I am indebted to Marta Amighetti Lujan, who graciously gave permission to use La Fuente, by Francisco Amighetti, San José, Costa Rica, © 1976, as the cover of this book.

Publication of this book was made possible in part by support from the Pachita Tennani Pike Fund for Latin American Studies.

Copyright © 2000 by the University of Texas Press

All rights reserved

Printed in the United States of America

Fourth paperback printing, 2008

Requests for permission to reproduce material from this work should be sent to:
Permissions, University of Texas Press, P.O. Box 7819, Austin, TX 78713-7819
www.utexas.edu/utpress/about/bpermission.html


Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data
Low, Setha M.
On the plaza : the politics of public space and culture / by Setha M. Low.—1st ed.
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
FI410.L69 2000
307.3'21'C098—dc21
99-050899

To María Eugenia Bozoli de Wille
Marlene Castro and Claudio Gutiérrez
Lucile Newman
Mentors and Friends
CONTENTS

List of Illustrations  ix
Preface  xiii
Acknowledgments  xvii

Part I: Introduction
Chapter One: Notes from the Field  3
A Personal Account
Chapter Two: Public Space and Culture  31
The Case of the Latin American Plaza

Part II: Histories
Chapter Three: The History of the Plaza in San José, Costa Rica  47
The Political Symbolism of Public Space
Chapter Four: The European History of the Plaza  84
Power Relations and Architectural Interpretation
Chapter Five: The Indigenous History of the Plaza  101
The Contested Terrain of Architectural Representations
Part III: Ethnographies

Chapter Six: Spatializing Culture 127
The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space

Chapter Seven: Constructing Difference 154
The Social and Spatial Boundaries of Everyday Life

Chapter Eight: Public Space and Protest 180
The Plaza as Art and Commodity

Part IV: Conversations

Chapter Nine: The Park and the Plaza in Costa Rican Literature 207
Imagined Places

Chapter Ten: Conversations on the Plaza 239
Remembered Places

Chapter Eleven: Public Space, Politics, and Democracy 238

Appendix: Recent Costa Rican Presidents and Their Terms 248

Bibliography 249
Index 267

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Tables
1. Population Count of Parque Central, Sunday, August 3, 1986 160
2. Population Count of Parque Central, Thursday, July 31, 1986 160
3. Population Count of Plaza de la Cultura, Sunday, August 3, 1986 161
4. Population Count of Plaza de la Cultura, Thursday, July 31, 1986 161

Maps
1. Plan of Parque Central 135
2. Plan of Plaza de la Cultura 146
3. Movement Map of Parque Central, 10:00 A.M. 164
4. Movement Map of Parque Central, NOON 164
5. Movement Map of Parque Central, 6:00 P.M. 165
6. Movement Map of Plaza de la Cultura, NOON 166
7. Movement Map of Plaza de la Cultura, 4:00 P.M. 166
8. Movement Map of Plaza de la Cultura, 6:00 P.M. 167
9. Plan of Redesigned Parque Central 168
10. Behavioral Map of Parque Central, 10:00 A.M. 170
11. Behavioral Map of Parque Central, NOON 170
12. Behavioral Map of Parque Central, 2:00 P.M. 171
13. Behavioral Map of Parque Central, 6:00 P.M. 171
14. Behavioral Map of Plaza de la Cultura, NOON 174
15. Behavioral Map of Plaza de la Cultura, 4:00 P.M. 176
16. Behavioral Map of Plaza de la Cultura, 6:00 P.M. 176
CHAPTER ONE

Notes from the Field
A Personal Account

Field Notes from Parque Central
Parque Central, weekday morning, February 20, 1985—First impressions on field trip #1.

The bus stopped at Parque Central. I am struck immediately with how ugly and strange the kiosko [bandstand] is; it is like a Preclassic Maya incense burner created in a giant form, or a Postclassic temple with cut-out sides. The stairs are so steep and it is so tall that it reminds me of a temple at Tikal [a Maya site in Guatemala]. I start taking photographs as soon as I step out, shooting in a continuous circle and also along the pathways and edges.

The park is full of people. Almost every bench is taken, mostly by men, who stand or sit in groups around a bench or wall ledge; a few are even stretched out full length on a bench. At each entry path there are two to three shoeshine men, a few with customers (see Photograph 2). They look quite established and part of the scene. Most of the men sitting are older, while the younger ones stand. One man is eating an ice cream cone. I look for women and find only two on a bench, and one campesino [country] couple sit silently with straight backs and severe faces. Two women have a flower stall, and one man is selling ice cream. The men’s behavior is a public display, full of symbolic posturing, verbal play, and social exchange.

---

The Parks
In the parks I added the pines’ height and filled my senses with books.

Student of Josefino parks, I promoted the trees to keep them always with me.

In the parks I rhyme the rose with the book, human suffering with children’s smiles while my friends learned the legal code and constructed syllogisms.

Los Parques
En los parques sumé la altura de los pinos y me llené de libros los sentidos.

Bachiller de los parques josefinos, promoví a los árboles para llevarlos siempre conmigo.

En los parques rimé la rosa con el libro, el dolor de los hombres y la sonrisa del niño, mientras mis amigos se aprendían los Códigos y construían los silogismos.

—ARTURO MONTERO VEGA
Parque Central, 8:00–10:00 a.m., weekday, May 19, 1986—First day of section observations on field trip #2.

The day starts with waiting for the bus. The traffic is stop and go, and the wait seems forever. The bus creeps along letting everyone get on even if it means that people have to hang out of the doors. A man gets up to give me a seat, which is a stroke of luck, since I am having a hard time standing in the crowd. I arrive at Parque Central on the dot of 8:00 with the cathedral bells ringing. Mobs of people descend from the bus hurrying on their way as I try to find a place to start.

I circle the park once feeling uncomfortable in this male-dominated space. At this time in the morning there are hardly any women here, and those who are, walk through quickly. The park is littered with leaves and paper, ill-kempt and cluttered, looking rather worn and run-down. The benches are full even though there are eighty or more in the area of a square city block; and half of the area is taken up with the monumental kiosk. I circle the park again and notice that in the kiosk basement is a children's library.

I decide that it is impossible to describe the plaza all at once, so I start on the northeastern corner where there is the most action. The northeast corner is what I call the shoeshine men's corner. Each bench has one or two men who are either cleaning a customer's shoes or waiting, talking and joking nearby. The shoeshine men use the benches as props for all of their activities, work as well as recreation, and they circulate from one bench to another to exchange information, jokes, money, and stolen goods or drugs. If one bench becomes too full, they move again.

There is an "in-crowd" of five or six men with long hair, beards, and short-sleeved dirty tee shirts. They appear to be in their late thirties or early forties, and they move as a group. Other shoeshine men are more conservatively dressed and do not look very different from the people who are having their shoes cleaned. A couple of men carry plastic "suitcases" and unpack there in the park. The in-group men, however, carry their equipment in plastic coffee bags, which they hang on the backs of the benches. Some shoeshine men hang around a lot, talking and relaxing, while others aggressively try to get customers by inviting them to sit down so they can clean their dirty shoes. One common technique is for the shoeshine man to point to your shoes and tell you that he can make them look much better—even if you are wearing tennis shoes!

After about half an hour I move counterclockwise to the northwest corner, which is much sunnier and less crowded, with the majority of people walking through. The benches here are full of men reading newspapers or sitting and staring at the passersby (see Photograph 3). I see a street sweeper and his friends, who follow him as he works, talking and smoking cigarettes.

I move to the southwest corner, where everyone is meeting someone, with someone, or holding someone, and a lot of people are walking through on the diagonal. At this corner there are two couples and a woman—the largest number of women anywhere in the park except for the women who sell flowers. I notice the vendors, small boys walking through selling ice cream, candy, or bread. The pace of the walking is quickening as the day moves on.

The last half hour is spent at the southeast corner, back facing the cathedral. I am getting tired, but there is nowhere to sit because all the benches are taken. Everyone there seems to be waiting and looking at their watches before going back to reading their newspapers. The most frequent activity is reading the newspaper, staring into space, or talking to the person who is next to you. I see a family—father, mother,
and four children—sit down on a bench, squeezing in next to a man they do not know. A young man comes over, offers me his seat, and then sits down next to me. He asks the time and then returns to reading his newspaper. He looks at me over his paper from time to time and notices if I glance back at him.

*Parque Central, 10:30–11:30 a.m., Sunday, June 15, 1986—*
*Sunday in the park during field trip #2.*

The band sets up slowly: first a truck pulls up and unloads the chairs, then the conductor's stand is arranged in the center, surrounded by a wider semicircle of the players' chairs. It looks like a full orchestra, and the sound is lovely. They play five different pieces of music on this sunny morning. Interestingly, most of the spectators stand on the platform of the kiosk in a circle surrounding the musicians (see Photograph 4).

I descended from the kiosk to take pictures of the people watching from the lower levels. The park is full of children running and playing, women talking, and older men looking on. There are many older Ticos [local slang for Costa Rican men] dressed up in their Sunday best, but I assume that this is because it is Father's Day!

I start to take a picture of three older men (over seventy years of age) who are talking (see Photograph 5); they smile and invite me to sit down. They also have come to hear the music, having gone to mass very early that morning. They ask me where I am from, if I am married, and whether I have children. I answer, "No, I do not have any children, but want to." They reply, "Then take your husband to Puntarenas. It is hotter there, and it will stick." They go on to talk about hot Ticas [Costa Rican women] and sex, chuckling that it is hard to get it up any more. They watch the girls walking by and add: "We watch more now than we did." I thank them for the seat and leave as another very old and quite feeble man with a cane comes up to join them.

As I walk around to the other side of the plaza an older woman, eighty-three years of age she says, hails me by waving her hand. She is
right one. Then he asks if I would bet 1,000 colones. I say that I do not have any cash on me. He tells me that I can bet my watch. Horrified, I react: “No, it was a gift from my boyfriend!” He smiles, says “OK,” and walks off.

The tired-looking shoeshine man next to me asks me to bring him shoe wax from the United States when I return on my next trip. He has asked me out to dance or have a drink a couple of times, and wants to know if I do those kinds of things. I reply that I am “promised” [engaged to be married], and thank him for his invitation.

Parque Central, 6:00—9:00 p.m., Saturday, June 28, 1986—
Saturday night in the park during field trip #2.

It is very difficult to do fieldwork in Parque Central at night. It is cold and damp on the benches, and I feel quite uncomfortable as a woman alone. The same observations that I have made before seem confirmed: couples meet and fill the benches at 6:00 p.m. and slowly drift off between 7:00 p.m. and 7:30 p.m. Some go into the movie theaters that surround the park, and others finally catch a bus home. By 7:30 p.m. the park is occupied mainly by single adult men, some in pairs, but mostly alone.

The only new activity that I can now clearly pick out is a group of young women who are hanging around under the arbor, giggling and talking. They seem young, about fifteen to eighteen years of age, and most are wearing tight-fitting jeans. The older women who walk by wear even tighter, more provocative clothing; their style is tough and playful.

The young women get a man’s attention by bumming a cigarette, teasing him, or planting a kiss on his cheek. The clearest pick-up is by a brunette woman in a floral dress and a sweatshirt. She goes over to a thin man, shakes his hand, and sits down. At first I wonder if he is her pimp. [I have since learned that in 1986 there were very few prostitutes with pimps, but that by 1997 prostitution had become more organized and dangerous, both to the sex worker and the client—see the short story in Chapter 3.] She bums a cigarette and smokes it dramatically, taking long, slow puffs. Two other men start to walk by, do a double-take, stop, and join them. She talks and flirts, commenting on the pleated pants of the well-dressed man of the pair, and the next time I look up they are walking off together. She swaggers and rotates her hips, and he smiles as they wave good-bye.
The most popular pick-up spot is the arbor. Everything is done pretty cautiously, as the Guardia Civil [local police] are everywhere, walking around and around the kiosk, so contacts are often in the form of shaking hands. Some women, however, are more direct; I see one jump on a man's lap and start kissing him before they walk off together.

*Parque Central, 2:30 p.m., Tuesday, January 6, 1987—*
First impressions on field trip #1.
The evangelical preachers who hold a prayer meeting every day under the arbor are just finishing as I arrive; I can hear their clapping all the way across the park (see Photograph 6). There is more business for the shoe shine men, and more women than during the last visit in the rainy season. One woman seems drugged, yet no one seems concerned. A policeman stops me and asks me if I am with the newspaper. I say no, and hurry on. All of the policemen are standing with girls; some were talking to prostitutes as they passed the time while on duty.

The same group of older pensioners are sitting on their bench. They salute me and invite me to sit down. I do not have time, so I smile and wave. Tourists wander by and sit on the steps of the kiosk. Policemen and groups of older men perch on the kiosk walls. The air is warm, not hot, and there is a breeze. It feels dry and very pleasant. Lots of children are playing on the kiosk, trying to slide down the curved, descending cement supports.

*Parque Central, 1:30–4:30 p.m., Saturday, January 10, 1987—*
Saturday afternoon during field trip #2.
Many more families, women, and couples are here; even the shoe shine men have their wives and children with them. Most people are sitting in the shade because the sunlight is so intense, except for one gringo [derogatory nickname for male North American] who is reading in the sun. The southwest-corner pensioners are still on their bench, but there are fewer on Saturday than during the week or on Sunday. And there are fewer shoe shine men. The one business that increases on Saturday is prostitution, and I notice one of my gringo friends wanders off with a girl.

Young people lounge on the kiosk, girls and boys separately watching each other. Couples with children wrapped up as sleepy bundles walk by. The police also wander across the kiosk surveying the passersby.

