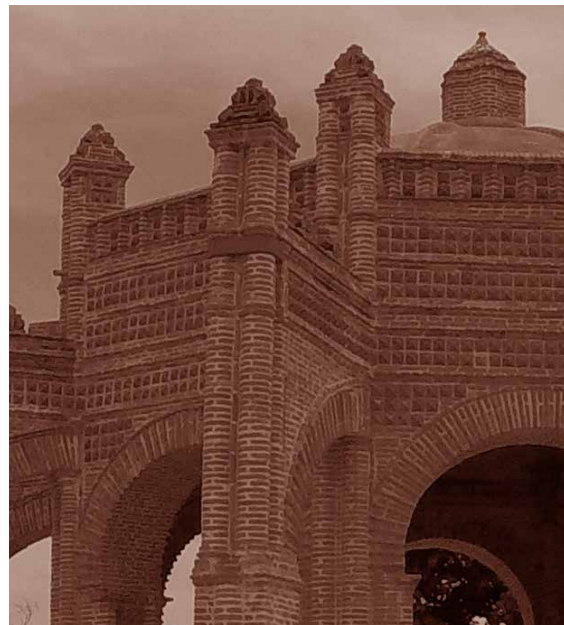
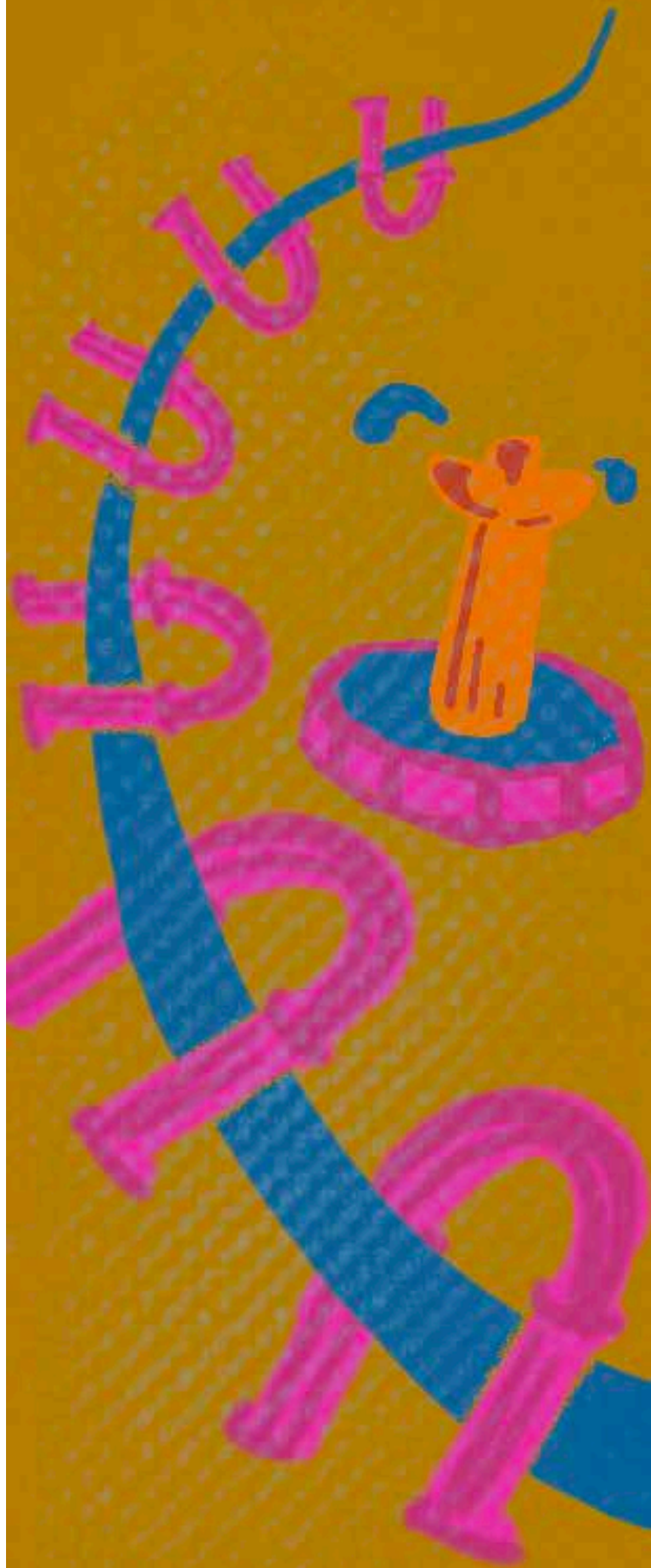


