

Christoph Machat

The vernacular between theory and practice

Theory building about the issue of vernacular heritage underwent two stages. In a first and – in terms of time – rather long period, conservation practice has had a direct and determining influence on the theory formation related to vernacular heritage: this period was finalized with the “Charter on the built vernacular heritage”³ in 1996 as a result of the continuous scientific work done by the International Committee on Vernacular Architecture (CIAV) founded in 1976.¹ The second period is marked by the adoption of the charter at the General Assembly of ICOMOS in Mexico in 1999 and its worldwide dissemination.² Since then several conservation projects based on and with reference to the *vernacular philosophy* of the Charter have been successfully implemented.

The reasons for the long way towards a doctrinal text for the conservation of vernacular heritage are manifold – three will be discussed here. The first reason is the linguistic problem of the term “vernacular”, the second reason is the lack of any mentioning of this specific type of heritage in the basic literature concerning the development of the conservation of monuments as a discipline. A third reason might lie in the simultaneously evolved idea and the creation of open air museums.

In many of the languages spoken around the world the term “vernacular” is unknown and this might explain the difficulties and differences in the perception and understanding among specialists from different disciplines and regions up to our days. A very good example is the interpretation of the term in the German language: before the unification in 1990, the two German ICOMOS national committees used different words for the vernacular: “popular” (*folk*???) in East, “rural” in the West Germany. As none of these translations is compatible with the real understanding of the vernacular, it is necessary to look for definitions: the English Oxford Dictionary defines with “of one’s native country, native, indigenous, not of foreign origin or of learned formation”. The explanation from an architectural point of view as “adapted to the character of one country or a landscape area” was included in the English-German Dictionary for the first time in 1962,³ perhaps as a result of term’s rising demand in the specialised language of conservationists in the second half of the 20th century. The latter might explain also the discussions on and the

¹ *Vernacular architecture*. ICOMOS Monuments and Sites V, München 2002, with: Machat, Christoph: *The history of CIAV*, pp. 7-9; and: Kovanen, Kirsti: *About the Charter on the built vernacular heritage*, p. 10.

² First published in the original English, French and Spanish version, in: *International Charters for Conservation and Restoration*. ICOMOS Monuments and Sites I, München 2001, pp. 126-133.

³ Langenscheidt’s Encyclopaedic Dictionary (English-German). Berlin, München 1974, p. 1603.

need for definitions on the vernacular architecture formulated and published in the recent decades, like *Architecture without architects* (a book of Bernhard Rudofsky of 1964) or like in formulations such as “it responds to the needs of the family groups”, “it is built with natural (and semi-industrial) materials”, “it is adapted to the environment and shaped by handicrafts techniques”. Several other definitions might be added, like those proposed by colleagues of the English Vernacular Group: “vernacular buildings are those which belong to a type that is common in a given area at a given time” or “that sort of building which is deliberately permanent rather than temporary, which is traditional rather than academic in its inspiration, which provides for the simple activities of ordinary people, their farms and their simple industrial enterprises, which is strongly related to place, especially through the use of the local building materials, but which represents design and building with thoughts and feelings rather than in a base or strictly utilitarian manner”.⁴

One of the recent publications of our CIAV-Committee for the General Assembly of ICOMOS in Sri Lanka in 1993 was focussing on the “popular (folk) inspiration” of an architecture “developed in a specific region, using local materials, traditional crafts and design”.⁵ The Canadian author of that article tried to formulate an overall and word-wide valid definition for vernacular architecture. However, the definitions of this specific type of heritage as “traditional”, “popular (folk)” or “vernacular” are unsatisfactory for a specific theory formation.

A search through the rich literature on the development of conservation theory is also unsatisfactory, because any mentioning of the “vernacular” is missing. Generally spoken, at the turn of the 19th to the 20th century, with the works of Camillo Boito and Alois Riegl, the development of heritage conservation as a discipline and the notion of an historical monument defined in space and time can be considered as accomplished.⁶ Limited in time by the era of industrialization, the typology of monuments already differentiated between urban structures and simple, small architecture, but this was only related to urban ensembles and acceptable only as “urban” vernacular architecture in our sense of understanding. In 1849, John Ruskin had been the first to raise the private, “true domestic architecture, the beginning of all other” to the same level as the “large” (the classical) architecture⁷ and therefore to enlarge the typology of monuments; while criticizing those who were only interested in the “isolated splendour of palaces”, he – and later William Morris – was also thinking about continuity in the context of inconspicuous houses in urban areas and called for an insertion of “urban building ensembles” into the cultural heritage canon.⁸ Even if we accept today that Ruskin’s notion of the “private and domestic” in fact meant the vernacular architecture, his ideas at those times had not been

⁴ A summary by Machat, Christoph: *Conservation management of the vernacular heritage*, in: *Proceedings of the international Conference on conservation and revitalization of vernacular architecture and ICOMOS-CIAV annual meeting 1997*. Bangkok 1997, pp. 98-99.

