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“To Live in This City is to Die”: Death and Architecture in Colonial Cuzco, Peru

Michael Schreffler

On Thursday, March 31, 1650, a powerful earthquake struck the Andean town of Cuzco, Peru. Contemporary accounts report that it occurred at 1:30 or 2:00 in the afternoon, that it lasted five to ten minutes, and that it caused substantial damage to the city and surrounding region. One eyewitness described the destruction of the city’s center as nearly total, noting that the temblor had ravaged all of its churches, and that, thus, “no quedó ninguno adonde poder entrar a oír misa” (*Relación* 1r) (there was nowhere one could go to hear Mass). He continued:

Y todas las casas del pueblo, asimismo arruinó, y echó por el suelo, y las que quedaron en pie, tan mal tratadas, que no es posible entrar en ellas, sino derribarlas, por el riesgo que están amenazando con su caída. (*Relación* 1r)

(It also damaged all of the houses of the town, crashing them to the ground, and those that remained standing are so damaged that it is not possible to enter them due to the risk they pose with their collapse.)

Violent aftershocks continued to strike the town and its environs in the days and weeks that followed. A text penned by the Cuzco cleric, Juan de Santa Cruz, more than a month after the initial quake, lays bare the anxiety that he, and presumably others, must have felt: “El vivir en esta Ciudad, es morir, en medio de tantos temores, y sobresaltos, sin dar paso sin riesgo de la vida, ni hallar lugar seguro para ella” (*Relación* 2v) (To live in this city is to die, amidst so many fears and starts, unable to take a step without risking life, unable to find safety).

As these writers and their contemporaries make clear, the earthquake of March 1650 brought death, despair, and destruction to Cuzco. It was also,

however, a watershed in the history of urban development in the town, for it ushered in a period of intense architectural production. Indeed, in response to the collapse of so many of the city's churches, convents, monastery complexes, and houses, extensive rebuilding campaigns aimed to construct an even grander city in the second half of the seventeenth century (Wethey; Marco Dorta; Kubler and Soria; Viñuales). The result of those efforts can still be seen in Cuzco's historic center today, where the imposing post-1650 facades of the Cathedral and Jesuit church loom over a picturesque central plaza.

But if the earthquake stimulated the construction of large and stylistically innovative buildings, it also fuelled another kind of cultural production: a corpus of representations of the seismic event itself. These included letters that circulated among colonial administrators, documents generated in the city's official survey of the damage, a narrative published in Madrid in 1651, and at least one painting. The production of these rich historical resources in the weeks, months, and years following the event might be seen as evidence of a macabre interest in destruction and death and, in the case of the published description and painting, an audience eager to contemplate it. But at the same time, they also partake of a broader field of representation, for similar kinds of texts were produced in the wake of seventeenth-century temblors in Lima, Santiago de Chile, and elsewhere in the early modern Hispanic world (Ortega 2001; 2004; Walker). The works in these genres allow historians to reconstruct the disasters, research their effects on a city's demographics and infrastructure, and measure the reactions of some of those who survived them (Fréchet et al., Zeilinga de Boer, and Sanders). In addition, visual and textual representations of natural disasters in early modernity also provide a uniquely situated window onto the construction of historical discourses (Buchenau and Johnson). For example, as Charles Walker has argued, representations of the earthquake and tsunami that struck Lima in 1746, bring to light a complex array of socio-spatial tensions in that eighteenth-century city.

In this essay, I pursue a line of investigation similar to that undertaken by Walker by looking at an interrelated set of representations of the 1650 earthquake in Cuzco. They include a set of letters from the town's corregidor, Juan de la Cerda y de la Coruña, to the Viceroy in Lima, a four-page *Relación* published in Madrid in 1651, and a painting commissioned by Alonso Cortés de Monroy. These texts and images are unified in their focus on a single event and, more specifically, their emphasis on architectural destruction and the deaths it caused. My analysis of these sources explores the strategies through which they link ideas about architecture (and its destruction or fortitude) with conceptions of colonial personhood in that seventeenth-century city. In making these associations, this group of texts and images constructs an official discourse on the built environment in which a set of ideals are conceptually embedded into the materiality of

