

THE CENTRE FOR INTERPRETATION AS AN INSTRUMENT FOR HERITAGE AND DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT: *This year has seen the commencement of the building of a Centre for Interpretation at the archaeological site La Blanca, which is being developed thanks to financing by the University of Valencia from its international cooperation budget. A team at the University Institute of Heritage Restoration has drawn up an architectural project which envisages an austere structure that is suitable for a natural tropical environment, and one designed to act as an information and reception programme for visitors to the Mayan ruins in Guatemala. This work may serve as a model to be followed at other similar archaeological sites that are starting to receive low-intensity cultural tourism and which may prove essential for promoting the sustainable development of surrounding populations.*

KEYWORDS: heritage ,cooperation,development,interpretation,maya,La Blanca

1. INTRODUCTION

One of the most pressing problems faced by developing countries which have an exceptional monumental archaeological heritage, like Guatemala has, is its proper conservation and maintenance, as resources tend to concentrate in large tourist resorts which are well-known and well-publicised by tour operators.

However in the Mayan area, there are many communities close to very important archaeological sites that have been gradually recovered from the passage of time thanks to cooperation programmes involving several countries. Although these countries' technical and financial support is fundamental, their financial set-up is insufficient to rescue them from dereliction and oblivion unless other parallel initiatives are carried out to encourage visitors and, consequently, measures to prevent their deterioration and destruction are established.

These sites usually attract another kind of tourism with an uncommon cultural curiosity and which, generally, seeks to distance itself from the masses and from the beaten tracks of the burgeoning tourist industry. For this type of tourism to have access to such places, it is essential to have the minimum infrastructure available in terms of access and information.

In this sense, Visitor Centres built at the entrance of archaeological ruins play an essential role. This is because they serve as a central reception, protection, information and

exhibition point, and provide an intermediate location between arrival at the site and access to the heritage element to be visited (Vidal and Muñoz, 2008).

In the Guatemalan province of El Petén, there are already many sites that have been researched and could be included on a route of sites for this type of cultural tourists to visit who are anxious to know about other exceptional manifestations of the ancient Mayas, but whose neighbouring community lacks, on the whole, the basic infrastructures and facilities to deal with the arrival of such visitors.

One of these sites is La Blanca, a Mayan city of the Classic period in which an interdisciplinary team from the University of Valencia, the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the University of San Carlos in Guatemala has been researching since 2004, and which is scarcely 2 kilometres from the village of the same name (Muñoz and Vidal Eds, 2005 and 2006) (Vidal and Muñoz Eds. 2007).

2. LA BLANCA CENTRE FOR INTERPRETATION

From the very beginning, one of the objectives of the La Blanca Project was to contribute to fostering social and economic activity around the archaeological ruins by enhancing their value and adapting them for visitors.

