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Plaza Mexicana

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In Los Angeles, where I live, many longtime Anglo residents regard the growing Latinization of the city as a new and foreign phenomenon. Confronted with sidewalks filled with people from places like Managua, San Salvador, Chihuahua and Monterrey, they imagine they are witnessing a cultural invasion from troubled nations to the south.

My impression of this change is different; I liken it to wildflowers pushing up through concrete. The seeds of this urban culture have been in California's soil for more than two centuries and have survived in the Americas for more than five hundred years. Compared to this longevity, the Victorian, wood-frame urbanism that the Yankees carried across the prairies seems flimsy and raw, and post-war automotive urbanism seems *arriviste*.

When I visit the old plaza and church of the Pueblo de Los Angeles and find it filled with the lively Spanish exchanges of parishioners, I realize this is not an invasion but a recolonization. The military seizure of Mexican California by the Yankees in 1848 may, a century and half later, be reversed by the sheer proliferation of these wildflower seeds breaking through the cracks of the Anglo-techno metropolis.

Clockwise from top left:
Street in Oaxaca, © Douglas R. Suisman; arcade near plaza in Oaxaca, courtesy Mexican Government Tourist Board; parade in Morelia, © Douglas R. Suisman; outdoor restaurant under arcade in Morelia, courtesy Mexican Government Tourism Office.

Text © Douglas R. Suisman.



One pole of daily urban life unfolds in front of your eyes; another pole of deep historical forces is still at play. The arc connects them, sparking and then retreating like an electric heartbeat.



Regretably, few Americans make a connection between this emerging “Latinization” and Mexico’s extraordinary urban culture. Mexican cities possess a grace in their architectural settings, a complexity in their social choreography and a dynamism in their interwoven public spaces that provides an exceptional richness of experience — particularly in the types of spaces that are so often exceptionally bleak in U.S. cities.

Ironically, the cities of Mexico are not so different from those north of the border. Like most early U.S. settlements, virtually all of them began as planned new towns. The plans of both U.S. and Mexican cities are generally orthogonal and open-ended, as distinct from the walled, medieval urban cores of Europe. And like our urban areas, Mexican cities today contend with the staggering growth of both human and automotive populations.

Given the similarities, why are the differences so profound? Why do Mexican social, political and family life continue to unfold gracefully under stone arcades, at sidewalk cafes and within earshot of fountains in plazas while the civic cores of so many U.S. cities continue to decline in a swirl of graffiti and litter along sidewalks emptied of people? Even as Mexico modernizes and industrializes, its cities sustain a civic apparatus of plazas, palaces and churches that acts as a virtual vortex of the nation’s social and historical consciousness.

Addressing this question may help us see the Latinization of our cities not as a problem with which we must contend but as a phenomenon of which we can take advantage. To lay the groundwork for that kind of appreciation, I want to go straight to the core of the tradition: the Spanish colonial plaza as it has

evolved in central Mexico, the viceregal heart of the empire. A comprehensive study would require three legs: the historic origins of plaza form, the evolution of plaza uses over five centuries, and social and physical character of plazas in contemporary Mexico. I will leave it to others to supply even the outline of the second leg. Instead, I hope that a synopsis of the plaza’s formal origins combined with a descriptive assessment of contemporary plazas will create a kind of electrical arc between these two analytical poles.

Certainly even a day spent observing life in and around the central plaza of almost any Mexican city suggests a potent and continuous cultural legacy, a potency underscored by the striking similarity of forms and rituals from city to city. But the course of that legacy is not always apparent. The experience of the Mexican plaza is moving because of the intuitive, almost preternatural way in which contemporary Mexicans weave their complex collective existence around these very old and rather schematic urban armatures. It has little to do with a grand Mexican theory of urbanism.

As an old man shines the shoes of a clerk along the path of a 400-year old plaza, as three businessmen gather at a cafe table under an eighteenth-century vaulted arcade, as the *campesina* trudges her sack of peppers to a nineteenth-century municipal market, as two young men sell videocassettes from the back of a parked minivan, there is a powerful sense of simultaneity in these material and historical forces. One pole of daily urban life unfolds in front of your eyes; another pole of deep historical forces is still at play. The arc connects them, sparking and then retreating like an electric heartbeat.



Plaza in Oaxaca.
Courtesy Mexican
Government Tourism
Office.

THE LAWS OF THE INDIES

110 Having made the discovery, selected the province, county and area that is to be settled, and the site in the location where the new town is to be built, and having taken possession of it, those placed in charge of its execution are to do it in the following manner: On arriving at the place where the new settlement is to be founded, which according to our will and disposition shall be one that is vacant and that can be occupied without doing harm to the Indians and natives or with their free consent, a plan for the site is to be made, dividing it into squares, streets and building lots, using cord and ruler, beginning with the main square from which streets are to run to the gates and principal roads and leaving sufficient open space so that even if the town grows, it can always spread in the same manner. Having thus agreed upon the site and place selected to be populated, a layout should be made in the following way.

Excerpts from the Laws of the Indies were originally published in Dora P. Crouch, Daniel J. Garr and Axel I. Mundigo, *Spanish City Planning in North America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982). Reprinted with permission.

