

HAITIAN RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT FOUNDATION

Willingness, Know-How, Resources

Weston, Florida, Port-au-Prince and Aquin, Haiti

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"FROM THE MOUNTAINS TO THE SEA"

From Charity to Development



Discovering the Cultural Connection: A Haitian in Cali

Finally, my feet touched the ground of Cali after four years of anticipation woven into the fabric of my journey to Cali, a city that danced in my thoughts but had been unreachable due to the restrictions imposed by the COVID pandemic. One figure stood out among the crowd as I exited the Alfonso Bonilla Aragón International Airport. It was Oscar, whose broad and genuine smile and open arms were the beacon in the frantic airport activity.

Oscar Becerra is an amalgam of passion and knowledge. Trained as an architect and a sociologist, and a teacher by vocation, Oscar works as a professor and researcher at the venerable National University of Colombia. His world revolves around traditional coatings and finishes in architecture, reimagining these ancient methods for use in modern materials. This bridge between past and present is not just a technical achievement but a commitment to improving life in popular sectors, where each innovation has the potential to transform everyday life.

His perspective deepens with international experiences, like his immersive research in Haiti, specifically in the region of Aquin. There, Oscar discovered how construction techniques rooted in tradition could evolve, employing materials like kaolin, an abundant resource in Haitian soil, to create not only structures but also utilitarian art pieces that adorn and strengthen, symbolizing the convergence of utility and beauty.



Haiti: House made of palm slats.

In our exploration of Cali's rural areas, a flash of familiarity surprised me. Some traditional structures resonated with those observed in the Haitian countryside. Recent invasion houses on the urban outskirts of Palmira, likely orchestrated for electoral purposes, revealed the ingenuity of their builders who used local materials like resilient bamboo, while in Haiti, the choice fell on versatile palm slats.

This technique, known in Colombia as bahareque, involves a guadua frame filled with moist earth, a practice that links these regions in a transnational architectural dialogue. Although the log wood skeletal structure and zinc roofs are common in both places, the dialogue between techniques becomes more intimate when considering local adaptations to a shared construction method.



Colombia: house made of bamboo slats.



El bahareque

Bahareque, more than a technique, is a narrative of adaptation and resistance, where the internal cavity of the walls not only serves as a thermoacoustic insulator but also as a testament to collective intelligence against climatic and economic challenges. Additionally, the tradition is painted in earthy colors, with pigments merging on the exterior walls, offering not just protection but also a canvas reflecting the natural palette of the region.

This exchange of knowledge between Haiti and Cali, though separated by sea and culture, highlights the universality and adaptability of traditional construction practices as a bridge between past and present, local and global.



Earthy colors and pigments

For a deep understanding of Santería or Regla de Ocha, Oscar introduced me to a local santero who initially described Vodou as 'black magic' and gifted me a book about Santería and its Yoruba origins in Cuba. We quickly developed a friendship and delved into the depths of Yoruba Santería, comparing it with Haitian Vodou. Although both practices share West African roots, they have evolved differently by merging with local cultures in Colombia and Haiti, respectively.

Santería has blended with Catholicism and African religious beliefs, aligning its orishas with Catholic saints. For example, Shangó is associated with Santa Bárbara, and Yemayá with the Virgin of Regla. On the other hand, Haitian Vodou maintains a more direct connection with its African roots, with the lwa presenting unique identities, often linked but not merged with Catholic figures.

While both Santería and Vodou value music and dance in their rituals, they differ in their communication with the divine. Vodou emphasizes spiritual possession for direct dialogue with the spirits, while Santería employs divinations and offerings to interact with the orishas.

This journey through Santería and Vodou highlights how these practices, rooted in African tradition, have adapted and persisted, enriching the spiritual landscape in new cultural contexts.

The peculiarities of daily life in Cali can be appreciated in the routine of its inhabitants, but for an external observer, they represent a fascinating window into the local culture. During a walk through the emblematic Parque del Acueducto, I encountered a scene that synthesized invention and community in urban life. A group of homeless people, in a gesture of camaraderie, shared a marijuana joint when I noticed some of them using a small stream to bathe and wash their clothes with chumbimba, a local fruit used as soap. Oscar, always enriching my understanding, detailed the process and common use of this fruit that, after boiling, is used as soap, showcasing one of the most enduring traditional practices and knowledge that persist in modern life.



Chumbimba fruits

As we left the park, a jovial drunk asked me, 'Where are you from, my friend? Do you have a carambolo with you? Did you hear me?' Once again, Oscar came to the rescue, explaining that carambolo is a regional fruit used, with great success, to cure 'guayabo' or hangover after consuming aguardiente, and that it is now found in all supermarkets.

That morning, Oscar drove through a highway in the Bolo culture region, southeast of Palmira, towards his workshop where he investigates the use of clayey soils as eco-finish materials. Oscar pointed out two hills that are the first places illuminated by the sun each morning. These hills are considered sacred due to the pre-Hispanic huacas or burial sites they shelter. It is said that the huacas contain gold objects that adorned the deceased. Occasionally, these sacred hills are profaned and looted by huaqueros, local peasants, who resort to pagan rituals, usually on Good Thursdays and Good Fridays, to locate the gold.



Oscar in his workplace

Upon reaching the workshop, Oscar showed how the use of clayey soils to build thermoacoustic walls is rigorously investigated. These walls are panels composed of two surfaces built with gradua matting, coated with earthy materials, leaving a void between them. This coating produces the acoustic effect, and the intermediate void, the thermal effect. Houses built with natural organic material or minerals are distinguished by their notable durability, which is estimated at approximately 50 years and can be significantly extended with proper maintenance. Likewise, the exterior coating of these constructions is effective in repelling ultraviolet rays, preventing the deterioration that these radiations can cause on synthetic paints.

These dwellings are also characterized by their healthfulness, since the natural materials used do not emit toxic volatile gases and offer the advantage of absorbing acoustic reverberations, thus optimizing the sound comfort inside. An additional notable aspect is the property of ceramic floors, which prevents dust accumulation and maintains their shine with just water cleaning, enhancing the practicality and aesthetics of the environment.



Restored traditional house.

Anecdotally, I also understood the process of producing Chinese porcelain, which has been historically carried out for over 500 years. Oscar taught me how mixing kaolin with the shining mineral feldspar produces the transparency and lightness characteristic of porcelain.

My week in Cali passed quicker than ice cream melting under the Colombian sun. Oscar, with a chivalry that seemed from another era, insisted on accompanying me to the airport. Between the handshake and farewell hug, in front of the migration offices, he shared one last pearl of wisdom: “You see,” he began, “once we leveled a mound to give an Afro-descendant community better access to water. But alas, in that leveling, more than a hill was lost. The natural catwalk where the women of the village, in their coming and going, offered a spectacle of swaying hips that would have made Shakira blush disappeared. A sway that, unwittingly, kept the local men engaged and very interested in local hydrology. Following that change, the gentlemen, now deprived of their “daily soap opera,” lamented so vehemently about the loss of their “visual stimuli” that one might think the water source had dried up.” With a complicit smile, Oscar concluded: “So, my friend, the next time you think about technology, remember that not everything lost is as obvious as a Wi-Fi signal.”



Cali - An innovation: a traveling ice cream parlor

And so, between laughter and reflections, Oscar turned a farewell into a reminder that, in the theater of life, sometimes the most trivial scenes are the ones most missed when the curtain falls. There it was, a last memory of Cali, a playful reminder that, as the world progresses, some things – like the appreciation for the little “views” of life – remain unchanged, even in the face of relentless progress.

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