Working with Photographs - Aerial Perspective by Guillermo Marquez

Richard Cross (1950-1983) visited San Basilio de Palenque in June 1975 as a photographer for Colombian anthropologist Nina S. de Friedemann, who began in 1973 an academic study of San Basilio de Palenque. Prior to this assignment, he served as a Peace Corps volunteer in Colombia for eighteen months, where he assisted the Colombian government in documenting erosion and cultivation practices, among other things.

The expressed goal of this anthropological study of San Basilio de Palenque was to study the organization, evolution and living conditions of its inhabitants, *palenqueros*, since its founding by the liberated Africans who sought refuge and freedom from European society and slavery in the mountains and forests of northeast Colombia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. More specifically, the study aimed at contributing to the deconstruction of stereotypes about palenqueros, and all Afro-Colombians, that are rooted in social, racial and economic discrimination with colonial era origins. In doing so, de Friedemann's study sought to make those descendants of the original palenqueros visible in Colombian society and the world. Their exploits stand as a testament to African resistance to slavery in the Americas.

In this section, we will explore San Basilio de Palenque from an aerial perspective through the lens of Richard Cross. An aerial perspective allows us to see the palenqueros' environmental reality and, through his notes, we know that Cross endeavored not only to demonstrate the geographic panorama, but also the terrain and vegetation that surrounds San Basilio de Palenque.[1] His aim was also to compare and contrast the community's physical structure and organization to that of ancestral Africa.

Before we do, however, consider the following information regarding aerial/panoramic photography.

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Mapping:

Visual orientation is vital, that is why outlining cultural geography and environment serves as a frame of reference.[2] Aerial or panoramic photographs allow us to identify an environment, natural or otherwise. Through this we can identify landmarks such as rivers, mountains, valleys, airfields, bases, neighborhoods, etc. Hence, photography is important to mapping.

Aerial photography is the most advanced application of photography as it was most useful for mappers. At this point, most if not all of the world has been photographed and the record has revealed things previously invisible to the naked eye at ground level. Many archeological sites have been found using aerial photographs.[3] Thus, aerial photography is very important to archaeology and many other fields.

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[1] Aerial Perspective of Palenque, "Pictures Needed" July 1976, Richard Cross Collection, Tom and Ethel Bradley Center at Delmar T. Oviatt Library, CSUN, Northridge, CA.

[2] Collier Jr., John, and Malcolm Collier. *Visual Anthropology: Photography as a Research Method* (Albuquerque: University of Mexico Press, 1986), 29.

[3] Ibid., 30.

Aerial photographs also provide us with sociocultural data. They demonstrate not only historical change, but also, and more importantly, present ecological relationships.[4] Below is a list of ecology and land use variables that are easily identified using aerial and panoramic view photographs[5]:

- Relationship of agriculture to geographic features - (distance from the sea, desert, mountains, etc.)
- Field Patterns - (are they large fields? small fields? etc.)
- Land divisions - (are they divided by walls? Fences? Hedges?)
- Engineering of irrigation systems - (how are they constructed/mapped out?)
- Soil fertility - (good or bad soil quality?)
- Type of soil - (is it rocky soil or alluvial delta soil?)
- Water erosion - (where has soil been washed away by water, or where alluvial movement has built soil?)
- Wind erosion
- Distribution of fields with rocks
- Fields plowed with rocks *in situ* - (fields plowed with hand tools because plowing with machines would be impossible)
- Fields cleared of rocks, large stones and stone fencing that was built with effort
- Agricultural technology - (use of contour plowing? Understanding of soil conservation and irrigation? Plowing to hold back erosion or without regard for it? Presence or absence of terracing?)
- Proportion of farmland returned to forest or brush
- Forest growth - Degree of timber farming and cutting; areas of forest blight

Aerial photography can be supplemented or even substituted by long views (panoramic) whenever a high point is present and accessible. If an aerial view is impossible, a long view is just as good, especially when the area has already been mapped by air. Panoramic views that span 180° are especially valuable to a researcher since ground-level viewing of ecological features will help to interpret aerial photographs.[6]

Color and black-and-white photographs can help us see altitude belts in both agricultural and natural ecology. A color key can be helpful when trying to discern soil variety and can be useful when attempting to quickly identify a farming region's geological topography. Whether air or ground-level mapping, the goal remains the same: to fully detail the ecology and degree of human activity.