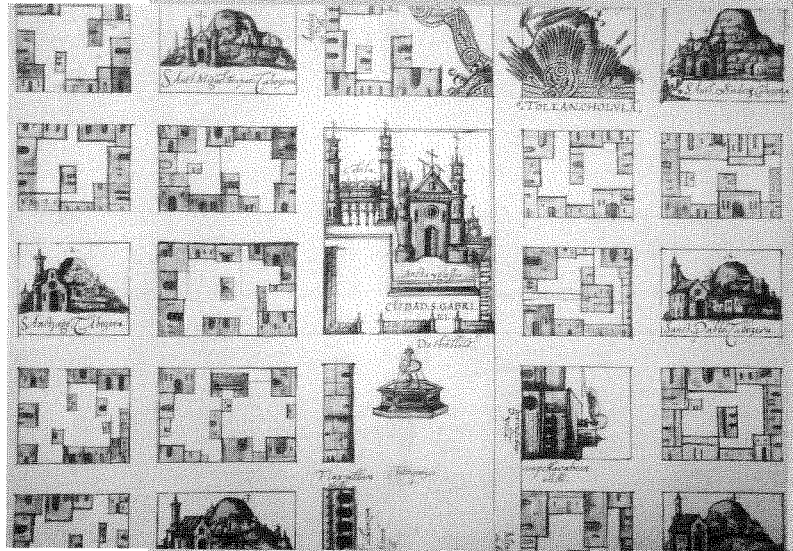
The Laws of the Indies: Instrument of Colonization

Many of the historical forces that shaped Mexican cities predated the arrival of the Spanish; the Aztecs, for example, had a powerful urban planning tradition. But the specific programmatic and repetitive form of Mexican plazas is anchored in the history of Spanish colonization.

The cities of Spanish America were not only born of a momentous and violent conquest but also regarded as the very instruments that would make the conquest permanent.¹ Spanish authorities had studied the Roman technique of ruling by establishing a network of highly regulated colonial cities and concluded that their shadowy New World territories could only be held together by a similar network. Similarly, the slow process of widespread religious conversion would require religious and urban settings of great power and permanence.

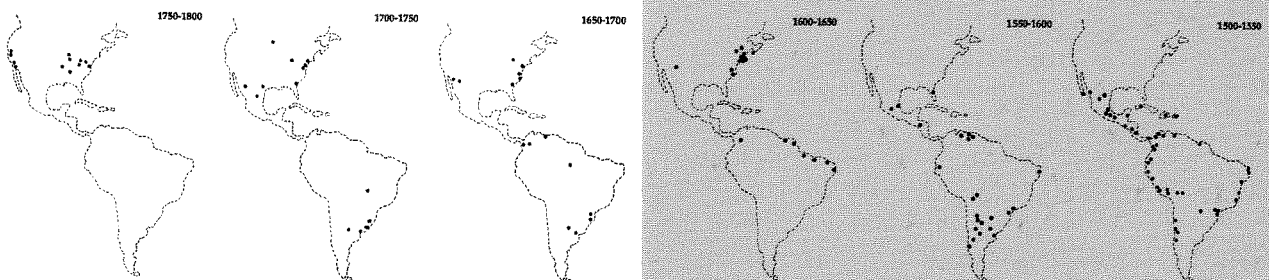
At first, decisions regarding the establishment of New World settlements were left to the *conquistadores*, who were empowered by King Ferdinand to “establish settlements in the numbers and the places that seem proper to you.”² But as the vast scale and riches of the New World became apparent, the royal authorities decided to exert more direct control and began dispatching more instructions. As time wore on, the growing number of royal ordinances became unwieldy and in 1573 they were reorganized into a single, momentous document, *Copilación de las Leyes de Indias* (Compilation of the Laws of the Indies).

By 1580 the Spanish had established more than 220 settlements — almost all of them laid out in a fairly regular, fairly orthogonal street plan with a plaza and church at the center — as far north as the Rio Grande and as far south as Patagonia. (This colonial wingspread, more than 5,000 miles, exceeded the span of imperial Rome). For their cumulative impact on so many settlements over such a wide area, the Laws of the Indies have been called “probably the most effective planning documents in the history of mankind.”³



Cholula, 1851. Courtesy Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, and the New York Public Library, Map Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden foundations. Photos credited to the New York Public Library are from *El Territorio Mexicano* (Mexico City: Instituto Mexicano de Seguro Social, 1982) unless otherwise noted.

Location of settlements established under Spanish colonial rule. © Douglas R. Suisman.



113 The size of the plaza shall be proportioned to the number of inhabitants, taking into consideration the fact that in Indian towns, inasmuch as they are new, the intention is that they will increase, and thus the plaza should be decided upon taking into consideration the growth the town may experience. [The Plaza] shall be not less than 200 feet wide and 300 feet long, nor larger than 800 feet long and 530 wide. A good proportion is 600 feet long and 400 feet wide.

114 From the plaza shall begin four principal streets: One [shall be] from the middle of each side, and two streets from each corner of the plaza; the four corners of the plaza shall face the four principal winds, because in this manner, the streets running from the plaza will not be exposed to the four principal winds, which would cause much inconvenience.

A New Urban Model: The Centrifugal Plaza Plan

The 148 ordinances addressed virtually every aspect of founding a new human settlement, from its site and layout to its social protocols and political structure. The focus here is on those ordinances concerned with the physical form of the settlement — its street plan, plazas, churches and civic buildings.

Spanish colonial cities are distinguished by a remarkable conception of dynamic centrifugality. The plaza would serve as the generative space of the entire settlement, which would be laid out from the center outward rather than from the boundaries inward. This conception was unusual and inventive since plazas in Spain (and throughout Europe) were rarely starting points of towns but rather renovations of existing urban fabric.

The pattern of streets and blocks was conceived not as a complete and delimited entity, like the ideal city plans then being formulated in Renaissance Italy, but as an open-ended projection of a fixed and precisely formulated core. The town was to be surrounded by enough open space to provide room for growth; the plaza would be connected to the periphery by a web of streets. The laws might reasonably have called for protective walls or boundaries, as in a traditional Roman castrum or the stockades of the American West. But the emphasis was on connection and growth, not confinement and protection.

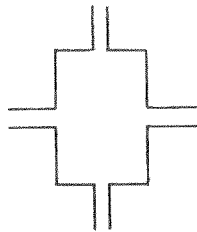
It is commonly thought that the laws required that a rigid street grid serve as the basic structure of new colonial towns.⁴ But the ordinances do not specifically prescribe a checkerboard or, for that matter, any other variant of a grid. Nor is there any requirement that streets or blocks must be straight, orthogonal, or regularly spaced. Rather, the ordinances established a procedure for laying out plazas, streets and blocks.