DORIS FULLER

## Un símbolo mestizo: The Chiapaneca Brick Fountain as a Product of the Transcultural Landscape of New Spain



After the fall of Tenochtitlan in 1521 and the foundation of New Spain, mendicant orders such as the Franciscans, Augustinians, and Dominicans made their way to the newly conquered territories to convert the Amerindian population to the Catholic faith.<sup>1</sup> To accomplish this, many church centres, and subsequently towns, were built across New Spain.<sup>2</sup> The conversion efforts of the friars resulted in a religious and cultural syncretism, where although the Aztec, Mayan, and other Indigenous groups practised the new religion with sufficient understanding of its teachings, they implanted native symbols and religious customs onto it.<sup>3</sup> This cultural syncretism does not reflect an amicable relationship between the two cultures. The Spanish were still in fact conquering and colonizing the Indigenous communities of Mexico and were intent



Un símbolo mestizo: The  
Chiapaneca Brick Fountain  
as a Product of the  
Transcultural Landscape  
of New Spain

DORIS FULLER

*“By exploring the function and architectural significance of a brick fountain (1562) located in the downtown plaza of Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico, it is possible to begin to understand how colonial architecture served as a stage for the intersection between Mudejar, European, and local Indigenous traditions.”*



on replacing Indigenous culture with their own. However, what happened, with or without the knowledge and approval of the Spanish, was a cultural production that integrated elements of Mexico's pre-Hispanic past with the colonial present. New buildings were meant to reproduce the classical style found in Europe; however, they were constructed using local Indigenous techniques and architectural organization.<sup>4</sup> This resulted in the emergence of different architectural styles than those in Europe. In fact, unlike the population in Spain, which had centuries of exposure to both Andalusian traditions and symbols of Spanish power, the Indigenous population was experiencing all Iberian visual culture for the first time.<sup>5</sup> The new context in which colonial architecture was made led to new meanings and interpretations, thus the architecture transformed into a reflection of the contemporary sociopolitical dynamics that were taking place in New Spain.



In order to understand the complexity that colonial structures present, one must explore the multiplicity of functions and symbolism that they held within a newly shifting transcultural landscape. By exploring the function and architectural significance of a brick fountain (1562) located in the downtown plaza of Chiapa de Corzo, Mexico, it is possible to begin to understand how colonial architecture served as a stage for the intersection between Mudejar, European, and local Indigenous traditions. The aim of this paper is to highlight the Indigenous character of the fountain while at the same time demonstrating how the process of transculturation resulted in unique works of art that became symbols of *mestizaje*, a cultural syncretism between Spanish and Mesoamerican culture.

Chiapa de Corzo was conquered in 1524 by Luis Marin and later by Diego de Mazariegos in 1528, but it was not until the Dominicans arrived in 1545 that several architectural structures were built across the region as part of a strategy to convert the local Zoque population.<sup>6</sup> The Dominicans founded Chiapa de Corzo on the very same site as the pre-Hispanic Zoque village as a way of establishing a new religious and social order, as they did with numerous other places across Mexico.<sup>7</sup> The contemporary documentation that exists for the





fountain in Chiapa de Corzo is limited. Only one source, written by Antonio Remensal fifty years after the fountain's construction, attributes the first half of the work to Rodrigo de Leon from Salamanca and the remainder to an unknown Spaniard.<sup>8</sup> Previous scholars who have written about the fountain relied only on Remensal's account for the history of the work.<sup>9</sup> As such, they mostly focused on de Leon's contributions, thus negating an important and influential aspect of the architectural structure, in which the local area and the Zoque community played a role in the fountain's construction.

