predict whether Purepecha building traditions will succumb totally to these alien forces. If Fathy's perceptions about the ability of cultural traditions to be endowed with new life is true, there may yet be hope that they will draw new vitality from other sources. Such an outcome might require a larger degree of control and proficiency over the use of industrial building materials than now exists, plus an increasing awareness about the value of traditional forms. Such awareness could enlighten those who currently hesitate about the proper course to take when building. A new tradition incorporating old and new elements could arise, as in the past, and this could contain an awareness and pride of identity that would shield the Purepechas from any form of stigmatization.

In any case, more research is needed in order to know before changing, to understand the role that built forms play in relation to ethnic identity and to increase the group's awareness about it. It may be more difficult for outside groups to exert outright imposition when such knowledge exists, both among those who are in a position to impose and among those who want to leave the old for the sake of it. The challenge of change will then be to overcome the negative consequences of destruction of traditional built environment.

It is important to undertake this kind of research at the present time when processes of industrialization appear to have no rational limits, and when the integration of the global economic system has been achieved. However, such tolerance and defense of cultural plurality is not always sought by many of the groups who currently claim to represent ethnic vindication. Many of these groups really only advocate their own interests against those of others, creating new forms of discrimination and imposition. The proposal to consider built forms not solely as a part of the culture, as is generally done, but also as a part of ethnic identity, permits a better understanding of the role built forms play in originating and maintaining certain structural and cultural characteristics of native groups, such as the Purepechas. This scheme may be applied to other situations where cultural plurality is considered a valuable goal, but in which it has not yet been achieved.
The fieldwork on which this paper is based was made possible by a grant from the Seminario de Estudios de Cultura, Consejo Nacional para la Cultura y las Artes, and research funds provided by the Universidad de Guadalajara. The author acknowledges support of both institutions. She also acknowledges the comments, drawings and photographs of Juan Fernando Bontempo, who is a partner in this research; the suggestions made on a first draft of this paper by two anonymous reviewers; and — last but not least — the patience and hospitality of many Purepechas.

6. Ibid., p. 28.
7. Ibid., p. 27.
8. Ibid., p. 36.
9. "The social inferiority of Tarascans is an incontrovertible fact, as proved by experimental tests to discover professional aptitudes." L. Mendiera y Nuñez, "Introducción," in L. Mendiera y Nuñez, ed., *Las Tarascas* (México, D.F.: UNAM, 1940), p.xxviii. The author thought this situation resulted from accidental social and economic conditions that should be improved.
12. J. Steward, "Preface," in Beals et al., *Houses*, p. ix. "Results capable of application have long been regarded as one important end of all anthropological research in the country," Beals et al., *Houses*, p. 1.
15. Ibid., p. 757.
19. J.F. Bontempo, "The Building Tradition." See also his application to Purepecha dwellings of the conceptual and methodological differentiation between shape and spatial organization, proposed by Rapoport.
23. *Relación de las Ceremonias y ritos y población y gobierno de los indios de la provincia de Múchamón* (1540), J. Tudela, ed. (Madrid, 1936).
26. INI was created especially to promote integration of Mexican ethnic groups into a single, modern Western nation. For a résumé of its goals and methods, see A. Caso, "Los ideales de la acción indigenista," *México Indígena: INI 30 años después, revisión crítica"* (México, D.F.: INI, 1978), pp. 79-82. For a critical review of the above, see Bonfil, *México Profundo*.