The evangelists are preaching in the arbor, the sermon and the time of day are the same as during the week. Saturday just draws a larger crowd. I think the weather slows the movement and increases the sense of well-being for both me and other park users. More people are out enjoying the dry weather of January than during the rainy days of May, June, July, and August.

I sit with an eighty-eight-year-old man with whom I have become friendly. He comes every day and stays until late afternoon. I am greeted by another of my old friends, a pensioner, who is unshaven and dirty, wearing worn clothes, although he is smiling. I ask him what is wrong, as he is usually more well dressed; he points out that it is Saturday. During the week he comes every morning and afternoon before he goes to work at a hotel on 4th Avenue. He is proud that he still works, and he lives downtown so that he can go home for lunch, see his wife, and then return.

I map the slightly different sitting positions of groups on a Saturday. Families, couples, and singles all sit in different areas. People from out of town come here to rest before catching the bus home. The
tempo of the traffic has increased on the edges of the park, but inside
the pace has slowed to a standstill. The shoe shine men with their fami-
lies are now having a picnic. One shoe shine man tells me that he is
hopelessly in love with me. Another comes by to ask me how I am and
where I have been for the past few months. They are funny and wel-
coming, and though I had felt some apprehension about talking with
them last July, now they are part of my social world.

The strollers are languid in their movements, and girls smile on the
arms of their boyfriends. People talk, look around, and then go back
to reading. Children play everywhere, and only mothers and children
walk through; everyone else is staying. There is a warm breeze that
cools the hot sun. As the shadows deepen, the shoe shine men pack
their bags and people stroll to the buses to go home. As it becomes too
dark to photograph, couples begin to arrive, vendors set up for the
evening crowd, and the tempo again picks up.

As I leave the park, I recognize two North American pensioners sit-
ting on the inner circle of benches near the northwest corner. I walk
over and say that I am surprised to see them here, as they usually go to
the other plaza. Across the grass, in front of the Boruca Bar, are four
more North Americans on their way to have a beer. I join them as they
are getting ready to leave.

Both men are retired: the first, wearing a cap over his silver hair,
worked for Standard Oil, and the second, for the Ford Motor Com-
pany. They love sport fishing and come here for four months each year
to fish in Puntarenas [a city on the Pacific coast] or Rio Colorado [an
area on the Atlantic coast famous for game fishing]. They learned
about Costa Rica from sport-fishing magazines and from friends. I
walk on and then return to ask them a question: "Is it true that the
gringos used to spend time over by the telephones in the park?" The
man in the cap replied, "Yes, but then they moved to the Plaza de la
Cultura." They get up to leave, saying that they want to go home for a
nap before dinner.

Parque Central, 2:00 P.M., weekday, December 16, 1993—
Interview with Rudolfo Sancho, the engineer in charge of the
redesign of the park, during field trip #4.
[Parque Central was closed and under construction.]

I begin by explaining that I am interested in the remodeling and re-
construction of Parque Central. Rudolfo Sancho responds by saying
that he got the original plans of the park from someone who came forth
during the initial uproar about tearing down or preserving the kiosk:

It was very interesting. It was quite a fight about the kiosk. If it
were mine, I would get rid of it, but we should not throw it out, as
it is part of our patrimony. And since they moved the fountain
to the University [Universidad de Costa Rica, located in an east-
ern suburb of the city], and the University will not give it back,
we will make a small copy of the original fountain to put in the
park.

He continues:

In 1889 we were the first city with lights in Central America. We
were the first to have water. But by the 1940s the city decided that
it was complete. There was no maintenance of the parks, and
many beautiful details were lost.

I ask about the new design for the park, to which he replies:

The idea is to raise the level of the plaza and just keep the lower
part green where the pensioners and shoe shine men are located.
Because of the monumentality of the kiosk, we are going to raise
the entire level of the park, that way the kiosk will not look so out of
scale. Since we see the park not as a place for sitting but [as] a
ceremonial center, we made it "harder," covering more of the sur-
face with cement to create a kind of paseo [walkway]. It should be
a celebration of the city.

Parque Central, 11:30 A.M.—1:30 P.M., Wednesday, January 22, 1997—
A visit during field trip #5.
[The park has been redesigned since my last visit.]

I enter the park about 11:30 A.M. It is a bright, sunny day; the benches
and ledges of the planters are full (see Photograph 7). The groups are
more dispersed because of the new pattern of small benches. Benches
now hold only two people, so there are often two seated with a third
standing. The corners still provide a way to describe the park, even
though the new design is more circular in orientation.

On the northeast corner there is only one shoe shine man left; he is
using a stand instead of a bench. Across the street there are four to five more on a sliver of sidewalk in front of the construction fence that is around the cathedral. The corner is only lightly populated, and it is quite warm there. I ask "What happened?" to the remaining shoeshine man, and he replies that they are no longer allowed in the park, that they have been banned by the municipality since the remodeling. I ask, "Where is everyone, then?" and he responds, "In front of the Post Office and on the 'Boulevard.'"

Moving clockwise, there is a large group of older men along the planter wall and on the small benches. The men are deep in conversation. I ask them about the changes in the park. One man comments that it is remodeled and prettier now. Overall, they have a mixed reaction to the design changes; they say that it is softer and more open, but less comfortable and green. The southern edge is also full of people waiting for buses. Even though buses no longer stop here, people still wait, and when they see buses arrive, then walk to nearby bus stops. There are more women now. The sense of "places" such as the arbor or the shoeshine corner has been lost and replaced with a series of self-contained locations and isolated spaces. The southwest corner, however, still has quite a few elderly men talking, and on the western edge there are forty people waiting to use the twenty-four newly installed telephone booths.

On the northwest corner, instead of praying and healing, there is a man called "Tango" doing acrobatic tricks with a soccer ball in front of a large crowd. I ask about the shoeshine men and vendors who used to be there, and everyone I ask confirms that they are now gone. A new security force is also very visible on the kiosk and on the park perimeter in their black uniforms. My photographer had counted four different uniforms yesterday when he was working, but I have seen only three: all black, all green, and the blue or khaki of the Guardia Civil. The men in the all-black uniforms must be the new municipal police placed throughout the center city to protect residents and tourists from the increased crime.

Parque Central, 10:00–11:00 A.M., Thursday, January 23, 1997—
The last visit on field trip #5.
I move clockwise around the kiosk to talk to some of the Costa Rican pensioners. I feel hesitant, but everyone is very friendly. I join a group of three men: the two older men are sitting and the younger one is
man in baggy pants sitting by himself, looking around. "They congregate here at 5:00 each evening."

I ask where the other pensioners are. The standing man replies that they are at the beach for the holiday. "Are they still there?" I ask, pointing to the southwest corner. "Yes," he replies, "they still come. One has died, but the rest come as before."

I move on and ask another older man why he comes here each day. He smiles and responds:

Because it is agreeable, I can see and greet my friends every day. I see people I know to talk to. I used to come when there was a ramada [the arbor] and when there were dances in the kiosk on New Year's Eve, where those who could not afford to go somewhere expensive could go. The most important part, however, is to see your friends and family who you otherwise would not see. It is very agreeable.

Field Notes from the Plaza de la Cultura

Plaza de la Cultura, weekday, February 20, 1985—First impressions on field trip #1.

At first I am shocked that the new plaza is so modern. It has a sunken fountain and is an expansive open space paved with cement tiles, lined with benches made of large metal pipes, and punctuated with small cement seats under a double row of fig trees. The space appears quite barren, denuded of greenery, and instead of plants, yellow and silver pipes stick up like periscopes from an underground submarine.

The plaza is multilayered, with offices below ground level where the Institute of Tourism's central office and a large marble exhibition space are located. The downstairs is closed, but the guard goes to get me a brochure that describes the plaza and its construction. The Gold Museum will eventually go into this subterranean space when there is adequate funding for guards. [In 1987 it was opened as Los Museos del Banco Central de Costa Rica (Museums of the Costa Rican Central Bank) and included the Precolombian gold collection, stamp collection, and painting and sculpture collection.]

There are two distinct parts to the plaza: (1) the section between the National Theater (see Photograph 9; the edge of this turn-of-the-century building is visible on the right) and the Gran Hotel Costa
Rica, which is for tourists and is full of vendors selling hammocks and other souvenirs (see Photograph 10), and (2) the plaza proper, which is a large, multilevel open space that extends along the side of the National Theater all the way to Avenida Central (see Photograph 9).

*Plaza de la Cultura, weekday, May 26, 1986—First impressions on field trip #2.*

The first day at the Plaza de la Cultura is so slow that I decide to observe it by sections: the tourist plaza in front of the Gran Hotel Costa Rica, the shopping arcade and shaded tree-lined walkway of the upper plaza, the sunny open section of the upper plaza, the lower plaza areas, the section below the fountain, and the entrance to the tourist office.

The plaza is full of young people—even the shoeshine men are boys; it seems to be the domain of the adolescent and the tourist. There is an equal distribution of males and females here, lots of couples, and couples with children (see Photograph 11).
Children love this plaza, especially the fountain and the open areas where they can run and chase the pigeons (see Photograph 12). Furthermore, the low benches seem quite comfortable for them, and there is the attraction of the juggler/clown who entertains during midday. The children adore his jokes and tricks and clowning with his assistant/wife. Children of all social classes, from little boys who sell crafts or shine shoes to children in private school uniforms, come to see and listen to the juggler/clown. They all crowd forward to see while the adults line up behind them.

Another major activity is that of older gringos and other foreigners as well as some Ticos, who pick up young women, even girls, on Saturday and Sunday afternoon (see Photograph 13). A friend's brother-in-law said that Plaza de la Cultura is actually more dangerous than Parque Central because there are more drugs being sold and more male prostitution. So far I have only seen one clandestine activity on the plaza and at least three or four in Parque Central; however, it could be I have not been here at the right time.

Plaza de la Cultura, 12:00 noon–3:00 p.m., Thursday, June 12, 1986—
Sex in the afternoon during field trip #2.

I need to change a roll of film so I sit down on the shady pipe bench next to three gringos who are looking at and talking about girls (see Photograph 14). Finally I say something, and the smaller guy says, “I wondered when you were going to admit that you speak English.” I then met “Jim,” “the Canadian,” and “the small man.” Most of the conversation focuses on their interest in the young Ticas.

We like them younger—the older ones are not as nice. We come to the plaza because that is where the girls are—before we met them in the street. Now the plaza is the place—in the afternoon, . . . If you do not have one by evening, it is too late.

The men I interviewed think that there are about 1,000–2,000 older North American men in Costa Rica looking for girls during the dry season, and that most of them have been living here for years. They get bored, leave, and then come back because of the beautiful young women. They say [to me] that North American women are awful in bed, and Ticas [Costa Rican females] know how to love. The conversation moves from sexual activity to “peckers,” penis implants, and
trouble with girlfriends. There is some joking and embarrassment that I would be shocked, but the conversation continues. It seems that young women and sex, or talking about it, are their main diversions.

Plaza de la Cultura, 5:00–7:30 p.m., Friday, June 13, 1986—
The great chain robbery during field trip #2.

Beautiful late afternoon, clear and cool. Tomás offers me a coffee, but by 5:00 p.m. I want to be back on my metal pipe bench. As I return, there is a lot of confusion and looking around. When I got off the bus I had seen three young men running down the street, and people shouting. I asked as many people as possible, “¿Qué pasó?” [What happened?]. The answers range from “a robbery” to a more precise description of “a girl’s gold chain was torn off her neck.” I have heard many stories about chain stealing, but this is the first case at which I am present. It happened under the trees of the shopping arcade. One man said that the robbers look for chains that they like, and then one stands in front and the other behind, working together to distract the unfortunate victim.

The plaza is filling up with high school students wearing uniforms and carrying musical instruments and banners. It seems that there is going to be a parade of high school marching bands along Avenida Central to celebrate the centennial of a private boys’ school.

There are two groups of teenagers, both leaning along the fountain rail. Usually just one group is there and the other is on the planter seat with a portable radio. One group is predominantly male and Black—the leader wears a “do-rag” with tails. He speaks Spanish and English and something that I can not understand [probably a form of street slang]. The other group is mixed male and female with a rotating leader. The young male who looks like the rock star Prince, from Purple Rain [a rock music album by Prince], often takes the lead, but so does a kid in khaki pants or a small, dark-haired girl. It is hard to tell; they move around a lot, and the group composition constantly changes.

There are, by the way, a lot of police around everywhere, either because of the parade or because it is Friday night. The khaki-pants kid, with a bottle in a brown paper bag, signals the main group of six guys to “move over.” They quickly go to the lower plaza in front of the entrance to the tourist office. It is darker and quieter there, and I follow. I am just wondering if they realize how many police are around when two Guardia Civil come up, take the bag, frisk two of the teenagers, take their identity cards, and line all six up along the National Theater wall. I go up to ask what was wrong, and the police curtly tell me to “move along.” I move back and watch with a growing crowd.

Plaza de la Cultura, 8:00–9:00 a.m., Monday, June 16, 1986—
Morning during field trip #2.

Early morning seems to be a time when people sit on the benches to rest and then move on. They sit for two or three minutes, then stand, straighten their clothes, and move on. Some read or study, but most just sit and stare. I would call it waiting, but maybe this is what Tomás calls meditar [to meditate, reflect, think] (see Photograph 15). A couple of women begin to talk, but in general there is little interaction. Morning does not seem to be a social time, but rather a passage to work or an early break in the day. The most active group are the sweepers who are cleaning the plaza. They talk and call back and forth to one another. The food sellers and jewelry sellers are not out. The first gringo shows up, sitting alone on the benches under the trees.
One comes over and sits on the pipe bench. There is so little activity
that it is hard to be a participant observer, and I am so sleepy that I
treat myself to coffee at the hotel café.

