



Identifying integrative built environments in the archaeological record: An application of New Urban Design Theory to ancient urban spaces



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 15 February 2013
Revision received 25 September 2013
Available online 26 October 2013

Keywords:

Built environment
Integration
Community
New Urban Design Theory
Maya

ABSTRACT

Ancient Maya settlement patterns have long been described as dispersed. Instances of low-density or dispersed urbanism among agrarian-based societies are common in tropical civilizations, and are of particular interest due to their expressed problem of social integration. Traditionally, archaeologists have focused on classic hallmarks of state integration, including force, infrastructural control, large-scale ritual, and kinship; thus, reflecting the polar extremes of integration. Current models accord a more multi-scalar and dynamic nature to state and urban organization, and the need to pursue diachronic perspectives that consider more subtle and varied degrees of integration. With regard to settlement, examining the total patch of occupation on a landscape, how it developed, how it was divided up, and in turn brought together, is of interest. In this study I apply criteria developed in New Urban Design Theory, a body of thought and practice concerned with modern-day issues of dispersed and low density settlement, to evaluate an architectural complex at the Classic Maya centre of Buenavista del Cayo, Belize, believed to have functioned as an integrative space within the civic entity.

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Introduction

Within archaeological settlement studies it is common to encounter potential non-domestic architectural complexes. When this occurs, the archaeologist must attempt to identify the alternative function(s) of such remains. This paper presents a cross-culturally applicable method of assessing the integrative potential of non-domestic built environments that are encountered among more typical settlement remains. The approach is presented as a case study from the archaeological context of an ancient Maya urban centre, and is couched within greater discussions regarding the nature and processes of urbanism—both in modern day and the past.

Study background

While conducting a settlement survey in 2007, an enigmatic grouping of mounds was encountered within a settlement zone of Buenavista del Cayo: a Classic Period (ca. 300–900 AD) Maya urban centre, located along the Lower Mopan River of west-central Belize (Fig. 1). Results of subsequent mapping, testing, and excavations,²

suggested this architectural complex did not represent a typical domestic material assemblage, and introduced the notion of a non-domestic function. This enquiry of function led to the possibility that the site served a community-oriented purpose. To determine its integrative potential, both within a neighbourhood and larger urban process context, the site and its material culture were subjected to a set of criteria developed in New Urban Design Theory.

Urban integration

Urban settlements constitute environments where flows of people, places, and things collide (Fletcher, 1995: 7). They are subject to factors of local ecology, local culture, and supra-local events and institutions that serve to constrain as well as to liberate. As such, urban environments are best described as “exercises in organized complexity” (Greenberg, 2011: 78–79).

Of particular interest to tropical urban specialists is the concept of dispersed or low-density urbanism (Fletcher, 2009, 2012; Isendahl and Smith, 2013; Smith, 2010a), and the problem of social engagement as it pertains to integration: the manner by which administrators go about securing people, labour and tribute, and suppressing uprisings (Scott, 1998). Traditionally, archaeologists have focused on the classic hallmarks of state-level integration such as force, infrastructure, trade, large-scale ritual, and alliances/kinship. These hallmarks reflect polar extremes of integration; however, current models emphasize the dynamic and multi-scalar nature of such organization among the ancient Maya

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¹ Research was conducted while the author was a graduate student at the University of Calgary (until December 2012).

² 2007–2010 Mopan Valley Archaeological Project (MVAP) (Peuramaki-Brown 2012; Yaeger et al., 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012).

