

Vernacular housing of northwestern Mexico in sinaloa: ways of living, spatial customs, and constructive traditions. The case of culiacan

La vivienda vernácula del noroeste de México en sinaloa. Formas de habitar, costumbres espaciales y tradiciones constructivas. El caso culiacán

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ABSTRACT

Cultural traditions in Mexico are undergoing a process of accelerated transformation, driven by the constant growth of urban settlements and the migration of rural populations toward metropolitan centers. This phenomenon, largely motivated by the search for better socioeconomic conditions, has led to the progressive abandonment of native communities and, consequently, to profound changes in their ways of life¹. As a result, there is an ongoing—sometimes irreversible—loss of sociocultural practices, constructive technologies, and hybrid knowledge that together constitute both tangible and intangible cultural capital. The study of rural housing in the region provides an opportunity to understand how local communities have met their needs through adaptive strategies suited to the physical and climatic environment. These solutions, inherited from an Indigenous past characterized by seasonal internal migratory patterns, reveal a deep knowledge of the surroundings, expressed in construction systems such as stick-frame walls coated with mud, post-and-beam structures, and palm or thatch roofing, all typical of a highly resilient pre-Hispanic dwelling pattern². In these contexts, despite the region's high temperatures, dwellings maintained cool interiors thanks to their proximity to rivers, the use of well water, and the climatic adaptation of their materials and spatial arrangements. Upper rooms, with thick adobe walls and sloped clay-tile roofs supported by beams, provided thermal insulation, while portals with vine-covered trellises and leafy trees strategically located on the plot created extensive shaded areas that helped regulate the ambient temperature.

Keywords: Vernacular Housing; Primitive Housing; Functional and Constructive Typologies.

RESUMEN

Las tradiciones culturales en México enfrentan un proceso de transformación acelerada, impulsado por el crecimiento constante de los asentamientos urbanos y la migración de poblaciones rurales hacia centros metropolitanos. Este fenómeno, motivado en gran parte por la búsqueda de mejores condiciones socioeconómicas, ha propiciado el abandono progresivo de comunidades originarias, con la consecuente modificación profunda de sus formas de vida¹. Como resultado, se observa una pérdida continua —a veces irreversible— de prácticas socioculturales, tecnologías constructivas y conocimientos híbridos que conforman un capital cultural, tangible como intangible. El estudio de la vivienda rural en la región ofrece una oportunidad para comprender cómo las comunidades locales han resuelto sus necesidades mediante estrategias adaptativas al entorno físico y climático. Estas soluciones, heredadas de un pasado indígena caracterizado por patrones migratorios internos estacionales, revelan un conocimiento del medio, expresado en sistemas constructivos como los muros de vara recubiertos con lodo, estructuras de horcones y cubiertas de palma o paja, propios de un patrón habitacional prehispánico de notable resiliencia². En estos contextos, a pesar de las altas temperaturas de la región, las viviendas mantenían interiores frescos gracias a su ubicación cercana a los ríos, el uso de agua de noria y la adaptación climática de sus materiales y espacios. Los cuartos altos, con muros gruesos de adobe y techos inclinados de teja sobre vigas, proporcionaban aislamiento térmico, portales con enramadas y árboles frondosos, estratégicamente ubicados en el terreno, generaban amplias zonas de sombra que contribuían a regular la temperatura ambiental.

Palabras clave: Vivienda Vernácula; Vivienda Primitiva; Tipologías Funcionales y Constructivas.

INTRODUCTION

Vernacular housing can be understood as a type of housing whose form, materials, construction techniques, and spatial organization emerge from local conditions—climatic, material, cultural, and economic—and from the construction traditions of the inhabitants. As various authors point out, vernacular architecture is “the fundamental expression of a community’s identity, its relationship with the territory, and at the same time, the expression of the cultural diversity of the world”. The municipality of Culiacán, capital of the state of Sinaloa, has a rich heritage of traditional housing, which, although in many cases it has been transformed or replaced by modern types, contains important formal, functional, structural, social, and environmental values that deserve to be recognized, analyzed, and potentially revalued. The objective of this document is to defend the value of vernacular housing. To do so, it is necessary to conduct a systematic analysis, articulating its characteristics, weaknesses, and opportunities, its connection to the natural and social environment, and the essential components that comprise it.

