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## 2 ANCIENT MAYA ARCHITECTURE AND SPATIAL LAYOUTS: CONTEXTUALIZING CAANA AT CARACOL, BELIZE

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*Architecture and architectural mass convey many meanings and can serve multiple functions. Monumental architecture not only impresses, but can also serve to create viewsheds and to channel traffic. The differential distribution of public and residential architecture at any one site provides a key for interpreting the organization of that settlement. For Caracol, Belize, a city covering over 200sq km, the clear focal point for the site is Caana, a massive architectural complex that even today rises 43.5 m above the plaza to its south. There is no other architectural construction like Caana at Caracol and this huge complex is located in the site epicenter and forms the central hub for the city's dendritic road system. Thus, it should not be surprising that the archaeological data suggest that Caracol's rulers occupied the buildings at the complex's summit and utilized the summit temples for private ceremonies. The stone rooms and buildings that comprise Caana have all been excavated and their forms and artifactual associations provide clues as to the function of various buildings. This paper reviews that data and shows how the Caana complex was used within the milieu of the ancient city of Caracol.*

### Introduction

Architecture serves a variety of human purposes. Besides being functional and having a social purpose, architecture also structures space and provides symbolic meaning. While perhaps not as straight-forward as the functionalist approach or the statements of Sullivan in 1896 (Sullivan 1896:408) that "form ever follows function," ancient architecture when contextually studied reveals social, symbolic, domestic, administrative, public, and private functions of constructed space. However, considerations of ancient architecture must be well grounded at several levels. The most basic analytic level is the building itself in terms of its basic plan, access patterns, the kinds of materials that were used in construction, and probable function(s). Artifactual remains recovered in association with an ancient building often permit inferences of use and function. Meaning and function can also be facilitated by a consideration of associated buildings and the spatial plan of any larger architectural complex for which it forms a part. Another level of analysis is the context and positioning of the building relative to the rest of the community or urban environment that includes a consideration of distinctiveness, replication, and scale. Finally, much ancient architecture needs to be potentially placed within ancient belief systems and worldviews in order to infer the roles and functions of that architecture in terms of social and/or religious meaning; this includes looking at deposits that may have been purposefully



Figure 1. Photograph of Caana, looking north.

included within the core of any given building or left in place on its surfaces.

At the Classic Maya site of Caracol, one architectural complex stands out as distinct from all others. Caana, Maya for "sky place," is the tallest man-made architectural complex in Belize today, rising some 43.5 m above the public plaza to its south (Figure 1). Caana's summit contained a centrally-located private plaza with pyramidal structures of a distinct style (Ballay 1994) on three sides and a long range building on its southern side that effectively shielded this space from public view. Also on the summit and to either side of the northern pyramid were smaller shielded plazas with associated living spaces. The layout of the buildings and rooms shows that access to Caana's central summit plaza and particularly to its upper side plazas was tightly controlled and monitored. Caana was also a unique architectural complex within

