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Review Essay

CRUISING THE PLAZAS

Flannery Burke

Two ideal storage places come to mind for *The Plazas of New Mexico*: one is a car and the other is a drafting table. The book is an amalgamation of history, cultural commentary, urban planning, and a travel atlas. The editors' charge to both explain the past and design a future makes for a large handsome book.

The volume contains stunning historical images and provocative photographs of everyday contemporaries engaged in work, play, and worship in plazas across New Mexico. The book is composed of four parts: "History," "Cultural Narratives," "Place Making," and "Communities, Plazas, Squares." It is this fourth section that makes the book an ideal travel companion.

Part 4 provides brief sketches of twenty-two plazas and town squares and the communities that sustain them. Upon opening the book, I flipped immediately to the section on Roy, a tiny northeastern New Mexico town founded in 1901 and, with 304 residents in the 2000 census, the largest in Harding County. As a child, I had visited family in Roy. "Why does anyone live here?" I thought during those trips. *The Plazas of New Mexico* answered my question. Inspired by word that the Dawson, El Paso and Southwestern Railroad was surveying a line nearby, Frank Roy founded the town. His

The Plazas of New Mexico. Edited by Chris Wilson and Stefanos Polyzoides, contemporary photography by Miguel Gandert. (San Antonio, Tex.: Trinity University Press, 2011. 338 pp. 25 color plates, 111 halftones, 106 line drawings, 159 maps, charts, appendix, notes, acknowledgments, figure credits, select bibliography, index. \$45.00 cloth, ISBN 978-1-5953-4083-2.) Flannery Burke is an associate professor of U.S. environmental and western history at Saint Louis University.

brother surveyed the town, following the pattern established by the railway line, which split the standard survey grid of the West, creating Roy's unique triangular plaza. The town flourished until the railroad stopped running and commerce began to flow instead on U.S. 85 and I-25, far off the path to Roy. Detailed local histories such as this act as a deep map. Reading it is like having an architectural historian and urban planner on hand as you pull up, park the car, and stop for a cold drink and some people-watching on a plaza bench.

The free-range roaming encouraged in part 4 is an excellent complement to the detailed historical and cultural analysis of the book's first two sections. Chris Wilson's essay in "History" lays out three distinct categories for New Mexico's plazas: ancestral Pueblo centers that serve as sacred space for Pueblo people; Spanish and Mexican plazas that typically correspond in part to the urban layout prescribed in the Law of the Indies; and Anglo frontier town squares that emerged from the late nineteenth-century combination of railroads, boosterism, and commercialism. Plenty of variations exist within each of these categories in the present. Not all of today's Pueblo plazas are as contained as they were at contact with Spanish colonizers, not all of today's plazas include a church on the plaza itself as indicated in the Law of the Indies, and not all of today's town squares are centers of commercial activity.

In addition each of the plazas' designs do not resemble one another as closely as a simplistic reading of the region's history might suggest, although the book does demonstrate some striking examples of mutual influence. Spanish plaza churches sometimes display a distinctive clerestory window, creating a parallel design to that of Pueblo kivas. Anglos sometimes grafted commercial activity and central monuments onto the plazas established by Spanish and Mexican communities. Also, all plazas, as a second essay by Mark Childs describes, have struggled with the pressures of automobile traffic and sprawl. As happy as I was to imagine my copy of *Plazas* nestled in my passenger seat, nothing has been more damaging than the automobile to the communities that once found camaraderie and civic identity in their plazas. Nonetheless, as Wilson and Childs carefully note, some plazas are healthy community and civic centers, and each one reflects its own unique social and environmental context.

Three of those contexts are beautifully described and analyzed in part 2: "Cultural Narratives." Don Usner takes us to Chimayó's Plaza del Cerro, a rural, rather than a municipal, plaza. Early colonists built the plaza to defend against raiding parties and planted the interior with vegetable plots. The exterior served as a local merchant hub until "the great quebrada, the break with

the past wrought by the one-two punch of the Great Depression and World War II” (p. 71). Since then, Chimayó’s plaza has fallen into disrepair. Locals are deeply divided over preservation, which might bring gentrifying tourists. The dangers of increased tourism are detailed in Sylvia Rodriguez’s essay on the town of Taos, where tourism has literally driven local interest in the plaza underground. An urban legend circulates that an ancient network of tunnels runs under the plaza. Aboveground, a series of structures—mostly businesses catering to tourists—have overrun sites of importance to Pueblo and Hispanic peoples, who now only frequent the plaza for the annual Fiesta. This causes locals to question the fight for a stake in places so easily overrun by tourists and cars. Rina Swentzell’s “Bupingeh: The Middle-Heart-Place” gives us a clue into this mindset. Swentzell’s essay is a love letter to her hometown Santa Clara plaza, or *bupingeh*. The bupingeh serves as the container for the *nansipu*, the place of emergence for Pueblo peoples, the center of their cosmos. Swentzell explains how the bupingeh reminds humans of their place in the universe and in the natural world. She ends by recalling a time when her great-grandmother insisted that she sweep the entire bupingeh. “The world stopped: there were no people, only me and the bupingeh. I was at the center, where life began and continues—and I was taking care of it” (p. 67).

In part 3, “Place Making,” urban designers Stefanos Polyzoides, Chris Calott, and Meghan Bayer provide suggestions for how all southwesterners can take care of their plazas and maintain, revive, or possibly even create something akin to the sense of place that Swentzell describes. To this historian, such conscientious suggestions for the future were refreshingly optimistic. Polyzoides recommends that Pueblo communities stay the course and continue to limit tourist and automobile access to Pueblo plazas (p. 106). Hispanic plazas require development that “should be anticipated and controlled” while Anglo town squares require urgent reconstruction to limit sprawl and bring coherence to dissipating communities (p. 107).

Whether New Mexican communities can achieve such a careful balancing act between promoting development and controlling gentrification is unclear. Calott and Bayer outline some success stories: the Monticello Plaza Plan and the Doña Ana Plaza Plan, which both included significant community input that resulted in designs meant to foster community and civic togetherness. They also note some missed opportunities, particularly the original Santa Fe Railyard’s Master Plan by Ehrenkrantz and Eckstut Architects designed to create a denser and more community-focused civic space. Indeed, if there is a villain in the book, it is the Anglo gentrification summed up in the word, “Santafeication” (p. 73). Particularly important for these places is answering

how the towns should revive Hispanic plazas and Anglo town squares without introducing the taint of outside money. The answer to that question will not be an easy one to find, but New Mexicans will be better prepared to tackle it now that they have *The Plazas of New Mexico* as a resource.