Community Design:

Aerial and long view photographs also help us observe patterns of community design, large and small. More importantly, however, they allow us to observe a community's relationship with the surrounding ecology, whether by the sea, in a desert, in a forest, a crowded city or a rural town.[7] Human settlements obviously exist in a wide variety of environments and they often reflect their ecological reality and/or the community's culture. As each community and culture uses land

[4] Ibid.
[5] Ibid., 32.
[6] Ibid.
[7] Ibid., 33.

differently, photographing from air and ground level allows us to responsibly identify a community and its character.[8]

Panoramic photographs, if taken from a high enough point, are very much like aerial photographs. Aside from land use patterns, they also allow us to identify social and cultural boundaries present amongst different groups within any area. They can also help us identify an area's changes, such as agriculture to urban or a change in the price and use of land.[9]

Panoramic photographs of landscapes also allow us to track change over time. A photograph of a landscape taken in the past one taken recently can help us make comparisons, which in turn can help us identify important patterns of culture and change.[10]

Surveying:

As we move from the countryside and into a community, we are followed by questions of economic function and status as factors of consumption, structure and organization become more evident:[11]

- Is this town important to the region's economy?
- Is it a lively business center or a sleepy town?
- What kinds of things does it offer, food, feed, fertilizer, etc.?
- Are there advertisements? If so, what kind?
- What kinds of storefronts exist? Are the streets busy with buyers?

However, beyond the physical and economic aspects of a community, be it a town, village, city, etc., one can also assess through photographs cultural and social identity and vitality:[12]

- Are there parks or benches?
- Areas set aside for large gatherings?
- What kinds of religious institutions/buildings dominate the area?
- What about places for recreation, are there any?

Photographing out on the streets shows us the *outer face* of a community and also reveals aspects of the local or regional culture. While we can also record these aspects of a community by hand and/or commit them to memory, notes can be lost and memory fades. Therefore, the camera helps us record tangible elements that can be analyzed and compared. Using photographs along with maps help us relate an area's ecology to the local or regional culture and social structure.[13]

Photographic mapping can be used to relate ethnographic issues to a larger environment. As facets of a culture become visible and through them, we can see variables like affluence and poverty.[14]

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[8] Ibid.
[9] Ibid., 33-35.
[10] Ibid., 35.
[11] Ibid., 36.
[12] Ibid.
[13] Ibid.
[14] Ibid., 37.

To map and survey affluence and poverty in rural areas is to focus on visual norms that carry psychological, cultural and economic significance. What do homes look like, are they big or small? Run-down or well-kept? Photographs let us compare homes for scale. They also let us chart beyond economic and cultural considerations and into regional or local mental health as, "emotional and cultural well-being may also be reflected in photographs of dwellings."[15] Consider the following list of variables of well-being in a rural setting:[16]

Economic:

- Fences, gates, and driveways
- Mailboxes, labeled and painted
- Telephone lines
- Power lines to house and to outbuildings
- Condition of the house's walls and roof
- Condition of the house's windows
- Condition of the house's yard, flower beds, and/or vegetable garden
- Farm equipment near the house
- Trucks and cars in the yard

Cultural and Psychological:

- Intrinsic care of the house
- Decorative painting
- Curtains in windows, potted plants
- Self-expression in the garden - as expressed through an abundance of flowers, plants
- Self-expression in the yard - raked, swept, wood and tools are stacked and stowed neatly

While each culture has its own symbols for defining its well-being, once those symbols are recognized and understood, one can proceed to interpret them responsibly.

An urban community offers even greater visual challenges since it simply has more of everything. Through photographs, we can define boundaries between neighborhoods and also identify and describe social and economic centers as well as historical trends. Photographs help us precisely identify the social and cultural features of a neighborhood such as the character of housing and the "feel" of the area.[17]

[15] Ibid., 38.
[16] Ibid., 39.
[17] Ibid., 38-39.