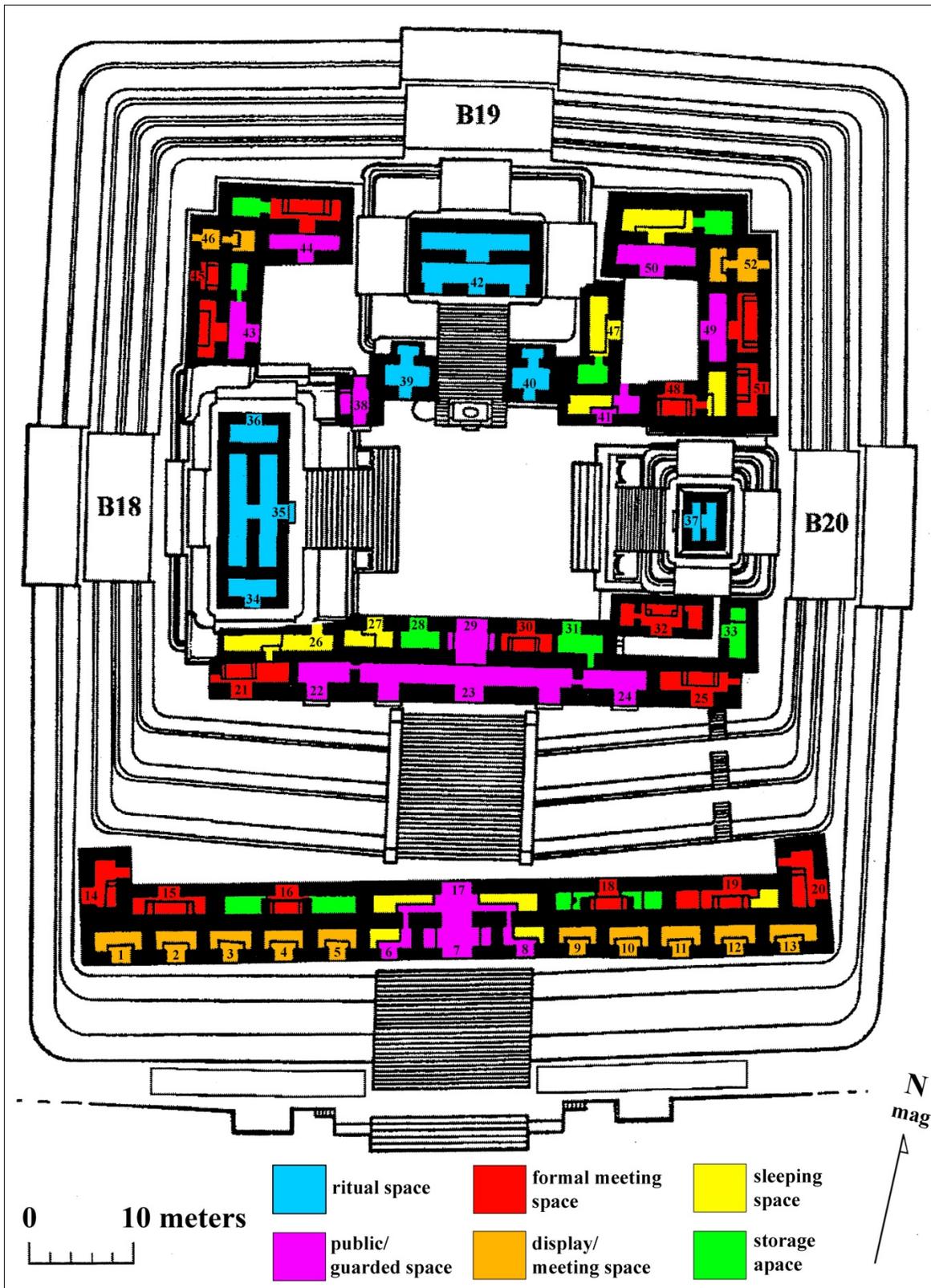


Figure 2. Plan of Caana illustrating the potential use of the various rooms.

the Caracol metropolitan area. Not only is it not duplicated elsewhere in the region, but it is at the very center of the site and the city's road system (all roads lead to Caana). All of this architectural information provides clues to the past Maya who once inhabited and used this complex.

### How Caana Was Utilized

Caana constituted the center of Caracol. It has a long history of use and modification. As noted above, even in its ruined state without standing building and roofcomb, the complex rises 43.5 m above the plaza to its south. The version of Caana currently visible was in place during the Terminal Classic Period (C.E. 800-900). Excavations have shown that by the Late Preclassic Period, this complex was at least 34 m in height (Chase and Chase 2006). The rooms associated with the final form of this architectural complex were a mix of public meeting rooms, ritual space, guard posts, sleeping space, and quarters for the royal family (Figure 2). Access to the complex was tightly controlled and became more difficult as one increased elevation with only limited and restricted access to summit areas (Chase and Chase 2001: 108-115). As previous research has shown, benches within many of Caana's rooms help to determine the function of the different suites: small benches that were often paired to face each other and that encompassed the entire room usually denoted guarded space; "armed" benches (termed "audencias" below) denoted formal meeting space for administrative duties; "C-shaped" benches in a room are usually publically oriented and were perhaps used for temporary meetings or displays; "L-shaped" benches within rooms signified the use of the room as sleeping space (Chase and Chase 2001: 109). Room numbers and functions are identified in Figure 2. While many of the room functions are clear from architectural features and archaeological remains, others are inferred as best possible based on parallels with more clearly defined spaces.

