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*On the plaza: The politics of public space and culture.*  
Setha M. Low.  
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274 pp., illus.

How do culture and politics shape public space, and how does space enact, encode, and reshape society's values in general, and those of Latin American cities in particular? How can this relationship between space and culture be theorized? How can our understanding and interpretation of this dialogic and dialectic relationship be enhanced, through the interweaving of various kinds of narratives, histories, and ethnographies? Setha Low satisfactorily and enjoyably engages these research questions in her book, through the historical and contemporary study of two plazas in San José, Costa Rica, with comparisons to other urban spaces in different cultural geographies and histories. The synthesis of the Costa Rican politics of public space and culture that Low provides in this book portrays Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura in San José as emblematic public spaces that embody "political ideals within a particular cultural milieu," and as essential to everyday civic life and the maintenance of a participatory democracy" (p.xiv). Although this review I expresses certain critiques to the book, Low's multifaceted, ambitious work is highly valuable in that it actually achieves what it sets forth to

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accomplish: the spatialization of culture, i.e. the integration of "the social production of the built environment with the daily routines and ceremonial rituals of the cultural realm and the phenomenological experience of individuals" (p.36).

The book is divided into four parts. In Part I, Introduction, Low presents ethnographic field notes on the two plazas of San José. Even while recognizing her intent to immerse the reader in the ambiance of the plazas right from the start of the book, Low's choice caused me some discomfort. For an author who claims the use of a multidisciplinary approach for the study of the urban environment that bridges methodologies traditionally perceived as pertaining to a particular field, the decision to open the book with her own ethnographic field notes in a chapter she calls Introduction, seems to me an overly conventional, straightforward anthropological approach that somehow may run the risk of defeating the purpose of reaching out to a broader audience.

In Part II, Histories, Low expresses the fact that ethnohistorical materials on the

origins of the Latin American plaza have traditionally been Eurocentric conceptions that privileged Europeans and overlooked Indigenous precedents. Thus, she stresses that the interpretation of these public spaces derives, not only from the analysis of the actual spaces, but also in a significant way, from the power embedded in the writing of history. Although the varied origins of plazas in Latin America in general is clearly established as encompassing both European and Indigenous precedents, it is not as clear how these different precedents distinctly influenced the conception and transformation of the two Costa Rican plazas studied.

When Low looks into the origins of the Latin American plaza, she looks to Europe and Pre-Columbian America. Yet, when she asks what the potential future of the Costa Rican plaza would be, she does not seem to rely sufficiently on the agency of the locals. She only points out the possibility of the plazas becoming like the American public spaces, however "emblematic of social conflict" they may be (p. 153)-Tompkins Square in New York or People's Park in Berkeley, for instance.



Notwithstanding the relevance of the other parts of the book to Low's overall research endeavor, Part III, *Ethnographies*, is by far the most valuable of the book, in my consideration. Only there does Low engage theory, by using the spatialization of culture as an analytical framework and method. By 'spatialize' Low means "to locate-physically, historically, and conceptually-social relations and social practice in space" (Ch.6, p. 127). The three chapters that compose Part III, dealing with the subjects of spatializing culture, constructing difference, and public space and protest (the plaza as art and commodity), provide the most critical contribution to the understanding of the role of the politics of public space in the culture-specific participatory democracy of Costa Rica. Low touches upon many important factors that interplay in the social production/construction of space, encompassing great breadth, but failing to provide sufficient depth when she moves precipitously to Part IV, in an unnecessary attempt to provide equal length to each part of the book.

For instance, more analysis from the physical design point of view—architecturally and urbanistically—of both the plaza and its immediate surroundings—the definers of the plazas' three-dimensional space would have better complemented the multiperspective approach that could fully answer Low's research questions. Besides, I would have benefited, earlier in the book, from the knowledge of what the spaces look like—their physical form,

in order to be able to create a spatial image of them, and then get to know how they were used and perceived. This information is offered only halfway through the book (in Part III, Ch. 6), where Low provides a physical description of the places as she explains their social production-factors that result in the physical creation of the plazas—and social construction—the phenomenological and symbolic experiences of the spaces. Another issue that is not fully engaged in Part III is how the national and international transformations of the political economy at the moment of the creation of the plazas resulted in their radically different designs. In the same manner, it would have been very enlightening to unveil in greater detail the architectural and urban planning ideas and ideals that existed at the time of the design of those plazas that resulted in their distinct spatial conceptions.

Finally, in Part IV, *Conversations*, Low aggregates literary, conversational and personal narratives in an attempt to provide multilocal and multivocal perspectives on the experience and representation of the spaces of the plazas. Although the inclusion of other voices is a commendable effort in order to provide "a more unmediated experience of being in the plaza than is possible in an ethnography" (p.206), Low should acknowledge that the "ever present voice of the ethnographer and author" in historical and ethnographic work is also present, however more discretely, through the selection of

texts (excerpts of literary accounts and interviews) included in Part IV.

In her conclusions in Chapter 11, Low coincides with the analyses about the impact of globalization upon places, as presented mainly by Manuel Castells (1989, 1996), Sharon Zukin (1991), and Saskia Sassen (1991). She stresses, however, "a counter social force called vernacularization: the process by which the global is made local through the attribution of meaning. These local spatial/cultural spaces provide the emotional and symbolic bases for maintaining cultural identity." Low further adds that the vernacularization of urban space is "a powerful and important corrective to globalization processes" (p.244). Although the intent is a much-needed reassertion of the power of (local) place in the global dynamic, Low's definition of vernacularization is still problematic. For instance, the attribution of meaning is an on-going process; therefore, cultural identity cannot be 'maintained', as it is always in flux. Vernacularization thus may be best understood as part of the process of cultural globalization, i.e., not a corrective to globalization processes, but rather a very important aspect of them. A different term that may best express this complex and as yet—not—fully—understood relationship between the local and the global environments is glocalization (the word entered the Oxford Dictionary of New Words in 1991. See for instance, the discussion of the term in *Postmetropolis:*

*Critical Studies of Cities and Regions*, by Edward Soja, 2000).

