

## PREFACE



This book documents a personal journey to uncover the cultural and political significance of public space by focusing on the design and meaning of the plaza in a contemporary Latin American city. It encompasses a search for the architectural origins of the Spanish American plaza and the ethnohistorical meanings embedded in its urban location and spatial form. It includes an ethnographic analysis of the historical, political, and sociocultural context of the development of two plazas in San José, the capital of Costa Rica, and the meanings generated by their social production of space. First-person narratives and ethnographies present what people are thinking and doing in these public spaces, and what they say about the meaning of the plaza in their everyday lives. When confronted with losing their occupied places on the plaza, people talk about the meaning of such a loss and about their struggle to maintain their daily activities in other locations or at the edges of the redesigned form.

Another representation of meanings are poems and excerpts from novels and memoirs by Costa Rican authors who write about life in urban plazas. Some of the literary reflections portray San José in the early 1900s, capturing the ambience and meaning of the plaza in earlier historical periods. Other selections are contemporary, representing a diversity of perspectives on everyday plaza life and describing Costa Rican social dramas in the public spaces of the city center.

Based on data collected during twenty-five years of fieldwork in Costa

Rica that began in 1972 when I was an anthropology student there, this study traces changes in my perceptions and understandings of Costa Rican culture and the plazas of San José. During this quarter of a century, cultural anthropology and environmental psychology have been enriched by theorists who are concerned with the importance of space in social analysis, while, correspondingly, architects, landscape architects, and urban planners have turned their attention to social relations and cultural aspects of design.

I have written this book as part of this new synthesis, adding my own interpretations of what I observed, theories of the processes I document, and methods for the ethnographic study of the built environment. These theories of the social production and social construction of space; social and spatial boundaries of culture, class, and gender; and state responses to protest by closing, policing, and redesigning of public places further our understanding of the politics of public space. I conclude that these culturally and politically charged public spaces are essential to everyday civic life and the maintenance of a participatory democracy. The specific example of the Costa Rican plaza illustrates how urban public space embodies political ideals within a particular cultural milieu, and helps to explain why plazas arbitrarily located in North American cultural contexts are often not successful as socially or politically vibrant places.

There are a number of questions, however, that this analysis can not fully answer. For instance, is the availability of public space a precondition for any kind of democratic politics? What are the middle-range connections between the theories of the social production of space and the raw ethnographies? Is the threat to public space actually a threat to democracy? I address these issues in my current work on urban fear and the built environment, which focuses explicitly on the sociopolitical dimensions of public space and communities of exclusion (Low 1997a).

I begin this journey by taking the reader directly to Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura in San José, Costa Rica, just as I arrived in February 1985 to begin the plaza study. Through a selection of field notes representing my experience during each subsequent field visit, I situate the reader in the ethnographic present of the field study. As a Costa Rican specialist who was initially unfamiliar with plaza life, my observations provide an interesting first-hand glimpse of these important public places. In my field notes I write as a “thirty-something,” English-speaking woman from the United States, but also as an ethnog-

rapher with many years of anthropological training. I am confident that the reader can identify with my surprise of discovery, physical discomfort, social awkwardness, and pleasure in renewed acquaintances as I returned time and again over the next twelve years.

These notes also reflect how my experiences might be different from the readers' everyday experiences in that I am continuously comparing and theorizing what I observe. Thus, this account also communicates the phenomenological experience of being in the plaza from my privileged as well as professional point of view. In subsequent chapters, I retrace my steps by presenting a more formal historical and ethnographic analysis of the Latin American plaza in general, and of the development of the Costa Rican plaza in particular, punctuated with excerpts from Costa Rican memoirs, novels, and short stories that provide the data for my interpretations. I conclude with conversations from Costa Rican literature, with friends and colleagues, and finally with the readers about everyday life and meaning in this exemplar of urban public space.

*Setha Low*  
*East Hampton, New York*  
*1999*

