Hiking step by step to the Virgin of Talpa

Landmarks by several architects offer resting and meeting places along the Route of the Pilgrim in Mexico, which leads from Ameca to the Church of Talpa de Allende.

The Open Chapel of Gratitude near Ameca by Derek Dellekamp and Tatiana Bilbao is the first of the architectural interventions along the Route of the Pilgrim. They are part of a masterplan curated also by Dellekamp and Bilbao.

More than three million visitors each year pilgrimage from Ameca to the Church of Talpa de Allende to prise the Virgin of the Rosary. Especially during Easter the flow of pilgrims goes on and on.

Claudia Suarez

The Route of the Pilgrim (La Ruta del Peregrino) in the State of Jalisco, dedicated to the cult of the Virgin of the Rosary, is a much-frequented cultural route that has existed for over 300 years and continues to evolve. Every year, especially during Easter, more than 3 million pilgrims embark on a religious trip of 117 kilometers, from the town of Ameca to a destination consecrated to the Virgin of the Rosary: the Church of Talpa de Allende. The Virgin of Talpa is the third destination of faith in Mexico, according to the number of pilgrims it receives per year, together with the Virgin of Zapopan in Jalisco (3 million visitors) and after the Virgin of Guadalupe in Mexico City (15 million) and the Virgin of San Juan de los Lagos, also in Jalisco (6 million).

The pilgrimage is an act of construction and modification of the landscape, both at the individual and at the collective level, figuratively as well as literally. The impulse that guides the pilgrims on their way through the mountains for a period of three to four days, lies not only in arriving at Talpa as the revered destination but also in every step of the way. In the process, the pilgrim also embarks on an inner journey of purification and redemption that gives meaning to the ground he walks on and transforms physically and symbolically the landscape he passes through.

Since the seventeenth century, when the first miracle of Our Virgin of the Rosary was recorded, this route has been traced by pilgrims across six municipalities in Jalisco: Ameca, Guachinango, Mixtlan, Atenguillo, Mascota, and Talpa de Allende. The journey takes place on foot, pilgrims walk...
During the 117-kilometer route from Almeca to Talpa de Allende the pilgrims overcome large altitude differences and pass a great variety of impressive landscapes.

The stone pier of the Estanzuela Sanctuary designed by the Chinese artist Ai Weiwei and his team from Fake Design offers great views to the mountains of Ameca.

over the footsteps of those who have made the journey before them. The pilgrimage route is a desire path in its pristine form, the itinerary of the route is the most direct path from start to destination, from Ameca to Talpa, through the valleys and mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental. The complex topography and variations in altitude throughout the hike lead the pilgrims through a great variety of colourful landscapes: pine, oak and fir woods, scrub, grassland, plantations and small villages; all of these landscapes having as a spinal cord, the route.

In 2008, the State Government of Jalisco through the Ministry of Tourism announced that it would invest in a master plan for the region, with the aim of improving the conditions of the route for the pilgrims and achieving a continuous flow of visitors to the route throughout the year. The plan included the realization of a series of architectural projects, which would offer services, shelter, lookout points, and sitting areas to attract pilgrims and new visitors.

Mexican architects Derek Dellekamp and Tatiana Bilbao were commissioned as curators for these projects. They gathered a group of architects and designers from around the world to implement the different constructions along the route: Ai Weiwei/Fake Design from China, Luis Aldrete from Mexico, Christ & Gantenbein from Switzerland, Alejandro Aravena/Elemental from Chile, Godoylab from Mexico, and HHF from Switzerland. The coordination of the projects and the master plan were handled by Derek Dellekamp and Rozana Montiel; in addition, Dellekamp, Bilbao, and Montiel themselves participated with two projects within the master plan.

As a consolidated element in permanent evolution, the pilgrimage route is the common thread running through all new architectonic pieces, and allows a reading of the architectonic interventions as a coherent ensemble. Located along the religious path and inviting the pilgrims to make a stop on the road, the new elements in a sense re-set the rhythm of the pilgrimage. The insertions allow the pilgrims to be more conscious of the journey they have made, to view and contemplate the landscape and the place they are in.

