

# Representing the Invisible. The Integral Plan for the Architectural and Cultural Landscape of Maní, Yucatán

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## Abstract

*For a place to be identified as a landscape, there is first a personal decision to differentiate it as an element of value; then there is a necessary process of transversal argumentation of its landscape intensity, and finally, it is disseminated in a clear and accessible way. However, on many occasions, what is really necessary is a method of visibility, of representation of blurred or unnoticed landscapes, which does not consist so much in contemplating the physical environment, but in understanding the cultural and collective memory that they hold. In this direction, the case of the Integral Plan for the enhancement of the landscape of Maní in Yucatán (Mexico) is presented as an example in which its graphic interpretation is a key tool for rescuing and conserving its cultural heritage. The ancient colonial city, and former Mayan ceremonial center, has come down to us today as a confused space of overlapping and unintelligible memories. The Plan –elaborated at intercontinental distance, without previous graphic documentation and affected by the restrictions of the COVID-19 pandemic– proposes to define the city from a personal vision and by means of different systems of representation and scales to offer a synthetic and comprehensible reading of the whole. Therefore, in this case, the choice of an eloquent method of graphic interpretation of the architecture, landscape and territory becomes the most effective instrument for the dissemination of heritage that is now culturally accessible.*

*Keywords: Colony landscape, Mayan landscape, Cultural memory, Maní, General Plan.*

## Introduction

The so-called *Tomba del Tuffatore* (480-470 B.C.), discovered in 1968 at the archaeological site of Paestum (Capaccio-Paestum), shows a famous fresco on the inner face of the limestone slab that closes the upper part of the tomb. There is no record of the genuine meaning of the scene, and not even the experts agree on a single hypothesis. It represents a solitary man throwing himself into the waters –the waters of death or the entrance to Hades, depending on the context– immersed in a landscape. Any supposition is the fruit of personal imagination, although figurative elements are recognizable: two trees, the rippling waters of

a river or rough sea, a rigged architecture as an elevated platform. This is the image that the deceased would perceive after waking from a deep sleep.

A landscape has just been described without being a landscape by consensus, the result of an inalienable concept of the meaning of place: the personal notion. Subjectivity of each individual, also inherent, professes an affective gaze on the landscape that allows us to perceive its aesthetic and sensorial values through emotion [Prada 2012]. Thus, part of what we contemplate is determined by the psyche of the observer and intimately related to

our own experience and memories. Conception of landscape evolves beyond the physical environment towards a “convergence of the natural and the cultural in the same formal expression” [Ballester 2017, p. 105].

The ‘state of mind’, as enunciated by Amiel or Byron, conditions the perception of a place and shapes its mental representation. Along the same lines, for Unamuno ‘the landscape becomes soul’ from the mere action of describing it through contemplation and knowledge. By extrapolating one’s own cultural baggage to new places, these make sense as complex systems of value that need to be made known.

For this reason, interdisciplinary work, and especially architecture, is used to deepen the methods of representing the landscape. The architect, far from assuming a categorical system of drawing, knows that each place demands intrinsic research in the development and transmission of its own image or, at least, a sensitive gesture that makes visible the features that differentiate it from other landscapes. Thus, the “physiognomies of the landscape” [Aníbarro 2017] constitute in the first place a subjective interpretation that is then translated through graphic systems.

This article delves into the personal decision of how to draw a landscape, becoming at once the beginning, the vehicle and the end of the process of recognizing it as such. Its representation constitutes a powerful tool for making visible those values veiled by the passage of time, by routine or by oblivion. Specifically, the *Integral Plan for the Architectural and Cultural Landscape of Maní*, in Yucatán (Mexico), is presented, which goes beyond the graphic interpretation of the place to practically address the definition of the project. Methodologically, we will now explain the particular starting point of the commission, which has undoubtedly conditioned its representation. In short, it is necessary to reflect on the choice of graphic methods according to the scales of the landscape and the proposal in a complex architectural and heritage space. All of this in order to tell the image and history of a city hitherto unrepresented, where representation is fundamental for its recovery and enhancement.

