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# Between Cultures: Public Space in Tijuana

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Architectural expressions of public life are deeply rooted in the history of Mexican cities. The first great plazas of the Americas, vast public spaces surrounded by temples or towering stone pyramids, were consistent features in pre-Hispanic indigenous settlements, especially those crafted by the Olmec, Toltec, Mayan and Aztec cultures.<sup>1</sup> The sprawling open plaza in Monte Alban, an ancient Zapotec city in the valley of Oaxaca, has been described as “one of the loveliest civic areas ever created by man, and certainly the most beautiful in America.”<sup>2</sup>

The public plaza was accorded official recognition as an important civic location during the period of Spanish colonial rule in Latin America. King Philip II of Spain, in a series of strict royal ordinances passed on to the colonists in 1573, proclaimed that every new town would have a central public square, or Plaza de Armas, which would be the fulcrum of town life and the main location of important public and religious buildings.

For more than three centuries, plazas have served as the most vital arena for public life in Mexican and Latin American cities. They have been embellished by kiosks, park benches, fountains and trees, and surrounded by arcade-covered sidewalks. Even in the

Background: Aerial view of Tijuana looking south from U.S.-Mexico border.

© Aerial Fotobank.

Opposite page, top: Ruins in Teotihuacan.

Opposite page, bottom: Plaza in Guadalajara. Courtesy Mexican Government Tourism Office.



twentieth century, as the pressures of population expansion have combined with changing transportation technology to alter urban structure, the public plaza (or *zocalo*, as it has come to be called in Mexico) continues to thrive as a locus for public life. Public space — plazas, parks and the street — remains embedded in the civic conscience of contemporary urban Mexico.

### Urban Public Space along the Northern Mexican Border

The cities of Mexico's northern border region, isolated from mainstream Mexican culture by distance, evolved under unique circumstances.<sup>3</sup> To understand the changing design and nature of public space in a border city like Tijuana requires that one sort out the varying

and often conflicting impacts the different cultures, Mexican and Anglo-American, have had on this region.

Like other towns on Mexico's northern edge, Tijuana languished as a small, insignificant settlement, nothing more than a *rancho*, or cattle-ranching village, well into the nineteenth century. Its birth as a town can be traced to the 1880s, the era of a land boom in Southern California. Two wealthy Mexican families, who lived in California and hoped to extend that boom south of the border, hired engineer Ricardo Orozco to create an ambitious plan for the town. The site they chose was adjacent to the international boundary, near a small border crossing and customs house, flat and easily buildable, and owned by one of the families.

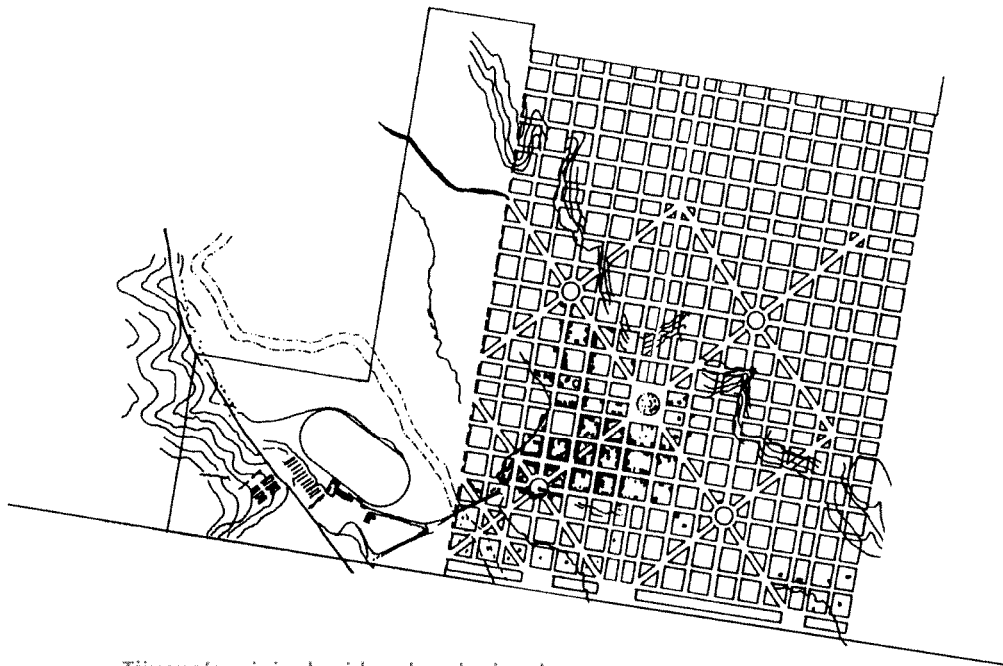
Orozco had worked for a California real estate company and was clearly influenced by the U.S design profession. It is not surprising that his 1889 plan for Tijuana combined the radial street designs in vogue in the rapidly growing western U.S. with the traditional Mexican plaza-centric plan.<sup>4</sup> The resulting hybrid urban design included one large central plaza and four smaller ones. The tradition of the Mexican Plaza de Armas was to continue along the northern border.