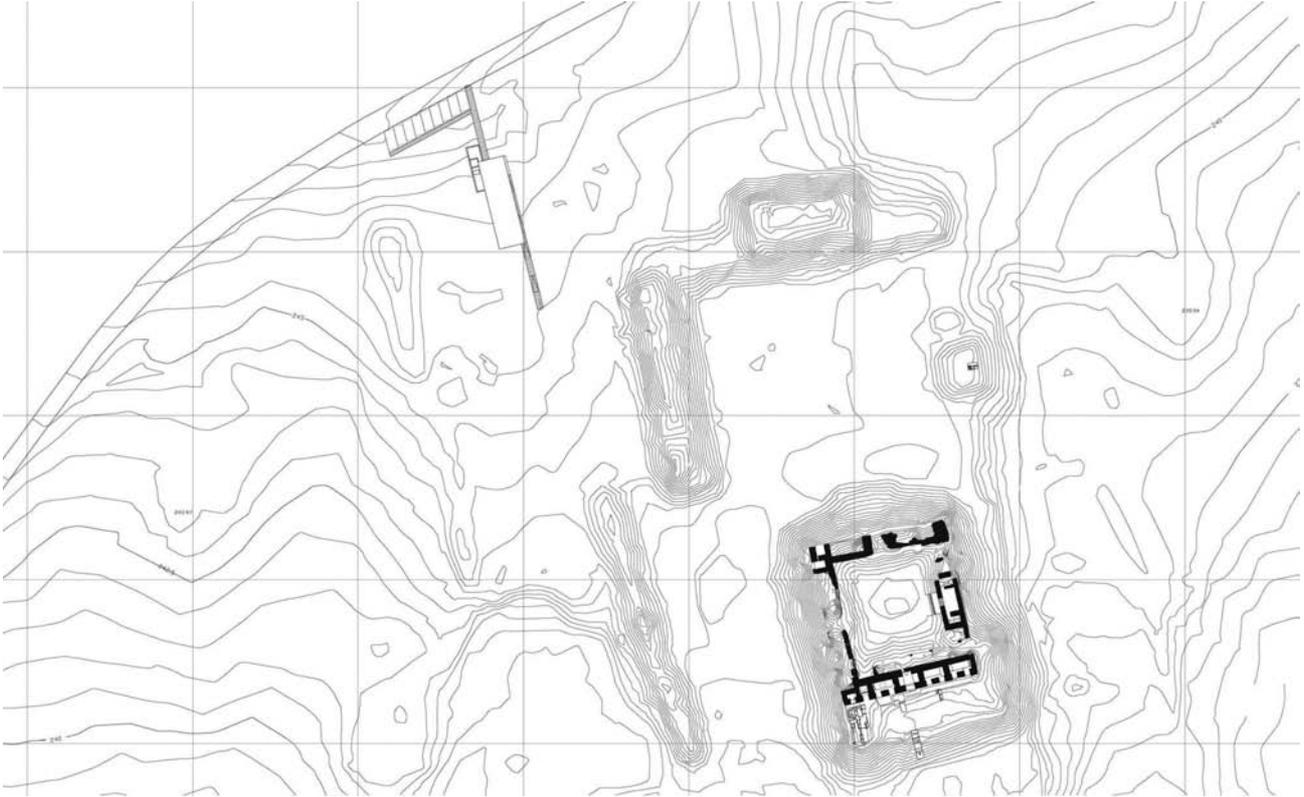


Figura 1. Situación del Centro de Interpretación de La Blanca.

To go about this, one of the basic actions was the creation of a Centre for Interpretation at the archaeological site, which would bring together all the services required for catering for visitors and interpreting this ancient Mayan city. Besides which, it is capable of housing certain elements required for the proper conservation of the site. In addition to an exhibition area, the Centre would include a keepers office, a warehouse, a rest area and healthcare services.

To this end, in November 2007 La Blanca Project obtained a financial subsidy from the General Foundation belonging to the University of Valencia for the construction and start-up of such a Centre, which is currently in progress.

The approach applied for the Centre for Interpretation by the La Blanca Project links two basic concepts (Vidal and Muñoz, 2008: 81):

- On the one hand, the nature of the site which houses it, which offers knowledge of the climate, physical environment, flora and fauna to provide an understanding of the social groups in the area both nowadays and in bygone days.
- On the other hand, its heritage consisting in architecture, ceramics, graphites and conceptual elements such as the colours or rites of its culture

In order to disseminate these two comprehensive concepts, other actions included in the project, besides the construction of the building, encompass the design and arrangement of the exhibition area with the collaboration of lecturers and students from the University of Valencia, the Polytechnic University of Valencia and the University of San Carlos, Guatemala, as well as the professional and educational training of guides, tutors and security staff.

2.1. The building

The architectural project has been undertaken by a team from the University Institute of Heritage Restoration of the Polytechnic

University of Valencia, comprising architects Gaspar Muñoz Cosme, Ricardo Perelló Roso, Marina Sender Contell and Beatriz Martín Domínguez. With its design, they have attempted to use suitable materials and shapes as well as ensuring that the building blends in with the natural environment in which the ruins are found and which complements the rest of the constructions in the area.

Conceptually, it must be a place of welcome to the archaeological site, a tranquil and peaceful place where visitors can obtain information, documentation and where they may rest before their visit to the ruins. Furthermore, it also has to be, in a sense, an exit gateway, that is, somewhere to rest and reflect on what has been visited prior to embarking on a new journey. Consequently, it is a geographical reference point which, without sidetracking the prominence of the ruins, will help visitors to gain an understanding of these ruins and to offer visitors all their magnificence.

The built surface area will be approximately 240 m², which is considered sufficient to meet the needs of the programme without affecting the environment. The planned areas will be structured sequentially: a reception, a museum, an information area and a rest area. From this point, a pathway will take the visitor to the ruins. In parallel, areas for the keepers, warehouses and services, required for the Centre's operation, will also be included.

