

397

Interview with Charlotte and Paul Thompson  
on Their Observations on a Trip to Sanarate

Feed C. Cuny

## OBSERVATIONS ON TRIP TO SANARATE

Char and Paul Thompson  
February 19, 1977

The town had been very badly damaged in the earthquake; perhaps only 15-20% of the original buildings were still standing. The Bricks for Guatemala program set an initial goal of building a house for all of the homeless in the town, which could have been a total of 800. But because of a shortage of funds and time, the goal was later lowered to include only those who needed a house. In the end, about 325 were built. They appear to comprise about one-third of the houses in the town but, interestingly, they do not stand out as such a dominant group.

The houses have already blended into the cityscape since about 2/3 of the BFG houses have been stuccoed and some painted. Others have acquired additions which change the appearance of the entire house. In short, the houses have rather melted into the town fabric, and one has the feeling that many of the houses could have been there for a long time.

Somewhat surprising is the great variety of specific shapes which the houses have taken, adding to the effect that they are integral to the town. Many have front porches; some put the porch to the rear (more traditional); many have no porch at all. Some have an extra front door for access to the store that has been set up. Some houses are narrower and longer than the "standard" plan, and there is a variety of window and door placements. This responsiveness to individual needs had two effects: it slowed the construction a little bit, and it allowed for windows and doors to be placed right next to corner columns, thereby unbalancing the walls.

Also adding to the variety of house appearances are the several different designs of the stucco patterns and the window grills. The front doors have commonly been salvaged from the fallen house, which is likely to represent an important symbolic tie to that previous home.

The masons for the houses were usually two men from each group who had attended classes in masonry given by the National Institute for Capacitation. However, the work which was not yet stuccoed over showed an uneven quality. The mortar -- a mix of earth and cement -- looked to be of very poor quality, and many walls were badly cracked. The amount of steel used and the closeness of the columns indicates that the house should withstand earthquake forces rather well.

In fact, we were impressed with the generally high quality of construction that is now going on in the town. Almost all of it is in concrete block, with some brick, many of which have columns at about 2-meter intervals and horizontal tie beams also at 2-meter spaces. It seems very likely that the BFG program has been a good object lesson for this new work.

Considering the circumstances, there is surprisingly little wood construction, most of it appearing to be only considered as temporary, i.e., food stands near the plaza and single rooms to the back of lots. Very little new adobe construction is apparent.

There was a great frequency of not providing crush joints between new construction (by BFG and others as well).

One of the outstanding features of the design is the cement-asbestos channel roofing. It is probably the single most expensive feature of the houses, greatly simplifying the construction process by eliminating the need for a wood frame structure, but it may not have been worth the cost.

CT/PT:jwp

## OBSERVATIONS OF EL PROGRESO

Char and Paul Thompson  
February 19, 1977

The present appearance of El Progreso is in considerable contrast to that of Sanarate. For one thing, it was more completely destroyed, leaving less fabric upon which to build. The single overwhelming impression is that made by the preponderance of Red Cross houses. According to their report, 1,000 were built in the town, appearing to comprise about 90% of all the houses in the town. The majority of these are the Type C house, of vertical board and batten, about 4 x 5 meters. The 170 plywood houses donated from California have an unpleasant "shed" appearance, and the horizontal siding Type A houses are better in appearance than the Type C. Perhaps the most telling description is that the whole town looks cheap and grim. The bright paint on all the houses does not help to alleviate the effect.

Some surprises from our point of view were that so few of the houses are sited off of the front property line, but rather in the most desirable location for a permanent house. Less than 10% are so sited (away from the best part of the site). We noted only three houses where work was now underway to build a block house around the existing wood unit which had been placed about one meter off the lot line. The contrast to Sanarate in terms of activity in getting a permanent house built is remarkable.

We left with the impression that this house solution and lack of siting in anticipation of a permanent house has set back the course of development in the town by many years.

CT/PT:jwp

