

## CHAPTER 8

## Public Space and Protest

*The Plaza as Art and Commodity*

## Introduction

This chapter tackles the problem of the relationship of landscape architecture and visual culture to unstable cultural meanings by examining the design and designing of urban plazas. The examination of public space as art and commodity provides a glimpse of the contradictions between the artistic and often idealized representational purposes of the urban plaza and its political and economic base. Bringing these contradictions to light helps to demystify visual culture and highlights the ways in which landscape architecture and urban design are deeply ideological, both in artistic style and in political purpose.

Further, by reconsidering a designed public space as a commodity, its planning, design, construction, or refurbishing takes on new economic meaning. A public space that is valued ostensibly as a place for people to sit, read, and gather becomes a way to maintain real estate values, a financial strategy for revitalizing a declining city center, and a means of attracting new investments and venture capital.

Landscape design and the reorganization of space are part of the creative destruction of forms of society, replacing traditional forms with new capitalist relationships (Harvey 1990). Global economic forces influence both the production and construction of these new spaces. At the same time, spatial forms such as public plazas are systems of representation and social products whose style is a confirmation rather than a cause of social differentiation. So the designs produced are at some

level simply reflections of social changes that have already occurred, and their analysis highlights the cultural conflict and contestation that are ongoing as economic forces restructure the public space of the city.

One of the best ways to analyze a visual and cultural artifact is as a moment in a particular historical time and cultural place. The analysis should consist of visual and spatial as well as social strategies (Zukin 1995), including an analysis of architectural form, urban location, symbolism, and role in social relations. Yet even in the clearest of place narratives, it is difficult to separate design from commodification. The interpenetration of artistic, political, and economic intent and interpretation is part of the process by which art and architecture serve ideological and economic rather than simply artistic ends. Certainly the position of the viewer—socially, politically, and physically—influences what can be and is seen.

The notion that a plaza can be analyzed as a commodity as well as an artistic artifact is drawn from the work of Sylvia Rodríguez (1989), who is concerned with the way that painting mystifies the economic or political objectives of its production. The design and building of public plazas serve these same purposes; even more so in that citizens perceive the plaza as a cultural mirror by which they can see themselves—and sometimes they do not want to look. In this sense, the mystification process may begin with the design of public space, but local residents, plaza users, city administrators, and the media actively participate in the obfuscation of certain political meanings.

Thus, a landscape design, like a painting, can be seen as a case study in mystification. Urban public spaces that planners and administrators say are designed for the common good are often designed to accommodate activities that will exclude some people and benefit others. Further, the economic motives for the design of urban public space often have more to do with increasing the value and attractiveness of the surrounding property than with increasing the comfort of the daily inhabitants, except where the social amenities are written into the zoning and economic equation.

Rodríguez (1997, 1998) presents a classic example of this transition from local plaza to the commodified version in her study of the main plaza in Taos, New Mexico, where the traditional plaza of grass, flagstones, and exposed dirt was redesigned to become a “plaza-mall” in 1976. The new design attracts tourists and tourist-related shops and services, further alienating the local population. By the 1980s the “day-to-day pres-

ence of native Hispano-Mexicano people on the plaza diminished, and it became a place most natives and locals now prefer to avoid" (Rodríguez 1997, 50). However, Rodríguez's ethnohistory of the realignment of ethnic, religious, and class relations involved in the production of the Taos fiesta ritually located on the plaza suggests that there is some resistance to this spatial appropriation. Even though the plaza is now a gentrified tourist space abandoned by locals in their everyday life, the fiesta has increasingly become a vehicle for the nativistic expression of Hispanic pride and the domain of the Hispano middle class. Rodríguez demonstrates how complex the interrelations of space, social stratification, and ritual can become by demonstrating how the cultural meaning of the Taos fiesta contests the symbolic furnishings of the redesigned plaza.

