

ABOUT HOUSES

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Each old house on Flores forms an entity, where every detail is hand made. “Hand made” has become a sign of value since those days, where mass products flood the world. Flores is in the lucky position of still having many traditional houses which are untouched, because so many people left for Canada or the United States. Their houses are therefore still complete in their traditional beauty and not destroyed by “modern” changes, like it happened in many other countries.

This value should be protected, where ever possible.

I am born in Hameln, a town in the North of Germany. After the Second World War every penny was put into new buildings. “New” was like a magic word. A person who lived in an old house was ashamed of that and somebody who lived in a new house was very proud. Big concrete blocks appeared everywhere. Old houses were destroyed where ever it was possible. This went on until around twenty years ago. Twenty years ago Hameln was touched by the newly developing knowledge that “old” could be a value. The authorities stopped the destruction of a street of old houses in the center of the town. Many people didn't understand the decision of the authorities at that time. The owners of an old house were angry that their plans of “modern” concrete blocks couldn't be realized anymore.

But these people are very satisfied today that the authorities stopped them from destroying their old houses. Why? Because today these houses are an attraction! Hameln is full of tourists who want to visit the old houses. Nobody looks at the new houses! The old houses have been refurbished and look much more beautiful than the uniform style of the new houses. And the old houses are in many cases stronger than the new ones. Old materials were often of better quality than materials used later. Many new houses are not only of less quality but after some years many of them had an ugly facade, full of humidity leaking from the pipes in the walls and full of ugly stripes from the rain on dilapidating concrete facades.

How does this correspond to Flores? In many ways:

The old thick stone walls were not only much stronger than the new thin walls of cement bricks, but they keep out humidity much better, too. One layer of cement bricks for a wall is not suitable for the local climate.

The old way of having a wooden floor with the people living upstairs and the cows staying underneath is a way of alternative heating: The cows heat the house. Scientists around the world look for alternative ways of energy creation, because the world cannot go on burning fossil fuel anymore. The climate is already today collapsing from all the cars burning fuel, from private heating or cooling and power stations burning fuel or coal. The world has to develop other ways to move cars, to produce heating or cooling and electricity. Solar energy, wind energy, energy from differences of water levels at sea and on land, bio gas, all these are safe ways of producing

energy. Already in hundred years the people will laugh about the primitive ways of using energy which we use today. Just an example: 95% of the energy which a car consumes is wasted. Only 5% are used for its intended purpose which is moving the car. Considering the need to change the present way of energy production cows heating the house are therefore a very modern idea!

The wooden floor in the house is very important, even if there are no cows underneath it. It is detrimental to human health to live directly on the ground like in houses where cement and tiles cover the floor. The layer of air under the wooden floor is very beneficial to human health. Studies show that people who live on the first floor with no air underneath get more often ill than people who live on the second floor. If I would inherit a house with a cement floor, the first thing I would do in order to protect my and my family's long term health would be to take the cement floor out and to put an elevated wooden floor. This is especially important in the sleeping area, because there people pass the longest period of hours of a day. A mouldy smelling sleeping room is a bad sign.

Another advantage of an isolating air layer is Radon. Radon is a radioactive gas which emanates from radioactive rock which can be found in various areas of this world. People who inhale Radon over many years have a much higher of lung cancer. If Radon is present in a house or not can be measured. If it is there, then ventilation under the wooden floor solves the problem. The gas has to get a chance to find a way out. Ventilation of the house helps too, of course. Open doors and windows and small openings around windows and doors, where air can pass even when doors and windows are closed, help the gas to blow off. Of course this is a bad method in colder countries, where people try to close their houses in order to keep the heat inside. But the moderate climate of the Acores allows this solution.

Wood is a marvelous material altogether. Old furniture of massive wood is very impressive. Much more impressive than some ugly modern furniture which is made of thin panels of chip board on which a thin layer of wood or even plastic is glued. Such furniture is in many cases not only ugly, but can also be dangerous. The glue gives off fumes which are hazardous to human health, especially when the furniture is new.

Massive wood creates a warm atmosphere. But one has to be very careful with the impregnation of wood. Especially products intended to protect wood against fungus can be extremely dangerous to human health. I know cases in Germany where houses had to be abandoned completely because of that. Their inhabitants had suffered from strange illnesses over many years. No doctor could find out, what was wrong. But after a while it was found out that certain chemicals in some wood paints are poisonous.

The same problem can arise from wall to wall carpets. Again it is especially the glue which can be dangerous. But not only the glue can be responsible for sick inhabitants, some synthetic fibers of which carpets are made, too. The first day I arrived at an environmental health hospital in Dallas in Texas, where I studied and worked, I accompanied the head of the hospital to court where he witnessed that one of his patients got sick because of a new carpet. The producer of the carpet was supposed to pay for the damage.

