

Indigenous Libraries Bridging the Design Gap

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Libraries in Latin America

Libraries in general terms are alien to Latin America and its native cultures and have traditionally adopted a Western-based design in the entire continent, even when serving communities which did not share Western values. On the other hand, traditional aboriginal spaces devoted to cultural expression and knowledge storage and transmission have been until recently unfamiliar and unknown to many within Latin American nations.

The increased visibility gained by indigenous topics and issues during the last twenty years, and the subsequent transformation of Latin American societies into more inclusive structures, has meant that libraries were transformed as well. As slow as this transformation process might have been, several advances have been made in terms of library design and service provision.

Libraries in AbyaYala

Libraries in Abya Yala are increasingly aware that they work in a land with diverse and ancient traditions. They understand that besides assessing the incorporation of latest developments, they must include in their collections and services the continent's popular knowledge, cultural diversity, traditional formats used to transmit information, and the unique Latin American intangible heritage. They understand that "library" is a concept that cannot remain anchored in the past; that it must be deconstructed, decolonized and fertilized with new ideas and approaches, so that it can evolve. Libraries accept that to be truly communal spaces, they need to consider many different perspectives, as well as the identities, languages and ideas that still exist in the continent.

Developing these library-related ideas and values in an ethnic, cultural, political, social and economic space as thorny and complex as Latin America is far from being an easy job. But despite the many setbacks, some libraries developing activities in Abya Yala's indigenous regions have achieved visibility and relevance. They gained attention after they managed to combine traditional building and space design with needed library services, all in an elegant, beautiful way.

The PAVA Project

A case study which exemplifies the new approach to indigenous libraries in Latin America relates to one of the *comunitecas* in the municipality of Tecpán (Department of Chimaltenango) in the highlands of southern Guatemala. The *comunitecas* are part of the PAVA project (Programa de Apoyo a los Vecinos del Altiplano/Support Program for the Highland Neighbours) (PAVA n.d.). There are three small libraries located in areas where most of the population belongs to the Kaqchikel people, a Maya-speaking society. The libraries in addition to maintaining their respective collections offer meeting places in which communities can conduct cultural and educational activities. They also support continuing education, working closely with rural teachers.

Innovative Space Design

The activities held today in the *comunitecas* were previously implemented in small spaces provided by other institutions, usually schools. In 2013, the Guatemalan architect Axel Paredes donated to PAVA the drawings to build a library in the community of Paxixil. Although the construction is small, the structure is very ingenious, and its appearance is certainly attractive. The structure is enclosed by mobile panels made of thick bamboos, each painted in bright colours to imitate the traditional patterns of indigenous textiles. The library provides access to 3000 books and a series of training programs for some 200 people.

In the last few years, the *comuniteca* at Paxixil has become very famous. It has been mentioned in specialized architecture magazines, such as *Domus*, and was the winner of the Architecture Biennial of Guatemala in 2016.

Paxixil's Library has not been the only rural library to win an Architecture Biennial. The public library "La Casa del Pueblo" (The People's House), located in the village of

Guanacas in the municipality of Inzá, department of Cauca, Colombia, obtained a similar recognition for its country in 2004. Designed by two architecture students at the request of Inzá officials, the library was built by the neighbours themselves over the course of a year. It has grounds and walls of stone and concrete, a complex internal structure made of thick bamboo, and a thatched roof made of straw. Although it does not precisely reflect the traditional architecture of the area, the design takes very good advantage of the available spaces and materials. "La Casa del Pueblo" provides many traditional library services to the communities settled in the area, some of whom belong to the Paez indigenous people. But its activities are often eclipsed by the history of its construction and, above all, by its evocative appearance.

Conclusion

The examples described demonstrate that the initial steps regarding library services to indigenous peoples in Latin America are being taken in the right direction. There is still the problem of stereotypes. An important issue is the development of regional and national policies regarding library services for indigenous peoples. Other issues concern lack of action in ensuring editorial production of content in indigenous languages, sustainable intercultural education and a long and complex "etcetera".

The existence of libraries like those in Paxixil and Guanacas is good news and hopefully provide exemplars to be emulated in many other places in Abya Yala and elsewhere. Step by step, libraries, especially those working in indigenous areas, must become spaces where cultures and visions combine to make places of knowledge welcoming for everyone.

Readings

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