In another example of the transition in public-space design from a local cultural form to a more commodified, middle-class version is found in a study of the central public spaces of Los Angeles, California. Don Parson (1993) argues that three successive central spaces—the Plaza, Pershing Square, and the California Plaza—represent and symbolize Los Angeles's cultural core, and that it is in the sequence of each space becoming the symbolic center of the city that the underlying social transformations of race and class can be seen. These three centers "reflect both the history and the actuality of the spatial recomposition of race and class in Los Angeles" (Parson 1993, 236). The Plaza was the focus of the historically Hispanic and now the Latino city; Pershing Square was the center of Anglo downtown; and the new California Plaza, next to the Los Angeles Music Center and the luxury condominiums of Bunker Hill, is the contemporary center of corporate exclusivity.

In the case of the two Costa Rican plazas presented here, the actions and conversations of local users contest the redesigned public spaces, as in the Taos plaza example, but there is no clear example of a civic event that ritually inverts their new meanings. And, like the moving center of Los Angeles, the plazas of San José represent the changing class composition of the city and the increasing corporate and commodified nature of public space through the expansion and renovation of plazas throughout the downtown area and through the redesign of the original Plaza Principal.

Ethnographic analyses of plaza design as art and commodity thus allow for some degree of demystification of the ideological, political, and economic bases of public urban design. To illustrate this contention, I will discuss a contemporary conflict concerning the image of the

plaza and design of the kiosk and the results of remodeling this traditional space. For the Plaza de la Cultura, I explore in greater detail how the artistic and economic goals of its creators do not meet the needs of traditional plaza users, but instead accommodate the needs of the growing tourist trade. In this discussion, the images of the plaza producers and concerns of the users are contrasted with the intentions of the designers and government officials to highlight how the conflict between representational and use value is worked out in a specific context.

### Public Space and Public Protest

Another aspect of this analysis concerns the power of public space to communicate civic sentiments and social resistance through its design and commodification. Public space is often about public protest, but the form of that protest is not always the same. I am particularly interested in three kinds of protest: *manifest* protest such as public demonstrations or the appropriation of space by marginal or outcast groups, *latent* protest such as the symbolic struggle for architectural and cultural representation within the built environment, and *ritual* protest such as fiestas, parades, and carnivals that temporarily invert the everyday social structure and hegemonic meanings of the public space.

Manifest protest is the most apparent and obvious. It includes strikes, demonstrations, and other gatherings organized to express discontent and disagreement. Spatial appropriation is another form of manifest protest. Although it is not as transparent as a demonstration, spatial appropriation can be seen by all participants and is clearly identifiable by outsiders. Spatial appropriation by groups such as drug dealers or homeless individuals, as in Tompkins Square in New York City (N. Smith 1996) or People's Park in Berkeley, California (Mitchell 1995), or shoeshine men, prostitutes, and alcoholics in Costa Rica, is frequently cited as a "problem" by municipal officials and acted upon by the state.

Latent protest is usually framed as an ongoing public contestation of the symbolic furnishings, design, and surrounding businesses and buildings of the public space. It is latent in that it requires decoding by the social analyst to illuminate the underlying sociopolitical struggle, as is demonstrated by the Costa Rican plaza examples.

Ritual protest, on the other hand, also resists hegemonic definitions of public space and it is visible. However, unlike the examples of manifest protest, resistance takes the form of the temporary control of the space, a symbolic inversion of its meaning, and then a return to nor-

malcy. It does not materially change the furnishings or constitute a reason to redesign or close the space, as illustrated in the case of the Taos plaza in New Mexico (Rodríguez 1998).

There are at least four basic outcomes of public protest. When manifest protest by demonstration is too successful—that is, it threatens the state—the public space is closed, sometimes gated, and policed. When manifest protest by spatial appropriation is successful, the public space is briefly closed down and redesigned in such a way as to discourage its continued use by the groups that are deemed undesirable, and then it is policed when it is reopened.

When latent protest by means of symbolic representation is successful, the public space becomes a contested arena for the control of meaning in the built environment. Conflicts about design and use become part of an ongoing public discourse expressed in newspaper articles, television discussions, and interviews, and in some cases, a public plebiscite (DePalma 1998).