Three two-room temples (Figure 2: numbered 35, 37, 42) dominated the Caana summit. Two rooms that probably had some kind of ritual function (Figure 2: numbered 34, 36) were attached to the western temple and two

two-room shrines (Figure 2: numbered 39, 40) were placed to the sides of the central stairway to the main northern temple. All buildings at the summit were elaborately decorated with stucco, which included glyphic texts on multiple structures and mat symbols on the Structure B18 substructure. Both the northern and eastern temples were associated with a series of deposits that spanned the Late Classic Period.

Structure B19 was extensively investigated and eventually stabilized. A painted "jaguar" throne was recovered at the western base of the final version of Structure B19 (-1st) and would have served as an area for a public viewing of or meeting with the Caracol ruler in semi-private space. At the central base of Structure B19, Altar 16 had been positioned over a ritual deposit that included a skull cap, two vessels, pieces of two incensarios, and over 100 chert drills. At the building's summit was an unsealed cache of five Terminal Classic vessels (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004: fig. 16.2). The B19 substructure was both tunneled and trenched (Figure 3), resulting in the recovery of a series of caches, including one directly above the central Late Classic Period tomb described below. The temple floors of an earlier version of Structure B19 (-2nd) were associated with episodic caching. The latest deposit was sealed with a floor patch and produced a complete lidded censer set above a finger bowl cache and the body of a child. Earlier floors for Structure B19-2nd were punctuated with multiple pits that all contained caches of paired vessels, obsidian eccentrics, jadeite chips and beads, spondylus chips, stingray spines, and clay beads. The original base of Structure B19 was associated with a central shrine room that had been buried by 4 m of fill when a new elevated court surface was established at the summit of Caana in the late Late Classic Period (reconstruction drawing in D. Chase and A. Chase 1998: fig. 4). A small roofed niche in the basal stairs leading to this earlier shrine room hid a passage down to a tomb that contained the body of a woman accompanied by eight vessels and dated by a wall text to A.D. 634 (Figure 4; see also A. Chase and D. Chase 1987: figs. 20-23; D. Chase and A. Chase 2003). Shrines added to the base of the latest version of Structure B19 (-1st), located on either side of its stairway after the