Plaza de la Cultura, 9:00 a.m.–3:30 p.m., Tuesday, January 6, 1987—
First impressions on field trip #3.
The plaza is not filled up yet. There are very few people who talk or
even walk by. The old woman who begs from tourists is sitting on the
steps of the hotel café (see Photograph 16), and a few single men are
reading the newspaper along the tree-lined edge. The hammock and
whistle men begin to set up. Most of the tourists are still in the hotel
restaurant (see Photograph 17), and the group of gringo men have not
yet appeared. This morning is not very different from my previous
early-morning observations.

By noon the plaza is packed with people. Early in the morning it was
slow and sleepy, but now that I am back there is an apparently drunk
man playing with a soccer ball and a long line of teenagers watching.
There are a lot of young people, mostly males but some females, in
groups and a few in pairs. This is a dramatic change because of the
school vacation. When school is in session, teenagers usually do not
come to the plaza until late afternoon or evening (see Photograph 18).
By 1:45 P.M. the plaza is no longer loaded with people; there are fewer teenagers, but the gringos are now in full swing. Other things have changed but not the pick-ups. There is a group of Peruvian singers performing for tourists at the edge of the planter (see Photograph 19). All of the gringos are sitting beside me on the center pipe bench trying to pick up three girls near us. One guy with a tattoo even speaks to the girls in Spanish. He seems to be doing pretty well; his conversation moves from Vesco [a well-known North American financier who fled to Costa Rica to escape prosecution in the United States] to chefs, restaurants, and then to girls.

I ask why they have come. A man in his fifties replies that they all have different reasons. He is a disabled veteran who had a “nervous breakdown.” He has had the same girlfriend for over eight months. He says that most of the men are concerned about the Costa Rican women lying to them. Most have been divorced or widowed and are bitter and disillusioned about American women. He goes on: “They are looking for real love and trust, not just sex, even though they say that they are interested only in sex.”

Just then two women and four small children who sell chicles [chewing gum] walk into the middle of the plaza. The youngest boy drops his tray of chewing gum, and one of the women beats him as he tries to pick it up. The gringos tell me that this mother sends her children out to beg every day and beats them if they do not sell enough. One man comments: “She is a hard woman.” The men drift off to home and dinner. The plaza is quiet and dark.

Plaza de la Cultura, 5:30–9:30 P.M., Saturday, January 10, 1987—
Saturday afternoon and evening during field trip #3.
The tourist stalls are set up in front of the hotel for the Saturday handicraft market. Ceramics, leather, hammocks, blouses, and paintings predominate. The whistle boy begins to wrap up his merchandise.
There are only a few people here, especially compared to Parque Central. Lots of girls, groups of women, and a few gringos are sitting in the sun. Single men sit under the trees. The only excitement is the approach of two cute girls, who are greeted with howls and calls such as “Morena [brunette], come here” by a group of teenagers.
I greet the Gran Hotel bouncer, who is standing at the edge of the hotel café, as I go in for a soda. He says that he works every day from
on a motorcycle who grabbed her purse and dragged her away. He was mugged on a bus during his first few days here.

I return later, about 9:30 p.m., to see if what the Gran Hotel bouncer had told me was right. As he had said, the plaza was full of people, too many to count, and many more than I expected. I could see and identify the teenagers, some single men, but no specific activities from that distance.

Plaza de la Cultura, December 13, 1993—
Interview with Renato Cajas, the head of tourism, during field trip #4.
I ask Mr. Cajas why the Plaza de la Cultura was originally designed and built. He responds:

San José started without a plan, so it developed in response to commercial and industrial needs. More than half the population of Costa Rica lives here, over a million people. The transportation is terrible, you cannot walk or breathe. This administration decided that it was necessary to reform the city government and to use 10 percent of the sales tax for the municipality. In 1990, Oscar Arias reformed the city governance so that we could create new policies for urban development.

We want to humanize the city. Something that we can do quickly and easily. The Plaza de la Cultura was the first project to attract tourism, and President Carazo got credit, even though President Oduber started it.

Plaza de la Cultura, December 16, 1993—
Interview with Rodolfo Sancho during field trip #4.
I ask Mr. Sancho what he thinks is going on with all the vendors totally covering the plaza (see Photograph 20). He answers:

The 1974 design of the plaza was what was in style. The objective was to save the National Theater. Now what has happened is that the Guatemalan and Honduran vendors have a good lawyer to fight for them, arguing that foreigners have the same rights as Costa Ricans. We have had a year of this; there are at least four or five groups that are still fighting based on the “Bill of Rights.” The result is that the Plaza de la Cultura is full of vendors and is no longer a plaza at all.
CHAPTER TWO

Public Space and Culture

The Case of the Latin American Plaza

The plaza in itself, considered limited in space by its four sides, is the most exquisite expression of social life ever achieved by Man's [sic] city planning and architectural genius. The giant monuments of ancient cultures are grotesque and shapeless imperfections in comparison. The pyramids of Egypt, the palaces of Babylon, the temples of Greece, managed to convey a limited aspect of human life, but in so doing they sacrificed the wholeness of life. For that reason, they always bear within their beauty a mortal and definitive seal of sadness. They are closed circuits, frozen or gruesome perfections, because Man [sic] was never able to fully inhabit them, in spite of all their rich and complex existential temporality and eternity.

In contrast, the plaza affirms and resolves all things that are incompatible to pure reason; it preserves them, and gives them a voice and a future. The simplicity of its space is clearly an invitation to the social and moral freedom of the people. But its fortress-like lines are a definitive reminder that life and freedom can be lived only in a concrete and limited location, for a well-defined purpose. If those limits disappeared, there would be nothing left but the naked countryside, in which nature has absorbed and destroyed the essential freedom of human art and ingenuity.

—FERNANDO GUILLÉN MARTÍNEZ

The Latin American plaza has been an object of aesthetic inspiration and controversy since its inception. Its architectural beauty, political symbolism, and cultural importance have been discussed and debated.
**Part II presents three histories** that provide the background for understanding the historical contingencies, spatial configurations, and political symbolism of the Costa Rican plaza. Part III, Ethnographies, analyzes the specific findings gleaned from twelve years of participant observation and interviewing in Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura and develops a series of theoretical frameworks. The concepts of spatializing culture, social and spatial boundaries, and commodification and demystification of public space organize the data and explain the sociocultural patterns found in these significant urban public spaces.

In Chapter 6, I attempt to "spatialize" culture, that is, to physically and conceptually locate social relations and social practice in space. By employing the perspectives of the social production of space and the social construction of space, I demonstrate how public space becomes meaningful reality to users and urban residents. In Chapter 7, I turn to the idea of spatial boundaries and examine how differences in the use of space define social groups and separate ideological differences through the physical realm of spatial relations. These plazas are inhabited by distinct groups of people who change places and uses throughout the day. The distinctions made between and among groups take on spatial form and ultimately have social consequences.

In Chapter 8, I explore how designed spaces are manipulated for political and economic ends under the guise of their artistic contribution to urban improvement. Plazas are a social good that enhances the life and well-being of urban users and residents, but the improvement of the urban fabric is not the only objective of these highly politicized places. I demystify the objectives of landscape design by analyzing the decision-making processes involved in building the Plaza de la Cultura and in redesigning Parque Central.

**CHAPTER 6**

**Spatializing Culture**

*The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space*

**Introduction**

Contemporary debates concerning ethnographic methodologies and writing strategies emphasize the importance of characterizing social actors in terms of their experience of the theorized phenomena. The coproducers of the ethnography must be given a voice and a place in the written document, and ethnographic research is increasingly judged by its ability to portray the impact of macro- and microprocesses through the "lived experience" of individuals (Appadurai 1992; Rodman 1992). Thus, an effective anthropological theory of the spatialization of culture and human experience must integrate the perspectives of social production and social construction of space, contextualizing the forces that produce it and showing people as social agents constructing their own realities and symbolic meanings. But it must also reflect both of these perspectives in the experience and daily life of individuals.

By "spatialize" I mean: to locate—physically, historically, and conceptually—social relations and social practice in space. In this chapter, I am using the specific analysis of Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura to explore the use of the two complementary perspectives of social production of space and social construction of space as tools for understanding how public space in urban society becomes meaningful reality.

To clarify this discussion, it is important to distinguish between these two terms that are often used interchangeably. The *social production of space* includes all those factors—social, economic, ideological, and tech-
ological—that result, or seek to result, in the physical creation of the material setting. The materialist emphasis of the term social production is useful in defining the historical emergence and political/economic formation of urban space. The term social construction may then be conveniently reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. Thus, the social construction of space is the actual transformation of space—through peoples’ social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting—into scenes and actions that convey meaning. Both processes are social in that both the production and the construction of space are contested and fought over for economic and ideological reasons, and understanding them can help us see how local conflicts over space can be used to uncover and illuminate larger cultural issues.

The contestation over the meaning of the plazas is the focus of this ethnographic inquiry. The plaza as a site of civic expression becomes a space of opposition and resistance in response to state and local efforts at social control. Steve Pile suggests that when we think of “resistance” we think of “unemployed people marching to demonstrate their plight . . . or a lone man standing in front of a tank as it rolls onwards to Tiananmen Square” (1997, 1); these events “take place,” creating “geographies of resistance.” I agree that it is critical to understand the material setting of resistance and to document the events that occur on the plaza. But I am arguing that the contest over public space is also about plaza meaning, which reflects differences in a war of cultural values and visions of appropriate behavior and societal order. Discussions of architectural style, plaza design, and nostalgia are equally important indicators of local struggles for political and social control (and resistance to control) of public space. Thus, this ethnography traces historical and contemporary conflicts in the design, use, image, experience, and meaning of the Costa Rican plazas.

There have been many macrolevel approaches to spatialization. David Harvey (1985, 1990) and Manuel Castells (1983, 1989) examine the spatialization of social conflicts, focusing on class-based struggle with state-imposed spatial regimes. They provide historical and contemporary examples of grassroot and labor organizations fighting to maintain control of housing (Castells 1983), urban sacred space (Harvey 1989), and neighborhood real estate (Castells 1983; see also Smith 1991 and Peattie 1969, 1987). In their analyses, the local population is portrayed as having a role through social movements that resist the control of the dominant classes and planning elite. The concern is with the way in which capital reformulates social relations and space. Within this system, space is constitutive of power, and resistance takes the form of social movements and local activism.

Michel Foucault, in his work on the prison (1975) and in a series of interviews and lectures on space (1984; Rabinow 1984), takes a historical approach to the spatialization of social control through analysis of the human body, spatial arrangements, and architecture. He examines the relationship of power and space by positing architecture as a political “technology” for working out the concerns of government—that is, control and power over individuals—through the spatial “canalization” of everyday life. The aim of such a technology is to create a “docile body” (Foucault 1975, 198) through enclosure and the organization of individuals in space.

Continuing this approach, Paul Rabinow (1989) links the growth of modern forms of political power with the evolution of aesthetic theories and shows how French colonists sought to use architecture and city planning to demonstrate their cultural superiority. He focuses on the ordering of space as a way to understand “the historically variable links between spatial relations, aesthetics, social science, economics, and politics” (Rabinow 1982, 267). James Holston (1989) develops this argument further by examining the state-sponsored architecture and master planning of Brasília as new forms of political domination through which the domains of daily life become the targets for state intervention. These writers successfully illustrate how architecture contributes to the maintenance of power of one group over another at a level that includes both the control of daily movement and the surveillance of the body in space.

Michel de Certeau takes resistance as his starting point, setting out to show how people’s “ways of operating” constitute the means by which users reappropriate space organized by techniques of sociocultural production (1984, xiv). These practices are articulated in the details of everyday life and bring to light the clandestine “tactics” used by groups or individuals “already caught in the nets of ‘discipline’” (De Certeau 1984, xiv–xv). By tracing out the operations of walking, naming, narrating, and remembering the city, he develops a theory of lived space in which spatial practices elude the discipline and constraints of urban planning. The pedestrian’s walking is the spatial acting-out of place, creating and representing public space rather than being subject to it.
In a more ethnographic effort to link human agents and resistance to domination, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) looks at the spatialization of everyday behavior and how the sociospatial order is translated into bodily experience and practice. He proposes the key concept of habitus, a generative and structuring principle of collective strategies and social practices, which is used to reproduce existing structures. In his examples, the Kabyle house becomes the setting in which body space and cosmic space are integrated through metaphor and symbolic homologous structures. Through the experience of living in the spatial symbolism of the home, social structure becomes embodied and naturalized in everyday practice. Since the concept of habitus, like Foucault's dispositif and De Certeau's walking, spatially links social structure to the human body and bodily practices, the possibility of individual resistance to these practices becomes more apparent.

These theories of spatialization provide a basis for working out how spatial analysis would satisfy the anthropologist's need to link experience, practice, and structure. Nonetheless, it is difficult to derive ethnographic research strategies solely from these conceptual approaches. One intermediate step is to identify domains of action and endeavor that allow for empirical analysis. I have chosen to concentrate on the historical emergence of the space, the sociopolitical ideologies and economic forces involved in its production, including the role played by planning and architecture professionals in its design, the social use of the space, and its associated affective and symbolic meanings. To categorize these domains in terms of their generative processes, historical, sociopolitical, economic, and professional understandings refer to social production of space; social use and affective meanings refer to social construction of space (Richardson 1982). I must point out, however, that it is always necessary to keep in mind that this sorting is somewhat illusory. I agree with Henri Lefebvre (1991) that social space is a whole and that any one event or illustration has within it aspects of that whole. The complex and contradictory nature of space is that "space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations" (Lefebvre 1991, 286, cited in Hayden 1995, 31).