Even so, most Latin American cities are organized on grids that vary from distorted fishnets to rigid grills. If the laws did not specify the grid, why does the form recur? Perhaps the implication of a grid was tacitly understood by surveyors. Another possible explanation is that the use of a regular grid for the imperial capital, Mexico City, in 1524 set a powerful precedent, offering a workable model that resolved the ambiguities of the ordinances.

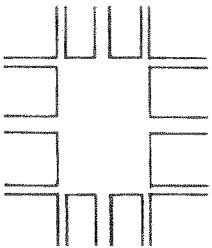
It seems remarkable, in our age of instant transmission of images, that the colonial urbanization of Latin America was orchestrated from Europe entirely on the basis of handwritten verbal instructions. Nevertheless, the urban model verbally



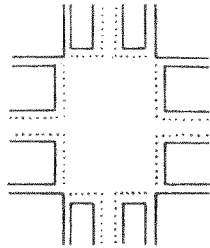
Rectangular Plaza



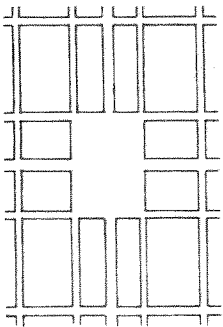
Plaza with Center Streets



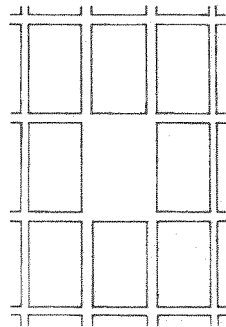
Twelve-Street Plaza



Twelve Street Plaza with Colonnade



Twelve-Street Plaza



Eight-Street Plaza

Drawings © Douglas R. Suisman.

transmitted by the Laws of the Indies possessed a remarkable balance of specificity and flexibility. The centrifugal plaza plan was simple and clear enough for widespread execution, yet sufficiently open for adaption to extraordinarily diverse situations. As a result the colonial cities of Latin America, whether in the jungles of Bolivia, the coastal desert of Chile, or the temperate highlands of Mexico, bear an unmistakable resemblance.

The Eight-Street Plaza

The laws required that plazas be rectangular, with a 2:3 ratio recommended. The plaza was to be the starting point for twelve streets: At the center of each side, a principal street was to begin (creating a "single-cross" pattern), and at each corner, two secondary streets were to begin.

This twelve-street model, however, was rarely employed. In most cases, the principal streets of Latin American cities leave plazas from the corners rather than the sides, resulting in an eight-street pattern. Streets that leave from the center of a

plaza's side are usually minor streets or through-block arcades, extending only a short distance from the plaza. The twelve-street model described in the laws may have been viewed as too elaborate for most settlements, and it may have been beyond the rudimentary surveying skills available at remote settlement sites.

Consequently, plazas are primarily entered and exited at the corners rather than along central axes, which fundamentally transforms the way they are seen and experienced. It also undermines the hierarchy of major and minor streets and creates a "double-cross" of parallel and perpendicular primary streets that pass along the edges of the plaza. Which streets emerge as the more important usually has been determined by factors away from the plaza, such as the presence of another important plaza or church, rather than by the geometry of the plan itself.

Mapa y Plan Orisontal que manifesta la Villa de Leon. Courtesy Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas, Austin, and the New York Public Library, Map Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden foundations.





Churches and Civic Buildings

The laws concerning the precise location of the principal church and its volumetric relationship to the plaza are vague, but they embody two concerns — protecting the space of the plaza and establishing the church's visual dominance — that establish a formal tension not addressed by the laws.

The laws state that “the church [shall] not be placed on the plaza, but at a distance” (notwithstanding the the common conception that the main church must be next to the plaza) — an instruction seemingly aimed at protecting the open space of the plaza while leaving some discretion as to the church's exact placement. The same ordinance also says the church “shall be separated from any other nearby building . . . and somewhat raised from ground level.” This is a clear mandate for the development of a church type that works as a freestanding object, visible “from all sides so it can be better decorated, thus acquiring more authority.”



119 For the temple of the principal church, parish, or monastery, there shall be assigned specific lots; the first after the streets and plazas have been laid out, and these shall be a complete block so as to avoid having other buildings nearby, unless it were for practical or ornamental reasons.

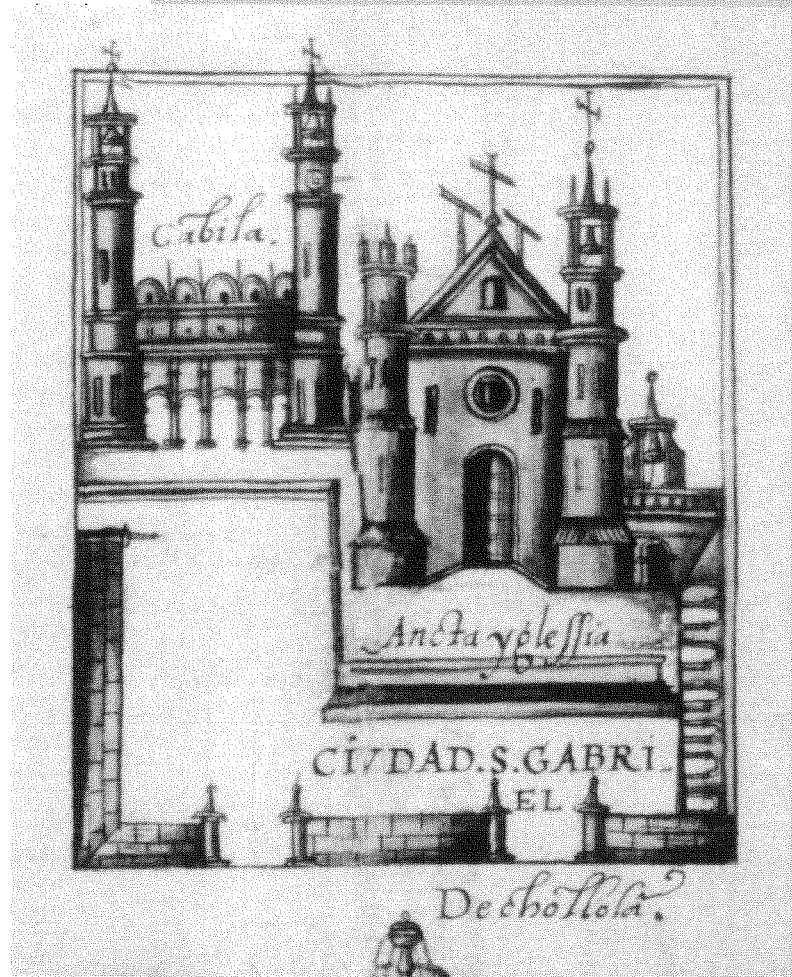
120 The temple of the cathedral [principal church] where the town is situated on the coast shall be built in part so that it may be seen on going out to sea and in a place where its buildings may serve as a means of defense for the port itself.

