



Alice Thomine-Berrada et Barry Bergdol (dir.)

Repenser les limites : l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines

31 août - 4 septembre 2005

Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art

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DOI : 10.4000/books.inha.289

Éditeur : Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art

Lieu d'édition : Paris

Année d'édition : 2005

Date de mise en ligne : 5 décembre 2017

Collection : Voies de la recherche

EAN électronique : 9782917902646



<http://books.openedition.org>

Édition imprimée

Date de publication : 4 septembre 2005

Référence électronique

AZEVEDO-SALOMAO, Eugenia María ; ETTINGER-MCENULTY, Catherine R. *Indigenous Contributions to City Planning in New Spain* In : *Repenser les limites : l'architecture à travers l'espace, le temps et les disciplines* : 31 août - 4 septembre 2005 [en ligne]. Paris : Publications de l'Institut national d'histoire de l'art, 2005 (généré le 27 juillet 2023). Disponible sur Internet : <<http://books.openedition.org/inha/289>>. ISBN : 9782917902646. DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.inha.289>.

Ce document a été généré automatiquement le 27 juillet 2023.

Indigenous Contributions to City Planning in New Spain

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Introduction

- 1 “Spanish town planning in America” is a phrase often used to describe the process of consolidation of cities and towns in regions in the New World colonized by the Spanish. Yet, to speak of Spanish town planning in America, as such, is to erase the Prehispanic urban and non-urban spatial traditions that undoubtedly contributed to the making of towns in the region. The phrase implies imposition as well as a vision of the colonized region as a tabula rasa, receptive to the European urban tradition and idealized Renaissance forms for the city. A review of literature on the subject of town planning in New Spain reveals the invisibility of the Mesoamerican urban tradition and the need to reassess local contributions to the formation of colonial towns and cities.
In this sense, urban design in New Spain can only be understood in terms of the confluence of two important urban traditions. With exception of the northernmost regions, the Spanish colonizers and missionaries who arrived in New Spain were faced with a sedentary population organized in clearly structured and often large settlements. They had distinct options: to reuse previous settlements, to move preexisting communities to new sites (often to distance them from ceremonial centers or to combine various towns once the population decline of the sixteenth century had wreaked havoc on the population). A third option was to create new towns to provide settlements for European colonizers. In all of the cases, the model had to conform and adapt to preexisting circumstances and spatial structures.

A new city in preexisting fabric?

- 2 In literature on urban history in New Spain the term “foundation” appears with frequency. In current usage this term would refer to the establishment of new towns

where there was nothing, yet research has shown that rarely was this the case.¹ Most cities in Mexico have names with two different components: a saint's name and an indigenous toponymic reference, testimony to their mixed origin.² Archaeological evidence confirms in many cases the superposition and reuse of Prehispanic settlements leading us to believe that the term "foundation" most likely referred to the establishment of a convent or chapel in or near an existing settlement. In a sense, the existing town was baptized with the name of a patron saint and a period of spatial reorganization ensued.

Much has been written about the use of Prehispanic structures, particularly platforms, for the erection of colonial churches, the most common interpretation being the symbolic domination of Christianity over paganism. This reuse presented other advantages such as having building materials nearby. Also, within existing cities platforms were hierarchical points and spaces central to the daily lives of the inhabitants; their reuse established spatial continuity in a period of rapid cultural and social change. There are countless examples of this type of reuse which implied an adaptation of the ideas from schemes for ideal cities to local circumstances and predefined urban structures.

There are outstanding examples of the reuse of whole settlements, foremost the case of Tenochtitlán—Mexico City³. Recent research has also unveiled the way in which Mérida, in the Yucatán peninsula, was rebuilt on the site of T'hó, maintaining the scale and basic spatial structure of the Prehispanic city.⁴ In the city of Pátzcuaro, seat of the bishopric in the sixteenth century, in the current day state of Michoacán in Western Mexico, the maintenance of the existing urban fabric meant that the church would not face the plaza, but rather was established on a large Prehispanic platform (fig. 1) that overlooks the city.⁵



Fig. 1 : Basil Patz, The Basílica of Pátzcuaro sits over the city on a Prehispanic platform a few blocks from the central plaza.