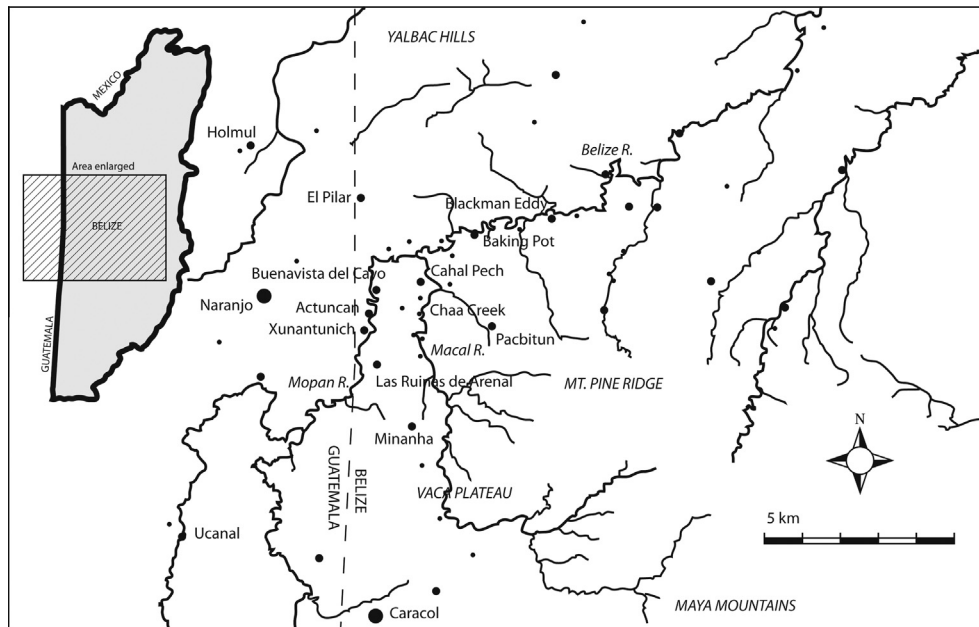


Fig. 1. Map of west-central Belize showing the location of Buenavista del Cayo (redrawn from Helmke and Awe, 2008: Fig. 2).

(Iannone, 2002; Marcus, 1992), and a need to focus on issues of urban organization while pursuing diachronic perspectives and more subtle degrees of integration along a shifting continuum (Swartz et al., 1966).

De Montmollin (1995), in his examination of three Classic Maya polities, identifies four potential strategies of political centralization, and by extension, urban integration: (1) elite sub-rulers/administrators living among scattered commoners, (2) social intervention involving an elite/administration strategy of going out to live among and normatively controlling scattered commoners, (3) requesting that commoners enter into civic centres to attend normatively-integrated rituals, and (4) keeping documentation on citizenry. Similarly, DeMarrais et al. (1996), through a cross-cultural examination, address the primary means of materialization of power in society: (1) the dedication and erection of public monuments, (2) the use of symbolic objects, (3) the use of written documents, and (4) participation in and sponsoring of ceremonial events. Schoenfelder (2004) adds the use of cultural experts to this list, including the adoption of local knowledge held by village councils or elders into larger political systems. Souvatzi (2008) further discusses the integration of pre-modern communities through the use of symbols, physical interaction, ritual, and daily practice to forge and reinforce collective ideals and notions of identity. These strategies are to be found along a *societas-civitas* continuum, and are commonly regarded as mutually exclusive; however, I view these as potentially overlapping strategies that are part of a larger, diachronic, integrative whole, particularly as they evolve within an urban setting.

As civic support is gained and subsequently lost, administrative entities typically seek to employ as many forms of integration as is possible: “In analyzing a political group, one will find different supports operating in different areas and various political competitors trying to manipulate the various sources of support in their favour” (Lewellen, 2003: 93). From this perspective, one might advocate for approaches that aim to examine multiple methods of integration over time. For urban environments to be connected, a variety of integrative methods are required to rectify differing scales of interaction: transport (roads, trains, water ways), culture (festival, ritual, and sports), politics (administration, representa-

tion, and physical boundaries), economics (tax, markets), etc. By examining multiple systems and relations involved in civic integration and subsequent disintegration, we might better understand the complexity and paradoxical processes of constructing and legitimizing the social landscape: how various methods combine simultaneously both in opposition and cooperation or, horizontally and vertically (Keating, 2000: 304).

The built environment

As part of the urban landscape, built environments are expressions of character that simultaneously shape the identity of those who live within them (Soja, 1989) and are “complex processes of construction and decay, celebrations of depreciation that render urban environments complex palimpsests in history” (Hall, 2006: 196). Spaces, buildings, and other objects that are monumentalized thus offer “each member of a society an image of that membership, and image of his or her social visage” (Lefebvre, 1991: 220).

Identity and attachment, including that of the neighbourhood, is often captured and expressed through the physical built environment and associated activities (Brown et al., 2003; Burchfield, 2009; Comstock et al., 2010); however, “the values, traditions, and identities of a community are not timeless, transcendent entities but anchored in the tangible images and acts that each individual can directly sense” (Inomata, 2006a: 805). Lohse and Gonlin (2007) address the role of monumental architecture in the creation of community sentiment and identity, primarily through the bringing together of commoners and elites in the construction of such projects. Ritual events reinforce the full articulation of public places and spaces (Hall, 2006: 193; Lefebvre, 1991: 220). Public spaces and sumptuary signifiers of status come together in major ceremonies, providing a system of spaces encoded with power on a landscape. This system of spaces in turn serves to articulate expected public behaviour: administrator-leaders use them to provide cues as to how they would like residents to behave (Vogt, 1965: 345). These projects and contexts are then visible on a daily basis, persisting beyond an individual’s lifetime, and provide a reminder to support populations of elite administration, thus serving an important link between elite and non-elite, or urban

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