### Project constraints

The ancient administrative province of Maní [Gerhard 1991], of great importance in Mayan and Colonial times, is a

little-known or at least little-explored landscape. In contrast to coastal tourist towns such as Cancún or Playa del Carmen, Maní does not open onto the sea, but is immersed in the jungle. It is located in the western half of the Yucatan Peninsula, 16 km geographically from Tikul (the city on which it currently depends administratively) and 100 km from Mérida. It is a small municipality of more than 5000 inhabitants [Secretaría de Fomento Económico y Trabajo (SEFOET) 2023] who, perhaps without knowing it, inhabit a city of great historical and territorial importance.

Since 2012, Fomento Cultural Banamex [1] has been promoting socioeconomic measures aimed at rescuing and enhancing the value of Maní through cultural

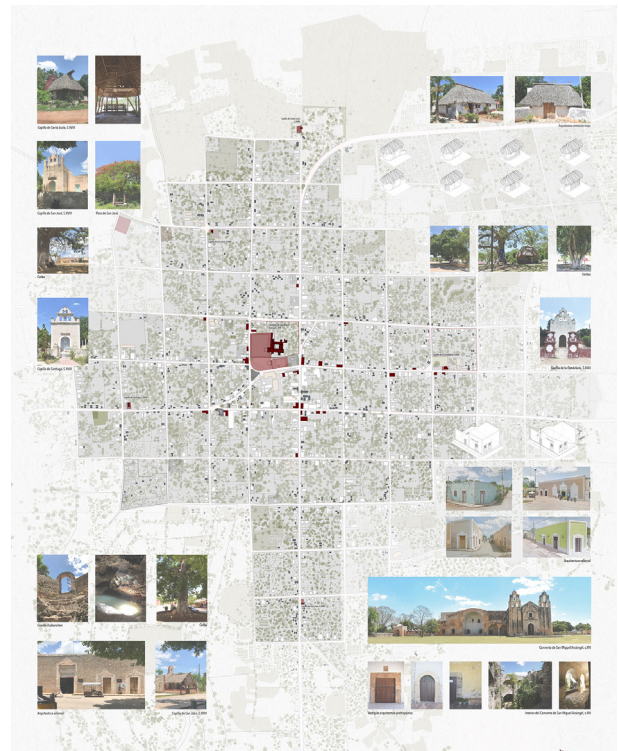


Fig. 1. Planta general de Maní con elementos de interés cultural. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP 2022).

tourism [Fomento Cultural Banamex 2023]. Within this framework, the Laboratorio de Paisaje Arquitectónico, Patrimonial y Cultural (LABPAP) [2] has been commissioned to draw up an Integral Plan (completed in 2022) whose architectural proposals aim to bring together the great wealth of tangible and intangible heritage examples (fig. 1). The aim is to make the sequence of historical and cultural strata that make up the current image of the city legible, decoding an overall landscape for its population and potential visitors. To this end, it is essential to recognize the memory that links civilizations over time. From the Plan's philosophy, the identification of this memory allows the past to be rescued in order to build a present that shapes the future landscape of the city and its inhabitants.

The commission, carried out over an intercontinental distance, posed two unique challenges from the outset. First, the graphic elaboration of the city is developed from scratch due to the lack of previous documentation on its current state. The lack of a general representation led to the creation of a completely new image of a place that had never before been drawn as a whole. We began by carrying out the architectural survey, using aerial photography, in a detailed manner by urban blocks. Secondly, the situation of global immobility during the COVID-19 pandemic significantly affects the work. The possibility of travelling and taking data in situ is discouraged; the use of powerful technological tools, such as 3D scanners or drone flights, usually employed in urban and territorial scale projects, is impossible.

In these circumstances, landscape drawing becomes a fundamental tool for understanding and valuing historical, natural and cultural heritage. Thus, contemporary design is based on the graphic definition that accompanies the investigation of the different landscapes of the city, establishing levels of knowledge and representation. The distance design process requires an innovative approach that uses graphics as the main means of knowing and transmitting the qualities of the environment, making up for the lack of prior information and the limitations imposed by the pandemic. Therefore, the commission becomes a model of work and study with a broadly experimental sense. Maní is understood as an architectural, urban and landscape laboratory; a space for research, very disparate in terms of the professional trajectory of the drafting team, but which nourishes, continues and expands its experience.