buildings and civic spaces (see also Fraser). Here I use the term “official” because this discourse on architecture emerges from within a field of official representation, one that was generated by colonial administrators and circulated in their ambit. In this way, these representations reveal some of the ideas and values associated with architecture from the perspective of Spaniards and others involved in the governance of the colonial state.¹ The representations of the 1650 earthquake considered here often contradict one another on details, such as the death toll and the structural damage incurred but at the same time, they construct a coherent socio-spatial universe by linking architecture and death (or survival) such that fatalities among indigenous people occur in concert with the destruction of their parish churches and are associated, in at least some cases, with unorthodox religious practices. In contrast, the survival of Spaniards is textually linked to the fortitude of their institutions and orthodox demonstrations of their piety. The consistency with which these associations are made in the texts and images is remarkable, for it reveals an official view of colonial society in which ethnicity is linked with architecture and, at the same time, morality determines mortality.

The Corregidor’s Letters

The conceptual ties that bind architecture and space to colonial subjectivity become evident in the writings of Juan de la Cerda y de la Coruña, *corregidor* (town governor) of Cuzco at the time the earthquake struck the city in 1650. Three of his letters to García de Sotomayor, the Count of Salvatierra and Viceroy of Peru (1648–1655), discuss the temblor and its impact in great detail.² The earliest of the three is signed and dated April 6, 1650, just one week after the initial seismic event. Its opening sentences describe the quake’s duration and aftershocks, but the author quickly turns to the subject of death. He writes:

Parece han muerto entre indias muchachos e indios hasta en cantidad de veinte y ocho o treinta personas más o menos que no hay número cierto por si fueren descubriendo otros. Murió un hijo del Vizconde de edad de tres años y el procurador de Santo Domingo que yendo por la calle cayó un palo y le mató; no ha muerto ningún caballero ni español ni mujeres. (Villanueva 203)

(It seems that approximately twenty-eight to thirty Indian women, children, and men died, but the exact number remains unknown since others may be discovered. A three-year-old son of the Viscount died as did a high-ranking administrator of [the monastery of] Santo Domingo,

who was hit and killed on the street by a falling piece of wood. No nobleman, Spaniard, or woman died.)

Here the author presents architecture, in the guise of a falling piece of wood, as the cause of the Dominican cleric's death. In the paragraphs that follow, he stresses architecture's potential to cause death, but provides numerous examples in which damage to the churches, hospitals, and monasteries associated with the city's Spanish institutions and population resulted in remarkably few fatalities. The bell tower at the monastic complex of San Francisco fell on the choir and destroyed it, he writes, but nobody died. Two cells and the kitchen of the nunnery of Santa Clara collapsed, but nobody died. Half of the church of Santo Domingo collapsed along with all of the monks' cells, but nobody died. Half of the church of the Jesuits collapsed, he writes, and nobody died. The earthquake's timing, he adds, was very convenient for the Jesuits because "deseaban mucho derribarla y habían enviado por licencia para ello" (Villanueva 204) (they very much wished to demolish it and had sent for a license to do so). De la Cerda also notes that two of the city's buildings most closely linked with Spaniards and the crown suffered little or no damage. One of them was the cathedral:

La iglesia mayor quedó en pie no tuvo daño ninguno aunque por ser tan vieja quedó lastimada y la que se está haciendo de nuevo se sintieron dos arcos, no cosa de consideración. (Villanueva 204)

(The main church remained standing [and] did not suffer any significant damage even though, because it is so old, it suffered some superficial effects and in the part that is being built anew two arches fell, [but this is] nothing of significance.)

The other building that escaped the earthquake unscathed was the Hospital for Spaniards which, de la Cerda notes, "no tuvo lesion ninguna ni murió nadie" (Villanueva 204) (suffered no damage at all and nobody died).

