



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1993 Volume I: The Symbolic Language of Architecture and Public Monuments

The Exchange, Destruction and Reconstruction of Architectural Signs and Symbols in Mexico-Tenochtitlan: a History of Order and Power

Guide for Curriculum Unit 93.01.08
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This essay deals with a multidisciplinary approach to the complex problem of the destruction of the city of Mexico-Tenochtitlan in the sixteenth century. It is a very important aspect of the Conquest of the continent called America. Although it could have a variety of ways to be introduced and carried on in the classroom, I have chosen to organize it in seven lessons with flexible timing and resources. The material itself could be adapted for the curriculum of elementary all the way to high school. One of the main features of this curriculum unit is the actual building of a model of the city of Tenochtitlan by students. This is a project that students find fascinating, stimulating and fun!

The destruction of Tenochtitlan by the Europeans raises serious questions about the recording of history in the continent. Scholarship indicates that it was imperative to be selective in the writings about the destruction of the native civilization so as to maintain order and the power of the invading. The manipulation of autochthonous icons, symbols, myths and architectural structures proves to be a greater and more profound weapon against the resisting forces than any dog, or horse, or canon could ever hope to be. This manipulation translates itself into psychological effects that not only would contribute to the destruction of Tenochtitlan but would be decisive in maintaining a defeated population in order, demoralized, and completely out of touch with their own culture and background. In this curriculum unit I want to explore some of the most outstanding elements in this change of power, and hopefully I would like to bring to light the relationship between architecture and power. For this I find that building in the classroom a model of Tenochtitlan could be a good motivator to explore symbols, structures, grammars and significations.

In the texts of the Conquest of the continent called America the presence of Tenochtitlan creates an alluring power in the minds of the Europeans. They get drawn to the site of the marvelous city with excesses of infectious actions that only show the reader the degree of seduction they suffer in the face of a "Mecca," in the face of an imperial city worthy of the highest dreams of a Columbus. But isn't it the same force that drew Columbus to go around the world, to undergo any suffering, or privation that prompts Cortes to reach, by all means necessary, the wonderful and famed Tenochtitlan? Indeed, it is the same force! Power, riches, women, slaves, land, fame, myth, fantasy, curiosity, immortality are some of the components of this relentless force. And it seems, looking through the window, that the Europeans, perhaps without knowing it, went to Tenochtitlan to stay. They went there to be swollen up by this massive metropolis built on water. These are some of the experiences that we touch and discuss in the essay about the life and destruction of Mexico-

Tenochtitlan!

(Recommended for Social Studies, Mathematics, and Science, Grades 4-12; also Art, Reading, Writing for all grades)

Key Words

History Writing Instruction

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