The alignment used to implement the building matches that which predominates in the buildings on the site so as not to clash with the powerful underlying urban structure.

As indicated, the criteria used to design the buildings is their integration into the rainforest environment which houses La Blanca ruins in order to avoid producing a camouflage effect. To this end, a decision was made to employ the native wooden structures and exterior open stone work and plaster those on the inside. For windows and shutters, wooden boards protected by screens have been chosen. Flooring has been designed with coloured cement mortar and wood.

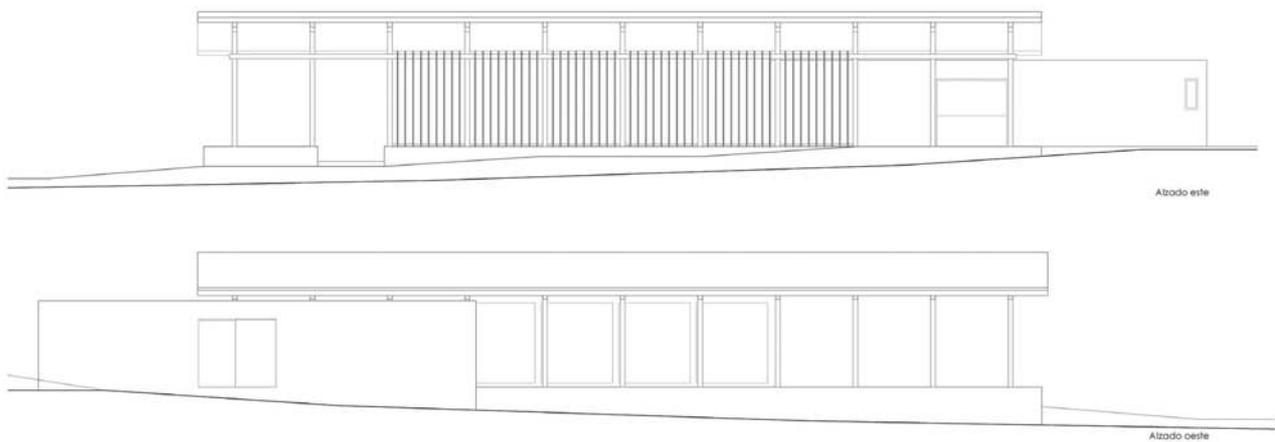


Figura 2 Alzados Este y Oeste.

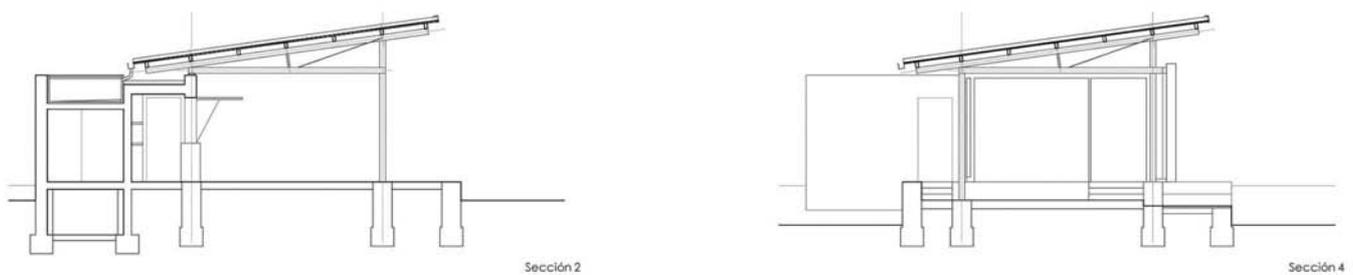


Figura 3 Secciones transversales.

In the exhibition area, a link with the outside has been obtained by using vertical slats which simulate the unbroken enclosure of the space in the longitudinal view, predominant during the tour. The structure, resolved with a central frame with two projections that protect the building from the heavy rains in the area, is used as an element which affords rhythm and order to the space.

The Centre for Interpretation has to be the central bridge that introduces the visitors to the historical and natural reality of La Blanca. For this purpose, a parking area has been designed next to the paths to the terraces, at the foot of which is located the archaeological site. From the parking area, a path leads to the reception, information and registration area. From this area, visitors can enter the exhibition area to learn about some of the general cultural aspects of La Blanca and the ancient Mayans who lived there. Then they can move on to the rest area which may be used by visitors both at the start and end of their tour of the site. This can be reached by a path which leads off from this area.