### Centrality in Time: San Miguel Convent and Cenote

Semantically, Maní alludes to the concept of 'place where everything happened' according to the Mayan language. However, its current image is that of an old Colonial city superimposed on the traces of an important Mayan city, with express documentary and historical references for being an important place before and during the Spanish colonization [3]. It represents a valuable documentary base in the territory that begins as a result of witnessing the first Auto de Fe of the Peninsula in 1564 [4]. In particular, the nucleus configures a landscape with enough reminiscences of colonial times to be recognizable. The urban grid, systematically reiterated by the Spaniards in the conquered cities as an imposition of order and jurisdictional control [Kubler et al. 2014], makes it possible



Fig. 2. Axonometría frontal del área del Convento de San Miguel. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP 2022).



Fig. 3. Estudio de color. Alzados Calle 27, estado actual y propuesta. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).

to define central blocks that represent the core of the population from a cultural and architectural point of view. The Convent of San Miguel Arcángel (1549) presides over this large public area [Suárez 2014]. Building opens to the exterior with the great vault on its main façade where an ephemeral construction would enter to constitute the so-called 'chapel of the Indians'. It also coexists with one of the four 'capillas posas' that flanked the platform for processions [Chico 2000, p. 665].

These permanences make up the present-day colonial landscape, although it is presumably superimposed on a previous landscape: the Maya. The Convent stands on a prominently elevated platform, and can be identified with the occupation of the corresponding ceremonial center and Mayan temple of the indigenous city, now disappeared [Gendrop, Villalobos 2012]. The Colonial grid would also have been imposed on the Maya grid, originally governed by planning rules related to cosmology. Adjacent to the Convent, several centennial ceiba trees frame the access to the urban center. This venerated tree appears in the sacred book Popol Vuh, playing an important role in the conception of the universe according to Mayan culture [5]. Likewise, the cenote of XCabachen was considered a sacred formation, symbolically constituting the gateway to the underworld.

For all these reasons, the nucleus of Maní condenses a very intense heritage area, full of inter-temporal culture, which must be enhanced. The Integral Plan seeks to reflect this agglutinating centrality as a focus from which the different itineraries for getting to know the city as

a whole radiate. However, the urban heart must be understood beyond the architectural fact that is the Convent, currently the only protagonist in the tourist visit. The project proposes extending the heritage area by integrating, on the one hand, the interior of the Convent as an autonomous landscape that recovers the traces of its orchards and monastic gardens and, on the other hand, the extraordinary exterior as if it were a great architectural ensemble under the open sky.

The representation also covers the south side of the building, presided over by the Town Hall with the remains of the disappeared dwelling of the last cacique Tutul-Xiu in Maní. In addition, leisure and sports spaces are sequenced, designed without a preconceived order, without forgetting the cultural heritage of this area where there are archaeological traces of the famous Auto de Fe of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The new design reorganizes and regenerates the area, based on the current layout and existing elements, to reinforce the centralizing character of the area. Street is blurred to become a road of coexistence that controls the passage of vehicles and very specific parking areas, leaving the pedestrian space as free as possible. Thus, the new texture sutures the two fronts of the area and integrates the ordered succession of spaces (fig. 2).

The residential architecture, with a clear Colonial expression, outlines and differentiates the monumental space. Colors on the facades of houses are studied in the Plan to highlight the chromatic connection of the architecture with the land and natural elements, maintaining the existing harmony at all times (fig. 3) [6]. From the graphic design,

the redevelopment gives meaning to everything that exists: it recovers and emphasizes layouts, dilutes others, reorganizes elements, eliminates superfluous paths and adds elements that reinforce this character, such as the area of palm trees on the side of the Convent in continuity with the geometry of the public space.

In addition, the area of influence descends through the street, like a great tentacle, until it joins the surroundings of the Xcabanchen Cenote, currently unlinked. Space is adapted and reconfigured in order to establish a small area for access to the cenote, equipped with an information pavilion. Minimal elements such as paving, benches and planting provide the site with an entity to make it visible and recognizable as a differentiating element. All of this defines the central void of Maní as a unique and expanded whole (fig. 4), where flows and perspectives converge, constructing one of the most significant images of the architectural and cultural landscape of the city.

### Urban Strategy: Heritage Focuses

Far from the current vision of Maní, the city constitutes a landscape of mixed times which encompasses much more than its cultural core and expands, progressively, towards the territory.