The people of the Acores should know one thing: In the richer countries of this world industry complies with safety standards more than in the more peripheral parts of this world. Everybody should to be aware that in peripheral areas sometimes dangerous products still are sold, products which even are forbidden already in the leading industrialized countries. I am from Germany and my husband from Belgian. There is already a big difference to be observed between these two

countries although they both belong to the EEC.

I said that old houses are often stronger and more beautiful than new houses. I touched some aspects of the strength of houses. There are many more aspects which could be presented.

Now I would like to touch the subject of beauty. Many people consider beauty suitable for romantic dreamers, but not for practical people. I must tell you that you are wrong.

Tell me, do you like to dress nicely for feasts? Why? Wouldn't it be much more practical to wear your everyday cloths? One other question: Why do you think religious traditions are important? Would it not be much more practical to have a week of seven work days without Sunday? Would it not be much more practical and cheap to tear all churches down? They are expensive to maintain and their altars and paintings need a lot of care in order to stay beautiful. Would it not be more practical to forget all that?

Think of all the things in live you do because of beauty. Why do you do that?

And something else. Why do you like to dress not only nicely but also differently from other people? Why don't people all wear the same uniform? Why is it a punishment for prisoners to wear a uniform and to stay in a cell where he is not allowed to put personal things?

Because we human beings need more than just practicability. We need beauty as much as religion. Human beings need more than just bread to eat, they need food for their soul and mind. If they don't get it, then their mind will become poorer and poorer and at the end sick.

Why is this like that? The answer is individuality. People are not made by machines. If one wants to compare human beings with products, then one has to admit that people are closer to hand made products than to machine made products. Every person has a very special origin in a certain family. Not like mass products which all look alike, if they are made in China or in Brazil. Therefore people get mentally sick, if they live in an environment which is too full of mass produced uniformity. Of course, many mass products can be very practical in our daily life, but we should not concentrate blindly on practicability. Sometimes we human beings need more than just practical things, we need beautiful things, like the nice dress for feasts. Even the poorest person in this world tries to beautify himself or herself for a feast. This is not just luxury. It keeps a person sane.

The traditional houses on Flores satisfy this need of people for individuality. These houses are full of beautiful hand made details. The attractive old wood work in many old houses for example creates a warm atmosphere of beauty. Everybody who looks at this work can imagine the person who did this work. It was not an anonymous factory, where this wood was cut. The beauty in such a house is beneficial to the mental well being of the inhabitants.

Over the years the people of a certain region develop a certain style. Every house is individual, but at the same time following the regional style. A person who is born in this region can look around and proudly see the result of the effort of many generations. He can say: "This regional style of architecture was developed by my ancestors. It makes my region unique in the world. If I look around I know that I am on Flores and not in Chicago or Hongkong."

This unique style should be protected. Every little detail is important, because it disturbs the harmony of the whole environment, even if the smallest detail is out of style. Like a beautiful painting, where one cannot just change one part of it in a way which doesn't go with the rest of the painting.

I went around and made some pictures of good and bad examples, because I feel that many people don't know, about what I speak. Fortunately there are some laws for example forbidding aluminum windows and cement tiles for the roof. But laws are not enough, if the people don't feel their importance and try to break them. The pictures I made are just taken by chance. I don't know the owners. I don't want to insult people, when I say that this is a bad example. In many cases the owner probably plans already to change his house to a more harmonious style.

My wish is to create more awareness among the people of Flores, that their old hand made houses, walls and streets are pieces of art. They are reasons to be proud of. I want to open the eyes of everybody to the beauty of the island. My wish is to see more people being proud of the artistic value of the traditional architecture.

Especially those people who come back from Canada and the United States should be more proud of their ancestors. The United States don't have much history. They are a very young country. It is not so important to be careful with a cultural heritage. Because their is not so much heritage. The feeling of the value of history is not very developed. And if history is important in the USA, then it is often the history of the pioneers who went westward. Therefore the philosophy of life in the USA is more geared to do new things than to protect old things. Europe is different. History is more visible in old buildings and it is valued. Many Americans envy Europe because of this. Many Americans suffer from lack of roots. Did you ever meet an American who didn't tell you within the first half hour where the ancestors of his of her family came from?

Many Azorians who come back from Canada or the United States after many years of hard work have forgotten how to value history. The time in the USA has influenced them in a way that they want everything new, practical and big. Many just don't see that big is not always good. They tend to build houses like big boxes which are out of proportion compared with the rest of their villages. Many come back and believe that everything which is not like in the States is bad. I would like to remind these people: "Do you really think that your ancestors were so stupid people that everything which they did should now be replaced and changed?" I say: "No, your ancestors worked very hard. They built walls, streets and houses which are very strong, which serve their purpose very well and which are in addition of exceptional beauty. You have every reason to be proud of them and to repair their work carefully instead of destroying it and putting new things, which are often of weaker quality."