- 3 The use of the grid iron plan is considered in traditional historiography one of the most important contributions of town planning in New Spain and a direct result of the application of the schemes for ideal cities. With respect to this assertion there are two

points to be made: firstly orthogonal grids were used in urban design in Mesoamerica long before the conquest and secondly they have appeared in diverse cultural settings all over the world as a logical solution.⁶

Because of this, it is surprising that urban historians have often found it easier to relate the use of the grid plan in New Spain to precedents in the Roman *castrum*, Italian and Spanish treatises, or the few built examples extant in Europe rather than to its presence in Mesoamerican city design. Similarity is not, obviously, equated with influence. Chanfón remarks on the importance of distinguishing between “formal precedents—those that reveal a similar solution but without any possible connection to the New World—and . . . cultural precedents . . . that are supported by demonstrated cultural influence, transmission or continuity.”⁷ In this case, local precedents are vital to understanding the genesis of new urban form. George Kubler, writing specifically of New Spain, mentions the importance of the local precedent with reference to the grid plan: “In Mexico, the checkerboard design did not represent an invention, but rather the repetition of a system used before the conquest on both continents.”⁸

The grid iron plan was widely used in New Spain, with regional differences, yet it was not the only form employed. Many mining towns (Taxco in the present day state of Guerrero and Guanajuato being two cases in point) grew spontaneously in hilly terrain with irregular street patterns closely following the topography of the sites. Detailed studies of several Mexican cities have allowed contemporary urban historians to understand the complex relationship between existing Prehispanic settlements and the “new” colonial towns.

To be noted are the distinct ways in which reuse is effected and the degree to which the existing street patterns and urban structure are modified. From the insertion of a Christian church in an existing settlement with relatively few changes to the urban structure, to the redesign of street patterns, the complex process involved in the reuse of Prehispanic sites presents a challenge to traditional historiography. Few of the many settlements that were occupied before the arrival of the Spaniards have been studied in depth in order to understand the intricate process of transformation so often reduced to the term “foundation.”

The reorganization of the territory, reorganization of the population

- 4 A second way of dealing with preexisting settlement structures was to effectuate population movements in such a way as to undermine the role of settlements that had been important previous to the arrival of the Spaniards, either as religious or as administrative centers. As the sixteenth century progressed and the indigenous population was decimated by epidemics, new strategies were implemented to deal with the great number of towns that had lost their population. The *congregaciones*, carried out mostly during the last two decades of the sixteenth century, called for the population of disperse areas or of small towns to relocate in designated settlements and constituted an important tool for territorial reorganization.⁹

This type of relocation allowed for the Spanish to establish new structures on the territorial level; important Prehispanic sites could be minimized or erased while population centers chosen by the Spanish could be favored for growth. The designation of certain settlements as bishoprics and administrative centers in the colonial system

would play a relevant role in this process.

The economic interests of the Spanish crown led to strategies for the exploitation of certain natural resources that also favored changes in the relative hierarchy of preexisting settlements and dictated the creation of new ones. Such was the case with mining centers that sprung up, with little or no town planning involved, and immediately attracted large numbers of workers to settle in their environs.

New towns and the characteristics of urban space in New Spain

- 5 The formation of truly new settlements in central New Spain was uncommon, in contrast to the northern regions where there were few preexisting urban centers.¹⁰ The two clearest examples are the cities of Puebla, east of Mexico City, and the city of Valladolid, today Morelia, in western Mexico. These cities were envisioned as settlements for Spanish colonists and laid out according to a preconceived design on sites that, though not void of indigenous population, did not contain important urban precedents. In both cases, streets were laid out in a relatively regular orthogonal design, with a large plaza as the central element. The European inhabitants would live in the central blocks of the city surrounded by *barrios de indios* where the indigenous work force resided.

Returning to the initial discussion of urban historiography and the implementation of a model, in these cases one would expect to find the ideal city as presented in its original form in Europe, yet again, when confronting the ideal with the urban realization, there are a series of characteristics that mark these new “Spanish” cities as distinctly “New Spanish.” Among these is the scale of central plazas, lot sizes, and the width of streets.¹¹ The central plaza gives origin to the design, rather than resulting from the intersection of streets, as in Spain.