**Figure 3.** North-south section through Caracol Structure B19.

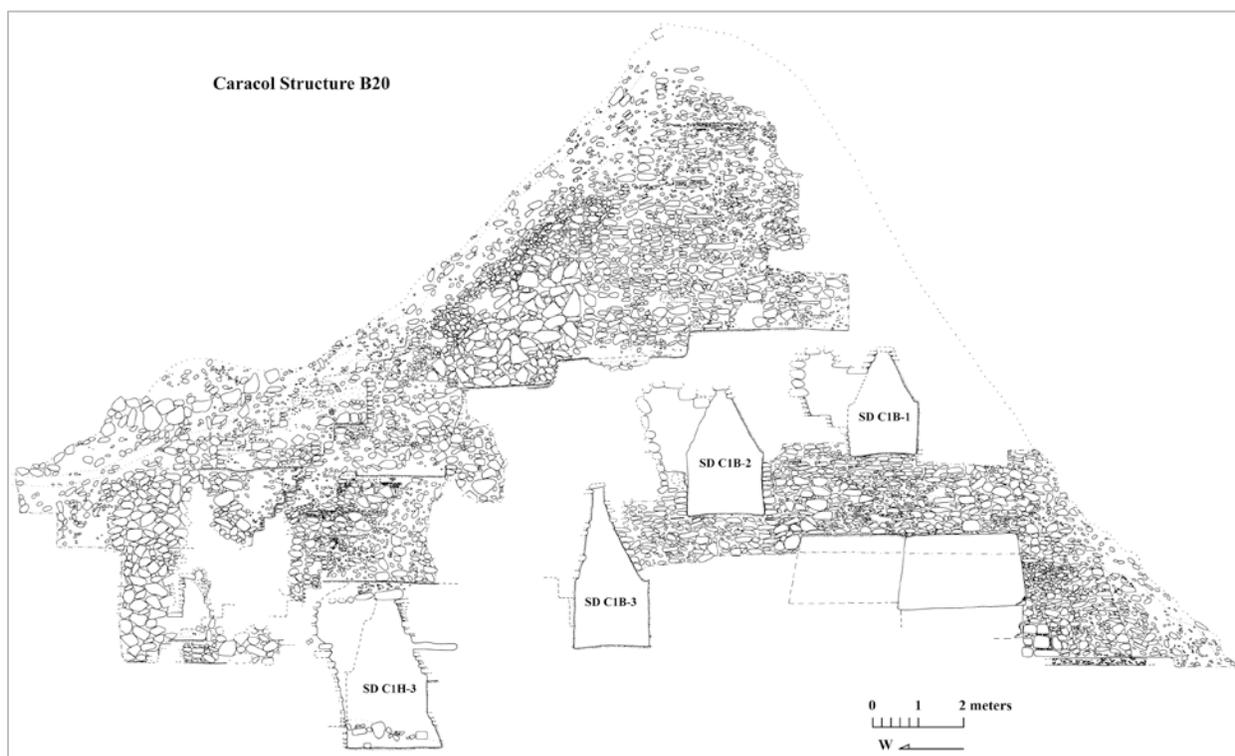


**Figure 4.** Photograph of axial tomb in Caracol Structure B19 excavated in 1986.

plaza was elevated, capped two more Late Classic tombs. Both were desecrated and then resealed at the beginning of the Terminal Classic Period.

Structure B20, the eastern pyramid (Figure 5), had been savagely looted prior to the start of our project in 1985. Like Structure B19, the buried base of Structure B20 also contained an architectural feature, in this case an elaborate earth monster mask in the middle of its stairway (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987: fig. 17). Before

being buried in the new elevated plaza, a human body had been placed within the maw of this mask. Another burial was placed in the new Structure B20 access stairway some 4 m higher. An earlier version of Structure B20 contained graffiti on its interior front wall, one scene of which showed a probable ruler being carried in a palanquin (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001: fig. 4.12). This buried building was accessed by an earlier stairway with another central mask that was surmounted by a small shrine room that contained a censer on its floor. The shrine room was directly above the westernmost of four tombs within the coring of the earlier structure and the only one that was recovered intact by the project. Three of these tombs contained painted texts with dates. The eastern three tombs had all been looted prior to the start of our project in 1985, although we were able to associate 17 pottery vessels, one footed marble bowl, and a small amount of human bone with one of the chambers (A. Chase and D. Chase 1987: fig. 15). In 1993, a fourth unlooted tomb was recovered, dating to A.D. 537 (Figure 6; see plan in D. Chase 1994: fig. 10.3). It contained the



**Figure 5.** East-west section through Caracol Structure B20.



**Figure 6.** Photograph of axial tomb in Caracol Structure B20 excavated in 1993.

body of a woman associated with 16 vessels (A. Chase 1994: fig. 13.1), spondylus shells, spindle whorls (A. Chase et al. 2008: fig. 2), and a jadeite pendent (Figure 7).