But Tijuana quickly parted ways with older Mexican cities. During the first three decades of the city's growth it became clear that Tijuana's emerging commercial character would not conform with the 1889 plan. By 1921, Tijuana had become a dynamic center for trade with its northern neighbor and for tourism. Commercial uses began to cluster in the northeastern corner of town, near the international border crossing, rather than around the main plaza that had been designated in the plan. The radial streets and plazas



fell into disuse. The city's form evolved with a compact geometry, which facilitated the provision of tourism services in a concentrated, accessible space, and with a series of commercial ribbons — arteries that facilitated travel back and forth across the border.

During the 1920s, Prohibition in the U.S. further accelerated Tijuana's evolution into a commercial zone by adding new activities like gambling, bars and cabarets. In the Tijuana of the "Roaring Twenties," traditional Mexican public spaces were quickly forgotten as the emphasis shifted to expanding the service economy and improving circulation for tourists. Calle Revolucion, lined with wooden *cantinas* and dancing halls, became the functional center of town. In Orozco's 1889 design the street had originally connected two plazas; now the plazas were disappearing and only one public space, a park called Teniente Guerrero, west the downtown area, would survive the fervent tourism boom.



Tijuana's original grid and early development (above), compared to its urban core today (opposite page). Historic map from *Diagnostico especial de la mancha urbana en la Ciudad de Tijuana*. Courtesy the New York Public Library, Astor, Lenox and Tilden foundations. Photo © Aerial Fotobank.

Mexico  
Border  
United States

River Zone   Plaza Rio Tijuana   Centro Cultural de Tijuana   Original Grid



### Public Space in Tijuana in the Late Twentieth Century

Between 1950 and 1990, Tijuana was among the fastest growing cities in the Americas, its population increasing from 65,364 in 1950 to nearly 1.5 million in 1990. The expansion, fueled mainly by migration within Mexico, placed enormous strains on the city's physical form, which by the 1980s was one of increasing decentralization and spontaneous growth. Within this amorphous geometry, the city's design continued to respond strongly to the commercial economy and its links with the United States. Partly because automobile ownership increased after 1950 and because Southern California's freeway-oriented planning practices and culture diffused across the border, Tijuana increasingly became a city oriented along commercial boulevards.

In Tijuana, much like in other North American cities, the public

plaza has largely been eclipsed by the quintessential late-twentieth-century private plaza: the shopping mall. A brief survey of Tijuana's vital public spaces today corroborates this point, although it also reveals some important exceptions.

The city's largest and most vibrant public space is Plaza Rio Tijuana, a private outdoor shopping mall completed in 1982 and located in Tijuana's heavily travelled River Zone, a linear wedge of office buildings and shopping centers with high-speed traffic corridors running through it. The plaza is built along the line of a modernist Southern California outdoor regional shopping mall, with a cluster of stores surrounded by a vast ocean of parking lots. It is anchored by three large department stores (two are Mexican companies, the other is Sears), a triplex movie theater, restaurants and an array of smaller shops that, as in the U.S., sell everything from designer

clothing to books, records, shoes, athletic equipment and pastries.

The mall's design enables its shoppers, most of whom are middle- and upper-class and most of whom arrive by car, to actively use its open-air public spaces. These spaces consist of sunken plazas and courtyards decorated in two-toned brown tile, and all of them contain ample seating and landscaping. The spaces are carefully maintained and tend to be heavily used for casual eating, with food supplied by numerous concessions. Plaza Rio Tijuana's tremendous popularity, however, may have less to do with its design than with the fact that it offers the kind of stores and quality of goods that Mexican consumers learned to prefer from their shopping experiences in the United States.

More specialized shopping centers in Tijuana have been far less successful. Plaza Fiesta, completed in 1986 and also in the River Zone, seeks to re-cre-