Of course it is very understandable that one absorbs the influences of a country, where one spends many years. Nobody can be criticized because of that. I want to draw the attention of those people who come back from America to the fact that there are differences. Europe is lucky to have a lot of history frozen in architecture and Europe is proud of it. Therefore it is important not to apply everything which is good in America to Europe. Things which are very suitable in America are not always suitable for European use. It is not a question of better or worse, but a question of difference.

In order to illustrate my observations I made pictures of the following details:

Doors: It is better, not to replace the old door handles by “modern” equipment like on the picture. It disgraces the beautiful doors and the whole facade of the house. It would be better to find or make pieces which are more in harmony with the style of the house.

The old method to close the windows from inside with wooden doors is a very beautiful way. Plastic sliding rouleaus are a less beautiful solution. Especially if they are attached with a big box over the outside top of the window. This disfigures the front of the house and should better be avoided.

Aluminum windows and doors are fortunately already forbidden by law. I think nobody will deny that the traditional windows and doors are a jewel of beauty and far more in harmony with the regional architecture than anything else. It is not the material aluminum which is to be criticized. It is the design of the aluminum doors and windows. The aluminum windows which can be seen on Flores are much to big. They are like big holes in the facades of the houses. In order to close these holes again, people are hanging many meters of curtains. Those big holes give a facade an ugly appearance and they are not even practical. The traditional windows are a beautiful decoration of a facade and they create a nice light inside the room. The partitions give extra charm to the window. If hand made glass is filling these partitions such a window is a lovely piece of handicraft. It is a pity that this hand made window glass disappears. The other ugly aspect of aluminum is its colour. There are aluminum doors and windows on the market which are coated with a white cover. Even small aluminum windows with partitions are on the market. Aluminum windows could look almost like the traditional windows, the problem is not the material but the design. Of course hand made decorations on wood cannot be imitated by aluminum, something which is a loss especially for doors.

Cement roof tiles are also fortunately forbidden by law. The old roof covering which is kept in place by stones is the most beautiful. It lets a lot of air pass to dry the house. It is even more beautiful than the new covering with red tiles. Anybody who loves his island should try to save as many as possible of the old roofs. Just look at the picture and feel the beauty of these roofs.

There is surely no doubt that there are only two ways to treat the facade of a house. If it is an old rock house with nicely mounted walls, then this can just be kept like it is, showing to the outside world the skill of the person who built the wall. If the house is already plastered with cement then it has to be whitewashed with white lime which creates a shining white appearance of the house. Coloured lime as well creates very intensive colours which are traditionally applied around the windows and doors. These coloured borders around the windows and doors give a very special charm to the houses of Flores. It is better to avoid any other way of treating the facades of a house. The ground colour of a house should be white from bottom to top.

I see that cement enjoys a lot of appreciation on the island. Don't make the same mistakes as the people in Germany who passed years of cement euphoria and covered every free spot around a house with it. Just look at the old stone covered passways and courts which still exist on Flores. Do you feel their beauty? Do you feel how sad cement covers are? They turn into ugly black surfaces after a while, while stone covered areas always look beautiful, even when a lot of grass

is growing between the stones. I see many people replacing stone walls and stone stairs with huge cement constructions. These constructions lack the harmony with which the stone walls and stairs fitted into their environment.

Up till now I talked about the outside of a house. The inside is as important of course. The old kitchen with its chimney and stone oven is unique in its beauty. It should be kept even in a house where the house wife doesn't use it anymore. Not only because of its beauty, but also because it might prove to be useful one day. Nobody can guarantee that boats will always come to bring gas and fuel to Flores. Wood might then be the only way to cook. In many houses I see lovely old wooden kitchen furniture which is not yet replaced by ugly plastic and chip wood furniture. This old furniture should be cared for with love. The same applies of course to the other traditional wooden furniture in the house and for all wooden parts of a house. Plastic ceilings disgrace a house.

At the end I would like to give a price to Fajanzinha. The people of Fajanzinha succeeded in protecting a most lovely harmonious appearance of their village. Fajanzinha is like a piece of art. There are only very few ugly cement block garages to be seen. There is only one of these big cement block houses which disturb the harmony of so many Acorian villages by being out of proportion. Almost all houses are white with different colours around windows and doors. Almost everywhere the traditional windows and doors are in good shape and almost no ugly aluminum windows are to be seen. I was very impressed, when I visited Fajanzinha!

Santa Cruz and Lajes are already lost. They can probably not be saved anymore. There are too many houses out of proportion, too many ugly aluminum windows and doors, too many houses painted in wild colours, and so on. Of course there are still many beautiful houses and especially marvelous old shops with valuable antique counters and shelves, but the image of a town which preserved its beautiful entity is lost. It is a pity that the new houses which are built in these two towns at the moment are built like a military camp, all aligned in a row. One can see the good will behind these buildings, but some more phantasy wouldn't have cost more money. The fact that the image of an entity is lost doesn't mean that no effort should be made anymore to save and protect at least those traditional buildings which are still there and represent a great wealth to Santa Cruz and Lajes.