Two secluded courtyards are located to either side of Structure B19 and these were likely utilized by the ruler and the immediate family; both were entered through restricted and presumably guarded space (Figure 2: numbered 38, 41). The western courtyard was more formal and was likely used for intimate – and private –

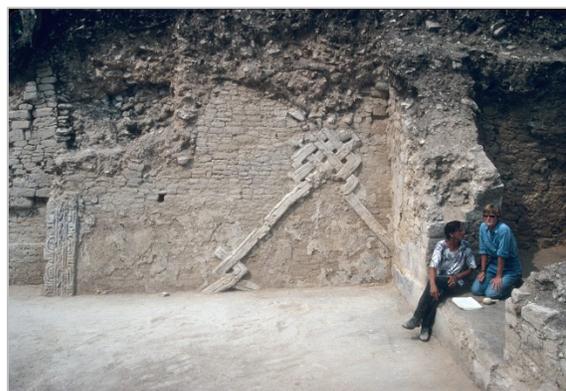
audiences with the ruler. A pair of three-room suites (Figure 2: numbered 43, 44) was situated on the northern and western side of the courtyard; both suites had a store room, a viewing area, and a formal “audencia” or meeting room with benches attached to the rear wall. The floors of these suites were also painted red. The western bench room produced a ritual incensario on its floor. At the southern side of this courtyard, the substructure for Structure B18 was decorated with a stucco mat symbol (Figure 8), symbolically emphasizing rulership. The eastern courtyard had four suites of rooms (Figure 2: numbered 47, 48, 49, 50) and was likely the residential area for the ruler’s family. The western-most suite in the eastern courtyard had two rooms that contained a sleeping area and a storage room; in its final form, this suite had been infilled and its doors blocked before abandonment; however, a series of serving vessels (consisting of footed plates and short vases) were recovered on the floor of the inner room and serving vases and a large storage vessel were also recovered on the floor of the infilled outer room. The northern suite in

the eastern courtyard had three rooms and, again, included a sleeping bench; while the innermost storage room had nothing on its floor, large storage vessels were located on the floor of the front room. The eastern suite of rooms consisted of an inner “audencia” room and an outer room that yielded many large storage vessels on its floor. An elaborate burner with attached warrior figures was recovered on the plaza floor in front of this suite. The southernmost suite of two rooms consisted of an inner sleeping room and an outer “audencia” room; the body of a 5-year old child was encountered on the floor of the inner doorway of this suite, possibly indicating a sudden and violent end to Caana’s residential occupation (D. Chase and A. Chase 2000). Two exteriorly facing audencias (numbered 45, 51) and two two-room “receiving” areas (Figure 2: numbered 46, 52) with “C-shaped” benches were located on the outside of each northern court.

The main upper courtyard had a long range building defining access to it on its southern edge. There was a large formal exterior entryway (Figure 2: numbered 22, 23, 24) to the summit complex and its temples. Two exteriorly facing audencias (Figure 2: numbered 21, 25) were located at either end of the formal entryway (Figure 2: numbered 23, 29). The western audencia had a blocked and infilled inner room (Figure 2: numbered 26) that had once been a sleeping area. A guardhouse (Figure 2: numbered 29) formed the rear room of the formal entryway to the plaza and four other rooms also faced the inner summit plaza; one of these had been used for sleeping (Figure 2: numbered 27); two were storage areas (Figure 2: numbered 28, 31), and one (Figure 2: numbered 30) was an audencia. A small private courtyard was situated just south of Structure B20. A stairway in the southwestern corner of this courtyard would have permitted entry to the roof of the upper range building that faced south. A suite of three rooms (Figure 2: numbered 32), consisting of a central audencia flanked by two storage rooms, faced south onto this courtyard; the floor of this audencia yielded an incensario and what appears to be a cache vessel and lid. Another building (Figure 2: numbered 33) defined the eastern entryway to this private courtyard and had probably been used for



**Figure 7.** Jadeite pendent from the 1993 tomb in Caracol Structure B20.



**Figure 8.** Photograph of stuccoed mat design on the northern substructure of Caracol Structure B18.

storage. Excavation beneath this private courtyard revealed the existence of a completely preserved earlier version of the southern range building that ran across the southern face of Caana. An elaborate stucco frieze was located on the northern upper cornice of this buried building and presented an ancestor scene complete with fish and waterlilies (Figure 9; line drawing in D. Chase and A. Chase 2009: fig. 11.3). The associated text detailed events in the life of Caracol rulers K’an II and Smoke Rabbit.