Should the figural space of the plaza dominate, with the church contributing one of its sides? Or should the church dominate the plaza, disengaged from all surrounding buildings like a monumental object? Most central plazas in Latin America manifest the struggle to resolve these competing imperatives, with the result that the church's legibility as object or edge often changes from one vantage point to another.

The ordinances concerning the location and expression of the civic buildings are less complex, requiring only that buildings to house the council and *cabildo* should be next to the plaza. The civic buildings are assigned neither a precise location around the plaza nor any particular architectural expression. In general, they have emerged as courtyard buildings whose surfaces define the plaza's edge.

The relationship of the principal church to municipal buildings is often competitive. While the architectural scale, massing and elaboration of the church usually make it the dominant element, the location of the municipal palace may challenge that primacy. In Lima and Vera Cruz, the *palacios* stand between the plaza and the waterfront, giving them a prominence that renders the church secondary by comparison. In Mexico City, the cathedral and National Palace occupy adjacent sides of the plaza, giving strong emphasis to the church but a close second to the palace.

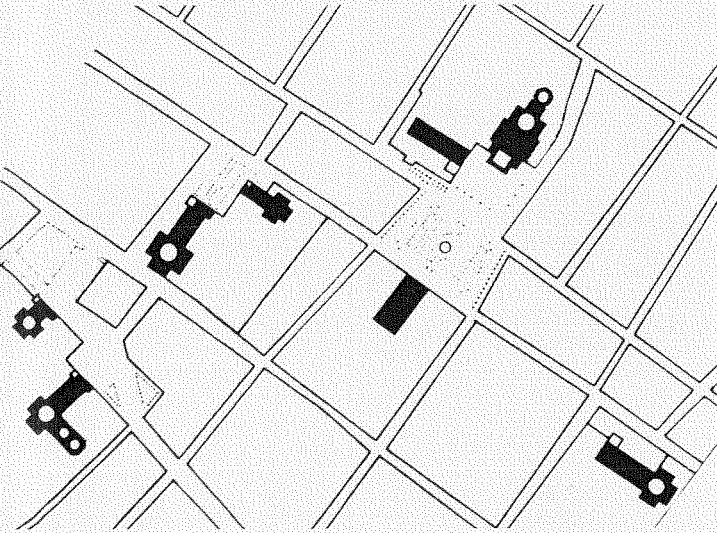
The complex and often tempestuous relationship of the Mexican government and the Catholic church is played out on the stages of the nation's principal plazas in a kind of choreography of spatial domination. In Guadalajara, the cathedral has been subjected to a monumental project of "disengagement" from its surroundings; it now stands at the intersection of an enormous spatial cross consisting of three small plazas at the head and sides and an elongated plaza below. The various government palaces are clearly secondary.



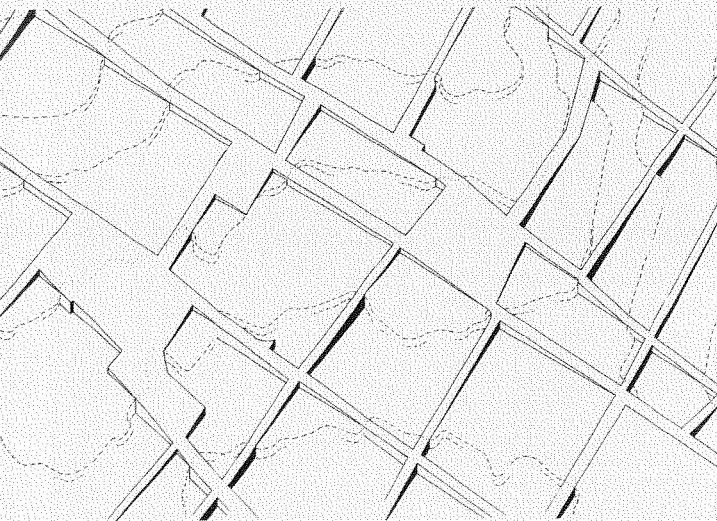
121 Next, a site and lot shall be assigned for the royal council and *cabildo* house and for the custom house and arsenal, near the temple, located in such a manner that in times of need the one may aid the other; the hospital for the poor and those sick of noncontagious diseases shall be built near the temple and its cloister; and the hospital for those with contagious diseases shall be built in such a way that no harmful wind blowing through it may cause harm to the rest of the town. If the latter be built in an elevated place, so much the better.

Opposite page, top: Morelia, © Douglas R. Suisman. Opposite page, bottom, plaza and cathedral in Guadalajara, courtesy Mexican Government Tourism Office. Above: Detail from map of Cholula, 1851. Courtesy Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, and the New York Public Library, Map Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden foundations.

