

Book Review: Plazas and Barrios: Heritage Tourism and Globalization in the Latin American Centro Histórico

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Joseph L. Scarpaci, *Plazas and Barrios: Heritage Tourism and Globalization in the Latin American Centro Histórico*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 2005. 267 pp. \$45.00 (cloth).

Plazas and Barrios: Heritage Tourism and Globalization in the Latin American Centro Histórico is designed around the idea of competing social, political, and economic forces at work in the plazas and surrounding neighborhoods of historic cities in Mexico, Cuba, Colombia, Ecuador, Uruguay and Argentina. Six of the nine cities researched are designated world heritage sites by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) because of their unique beauty and historic significance. Extensive field work over a period of more than ten years provided the basis for discussing past and present urban morphology of historic districts in Spanish speaking Latin America. Scarpaci, a geography professor at Virginia Polytechnic Institute, prefaces his book with a description of his decades of teaching and research experiences in the Caribbean, Mexico, Central and South America. Well qualified to interpret the built heritage of Latin American cities, Scarpaci intends his book to be of interest to professionals and generalists alike.

The strength of this book lies in the tensions of a vertically integrated and multi-scalar approach. The vertically integrated perspective reveals the mutual and contrary goals of multiple parties involved in heritage preservation and tourism: international agencies, national and local government, residents, tourists, private enterprise, and non-governmental organizations (NGO's). The multi-scalar approach provides differing layers of analysis, offering the reader a broad overview as well as a detailed look down the streets, through the doorways, and, in some cases, into individual buildings. All nine cities were studied and compared with regard to historical context, land use, building quality, skylines and social constructions. Cartagena, Havana and Trinidad received additional in-depth analysis. These detailed case studies enhance overall quality of the book and provide insights not otherwise possible.

Scarpaci begins by setting heritage tourism in the context of the international tourism industry and the milieu of social, economic and political forces. He explains the difficulties of funding historic preservation in the face of more pressing public needs such as schools, transportation and other urban infrastructure. Likewise, as owners moved to the suburbs, renters became the norm in many historic city

centers, typically spending less on building maintenance than the owner-residents of the past. The question arises as to who should be responsible for the preservation and maintenance of historic buildings and neighborhoods. Confounding the problem, historic districts do not only include the built environment. "Rather, historic districts include non-material culture such as the people, their lifestyles and traditions, productive activities, beliefs, and urban rituals (saints' days, founder's days, pre-Lenten carnivals)" (p. 10). These districts are dynamic and evolving. They cannot be stopped in time like museum objects.

To further complicate matters, "...the evidence is clear: those who live in the historic quarters must articulate their needs in a policy arena that is increasingly dominated by international capital" (p. 26). While national and local governments are promoting heritage tourism, little or nothing is being done to enhance or maintain the quality of residential buildings. In reality many ancient buildings suffer from poor maintenance as well as weather and earthquake related damage. Diesel fumes of buses and gasoline fumes of taxis pollute the air and damage building exteriors. Architectural landscapes in many cities are further contaminated by the tangle of electrical lines and uncontrolled signage. Scarpaci concludes his first chapter by explaining that the purpose of the book is to explore "how heritage tourism and globalization reshape the Latin American historic district" (p. 32). He uses an approach that studies place as contemporary as well as historic, that looks for social meaning in urban landscapes, and that uses diverse methods to extract layers of information in urban historic districts. A summary attribute table and an overview map of city locations are provided.

Chapter 2 combines literature review, maps, drawings, photographs and anecdotal interviews to convey the historic geography of the Spanish American *centro histórico*. Authoritative Spanish colonial architecture surrounds plazas in the cities studied. The planned size and direction of the plazas foretold the subsequent size and direction of the surrounding grid pattern of streets. A fascinating page of street plans for each of the nine *centros históricos* is provided (p. 46). All plans refer to the same scale, thereby offering a comparison of overall size of each *centro histórico* as well as street and block size within. Unfortunately subsequent individual maps in this chapter either lack scale altogether or have a different scale relative to the street plan than the initial group of maps. This makes it difficult to know which, if either, is correct. Likewise there is a contradiction between the historic 1894 topographic plan for Barrio La

Candelaria in Bogotá showing the grid at approximately 45 degrees from north compared with the urban morphology plat of 2002 for the same area with a grid pattern of streets running north to south. Similar technical difficulties seem to plague this chapter that otherwise is filled with interesting details of past and present design of each historic center. Historical context of settlement patterns and economy as well as a contemporary overview of planning issues is provided. Of note, the existence of central business districts (CBD's) geographically some distance from the *centros históricos* helped to preserve the cultural heritage of the latter. Photos elucidate twentieth century design and planning issues of the *centros históricos*.