*“Yet, the role the Zoque population played on the function and significance of the fountain has been given little attention by art historians”*

The structure follows an octagonal shape and consists of two main parts: the inner tempietto with arched openings and eight columns supporting a Renaissance-inspired cloister vault<sup>10</sup> and the outer ring, consisting of eight pilasters with arched flying buttresses that attach to the tempietto (fig. 1). The dome itself is octagonal, with the sections separated by thin ribs made of brick. Located within the tempietto at the centre is an octagonal basin meant for holding water. While the work looks mostly symmetrical, in one of the vertices of the outer ring extending from an arched buttress is a cylindrical tower with a spiral staircase that leads up to the roof.<sup>11</sup> Bricks with projecting diamond-shaped bosses are placed above the arched openings along the upper parts of the wall,<sup>12</sup> while flat polygonal bricks are used for the dome columns, buttresses, and ribs of the dome itself.<sup>13</sup> In addition, each dome column, pilaster, and buttress has a pinnacle and merlon at the top (fig. 1). The structure is made entirely of red brick and decorated following a design of multi-shaped brick called *aplantillado* (fig. 2)—a characteristic of the Mudejar tradition.<sup>14</sup> Although no exact parallel exists in Europe, this use of stone and geometric decoration can be seen in other architectural structures in Spain. Many sources, either directly or indirectly, influenced the construction of the fountain; for



Figure 1. La Pila Fountain, 1562, Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, Mexico. Author photo, 2018

instance, el Claustro de Guadalupe in Cáceres, Spain, made in the Mudejar manner, follows similar geometric designs and red brick handling for its exterior decoration and contains a fountain that rises from an octagonal base. Other similarities can also be seen in el Claustro de los Reyes in Salamanca. Here, one can observe a similar vaulted dome supported by arched columns, all of which are made with brick. By analyzing similar architectural structures in Europe, it is possible to understand how Rodrigo de Leon, being from Salamanca himself, was most likely drawing from his own knowledge and experiences of architecture for the fountain design in Chiapa de Corzo. In addition, for the design of the fountain, Rodrigo de Leon was also likely following Leon Battista

Alberti's architectural treatise—a series of texts that reimagined methods of classical architecture for the Renaissance landscape.<sup>15</sup> During this time, Alberti's treatise was already circulating in Europe, and as religious orders made their way to New Spain, many copies of the treatise became available in the new Spanish colonies.<sup>16</sup> Overall, the dome, the brick decoration, and the polygonal plan are characteristics of Mudejar and Renaissance architecture. The octagonal shape of the fountain also comes to signify the resurrection and eternity of Christ, as well as the renewal and the eternal eighth day after God created the universe. It is through Rodrigo de Leon, the Dominican order, and Alberti's treatise that the fountain becomes a combination of Renaissance, Mudejar, and Christian traditions. Nonetheless, the local influences also played a role in how the fountain was conceived and carried out.

Jeanette Pearson discusses how friars from the mendicant orders relied on the abundant available labour and abilities of Indigenous communities to build churches, cloisters, and civic buildings.<sup>17</sup> Further, Samuel Y. Edgerton points out how while the plans were determined by the friars—"few of whom possessed much more than a smattering of architectural or artistic skill"—most of the construction work was carried out with great autonomy by trained