In this chapter, then, I examine the theorizing power of these perspectives by focusing on the ethnography of the two Costa Rican plazas. Applying these analytic tools to the ethnographic material, I demonstrate that there is a relationship between the circumstances of the production of public spaces such as plazas and people's experience of them; that this relationship is dialogic rather than dialectic, in spite of the high degree of conflict and contestation often found in the Costa Rican plazas; and that the plazas act as containers, thus permitting resistance, counterresistance, and change to occur publicly and with relative safety. In addition, the negotiation of the form and meaning of spatial representations is illuminating as a public forum for the working out of larger conflicts stemming from the growing impact of globalization, increased tourism, and the struggle by both individuals and the state to maintain a distinct cultural identity.

The Ethnography of the Spanish American Plaza

Parque Central represents Costa Rica's Spanish colonial history in its spatial form and context. Its relatively long history spans the colonial, republican, and modern periods, and a number of historical photographs and portrayals of earlier periods of plaza design and social life were available in local archives. During the research period of 1988 through 1987, Parque Central was a vibrant center of traditional Costa Rican culture, inhabited by a variety of largely male workers, pensioners, preachers and healers, tourists, shoppers, female sex workers, and people who just wanted to sit and watch the action. This chapter focuses on this fieldwork period. When I returned in 1993 and 1994, the plaza was under construction: the cement kiosk was being renovated and the surrounding benches, pathways, and gathering spaces were in the process of being redesigned. By 1997 it had reopened, and its design and use had changed, as discussed in Chapter 8.

The Plaza de la Cultura, a contemporary plaza only one block east and one block north of Parque Central, is a recently designed urban space heralded by Josefino boosters as an emblem of the "new Costa Rican culture." Because it was opened in 1982, I was still able to interview individuals involved in its design and planning, while at the same time it could be studied as a well-established place. The Plaza de la Cultura proved to be an excellent comparison to Parque Central, providing contrasts in style of design, spatial configuration, surrounding buildings and institutions, activities, and the kinds of inhabitants and visitors. It is a site of modern consumption, a so-called landscape of power (Zukin 1991). North American culture is consumed by Costa Rican teenagers carrying radios blaring rap music, and North American tourists "consume" Costa Rican culture by buying souvenirs, snacks,
theater tickets, and artworks as well as the sexual favors and companionship of young Costa Ricans.

These two urban spaces were socially produced—planned, built, designed, and maintained—in different historical and sociopolitical contexts, and both were constrained by limits imposed by the available resources as well as by the central government’s political objectives. The environments thus produced are observably different: Parque Central is a furnished and enclosed space of trees, paths, and benches, while the Plaza de la Cultura is an open expanse with few places to sit, providing a magnificent open vista leading to a view of the National Theater.

These plazas were also socially constructed through contested patterns of use and attributed symbolic meanings. The social uses of the plazas, which at first glance appear similar, are fundamentally different in the age, sex, ethnicity and interests of the users. The degree and form of social contestation and conflict between the regular users and the agents of the municipal government—the police, the planning agency, and the directors of surrounding institutions—also vary, most visibly in terms of the kind of spatial control that is maintained. Even the experience of “being-in-the-plaza” (Richardson 1982) is distinct and voiced in different ways in the two spaces.

The differences in the plazas’ material production and experiential construction have created very different urban spaces that are distinct in physical design as well as use, and that are controlled, experienced, and thought about differently by both users and nonusers. These distinctions provide a vehicle to contrast the ways in which urban space is socially produced, both materially and metaphorically, and socially constructed, through experience and social interaction.

**Parque Central**

The plan and urban design of Parque Central was part of the establishment of the Spanish American colonial empire, which repeatedly created a type of urban space that has continued to be “produced despite the vicesitudes of imperialism, independence and industrialization” (Lefebvre 1991, 151). Its history is a perfect illustration of the production of space in Spanish American towns based on the 1573 Ordinances for Discovery and Settlement, as characterized by Lefebvre:

> The very building of towns thus embodied a plan which would determine the mode of occupation of the territory and define how it was to be reorganized under the administrative and political authority of urban power... The result is a strictly hierarchical organization of space, a gradual progression outward from the town’s centre... from the inevitable Plaza Mayor a grid extends indefinitely in every direction. Each square or rectangular lot has its function assigned to it, while inversely each function is assigned its own place at a greater or lesser distance from the central square: church, administrative buildings, town gates, squares, streets... and so on. (1991, 151)

Lefebvre characterizes the building of Spanish American towns such as San José as the “production of a social space by political power—that is, by violence in the service of economic goals” (1991, 151–152). While I agree with his theoretical analysis, the details of the origins of the plaza-centered grid-plan town deserve further examination.

I argue in Chapter 5 that the Spanish American plaza and grid-plan town are syncretic spatial forms derived from European architectural traditions of medieval bastides, and the Mesoamerican plaza-temples complexes and urban plans of the cities encountered during the conquest of the New World. Many of the earliest Spanish American plazas were in fact superimposed on the ruins of their Aztec or Maya antecedents. The European and Mesoamerican plaza designs had similar aims: both were produced to display military conquest and market domination by the conquering rulers, whether those rulers were Aztec, Maya, or Spanish. Therefore, although the Spanish American plaza is a product of colonial control that was consciously produced as a means of spatial domination, its form also derived from indigenous forms of political and economic control expressed in the Mesoamerican plaza-temples complex. Since the spatial relations of plaza to buildings, hierarchy of spaces, and functions of the plaza remained the same from the Mesoamerican to the Spanish American plaza, the symbolic meanings of the spatialized material culture reflect aspects of both cultural histories.

Parque Central retained its colonial form and meaning until the mid-nineteenth century, when it was redesigned to become the civic center of San José. By the late nineteenth century it became the social center for elite families who met after attending mass at the Catholic cathedral on Sunday mornings and Friday afternoons. It is from this late-nineteenth-century period that there is textual and photographic evidence of class-based social constructions of the appropriate use (and appropri-
ated use) of public space. The accumulated wealth of coffee growers and a republican government made up of landed elite began to impose a class-based conception of public space and spatial representation.

Historical texts, retrospective interviews, and diaries from this period describe Parque Central as a place where the elite would gather and stroll in the evening; at night it was locked and patrolled (Fernández Guardia 1985). However, this elite image is contested in other sources. For instance, photographs from 1870 show workers in open shirts and barefoot boys resting in the plaza (see Photograph 38), and a well-known 1915 portrait of middle-class men with their children sitting on the ledge of the fountain captures a barefoot boy standing on the side of the scene (Banco Nacional de Costa Rica 1972). Photographs from 1917 of street scenes along the fenced edge of the plaza include barefoot campesinos as well as well-dressed urban businessmen (Banco Nacional de Costa Rica 1972); and novels of the period describe street children and poor people living in or along the edges of plaza (Trullás y Aulet 1913).

This conflict between the images of Parque Central as an elite strolling park or a socially heterogeneous public gathering place has continued, manifesting itself most recently in the ongoing resistance to the replacement of the original 1890 kiosk. In 1944, a giant cement kiosk, which housed first a disco nightclub and then a children’s library, was donated by Anastazio Somoza. By now, daily users have incorporated the cement kiosk into their spatial pattern of activities. It makes a convenient stage and a place to continue business on a rainy day. Children play on its ledges, and it is large enough to hold the orchestra and audience for the weekly Sunday concert (see Map 1).

However, as recently as the spring of 1992 there was a movement by a group of citizens to tear down this cement structure and reconstruct the original Victorian one; the conflict was so controversial that it provoked a series of well-attended town meetings. The cement kiosk and its current uses do not fit many Josefinos’ idea of the appropriate architecture for the ceremonial and civic center of the city. Yet the citizens who are attempting to reconstitute Parque Central in its elite turn-of-the-century image are not the daily users or the municipal designers, but are professional and middle-class Josefinos who yearn for an ideal-
Middle-class businessmen and nonusers, however, have generated political pressure to increase the number of police in order to remove "undesirables." Concerned about the increase in crime and vagrancy, which they associate with the ongoing economic crisis, these citizens perceive the resulting rise in the number of people working in the plaza and of homeless people who hang out there, as well as their associated activities, as reflections of their fears. The state therefore is attempting to constrain these uses in several ways. The police maintain open surveillance from the top of the cement kiosk, thus repeating and reiterating Parque Central's colonial history as a public space originally produced as a spatial representation of state domination and social control (see Photograph 39). In addition, there are plainclothes policemen looking for drug dealing and the selling of stolen goods. A young couple moving through the plaza who stopped by to ask what I was doing turned out to be plainclothes police. There are also municipal agents, representing a different kind of state control, who require vendors to pay for the right to sell on city streets and in the plazas. If vendors do not have the money to pay for a license—a frequent occurrence—they forfeit their proceeds for the day.

Many of the older men in the park are Costa Rican pensioners who come to spend the day on their regular benches with a group of cronies.
One pensioner, Don Carlos, says that he is eighty-six years old. He comes to the plaza every day about ten in the morning, after having his coffee, bread, and cheese—"something to nourish one"—at home. He sits with his friends on the southwest corner until the afternoon, and then returns home to eat a late meal. When he was younger, he was employed by the civil police and at one time had worked as a guard in the plaza. He opened the gates at six in the morning and closed them at ten at night. When I asked how the plaza had changed, he replied: "The plaza was more strict before; they locked the gates at night. People of all kinds can come here now, but not before. It was a very polite place then, and not everyone was allowed in." So, access to the plaza is apparently controlled less openly and more subversively than it used to be.

Another example of symbolic contestation in Parque Central lies in the number of evangelical healers and preachers who hold prayer meetings in the shady arbor and healing services on the northwest corner. These evangelical healers and preachers are the result of the influx of North American missionaries who have come to San José to convert Catholic Costa Ricans to various Christian sects. Protestant practitioners and their adherents can be interpreted as symbolically contesting the religious hegemony of the Catholic cathedral that flanks the eastern side of the plaza. Although the original Parque Central was designed as the "front garden" of the Catholic church (Richardson 1978), the diversity of religious beliefs and practices has now reconstituted the space as one of broadly defined religious heterodoxy. The presence of various religious sects, from Hare Krishna followers to born-again Christians, in front of the city's major Catholic institution challenges the professed state Catholicism of the plaza's spatial symbolism.

The experience of the plaza users who say that they enjoy the spectacle of the healing ceremonies—to which successful cures draw large crowds of believers—also contests the hegemony of state Catholicism. One of the more successful healers—a man called the "Christian" who dresses in a robe of rough sackcloth tied with animal skins—appears about noon each day on the northwest corner of the plaza. A crowd of passersby quickly gathers around the raised plant bed where he stands. As the circle forms, he calls out: "Who wants to receive Christ and be healed?" (Photograph 40).

There is no unified experience of being in Parque Central, but fragments of its social production are reproduced in the everyday practices and feelings of its users. Many of the older men express considerable affection for and attachment to the plaza; often the sense of being comfortable is based on memories of being in the park at an earlier time or in different circumstances. One elderly man expressed his feelings when he began to cry upon seeing a giant palm cut down and reminisced about how it felt to sit in the shade of that tree.

Women, however, often express a sense of unease and are rarely found sitting for very long, especially during the week. A woman who sat down next to me gave me her explanation when I asked her if she came there often. She replied: "No, but I am resting because my package is heavy." She said that she lived in an outlying suburb and was on her way home. "I normally only come to the plaza on Sunday," she commented. I asked her why. "Because there are a lot of unemployed men here and women"
are usually working, or if they are not working, they are in the house. Sunday is when women come to Parque Central with their children."

Younger adult men are often found working in the plaza. One man was running his real estate business from a bench: "With the high price of rent, the electricity, water, and everything else, it is difficult to stay in business. Here my clients can find me, and I do not have all these other expenses." Other regular plaza workers include the food, candy, flower, lottery ticket, and newspaper vendors; shoeshine men; gamblers; sex workers; and day laborers waiting for pick-up work in the morning. These working users are territorial about their spaces and defend them both from new workers trying to find a workplace and from casual passersby. When asked about their work, they express satisfaction with their working conditions, and in the case of the shoeshine men, intend to hand down their work location to their children or friends.

Other plaza users come to participate in the illicit world of gambling and the trading and selling of stolen goods. One rainy day, while standing on the kiosk, I watched a well-dressed young man sit down, take off his watch, and show it to the man currently running the "shell game." The man gave him some money while taking the watch. They proceeded to play until the young man finally lost the game, handing the money back to the gambler, who now had both the watch and the cash. As the young man walked away I went up to him and asked him what had happened. He said not much, that he had traded his watch for cash to gamble, but had lost everything. He said that he knew that he would be more successful next time (see Photograph 41).

According to some plaza users, more sex workers now work in Parque Central. One afternoon I was working on a map sitting next to a man who asked me what I was doing. After I told him, I asked him who the women were in front of us. He replied: "Prostitutes, young prostitutes. They come every evening. There seem to be more [of them] than ever now out of economic necessity." I also asked him about why there are so few women in the plaza. He replied that there is increasing unemployment and that the unemployed men in the plaza make women uneasy: "It is the government's fault. Have you heard that they want to build 80,000 houses? You could not even do it physically! And the price supports for farmers and manufacturers just do not work."

Even the clowns who work in Parque Central are concerned about the economic conditions of people who use it. In an interview with two clowns, I commented that they had cut their performance short the day before. The older clown responded by saying that they do not make much money in Parque Central and do better at the Plaza de la Cultura: "Because the people of the Plaza de la Cultura are of a higher social class, and are richer . . . there are more tourists and foreigners. Here in Parque Central they do not have the resources." An older man who had overheard us walked up and said: "I am a pensioner, and I enjoy the clowns and would like to give money, but I do not have enough to even support myself. That is how we are."

