In 1519, the first Europeans to visit Tenochtitlan saw a massive pyramid supporting twin temples looming over the capital city of the Mexica, or Aztecs. Today, based on archaeological research and interpretations of 16th century documents, Tenochtitlan’s great temple is understood as a sacred mountain, a replica of Coatepec (“serpent hill”), a place described in Mexica oral histories.

More than 2000 years earlier, other Mesoamerican peoples built the first great pyramids in Central America, but no written records survive from these early times. In order to understand the genesis of these impressive buildings, modern interpretations of these earliest monumental constructions tend to project the specifics of later situations back in time, imagining that the first pyramids were likewise intended to be effigies of sacred mountains. But is this the case? How can we understand the intentions and actions of people who lived in a world lacking things like pyramids that later people took for granted? Questions like these are raised by Karen Vitelli and other archaeologists interested in understanding innovations.
Like Vitelli, I find it necessary to “think up” from the past to avoid projecting back later experiences, as I try to understand revolutionary changes in social life experienced by people in villages across Mesoamerica during the Early and Middle Formative periods (ca. 1500-500 BC). I find it necessary to set aside what I know about the later public buildings of the Mexica and Mayas in order to imagine the actions and intentions of the people who raised the first massive earthen platforms, which are the forerunners of later stone and plaster pyramids.

I am interested in the lives of the people who inhabited what is now the north coast of Honduras. There, the Ulua River winds its way through a 2,075 km² tropical valley. A center of banana and sugar cane cultivation in the 20th century, the Ulua Valley was one of the most prized sources of cacao in 16th century Mesoamerica. In a project co-directed by Professor John Henderson of Cornell University, we are exploring the long-term history of this valley. Our research on farmsteads and hamlets of the Late Classic period (ca. AD 500-850) has uncovered evidence of earlier communities buried under the later villages that dot this fertile landscape. Our earliest dated evidence comes from Puerto Escondido, a village whose inhabitants produced striking, well-made pottery for at least two millennia, starting before 1500 BC.

Over a period of five to seven centuries, early residents of Puerto Escondido built, remodeled, enhanced, and demolished their houses, producing thick deposits of floors, fills, and building debris. The buildings they constructed were made of materials that decayed under the tropical forest conditions in which they lived. Poles lashed together provided the frame-
Fragments of Usula dentate stamped bowls from Puerto Escondido, ca. 1600-1400 BC.


Bottle imitating squash, Bodega Burnished type, in the process of excavation from a cache at Puerto Escondido deposited ca. 900-700 BC in conjunction with remodeling of ground-level structures to form a low, stepped platform.

Cylinder vase, Ulua Polychrome Santa Rita Mellizo class, typical of the Late Classic occupation at Puerto Escondido, ca. AD 500-600. Collection of the Instituto Hondureño de Antropología e Historia, Museo de San Pedro Sula, Honduras.
work for walls finished with coats of mud plaster. Carefully prepared beds of pebbles under the main house posts could not prevent these buildings from decaying after years of tropical rains. Nor could the mud plaster, renewed at intervals, protect the framework of the walls from tropical insects. For the builders of Early Formative Puerto Escondido, earthen architecture was something that needed to be renovated regularly.

Throughout Formative Mesoamerica, builders who had a background in these kinds of construction, renovation, and demolition techniques were responsible for the first monumental construction projects. The largest pre-Columbian buildings ever constructed in Honduras are the pyramids at Los Naranjos dating to the Middle Formative period (900–400 BC). Located a short distance south of Puerto Escondido, Los Naranjos occupies the shore of an upland lake surrounded by mountains. As it appears today, the taller Structure I measures 100 m x 75 m, rising 19 m to a summit platform 25 m x 30 m in extent. In contrast, Structure IV is more modest in height, measuring about 6 m tall, but it is almost as extensive in its basal dimensions and it supports a group of three platforms that rise an additional 3 m in height.

These buildings, explored by archaeologists Claude Baudez and Pierre Becquelin in the 1970s, have complex histories of remodeling that lasted for centuries. In their earliest phases, Structure I rose to 13 m, while Structure IV was only 6 m tall. The initial construction of these platforms was less about building a tall pyramid than creating a broad platform. Only when the original platforms were augmented in height did they begin to look like pyramids and present a model for later pyramids understood as sacred mountains. In their original form, the broad earthen platforms of Los Naranjos actually recall the architecture of Puerto Escondido. There, during the remodeling of certain buildings, debris from earlier structures formed platforms that elevated later buildings. Patricia Urban and Edward Schortman describe a similar pattern of “incremental” construction for the contemporary Naco Valley to the west, where earthen platforms extending up to 49 m in diameter rose initially only 20 cm to 1.2 m above the surrounding ground surface.

Such modest beginnings have interesting implications. We may need to consider whether the earliest stages of monumental platforms were intended to persist at all, or if they might have been expected to weather away, as abandoned houses did. The builders of the earliest Honduran monumental earthen platforms would have understood clay platforms to be impermanent constructions that would regularly require refurbishment. They knew that using clay in any building would likely lead to erosion and that, to extend the life of the building, it would need to be renewed. The durability of monumental earthen constructions may have been an unintended consequence of the increase in volume of the unexposed mass of earth in a broader platform. With less exposed surface to erode actively, broader clay platforms of even relatively modest increased height, like those at the heart of the early monumental buildings of Los Naranjos, may have been more stable than their makers envisioned.

Clearly these early construction projects meant something to those who built them. But projecting the better understood meanings of later monumental buildings back onto these early structures may lead us to overlook distinctive perspectives of the earliest monument builders. Instead, we can “think up” from the perspective of these builders. The earliest earthen platforms that transformed Formative Mesoamerican landscapes, and became part of all later landscapes in the region, may have been constructed without an explicit intention that they endure to convey sentiments to future viewers. Once built, however, even the relatively low early platforms transformed the space of the communities where they were constructed. As visually omnipresent and stable points of reference in their communities, monumental platforms created physical centers in Formative villages. Successor builders who placed temple platforms in central locations in communities carried on this effect, but not necessarily the intention behind...
these early buildings. Formative earthen platforms were projects whose precedents lay in everyday construction practices that they transformed forever.

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For Further Reading