DEVELOPMENT

The study of vernacular housing in Imala, Culiacán, is based on the recognition of traditional architecture as a cultural and technical expression that emerges from the relationships among the physical environment, social practices, and a community’s symbolic systems. Vernacular architecture is not conceived as a marginal or primitive manifestation, but as a cumulative cultural process that integrates form, function, and structure in harmony with the natural environment.

Formal typology: form as a cultural and climatic reflection

According to Rapoport⁽⁵⁾, the formal dimension of vernacular housing responds to the interaction between climatic factors, local materials, customs, and social values. In the case of Imala, the morphology of the dwellings—characterized by their sloping tile or palm roofs, adobe walls, and interior courtyards—is an adaptive response to the region’s hot, dry climate and the communal logic of living.

The forms of Mexican vernacular architecture are the product of resource economy and popular wisdom, where each construction element responds to a specific need. Thus, form is not imposed from an external aesthetic but arises from a dialogue between the inhabitant and their environment, consolidating a recognizable territorial identity. This vision aligns with that proposed by Mendoza Anguiano⁽²⁾, who defines architectural form as the result of a sedimented cultural process in which time and use transform architecture into an art of living.

Functional typology: dwelling as a social and symbolic system

From a functional perspective, the vernacular housing of Imala reveals a communal way of life in which housing is not limited to serving as shelter, but rather articulates family, productive, and symbolic relationships. Herrera Rivas et al.⁽⁶⁾ argue that patterns of domestic space use reflect a community’s social structure and values. In rural Sinaloa housing, courtyards, kitchens, laundry rooms, and corrals form a continuous system of open spaces that integrates agricultural work, coexistence, and subsistence.

Segre argues that living in Latin America should be understood as an integral cultural practice in which social dynamics are materially inscribed in the home.⁽⁷⁾ In Imala, this relationship is evident in the layout of spaces around axes of shade and ventilation, as well as in the domestic hierarchy that organizes daily life between the interior and exterior. Housing, therefore, is not only inhabited: it is lived in and produced collectively, in constant interaction with nature.⁽²⁾

Spatial and functional typologies of vernacular housing

First of all, it is difficult to separate, classify, or determine the constants that characterize a group of dwellings. There is no purity in the categories; there are elements that appear in most cases, but there are features that make each dwelling unique in terms of position, layout, or functionality, regardless of the category to which it belongs, bearing in mind that each family, due to spatial necessity, leaves its own mark on it.

This is how the houses in the first block around the main square and the church are described in terms of temporality and similarity. Here, we find that most houses are aligned with the street and lack porches, although there are important associations on the east, west, and south facades.

Spatial Functional Typology

Functional typology is a juxtaposition of associations and fusions of activities that fulfill a function, based on the social practices of a community, which inform the type of response architecture must provide to meet the varied and complex needs that constitute the complex living requirements of a people or region.⁽⁸⁾

According to Waisman⁽⁹⁾, they constitute a condensation of functions, needs, and social practices, and therefore, important aspects of architectural practice can be understood. Their character can provide indications about the type of response that architecture provides today to changing lifestyles.

Structural typology

A mechanism in which construction technology, together with formal and functional needs, today generates or creates the structural type over time, on which it achieves its materialization and is preserved as a mental image in the ancestral ideology of a people.⁽⁸⁾ For Waisman⁽⁹⁾, structural typologies can therefore be considered as elements of a series, which are sometimes used directly in the search for established models to be used in the architectural design of housing.

Structural typology: technique, materiality, and sustainability

Regarding structural typology, Guerrero Baca⁽¹⁰⁾ highlights that vernacular architecture is a lesson in sustainability and technological balance. Traditional construction solutions—adobe walls, wooden beams, palm or tile roofs—are manifestations of empirical knowledge based on observation of the environment and intergenerational experimentation.

Guerrero Baca⁽¹⁰⁾ 10 proposes understanding vernacular technology as a “system of constructive intelligence,” in which the effectiveness of materials is combined with respect for the environment and the oral transmission of knowledge. In this sense, the dwellings of Imala express a resilient architecture: they adapt to the availability of natural resources, respond to the climate, and maintain a balance between permanence and transformation. This inherent sustainability anticipates contemporary principles of bioclimatic architecture, but from a culturally situated root.

Conceptual synthesis

The study of Imala’s vernacular housing is approached from a comprehensive perspective that articulates the typological dimensions:

- The formal, understood as the morphological expression derived from culture and climate.
- The functional, which reveals ways of living, producing, and relating to the environment.
- The structural, which integrates construction knowledge, local materials, and technical sustainability.
- The spatial, defined as the volume where the habitable space is developed, where all user activity takes place.