2.2. The exhibition area

The exhibition area covers a built area of 60 m². In it, the visitor will find all the information about the archaeological site and the natural environment where it is situated. For this purpose, special panels have been designed to withstand the tropical rainforest environment; these include texts, photographs and cartographical documentation. This information will be provided in Spanish and English.

These panels will cover aspects such as the city and its buildings, the techniques that the La Blanca Project has employed in its research, the daily life in antiquity, artists and their works, or the abandonment of the site which coincided with the famous collapse of the Classic Mayan society.

Likewise, information relating to alternative routes through the archaeological site is provided, which indicates the paths which lead to the monumental complexes and those designed for watching nature.

The reproduction of a painted stucco wall, made according to the same techniques used in antiquity, will enable the visitor to discover the materials employed by the Mayas for covering the walls of their beautiful palaces. Similarly, reproductions of some of the encrusted drawings or graphites which abound in the buildings at La Blanca can be admired on this wall, and constitute a source of iconography of invaluable worth on the vision of the cosmos and the daily life of its distinguished inhabitants.

Other educational resources which will preside the exhibition area are the scale models with materials adapted to the environment in order to guarantee their conservation. A scale reproduction of one of the vaults of the main Acropolis palace will help the visitor to understand the building system of the well-known Mayan vault, or approximation vault. At the same time, a general scale model of the site will serve to highlight the urban planning activities which flourished at the site of this ancient Mayan city

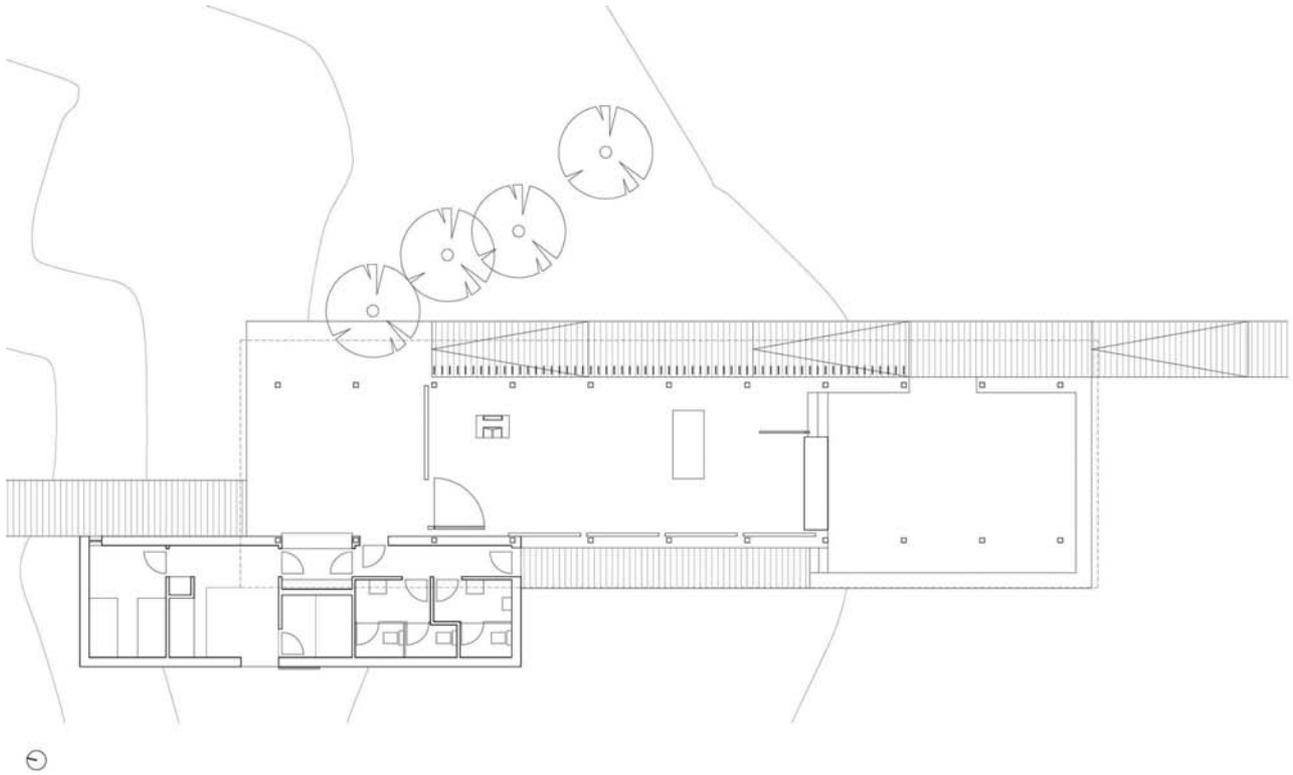


Figura 4 Planta general del Centro de Interpretación.