The Open Chapel of Gratitude is the first of the interventions, found at the beginning of the route in Ameca. Designed by Derek Dellekamp and Tatiana Bilbao, it is an open space of 160 square meters, structured by...
The Pilgrim’s Column by the Swiss architects Christ & Gantenbein on the top of Cerro del Obispo is a popular meeting point. The column with its curved walls enables a singular view to the sky.

On the way down to Mixtlán Tatiana Bilbao arranged two fractions of pyramids of the Mesa Colorada Sanctuary on a clearing in the oak and fir wood. four walls of different heights; seen from above the arrangement of the walls outlines a cross. This space is contained by a wall of stacked stones, the Wall of Promises, which invites visitors to leave behind some symbolic object, an image, or a request.

The journey of the pilgrimage meets a strenuous section once it has passed the Open Chapel of Gratitude. The path ascends the Cerro del Obispo (Bishop’s Hill), reaching up to an altitude of 1,940 meters. The mountain is crowned by the Pilgrim’s Column, a structure designed by the Swiss architects Emanuel Christ and Christoph Gantenbein. The 26.55-meter-high column contrasts with the sky and the ochre colours of the surrounding landscape. With an irregular floor plan and curved walls it is a highly recognizable landmark, a kind of a beacon of light.

“Tepame” trees (Acacia pennatula) surround the column whose white colour acts as a background that reveals and highlights the trees’ tortuous trunks and branches. Offering spectacular views, this site is used by many pilgrims as a meeting point where they often create temporary cover with oak leaves to take a break and have a meal. As one draws closer to the column, an entrance reveals itself. Inside, the zenithal light directs the eye upward; viewing the sky from the interior of the column is a unique experience. The particular strength of this structure derives from its environment. While it is in itself a useless object, it highlights the natural context in which it is located. This structure does not overwhelm nature, it creates a dialogue with her.

After the descent from the Cerro del Obispo, as the pilgrim’s path reaches Guachinango, the Estanzuela Sanctuary, designed by the artist Ai Weiwei, intersects perpendicularly with the route. The sanctuary consists of a stone pier that emerges from a point below ground level and rises up several meters, leading the pilgrim from a closed space to an open one. At its above-ground tip it becomes a lookout point that redirects the step and the view, to the south. Visitors are not only offered a changed perspective of the path they have been following, they are also afforded a panorama of the Armea mountains.

The next stop on the road is the Estanzuela shelter, conceived by Luis Aldrete. At a size of 338 square meters, the shelter is designed as a series of basic modules that structure the building formally and can be multiplied for adaptations and extensions. The perimeter of a building module consists of lattice walls made of adobe-coloured block, a local product. The wall of the shelter building has openings, allowing for sufficient ventilation in the subtropical climate. The lattice wall structure creates an interesting play of light and shadows. At this place, pilgrims spend the first
The Los Guayabos viewpoint with its asymmetrical arches by the Swiss architects HHF offers a 360 degree view over the surrounding valleys and mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental.

The Estanzuela and Atenguillo shelters by Luis Aldrete are designed as an ensemble of modules that can be multiplied if an expansion becomes necessary. Pilgrims can rest and sleep here. Openings in the wall allow ventilation – an important fact in the subtropical climate.

The route continues descending all the way to Mixtlán, where the pilgrims meet the Mesa Colorada Sanctuary, designed by Tatiana Bilbao. The sanctuary stands on a clearing in the oak and fir woods. From the red soil, two incomplete pyramids that are open on one side emerge. They are juxtaposed in an offset manner, thus creating an intimate space inside and between them, where the sky and landscape barely penetrate. The structure also provides a shady resting place.

In the town of Atenguillo another shelter is located. Designed by Luis Aldrete, it is over 600 square meters large and includes an outdoor dining area covered by a pergola. The apparent simplicity of this project yet indicates a profound sensitivity and knowledge of the site.