Although the book concedes that the public plazas in Costa Rica provide a rich stage for the negotiation of larger conflicts produced by the growing influences of globalization, tourism, and the individual and social struggles for the definition of cultural identity it fails to provide a thorough critical analysis of how the first two factors impact the third. The ongoing changes produced by globalization and tourism have had an unprecedented catalytic effect on the transformations of Latin American public spaces. Have the Costa Rican plazas really resisted commodification, or slowed its pace, as Low suggests (pp.35-6)? Low's analysis (in Ch. 8) seems to show that despite all the social contestations, the plazas are becoming places of commerce and consumption, as well as instruments of state-controlled representations and myth-making, just as many public spaces in the U.S. Recognizing the increasing commodification of public spaces and the role of representing places in the Costa Rican context-events that are also happening elsewhere—Low is too quick to assert that "the meeting place of the past has become the marketplace of the future, where the goods that are exchanged are representations of the nation and city, and the creation of public space has become part of the imagineering of a city" (p. 197). To be sure, plazas have not ceased to be meeting places, and they have a long history as marketplaces. Moreover,



they have always been representations of ideal notions of nation and/or culture, by dominant social powers, as testified by the historiography of their transformations. What has changed is the intensity and pace of these phenomena, due to the postmodern, global condition of time-space compression.

In addition, the current processes of deterritorialization/reterritorialization of Costa Rican society, identified by Low, testify to the ongoing processes of transformation of the plazas and provide elements for further analysis of the politics of public space and culture. For instance, with the retreat of the upper and middle classes to the suburbs and the abandonment of the plazas to the lower-income classes, how do issues of use, perceptions of and actual crime, and government maintenance of the plazas change?

What are the new spaces for socializing that the rest of Josefinos use? Are they shopping centers? Are they non-existent? How is this similar to other Latin American or even other first-world cities? These are some of the research questions prompted by the book. Even more critical are questions that Low leaves totally open, for instance, "is the availability of public space a precondition for any kind of democratic politics? Is the threat to public space actually a threat, to democracy?" Low claims that she addresses these issues in her current work ("Urban Fear: Building the Fortress City." *City and Society*, Annual Review: 53-72).

It is clear how Low's analysis leads her to conclude that "vital public spaces are at risk and have been vulnerable to the political gaze and pressures of privatization" (p. 246). Where I do not see her work leading, however, is to her assertion that the power of computer communication technologies is an equal threat to the survival of these sites of social interaction: actually, a number of studies have demystified this vision, at least for our current reality and immediate future. This claim is not in any way derived from her study and should not be brought up as part of the conclusion of the book. Inexplicably abandoning the actual theme of her book right at the end, Low fails to oppose her advocacy for "an obligation to protect, preserve, and fight for public spaces against the hegemonies of political, cultural, and commercial powers enacted at the local, national, and global scales, favoring instead an unsubstantiated opposition—by her analysis—to a "placeless, international city" (using Castells' concepts). The publication of Low's book seems to have been delayed, to its detriment. Doing field research over decades actually works as a double-edged sword: while this extent of time allowed for the use of multiple methods in the exploration of the plazas and the investigation of them over time, it also allowed for the major findings of the study to be filtered out before the publication of the book, in fact, mainly revealed by Low's own previous publications, in particular, *Indigenous Architecture and the Spanish American Plaza in Mesoamerica and the*

*Caribbean*" (*American Anthropologist* 97, 1995); and "Spatializing Culture: The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space in Costa Rica" (*American Ethnologist* 23, 1996). In this way, what could have been critical contributions, such as the demystification of the exclusively European origin of the Latin American plaza, have somewhat lost their force for the people that were already familiar with Low's previous work.

Regarding methodology, it was certainly the case that when Low started her research on Costa Rican plazas (in 1972), the study and representation of public space was compartmentalized into the different disciplines that concerned themselves with the subject—anthropology, environmental psychology, architecture, urban design and planning, etc. In her book, however, Low explains that addressing her research questions required the integration of "architectural, archaeological, historical, ethnographic, and phenomenological materials," and she consequently does so. Nowadays, it is considered state of the art in the social sciences to have a multi-layered methodological approach and an analytical framework. Poststructural and postmodernist perspectives on race, class, and gender in the urban context have growing influence in the reshaping of questions and modes of cultural/spatial research, even when these remain embedded in frameworks of modernist critical theory. Therefore, Low is not doing anything new in this sense, but engaging

an ever more frequent eclectic research approach in critical cultural studies.

Despite the aforementioned critiques, *On the Plaza: The Politics of Public Space and Culture* is an extremely useful pedagogical work, which goes into great detail to explain and flesh out both the application and the results of all the methodological and analytical approaches used to investigate the social production and construction of space in the two Costa Rican plazas studied. With the increasing interrelation of humanities and social sciences disciplines, this book is highly recommended for research methodologies and analytical courses in a wide spectrum of disciplines that seek to understand the interplay of space and culture. Furthermore, at a time when both the Hispanic population and academic interest in Latin American studies are growing in the United States, this book is a much-needed addition to the too-scarce literature on the subject of Latin American culture in space, firmly establishing the syncretic nature of cultures, physical designs, and socio-political meanings of public places in Latin America.