When ritual protest by means of a popular fiesta or parade is successful, the public space is reclaimed by the protesting group for a limited period of time, but is then returned to the domain of hegemonic forces. There are numerous examples of ritual protest in the form of parades, such as the Mummers' Parade in Philadelphia (Davis 1986) or the Halloween Parade in Greenwich Village, New York (Kugelmass 1994), and in the form of fiestas, as in Taos and Santa Fe, New Mexico (Rodríguez 1998; Wilson 1997), and carnival in Brazil (Da Matta 1984; Linger 1992). In each of these examples, the symbolic protest is limited in time and space, expressing unresolved social relations but not necessarily changing the physical environment.

Only some public spaces become arenas for working out social and cultural conflict. I discovered, based on my research on the history of the Spanish American plaza, that planned central public spaces—sacred spaces or civic plazas—take on layers of historical meaning that are retained through the mnemonics of environmental memory (see Chapters 4 and 5). Spaces such as the Zócalo in Mexico City, Tiananmen Square in Beijing, Plaza de Mayo in Buenos Aires, or Parque Central in San José have layers of past meanings semiotically encoded in the spatial relations, furnishings, and architecture of the place. These meanings, embodied in the space itself, become a subtext for the protest that occurs there, and by placing protest in the symbolic center of the society, it captures national attention.

Probably the best example of the outcome of manifest protest is the closing down of Tiananmen Square in Beijing—the sacred center of the Chinese Empire in front of the Forbidden City. When the student demonstrations of 1989 challenged the oppressive regime of Deng Xiao Peng, the students were fired upon by troops under the control of China's Minister of Defense, General Chi Haotian, and the square was closed down. Even a year later when I was there, the space was heavily policed to discourage any activities other than those sanctioned by the state.

Another example of a space of manifest protest being closed down is the Aguascalientes built by the Maya Zapatista rebels in Chiapas. The name Aguascalientes commemorates the abortive meeting held in the town of Aguascalientes, Mexico, between Emiliano Zapata and Pancho Villa to chart the future of the Mexican Revolution in 1914. The first Aguascalientes was hastily built in July 1994 of posts and canopies on the edge of the Lacandón jungle to house the First National Democratic Congress. The Zapatistas invited a host of national and international media representatives and political candidates of the opposition parties to witness their first "revolutionary forum" (Gossen 1996). By 1995, however, the Mexican army had destroyed and occupied the site of the 1994 Aguascalientes convention.

In response, "New Aguascalientes" were constructed to resemble the plazas of ancient Maya ceremonial centers in four sites outside of existing municipal centers. These public spaces were "complete with raised platform mounds crowned by posts covered with multicolored, plastic-laminated sheets" (Gossen 1996, 529), and the four pavilions have become potent political statements, acting as new social and cultural centers for the media and the public. Yet even the New Aguascalientes have become threatening; the Mexican government has blocked access to the dispersed sites from public roads so that no gatherings can occur there. Nonetheless, these centers remain a permanent public forum and symbolic center of the contemporary Zapatista movement. In this illustration, the success of using public space as a form of protest has been blocked, policed, and occupied, while the symbolism of the sites is retained.

An example of manifest protest by spatial appropriation with the resulting outcome of the space being redesigned is Parque Central in San José, Costa Rica. By 1987, this public space was heavily populated with drug dealers, people selling illegal goods, shoeshine men gambling, day laborers waiting for pick-up work, and prostitutes—socially mar-

ginal individuals who challenged some Josefinos' and municipal officials' cultural image of themselves. Their vision of San José as an attractive tourist site was not reflected in the presence of underemployed and unemployed workers or of workers whose occupations had taken over the plaza. The government responded first by building the Plaza de la Cultura to represent their new cultural ideals. But when this new plaza also became a stage for activities that middle-class citizens and government officials did not want visible, the municipality closed Parque Central in 1993 and redesigned it without its cover of trees, secluded arbor, and private benches. The redesigned Parque Central opened in 1994. With increased policing and the addition of new laws to prohibit vending and shoe shining, there was a dramatic reduction in these activities. Nonetheless, there has also been a corresponding increase in the presence of teenage gangs who gather in the late afternoon to plan their evening of mugging tourists and pickpocketing shoppers.