In his second letter to the viceroy, dated one week later (April 13, 1650), de la Cerda opens with the surprising news that, in spite of the continuing aftershocks, many of which were very strong, no more fatalities had occurred. This statement would seem to be contradicted in the paragraphs that follow, in which he reports that

Las parroquias de Belén y San Blas y parroquia del Hospital y la de Santiago se les cayó las iglesias y muchas casas y las demás quedaron muy atormentadas parece hasta hoy haber muerto quince o veinte indias y muchachos. (Villanueva 206–7)

(The churches and other buildings at the parishes of the Virgin of Bethlehem, San Blas, Hospital de los Naturales, and Santiago collapsed and other structures are very badly damaged. Up to now fifteen or twenty Indian women and children have died.)

The Indian parishes of the Virgin of Bethlehem, San Blas, Hospital de los Naturales, and Santiago ringed the city's urban core, where the cathedral, hospital, monasteries, and nunneries previously mentioned by the author were located. It would seem, then, that for the *corregidor*, “no more fatalities” means “no more fatalities except for those among the city's indigenous population.” Similar contradictions appear in his first letter—cited above—in which his claim that several Indian women had died is followed by the statement “no nobleman, Spaniard, or woman died,” as well as in his third letter, dated May 13, 1650, in which he notes that in the weeks that had passed since the previous letter, “No ha muerto más gente sino solo dos indios que cayeron del techo de una iglesia” (Villanueva 208) (No more people died except for two Indians who fell off the roof of a church).

These passages construct an image of a city that consists of only two kinds of people: Spaniards and Indians. In light of the documented existence of Africans and their descendants in the city (Lockhart, Bowser, Restall, Garofalo), as well as a deeply entrenched lexicon used to describe people of “mixed race” (e.g., mestizo, mulatto), the ideological work performed by such statements is clear. That is, they transform a demographically complex city into one that is less diverse, and, moreover, they link certain architectural structures and spaces with individual social and ethnic groups. De la Cerda makes it clear that much of the architecture associated with Spaniards in Cuzco suffered some damage during the earthquake, but in his account, those structural failures almost never resulted in death. Indeed, he cites only three fatalities among that sector of society. In contrast, he reports that the damage inflicted on four Indian parish churches resulted in the death of fifteen to twenty Indian women and children.

How can this discrepancy between the numbers of deaths of indigenous Andeans and Spaniards be explained? A twenty-first-century reader might suppose that the death toll was proportionate to the city's total population. That is, in a city of many more indigenous people than Spaniards, one might expect more of the former than the latter to have perished in the earthquake. Other reasonable explanations include the possibility that more Indians than Spaniards found themselves inside of the city's churches and other buildings when the earthquake and its aftershocks struck, or that the use of different construction techniques and materials had an impact on the number of deaths. De la Cerda, however, makes reference to none of these, indicating, instead, that there were other forces at work in determining who lived and who died. In his second letter (just before his accounting of death and destruction in the city's Indian parishes), the *corregidor* includes a telling

passage. Following his description of the aftershocks that struck the town and some incidents of looting by “seis or siete mestizos e indios” (Villanueva 206) (six or seven mestizos and Indians), he tells this story:

Parece que el provincial de San Francisco predicó que una mestiza había puesta en un asador a un Cristo y asándole en las brazas empezó a sudar diciéndole que si no le traía a su amigo le había de tostar en ellas y espolvoreándole con coca lo quemó. (Villanueva 206)

(It seems that the head of the Franciscan Order in this province preached about a mestizo woman who had put an image of Christ in an oven and [while she was] holding it over the coals, it began to perspire. She said to it that if it did not bring her boyfriend to her she would burn it, and sprinkling it with coca she set it on fire.)