⁵ Varin, Francois: *L'architecture vernaculaire: une définition difficile à cerner*, in: *Vernacular architecture*, International Scientific Committee, 10th General Assembly of ICOMOS. Colombo 1993, pp. 3-8.

⁶ Choay, Françoise: *Das architektonische Erbe, eine Allegorie. Geschichte und Theorie der Baudenkmale*. (Bauwelt Fundamente 109), Braunschweig, Wiesbaden 1997, p. 128.

⁷ Ruskin, John: *The seven lamps of architecture*. London 1849 (edition of 1956), § IV, p. 185.

⁸ We follow the presentation by Choay 1997 (note 6), p. 106 and notes 37, 38.

taken into account and disseminated outside England (and France) and therefore did not enter any discussions on conservation theory.

It was Gustavo Giovannoni in his article “Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova” of 1913 who introduced and worked out the conception of a “small architecture” (including private architecture) from a historical and aesthetical perspective as indispensable components of the old urban ensembles and claimed the same protection measures as for old cities.⁹ It is obvious that the traditional, rural or folk architecture was not the subject of Giovannoni’s reflections.

At that time the first open air museums had opened their doors already twenty years ago: the Skansen Museum in Stockholm, founded by Arthur Hazelius and opened in 1891, is considered the first open air museum in the world. First steps had been made by the Swedish-Norwegian King Oscar II, who in 1882 initiated the translocation of a Norwegian farmstead to his property on the peninsula of Bygdøy (Oslo), followed in 1885 by the 13th century stave church from Gol and the foundation of the Oslo Norsk Folkemuseum. In 1897, the first building for the Sorgenfri Frilandsmuseum in Lyngby near Copenhagen had been transferred and rebuilt.¹⁰ The first intention of open air museums was to give a future to vanishing traditional cultures. They were part of a more general conservation movement that appreciated threatened rural culture because of its social value and wanted to conserve it by transferring their built artefacts into museums – the background was the comparable to Ruskin’s reflections upon the disastrous damage to traditional culture and architecture caused by the Industrial Revolution. Since the mid-19th century the European society had to face considerable changes due to the migration of the rural population towards the big urban industrial centres. The rural, agricultural communities were threatened by a first cultural standardisation which overlapped the diversity of regional cultures and resulted in the loss of traditions. As a reaction, artists, writers and ethnographers developed a cultural consciousness for the qualities of regional cultures – for preserving the regional cultural identity that was considered a continuum and interpreted as the fundamental difference between nations and their people. First results of this movement were presentations of national architecture during World Exhibitions, like in Paris in 1867 with copies of traditional houses from the participating countries along the Rue des Nations and in 1878 of the architecture from the French colonies. The interiors of these houses were decorated with objects of traditional culture and offered as perfect scenery for the display of traditional culture, songs and folk dances in traditional costumes. This new way of presenting traditional and ‘authentic’ cultures in their reconstructed environment inspired – without any doubt – the founders of the first open air museums.

Open air museums were conservation projects where, together with the material expression of architecture and objects from the pre-industrial time, the social aspects of the vanishing cultures were kept. This converted them into *living museums* not only

⁹ Giovannoni, Gustavo: “Vecchie città ed edilizia nuova”. *Nuova Antologia*, XLVII, 995 (1913), pp. 53–76. Giovannoni’s main work was published under the same title in Torino 1931; see also Choay 1997 (note 6), p. 107.

¹⁰ Laenen, Marc: Les Musées de plein air. Un futur pour un passé, in: *Vernacular Architecture* 1993 (note 5), p. 26. *Skansen Centenary Museums guide*. Stockholm 1991, p. 5.

because they showed ‘traditions’ along with the exhibition of folk dance, songs and crafts but also because they were meant to keep these tradition “alive”.¹¹ In the 20th century, the preserving role of these museums was completed with museological work, systematically organized scientific collections and a strong educational function as museums for social history.