Together, these dimensions form an architectural model that not only responds to basic needs but also constitutes a testimony to identity, resilience, and ancestral knowledge. The vernacular housing of Imala, therefore, should be understood as a living manifestation of the tangible and intangible cultural heritage of northwestern Mexico.

Location of the object of study, the Imala region



Figure 1. Location of towns in Oasisamerica



Figure 2. Climate divisions⁽¹²⁾

The transitional position of the Sinaloa territory between the cultural areas of Mesoamerica, Aridoamerica, and Oasisamerica, in contact with the Sonoran Desert, the Sierra Madre Occidental mountains, the Gulf of California, and the rivers that become mighty during the rainy season, fostered remarkable ecological and cultural diversity. In this environment, groups such as the Tahues in the valley and the Xiximes and Acaxeas in the mountains developed, adapting their ways of life to extreme climatic conditions characterized by intense heat and water scarcity during several months of the year. These people mastered techniques for gathering and using natural resources, identifying plant and tree species suitable for building homes, huts, and shelters to protect them from the elements.⁽¹¹⁾ Likewise, their knowledge of the territory included the location of springs and hot springs, which were integrated into their daily lives and ritual practices linked to nature.⁽⁸⁾

Traditional knowledge of the territory, both in its natural and social dimensions, was exploited during the New Spain era when towns and settlements were founded on ancient indigenous villages. This process profoundly transformed the concept of housing and property inherited from the original cultures, which were governed by a circular worldview in which inhabitants belonged to the land and there was no notion of written property rights. In this symbolic system, temporality was conceived as an indeterminate and sacred cycle, in contrast to the linear, measurable, and historical vision that characterized European society, where the territory could be appropriated in the name of the Spanish Crown with the legitimization of the Catholic Church.⁽¹³⁾

The convergence of these cultural processes, together with climatic conditions and the availability of local materials, gave rise to new forms of appropriation of living space. These forms, the product of the fusion between indigenous traditions and European influences, generated constant typological differences from the pre-existing primitive housing, shaping what we now recognize as traditional vernacular housing in northwestern Mexico.⁽²⁾

Formal, functional, structural, and spatial organization

The spatial typology of vernacular housing in the Culiacán region reflects a balanced composition of internal and external spaces, where bedrooms, living room, kitchen, storage room, corrals, gardens, and patios form an integral system of domestic life. This spatial organization responds not only to functional needs, but also to the social structure of rural communities, in which the dwelling constitutes a hub of family, productive, and symbolic interaction.⁽²⁾ The intentional arrangement of openings, vents, and shaded areas demonstrates an empirical understanding of the climate, orienting the dwelling to maximize cross-ventilation and reduce direct sunlight. Likewise, the corridors and perimeter galleries allow the living space to expand outward, creating mixed-use spaces that combine work and outdoor living.^(8,9,10)

Materials and construction details

The use of local materials is one of the most distinctive features of the vernacular architecture of this region.^(11,12) Their use responds to an economy of resources and a deep understanding of the environment, reducing transportation costs and ensuring optimal adaptation to the hot, dry climate.⁽¹³⁾ In most cases, construction is carried out by the inhabitants themselves or by local master craftsmen, which reinforces the intergenerational transmission of construction knowledge.^(14,15) These construction systems, in addition to being efficient, foster a sense of belonging and self-sufficiency, making the dwelling a material extension of the cultural landscape. As Torres⁽¹⁶⁾ points out, the vernacular architecture of northwestern Mexico represents a synthesis of technique, sustainability, and identity.

Overall, vernacular housing in Imala, Culiacán, combines simple formality consistent with the natural environment, functions linked to daily life and the domestic economy, and a construction structure based on the availability and knowledge of local materials. Its longevity demonstrates the effectiveness of a sustainable, culturally significant model of living.

Housing in Imala, its components, and the concepts involved

Vernacular architecture is a fundamental expression of a society's culture. It relates to a community's territory and identity. It is the traditional, natural way houses are built, subject to continuous change to adapt to the new needs of social groups and new construction systems. This is the starting point for the following definition of the evolutionary process of rural housing in the transitional region of Mesoamerica and Aridoamerica in central Sinaloa.