Indigenous masons.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, one can assume the same was true for the fountain and the overall building program in Chiapa de Corzo. Yet the role the Zoque population played on the function and significance of the fountain has been given little attention by art historians. Instead, most scholars have focused on European influence and how the Spanish taught the local Zoque population new skills. José M. Chávez Gómez and Brooks R. Jeffrey discuss how the Dominican friars must have taught the Zoque population new techniques in architecture and ceramics.<sup>19</sup> Gómez mentions how in pre-conquest times the Zoques were good ceramicists, and for this reason they adopted these new techniques with ease.<sup>20</sup> However, it is important to keep in mind that before the arrival of the Spanish,

the Zoque population already had knowledgeable builders, ceramicists, and masons. In fact, the precolonial structures in Chiapa de Corzo were built with adobe blocks and the material used to make the fountain was widely available because the area of Chiapa de Corzo was rich in clay quarries.<sup>21</sup> This knowledge of architecture and masonry did not disappear but was maintained among the general population. While Rodrigo de Leon designed the plan for the fountain, he relied on Zoque workers with their skills and knowledge to construct it. Thus, the fountain does not symbolize only Spanish, Mudejar, and Renaissance techniques; not just one work or tradition informed the design of the fountain—rather, it was a mix of different styles and traditions.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, rather than viewing the architecture of the area just as a result of Spanish teachings and as unidirectional influence, one must consider the pre-existing traditions, techniques, and styles that were part of the distinctive local environment and how these were in fact helping shape the cultural fabric of Chiapas. Although on the surface the fountain structure displays only European Christian traditions, it is through the construction and the spatial arrangement of the building with respect to the central plaza that the work shows the use of precolonial practices. While

Figure 2. La Pila Fountain, 1562, Chiapa de Corzo, Chiapas, Mexico. Author photo, 2018



Christian conversion was the main element fuelling the cultural production of the mendicant friars, they relied on native techniques and building layouts to do so. Joan García Targa discusses how the colonial layout of town plazas built in southern Mexico mimicked the organizational layout of Mayan centres, given that the Mayan people already had big open civic spaces prior to the arrival of the Spanish.<sup>23</sup> The new colonial town plazas were seen as open civic centres—focal points of community activity just as they were in pre-conquest times.<sup>24</sup> Buildings were placed in an open square, where they could become the new centre of the community.<sup>25</sup> This parallel can also be seen in Chiapa de Corzo, where the fountain acts as a focal point of everyday activity, as it was meant to supply the population with water.<sup>26</sup> Although the fountain was intended as a symbol of Christianity, it was rooted in precolonial practices. This idea is further strengthened by the fact that the town plaza was constructed in the same place as a giant ceiba tree—still standing there today—which was sacred to the local population.

The ceiba was the centre of the quincunx and it sustained the three levels of the cosmos, with its deep roots going to the underworld, the tree trunk in the earthly realm, and its tall branches

*“Although the fountain was constructed as a symbol to represent the power of Christianity and the power of the Dominicans, it was rooted within the worldview of the Zoque.”*

connecting to the heavens.<sup>27</sup> The ceiba tree represented an *axis mundi* and would traditionally be found at the centre of villages.<sup>28</sup> The friars of Chiapa then placed the *convento*, or church, in this centre, so that it became the new heart of the village. The layout and position of the fountain in the location reflects the influence and importance of the ceiba tree on the spatial arrangement of the area.<sup>29</sup> The significance that these trees had on the local population was advantageous to the Dominicans, as they could assign a theological Christian meaning that was parallel to the Indigenous vision of the cosmos.<sup>30</sup> They drew connections to the tree of life and knowledge in the Bible<sup>31</sup> in order to try to achieve a “seamless” conversion from a pagan belief into a Christian one. The Dominicans adopted the ceiba tree and the native practice of having ceremonies in open spaces for Christian purposes. Chávez Gómez describes how, in

the beginning, the ceiba tree might have been used by Dominican friars as a place to preach.<sup>32</sup> Once the structure of the fountain was finished, prayer was done here in a semi-open space, where the dome offered good acoustics.<sup>33</sup> Kelly Wallace discusses how the spirit of these acts of appropriating native symbols into Christian symbols would have been completely understood by Indigenous viewers.<sup>34</sup> However, these symbols may have “evoked memories and religious sentiments distinct from what the friars tried to teach.”<sup>35</sup> From the Zoque point of view, the retention of the ceiba tree in the town square could have been seen as the preservation of a sacred object. Although the fountain was constructed as a symbol to represent the power of Christianity and the power of the Dominicans, it was rooted within the worldview of the Zoque. It is possible that the Zoque population related to this structure as it was in the open air, brought them together in the



square, and was next to the sacred ceiba tree. In this way, the fountain retained a significant meaning and function to the Indigenous viewer.