Half-way up the front face of Caana was a long range building that presented 13 doorways to the plaza south of this complex. Thirteen was a sacred number to the Maya and had cosmological meaning (Awe 2008:163, 169). Ten of the front rooms (Figure 2: numbered 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13) were public receiving rooms. One of these rooms yielded a footed plate and another held a water jar, an olla, and a



**Figure 9.** Stuccoed frieze on northern façade of building buried beneath Caracol Structure B16; frieze is 2 m in height; painting by Jagdish Chavda; colors are accurate.

large platter, indicating that some consumption took place in these front units. The two rooms adjacent to the central entrance (Figure 2: numbered 6, 8) likely had multiple functions as both sleeping areas and display areas. The central doorway room (Figure 2: numbered 7) functioned as a guardhouse, complete with a rear room (Figure 2: numbered 17) that also functioned for sleeping and guarding; two modeled-carved cylinders of Terminal Classic date were located on the floor of the entryway (A. Chase and D. Chase 2004: Figure 16.7 1). Two *audencias* (Figure 2: numbered 14, 20) defined the eastern and western ends of the range building. Four other *audencias* (Figure 2: numbered 15, 16, 18, 19) faced an interior passageway, making them far more private than the exterior receiving areas. One *audencia* (Figure 2: numbered 15) had no added room; two *audencias* (Figure 2: numbered 16 and 18) were associated with storerooms; and, one *audencia* (Figure 2: numbered 19) was associated with a sleeping bench and another bench. Ceramic serving vessels including plates, cylinders, and barrels were recovered from the eastern alley associated with the Caana mid-level range building (A. Chase and D. Chase 2005: fig. 16.7 f,h,j,p,q,s). A battered slate axe bearing the names of K'an II also was recovered from the western alley (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001: fig. 4.5).

Caana was further articulated with the other structures that surrounded its base on the

west and to its north. No evidence for day-to-day food production, or cooking, was found on Caana. Food apparently was prepared in a large royal kitchen to the west of Caana, Structure B37 (Chase and Chase 2014:10), and was carried up to the summit occupants. This facility likely served much of the Caracol epicenter (Chase et al. 2001). Thus, while it is difficult to reconstruct all the functions of architectural complexes and rooms at Caana from the archaeological data, it is clear from these data that the rooms that comprised Caana functioned as the administrative and ritual center for the immense site of Caracol and as a royal residence.

### **Situating Caana in Ancient Maya Landscape and Worldview**

The use of architecture to interpret past Maya society has a long history. Pollock (1962:xi) noted that engagement with architecture “in essence summarizes the development of archaeological research in the Maya area.” The archaeological reports of the Carnegie Institution and other projects are centered on architectural studies that define both development and changes over time as well as the deposits that are associated with buildings. Architecture has also been utilized as a method for analyzing transitions in institutional complexity, especially when viewed in terms of scale. Trigger (1990:128) portrayed monumental architecture as signifying the

“control of energy” reflective of “political power.” In this light Caana is reflective of great political power.

One of the better frameworks for analyzing how architecture is reflective of social and political organization was provided by Jerry Moore (1996) for Andean monumental architecture. In his study Moore (1996:140) provided six criteria that he considered as useful in assessing transformations in the organization and form of public space from the standpoint of changes in social or political power. These criteria are: centrality, permanence, accessibility, visibility, scale, and ubiquity (see also Beck 2004:325; Smith 2011:174). The social purposes of architecture are revealed by centrality and ubiquity; these terms refer to the location of the architecture and how common it is as an architectural type. Caana is centrally located at Caracol and formed the central node for the site’s causeway system; both the Conchita and Cahal Pichik Causeways viewed Caana when entering the epicenter. It is also a unique architectural complex, although range buildings with set numbers of doors are found combined with centrally-located pyramids at other sites in western Belize (Awe 2008). Thus, the archaeological interpretation of Caana as the architectural complex associated with the ruling family and the administrative functions of the central elite (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001) is consistent with its position in the urban matrix and its distinctiveness.