The experience of being in the plaza is sensory as well as social. When I returned to study the plaza during the dry season, I noticed that a group of pensioners had moved from the benches on the southwest corner, where I had always seen them, to the inner ring of benches near the kiosk. Until that point the territories of different groups of people had been quite stable in terms of both location and time of day. When I asked them if I had been mistaken to assume that their preferred bench was on the southwest corner, they told me they had sat on that corner for the past five years, but that the noise and fumes from increased bus traffic had become intolerable. The inner ring had benches where it was quieter and smelled better. I also noticed subtle sensory changes in the environment throughout the day: the bird songs early in the morning
and at sunset, the bells of the cathedral at noon, and the smell of roasting candied peanuts and meats that announced the vendors who catered to the evening movie-theater crowd. These sensory perceptions are part of the cultural landscape that is valued, yet these sensations are also being changed.

Thus, the ethnographic evidence for the transformation of Parque Central into a workplace and a place mainly for pensioners and unemployed men during the weekdays shows how the space is being contested by the conflicts over the nature of social and spatial representation in the urban center. The struggle over the design of the kiosk, the number of police and the kind of state control, the increasing territoriality of the vendors and shoeshine men, the discomfort of women and children, and the heterodoxy of religious practitioners illustrate how individuals and groups resist and counterresist the consequences of the larger sociopolitical, economic, and historical forces.

**Plaza de la Cultura**

The second case study, the newly built Plaza de la Cultura, sheds further light on these processes by allowing us to observe how a new public urban space was created and defined, only to be appropriated by a group of users different from those for whom it was intended.

The Plaza de la Cultura is a modern paved plaza reminiscent of the futurist design of the Pompidou Center in Paris (see Photograph 42). Beneath the plaza are subterranean museums, exposition spaces, and the Costa Rican tourist center, entered from the northern edge by a series of grassy, sloping steps. The plaza is bordered on the south by the National Theater; on the west by the Gran Hotel; and on the north and east by busy shopping streets lined with McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Sears, photographic supply stores, bookstores, as well as other local businesses (see Photograph 43). The few trees are in planters lining the western edge alongside the hotel shops, which include a newspaper stand carrying the Miami Herald, a clothing store, and a shop that sells the renowned Costa Rican ice cream, Pops.

The building of the Plaza de la Cultura, introduced in Chapter 3, was an inspiration of the Minister of Culture. At one time, Costa Rica's world-famous collection of Precolumbian gold artifacts was stored in the Central Bank of Costa Rica. In 1975 the head of the Central Bank convinced the Legislative Assembly to allocate funds to build a Gold
Museum in order to display the collection as a celebration of indigenous Costa Rican culture. The plan was supported by the “Liberationists,” members of the political party in power at the time. The National Liberation Party (Partido Liberación Nacional; PLN) represents a politically liberal coalition of professional, middle-class, and working-class Costa Ricans, in contrast to the Social Christians’ Unity Party (Partido Unidad Social de Cristianos), a more conservative party that grew out of earlier political coalitions, including the landed gentry and coffee-growing elite.

The Minister of Planning and the head of the Central Bank selected the land around the National Theater, already partly owned by the Central Bank, as an appropriate site for a cultural center that would accommodate tourists and visitors to the new Gold Museum. Of the thirteen lots needed for the project, three were owned by the Central Bank, two by the National Theater, and the remaining lots were registered to individual citizens or their heirs. According to Edgar Vargas, the architect/planner heading the project, the state purchased the corner lots for 6,900 colones per square meter, and the rest for 5,000 colones per square meter. They tore down the old, turn-of-the-century houses and retained the balconies (balconies) for use in the shopping structure known as “the arcades.” Then they cleaned up the area and put a fence around it. Some structures would remain: the new plaza would incorporate the already existing parquecito (little park) Juan Mora Fernández in front of the Gran Hotel and the shopping structure (Coto 1982). Everything else was demolished, including Librería López (a bookstore), Optica Rivera (an optician’s office), Casino Española (a gambling spot), and other small businesses as well as the homes of a few older residents.

This initial design was radically changed and expanded. According to Minister of Culture Guido Sáenz, when he went to the site to survey the progress of the demolition, he saw the National Theater sitting in an open space created by the destruction of the surrounding buildings. In an instant, he said, he realized that it would be a much more powerful plan to have an open public plaza, with the Gold Museum underground, so that there was an unobstructed view of the National Theater. Thus, the architectural plans for the original Gold Museum were scrapped, and a new phase of planning and design began.

The planning, design, and building of the Plaza de la Cultura began in 1976 and was finished with its opening in 1982. Although some of the buildings selected for demolition, such as the turn-of-the-century houses mentioned above, were deemed of historic significance, the plan moved forward despite local protest. More vigorous protests were expressed in the media, which criticized the government for spending money to put the Gold Museum underground (an expensive and difficult feat of engineering) when a particularly harsh rainy season prevented the project from moving ahead on schedule.

Both the location choice and the design program were produced by a combination of local sociopolitical forces and global, particularly North American, capital. When the plaza was conceived in 1976, global capital was already fueling the Costa Rican economy and the IMF restrictions would soon be in place. Foreign as well as local interests influenced the siting of the plaza—placing it next to the major tourist hotel and the National Theater and in the center of North American businesses such as McDonald’s, Burger King, and Sears, where there was the greatest tourist activity. The design, on the other hand, was influenced by the political ideology of the National Liberation Party, which was under the leadership of a new professional class that desired a representation of Costa Rican culture as both modern, drawing upon contemporary European idioms of design, and indigenous, based on the Pre-Columbian past.

The spatial form and design, however, were ultimately determined by a team of three architects who had won the design competition for the original plan, the above-ground Gold Museum. The architects themselves, although all Costa Rican, represented Costa Rican, European, and North American design training blended to create what they defined as a new Costa Rican design idiom. From my interviews with them, it seems that each had a different vision of the plaza. Further, they produced design features best appreciated from a male point of view (see Map 2).

One architect imagined it to be a plaza where men could watch women walk by, and he designed a vast paved open space, providing the longest sight line in the city for watching women (see Photograph 44). Another architect saw the plaza as a meeting place, symbolically linked to other plazas in the city by a second grid, with pedestrian walkways and trees. He imagined young men leaning on the outside rails of the perimeter piping and put a foot rail just where a man’s foot might rest. The third architect was concerned that the new plaza be a significant open space: “Costa Ricans have their gardens and their parks, and they have their special places, but they do not have a center for jugglers, music, political
imagining has been rapidly appropriated by groups of users. The vast open space is used by street performers, religious singing groups, political speakers, and teenagers break-dancing or playing soccer (to the delight of the third architect). These are all users who did not have a public place before this plaza was constructed, since these activities are not well accommodated by the parklike atmosphere of Parque Central.

In addition, the small plazas created by the designers in front of the National Theater and the Gran Hotel are used by officially licensed vendors with semipermanent stands from which they sell local crafts to tourists. The Gran Hotel generates a seemingly endless stream of tourists who sit on the edges of the plaza watching people from the safety of the hotel's sidewalk café. Women and families bring their children, who run after pigeons and play in the fountain during the afternoon, while in the late evening the plaza becomes a "cruising area" and social meeting place internationally known through guidebooks such as the *Spartacus Guide for Gay Men*.

But, from interviews with key informants and conversations with users and friends, one learns that this tranquility is disrupted by a number of illicit activities that make people perceive the Plaza de la Cultura as
an unsafe and unpleasant place to be. This perception is reinforced in a number of ways: the newspapers regularly run articles reporting frequent mishaps and transgressions and criticizing the municipal government’s management. The hotel bouncer remains posted at the edge of the plaza, ready to protect his customers from the sight of beggars or poor people looking for a place to rest. Official uniformed police stand outside the National Theater and refuse entrance to anyone who looks as if they might cause trouble or incite a disturbance, and when a young man ran by and grabbed a gold chain from the neck of a girl, the police were everywhere within seconds. The intensity of social and spatial control appears even greater than in the Parque Central, more visible, more intensely contested, and as yet unresolved.

The experience of being in the Plaza de la Cultura produced by these conflicting forces is characterized by considerable ambivalence. Non-users uniformly describe the plaza as dangerous, scary, and uncomfortable. The media seem to have influenced many potential users in ways that I find hard to understand, since the bright, sunlit plaza seemed unthreatening to me. Mothers and children do come to this plaza to play with the pigeons or to splash in the low fountain. Many more young men and women, often students, stop by to meet one another or to have lunch or an ice cream cone in the afternoon sun than can be seen in the Parque Central. Tourists seem quite secure and comfortable.

Yet many of my students at the Universidad de Costa Rica were uncomfortable and unwilling to go there, even for a field visit. The one female student who finally did visit was afraid the entire time that a thief was waiting to take her purse. Friends told me that there was drug dealing and that it was a terrible place to be. Most non-users cited examples of robberies, pickpocketing, or uninvited sexual proposals that someone they knew had experienced there. For people who were not familiar with the Plaza de la Cultura, it was not a place to visit, and certainly not a plaza that represents the positive aspects of Costa Rican culture.

Frequent users also had criticisms of the space, even though they admitted to spending a considerable amount of time there. For instance, an artist who said that he spends too much time in the plaza told me that he thinks it is poorly designed: “It should have had a roof—a roof where artists could work and things could happen. This plaza is useless when the weather is forbidding, and it is usually forbidding. We might as well have had a football stadium here.”

Another frequent user—a young man—when asked how he liked the plaza, said that he preferred the Parque Morazán, a small park a few blocks northeast. He said that just young people come to the Plaza de la Cultura and they make a lot of noise and commotion. “Like what?” I asked: “They have radios blaring, shout, and make a scene,” he replied. He prefers the other park, where it is quiet.

Another man, who was sitting with his girlfriend, complained: “The plaza should be for cultured things, not for rudeness, drugs, or radios.” He went on to recount all the performers who had come to the plaza: “The ball man who bounces a ball with his body. The doll, an old woman, who sells violets. A ‘crazy’ man who acts like a truck—these are special. But a plaza is for sitting, watching, talking . . . for music, meetings, and groups, but not for the rest of this stuff.” He went on to say, “If you have a bar and let the wrong kind of person in, even one, then more will come and it will be too late.”

People who work in the Plaza de la Cultura express some of the same ambivalence about working there. While the clowns prefer the crowd because they can collect more money, the vendors complain that they are charged a high fee for putting up a stall in the tourist area. These stalls are carefully regulated by the municipal government and have expanded in numbers over time. During most of the time that I observed the vendors, they sat around, talked, and smoked cigarettes while waiting for the busy Saturday craft market held in front of the National Theater. During my visit in December 1993, however, the plaza was crammed with stalls and vendors, most of whom were illegally selling clothes and souvenirs from other Central American countries. It seems that a Guatemalan vendor, who was fined for selling without a permit, sued the city and is bringing his case to court. He is arguing that the plaza should be a “free market” with no charge for selling in this “democratic” country. So even the vendors are resisting the control of the city to regulate their means of making a living. The Plaza de la Cultura also has a few child workers—young shoeshine boys in front of the Gran Hotel and children who sell gum and candy—who are illegal under Costa Rican law. These young boys—about seven to nine years old—are not found working in Parque Central.

However, there are those who are happy with the plaza, often for very specific reasons. For example, two North American men whom I interviewed in the café next to the plaza said that they like the plaza for one simple reason: it has the best girl-watching view anywhere in San
José. One offered this observation: “You can watch them all the way across the plaza on the left to the end of the hotel plaza. It is a long walk—and the girls are the best here, mostly upper and upper middle class . . . I mean the best for watching. I prefer the lower-class and country girls. They are friendlier, warmer, and it comes from the heart—not stuck-up like the upper-class girls.” The two men talked on, complaining that the benches in the Plaza de la Cultura were not comfortable and that there were no good places to sit, but saying that they meet there every day as part of their daily routine. Another retired North American commented that although the plaza pipe benches were uncomfortable, he liked how friendly the young girls were, and he knew he would find young people there. The Plaza de la Cultura is also near the McDonald’s, which is another teenage hangout: “Imagine a middle-aged guy like me hanging out in a McDonald’s in Kansas City to meet girls. I would be arrested.”

Probably the happiest group are the teenagers who hang out in the evenings along the pipe railing. One young man said he found the spaciousness appealing. “Here,” he said, “we feel at home.” When I asked two young men what they were doing in the plaza, they replied: “Passing the time, shooting the breeze. What do young people do in the U.S.?” Before the creation of this plaza, the teenagers were not a visible part of any park or plaza. You could see them walking down the streets or in couples kissing or quietly talking in Parque España or Parque Morazán. But now they have their own space, designed in a way to create a stage for their nightly performances. And they have successfully appropriated this public space for their activities in the evenings. But, as in Parque Central, the visible presence of the Gran Hotel bouncer and the Guardia Civil (civil police), who question the youths and in some cases stop or detain them, contests their symbolic dominance.

Compared to Parque Central, this recently designed urban space represents and accommodates more modern spatial practices based on youth, foreign capital, tourism, and an ideology of liberal modernism—framed by the localized discourse about the safety and comfort of the plaza. The Plaza de la Cultura is more about the “consumption of culture” than the working landscape of Parque Central. Most important, the forces that produced this new plaza are reflected in its design and social use as well as in the ambivalence about being there. The teenagers and tourists are comfortable, while other Costa Ricans either fear the plaza or wish that it was quieter, calmer, more shaded and sedate.