As a statement of the new religious and social order, mendicant orders constructed churches and town centres following the same architectural styles found in Europe. But unlike Spanish audiences who had centuries of exposure to Iberian visual culture, Amerindians were experiencing these styles for the first time. As a result, friars had to find new ways to transmit Christian messages in a way that the Indigenous population would understand. For this reason, they incorporated native symbols, practices, and traditions into the construction of religious and civic buildings. Furthermore, as most of the construction was done by the Indigenous people, the architectural programs led by the friars resulted in unique creations that had no parallel in Europe, as is the case in the construction of a brick fountain in Chiapa de Corzo. While this structure uses Mudejar and Renaissance elements to represent Christianity, its location at the centre of town connects it to the customs and worldview of the Zoques. Although the fountain was possibly seen as a symbol of the new social and religious order, its function and execution were still dependent on the cultural practices of the Zoque population. The

architectural vocabulary may have been European, but the context and symbolism in connection to the ceiba tree remained Indigenous.

While little has been written about this fountain located in the state of Chiapas, those who have written about it have focused mostly on the contributions of Rodrigo de Leon. Remesal's attribution to de Leon has caused art historians to overlook the influence that local Zoque culture had on the work. The fountain has been studied through a European colonial lens, relegating the impact of local culture to the background. My aim has been to bring forward a discussion on the Indigenous character of the fountain and consider the structure not simply as an example of European styles but rather as a product of the transcultural interactions taking place in sixteenth-century Chiapas. The fountain is one example out of many of how art and architecture during this period came to be seen as a symbol of *mestizaje*.