One potential problem with this research is sample-size. When research relies upon a handful of nine cases, it becomes risky to generalize from the information gathered. This problem was mitigated by the depth and comparative nature of each case study and to some extent by conducting a massive land use survey of approximately 30,000 doorways. The doorways provided the point of observation of building uses. All doorways in the historic centers of all nine cities were surveyed, making this a doorway census and not simply a sample. Scarpaci personally collected nearly all data (97%), thereby minimizing observer bias in the classification of categorical data. In Chapter 3 he summarizes the methodology and results of this contemporary street level assessment of land use. Three variables were measured for each doorway, two categorically: land use (seven categories), quality of the façade (three categories) and number of stories. From this data he was able to generate summary tables showing land use variation, building quality variability, and distribution of building heights by city. The mean number of floors per building graph would have benefited from analysis of median number of floors, since a few tall buildings, for example in Buenos Aires and Montevideo, skew the mean, thereby giving an unrealistic picture of the overall average skyline of the nine cities. In addition to the extensive doorway survey, the author conducted personal interviews with local residents, property owners, business owners, bankers, government officials and NGO representatives. He also consulted archives and contemporary news media.

Social construction in *centros históricos* is the topic of Chapter 4, beginning with a literature review that ties together globalization theories, heritage tourism and local spaces. Of particular interest is the role of public-private partnerships and remittances. Scarpaci conducts interviews and focus groups in three of the nine cities studied to learn more about residential perceptions of heritage tourism. This field work took him to Havana, Cuba for nine weeks, Cartagena, Colombia for four weeks and Cuenca, Ecuador for three weeks. Transcribed interview sessions were analyzed using content analysis to define trends in resident perceptions. He concludes that there is no common local response to the global forces that are implicit in heritage tourism.

The next three chapters delve further into the implications of heritage tourism for three of the nine cities studied. Scarpaci focuses in Chapter 5 on land valuation, forms of investment, and taxation in three historic neighborhoods of Cartagena, Colombia. Chapter 6 focuses on the restructuring of Old Havana, Cuba during the post-Soviet age. Unfortunately, the Master Plan for Old Havana's revitalization map (p. 189) showing type of investment categories for Havana lots is impossible to decipher using the seven shades of gray and black provided. The cartography would benefit from patterned designs of shading. Of interest in this chapter is the discussion of the challenge of urban revitalization without economic and social exclusion. An important common theme that is highlighted is the issue of whose collective memory is to be showcased in the *centro histórico*. Chapter 7 presents an in-depth case study on tourism planning and heritage preservation in Trinidad, a small city located on the south-central side of the island of Cuba. The oldest and smallest city studied, Trinidad, is noted for nearby historic sugar mills.

I was puzzled by the selection of two cities within the same country (Cuba, Columbia, and Ecuador). If an objective was to have a representative sample of Latin American cities, it would have been preferable to limit selection to one city per country. I suspect to some extent the choice of cities was a function of logistics and available sources of funding. Several other problems warrant comment. An organizational flow chart to orient the reader to the various scales of analysis is needed somewhere in the first two chapters. Cartographic errors and map design problems contributed to a less polished final product. In spite of these problems, the author has produced a fine volume, highly readable and filled with fascinating details.

The need to connect past and future cultural identity is shown to drive public and private sector collaboration to preserve historic districts. The question remains whether heritage means "using the past as an economic resource for the present" (p. 18). In Spanish heritage translates to *herencia* (inheritance, estate, legacy) and *patrimonio* (patrimony, heritage, birthright). Perhaps the rich heritage of *centros históricos* can be saved and enjoyed without the commodification of the historic landscapes. I would like to have seen more discussion of cultural identity and the role of indigenous groups, especially in the Andean cities where the population is large and poor. Historic buildings in numerous old city centers have been partitioned into residential, commercial and office space. Many poor people live in these over-crowded, partitioned colonial structures. Each city approaches the issues of preservation differently. Perhaps spatial policies can be sought that will preserve the rights and desires of local residents without losing the economic benefits of heritage tourism.

The result of an impressive amount of field work, Scarpaci's *Plazas and Barrios: Heritage Tourism and Globalization in the Latin American Centro Histórico* is a testament to the author's perseverance and scholarship. He has

done an excellent job of filtering, sorting and evaluating a massive amount of qualitative and quantitative information. After reading this book, it seems clear that the more we understand the dynamics of global and local forces involved in heritage tourism, the more we realize the complications of maximizing benefits to all involved parties. These nine case studies can be broadly applied to other cities. Planners, investors and citizens must decide whether to restore or neglect significant historic buildings. The weakness of taxing authorities and the need for financial resources to achieve objectives is a common theme throughout this book. Whether

future generations enjoy and know their history or whether it is lost to the ravages of weather and time depends on decisions today.

I recommend this book as a supplemental reader for undergraduate and graduate cultural, historical and urban geography classes. It would also be appropriate for planning and architecture classes, Latino Studies, regional classes on Latin America, and various other social science courses with an interest in *centros históricos*.