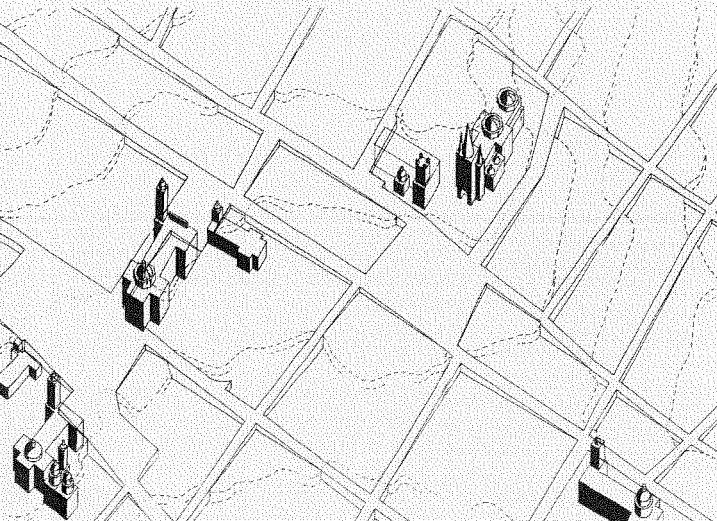
Central Morelia, plan view.



Central Morelia, axonometric view of topography.



Central Morelia, axonometric view of topography, including tower buildings.



Drawings © Douglas R. Suisman.

The Missing Dimension: Towers and Domes

The laws contained few clues as to the character of the architectural manifestations of its urban model, either in terms of building height, volumetric relationships, or visual connections. They provided only that buildings should be “all of one type, for the sake of the beauty of the town.”

In this respect the laws implicitly acknowledged that there is an operational gap between planning and urban design. One can trace a grid on the bare ground almost anywhere, but the resulting architectural expression will vary significantly depending on local conditions. Furthermore, even if Spanish authorities had wished to address this issue, they would have had very little experience from which to draw. Plazas of contemporaneous Spanish cities were usually little more than dusty intersections of major roads; they were rarely located in the geometrical center of the city or graced by its primary church.⁵ So the specific formal resolution of the urban framework established by the laws had to be worked out on an experimental basis in the field.

Towards the end of the sixteenth century, two architectural elements that were never mentioned in the laws began to appear in Mexican cities. Both were related to the construction of churches: the tower, imbedded into the front corner of the church; and the dome, surmounting the crossing of the nave and transept. Because of their height, plasticity and distinctive silhouettes, these two forms provided an unforgettable spatial correspondent to the grid-and-plaza plan.

Under the religious edict known as the Constitutions of Barcelona, church towers had been outlawed because they were viewed as extravagant. But in the Spanish tradition of *obedezco pero no cumpro* (“I obey but I don’t comply”), towers were soon found all over New Spain.⁶ One reason may have been the impulse to fortify churches, with towers providing protection. Another reason may have been the need to hang bells for calling congregations to prayer; by 1526 a foundry was turning out bells in Mexico City and it seems no town felt municipally complete without them. The simple, and ecclesiastically legal, method of supporting them was by raising the church gable above the roofline and piercing an arched opening for each bell, an arrangement known as an *espadaña*.

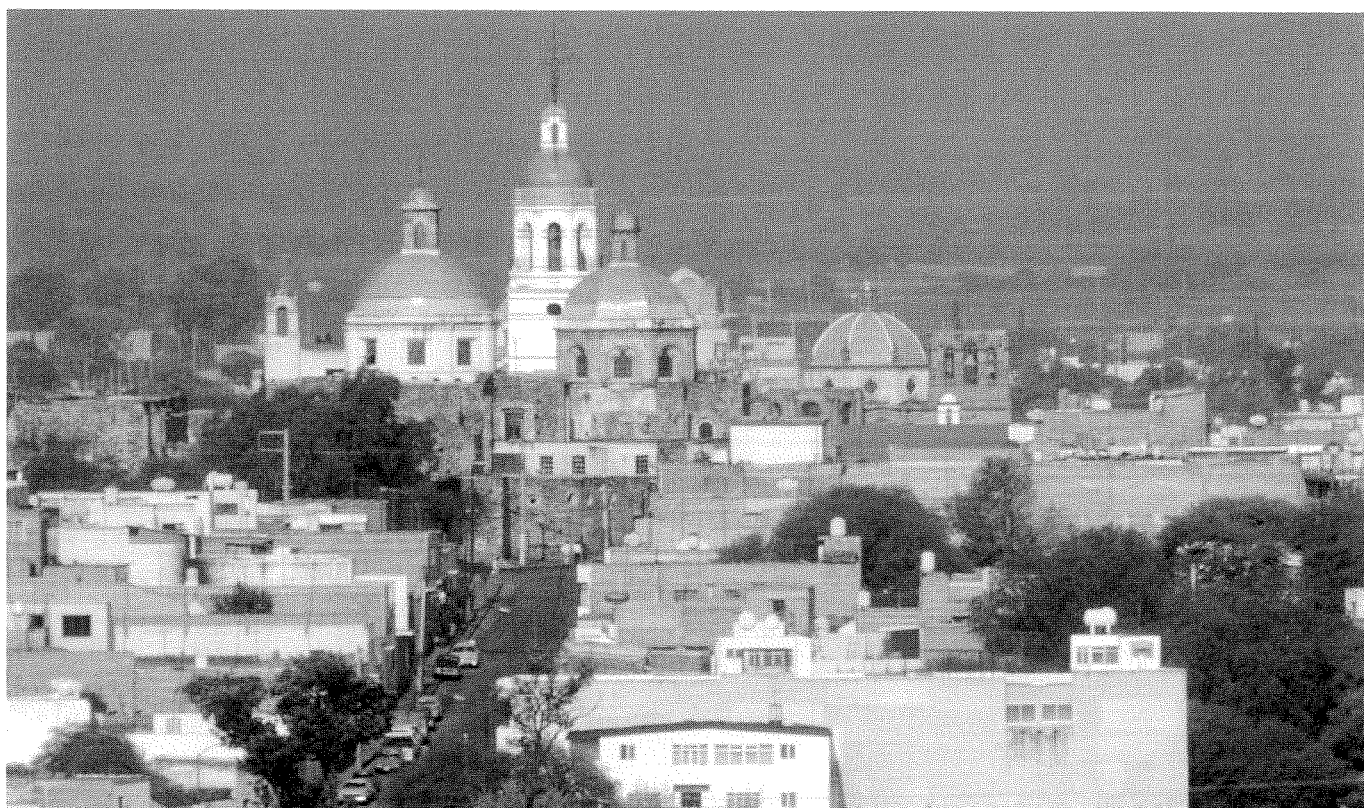
But the *espadaña* only slightly increased a church’s visibility, an issue that became increasingly important as rivalries between monastic orders increased. Since the grid plan virtually precluded a frontal approach to any church other than the one next to the main plaza, the majority of secondary churches were located at intersections, where they were more readily visible to pedestrians. Naturally, this visibility could be made

more commanding if the corner were articulated as an ecumenical skyscraper. Thus the most characteristic church massing in Mexico is not symmetrical towers flanking the entrance, but a single tower hugging the corners of the grid.