It is evident that the conservation philosophy of open air museums is very different to that of a conservationist point of view – even opposite: the dismantling (not to say demolishing), transferring and rebuilding of a house or farmstead causes the loss of original material (e.g. joints in wood constructions) and another important part of its authenticity: the original setting and context. As a result, the rebuilt object becomes an exhibit of the museum. For this reason the “Charter on the built vernacular heritage” does not even mention this alternative of ‘saving’ vernacular heritage. The ‘triumphal advance’ of the open air museums all over the European countries in the first half of the 20th century however can be considered as consequence for the lack of any mentioning of the rural vernacular heritage in conservation theory: the conservation or saving of this type of heritage was, for a long time, considered a duty of the open air museums and not the subject of monuments’ conservation. Nevertheless first attempts towards the inclusion of the rural vernacular in the typology of monuments are indebted to Paul Clemen, the ‘father’ of monuments’ conservation for the Rhinelands, who was since 1893 in charge of the recording and publication of the scientific inventories for the historical monuments of that province of Germany. In his memorable speech at the “Tag der Denkmalpflege und des Heimatschutzes” (trans. Common day for monuments’ conservation and home protection) in Salzburg (Austria) in 1911, he explained how art historians – under the influence of the home protection movement – started to accept small, apparently insignificant monuments of vernacular origin, like houses, farmsteads, chapels and crosses worth to be protected and claimed the “extension of monuments’ protection on the whole townscape, the historic urban and rural settlement structures and the landscape” (Clemen). Even if Clemen had included vernacular heritage in his early inventories and repeated his demands in 1930,¹² the efficient protection of vernacular heritage in Germany was guaranteed only in the early 1970s with a new legislation. In the dressed lists of protected monuments, the ‘vernacular’ covered more than a third.

After world war II, open air museums continued to be considered as the specialized institutions for the safeguarding and study of the vernacular heritage. Especially in the East European socialist countries the new rulers strongly supported these activities due to the ethnographical approach and the educational function, but neglected protection measures for well preserved vernacular heritage in the countryside itself. Among those countries only Bulgaria developed a somehow different attitude by declaring a number of well preserved vernacular settlements as “museum villages”¹³ which were protected as

¹¹ Laenen 1993 (note 10), pp. 25-30. Laenen, Marc: “Vernacular architecture and cultural development in Europe”, in: *Historische Kulturlandschaften*. ICOMOS Journals of the German National Committee, XI (1993), pp. 46-47.

¹² Machat, Christoph: *Paul Clemen als Inventarisor*, in: *Paul Clemen zur 125. Wiederkehr seines Geburtstages* (Rheinische Denkmalpflege 35), Köln 1991, p. 59.

¹³ Anguelova, Rachelle: *Le musée village. Une méthode de conservation des villages historiques*, in: *Vernacular Architecture* 1993 (note 5), pp. 34-37.