The next point, at an altitude of 1,600 meters, is the Los Guayabos viewpoint, designed by Tilo Herlech, Simon Hartmann, and Simon Frommenwiler of the Swiss firm HHF. The circular structure is held by asymmetric arches and, despite its massiveness, gives the impression of settling lightly on the ground. Stairs lead to the top of the viewpoint, allowing a 360-degree view of the surrounding valley and mountains. The structure’s scale fits perfectly into mountains of the Sierra Madre Occidental whose monumentality it both picks up and lets itself be dwarfed by. Its curved exposed concrete walls serve as blank canvases for visitors, who record their passage through the site by writing on them. From Los Guayabos towards the heights, the Las Cruces viewpoint can be seen, designed by Alejandro Aravena of the firm Elemental. It consists of a rectangular pavilion made of exposed concrete and, at an altitude of 1,950 metres, seems precariously balanced on the edge of one of the highest mountains crossed by the route. The spectacular view from inside the pavilion is obstructed - perhaps enriched - by an oak tree. When the sun is in the right position, an opening in the roof of the pavilion draws a silhouette shape of the Virgin of the Rosary on the floor.

Finally, in the town of Mixoltla, pilgrims reach the Void Temple of Derek Delekamp and Rozana Montiel, a huge ring of concrete with 40 metres in diameter. Despite its size, the structure appears to be placed subtly on the ground. There are two entrances, a single doorway cut in
Despite its size the huge concrete ring of the Sanctuary designed by Derek Dellekamp and Rozana Montiel seems to hover between the trees. The Las Cruces viewpoint by Alejandro Aravena of Elemental seems to balance on a slope of the highest mountain along the route. Oak tree enriches the view of the outlook opening.

The Route of the Pilgrim, from Ameca to Talpa de Allende, Guadalajara, Mexico – Master Plan
Client: Ministry of Tourism, State of Jalisco, Mexico
Curatorial team: Dellekamp Arquitectos+Tatiana Bilbao S.C.
Coordination of the projects: Dellekamp Arquitectos | Derek Dellekamp+Periférica | Rozana Montiel
Research team: Adiranne Montemayor, Carlos Zimbrón
Environmental strategy: TOA – Taller de Operaciones Ambientales
Invited architects and designers: Ai Weiwei | Fake Design (China), Luis Aldrete (Mexico), Christ & Gantenbein (Switzerland), Dellekamp Arquitectos (Mexico), Elemental (Chile), Godoylab (Mexico), HHF (Switzerland), Periférica (Mexico), Tatiana Bilbao S.C. (Mexico), TOA (Mexico)

one side, and a place where the ground descends and leaves a gap so that visitors can duck beneath the hovering edge of the circle. The sanctuary encloses and protects a number of existing trees and appears to celebrate its own location. As this sanctuary is not placed immediately along the route, it is one of the least visited. From here, the part of the route that remains to be walked is the descent to Talpa; hiking becomes lighter as the final destination of the pilgrimage draws close.

Functioning almost as environmental sculptures, the architectural works recently built along the Route of the Pilgrim enter into a dialogue both with their natural surroundings and the religious ritual of which they became a part. They not only create places of unique atmosphere and charm along the route but also encourage visitors to look at, and conceived of, their natural environment with greater respect and sensitivity. In addition, the visible footprints of human interaction provided at very remote sites radiate an aura of safety and refuge for the pilgrims.

The installation of these structures along the ancient pilgrimage route to Talpa has changed the experience of the tour as well as of the landscape. It has also attracted a new kind of pilgrim: the secular pilgrim, i.e. visitors who do not frequent the site for religious reasons but as tourists, and to see the recently built architectural structures. This type of pilgrim rarely does the full tour; their goal is not to do penance by completing the route on foot. These visitors arrive via different routes and usually travel by car as closely to the new sites as possible in order to minimize the hiking, or in the case of the Los Guayabos and Las Cruces viewpoints, on horseback. This new tourism explains one of the goals when designing the route’s master plan: encouraging the influx of visitors throughout the year.

The importance of the historical, religious, and cultural heritage of this ancient route is undeniable. The introduction of the new architectural interventions, designed expressly for this route that has organically evolved over 300 years, changes the existing dynamics of the pilgrimage by creating new patterns of movement and use, and attracting different kinds of visitors. Is it therefore worth asking: How do these interventions transform the dynamics that have existed for years? Do they have impact upon the integrity of the route’s historic values?

The interventions along the Route of the Pilgrim have been successful in giving added value and visibility to a historical and ancestral route, turning it into a more universal tradition by attracting attention and comment from outside religious circles. The journey ends at the Church of Talpa; the almost constant bustle of the main square contrasts with the silence and stillness of the route. The festive spirit is par...