Around the central void, other heritage centers of interest appear, presided over by eighteenth-century chapels that take on the character of new satellite centers. The five religious constructions—Chapels of Santa Lucía, Candelaria, San Juan, Santiago and San José— have their origins in the movements of indigenous peoples 'appropriated' by the Spanish [Kubler et al. 2014] in order to have greater control over administration and evangelization. Thus, they are the trace of the demographic and territorial reconfiguration carried out by the colonists, grouping pre-existing populations into head towns. In this way, Maní became an agglutinating space where each chapel corresponds to the nucleus of aggregation of the immigrant communities from neighboring villages. For this reason, the chapels distinguish areas within the homogeneity of the layout and are more than just elements of cultural or religious value.

Chapels organize the city's current neighborhoods, with reminiscences and identities specific to the founding collective that still survive today. In this sense, the Plan covers the drawing and redesign of these spaces in continuity with the system of representation shown in the central area of

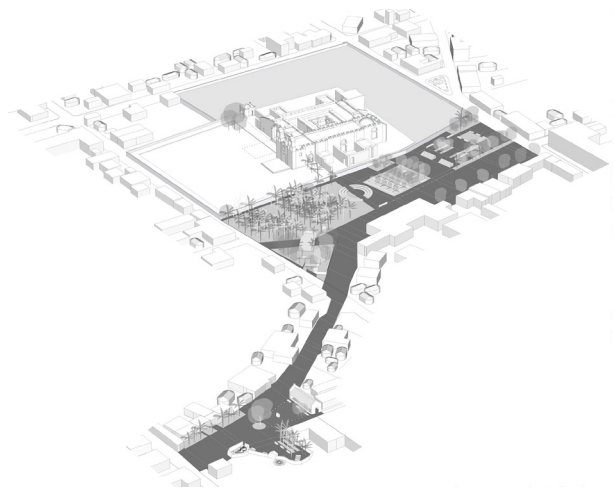


Fig. 4. Vista aérea de propuesta en el entorno del Convento de San Miguel y el Cenote. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).

the Convent. Different levels of graphics are established in the approach to each area where, inevitably, the drawing carries implicitly the idea of the project. Thus, the strategy is based on the definition of a series of minimal and reiterative design mechanisms that are based on the character of some existing elements in order to reinforce or complete them with new ones.

For each area, a graphic ground plan survey is carried out as a state of the question to understand morphologies, dimensions and relationships between elements (fig. 5). It is also the first step towards the search for a system of representation of the city that allows us to convey its sensorial meaning. The results are drawings of textured plants at different scales to represent the great presence of the jungle vegetation flooding everything, the stone masonry that forms the boundaries of the blocks, the size of the buildings and their arrangement on the plots, the earthy sensation of the roads or the compactness or dispersion according to zones. These textures are intended to evoke sensitive perceptions through graphics, which involves an important work of abstraction. Through colors, textures and strokes, the team draws what is essential to transmit this sensation, but without reaching the precision of detail. Otherwise, the representation would become a graphic



Fig. 5. Axonometría frontal del área de la Capilla de La Candelaria. Estado actual. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).



Fig. 6. Axonometría frontal del área de la Capilla de Santiago. Propuesta. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).

incongruity; a useless planimetry, of impossible scale and reading which, taken to the extreme as in Borges' story, the accuracy of detail would mean that the "map of a single province would occupy an entire city and the map of the empire, an entire province" [Borges 1992, p. 443].

The new graphic information is based on plans that need to provide more information at the propositional moment, thus giving rise to axonometries. In particular, the frontal axonometries constitute an evolution of the contrasted representation in the plans that allows the sensation of volume to be introduced. They propose the placement of newly designed umbraculums, the rearrangement of street furniture, the planting of new native trees or the development of different levels of signage in relation to the chapels, as outstanding architectures in the image of this landscape. In addition, its scale allows us to provide greater detail of the proposal where, for example, new garden systems are defined that homogenize the existing spaces, extending and specifying the uses (leisure, recreational, sports or walking); new children's playground areas are designed and the type of trees planned is specified (fig. 6).