Editors:  
Syed Apanuba Puhama,  
Kathy Zheng

## NOTES

1. Samuel Y. Edgerton, *Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico*, 1st ed. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001), 37.
2. Edgerton, *Theaters of Conversion*, 37.
3. Jose Manuel Aguilar-Moreno, "Tequitqui Art of Sixteenth-Century Mexico: An Expression of Transculturation" (PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1999), 39.
4. R. A. Musiate and M. Forni, "The Art of Building in New Spain: Knowledge Dissemination and Religious Orders in the 16th century," in *History of Construction Cultures*, ed. João Mascarenhas-Mateus, Ana Paula Pires, and Manuel Marques Caiado, Ivo Veiga (Leiden: CRC Press, 2021), 615.
5. Maria Judith Feliciano Chaves, "Mudejarismo in its Colonial Context: Iberian Cultural Display, Viceregal Luxury Consumption, and the Negotiation of Identities in Sixteenth-Century New Spain" (PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004), 15.
6. Jose M. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso: Las ceibas como axis mundi de la evangelización dominica en Chiapa de los Indios, siglo XVI," *Arte y Ciudad* 6 (2014): 64; Fredy Ovando Grajales, "La Pila de Chiapa: un surtidor de agua, obra de Rodrigo de León, O. P.," *Boletín de monumentos históricos INAH* no.16 (2009): 92.
7. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 53.
8. Sidney David Markman, *Architecture and Urbanization in Colonial Chiapas, Mexico* (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1984), 148.
9. John McAndrew, *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico: Atrios, Posas, Open Chapels, and Other Studies* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965), 564.
10. McAndrew, *Open-Air Churches*, 564.
11. Grajales, "La Pila de Chiapa," 101.
12. Markman, *Architecture and Urbanization*, 150.
13. R. Brooks Jeffery, "From Azulejos to Zaguanes: The Islamic Legacy in the Built Environment of Hispano-America," *Journal of the Southwest* 45, no. 1–2 (2003): 301.
14. Jeffery, "From Azulejos to Zaguanes," 301.
15. Alexandria R. Tsagaris, "The Architectural Treatise: Reading Like an Architect," <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/leonardo/feature/the-architectural-treatise-reading-like-an-architect>.
16. Grajales, "La Pila de Chiapa," 102.
17. Jeanette F. Peterson, "Synthesis and Survival: The Native Presence in Sixteenth-Century Murals of New Spain," *Phoebus* 7 (1995): 15.
18. Edgerton, *Theaters of Conversion*, 49.
19. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 78; Jeffery, "From Azulejos to Zaguanes," 301.
20. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 78.
21. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 78; Gloria de los Ángeles Santiago Lastra, "Análisis de la arquitectura prehispánica zoque de Chiapas" (master's thesis, Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, 2013), 110.
22. Markman, *Architecture and Urbanization*, 148.
23. Joan García Targa, "Diseño arquitectónico y urbano en comunidades mayas coloniales: un estudio arqueológico y etnohistórico," *Mesoamérica* 23, no. 43 (2002): 60.
24. García Targa, "Diseño arquitectónico," 60.
25. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 58.
26. Markman, *Architecture and Urbanization*, 148.
27. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 75.
28. Stephen Gregory, "A Tree for All Reasons: The Maya and the 'Sacred' Ceiba" (PhD diss., University of Calgary, 1995), 27.
29. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 66.
30. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 66.
31. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 66.
32. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 78.
33. Chávez Gómez, "Trazando un paraíso," 78.
34. Kelly Wallace-Donahue, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America, 1521–1821* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008), 4.
35. Wallace-Donahue, *Art and Architecture of Viceregal Latin America*, 4.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Aguilar-Moreno, Jose Manuel. "Tequitqui Art of Sixteenth Century Mexico: An Expression of Transculturation." PhD diss., University of Texas at Austin, 1999.
- Chávez Gómez, José M. "Trazando un paraíso: Las ceibas como axis mundi de la evangelización dominica en Chiapa de los Indios, siglo XVI." *Arte y Ciudad* 6 (2014): 61–82.
- Donahue-Wallace, Kelly. *Art and Architecture of Viceroyal Latin America, 1521–1821*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2008.
- Edgerton, Samuel Y. *Theaters of Conversion: Religious Architecture and Indian Artisans in Colonial Mexico*. 1st ed. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2001.
- Feliciano Chaves, Maria Judith. "Mudejarismo in its Colonial Context: Iberian Cultural Display, Viceroyal Luxury Consumption, and the Negotiation of Identities in Sixteenth-Century New Spain." PhD diss., University of Pennsylvania, 2004.
- Gregory, Stephen. "A Tree for all Reasons: The Maya and the 'Sacred' Ceiba." PhD diss., University of Calgary, 1995.
- Jeffery, R. Brooks. "From Azulejos to Zaguanes: The Islamic Legacy in the Built Environment of Hispano-America." *Journal of the Southwest* 45, no. 1–2 (2003): 289–327.
- Markman, Sidney David. *Architecture and Urbanization in Colonial Chiapas, Mexico*. Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1984.
- McAndrew John. *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico: Atrios, Posas, Open Chapels, and Other Studies*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965.
- Musiate, R. A., and M. Forni. "The Art of Building in New Spain: Knowledge Dissemination and Religious Orders in the 16th Century." In *History of Construction Cultures*, 615–22. Leiden: CRC Press, 2021.
- Peterson, Jeanette. "Synthesis and Survival: The Native Presence in Sixteenth-Century Murals of New Spain." *Phoebus 7: Native Artists and Patrons in Colonial Latin America*, (1995): 1435.
- Santiago Lastra, Gloria de los Ángeles. "Análisis de la arquitectura prehispánica zoque de Chiapas." Master's thesis, Universidad de Ciencias y Artes de Chiapas, 2013.
- Targa, Joan García. "Diseño arquitectónico y urbano en comunidades mayas coloniales: un estudio arqueológico y etnohistórico." *Mesoamérica* 23, no. 43 (2002): 54–88.
- Tsagaris, Alexandria R. "The Architectural Treatise: Reading Like an Architect." <https://exhibits.stanford.edu/leonardo/feature/the-architectural-treatise-reading-like-an-architect>