Mexico's infatuation with domes, it has been argued, was unleashed by the seventeenth-century emergence of the Baroque in Europe.⁷ The reductive mentality of colonial culture led to the proliferation of a single type, the hemispherical dome resting on an octagonal base, rather than an explosion of formal variety.⁸ Within this narrow expressive range, however, domes began to develop a mimetic relationship to the nearby towers. The upper levels of square-plan towers often became octagonal to serve as the base for miniature domes; while the major domes were frequently surmounted by cupolas that resembled miniature belltowers. The result is a characteristic Mexican colonial skyline with a flickering, almost festive quality. In many cities it achieves in spatial terms some of the exuberance usually reserved in Mexican culture for the ornamentation of two-dimensional surfaces.



Right: Morelia's main street, © Douglas R. Suisman. Below: Queretaro, Courtesy Mexican Government Tourism Office.



Morelia: The Plaza as Formal Network

Here, then, was a kit of parts for making civic space in colonial territories: street, block, gate, plaza, arcade, church, palace, market, tower, dome. This prescriptive method of town planning remained virtually unchallenged for three centuries. Although political stability eroded in late 1700s and the forces of industrialization came into play soon after, the cities of Spanish America could absorb these changes by expanding the urban pattern.

Only the overwhelming forces of international Americanism, decentralization and the automobile have managed to threaten the basic relationships established by the colonial kit of parts. Change has come more slowly to Mexico than to the U.S., but it is visible and more is on the horizon (the effects of a North American Free Trade Agreement, for example). Nonetheless, the tradition of Spanish colonial space-making is alive in Mexico today. Two case studies can illustrate not only the richness and variety of the centrifugal plaza plan, but also its durability as a formal structure and a cultural setting.

Morelia sits in relative isolation amid pine forests and volcanic mountains some 150 miles west of Mexico City. The state capital of Michoacan, it has many government workers, a large university population and nearly half a million residents. It is somewhat cut off from the country's major industrial and

shipping corridors, and its character is conservative, handsome, provincial and dignified.

Morelia demonstrates the capacity of the centrifugal plaza plan to generate a dynamic linear orientation. In plan, the city's street grid appears nearly perfect, with regular blocks and an archetypal plaza-and-cathedral structure in the center. What is not apparent from the plan is that the grid lays over a gentle, north-south ridge, and that the ridgeline is occupied by Morelia's main street, which also passes along one edge of the plaza.

Over time, the historic core has oriented itself toward the street. The cathedral originally faced the central plaza but was later reoriented to face the main street. A second plaza was created to the south of the original plaza, thereby reinforcing through symmetry the principal axis of the church and lending greater weight to the street. The state capitol was located across the street from the cathedral, not across the plaza from it. Along the main street, opposite the cathedral, are the city's most popular cafes, where people of all classes and professions gather.

This balance towards the linear dynamism of a main street rather than the more static centrality of a plaza reverberates throughout the core. Twelve streets radiate from the space around the cathedral (although not in the manner prescribed



Morelia's plazas, cathedral and main street. Courtesy Mexican Government Tourism Office.

by the Laws of the Indies), and they encounter at least five other religious complexes within two or three blocks. Almost all of these secondary churches and plazas (one of which serves as a market) are visually connected with glimpses of towers, domes, or portals. In other words, Morelia is a magnificent example of the capacity of an uninflected grid to evolve into a circuit of connected public spaces.

While the cathedral area is clearly the focus, there is a feeling of activity and connection throughout the core. Most people still buy their food at one of several neighborhood public markets. Churchgoers spill into the plazas after services. University students sit on fountains and talk between classes. Businessmen and politicians read newspapers while having their shoes shined in the public garden.

The city's natural conservatism, due in part to its isolation and its rich cultural history, has resulted in a strong sense of historic preservation. The built fabric is extremely well documented, and new buildings must be sympathetic to the older colonial structures (preferably by using the favored local stone, which has a distinctive rose hue). Within this beautiful and carefully preserved setting, Morelia's public life unfolds.

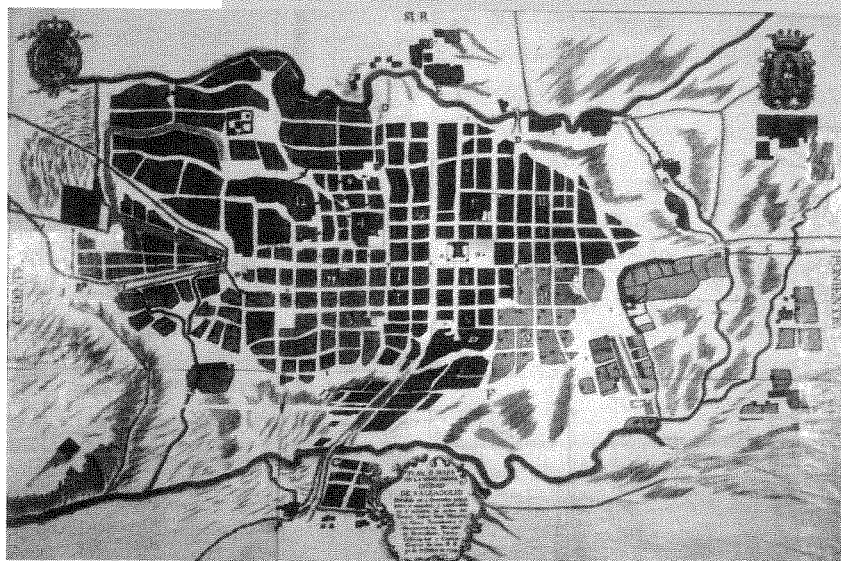
In recent years, the influence of American suburbanism has been felt. Some wealthier residents are leaving their single-story patio houses in the historic core for new, freestanding houses in gated compounds. This new housing on the outskirts is accompanied by a modern shopping mall, complete with department store and supermarket. A peripheral roadway, while hardly a California freeway, handles heavy traffic at high speeds with little concession to pedestrians. Clearly, these newer districts are geared towards owning an automobile.