But in both cases, Parque Central and the Plaza de la Cultura, there is a relationship between what is experienced and socially constructed by the users, and the circumstances that socially produced the space and its current physical form and design. For example, the North American tourists and pensioners gravitate to and feel comfortable in the open plaza that was designed as a Costa Rican advertisement for foreigners, and teenagers identifying with North American rap culture make it their hangout. On the other hand, both tourists and “cool” teenagers avoid the shady Parque Central that in 1992 still retained the parklike design created by the 1890 Costa Rican elite, who reflected an earlier version of Costa Rican culture. The architectural design and furnishings of these plazas are subject to interpretation and manipulation by the users in such a way that the designs and material conditions of these two worlds become cultural representations to the users themselves. Thus, the contestation of the design, furnishings, use, and atmosphere of a plaza becomes a visible public forum for the expression of ongoing cultural conflict and social change. The increasing social differentiation and distance between classes, the widening values gap between age groups, and the changing definitions of gender roles are all captured in the discussions and disagreements over plaza behavior and use. These social changes are investigated further as microgeographies of culture, class, age, and gender in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

In these two examples of Costa Rican plazas, I illustrate how an anthropological approach to the study of urban space would work ethnographically. I have focused on the historical emergence, sociopolitical and economic development, patterns of social use, and experiential meanings of plaza life and design as a means of empirically working out the implications of the broader perspectives of social production of space and social construction of space. The ethnographic illustrations highlight sociopolitical forces, spatial practices, symbolic meanings, and efforts at social control that provide insight into the conflicts that arise as different groups attempt to claim and define these urban spaces. Further, these processes elucidate how the forces and limits of the social production of space and social construction of space are engaged and contested in public space.
To summarize how these complementary perspectives work analytically, I return to the example of the recent conflict over the design and style of the kiosk in Parque Central. As I mentioned, from 1990 through 1992 the city held a series of town meetings to discuss replacing the 1944 modernist cement kiosk with a replica of the previous Victorian wooden one. Many Josefinos argued that the Victorian kiosk was a better representation of Costa Rican cultural values because it evoked a nostalgic image of bourgeois decorum and cultura (culture; see Low 1997b; Richardson 1982, and Chapter 7 of this work). Others, however, argued that the 1944 cement kiosk was part of the city's patrimony and should not be torn down, but instead preserved and improved.

Ultimately the forces for historic preservation won, and the cement kiosk has been restored as the central design element in a redesigned plaza that opened in 1994. This vignette illustrates several key points: (1) the cultural importance of the design of the kiosk, as shown by the fact that citizens staged demonstrations and the government responded with a series of open town meetings; (2) how these two images of a kiosk were materially produced in different historical and political periods and retained symbolic meanings from the periods of their material production; (3) how these spatial representations have taken on new social meanings in the recent struggle between modernization and historic preservation forces in San José; and (4) how this conflict highlights the importance of spatializing culture and human experience as a strategy for understanding people's negotiation of cultural values and representations of those values. Thus, the conflict about and local resistance to change in plaza design tells us about the social divisions and cultural disjunctures in Costa Rican society, and illustrates how the politics of public space attempts to manage these divisions and disruptions and their symbolic expression.

Another important aspect of this sociospatial analysis is the highlighting of the “visible” and “invisible” in public space. Many of the illegal activities that occurred in Parque Central—the prostitution, the drug dealing, and the gambling—were apparently tolerated within the confines of this plaza. The dense foliage and tree cover provided places for clandestine activities that were in some sense “invisible” to the cultural gaze. But with the development of the Plaza de la Cultura as the new ceremonial and cultural center, these same activities were “exposed” by the modern landscape architecture, open design, and increased social scrutiny. The increased visibility of these activities creates an atmosphere characterized by ambivalence, fear, and increasing social sanctions. When faced with the invisible made visible in public space, the state reacts with increased social controls, and if this strategy does not work, it abandons the public space, building a new one where “culture” can be represented in a more pristine form. This effort at social control through design is explored further in Chapter 8.

These insights leave me with a number of questions. Will the public spaces in San José become like those in New York City, with police and guard dogs to keep out homeless persons and drug dealers or designed with benches that do not allow sleeping and ledges with spikes so that you can not sit? Will the plazas of San José become emblematic of social conflict over the presence of disenfranchised people like People’s Park in Berkeley, California (Mitchell 1995), or Tompkins Square in New York City (N. Smith 1996)? Or will the public spaces of San José become centers of so much conflict that they become uncomfortable places to be even in a participatory democracy?
CHAPTER 7

Constructing Difference

The Social and Spatial Boundaries of Everyday Life

Introduction

The concept of spatial boundary often elicits an image of a physical or social barrier, a metaphorical fence or wall that separates and defines space and its use. It seems equally possible, however, that boundaries as such do not really exist and that what we are describing are locales where difference (different people, different ideas, different activities, different land uses) is evident. Gregory Bateson (1972) argues that humans focus on perceived difference as a way to make sense of the world, and that it is difference that creates edges, borders, boundaries, and peripheries. Difference, in fact, gives shape and form to the world by providing the differentiation and features that permit labeling and classification.

This reconceptualization of spatial boundaries implies that territories of influence, such as the workplace of the shoeshine men in Parque Central or the sitting areas of the teenagers in the Plaza de la Cultura, are perceived to be bounded or distinct because the activities and people within the territory are distinct from the people and activities outside of it. The boundary is nothing more than the marked transition from one sphere of control to that of another. This kind of boundary, the locale where differences come together and create something that can be perceived or felt, may take many forms, as it is only there in the sense of a contrast that marks the interface of the spaces. It is the contrast, the difference, that makes the distinction possible. For instance, imagine a plaza where people and social activities were evenly sprinkled throughout space and time. Would one then experience or observe any spatial boundaries? Thus, boundaries are said to exist only where there is difference and contrast.

Boundaries are inherently arbitrary based on cultural rules of difference and differentiation. They are extremely useful, however, in that they allow symbol-dependent humans to order and make sense of the world. Many anthropologists have argued that this ordering is an essential part of human culture and that boundaries and boundary-maintaining systems constitute the most basic forms of social organization and social structure.

Boundaries, however, are also political devices for social control and discipline. In situations of social or political inequality, boundaries may provide the logic for inclusion or exclusion, with tragic consequence for those without power. The history of the genocide of selected groups throughout the world is an adequate reminder of the political consequences of boundary systems used as weapons of repression and war. In the context of geopolitical forces, boundaries are frequently set as a consequence of major conflicts and then become the focus of nationalist and ethnic conflicts for future generations. Moreover, increasing segmentation of populations by nationality, race, class, and gender is essential to the functioning of the global capitalist system, and “as people define themselves nationally and regionally, they are also vociferously defining out other groups” (Mullings 1997, 23). Therefore, how we construct our boundaries has significant impact on both the production of social space and the politics of our daily lives.

To explore the implications of this reconceptualization of spatial boundaries as locales where different people, activities, and ideas come into contact with one another, this chapter examines the microgeographies of everyday life in Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura. These locales are created by the individual temporal and spatial attributes of plaza users whose daily movements and activities define these spaces. As Alan Pred has explained:

Since each of the actions and events consecutively making up the existence of an individual has both temporal and spatial attributes, time geography allows that the biography of a person may be conceptualized and diagrammed at daily or lengthier
scales of observation as an unbroken continuous path through
time-space subject to times of constraint. In time-geographic
terms a project consists of the entire sequence of simple or com-
plex tasks necessary to the completion of any intention-inspired
or goal-oriented behavior. (1984, 256)

The paths and projects of individual plaza users are presented as a series
of population counts, movement maps, and behavioral maps organized
by time and day for each plaza. The overlap of the movement and be-
behavior maps combined with ethnographic description identify a series
of distinct locales that are defined by class, age, and gender.

The growing differences of these locales in terms of the users' class,
gender, and age, and their corresponding social activities are reinforced
by differences in local interpretations of the concept of cultura. These
social, behavioral, and ideological differences have created spatial bound-
daries such that people do not cross from one locale to the other, the
users do not overlap, and their representations of cultural life are seen as
competitive and mutually exclusive.

Based on the ethnographic evidence, I suggest that this differentia-
tion is a constructed spatial representation that symbolizes the chang-
ing nature of Costa Rican ideology and culture. The contrasting and
often conflicting images of the two plazas reflect important differences
in class orientation, gender participation, and generational values that
separate contemporary Costa Ricans socially and politically. These dif-
ferences can be understood through the use of Miles Richardson's con-
cept of cultura in the plaza and Costa Ricans' ongoing public discourse
about culture.

In his study of the plaza in Cartago, Costa Rica, Richardson (1978,
1980) is able to link phenomenologically different places by contrasting
the cultural importance of being "proper" in the plaza with being "smart"
in the marketplace.

The terms cultura (culture) and progreso (progress), which ap-
pear frequently in the conversations of people talking about the
qualities of life in small Spanish-American towns, come close
to expressing the contrast. Cultura is the victory of Spanish-
American civilization over nature and over the bestial aspects
of human behavior. The plaza, by its very greenery and by its
behavior, leisurely strolling under the trees, epitomizes cultura."    
(1980, 226)

He resolves the different images of public life as being separated, yet
integrated, by space and experience. Richardson does not discuss spe-
cific spatial boundaries, but he is concerned with how we know how to
behave and experience places differently while maintaining a sense of
continuity of the experiential world.

This chapter expands Richardson's analysis of the plaza as a place of
cultura by comparing the two central plazas, located a block away from
one another, as different and competing expressions of cultura in San
José. The ethnographic examples illustrate the way in which differences
in users, social activities, built environment, and symbolic intentions
reinforce the contrast between the two places. I argue that it is the dif-
ference between the plazas and between the users and their activities
that constructs the perceived boundaries between the two places, and
that these spatial boundaries mark social and political locales that be-
come concretized over time. Even though they are located almost next
to one another, these two plazas represent distinct facets of Costa Rican
culture—the traditional, Spanish, hierarchical, predominantly older
male, Catholic culture of the past; contrasted to the modern, younger,
male and female, North American culture of the present. And though
symbolic elements of each force their way into both plazas, the heg-
emony of the traditional or the modern ideology of cultura remains. Yet
the class and culture tensions, and fears about social contact and public
expression, continue unresolved, highlighting the political nature of these
cultural expressions.

In San José, cultura is often discussed as a value from the past, a
-cultural ideal that is desired but that conflicts with aspects of modern
life. In order to discuss how cultura remains a cultural theme in the
urban plaza, the everyday life and social behaviors of Parque Central
and Plaza de la Cultura are compared. In this comparison, time, space,
and social activity change the meaning and interpretation of cultura,
reinforcing the contrasting metaphors expressed in the physical design
of each.

**Rhythms of Everyday Life**

Three specific kinds of data were collected and analyzed to describe
everyday plaza life: population counts by gender on a typical (not a
holiday or rainy day) weekday and Sunday, movement maps by gender
at two-hour intervals on a typical day, and behavioral maps of group
activities by time and place. These counts and maps provide quantitu-
tive data and physical evidence of plaza users' activities, supplementing interpretations made based on qualitative sector observations, participant observation, and unstructured interviewing. Taken together, these data identify the locales, paths, and projects that mediate the actions of individual plaza users with the social structural differences and spatial boundaries observed between the two plazas. Thus, individuals produce these social and spatial boundaries by their everyday plaza routines and practices.

**Population Counts**

The plaza populations were counted in fifteen-minute intervals alternating between fifteen minutes before and fifteen minutes after the hour in each. Counts were recorded on a clipboard, transferred to a summary sheet, and then added together by category to complete the analysis. Two people counted at a time whenever possible, one recording women and the other recording men. The results are presented in the following series of population count charts and compared by day of the week and by plaza.

In Parque Central there is so much activity on Sunday that it is hard to see any pattern other than differences in the number and location of men and women, who are spatially separated into distinct concentric rings, with women usually seated and men standing. On Sundays at 10:00 A.M. the band starts playing, drawing a large crowd of men, women, and children who stand on the kiosk or sit on benches to listen. Sunday morning is the only time when there are many people in the park, yet compared to the crowd at 4:00 P.M., there are still fewer women, children, and teenagers present: 30 percent women at 10:00 A.M. compared to 34 percent women at 4:00 P.M., and 16 percent children and teenagers (0–19) in the morning compared to 23 percent children and teenagers (0–19) at 4:00 P.M. (see Table 1).

The total number of people in Parque Central on this Sunday exceeds the weekday by 70 percent, and the composition of the crowd is primarily families and couples rather than single males: 35 percent women on Sunday as compared to 19 percent women during the week (see Tables 1 and 2). Children (ages 0–12) make up 10 percent of the population on Sunday, compared to 3.5 percent during the week, while teenagers and children together (ages 0–19) make up 23 percent of the Sunday population, and only 7 percent on a weekday. The Sunday crowd also fluctuates widely depending on the presence or absence of local entertainment—such as the band playing or the “soccer” man bouncing a ball with his head—that attracts spectators (see Table 1 at 10:00 A.M.). On Sunday there are women in the park throughout the day, making up as much as 42 percent of the total population at 2:00 P.M. (see Table 1). During the week, on the other hand, most women are at home or work in the morning, and do not go out until after the main noon meal is served. There is a steady increase in the proportion of women users throughout the day, with the largest number of women (33%) present at 6:00 P.M. (see Table 2).

Plaza de la Cultura is spatially organized quite differently from the concentric circles of separated men and women in Parque Central. Instead, people arrange themselves in a series of tiers from the most visually exposed to the least visually exposed; the most exposed is the highest tier next to the National Theater and the Gran Hotel, the second is the transitional space between the main plaza and the lower level, and the third is the grassy area in front of the lower area where the tourist office, art gallery, and gold museum are located. The first tier is made up of families, single men and women, and couples; the second, of middle-aged and older men; and the third, of young single men. Edge zones are particularly important and desirable, especially along the railings and on the pipe benches. The edge along Central Avenue is dominated by teenagers at night, but during the day the composition of the group occupying it often changes.