Furthermore, different types of axonometric representation are used, reiterated systematically in the proposal for each area. All of them are preceded by a preliminary, highly conceptual drawing, which in greyscale synthesizes the spatial and architectural approach (fig. 7). The new paving is defined in negative, highlighting the sense of crossroads that each chapel generates. Intersection of part of the streets leading to the chapels, linked to open public areas, generates recognizable forms of confluence. It is defined by a system of soft paving with geometric breaks, essentially designed for pedestrian use, although compatible with road traffic by means of specific elements of separation and protection from traffic.

From this point on, graphic design progresses, adopting increasingly more environmental features and closer to a possible real image. The final aerial views give an overall view of the project that corresponds to the final steps in the Plan's cognitive and representational scales (fig. 8). This allows to complete the proposal and to show the character of a differentiated, dynamic and attractive crossroads space. In this way, they are represented and projected as real heritage and social focal points of interest, both for the inhabitants of Maní and for visitors. Finally, the graphic process leads to an image of each area which, close to the rendering, presents the proposal as fully accessible and realistic (fig. 9).

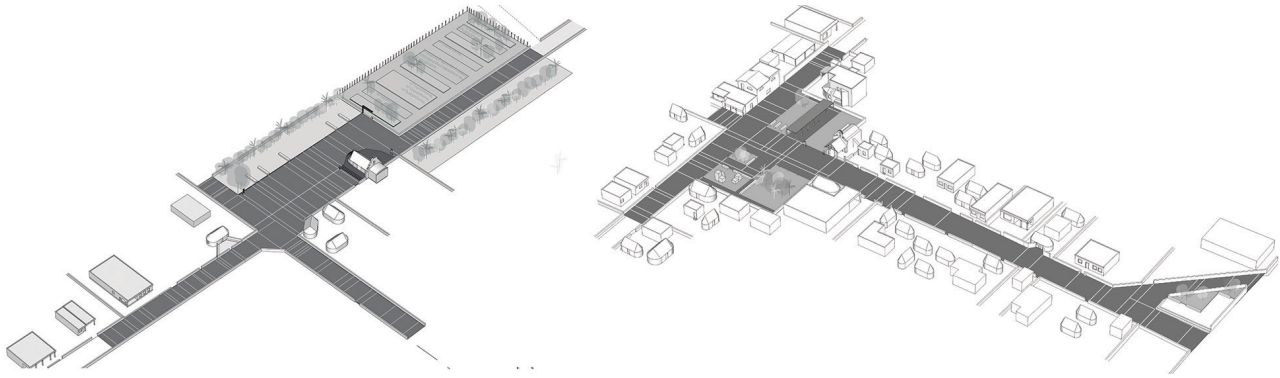


Fig. 7. Concepto espacial-arquitectónico del área de la Capilla de Santa Lucía y San Juan. Propuesta. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022)

### Overall strategy: network system

The Integral Plan is proposed as an overall strategy, although in its development the redesign of some singular spaces will be tackled in order to give them a new, more integrating character. The five focal points, together with the central one of the Convent, function as nodes of time and memory within a fully regulated urban structure. In this way, the areas that concentrate the highest density of cultural memory are identified in order to convert them into significant tools of the Plan. They constitute the support points for generating the network system that organizes the new architectural landscape of the city (fig. 10). All the intervention procedures are based on an abundant and precise planimetric representation which, at this point, covers the urban scale as a whole.

To this end, it is necessary to recognize the traces of the different layers of memory, the traces that allow an identification from the material to the environmental. In the general plan, as the urban grid advances towards the territory, there is an architectural dissolution of the blocks. Buildings diminish and other landscapes frozen in time emerge, such as the so-called 'Mayan plots', blending in with the increasingly natural surroundings. This is an ancestral system of land organization and lotification that fragments the block grid into elongated plots, with narrow stone fronts, to configure family units for self-consumption [Baños 2003; Avila 2009]. The

Mayan plot of land is the protagonist of the image of the border landscape, constituting the fusion between the urban space and the thick forest. Identifying these elements –Colonial, religious, ephemeral, vernacular, environmental or historical– leads to the redefinition of the urban grid that organizes the population, understood as a fact of identity in itself (fig. 11). In this way, the layout becomes an argument for the conception of the architectural landscape itself. It establishes a system of networks made up of itineraries, crossroads and connections to definitively imprint the character of the whole. In contrast to the idea of the Convent as the only piece of heritage that can be visited, the definition of cultural routes allows other elements of interest to be interconnected, promoting their conservation and enhancement. Specifically, different themed itineraries radiate from the urban center in the form of a cluster to link this area with those of the chapels.

