

Castells take their act on the road

Perhaps the most daring of Catalan traditions, human towers have been used around the world to teach valuable lessons

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● *Castells*, Catalonia's trademark human skyscrapers, are proving to be as much of an export as its cava. Well, maybe not quite that much, but Catalan *colles* (teams of *castellers*) are travelling around the world more and more, leading to a surge of interest in this home-grown tradition. Besides the simple fact that they're really cool to watch, much of the attraction to castells seems to come from the team-building values and skills needed to successfully erect towers that can reach upwards of eight stories high.

Castells' origins actually lie in a traditional Valencian dance, says Miquel Ferret, the president of the green-shirted *Castellers de Vilafranca*. In the grand finale of the dance, participants would form small towers. Little by little people strove for higher towers until one day, by the early 1800's, the human structures had become an end in themselves.

Castells have an undeniable link with Catalan culture, but Ferret stresses that the relation between castellers has always been one of unity and tolerance rather than exclusion. "We never wanted to do politics or use (castells) as a political weapon, nor could we," he says. The tradition survived relatively intact during the Franco years despite the fact the salute made by the highest person – a bent, raised arm – was replaced by a straight-armed fascist salute.

With that long behind, Ferret highlights the inherently democratic nature of castells. It's the only activity where "the carpenter or the farmer can walk on the banker's back," he says.

Human architecture

In addition to a sort of built-in egalitarianism, teamwork is another necessary ingredient in building a successful tower. There are "reinforcements, balances, forces...if one pushes one way without a counterbalance, it falls," says Ferret. "It's like a building with pillars and columns to transfer the weight to the ground... It's human architecture."

Of course, architectural theory might seem a lot less abstract if you find yourself on the high end of a tower nine-people tall. When asked how scary it is up top, 12-year-old Jordi says "Well, it's not exactly fear but



In the top photo, members of the *Castellers de Vilafranca* raise tandem human towers in Chile's Plaza de la Constitución. Miquel Ferret in action (l). Teamtowers with the Jerusalem Circus (r)/PHOTOS: C. REYES (EFE), G.A.C., N. SHARON.

there is a touch of insecurity about the fact the tower could fall."

Clearly trust is another in the list of castellers' values. Together, these qualities have made castells an especially exportable aspect of Catalan culture.

Chilean barrios

In January of this year, around 150 of the *Castellers de Vilafranca* kicked off their 60th anniversary in style, crossing the Atlantic for an eight-day trip to Chile. With participants from both continents, the visit aimed to promote values of solidarity, social integration, team work and success. Luis Carrasco, a professor at the Universidad de Santiago de Chile and one of its

early promoters, discovered castells while doing postgraduate work in Barcelona in the late 1990's. After having what could be described as a revelation, he decided to use castells for social good in low-income areas of Chile. He says that "social disintegration and individualism" that lead to drug use and delinquency "can't be resolved if we only promote competition between the weakest members of society." Instead, he believes human beings can "succeed in doing extraordinary things if we cooperate." Now the Chilean municipality of Lo Prado has its very own colla.

However, solidarity projects aren't the only sphere where castellers are reaching for the

clouds.

Corporate towers

Another casteller, Fèlix Miret, co-directs Teamtowers, which applies the team-building concept to corporations. Teamtowers uses values integral to the casteller experience to teach everyone from large corporations to sports teams to work together more effectively.

Teamtowers' clients have included Swiss bank UBS, Caixa Catalunya, FC Barcelona and American beverage giant PepsiCo.

A typical session involves expert castellers teaming up with the clients. Teamtowers defines the rules but then leaves it to the clients to organise themselves

into the *pinya*, or base of the tower. Usually the clients confine their participation to forming the base, though a few might receive special training to climb up to the second story. The third story is off-limits to everyone except the castellers themselves.

Miret says that different groups work out the construction in different ways, but the end result is always the same: the

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Miret hopes that one day a typical visit to Catalonia will include the building of a castell.

However, corporate clients aside, it seems like solidarity is never far from a casteller's heart.

Jerusalem gymnasium

One of the last places one might expect to find a Catalan castell is in a school gym in Jerusalem.

But in December of 2005, five members of Teamtowers collaborated with Jerusalem Circus, an Israeli NGO dedicated to promoting co-existence among Jews, Arabs and Christians through the circus arts. The collaboration, in which 100 people from all three walks of life participated, was held to celebrate the culturally diverse holidays of Id-al-Adah, Hanukah and Christmas, in addition to welcoming in the new year.

While in Catalonia, there can be a strong element of competition between *colles*, Elisheva Yortner, the founder and director of Jerusalem Circus, says that she didn't see this aspect of casteller culture.

Yortner dedicated the project to children and "to something better that might be built," an apt goal for castellers the world over.

"The main point is really the team spirit. We weren't in a contest," she says. "Building a tower between people, working together to build a beautiful tower, it's the same as the circus."