Primitive housing

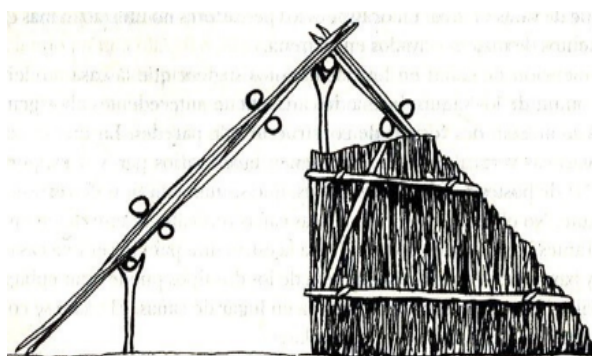


Figure 3. Primitive dwelling used as temporary shelter made of logs and branches

This refers to dwellings built with logs, earth, grass, and plants from the region, which are easily reincorporated into the local, pre-Hispanic, peasant environment and serve only to shelter people who migrated from the mountains to the sea in search of food or on their way to Aridoamerica or Mesoamerica¹⁴ from the rain and sun.⁽¹⁴⁾

Vernacular housing

Vernacular housing is described as indigenous settlements, with the Aboriginal and the native, the domestic, the regional, influenced by customs, native and foreign building traditions incorporated, the environment, its relationship with it, the context, and the identification of elements of the urban image within a vast site. The vernacular housing of Imala is a historical product of traditional rural domestic languages with local pre-Hispanic and peasant languages of northwestern Mexico.

Access to the dwelling

The rooms are accessed directly from the street, with no transitional element between the public and private spaces. In some cases, rooms must be crossed to reach other areas of the dwelling.

Load-bearing walls sometimes separate these interior rooms; others are only dividing walls, and in some cases, curtains adapt the space to functional needs, serving as a reception area during the day and a bedroom at night.

It is important to note that most homes lack space for circulation or a hallway to organize traffic. Most lack living areas, as the kitchen and dining areas serve as communal spaces. This is where the rear porch comes in as an auxiliary space and an organizer of the interior. In some cases, it has a low wall that delimits the built area and also serves as a seating area.



Figure 4. Home with chain-link fence

The kitchen

The kitchen has a stove for cooking over a wood fire. Due to the heat and smoke produced, in some cases it is located inside the bedroom and, mainly due to the climate of the region, it is separated from the main body of the building but always close to a porch that serves as a dining room and for ventilating the smoke.



Figure 5. Vernacular kitchen in El Carrizo



Figure 6. Interior kitchen with reed walls and roofs made of vegetation from the region

Bathrooms and laundry rooms in the backyard

The bathroom in these homes is not always integrated into the house, but it is still connected to the porch and the open areas, which in this case are service areas. Some have laundry rooms at the back or in the middle of the property, where there are sometimes vegetable gardens and corrals that take advantage of the moisture from the laundry rooms to water the trees that provide shade for them and their users, shade in the corrals for livestock, and fruit trees for consumption. In addition, there are houses where water springs from the subsoil in the courtyards, allowing for abundant trees.



Figure 7. Washing areas at the bottom of the land

Private Area

The intimate area is located in the built-up area, which is usually small and is only used at night and for sleeping due to the intense heat in the region. They have large windows that provide good daylight and efficient ventilation at night. They are also ventilated by the main doors, which allow the wind to pass through the house, oxygenating the spaces. It should be remembered that these are dwellings that met the spatial needs of the 19th century, when there were no mechanical means to help regulate indoor temperatures or provide outdoor lighting, and when rural activities meant spending most of the day away from home, starting the day at dawn and returning to their rooms at sunset.

The courtyards



Figure 8. Tree planting creates a microclimate

It should be noted that the courtyards provide ample shade thanks to a large number of trees, which help lower the temperature in interior spaces such as doorways and kitchens. Figure 8 Speaking of exteriors, on the west and east facades, we can find trees that reduce sunlight on the main facades.



Figure 9. Vegetation as a temperature regulator in work areas

Even on facades with little solar incidence, we find that trees help regulate the environment by exerting a thermoregulatory effect. Sunny facades have thick walls and considerable height, which helps keep hot air from rising to the top. In others, the parapets cast shadows on the gabled roofs of the south facade, which are sunny all day long.



Figure 10. Arbor in the courtyard of the house



Figure 11. Land enclosed by barbed wire fence

Use of the plot

Two plots of land belonging to the house are located on one side of the house, at its edge, bordering the public road.