An example of latent protest through architecture, and of the outcome of the space becoming contested terrain, is the Zócalo in Mexico City (see Photograph 46). The indigenous symbolism of the archaeological remains of Tenochtitlan and the Templo Mayor contests the architectural dominance of the colonial grid, the cathedral, and surviving colonial buildings, as discussed in Chapter 5. In this setting, two representations of the state retain an uneasy relationship to one another through the politics of historic preservation and archaeological excavation of the built environment. Another example is the stark modernity of Plaza de la Cultura in San José, Costa Rica, and the continuing criticism of the plaza by the local press as well as the public's destruction of some of its features upon its opening, as discussed in Chapter 6.

This chapter reanalyzes the two Costa Rican plazas and considers data collected during the final field visits in 1993 and 1997 in order to answer how public space embodies civil protest and social resistance while at the same time semiotically encoding the artistic desires of its designers and the economic and investments goals of its founders and administrators.

### **The Plaza as Art and Commodity**

The building of a new plaza is usually heralded as an artistic achievement, and both the Plaza de la Cultura and Parque Central were introduced as significant contributions to the aesthetics of downtown San José. The Plaza Principal began as a municipal market, a site of the war



46. Zócalo in Mexico City

for independence from Spain, a source of water for city residents, and the place where the monthly lottery was drawn. It was not until 1885 that the Plaza Principal was converted into a garden, and a municipal market was established as a separate entity where businesses could be concentrated. By 1890, Parque Central emerged with its greenery, wooden kiosk, fountain, and garden gates as part of a comprehensive landscape design (La pila del Parque Central 1944). During the subsequent decade, Parque Central was thought to represent the highest achievement in landscape design, incorporating indigenous plants and flowers into a park where the public could go to refresh themselves in the shade of the large and venerable fig trees (La capital de antaño 1928).

The political intentions of this dramatic transformation from marketplace to ceremonial plaza and park are difficult to decipher from the writings and news clippings of the past, but if the present is any guide, the artistic aspirations of park design were just as political as recent decisions about Parque Central's renovation and restoration. I will begin with the analysis of the conflict of the early 1990s over the historic preservation of the modern kiosk and the park remodeling, discussed

briefly in Chapter 6 but now focusing on these changes as artistic endeavors that would beautify the comfortable but decaying Parque Central. Following this analysis I will discuss the corresponding commodification of this traditional public space into a site that planning and design professionals and the governing elite considered more appropriate for global tourism, middle-class values, and social control.

*Parque Central: Historic Preservation or Social Control?*

The contestation of the turn-of-the-century image of Parque Central as an elite plaza or as a contemporary heterogeneous urban center was sparked by a public debate about replacing the modern cement kiosk with a model of the original wooden one. In the spring of 1992, a group of citizens brought a petition to the municipality to tear down the cement structure and reconstruct the Victorian bandstand. I was not in San José at that time, but the newspapers describe the conflict in great detail. The number of articles and the extent of the debate confirms my contention that this space is one of the most charged battlegrounds for the symbolic control of the Costa Rican cultural landscape.

Concern over the deteriorating condition of Parque Central was editorialized as early as August 8, 1988, when Jorge Coto E., a columnist for *La Nación*, commented that Parque Central was to be a site of urban redevelopment. He notes that the Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sports (Minister of Culture) had initiated the renovation to give the plaza more visibility, but that he was concerned that Parque Central, the true symbol of Costa Rican identity, might lose what little personality it had left.

By December 1, 1991, a plan to remodel Parque Central was announced as part of a joint program of the municipality and the Minister of Culture to renovate the parks and plazas of the capital. An interinstitutional commission was set up as the planning and decision-making body. They hoped that the work would begin in February 1992.

