

LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION: UT's Presence in the Maya Heartland

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THE INTERRELATED FIELDS OF ART, ART HISTORY, archaeology, and anthropology—all strongly represented at the University of Texas—are undergoing important changes, none more so than in the increased participation of Latin American voices and perspectives within an international dialogue.

To that end, the Department of Art and Art History's Mesoamerican Center is developing a special relationship with a local foundation in Antigua, Guatemala, that will result in exciting possibilities for UT faculty, staff, and students.

The Mesoamerica Center, founded in 1990 by the late Linda Schele, aims to facilitate knowledge and learning about Mesoamerican cultures and peoples, highlighting the interdisciplinary strengths of faculty and students throughout the university. Directed by David Stuart of the Department of Art and Art History, it focuses primarily on the integrated study of the arts, languages, and archaeology of Mesoamerican indigenous cultures. Affiliated faculty include Nora England of Linguistics, Julia Guernsey of Art and Art History, and Enrique Rodriguez Alegria, Brian Stross, and Fred Valdez of Anthropology.

The Mesoamerica Center has been eager to establish closer connections with scholars and students in Central America and Mexico, seeking a physical space that could be used for seminars, research, and teaching. This dream began to become reality in the summer of 2005, when Mesoamerica faculty and staff first met with members of the Fundación Pantaleón, a Guatemalan nonprofit foundation dedicated to advancing education and social and economic development for the country and its residents, especially through projects that benefit rural areas.

The Fundación Pantaleón owns a large seventeenth-century house

nestled in the heart of Antigua, but had spent years searching for a meaningful use for the property, known as the Casa Herrera. It didn't take much time for the two institutions to draft a mutually beneficial proposal for the Mesoamerica Center to inhabit the Casa Herrera. The location is perfect within Antigua, a famous colonial city designated "La Muy Noble y Muy Leal Ciudad de Santiago de los Caballeros de Guatemala" by the conquistadors in 1543. The town offers a wealth of educational and cultural resources available to visiting students and scholars and is centrally located in Guatemala, less than one hour from Guatemala City.

The Casa Herrera property is currently undergoing a massive restoration and adaptive reuse of its space; the Casa will continue to be owned by the Fundación Pantaleón, with the Mesoamerica Center as its sole occupant. Once restoration is completed, it will provide a premier location for the Mesoamerica Center to host seminars, workshops, conferences, classes, performances, exhibitions, archaeological and conservation project activities, and scholars in residence. Prof. Julia Guernsey, who is actively involved with art historical and archaeological research in La Blanca, Guatemala, states, "The Casa Herrera project is enormously exciting for the University, as it will provide an incredible research facility for those students and faculty engaged with the culture—both ancient and modern—of Guatemala and Latin America in general."

Antigua has been designated as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, and the beautiful restoration of the property, overseen by Guatemalan specialists, acts in accordance with these guidelines. The completed center will serve as a springboard for current research in Guatemala, bringing the built-in resources of the Mesoamerica Center to the heart of Maya culture.

CALLING ON THE RESOURCES OF THE MESO-AMERICA CENTER, THE CASA HERRERA IS SET TO BE THE WORLD'S PREMIER SITE FOR THE INTERCHANGE OF IDEAS AND INFORMATION SURROUNDING MESOAMERICAN ART AND CULTURE.

A key advantage of having a Mesoamerica Center location at the Casa Herrera is the ability to allow international scholars, researchers, and artists to interact directly with their peers in Guatemala and neighboring Latin American nations, and to open many of these activities to the public. The Casa's vision encompasses a year-round series of cultural and community events. In this endeavor, the role of the community as both audience and active participant is key.

John Yancey, Chair of the Department of Art and Art History, has provided leadership in his endorsement of this unique opportunity. "The Casa Herrera research center represents a very exciting initiative in the research and academic program of the Department of Art and Art History," he says. "By providing a base of operations in Central America for international Mayan, Mesoamerican, and Pre-Columbian scholars to conduct research and research-related activities, the Casa Herrera represents

a momentous opportunity for the Department of Art and Art History and the University of Texas. On my visits to the Casa Herrera site in Antigua, I was impacted by the astounding beauty and cultural richness of this city, as well as the ease of travel from Austin. This center will enrich the lives and work of scholars and students for many years to come."

It is critically important that the Department of Art and Art History feature a Central American location for international collaborative research. Calling on the resources of the Mesoamerica Center, the Casa Herrera is set to be the world's premier site for the interchange of ideas and information surrounding Mesoamerican art and culture.

The Mesoamerica Center's presence at the Casa Herrera began as a conversation between two international institutions, the Department of Art and Art History and the Fundación Pantaleón; each was searching for a meaningful way to advance research and scholarship in

Mesoamerica. The spirit of this initial dialogue will often resonate in small and large contexts at the Casa, from scholars-in-residence quietly conferring in the courtyard, to the noisy beginnings of a multidisciplinary conference settling down to engage with an international panel of scholars. Bryan Roberts, Director of the Teresa Lozano Long Institute of Latin American Studies, adds his thoughts on the impact of the Casa Herrera to the University of Texas: "Casa Herrera gives UT a tangible and architecturally impressive presence in the Maya heartland of Central America. It will greatly facilitate UT's work in Mayan studies, in other aspects of Central America's past and present realities and, importantly, enhance collaboration with local institutions in Guatemala and elsewhere in Central America and Southern Mexico."

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Left to right: 1) Massive restoration is underway on the Casa Herrera property, 2) Adaptive reuse of space planned for many functions of Mesoamerican Center, 3) Antigua has been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site