There is also a clear pattern of sun and shade distribution among users and spectators. On sunny days, girls and women eat their lunches sitting in the shade of the fringe of trees alongside the National Theater, while men stand under the trees in the area in front of the National Theater. Students in uniforms, both male and female, and some men reading papers occupy the small bench seats in the shade of the fig trees along the shopping arcade. Only young men sit on the sunny benches along the back ledge watching others cross the plaza.

On Sundays, Plaza de la Cultura is used by more women than men (52% women overall), even in the early morning (see Table 3). Children under twelve years of age make up 25 percent of the total population, and teenagers from ages thirteen to nineteen make up another 33 percent. This unusual population pattern of 52 percent women and 53 percent teenagers and children on Sundays, compared to 35 percent women
and 32 percent teenagers and children on weekdays, provides further evidence that the plaza is perceived as an appropriate and comfortable place for families and, even more important, for mothers and children to relax and play when they have leisure time (see Tables 3 and 4).

On weekdays the most dramatic change in population composition is the appearance of mothers and children in the afternoon (see Table 4). Mothers are free after lunch and their young children are out of school, so they bring them to play in the fountain, chase the pigeons, and then sit on the shaded benches and planter ledges. By 6:00 P.M. on a beautiful evening, Plaza de la Cultura is full of people. On the lowest tier next to the tourist office, couples sit and hold hands, while a young-adult crowd fills the second and intermediate level. On the main plaza, teenagers gather along the planter edge: boys play soccer, interrupted by flirting with girls, or sing accompanied by a blaring radio. Other young people fill the fountain edges, and a few older men and couples remain seated under the fig trees. The population counts reflect these changes: the largest percentage of women (46%) can be found at 2:00 P.M., but the plaza crowd remains 37 percent female even at 6:00 P.M., and the largest percentage of teenagers (39%) is found at 6:00 P.M.

The population patterns found in Plaza de la Cultura are not unlike those of Parque Central except that there are many more women, teenagers, and children on a weekday afternoon and on Sunday. In Parque Central, the percentage of women and children increases on Sunday, but not to the degree in Plaza de la Cultura, since the former is still perceived as the domain of men and workers. The total population of Plaza de la Cultura is also much smaller, only a third of the number of people counted at Parque Central on Sunday (503 compared to 1,583), and half of the number of people counted in Parque Central on a weekday (466 compared to 929).

Overall, then, Parque Central retains the largest number of people, both on Sundays and on weekdays, while Plaza de la Cultura has the highest percentage of women, teenagers, and children, both during the

| Table 1. Population Count of Parque Central, Sunday, August 3, 1986 |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AGE | O-12 | 13-19 | 20-39 | 40-59 | 60-79+ | Totals |
| GENDER | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M |
| 8:00 A.M. | 4 | 2 | 16 | 5 | 16 | 4 | 8 | 14 | 5 | 7 | 15 | 5 | 7 | 15 | 5 | 4 | 71 | 12 |
| 10:00 A.M. | 24 | 7 | 19 | 36 | 50 | 149 | 32 | 92 | 7 | 302 | 132 |
| 12:00 A.M. | 4 | 10 | 8 | 18 | 23 | 17 | 37 | 4 | 25 | 1 | 97 | 50 |
| 2:00 P.M. | 4 | 14 | 9 | 27 | 42 | 49 | 30 | 49 | 7 | 146 | 104 |
| 4:00 P.M. | 24 | 27 | 27 | 28 | 165 | 69 | 70 | 31 | 20 | 1 | 306 | 156 |
| 6:00 P.M. | 5 | 12 | 4 | 12 | 36 | 34 | 46 | 15 | 13 | 0 | 104 | 73 |

| Table 2. Population Count of Parque Central, Thursday, July 31, 1986 |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AGE | O-12 | 13-19 | 20-39 | 40-59 | 60-79+ | Totals |
| GENDER | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M |
| 8:00 A.M. | 0 | 0 | 1 | 0 | 22 | 3 | 35 | 0 | 36 | 1 | 94 | 4 |
| 10:00 A.M. | 3 | 3 | 0 | 1 | 31 | 9 | 43 | 3 | 53 | 0 | 130 | 16 |
| 12:00 A.M. | 2 | 1 | 1 | 2 | 34 | 12 | 85 | 11 | 41 | 4 | 103 | 30 |
| 2:00 P.M. | 4 | 4 | 5 | 4 | 21 | 8 | 79 | 15 | 26 | 5 | 135 | 36 |
| 4:00 P.M. | 4 | 5 | 3 | 8 | 12 | 15 | 75 | 9 | 32 | 1 | 126 | 18 |
| 6:00 P.M. | 1 | 6 | 3 | 0 | 60 | 29 | 27 | 13 | 14 | 4 | 105 | 52 |

| Table 3. Population Count of Plaza de la Cultura, Sunday, August 3, 1986 |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AGE | O-12 | 13-19 | 20-39 | 40-59 | 60-79+ | Totals |
| GENDER | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M |
| 8:00 A.M. | 1 | 2 | 2 | 3 | 3 | 1 | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 5 | 13 |
| 10:00 A.M. | 1 | 4 | 2 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 2 | 16 | 17 |
| 12:00 A.M. | 1 | 1 | 4 | 7 | 5 | 18 | 4 | 4 | 0 | 0 | 24 | 44 |
| 2:00 P.M. | 3 | 8 | 12 | 12 | 17 | 12 | 7 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 16 | 39 |
| 4:00 P.M. | 13 | 14 | 26 | 26 | 30 | 19 | 3 | 8 | 3 | 1 | 75 | 68 |
| 6:00 P.M. | 21 | 19 | 30 | 36 | 16 | 14 | 5 | 10 | 4 | 1 | 76 | 80 |

| Table 4. Population Count of Plaza de la Cultura, Thursday, July 31, 1986 |
|-------------------|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| AGE | O-12 | 13-19 | 20-39 | 40-59 | 60-79+ | Totals |
| GENDER | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M | F | M |
| 8:00 A.M. | 0 | 2 | 0 | 0 | 10 | 2 | 9 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 1 | 24 | 5 |
| 10:00 A.M. | 0 | 4 | 9 | 7 | 9 | 2 | 13 | 4 | 10 | 1 | 41 | 18 |
| 12:00 A.M. | 0 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 51 | 19 | 16 | 3 | 4 | 0 | 71 | 27 |
| 2:00 P.M. | 8 | 12 | 4 | 5 | 23 | 15 | 7 | 7 | 6 | 3 | 50 | 42 |
| 4:00 P.M. | 8 | 8 | 11 | 7 | 18 | 9 | 10 | 5 | 2 | 0 | 49 | 39 |
| 6:00 P.M. | 6 | 7 | 27 | 17 | 32 | 15 | 4 | 3 | 0 | 2 | 105 | 46 |

TOTALS BY SEX M 1,026 F 357 TOTAL BOTH SEXES 1,383
TOTALS BY SEX M 242 F 161 TOTAL BOTH SEXES 503
TOTALS BY SEX M 303 F 163 TOTAL BOTH SEXES 466

TOTALS BY SEX M 753 F 176 TOTAL BOTH SEXES 929
week and on the weekend. Based solely on the population counts, gender and age distributions by day and time differentiate the two public spaces.

Movement Maps
Pedestrian movement in the two plazas is another way to describe the rhythms of everyday life. Movement maps were created by recording the pathway of each pedestrian during a fifteen-minute or thirty-minute observation period. Vicky Riser, a dance ethnologist at the Library of Congress, worked with me to develop a simplified system of notation based on her extensive research experience recording dance in its cultural context. She worked out a system that recorded pathways used, as well as gender and estimated ages of the observed pedestrians. The entrances were rotated throughout the observation period, and notes were made as to who was sitting in the plaza at the time and other significant behavioral details (e.g., the pedestrian shakes another man’s hand as he walks through).

Movement maps were collected from 8:00 A.M. to 6:00 P.M. in both plazas. Maps 3, 4, and 5 record observations in Parque Central on Thursday, July 31, 1986, a day that started out cloudy and damp, but became sunny in the afternoon. At 8:00 A.M. a few men are moving from northwest to east, and from east to west and southwest, while only two women, a young woman and an elderly woman in a pair, journey in a southward route across the park. By 10:00 A.M. more people are crossing and circling, moving from the northwestern to the eastern pathway that faces the cathedral. There are still more men than women, and mostly men are exiting at the southwestern corner (see Map 3). By noon the direction of movement shifts significantly as the majority of people exit at the southwestern corner: these seem to be men and a few women catching the buses that stop along Fourth Avenue (see Map 4). The afternoon is the busiest time, with many more men moving through, mostly in an eastern to southwestern direction. Between 4:00 P.M. and 6:00 P.M. the flow of people reversing their morning journey reaches its peak. People exit both east and west, but the western exit is used predominately by young men going to the bars located on the west-northwestern edge of the park (see Map 5).

The movement maps from Wednesday, June 18, 1986, on the Plaza de la Cultura (Maps 6, 7, and 8) record a similar pattern with an increase in activity from the morning to the early afternoon. One popular pedestrian pathway, from the southwest corner near the entrances to the Gran Hotel and the National Theater to the northeast corner on Central Avenue, is used as a shortcut by people moving in either direction (see Map 6). At 4:00 P.M., however, there is a lull when a sudden rainstorm temporarily stops all activity. Only four young men venture out into the rain during the half-hour observation period (see Map 7). But by 6:00 P.M. activity has picked up again. A secondary pathway, from northwest to southeast, emerges, with men walking in both directions from Pops ice cream store on Central Avenue (northwestern corner) to the lower level of the plaza and Second Avenue, where there is a bus stop that services the eastern part of the city (see Map 8).

Comparing the movement maps of Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura adds another dimension to the way in which the spaces are used and experienced differently. The maps describe “rivers” of movement that make up time-geography paths, segregated for the most part into male and female spheres. When integrated with participant-observation field notes and photographs of people walking, the movement maps indicate that there are two major types of people in each plaza: those who are traveling through the space, and those who have taken up residence by sitting on a bench or leaning on a wall. Many people move from one category to another, of course, but overall there seems to be a residential and a transient population on both plazas.

What is noteworthy, however, is the manner in which the two groups interact with each other, which is different in each plaza. In Plaza de la Cultura, people take up residency in large part to watch the nonresidents and other residents move through the rivers and along the paths. In Parque Central, however, the residents are much less interested in the nonresidents who move through the space. This difference in group interaction illustrates a kind of “closed-society” versus “open-society” behavioral ecology (Wulff and Low 1987). Parque Central, with its internally focused groups of men talking and reading and not necessarily interacting with passersby, could be characterized as a closed society, socially and spatially bounded by cultural rules and notions of tradition and costumbre (custom). Plaza de la Cultura, on the other hand, consists of outwardly focused groups of men and women who are constantly looking around, talking to passersby, and frequently breaking out of the group to meet someone or to join another group.

The design of the Plaza de la Cultura certainly reinforces this openness and increases the possibilities of interacting across groups, while
the shaded, enclosed corners of the pre-1994 Parque Central provide more privacy and seclusion. But the differences observed in the interaction and movement patterns express more than just the design of the space; they represent an example of landscape architecture and the cultural rules reinforcing each type of pattern, and it is difficult to separate out the extent to which each influence plays a determinant role.

The March 25, 1994, opening of the redesigned Parque Central provides additional evidence (see Map 9). The new design required the removal of many trees, paved over most of the grassy areas, replaced and relocated three-person benches with two-person ones, and added wide expanses of pedestrian walkways. A series of telephone booths plus the police station and art gallery appropriated spaces for municipal use. The remaining hard landscape is much more open and does not offer residents the same sense of privacy.

Nonetheless, some of the Costa Rican pensioners are still there, along with the photographers, only one shoeshine man, and a few sex workers. At the same time, though, real changes have occurred: young Nicaraguan domestic workers predominate on Sundays, and they spend most of their time looking for friends and joining other groups. The socioeconomic changes created by the economic crisis and the influx of Nica-
raguan refugees discussed in Chapter 3 can be seen in the spatial appropriation of the redesigned Parque Central on Sunday. Furthermore, juvenile gangs take possession of Parque Central at 5:00 P.M. now that the shoeshine men have been cleared out. It seems that the redesigned spaces afford new social "niches." Thus, it appears that the reclaiming of Parque Central by its traditional groups of Costa Rican men has been only minimally successful, while the modern curved benches of the new design accommodate the newest residents. The "closed society" of Parque Central has been partially transformed by its new design, yet it retains elements of its original movement and interaction patterns in the remaining shaded spaces that allow for sitting and talking.

**Behavioral Maps**

Although the plazas are very different in history, design, and representation, the daily activities that occur there are similar. Yet the people who perform these activities are again quite different. These different groups of people define the public space of the plaza in terms of their distinct social worlds. This difference is significant in that these users—and their
distinct social worlds—socially construct an "out-of-awareness" (nondiscursive) boundary-maintaining system. For instance, older men and women, female prostitutes, shoeshine men, and gamblers are almost exclusively found in Parque Central. On the other hand, tourists, young women and children, students in uniforms, teenagers with boom boxes, and North American pensioners are almost exclusively found on the Plaza de la Cultura.

The following description of a sunny weekday in January 1987 illustrates the similarities and differences. Observations were made continuously and in timed samples recorded on behavioral maps from 8:00 A.M. until 10:00 P.M., although the majority of activity occurred during the late morning, afternoon, and early evening. A few of the behavioral maps are included to illustrate the points made; however, the bulk of the maps were used as the database for this summary. The maps were drawn on 8 1/2-by-11-inch plaza plans using black ink and colored pencils to record various ongoing behaviors and locations of individuals. Since the colored-pencil data could not be reproduced here, circles and written descriptions are used in an attempt to convey the richer data of the originals.