When looking at the plazas in the cities of Mexico one is reminded of the reactions of the Spanish conquistadores when faced with the monumentality of such cities as Tenochtitlán and Cuzco, planned around immense open spaces that framed ceremonial and administrative buildings and modeled the landscape. The Europeans were amazed at the scale and the visual magnificence of these cities, and the way they extended unbounded into the landscape.¹² There exists great disparity between two urban realities, one engendered in Spain, the other in America, with “abstract schemes that are formally similar, but of different magnitude” (fig. 2).¹³

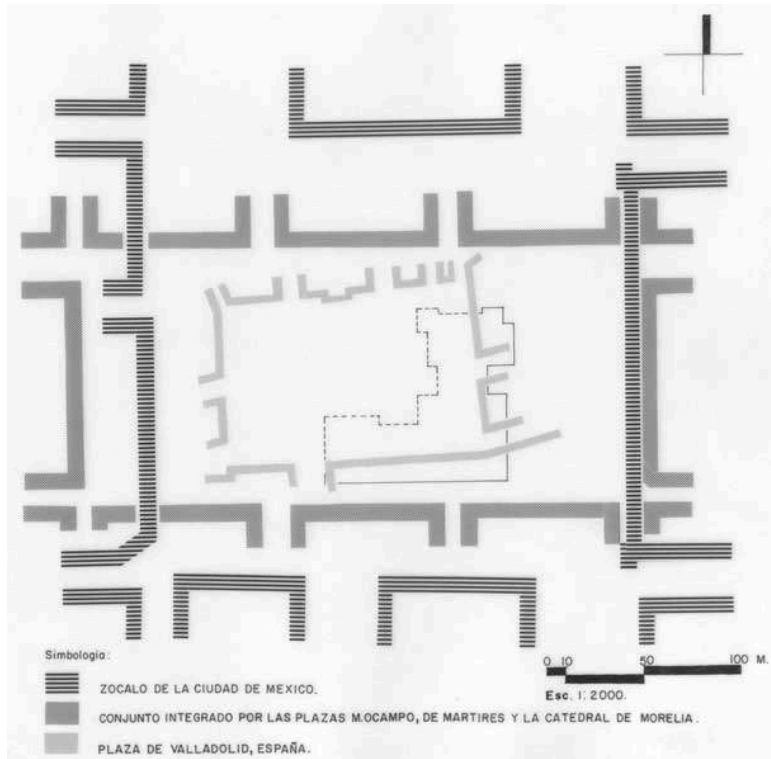


Fig. 2 : Plaza Morelia, The superimposition of the dimensions of the central squares in Morelia, Mexico, and Valladolid, Spain serve to illustrate the contrast in scale.

- 6 The differences in scale between the model and reality, and the role that large central plazas play in city planning in New Spain, suggest that the Mesoamerican urban tradition of open spaces on a monumental scale was a fundamental ingredient in the structuring of urban space. The local experience in the use of public space and the quality and amplitude of these went beyond previous Spanish experience; the change in scale that derived from the notion of space without limits favored a policy of generosity in the size of central elements in the urban structure. The *Plaza Mayor* in Spanish America includes, within the space of political power, the presence of the Church, modifying the Spanish urban tradition, while at the same time recovering from this tradition the use of continuous walls and arcades to limit open space.¹⁴

New perspectives in the study of town planning in New Spain

- 7 With reference to indigenous contributions much research has been done for central New Spain and the Yucatán peninsula (the most densely populated regions of the country). This work illustrates the complexity of the process of the transformation of settlements in the early colonial period in New Spain, a complexity often reduced in the literature on the subject to the term of foundation with little or no recognition of preexisting conditions. Research on other regions promises to contribute to better understanding of regional differences in relation to the ethnic diversity present in Prehispanic Mexico. For the case of the northern New Spain, home to mostly semi-nomadic indigenous groups, more research needs to be done to understand the ways in which the appropriation of the territory, on the part of these groups, marked the urban

expressions that later articulated the same territory. The concept of habitability, an understanding of the importance of the use of open space and of the interaction between natural factors such as climate and the indigenous way of life will help to explain the urban expressions in this area.

Another, very provocative line of inquiry is the influence of the New World experience on Europe. The scale and the importance of public plazas within towns and cities in New Spain as a reflection of local customs in the use of outdoor space contrasts with previous European experience, yet prefigures the emphasis given on the creation of large public urban spaces in the seventeenth century in many European capitals. Following this line of research, a wider inquiry into the changes in urban design implemented in Europe in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries may reveal the ways in which the experience in America contributed to a distinct vision of the city. In particular the vision of limitless unbounded space for the growth of the city and the experience of the daily use of large open plazas were two aspects that were novel in the European experience.

NOTES DE FIN

1. Valladolid, today the city of Morelia, in Michoacán and Puebla are cases of true foundations in the sense that they were new settlements, created expressly as colonial cities to be inhabited primarily by Spanish colonists.

2. Carlos CHANFÓN OLMOS, *Historia de la Arquitectura y Urbanismo en México*, Volumen II, Tomo I, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1997, p. 209.