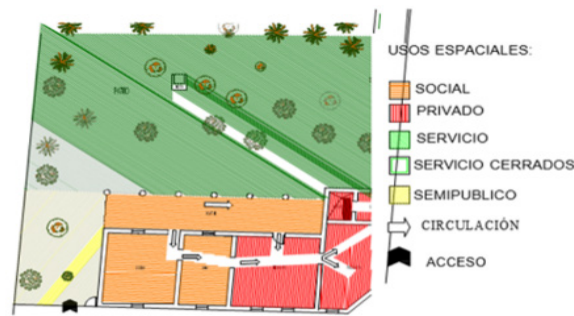


Figure 12. Housing Plan

Side entrance to an interior hallway, which serves as a distribution point for circulation to the other rooms and as a social area. One enters a kitchen and passes through it to the other rooms. It has a private bathroom accessible from the bedrooms. The bathroom was an addition to the original construction. The latrine and sink are in the courtyard, which now contains a spring, allowing for a garden with many trees and creating a microclimate in the mornings on the sunniest side of the house.

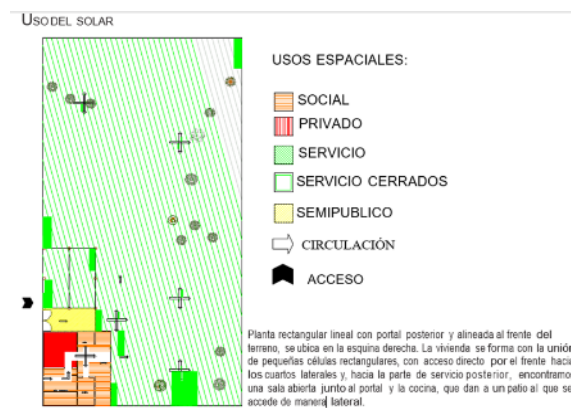


Figure 13. Regular floor plan, zoning

Functional

Large room on the corner of the property, private area with bedrooms in the main living area, a small room serves as a social reception area which can be entered from the front and between the rooms or through a side entrance which, in turn, leads to a rear porch, combined with the kitchen and a courtyard, forming the social and service area. See sketch below

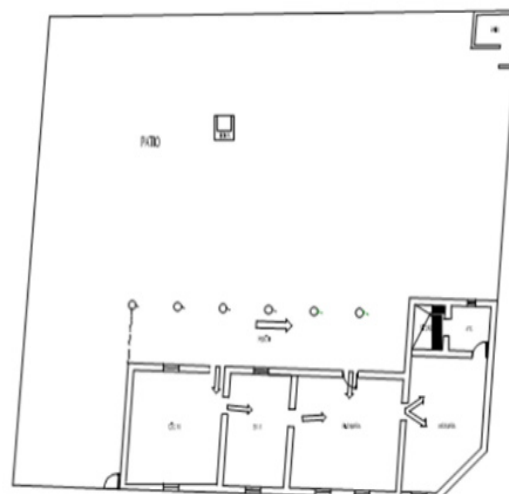


Figure 14. Floor plan of a linearly organized dwelling

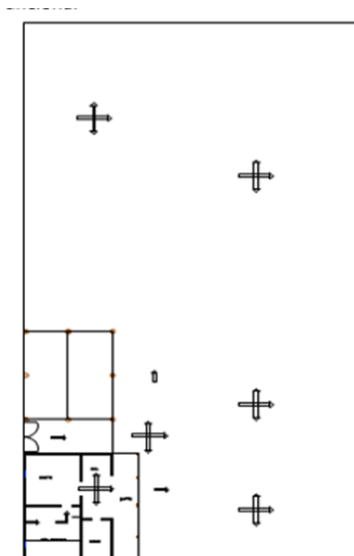


Figure 15. House with trees

The patio is the complementary area of the house, with circulation marked by arrows, connecting the basic rural functions of rural survival, such as a vegetable garden, a corral, a laundry room, and bathrooms.

The building is aligned with the street and has a side entrance to an interior porch that serves as a vestibule to the other rooms and as a social area. It leads to a kitchen and the other rooms. It has a bathroom integrated into the building and a latrine at the end.

The original layout has been modified to close off access from the corner of the building and to add a new kitchen and bathrooms, making it more modern and less rural.