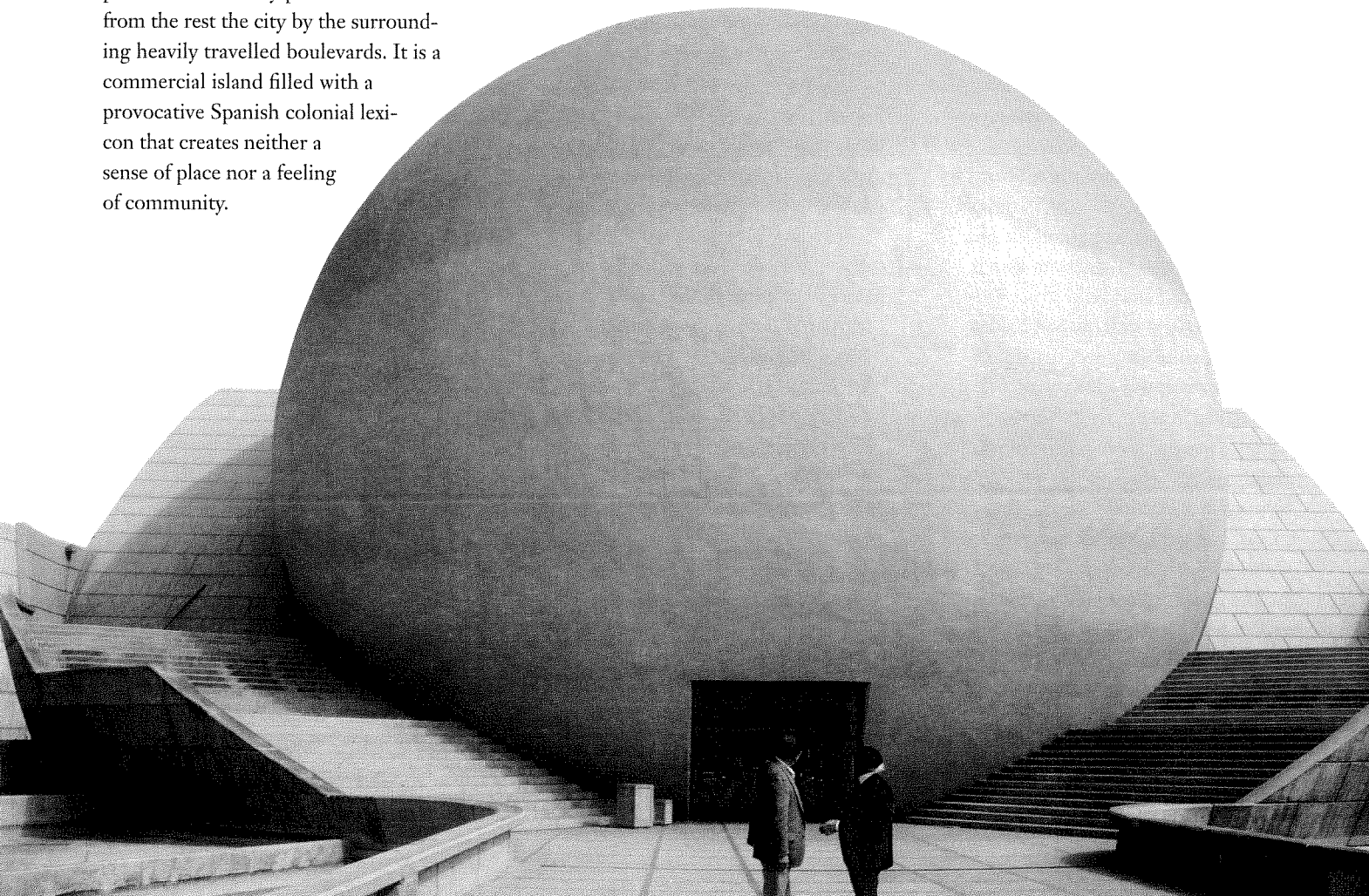
Plaza Rio Tijuana, a regional shopping mall, has courtyards and pedestrian spaces that are heavily utilized by city dwellers. Courtesy Lawrence A. Herzog.

ate the lively ambience of a Spanish colonial town (some speculate the developers had Guanajuato in mind) by providing a space dominated by outdoor cafes and restaurants. The site plan consists of two rectangular rings of stores, one nested inside the other, with the space between designed to resemble a series of colonial streets and small plazas. The buildings are white stucco with pseudo-arcaded facades and second-floor balconies with iron railings and lanterns; the public areas have fountains and imitation *kioscos*.

There is very little public seating; users of these spaces are primarily those who sit under the brightly colored awnings and umbrellas of costly outdoor cafes or restaurants. The center offers live entertainment in the evening, but it is largely underutilized, claustrophobic and not very public. It is cut off from the rest of the city by the surrounding heavily travelled boulevards. It is a commercial island filled with a provocative Spanish colonial lexicon that creates neither a sense of place nor a feeling of community.



Above and below: The Centro Cultural de Tijuana, which recalls the grand plazas of Mexico's indigenous cultures, also is a setting for public life today. Courtesy Manuel Rosen.