The symbolic intent of Caana is both directly indicated in its front façade and in its scale and its permanence. Scale refers to the size of the architecture and how it compares to the size of other structures. The front façade of Caana presents the fronts of two range buildings, one having 13 doorways and one having seven doorways, both important numbers for the Maya in terms of their cosmology (see Awe 2008:169). The three temples on its summit during the Terminal Classic era may also have symbolically represented the three hearthstones associated with Maya origin mythology (Freidel et al. 1993; Taube 1998); this would also be consistent with the symbolic perception of Caana as a sacred mountain (*witz*) that literally incorporates carved bedrock on its southeast corner as part of its first terrace. Clearly, there

is nothing on either a symbolic or architectural scale that is equivalent to Caana elsewhere at Caracol (A. Chase et al. 2011: 393). The next highest structure at the site is Structure A2 in the A Group, rising some 25 m above its associated plaza and forming a focal point of entry to the epicenter for pedestrians coming from the northeast; this pyramid forms the western construction of an E Group and did not support a formal construction at its summit (A. Chase and D. Chase 1995, 2017). The scale of Caana was consistently larger than other structures through time. Four kinds of architectural permanence are delineated by Moore (1996:39): ephemeral, episodic, generational, and multigenerational. There is no doubt about the permanence and multigenerational longevity of Caana. It was continually built and remodeled. Late Preclassic Caana rose some 34 m above its associated large southern plaza (Chase and Chase 2006: 41). Indications are that construction and change went on continuously over time. Among some of the last changes to Caana were the raising of the summit plaza by 4 m in conjunction with the construction of Structure B18 at the beginning of the Terminal Classic Period, suggesting an attempt at the projection of even more power and perhaps social change (see Chase and Chase 2007: 21). Thus, the symbolic message sent by the architectural complex known as Caana is riven with power and status, forming an appropriate node for the administration of the site and the location of the royal residence.

Caana’s architecture also provides information on social control through its visibility and access patterns. Moore (1996:140) uses visibility to assess public viewing of associated activities and accessibility to determine control of movement within a public space. Because of its height, Caana is widely observable from higher points at the site and would have been quite noticeable for miles if the area had been denuded of trees. Visibility is also demonstrated by causeway access and views. All causeways entering Caracol provide vistas of monumental architecture. Caana comes into view from two entry points to the site - from the northeast and from the south. However, many of the activities that would have occurred within this complex could not have been seen by the public. What they could view from the large

public plaza that Caana fronts would have been individuals within the 13 doorways (and rooms) of the mid-range buildings and individuals going up and down the frontal stairway. Awe (2008:170) has pointed out that “at least in western Belize, large range-type buildings with 13 doorways were often used to demarcate points of transition between private elite space and public access space.” Activities in many of the restricted access rooms and on the summit plazas and buildings associated with Caana would have taken place in private. As noted above, accessibility was also tightly controlled, suggesting that the occupants of Caana desired to maintain their privacy and probably the prerogatives of their higher social status. Other elite complexes in epicentral Caracol – South Acropolis, Central Acropolis, Barrio, and Northeast Acropolis – restricted access (A. Chase and D. Chase 2001); however, no other location was as protected as the Caana summit. Thus, the architectural configurations at Caana represent the clear imposition of social hierarchy and inequality at the site.

### Conclusion

In sum, the functions of the architectural complex of Caana are to a large degree discernible from considering the building form and siting of the complex at the site. Following Moore (1996) Caana was central, permanent, visible, and massive in scale. The complex was both accessible and restrictive (as appropriate for its function). Its base and vista are accessible via public plazas and from causeways entrances to the site; however, befitting a royal complex, Caana also had areas where activity was obscured from public view. The existence of a palace of such scale alone suggests that Caana was the formal residential complex associated with the ruling elite. However, excavation and contextual analysis provides the proof. There is evidence for both the presence of rulers in named artifacts and stucco facades as well as evidence for the residential activity associated with food consumption and storage. Interments, graffiti, and cache offerings complete the evidence for royal occupation. Thus, architecture and its spatial location provide a significant key to functional interpretation, but archaeological excavation and

context provide the full interpretation of architectural meaning.

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