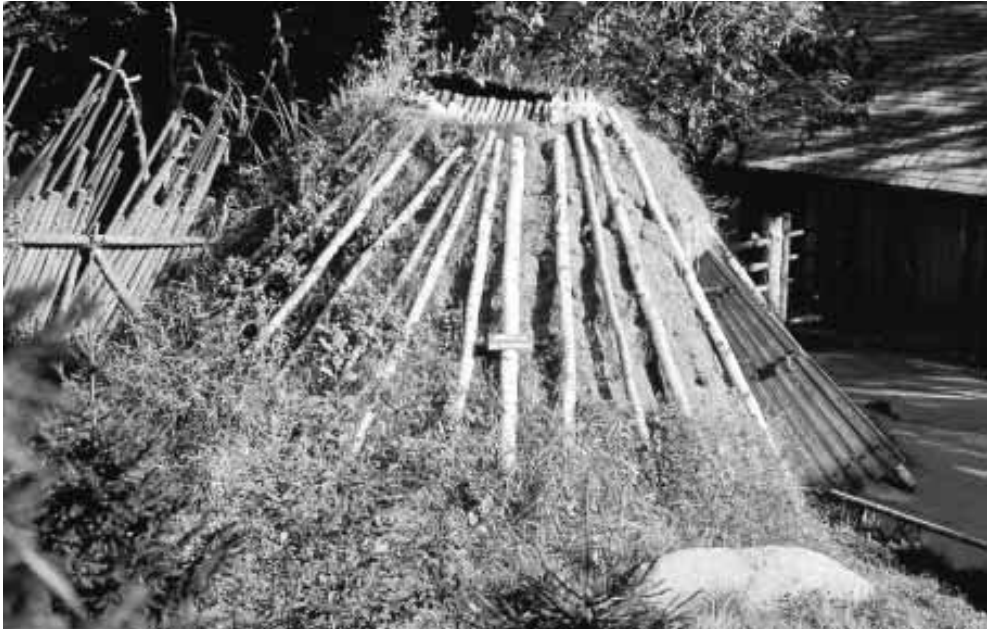


Fig. 1. Skansen Museum, Stockholm: Lapp's Camp, 1891. (photo: Christoph Machat 1991)

architectural reserves. Also in Western Europe new open air museums were founded, e.g. in Germany in Kommern 1958 and Lindlar 1986, and in recent times even on the Asian continent, like the Muang Boran Ancient City open air museum¹⁴ close to Bangkok, Thailand or the presentation of the last traditional houses of the Ifugao province in Hungdian, Philippines.

This rather short presentation of more than one hundred years of safeguarding the 'vernacular' was necessary to understand the background and starting point for the activities of the ICOMOS Vernacular Committee: it started working in 1977, the permanent seat was installed in Plovdiv, Bulgaria, all the permanent members came from European countries (from open air museums or universities) and only two of the associate members were from other continents – Australia and Canada. From the very beginning the agenda of the committee included the search for a definition of vernacular architecture, a 'state of the art' dictionary on its special terminology and later the "Charter on vernacular architecture". The first years of scientific work were marked by continuing the research limited to the European rural vernacular from the pre-industrialized period within the framework of conferences, publications and exhibitions. The conservation *in situ* of vernacular heritage up to the 20th century including the urban vernacular was not (yet) in the focus of interest, even if presented and discussed at several CIAV conferences; the contributions from the Australian and Canadian colleagues about their prefabricate and semi-industrial vernacular

¹⁴ *Proceedings* 1997 (note 4), p. 569.



Fig. Lyngby, Sorgenfri Frilandsmuseet: farmstead from Tue. (photo: Christoph Machat 1991)

architecture dating from the industrial age of immigration since the second half of the 19th century had not really been taken into consideration.

The first version of a charter was presented at the annual meeting 1984 in Plovdiv and was worked out by the founding President of the committee, Rachele Anguelova, Bulgaria. It had more or less the character of a declaration concerning the strength of popular collective creativity. As a consequence and in terms of a theory formation of the ‘vernacular’, some members of the committee became conscious of the main tasks for the future work, started to rewrite the committee’s content, working methods, international coordinating or cooperative tasks and to think about a restructuring of its composition in order to become a real worldwide operating committee.

In a first step the project “Regional architecture and cultural development in Europe”¹⁵ was developed in 1989 in order to re-defining the committee’s attitude towards their conservation philosophy including open air museums, conservation tasks *in situ* and the research for a typology of the vernacular architecture. The active contribution to the Skansen Centenary (organized by the European Association of Open Air Museums and the Skansen Museum) in September 1991 was part of the project implementation. As a result of very fruitful discussions about fundamental differences in the conservation philosophy and the distinctive tasks of open air museums versus monument conservation *in situ* were stated: e.g. was the presentation of the Lapp’s Camp in Skansen since 1891 (Fig. 1) to be accepted today as the only way of conservation, because these camps have disap-

¹⁵ The project has been worked out by Marc Laenen, then General Secretary of CIAV, and Olga Sevan from the Russian Institute for Cultural Research, Moscow. See also: Laenen 1993 (note 11).

peared already in the Lapponian regions of Northern Scandinavia, whereas from the protection and conservation point of view the presentation of half timber houses or farmsteads, like the farmstead from True in the Lyngby Frilandsmuseet (Fig. 2), was not necessary? The number of *in situ* preserved half timber constructions is countless, their traditional construction technique is known from the Middle Ages and today still spread all over Europe (e.g. in all the Balkan countries, e.g. in Ohrida, Macedonia; Fig. 3) and other continents like in Japan (see Fig. 9). The necessity to enlarge the typology of the vernacular architecture with buildings of a recent past and to admit them in museums' collections was also recognized – in Skansen it happened already since a couple of years.¹⁶ The 1992 annual meeting of the CIAV, hosted by ICOMOS Germany and combined with the international conference on “Preservation of the rural heritage. Cultural landscape and sites in Europe” in cooperation with the Council of Europe, was also part of the project: it focussed on the conservation *in situ* and the importance of protecting vernacular architecture as an expression of regional identity in its strong relationship with the surrounding cultural landscape.¹⁷