METHOD

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to understand the cultural, spatial, and technological systems of meaning that shape ways of living in vernacular housing in the town of Imala, in the municipality of Culiacán, Sinaloa. The qualitative approach allows access to the deeper meanings that communities attach to their building practices and to the appropriation of space, considering that these practices cannot be reduced to mere architectural typologies but rather respond to complex cultural systems.⁽¹⁵⁾

The research is carried out through a single case study, selecting the community of Imala for its wealth of construction traditions, its persistence of ancestral technical knowledge, and its location in a transition zone between urban and rural areas. The case study, as a methodological strategy, allows for an in-depth examination of a specific phenomenon within its real context to interpret its social, material, and symbolic dimensions.⁽¹⁶⁾ Three main techniques were used to collect information:

- Non-participatory direct observation in the field, focusing on construction elements, spatial distribution, and use of space in traditional dwellings;
- Semi-structured interviews with residents and builders, to recover technical knowledge and narratives associated with everyday living; and
- Photographic records and architectural sketches, used as documentary support for the spatial and morphological analysis of the dwellings.

The analysis was carried out using open thematic coding and interpretive categorization within a hermeneutic approach, which allowed us to establish relationships among the physical dimensions of the dwelling, cultural patterns of space use, and construction knowledge transmitted across generations. This approach allows us to reconstruct the internal logic of living in rural contexts, far from the normative schemes of modern architecture.⁽¹⁷⁾

The fieldwork was conducted in accordance with the ethical principles of qualitative research: consent was obtained from the site owners, and the process was carried out at different times over several years, as it includes photographs of buildings that no longer exist.⁽¹⁸⁾ In short, this methodology seeks not only to document the traditional construction techniques of Imala but also to understand vernacular living as an integral cultural practice, historically situated and anchored in a deep knowledge of the territory.

The northwestern region of Mexico is analyzed using maps to locate the transition area between Mesoamerica, Aridoamerica, and Oasisamerica, to understand why materials such as earth, mud, stone, grass, and wood from local tree species are used in traditional construction systems. A distinction is made between primitive housing and vernacular housing based on their construction types, considering that, after more than 495 years of domination—first Spanish, then Creole, and finally mestizo—primitive vernacular housing is almost extinct.⁽¹⁹⁾ However, functional typologies related to access spaces, kitchens, patios with bathrooms and laundry rooms, as well as plots with fruit trees or corrals, which are direct extensions of the domestic and subsistence activities typical of rural housing, persist. The information was compiled through a review of the literature, analysis of construction, spatial, and functional typologies, the preparation of sketches, aerial photography, and fieldwork carried out in rural communities.⁽²⁰⁾

Table 1. Complementary visual outline of the study conducted.

Phase	Activity	Techniques	Objective
Case selection	Identification and justification of Imala as the unit of analysis	Documentary review, preliminary geographical and sociocultural analysis	Establish criteria for the relevance of the case due to its vernacular richness and continuity of traditional practices
Fieldwork design	Planning of visits, design of instruments, and community contacts	Preparation of interview guides, access strategies, photographs, and schedule.	Ensuring the methodological, ethical, and logistical viability of the ethnographic work
Data collection	Direct recording of ways of inhabiting, constructing, and signifying space	Direct non-participatory observation, semi-structured interviews, sketches, photographic record	Recovering narratives, construction techniques, and traditional spatial distribution.
Analysis and interpretation	Data processing from a hermeneutic and categorical perspective	Data processing from a hermeneutic and categorical perspective	Interpreting the links between culture, space, and construction techniques from a local perspective
Validation and feedback	Confirmation of results and ethical feedback to the community	Informal presentation of findings, dialogue with key actors	Strengthening the legitimacy of the analysis and respect for community knowledge

CONCLUSIONS

All these structural and functional typologies, with their way of inhabiting our cultures in the northwestern region of central Sinaloa, which responded to the very dry climate some months of the year and other months with abundant cyclonic rains, are in a process of gradual disappearance that must be monitored so that they do not become extinct in the annals of history and elements of the vernacular social and environmental territory that the inhabitants of these rural regions of the Mexican countryside mostly give extreme poverty. Currently, they are mainly used for tourism or as gastronomic venues, detracting from the importance and ancestral cultural weight they deserve. Schools of architecture, anthropology, and history should give them.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

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Software: Pablo Torres Cisneros.

Supervision: Víctor Manuel Martínez García.

Validation: Víctor Manuel Martínez García.

Visualization: Yennifer Díaz Romero.

Writing – original draft: Ricardo Mendoza Anguiano.

Writing – review and editing: Yennifer Díaz Romero.

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