This story about a woman burning a crucifix introduces the racial category of mestizo into a narrative that previously had focused solely on Indians and Spaniards. Its inclusion immediately after the passage about mestizo and Indian looters suggests a link between the two racial categories, and it ultimately serves as an example of the kind of behavior practiced by those groups in Cuzco that, de la Cerda believed, had brought the wrath of God to the city in the form of an earthquake. He continues:

Vea V. Ex.a con esta maldad y confesiones que se han hecho de veinte y treinta años las gracias que se deben dar a Dios de que no se haya tragado la tierra toda esta ciudad como sucedió en tiempo del inga con otros temblores y se sabe por tradición de los antiguos y se ven los edificios cuando se abren algunos cimientos. (Villanueva 206)

(You see, Your Excellency, with this wickedness and the confessions that have been made for twenty and thirty years, the thanks that are owed to God for not having swallowed the entire city into the earth as happened in the time of the Inka with the other earthquakes, which we know about through the traditions of the ancients whose buildings we see when we break ground for some foundations [for new construction].)

Here, perhaps more than anywhere else in the letters, the link between unorthodox religiosity and the destruction of certain kinds of architecture comes to the fore. Indeed, de la Cerda seems to interpret the presence of the remains of Inka architecture underground as evidence for destructive earthquakes in the past. It is curious that he describes Inka architecture as being invisible under normal circumstances, and visible only when, as he says, “we break ground for some foundations.” Surely there were many Inka

walls that were visible in the city in 1650. Among them must have been the well-known curving wall that was part of the Dominicans' monastic complex. But de la Cerda's letters describe those constructions as being buried underground and, in so doing, he makes an association between architecture and religious orthodoxy. It is likely that de la Cerda's reference to the “confessions that have been made for twenty and thirty years” refers to the campaigns, centered in the Diocese of Lima, known as the Extirpation of Idolatry. Through those campaigns, the Church investigated reports that indigenous people in the Viceroyalty of Peru were secretly venerating non-Christian deities under the guise of orthodox Christian ceremony (Griffiths; Mills).

What the passage ultimately suggests, then, is that the unorthodox religiosity of indigenous people and mestizos in Cuzco was the reason the earthquake had struck the city and had killed some members of that sector of society. Indeed, the belief that earthquakes and other natural disasters were forms of divine punishment was widespread in early modernity and continued to inform official reactions to such events in Peru into at least the eighteenth century. As Walker notes, this explanation was also widely embraced to explain the 1746 earthquake and tsunami in Lima, where the city's wickedness was seen as rooted in the immorality of its inhabitants and, especially, its female inhabitants. De la Cerda's assertion that the cathedral and the Hospital of the Spaniards survived the earthquake with little or no damage might thus be read as architectural proof of the piety of the Spaniards in Cuzco and, in turn, as the reason for the small number of deaths among them.

Relación del terremoto

Some of the details of destruction and death reported by de la Cerda are echoed in the *Relación del terremoto*, a four page pamphlet published in 1651 in Madrid by Julián de Paredes. As in the report of the *corregidor*, the *Relación*, too, notes the death of the administrator of the Dominican Order and identifies him by name as Father Vallejo. The compiler of the text also mentions the death of the son of the Viscount of Portillo and catalogs, with precision, the extensive damage that befell the city's nunneries, monastic complexes, and Indian parish churches. In other details, however, the published report differs from the letters of de la Cerda. It asserts, for example, that the new portion of the cathedral that had been under construction was so damaged that “será menester derribar la mayor parte de ella; cosa de gran lástima” (*Relación* 1r) (it will be necessary to demolish most of it, a matter of great pity). This contrasts with de la Cerda's assertion, noted above, that “the main church remained standing [and] did not suffer

any harm.” In addition, the published report presents a count of fatalities that is much higher than reported by the *corregidor*: “Ha sido grande la misericordia de Dios, pues las muertes de Españoles no llegan a diez, y las de indios, y indias llegan hasta ciento, y no ha muerto persona de consideración” (*Relación* 2v) (God’s mercy was great, for there were fewer than ten deaths among Spaniards and around 100 among Indian men and women, and no one of consequence was killed).