Fig. 3. Ohrida, Macedonia: half-timber urban vernacular house. (photo: Christoph Machat 1985)

On the long way towards the formation of a concise theory the next step was decisive: in accordance with the “Eger Principles for international scientific committees” (by the General Assembly of ICOMOS in Colombo, Sri Lanka 1993), new statutes for CIAV were adopted in 1994. In 1995, the restructured committee held its constitutive meeting in Guatemala and decided to start its worldwide operating by moving with the annual meetings and scientific conferences from one continent to the next continent and by finalizing the “Charter on vernacular architecture” as a worldwide valid and accepted document. This was the starting point for a very important learning process opened the Eurocentric perspective of the committee by studying the different regions around the world with their vernacular traditions and by including all the regional experiences into the reflection upon a uniting doctrinal text. The enlargement of the vernacular typology in space and time, accepting the prefabricate and semi-industrial vernacular in the classical immigra-

¹⁶ *Skansen Centenary* 1991 (note 10), pp. 5-6.

¹⁷ See the publication of the results: *Historische Kulturlandschaften* 1993 (notes 11, 14).



Fig. 4. Toraja County, Sulawesi, Indonesia: traditional village. (photo: Christoph Machat 2002)

tion countries of Northern America (USA, Canada¹⁸) and Australia (even with industrially produced building materials, like nails or corrugated galvanized iron¹⁹) is only one example.

During the preparatory works for the charter three versions had to be examined – two from Europe, one from Asia – and the last one (worked out in 1990 by Roland Silva, Sri Lanka) was the most informative: it started from the village as the “basic unit of society”, explained the strong relationship between vernacular heritage and the community involved and defined the village as the “smallest vernacular unit” (Fig. 4). Reflecting on this proposal it became evident how basic and worldwide valid this attitude towards the origins of the vernacular had to be considered, since settlements and communities with living vernacular traditions were still to be found all over the continents, the different countries and regions of the world – even in Europe (Fig. 5). The European experience on the interdependence between the settlement and the cultural landscape (see the Brauweiler Conference 1992) seemed valid worldwide as well, but the study, assessment and possible protection of vernacular heritage needed has to be extended on the surrounding cultural landscape as the result of the interaction of man and nature.

As a consequence, the final version of the charter – avoiding any definition for good reasons – clearly explains how strong vernacular heritage is always related to the involved

¹⁸ De Caraffe, Marc: *Commemorating the prefabricated*, in: *Proceedings 1997* (note 4), pp. 338-347. Mills, G. E.: *Buying wood and building farms. Marketing lumber and farm buildings designs on the Canadian prairies 1880 to 1920*. Ottawa 1991.

¹⁹ Lewis, Miles: *The conservation of post-industrial vernacular*, in: *Proceedings 1997* (note 4), pp. 276-282.

community. Therefore, any assessment of the vernacular must not be reduced to different building types without taking into consideration the settlement (the “smallest unit”) but has to reflect the traditions of the community and the strong connection with the surrounding landscape: the geomorphological conditions of the landscape area, that means geology, topography, climate and vegetation, building materials and the type of occupation in relation to the traditional land-use system as part of the heritage value. One example: the highlands of Guatemala are characterized by spread farmstead units located in the middle of the fields cultivated with corn (*maize*) and small vernacular market places without traditional villages, whereas in the mountain areas of Europe, like Costa Verde in northern Spain, the system is completely different: with small villages of high density (Fig. 5), the typical mountain terraces for pasturing and a population living from livestock production. Such



Fig. 5. Village of Carmona, Costa Verde, northern Spain. (photo: Christoph Machat 1996)



Fig. 6. Ifugao Province, Philippines: Hungduan rice terraces, word heritage site. (photo: Christoph Machat 2007)