These routes, both architectural and cultural, allow successive narratives within Maní, enriching the palimpsest [Lázaro 2023].

In addition, the overall strategy is based on the introduction of a comprehensive signage model to identify the elements of interest and define the itineraries. The scale of the new structure in the city is very broad and with different casuistry along the routes, so a system of signs is designed according to function –plaque, lectern, totem or information pavilion. It should be noted that all the satellite chapels are strategically located on the



Fig. 8. Vista aérea de propuesta del entorno de la Capilla de San José. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).

Fig. 9. Vista del entorno del Convento de San Miguel Arcángel. Propuesta. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).

entrance roads to the city, forming, at the same time, real access areas. Their historical creation is intended, on the one hand, to reverberate on a more contained scale the symbolic charge of the Convent area and, on the other, to project the regulated morphology into the organic landscape. For all these reasons, the layout of the chapels accompanies the idea of jurisdictional and religious conquest in expansion, from the center of the city towards the territory. Analysis of the aerial images shows traces of past times and uncovers new territorial planning relationships.

The new drawing recovers these geometric configurations closely linked to Mayan cosmology (fig. 12). Routes departing from Maní are identified with the axes and diagonals of its urban grid, directly linked to the axes of the cities they connect. In this way, graphic coincidences emerge, clearly intentional, of orthogonal expressions, triangles and circles of relationship in the territory. Guidelines, of Mayan origin, show man's will to impose his order through the transformation of the territory as a means of control. An example of this is the documented triangle constituted by the cities or *batabilob* of Maní, Ticul and Oxkutzcab [Loveland Roys 1957], which configures an interior area where the four lordships resided headed by the Xiu rulers [Okoshi Harada 2012], the main Maya power in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. This will give rise to another even larger triangle of power, as a strategy of socio-political advancement in the territory, with Mayapán as the vertex, in which Maní would continue to be the 'core of dominion' of the Xiu jurisdiction. Likewise, the representation of the territory reveals Maní as the epicenter of a possible system of concentric circles, relating the cities around it and other environmental elements (cenotes, haciendas, lagoons, etc.), of great importance for the creators of this system of territorial relations.

## Conclusions

Each landscape is the story of everything that has happened in this place, on a material and cultural level, and acquires different meanings according to the interpretation of the abstract that resides in it. Furthermore, from this research it is considered that the landscape also speaks of spatial and temporal extension: origin, transitions, current state and imminent near future, but never





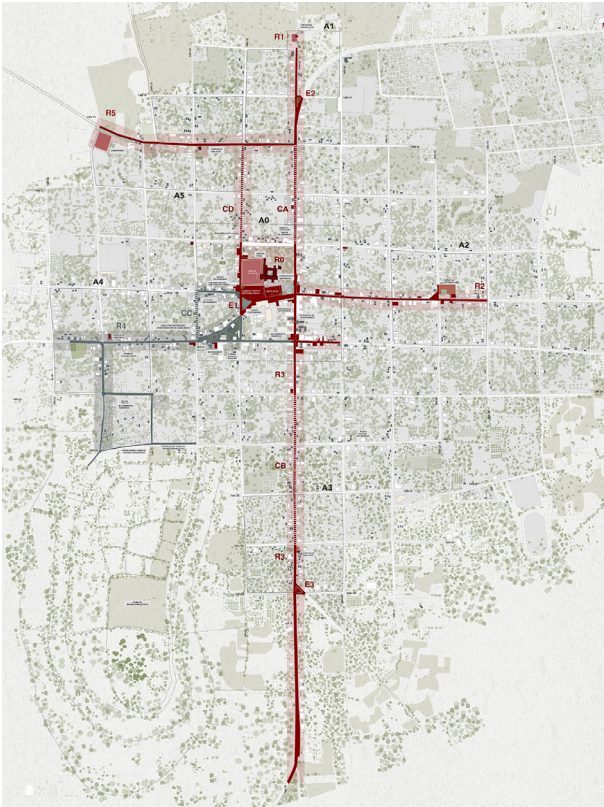


Fig. 11. Planta general. Análisis de la ciudad; redes itinerarios y áreas de propuesta. Plan Integral de Maní (elaboración gráfica de LABPAP, 2022).