Figura 5 Vista general infográfica.

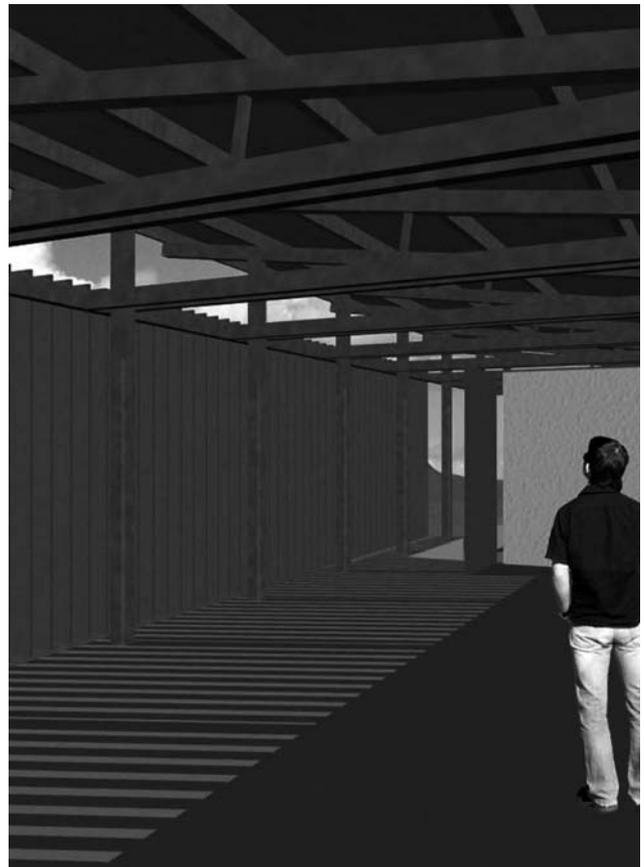


Figura 6 Vista interior infográfica.



Figura 7 Muro con grafito en La Blanca.



Figura 8 Diferentes grafitos de La Blanca



Figura 9 Equipo de trabajo de la excavación.

2.3. The route

The second part of the visit provides the option of several routes, of variable lengths, which take the visitor to the natural and cultural heritage of the archaeological site.

For these routes, small signposts need to be installed to indicate the different points to be shown, as well as signs providing the necessary indications to avoid any situation which might harm the visitor or the environment to be conserved.

Similarly for these routes, the assistance of specialised guides who can provide explanations in both Spanish, and in English or French, will also be necessary. In this respect, another activity that the La Blanca Project will encourage will be to provide heritage conservation awareness workshops in the neighbouring village of the same name, which are intended to train workers who have collaborated in the archaeological project so they can start out in this profession.

In short, and as mentioned earlier, all these services to be provided by the Centre for Interpretation are being designed by an interdisciplinary team which combines architecture and graphic arts, psychology, didactics, museography or archaeology so that the visit to the archaeological site is genuinely efficient and enables the visitor to take away the best memory of it.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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Versión española

TÍTULO: *El centro de interpretación como instrumento de Patrimonio y desarrollo.*

RESUMEN: *En este año ha comenzado la construcción de un Centro de Interpretación en el sitio arqueológico de la Blanca, que se está haciendo realidad gracias a la financiación de la Universidad de Valencia, dentro de sus presupuestos destinados a cooperación internacional. Un equipo del Instituto Universitario de Restauración del Patrimonio ha redactado el proyecto arquitectónico que contempla una estructura austera, adecuada a las condiciones del medio natural tropical, dispuesta para cumplir un programa de acogida e información de los visitantes que llegan estas ruinas mayas de Guatemala. Estas actuaciones pueden ser un modelo a seguir por otros sitios arqueológicos de similares características, que comienzan a recibir un turismo cultural de baja intensidad que puede ser fundamental para promover un desarrollo sostenible en las poblaciones aledañas.*

PALABRAS CLAVES: *patrimonio, cooperación, desarrollo, interpretación, Maya, La Blanca*