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The Central Plaza: Urban Open Space in Two Colonial Cities

Introduction

Who we are, and where we are from, has a profound effect on how we experience open space. Like other students native to the Americas, I found myself inclined to look for inspiration in other European countries such as Germany or the Netherlands, ignoring the richness of my own cultural and historical heritage. As a Colombian, my aim is to explore the rich spatial qualities of the central plaza in two colonial cities in my homeland using the techniques presented in the books “The Social life of Small Urban Spaces” by William Whyte, and “A Pattern Language” by Christopher Alexander.

Myself

Twenty-five years ago I was born in Barranquilla, a small city located on Colombia’s Caribbean coast. In 2004, when I was fifteen, my family moved to the United States. This move to the United States at such an early age has helped me assimilate to the culture rather well, but at the same time has created a blurred identity of sorts, where I am able to identify with both cultures rather well, but I am neither of them to a full extent.

When I began to consider Colombia as a destination, one of my 7th grade teachers from back home came to mind. His advice was to explore one’s own country first, and then venture out into the world. Within the past ten years since my arrival to the United States, I have been to numerous states and cities, and have gained a clearer understanding of space, and awareness of culture. My travels in the United States have taken me as far west as California, and through the majority of the states on the east coast. In 2012, I transferred into Rutgers University where I am currently a junior in the Landscape Architecture program. This academic pursuit has helped me develop a keen understanding of design of open spaces within different contexts- In the summer of 2013, I participated in the Germany Study Abroad program after receiving a full study abroad scholarship from the School of Environmental and Biological Sciences (SEBS). In Germany, our class visited 5 cities, and gained outstanding knowledge that no in-class studio could ever teach. From there I went to Spain where I stayed another month and did more exploring of my own. I realized that learning about landscapes and their functionalities solely upon lectures, and not experiencing the landscapes themselves, is like learning how to paint without a canvas, brushes, and paints. For this reason, and after having gained some experience, I absolutely agree that, “Travel experience is perhaps one of the most valuable tools available to a designer.” (Roy H. DeBoer Travel Prize)

Why I Chose my Destination

I suddenly realized that I have experienced plazas in all these other countries, and have done so with my Landscape Architecture goggles on, but have not had the chance to go back to Colombia and analyze these open spaces with the knowledge I currently possess. T. S. Eliot once said:

“We shall not cease from exploration, and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time.”

It is important for me as a designer in the making to return to the place where I started, for I need to know where I come from to get rid of this identity gap between who I am because of my background and heritage, and who I am because of where I live. This is why I have chosen to go back to Colombia.

What is a 'Central Plaza'?

Researching the topic of central plazas and their importance to colonial cities has led me to find that these main plazas were (and still are) an important cultural center, and that their development followed a particular model. The following excerpt from Linda Greenow's paper "URBAN FORM IN SPANISH AMERICAN COLONIAL CITIES: CARTAGENA DE INDIAS, NEW GRANADA, IN 1777" goes into further details about the physical characteristics of these colonial plazas:

The traditional model of the Spanish American colonial city emphasizes the significance of a central plaza surrounded by buildings, people and economic activities of the highest status. The principal church, civil administrative offices, and homes and businesses of the wealthiest elite were concentrated on or near this central plaza. Residents and land uses of lesser social and economic status were found with increasing distance from the central plaza.

Central Plazas: Case Studies

1. Plaza de la Proclamacion, Cartagena



My first case study choice is Plaza de la Proclamacion in Cartagena. My research on the plaza has led me to find many uses other than a congregation of people coming out of mass on Sunday. Here are some pictures to show a few examples of the different activities that occur at this location:



2. Plaza de la Catedral de Santa Marta, Santa Marta



My Methods (exploration)