Morelia also has seen an influx of professionals from Mexico City, seeking refuge from the traffic and environmental oppression of the capital. They bring a cosmopolitanism that may influence the pace of Morelia's social rituals and their locus in the historic core. For example, the state symphony hall is located in a freestanding cultural complex well outside the center, surrounded by a large parking lot. This setting makes the central plaza seem quaint and raises questions as to how well and how long the historic formal and social structure can withstand the constant televised pounding of "foreign" culture, from elsewhere in Mexico and abroad.

116 In cold places the streets shall be wide and in hot places narrow; but for purposes of defense in areas where there are horses, it would be better if they are wide.

117 The streets shall run from the main plaza in such manner that even if the town increases considerably in size, it will not result in some inconvenience that will make ugly what needed to be rebuilt, or endanger its defense or comfort.

118 Here and there in the town, smaller plazas of good proportion shall be laid out, where the temples associated with the principal church, the parish churches, and the monasteries can be built, [in] such [manner] that everything may be distributed in a good proportion for the instruction of religion.



Plan, O Mapa de la Nobilissima Ciudad de Valladolid [Morelia], 1794. Archivo General de la Nacion, Mexico. Courtesy New York Public Library, Map Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden foundations.

126 In the plaza, no lots shall be assigned to private individuals; instead, they shall be used for the buildings of the church and royal houses and for city use, but shops and houses for the merchants should be built first, to which all the settlers of the town shall contribute, and a moderate tax shall be imposed on goods so that these buildings may be built.

129 Within the town, a commons shall be delimited, large enough that although the population may experience a rapid expansion, there will always be sufficient space where the people may go to for recreation and take their cattle to pasture without them making any damage.

133 They shall arrange the building lots and edifices placed thereon in such a manner that when living in them they may enjoy the winds of the south and north as these are the best; throughout the town arrange the structures of the houses generally in such a way that they may serve as defense or barrier against those who may try to disturb or invade the town, and each house in particular shall be so built that they may keep therein their horses and work animals and shall have yards and corrals as large as possible for health and cleanliness.

134 They shall try as far as possible to have the buildings all of one type for the sake of the beauty of the town.

Oaxaca: The Plaza as Geographic and Social Landscape

Unlike Morelia, which is located on a ridge, Oaxaca sits on the lower slopes of a broad valley. While it rarely offers dramatic views of the valley floor, its uphill street views often terminate in the green, upland pastures of the valley wall.

These views are tepid compared to the dramatic views from Monte Alban, the famous pre-Columbian site that sits on a flattened hilltop in the center of the valley. Indeed, from the central plaza of Oaxaca, on its relatively level site and with its enormous trees, one is noticeably cut off from any visual connection to the larger landscape.

Oaxaca's real connection to its site is not the views one has of the surrounding landscape. Rather, it is through a kind of an urban respiration that reflects the location's benign climate. There is a fluidity of movement at all scales that results from the clear hierarchy of spaces and the unimpeded connections between them.

The valley acts as a big room with the hills as its walls. The streets of the city act as the connectors from the valley to the large, urban room of the plaza, whose walls are the surrounding blocks of buildings and their open *portales*. The *portales*, in turn, give way to courtyards, smaller outdoor rooms whose walls are the buildings themselves. Finally, the courtyard, by means of arcades, *portales*, verandas and terraces, give on to the few truly interior rooms. The rooms are, in effect, the city's cells, and are used mainly at night. Together, the valley, plaza, *portales*, courtyard and rooms comprise a fractal spatial organization, with each scale containing within it the structure of the next.

This relationship of rooms within rooms and the effortless means of transition between them constitutes a spatial language that is based on both a fluid pattern of urban activity and a climate that permits a weaving of indoors and outdoors. Along with this weaving comes a sense of spatial modulation, a gradation from the enclosed to the exposed, with rich variety and subtle transitions.

The purpose of doors is quite ambiguous and often has less to do with providing thermal enclosure than with establishing a social threshold. Many exterior doors and gates open onto other outdoor spaces, while the "roof" may be a canopy of trees; the most spectacular of these spaces is the plaza itself.

This weaving characteristic extends even to the use of color. There is a chromatic sympathy between the way Oaxacans live and the city's architecture: The people have a love of color, which can be found in the fruit and flowers, and in fabrics,



Oaxaca 1848 de Order del Exmo. Sr. Gobernador D. Benito Juarez. Courtesy Nettie Lee Benson Latin American Collection, University of Texas at Austin, and the New York Public Library, Map Division, Astor, Lenox and Tilden foundations.



Top: Plaza in San Luis Potosi.
Other photos from Morelia,
Oaxaca and San Luis Potosi.
Photos © Douglas R. Suisman.

ceramics and walls. There seems to be a flow of consciousness regarding ornamental surfaces, from embroidered dresses to the carved facades of churches.

The fluidity that is built into the architecture is reinforced at the urban scale by the system of streets and plazas, which encourages continuous movement and connection. There are, for example, almost no culs-de-sac in this indoor-outdoor continuum (with the notable exceptions of the church altar and the cemetery). The city itself fingers into the landscape without the transition of city walls or city gates.