Evidence internal to the publication suggests the reports on which it was based date no later than May 14, 1650, thus making them roughly contemporary with de la Cerda’s third letter to the viceroy. It is uncertain why the publication reports approximately twice as many deaths as do the letters of the *corregidor*. One possible explanation is that, in general, the *Relación* presents its readers with a more highly sensationalized representation of the event than do the letters of de la Cerda. The true number of deaths, however, is not my primary concern in this essay. Instead, I am interested in how the *Relación*, like the letters, constructs a coherent narrative in which the widespread destruction of the buildings associated with both Spaniards and Indians brings about a significantly higher death rate among the latter. Indeed, the *Relación*, like the letters of de la Cerda, insist that the earthquake was a demonstration of God’s anger at the city, and intimates that survival and death are linked to differing degrees of piety and orthodoxy among the city’s residents.

It is perhaps not surprising that the author of the Madrid publication goes into much greater detail about how the city’s Spanish residents responded to the earthquake, for it is likely that Spaniards in Madrid (and elsewhere) were his intended audience. About midway through the report, he describes the ceremonies enacted by Spaniards to “aplacar la ira del Señor” (*Relación* 1r) (appease the Lord’s anger). De la Cerda, too, mentions the religious ceremonies carried out in Cuzco’s main plaza (Villanueva 205), but the text of the *Relación* goes into much greater detail. Among the acts it describes are two processions, one of which began at the Mercedarian monastery and which centered on an image of Nuestra Señora de la Soledad; and another—led by the Order of San Juan de Dios—in which devotees walked with an image of Jesus Christ. The author writes that the images were then set up in Cuzco’s main plaza and were surrounded with candles so that all who passed by could venerate them. They evoked an impassioned response:

Y diziendo el Predicador misericordia eran tantas las lágrimas, alaridos, y sollozos que parecía que se acabava el mundo, y que era el día del juicio llegado. (*Relación* 1v)

(And as the Preacher asked for mercy there was so much crying, shrieking, and sobbing that it seemed that the world was ending and that Judgment Day had arrived.)

As William Christian has noted, religious weeping was performed and seen as a demonstration of piety in early modern Spain. Such a display toward the images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ contrasts sharply with de la Cerda’s account of a mestizo woman’s burning of an image of Jesus Christ and thus lays bare the distinction that is made in these texts between the orthodox religiosity of Spaniards and the behavior of those who had, according to these authors, invoked the wrath of God.

Also of note in the above-cited passage from the *Relación* is the comparison made between the sights and sounds in the main plaza and the end of the world. The comparison appears three more times in the text, and indeed, the aftermath of the earthquake seems to have been viewed through the lens of the Final Judgment. That biblical episode was also a key point of reference, I would argue, in the only known painting of the earthquake, a canvas that today hangs in a chapel in the Cathedral of Cuzco (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1. Artist unknown, Second-half of the seventeenth century. View of *Cuzco at the Time of the Earthquake of 1650*. Oil on canvas. Cuzco, Cathedral of Cuzco. Photo © Paul Maeyaert / The Bridgeman Art Library.

The Painting

The painting, which has been described as a large-scale version of an *ex-voto* (Kagan; MacCormack; Hajovsky), presents a bird's eye view of Cuzco as seen from an elevated viewpoint to the northeast of the main plaza. At the center of the canvas is a sequence of three plazas that recede into the distance to the southwest of the city. The one closest to the foreground (or bottom) of the pictorial space is the main plaza, in which the sacred images of the Virgin Mary and Jesus Christ (described in the *Relación*) were displayed. The plazas are shown filled with people engaged in various activities, and this human drama is certainly an important aspect of the picture and its production of meaning (Stanfield-Mazzi). But the damage inflicted on the city's architecture by the earthquake is another important pictorial theme. The way in which architectural damage is represented visually, however, departs in some ways from its description in the texts.

In the letters of de la Cerda, as well as in the *Relación*, architectural damage was described in terms of structural collapse. Roofs and towers are said to have fallen, and sometimes they crushed the walls of the rooms beneath them. Scenes of falling roof tiles appear throughout the painted image, as do large cracks traversing the walls of buildings. But other symbols of architectural destruction in the painting—the many flames and clouds of smoke emanating from buildings—are not mentioned in the contemporary texts. This difference may be evidence of the painter's or the patron's own memories of the scene, but it may also be an artifact of the comparison made in the *Relación* between the earthquake and the Final Judgment. Indeed, flames and smoke are pervasive in prints and paintings of that apocalyptic scene, and a number of such canvases were produced in the seventeenth-century Andes (Stratton-Pruitt 126–29). Another parallel between such images and the painting of the Cuzco earthquake is the scene of divine intervention in the upper left corner, for representations of the Virgin Mary and others kneeling before the Holy Trinity are standard parts of the iconography of the Final Judgment.