Fig. 7. Chichicastenango, Guatemala: the daily market. (photo: Christoph Machat 1993)

agrarian man-made terraces, for pasturing, olive trees, vineyards or rice cultivation are world-wide convincing examples for the interaction between man and nature and these are indispensable documents for the understanding of the vernacular. Best examples are the famous rice terraces in some Asian regions (Fig. 6). The conditions of the landscape always had a strong influence on the daily life and the organization of the community, including the social life, beliefs, tangible and intangible traditions. A very 'tangible expression' of that daily life are the markets, like the famous one in Chichicastenango (Fig. 7). This market is important not only for the tourism in Guatemala, but also for the Indians, because – besides the social function – this living market provides them with all the needs for the whole week. Many other examples might be added, like the animal markets in Guatemala (San Francisco el Alto) or in Toraja County, Sulawesi (Indonesia), or the famous "swimming markets" in Thailand. The religious festivities, ceremonies like processions and

beliefs are also tangible and intangible traditions of the communities and part of the vernacular heritage worth to be recorded and preserved: e.g. the Buddhist "houses of the spirits" of pagan origin in Buddhist Thailand²⁰ as essential components of each farmstead (Fig. 8). All these different examples show the variety of the vernacular, but exemplify the difficulties, or even the impossibility, to formulate a world-wide valid definition for vernacular architecture.

It is not the place here to present the text of the charter, but the preamble and especially one paragraph might serve as an explanation for the complexity of problems related to the understanding, protection and the threats of vernacular heritage:

Vernacular building is the traditional and natural way by which communities house themselves. It is a continuing process including necessary changes and continuous adaptation as a response to social and environmental constraints. The survival of this tradition is threatened world-wide by the forces of economic, cultural and architectural homogenisation. How these forces can be met is a fundamental problem that must be addressed by communities and also by governments, planners, architects, conservationists and by a multidisciplinary group of specialists. Due to the homogenisation of culture and of

²⁰ Panin, Ornsiri: *The central region Thai vernacular houses*, in: *Proceedings* 1997 (note 4), pp. 57-58.



Fig. 8. Central Thailand: traditional farmstead with the “house of spirits” (right; photo: Christoph Machat 1997)

global socio-economic transformation, vernacular structures all around the world are extremely vulnerable, facing serious problems of obsolescence, internal equilibrium and integration.²¹

The “Charter on the built vernacular heritage” is a doctrinal text and the result of a continuous scientific work of the CIAV since its foundation. For the practical implementation of its conservation philosophy it will be necessary to work out detailed regional guidelines for the different ‘vernacular areas’ of the world. Nevertheless several projects based on the charter have been worked out since its dissemination after the adoption in Mexico 1999. Two of them were implemented in the last years and are of special interest: in the province of Ehime, Shikoku Island, Japan, the district administration started in 2002 a project of revitalisation and conservation of the vernacular heritage in the former villages, today the market places of Uchiko, Ozu and Uwa. Town planners, conservationists, professional craftsmen but also the communities and house owners themselves had been involved and the very convincing results were presented to the national (and international) public as a ‘permanent exhibition’ in 2004 – the CIAV committee and ICOMOS Japan in co-operation with the district administration and the communities hosted the annual meeting of CIAV in Uchiko in 2004 (Fig. 9). In 2005, the School of Architecture of Morelia, Michoacán province, Mexico, started a research project (in co-operation with ICOMOS Mexico) in the Purépecha region about the well-preserved Indian villages north of Pátzcuaro. After researching and recording the tradi-

²¹ *International Charters* 2001 (note 2), p. 150.



Fig. 9. Uchiko, Ehime Province, Shikoku Island, Japan: half-timber house. (photo: Christoph Machat 2004)

tional houses students and teachers started a dialog with the community of San Antonio that planned to modernize the village with asphalt being turned on the streets and all the traditional shingle roofing of the farmsteads replaced. In the spirit of the “CIAV-Charter” a project for the revitalization of San Antonio was worked out. It involved all the members of the community and convinced them to contribute to the village modernization by paving the streets with stone, renewing the roofing with traditional wooden shingles and to improve the living conditions by introducing a special and very efficient stove in their traditional kitchens. With financial support of the province governor, the Morelia School of Architecture and ICO-MOS Mexico the project was accepted and implemented: first results have been presented to the members of our committee during the annual meeting 2006 in Pátzcuaro, the local community being proud of the very impressive results and



Fig. 10. Village of San Antonio, Michoacán Province, Mexico. (photo: Christoph Machat 2006)

their own active contribution. Fig. 10 is showing one of the main streets in San Antonio during the visit in early November 2006.

Both projects were based on the conservation philosophy of the “CIAV-Charter”, its conservation principles and guidelines and confirmed the efficiency of the *vernacular theory*. Nevertheless regional guidelines are still a demand for the future work of the committee.