Parque Central

In Parque Central, morning is a time for men to sit and read the newspaper. By 10:00 A.M. almost every bench is filled with an adult man reading his paper (see Map 10). The shoeshine business in the northeast corner is slow, and vendors of fruit and lottery tickets are not doing much business. The passersby are mainly on their way to the bus or shopping. The most active person is the municipal employee who sweeps the sidewalks and picks up fallen leaves and trash.

By noon the tempo has picked up (see Map 11). The men on their benches are joined by friends who talk animatedly as the walkways fill with men and women meeting for lunch or catching the bus home. The healer starts his routine in the northwest corner, and the missionaries set up under the arbor. One group of elderly men leave Parque Central at this time to go home for lunch and their siesta and do not return. Others leave but will return after their lunch. As one seventy-year-old man said: "The plaza is my place of employment now that I no longer work. I am underfoot at home. The house is my wife's domain, and I feel better being out of the house during the day."

In the afternoon, a few older women appear, bringing their children to the library, shopping with friends, or resting from a busy morning in town (see Map 12). The shoeshine business is at its peak as middle-class men stop to get their shoes shined on their way back to work. Sometimes during the midafternoon a clown and his assistant begin their routine telling jokes on the kiosk platform. Vendors of ice cream, peanuts, candy, and snow cones circulate along the edge of the crowd. The police walk by in pairs, stop and watch for a while, and then continue on their patrol of the street.

By 4:00 P.M. most of the older men have left, and young and middle-aged couples meet in Parque Central for coffee or to take the bus home. The number of women is the highest at this time, still only making up about 20 to 30 percent of the population, but very different from the all-male reading period of the morning. At 6:00 P.M. the light begins to fade and the air is cooler (see Map 13). A new group of vendors with carts of hot corn or skewered beef appear on the edge of the sidewalk. As couples circumambulate around the kiosk, they stop to buy food and talk to the vendors, drawn by the smell of the sizzling grilled beef.

At 7:00 P.M. it becomes quiet. The shoeshine men have left for the day, and only a few couples, some single young men, and the vendors
remain. If it is a nice evening, more people will wander by on their way to the Rex Cinema or to have a drink in the Soda Palace. A small group of street kids run by trying to beg money from a passing gringo, and tired young prostitutes sit under the arbor waiting for business. By now the lines of the buses are not as long, and tired workers wait in groups talking about the day or buying lottery tickets from the corner vendors. Later in the evening, between 9:00 P.M. and 10:00 P.M., Parque Central is almost completely deserted except for one or two solitary men sitting on the benches or walking slowly down the paths. Even later, men from the countryside, drunk and sleepy, may find their way from the cheap bars surrounding the central market to sleep relatively undisturbed on the park benches until morning.

One footnote must be added to this description. The redesign of Parque Central instituted a new set of municipal laws about what could be sold and who could be there. As of January 1997, only one shoeshine man was working on the plaza, while a few remained across the street, and the number of vendors was restricted. From my observations, it still looked as if people were selling candy as well as the ubiquitous lottery tickets. The uniformed police did not stop the vendors that I saw; however, overall there were many fewer vendors than in 1987.

Plaza de la Cultura

In the Plaza de la Cultura the day also starts slowly. During the morning there are very few people, usually just a couple of men or male tourists reading a newspaper in the sun, and a group of green-uniformed plaza employees who sweep and empty the trash cans. Sunday is a little busier, with the artisan market for the tourists, but even then there is little activity.

About noon the older North Americans, known as gringos verdes, or “green” Yankees, appear in their baseball hats, sunburns, and smiles (see Map 14). They will stay for most of the afternoon waiting for girls or watching those that walk by. These men are a mixture of regular tourists who come each winter to enjoy the weather and pensionados, North Americans who have elected to retire to Costa Rica full-time. Attracted by tax advantages and other benefits from the Costa Rican government, they live off their guaranteed monthly pensions from the United States or Canada. Students, young office workers, and friends sometimes stop to have their lunch in the plaza or to buy ice cream at the nearby Pops and sit a moment to finish eating. Tourists are in the café having lunch

or wandering in front of the National Theater buying souvenirs or taking pictures.

By 2:00 P.M., the pace quickens as more and more office workers return to work walking through the plaza on their way from the bus stop. Young mothers and children stop to look at the fountain or to play with the pigeons during a shopping outing. Students, finished with classes, stop to meet friends while they are still in their school uniforms. On some afternoons a clown and his wife/assistant or a Peruvian musical group may come by. The clown performs almost in the center of the plaza, attracting children and their parents as well as the downtown office crowd. The Peruvian singers play in the tourist area and draw a crowd of tourists and young adult Costa Ricans. Later, an evangelical group with guitars, singing popular songs in praise of Jesus, might entertain a bored teenage crowd (see Photograph 45).

At 4:00 P.M., the gringos leave for their afternoon coffee and rest, and many of the families start on their way home (see Map 15). By 5:00 P.M., or so, teenagers in blue jeans begin to appear (see Map 16). They play music on portable radios or tape decks, dance, and even start soccer games on the far end of the main open space. They are the major occupants until the National Theater opens at 8:00 P.M. Sometimes there are special evening events, such as a tribute to local high school bands or a radio interview of teenagers who are there. If there is no performance at the National Theater, the plaza becomes quiet by 8:00 P.M. as the teenagers leave to go on to their evening destinations. Later in the evening, after 9:00 P.M., single men gather on the lower plaza near the theater ticket window to meet and talk. Groups of young men often wander by or stop to smoke marijuana. In a few cases, policemen passed by and arrested one of the young men, either for drinking or having drugs on him. The encounters were brief, however, and carried out in hushed tones. The atmosphere in the lower plaza seemed to me to be more relaxed than frightening as the men shared their thoughts and waited to meet friends.

It is apparent from these two descriptions that the activities of reading, talking, eating, and meeting friends are the same. Both plazas are dominated by men and their related activities of reading, sitting, watching, and talking in the morning, and accommodate women, families and children, and couples in the afternoon. They both have vendors who sell flowers, food, and trinkets; people who provide personal ser-
vices; entertainers who sing or clown; and preachers of various denominations. They are both surrounded by cafés where users can go to get inside from the rain or sun or where nonusers can simply survey the scene. They both have a small number of people who want to lay claim to the space but who are considered by some to be undesirable occupants, such as people begging, prostitutes, homeless people, drug dealers, and gaffers. Police who patrol and maintainence people who clean up the trash are also there representing the municipal social order.

What seems more important, however, is not that the activities are the same—although this sameness may indicate some common cultural response to the use of public space—but that the activities take on such different forms and meanings and are performed by such different people. For example, the cafés of Parque Central are populated only by men—when an unaccompanied woman enters one of these cafés, it causes a minor stir. The cafés on the Plaza de la Cultura, on the other hand, are frequented by both men and women, usually tourists and upper- or middle-class Costa Ricans. The prostitutes in Parque Central are young female Costa Ricans who are professionals and who solicit men of all ages and nationalities. The young women who meet men in the Plaza de la Cultura, however, call themselves *touretas*, which I was told means that they engage in sex in exchange for a nice meal or clothes, but not for money or as a professional occupation. The *touretas* are involved mostly with older men, often North American pensioners or tourists who come to Costa Rica searching for very young women and for a sexual, and sometimes loving, relationship. The expectations of both the older men and the young women vary from romantic to mercenary, and the reality of the relationships vary as well. Vilma Loria’s story of a Costa Rican returning home who is robbed and “rolled” by a woman he meets in the Plaza de la Cultura portrays some of the ambiguity of the situation (see Chapter 3 for the complete short story).

Other examples of the contrast in the expression of social activities include what is sold: tourist items, popcorn, and balloons in the Plaza de la Cultura versus lottery tickets, food, and newspapers in Parque Central; the difference in the green-uniformed maintenance men in the plaza and the municipal maintenance man’s rag shirt in Parque Central; the presence of a large number of foreigners in the Plaza de la Cultura and the absence of many foreigners in Parque Central. The contrast can be summarized as the emerging social divisions between young and old,
foreign and local, lower and middle class, and male and female that are now spatially and temporally distributed across the two plazas.

These differences in expression reiterate the historical and physical comparison, that is, the separation between an identification with modern North American or international culture in the Plaza de la Cultura and the maintenance of a more traditional Costa Rican identity in Parque Central. Taken together, yet separated and bounded by their difference, the two plazas express the contemporary dimensions, contradictions, and tensions of Costa Rican culture.

The new plaza, built only one block northeast of Parque Central, was to be a reflection of contemporary culture based on different values and by its difference, created a "symbolic space," a "spatial boundary" between the images of Costa Rican culture produced in these two places. The social boundary that separates these two worlds is one that is constructed more by the contrast than by any physical or social barrier that exists between the two plazas. In fact, one would think that the shoe shine men, the pensioners, the couples, and the vendors would travel between the two plazas, depending on weather, business, and amount of crime or disturbance that might exist in either place. Yet the residents of Parque Central remain firmly in place and regard the new plaza as suspect. They say that the new plaza is an uncomfortable place where the "wrong" people hang out, while the residents of the Plaza de la Cultura describe Parque Central as dark and dangerous. One explanation for this separation of the two places is that the new plaza has, in fact, been successful in reconstituting Costa Rican culture with a different image, and has succeeded in disenfranchising the older, more traditional representation of social life presented in Parque Central.

Thus, the contrast between the two plazas is significant; their histories, design, and users are in many ways distinct. Within Parque Central there is very little contested space because a long-term pattern of users and activities has built up over the years. New activities such as the Christian healing are accommodated either at the edges of the plaza or through the reallocation of space in time. The Plaza de la Cultura, however, is still a highly contested arena; tourism and the Costa Rican image of culture conflict with the nightly appropriation by "cruising." The separation between the two plazas is a cultural gulf, with older retired and working men dominating one scene, and students, young women, women and children, tourists, and teenagers enjoying the other. Both are Costa Rican representations of culture, but they represent different
versions of that cultural goal. There is an invisible boundary between them, yet their commonalities link them. Culture is not some homogeneous set of rules for life, but is made up of conflicting and fluctuating images and aspirations.

**Conclusion**

The behavioral maps complete the time-space descriptions begun with the population counts and movement maps. While the movement maps describe paths that link walking individuals with gender segregation in Parque Central, the behavioral maps record individual projects such as men shoeing shoes, elderly pensioners meeting to talk, or teenagers playing soccer. The accretion of multiple paths and projects located in space and time links the individual activities to age, gender, and class differences found in the two plazas. Over time these differences become naturalized, as has been argued by Pierre Bourdieu (1977), and perceived as social reality. Thus, individual paths and projects are transformed into cultural norms for behavior reenacted in daily social practices.

These microgeographies demonstrate how plaza meanings are socially constructed through historically constituted social practices, political ideologies, users’ behaviors, group activities, and urban design to represent and reproduce distinct aspects of Costa Rican culture. This social construction occurs through the historical and sociopolitical forces that created each plaza (discussed in Chapter 6) and through the paths and projects that create the distinct social worlds presented here. These differences are reinforced by the social practices of the people who inhabit these spaces.

The social and spatial boundaries that separate these two spheres, which are so physically close yet so culturally different, are social constructions that are meaningful at the level of lived experience of everyday life. They provide clues as to the significant schisms in what otherwise seems like a very homogeneous culture.

For example, culturally ideal gender roles in which the woman/housewife stays at home and the man/provider goes out to work and into the public realm of the plaza are breaking down as women are needing or wanting to work in response to changes in the political economy. The cultural norms of Parque Central restricted women’s attendance to Sundays and late afternoons and to being accompanied by their partners or children, leaving them without a public space. Thus, the Plaza de la Cultura has become an important alternative space and a means of expressing this new cultural definition of gender roles.

In a similar vein, the social status of being a teenager has become more important with the influx of North American capital and culture that includes age-specific modes of dress, music, and behavior. Before the 1970s most teenagers were working adults. I remember interviewing adolescents from 1972 through 1974 who said that after the sixth grade (age 12 or 13) they were expected to go to work. In the countryside and in very poor urban households, this expectation may still hold, but in the city most San José teenagers go to school and many hang out to meet their friends. The Plaza de la Cultura provides the new public space necessary for this change in culturally proscribed behavior, and its open design allows for the possibility of dancing and playing soccer in the urban center.

The increasing social divisions and socioeconomic inequality resulting from the impact of global market forces, the influx of North American capital, local economic crises, and shifts in modes of production have also resulted in the segmentation and redefinition of the Costa Rican class system. This segmentation can be seen in the differences in cultural ideals reflected in the notion of cultura. The traditional myth that “Costa Rica es diferente,” that Costa Rica was historically a country of small farmers that produced an egalitarian class structure, has been disrupted by obvious differences in wealth, increasing segregation of residential neighborhoods, increasing unemployment and underemployment, and the dismantling of the legislated safety net of social security, basic food subsidies, and other social welfare programs. Older Costa Ricans will still tell you that “we are all middle class” if you ask about class structure, but increasingly young people and the disenfranchised point out that things are changing, and that while everyone may be the same politically, they no longer are in terms of wealth. These changes in class are also expressed in the discourse concerning behavior and activities in the plazas and are captured in the cultural metaphor and social sanction of cultura. Thus, class, gender, and age differences separate these two socially and spatially bounded domains, as well as the cultural notion of cultura.

This exploration of spatial boundaries also reveals a secondary theme of how imperfectly concepts of culture are realized. The introduction of a new cultural image was intended to be a sociopolitical statement resolving the problems of socioeconomic change that were altering the sense of cultura in Parque Central. But social problems have reappeared on the Plaza de la Cultura, and the design, instead of representing cultura, exposes other cultural goals and reflects the underlying structural changes in Costa Rican society.