More than in Morelia, with its balanced focus on street and plaza, the public life of Oaxaca spins around the main plaza in pinwheel formation. But the character of that public life has changed in recent years. For generations, the plaza had been the exclusive domain of the ruling elite. Farmers, vendors and workers were permitted to pass through or sell their wares at the market, but the government buildings and the *portales* were reserved for the *grandees*. The city's relative isolation meant that foreigners were few in number and did not tip the prevailing social order.

In the 1960s, Oaxaca became an important destination for the hippie movement. Young people, mostly from the U.S. and Canada, found that Oaxaca, with its temperate climate, slow pace, rich culture and isolation from mainstream tourism, was an ideal hangout, with the central plaza serving as ground zero.

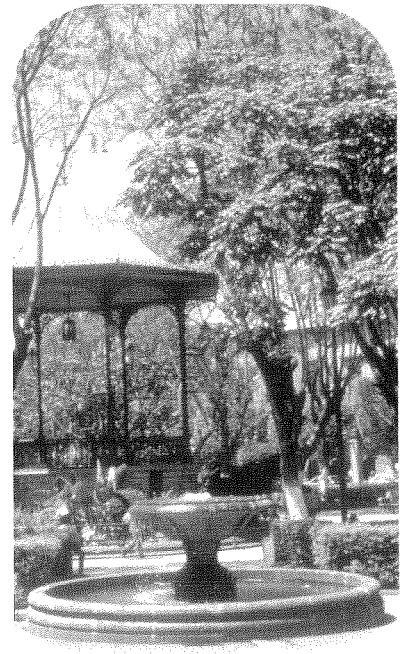
The arrival of the young foreigners precipitated a major change in the social geography of the plaza. Innocently ignorant of the prevailing social segregation, they took over the *portales*, the gardens and the cafes. Imbued with populist and leftist ideology, the visitors had a natural sympathy for the

workers and *campesinos*, to the point of emulating their dress of simple white cotton clothing and leather sandals. It must have been bewildering to conservative, hierarchical Oaxacans to observe this invasion by tall, long-haired, relatively affluent Anglos dressed like Mexican peasants. The effect of this latter-day "conquest" was, in effect, the social liberation of the plaza. All the residents of the city and the countryside began to view the plaza as their own.

Today the plaza has become a destination for family outings. On Saturdays and Sundays, it has the atmosphere of a festival. Early in the morning, the balloon and toy vendors arrive and set up their wares. The elite families now limit their presence on the plaza to Sunday afternoons, following their attendance en masse at the noon Sunday mass in the cathedral. They move into a single cafe at the northwest corner, reinforcing their class identity and reclaiming for a short period their dominating presence around the plaza.

The atmosphere in the plaza is one of extraordinary *laissez-faire*. There is little police presence; the plaza is self-policed: People behave well; they sit quietly, passively. Children, however, may run and scream. Throughout Mexico, it seems, there is an extreme love of children and a tolerance for their wildness through a certain age.

The children are street smart. They sit on walls and stand at streetcorners after school, in their crisp green uniforms. They're at home in public space. The city really is their playground, their backyard. Home provides a bedroom, a kitchen and dining room, maybe even a place to watch television. But the living room seems to be, for many people, the city.



Tides Across the Border

The creation of a hemisphere of cities for the purposes of empire has yielded, after half a millenium, an urban culture of remarkable power, durability, complexity and grace. But for so many Americans, this culture is seen in the periphery of our vision if it is noticed at all. Few of us have experienced Latino urbanism in operation on its home turf in Zacatecas or Arequipa or Cordoba, which means we barely recognize it when it shows up on our own streets. Greater familiarity with the sources of this urbanism in places like Morelia and Oaxaca (themselves shaped through the merger, albeit violent, of two cultures) would open our consciousness to new possibilities, new ways of imagining the American city.

When a Cuban-American businessman takes espresso in a parking lot along Calle Ocho in Miami, or when a woman from central Mexico carves mango into a floral sculpture on top of a little cart along Broadway in Los Angeles, their embrace of urban public space echoes with the rituals of the Latino New World. The crossing of Latino and (let us call it) Anglo urbanism produces riptides and a rich intertidal zone in which hybrid forms of urban occupation emerge.

The structures and rituals of the Spanish colonial settlements in Latin America can hardly be expected to reverse the deterioration of our cities. But they offer a bracing contrast to the articles of faith — functional segregation, retail agglomeration, suburban privacy and the automobile — that underlie the ongoing crisis of our cities. They remind us that the life and design of cities are still rooted in the most ordinary places, the most simple gestures — the basics of being human in a street, a park, or a plaza.

Notes

1. Leonardo Benevolo, *The Architecture of the Renaissance* (London: Westview, 1978). I am deeply indebted to Professor Benevolo who, during his visit to Columbia University in 1981, provided the inspiration, insight and encouragement for this research.
2. Dora P. Crouch, Daniel J. Garr and Axel I. Mundigo, *Spanish City Planning in North America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1982). I also am very much indebted to Professor Crouch, who permitted me to review her work while it was still in manuscript form, and who made helpful suggestions on the direction of my own work.
3. John Reps, *The Making of Urban America* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1965). Despite their significance, the laws were not translated into English (by Celia Nuttall) until 1921. This may partly explain the generally dim awareness of this urban legacy in the United States. In 1976 Crouch, Garr and Mundigo produced a new translation that corrected many flaws in the Nuttall version.
4. As an example of different views on whether the grid was predetermined, Eryvn Galantay, in his *New Towns: Antiquity to Present* (New York: Braziller, 1975), asserts that the laws prescribed a “regular checkerboard” and a “nine-square plan.”
5. George M. Foster, *Culture and Conquest: America's Spanish Heritage* (New York: 1960).
6. John McAndrew, *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).
7. Graziano Gasparini, “The Present Significance of the Architecture of the Past,” in Roberto Segre (ed.), *Latin America in its Architecture* (New York: 1981).
8. Gasparini.

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