

LAND, COMMUNITY, HERITAGE AND WAL-MART AT TEOTIHUACAN



Great comment from Meg (Butler) on [past-present relationships](#) in Mexico.

Another interesting case of past/present relationships with landscape and monuments began getting press coverage this past week. I have provided below links to various articles. A controversial decision to build a Wal-Mart close to Teotihuacan provoked some very different responses from supporters and opponents. The articles attest that there is some local support for the store's construction because of the lower prices and variety of goods it will provide the community.





The opposition seems to take three different forms. One view is that the store will upset the community's "cosmic equilibrium", some sort of energy related to the monuments built at Teotihuacan. A second says the store's presence will undermine the community's perceived ancient heritage, which, according to this view, traces its roots back to ancient Teotihuacan (quotation from one article: "Opponents say it will ruin a way of life that dates back centuries"). The third line of opposition is the kind often found when Wal-Mart moves into small towns in America. Concerns about preserving small, locally-owned businesses as part of the community's recent heritage seem to weigh heavily in the debate. One resident is concerned whether the Wal-Mart will drive a local street market out of business. An AP article quotes him as saying it should be preserved, even though it "is full of plastic stuff and Chinese goods".

One of Wal-Mart's concessions to the community is that they will build the store in "subdued" colors with a stone façade. I'm unsure whether this is to make it less conspicuous or an attempt to "match" the nearby ruins. They have promised also to preserve under Plexiglass an altar uncovered in what will be the store's parking lot.

Much of the opposition to this store is from outside of the community, even outside of Mexico. I remember hearing a similar story on NPR when the first Wal-Mart was built in the far interior of China. The "international community" was outraged over modern Western encroachment on a "traditional" way of life. And yet when they interviewed the residents of the town in question, they were thrilled to have access to inexpensive goods and a wide array of choices. I was bothered by both sides of the debate. Wal-Mart in China seemed to represent a further step in homogenizing the world, in addition to the inevitable decline of small businesses (perhaps a new frontier in archaeology?). But the international opposition was in part a desire to mummify the community as a relic, as a model of a "traditional" way of life for our intellectual

curiosity and appreciation, and as a “link” with the past unwillingly relinquished. Of course communities all over the world have taken economic advantage of this very desire, with residents turning themselves and their towns into “living museums”.



The Teotihuacan case is a little different in that the proximity of the store to the monuments is causing great grief. Besides obvious concerns over the physical preservation of the ruins, it seems that the monuments need to reside in a “timeless” space without physical intrusions of the modern era. This raises questions of “authentic” viewing experiences. What is the difference between experiencing Roman ruins amidst the chaos of the modern city and Colonial Williamsburg, where businesses are encouraged to play along with the early American theme and residents wear colonial garb? The

first experience, without attempting to recreate the experience of ancient Rome, actually suggests continuity (busy city then, busy city now), whereas the staged experience of Williamsburg has done wonders for architectural preservation but little towards an experience of being anywhere but tourist camp.

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