There may still be hope for the memory of spontaneous public life in Tijuana, though. One fine example of a contemporary public space is the outdoor plaza in the Centro Cultural de Tijuana museum complex designed in 1982 by architects Pedro Ramirez Vazquez and Manuel Rosen. The architects believed the museum would be more exciting if it included a usable outdoor space.<sup>5</sup> The one they created has touches of the indigenous ceremonial plazas, empowered by the massive concrete walls of the museum and a globe-shaped amphitheater. The space is generously used by pedestrians, school children and museum visitors. Taxis stop and pick up nearby; vendors sell tacos, hot dogs, sandwiches, ice cream and juices. Unfortunately, it is mainly utilized as a function of the presence of the museum and has yet to take on a life of its own, primarily because the site is hard to reach on foot.

In downtown Tijuana, two public spaces remain: the shopping streets and the old Parque Teniente Guerrero. Calle Revolucion (Revolution Street) is a pedestrian artery that is an island of intensive tourist activities: nightclubs, shopping arcades, restaurants, stands selling artisans' work, and street vendors; it connects with the San Ysidro border crossing via a pedestrian walkway. The street was substantially remodelled in the early 1980s to enhance its appeal to tourists: sidewalks and the street itself were widened, iron benches installed, colorful flags hung, special bus stops created. Surrounding buildings were modernized, their facades repainted in bright pastel shades, while new glass-box style stores and office buildings were built (although at a scale that allows the streetscape to retain its vitality).

One block west is Calle Constitucion, the main pedestrian

shopping street for Mexican consumers. This busy corridor of retail stores, small eateries and service businesses is oriented toward Tijuana's large middle and working class. Its buildings are not glitzy or carnival-like, as on Revolucion, but simple and austere. Although the street is in the heart of the downtown business district, it is not pedestrian friendly: The sidewalks are narrow and the street is crammed with vehicles, since it is an artery for the municipal bus system and for trucks delivering goods.

The second major public space in downtown Tijuana, Parque Teniente Guerrero, emerged near one of the original secondary plazas from the 1889 urban plan. The park, established in its current location and expanded to cover an entire city block in the 1920s, consists of radial pedestrian paths leading into a central square (mirroring the original town plan) with a *kiosco*. Along the perimeter are iron benches and a series of green spaces bordered by well-manicured hedges, a variety of lush tropical plants, and trees (all carefully painted white on the lower portions).

In a city largely devoid of open space, Teniente Guerrero remains essential. Although the park does not serve the larger city, it is a well-maintained neighborhood public space used by residents of the downtown zone. At dusk, it comes alive with children on bicycles, young couples, pigeons, vendors selling elote (corn on the cob) and shoeshine stands. It is Tijuana's throwback to the colonial *zocalos* that have generally been well preserved in Mexican cities in the interior.

### Places Pulled between Two Cultures

Public space in Tijuana may be a fitting metaphor for the city as a whole, which has been pulled between two cultures,

Mexican and U.S., since its birth. At its inception, Tijuana sought to preserve the past by configuring itself as a city of public plazas. But these plazas and the spontaneous urban public life they symbolized disappeared in the first decades of the twentieth century when an architecture of North American consumption swept through. In the 1950s and 1960s, the automobile arrived and Tijuana's public life was pulled into private shopping malls and pushed onto a few downtown shopping streets.

Like its neighbor, Southern California, modern Tijuana is a highly fragmented space in which continuous pedestrian movement is not possible. Communities and pedestrian zones are arrayed like islands floating on the superstructure of a diffuse, highway-oriented commercial metropolis. Perhaps, though the town square has disappeared, one can find hope in the fact that the memory of vibrant public spaces did not. Architects like Pedro Ramirez Vazquez and Manuel Rosen have kept it alive in civic building. Residents have kept it alive by actively utilizing the oldest park/plaza in the downtown area.

### Notes

1. See Doris Heyden and Paul Gendrop, *Pre-Columbian Architecture of Mesoamerica* (New York: Electa/Rizzoli, 1988).

2. Jorge Hardoy, *Ciudades Precolombinas* (Buenos Aires: Ediciones Infinito, 1964), 138.

3. See Lawrence A. Herzog, *Where North Meets South: Cities, Space and Politics on the U.S.-Mexican Border* (Austin: CMAS/University of Texas Press, 1990).

4. See David Pinera, *Historia de Tijuana* (Tijuana: Centro de Investigaciones Historicas UNAM-UABC, 1985).

5. See Lawrence A. Herzog, "Driven By Shame," *San Diego Reader* (13 June 1991), 10-14.



A tourist-oriented street in downtown Tijuana. Courtesy Sandy Huffaker.



Parque Teniente Guerrero, a public plaza reminiscent of the colonial *zocalo*, is Tijuana's link to the past. Courtesy Lawrence A. Herzog.

Plaza Fiesta, a shopping center designed to be reminiscent of colonial Mexican towns, was intended to bring tourists and upscale residents into a common public space. However, it has not been very successful. Courtesy Lawrence A. Herzog.