If the painting departs in certain ways from the details of the contemporary texts, in other ways it echoes them. For example, like the *corregidor's* letters and the *Relación*, the canvas also asserts that the widespread destruction of Cuzco's architecture resulted in the deaths of very few Spaniards. I have searched the picture for representations of death, but have found, as we might now expect, very few of them. There are three figures, near the fountain in the first plaza, who appear sprawled on the ground, although it is not clear whether they are to be understood as having fallen or if they are deceased. If the latter is true, then it would seem that it was not the collapse of architecture that killed them. Another similarly

positioned figure appears to the extreme right of the painting in an enclosure that seems to be the only place where people in indigenous dress are gathered. The marginality of this scene shows that the earthquake’s impact on the city’s indigenous population was not the main concern of the painter and/or patron; rather, it focuses on the fate of Spaniards and creoles. Like the *Relación*, the painting, too, asserts that Cuzco’s Spanish citizens performed admirable acts of piety and repentance in an effort to calm the wrath of God. Such acts appear in all three of the plazas that form a central axis on the painting. Reinforcing the religiosity of the city’s Spanish population is the fact that the cathedral—at the bottom of the canvas near the center—appears, as it is described in the letter of de la Cerda, as undamaged. Its numerous vaults are among the very few rounded shapes in the painting and they are shown intact.

Differences in the way the earthquake of 1650 was described in the letters of de la Cerda, the *Relación*, and the painting speak to the different functions each of those representations was designed to fulfill. De la Cerda’s inclusion of more details about the fate of Indians and mestizos might be seen as a reflection of his desire to present an image of himself as a provider of good government to all of those under his charge. In contrast, the *Relación*, with its thick description of the Spaniards’ acts of piety, may have been intended to appeal to a Spanish audience eager to know about the fate of Spaniards in the face of a violent demonstration of the wrath of God. The painting’s similar focus on the Spanish and creole populations of Cuzco and their survival may relate to the fact that it was commissioned by Alonso de Monroy y Cortés, a Spaniard from Trujillo, whose portrait appears in the lower right corner of the painting (Kagan 178–79).

Despite some of the differences in these representations of the event, the texts and image are unified in their assertion that the earthquake brought about the destruction of most of Cuzco’s buildings, the death of some Indians, and the death of very few Spaniards. In light of this, the claim that, “to live in this city is to die,” comes to be seen through the lens of both the rhetoric of the Final Judgment and the mechanics of colonial rule, and can be more accurately re-stated as something like this: “To live in this city is to be subject to the administration of justice.” The representations, therefore, present a scenario in which Cuzco’s Spanish citizens, through their very survival, and in spite of the destruction of their architecture, proved their righteousness, and in which the ongoing concerns of the campaign to extirpate idolatry took an apocalyptic turn.

Notes

1. Similar investigations of visual and textual representations of architecture in colonial Latin America have been undertaken by Valerie Fraser, Carolyn Dean, and Richard

- Kagan, who have looked at the dynamics of such representations in, respectively, the Colonial Andes, the Inca site of Sacsahuaman, and the early modern Hispanic world. This mode of examining architecture and its representations, foregrounds the symbolism of buildings and spaces, and contrasts with the foundational literature in the architectural history, which focused, instead, on identifying the people involved in the design of individual structures, establishing dates for their construction, and using them to plot a narrative of stylistic evolution (Wethey, Kubler and Soria).
2. The letters are held today in the Archivo General de Indias, Sevilla, and were transcribed and published in 1970, by Horacio Villanueva Urteaga in the *Revista del Archivo Histórico del Cuzco*.

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