3. The city of Tenochtitlán is a case in point; its population, upon the arrival of the conquistadores, is estimated at 1,000,000. The Spaniards marveled at the site, surprised by the scale and cleanliness of the city as well as by its orderly layout. The Prehispanic city was divided into four quadrants by wide avenues that faced the cardinal directions and created *calpulli*, or barrios, laid out orthogonally. The city was burned and sacked during the conquest. Reconstruction was undertaken following a design attributed to Alonso García Bravo that took into account major features of the original settlement such as the causeways and canals. Although a new lot division was employed and land was redistributed accordingly, preexisting structures such as platforms were decisive in the formation of the layout. See Carlos CHANFÓN OLMOS, *Arquitectura del Siglo XVI, temas escogidos*, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1994, pp. 91–117.

4. This study illustrates the problems faced and the different strategies employed by the colonizers in the superimposition of new settlements on sites previously occupied. In this case the Prehispanic settlement was structured by two perpendicular axes that divided the city into four sections. Their intersection would appear to have served as reference for the post conquest layout; the size and shape of the plaza were also predetermined by an existing space delimited by three large pyramids. The attempt to create a perfectly ordered grid was hindered by preexisting pyramids to the west of the central plaza resulting in a loss of regularity in some parts of the city. See Lucía TELLO PEÓN, *Aproximaciones al Tema Integral Histórico del Crecimiento y Evolución de la Ciudad de Mérida durante el Virreinato*, doctoral dissertation, Mexico City, Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 2001 and Marco Tulio PERAZA GUZMÁN, *Espacios de identidad, la centralidad urbana y los*

espacios colectivos en el desarrollo histórico de Yucatán, Mérida, Universidad Autónoma de Yucatán, 2005.

5. In the case of Pátzcuaro, the Prehispanic radial layout competes with an orthogonal design. See Carlos CHANFÓN OLMOS, *Arquitectura del Siglo XVI* and Catherine R. ETtinger MCENULTY, *La Transformación de los Asentamientos de la Cuenca Lacustre de Pátzcuaro, siglos XVI y XVII*, Morelia, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo and Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, 1999.

6. Fernando DE TERÁN, ed., *La Ciudad Hispanoamericana. El Sueño de un Orden*, Madrid, CEHOPU, 1989, pp. 63–102.

7. Carlos CHANFÓN OLMOS, *Historia de la Arquitectura y del Urbanismo Mexicanos*.

8. George KUBLER, *Arquitectura Mexicana del Siglo XVI*, Mexico City, Fondo de Cultura Económica, 1983, p. 100.

9. The *congregaciones*, or *reducciones* as they are often called, were legal instruments that called for the relocation of the indigenous population in order to form compact settlements that would better adapt to the needs of both colonizers and missionaries.

10. The exception to this is New Mexico where the Pueblo Indians lived in compact dense settlements.

11. Fernando DE TERÁN, pp. 99–102

12. See for example Bernal DÍAZ DEL CASTILLO, *Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva España*, Mexico City, Espasa-Calpe Mexicana, 1950.

13. Fernando DE TERÁN, p. 99.

14. Eugenia Maria azevedo-salomao, *Espacios Urbanos Comunitarios Durante el Periodo Virreinal en Michoacán*, Morelia, Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolás de Hidalgo, Gobierno del Estado de Michoacán, Morevallado Editores, 2003, p. 38.

RÉSUMÉS

This article questions the traditional historiography on town planning in sixteenth-century New Spain (Mexico) with reference to the notion that towns founded in New Spain were the concretion of Renaissance models. With reference to specific cases it deals with the reuse of existing settlements, the reorganization of population on a territorial scale, and the use of the grid plan arguing the relevance of understanding local precedents in order to comprehend the new urban expressions as hybrid forms. Reference is made to scale and use in defending the indigenous contributions to the making of towns in New Spain. In closing it is suggested that research be done on flows from America to Europe with reference to the appearance of large public squares in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

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Index chronologique : XVIe siècle, XVIIe siècle, XVIIIe siècle, Epoque moderne

Mots-clés : architecture coloniale, town planning

Index géographique : Espagne, Mexique, Mexico, Cuzco, Mérida, Morelia, Pátzcuaro, Puebla, Taxco

AUTEURS

EUGENIA MARÍA AZEVEDO-SALOMAO

Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolas de Hidalgo, Mexique

CATHERINE R. ETTINGER-MCENULTY

Universidad Michoacana de San Nicolas de Hidalgo, Mexique