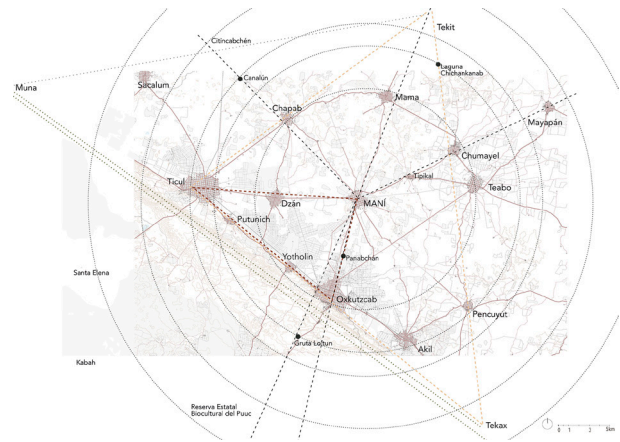


Fig. 12. Planta territorial. Esquema de relaciones geométricas de la trama urbana de Maní en el territorio (elaboración gráfica de autora sobre documentación del LABPAP, 2022).

representation at different scales has been chosen in order to show the integral vision of the city. The approach route employs various types of drawing, from the ground plan, axonometries and, finally, the rendered approach as the last step of setting the scene. At the same time, the different systems of scale and graphics serve to emphasize the elements of interest implicit in the project strategy. Thus, in the regular checkerboard layout, where it is difficult to single out urban spaces, the plan focuses on the presence of the chapel-satellites to support the grid system and build a recognizable architectural landscape. In conclusion, in the representation of the landscape of Maní, a dual design process takes place, referring to the generation of the Plan and, inherently, of the intervention project in the city. This shows a new perspective which, although personal to the Drafting Team, has previously identified and interpreted the historical and cultural values it presents. The architectural drawing is the language that allows them to be translated and revealed, from the scientific research, in order to direct attention to them [Lapayese 2008]. The result constitutes the formal, spatial and functional definition of the town, knowledge of which determines its perception, or not, as a heritage landscape.

## Notes

[1] Non-profit organization promoted by the National Bank of Mexico.

[2] The Architectural, Heritage and Cultural Landscape Laboratory is a recognized Research Group of the School of Architecture of the University of Valladolid, Spain, formed by professors and architectural researchers, coordinated by Darío Álvarez Álvarez and Miguel Ángel de la Iglesia Santamaría, with Sagrario Fernández Raga, Carlos Rodríguez Fernández, Flavia Zelli, Laura Lázaro San José, Lara Redondo González and Ana Muñoz López. It also has scholarship holders and collaborating researchers from different European universities.

[3] This refers to the compilation of facts and descriptions of the daily life of the city that the first bishop of Yucatán, the Toledo-born Fray Diego de Landa, compiled in the form of a logbook during his stay in Maní.

[4] Thus began the “most notorious case of persecution in Yucatán”, [Quezada 2001, p. 288] where the burning of codices and symbolism of Mayan gods took place, as well as the exhumation of corpses that had been buried according to the Mayan rite, considering that “they contained nothing more than the lies of the Devil” [De Landa 2001, p. 39].

[5] “And the Great Mother Ceiba arose, amidst the memory of the destruction of the earth. [...] It sat upright and raised its crown, asking for everlasting leaves. And with its branches and its roots it called out to its Lord. There was no light on the earth. There was no sun, no night, no moon. They woke up when the earth was waking up. And then the earth awoke, at this moment the earth awoke. Infinite steps of time and seven more moons were counted since the earth awoke, and then it dawned for them.” [Médiz 1985, p. 89].

[6] Color study based on the color theories of M. Eugène Chevreul, published in his work *Principios de Armonía y Contraste de Colores* (Principles of Harmony and Contrast of Colours) in 1859. Plan pursues a minimum chromatic adequacy, moving away from cold colors and highly saturated reds, towards colors with a predominance of yellow, reminiscent of sand and land.

[7] From the expressionist painter Paul Klee’s quote “art does not reproduce the visible, but makes it visible” [Klee 2013, p. 1], it can be said that, in these cases of vast heritage landscapes, it is essential to make the invisible visible in order to make its knowledge accessible.

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