1. Begin by identifying the central plaza spaces of Spanish colonial origin: Plaza de la Proclamacion, Cartagena de Indias and Plaza de la Catedral de Santa Marta. Followed by documented observations regarding original function and change of use over time (done before trip).
 - Identify history, original structures, and their use.
 - What is the current use?
2. Perform a site inventory and analysis including:
 - Plantings
 - Seating
 - Lights
 - Other Structures
 - Views
 - Circulation
3. People watch /sketch and map usage / interview local plaza users (vendors, passerby...). The data collected here will be used to determine program and function of the site within a cultural context.
 - Anecdotal experiences gathered from locals will add cultural richness and aid in my own understanding of the identity of central plaza.
4. Compare and contrast patterns from Christopher Alexander's "A Pattern Language" with topics from William Whyte's book "The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces", and determine whether the plazas in the case studies adhere to these fairly contemporary concepts and if so, are they successful spaces?
 - Paths
 - Nodes
 - Sun/Shade
 - Water
 - Seating
 - Streets

My Goals

- To understand the cultural and historical connections between the old central plaza and its current use.
- To understand how, and why open spaces that were established over 300 years ago are still successful. Are they successful?
 - Do these plazas follow Christopher Alexander's, or William Whyte's recipe of a successful open space?
- To be able to provide clarity of my own cultural heritage gained through the understanding and observation of people and the sense of place.
- To expand my vision as a designer by learning from cultural landscapes.

My Budget

- **Airfare***** - \$1300.00 Round-trip (Unfortunately August is high season, and I plan to take a summer internship from the end of May until the end of July)
- **Food** - \$200.00 (This is about \$12 a day for the days I will be traveling to my case study sites, other than that I will be eating at my grandparents' home)
- **Transportation** - \$200.00 for entire stay (this include transportation within cities, and travel between cities.)
- **Lodging** - \$300.00 (for lodging accommodations between August 11-18 and 19-25. The rest of the time I will be in Barranquilla at my grandparents')
- **Prints** - \$100.00 (These prints are the large panoramas for my exhibition)
- **TOTAL:** \$2100.00

Itinerary

- **August 1, 2014 – Fly to Barranquilla, Colombia**
- **August 4, 2014 –** Visit Universidad Autonoma del Caribe's School of Architecture and talk about open spaces, mainly the ones of my case studies.
- **August 8,** Visit the Geographic Institute Agustín Codazzi and request information regarding maps, and cadastral surveys
- **August 11-18-** Travel to Cartagena for the first case study. This visit will be over the course of the weekend to understand the plaza's usage after mass on Sundays.
 - Methods 1-4 will be distributed evenly among the days.
 - Visit a public library, or other archives to obtain old photographs of the plaza to understand past use.
- **August 19-25** - Travel to Santa Marta for the second case study. This visit will be over the course of the weekend to understand the plaza's usage after mass on Sundays.
 - Methods 1-4 will be distributed evenly among the days.

- **August 28 – Fly back to the United States**

Deliverables

- An exhibition showcasing two high-resolution experiential panoramas or pano-graphies, providing a 360 degree view of the central plazas presented in my proposal. Sizes of the pictures will be around 3 feet tall and as wide as need be complete the 360 degree view. The panoramas will be annotated to highlight patterns and social elements as expressed by Alexander and Whyte.
- A blog that will be updated twice a week. This blog will contain pictures, personal accounts, interviews of people using the plazas like vendors and such, as well as other interesting findings along the way.
 - This blog will be connected to social media, such as blogspot.
- A journal of sketches, quick drawings, notes, and thoughts recounting my experiences.
- A presentation that will explain my research, its methods and discoveries, as well as incorporate additional deliverables.

Resources

- Alexander, Christopher, “A Pattern Language”
- Greenow, Linda, “URBAN FORM IN SPANISH AMERICAN COLONIAL CITIES: CARTAGENA DE INDIAS, NEW GRANADA, IN 1777”
- Whyte, William, “The Social Life of the Small Urban Spaces”

Other Resources

- Visit to Universidad Autonoma del Caribe School of Architecture.
- Public libraries for old archived pictures of the plazas, and other records.
- Geographic Institute Agustín Codazzi – Visit them to request maps and cadastral surveys of towns of my case studies.
- Jackson, John Brinckerhoff, “A Sense of Place, a Sense of Time”