But by February 10, 1992, Jorge Solórzano, a reporter for *La Nación*, wrote that there was a lack of consensus concerning the demolition of the kiosk. The executive officer of the municipality, the engineer Johnny Araya, stated that there was some doubt within the interinstitutional commission as to whether the kiosk donated by Anatasio Somoza García should be replaced by a model of the 1905 Japanese-style one (*sic*). Mr. Araya stated that the present structure did not add anything aesthetically to the park and that it took up a great deal of space. However, Aída de Fishman, the Minister of Culture, argued that the integrity of the

park must be respected. The commission suggested that a questionnaire be distributed to the public to vote on the destiny of the kiosk.

On March 10, 1992, the Council of the Municipality of San José was asked to hold a town meeting (*cabildo*) so the public could participate in this difficult decision. The public would be presented with sketches of the alternative projects: one of the park restored with the actual kiosk, and the other based on the original image with the wooden kiosk, fountain, and iron fences. Johnny Araya reported that in a questionnaire undertaken by the municipality, more than 75 percent of the respondents wanted the elimination of the kiosk and the restoration of Parque Central as it was at the turn of the century. The previous Ministers of Culture, Guido Sáenz—who was instrumental in the creation of the Plaza de la Cultura—and Francisco Echeverría, also attacked the aesthetics of the current “temple” (a nickname for the kiosk). On the other hand, the architect Jorge Grané argued that no one was sure why they wanted to tear it down or to what end. The columnist José David Guevara M. of *La Nación* commented on March 24, 1992, that the sixty shoeshine men and their clients, the “crazies” (*locos*), and the elderly (*viejillos verdes*) who inhabit the park were not being asked their opinion. He concluded that “the long and the short” of the question is whether the renovation will conserve the park’s identity as the heart of the capital.

The vote took place on April 4, 1992, at 2:00 P.M. at the Liceo de Costa Rica. The government presented three initiatives: demolishing, improving, or leaving the kiosk intact. Seven thousand people were expected to participate in the first town meeting ever held in San José.

The day after the plebiscite Jorge Solórzano reported that a majority of the people voted to demolish the actual kiosk. Only 1,153 people voted: 487 for the destruction of the structure, 372 for leaving it intact, and 292 to conserve it with modifications. The results of the vote further divided the members of the commission. Those who were opposed to the demolition thought that the two options that received fewer votes should be added together to produce a majority of votes to save the kiosk. Other members, such as Johnny Araya, thought that the commission should respect the winning option, which was to eliminate the actual kiosk and reconstruct the original park. Mr. Solórzano commented that Dr. Arias, ex-president of Costa Rica and builder of many parks and plazas, had suggested that the decision should be delayed until the economic situation in the country improved.

The public’s vote to tear down the kiosk and its reinterpretation by

the commission was met with professional alarm. The Colegio de Arquitectos (similar to the A.I.A. in the United States) put a full-page ad in *La Nación* stating that the vote did not represent an adequate sample of Josefinos and announcing their opposition to the plan. Nonetheless, on April 21, 1992, the Municipal Council of San José approved the demolition of the kiosk by a vote of nine to four. But on April 23, 1991, the Minister of Culture, Youth and Sports, Aída de Fishman, disapproved the destruction of the kiosk based on Law 5397, the Historical Patrimony Law, which states that no public building or property can be destroyed, remodeled, or modified without her approval. Thus, the battle ended with the assertion of the Minister of Culture's legal power to resolve the conflict.

The citizens who were attempting to reconstitute the Parque Central in its elite, turn-of-the-century image were not the daily users, but professional and middle-class Josefinos. The conflict over the architectural form of the kiosk was a struggle about control of the artistic style of the Parque Central in which the architectural furnishings represented broader social and class-based meanings. The final resolution was a compromise in which the kiosk was remodeled and a replica fountain added; at the same time, the green spaces, many of the trees, the arbor, the working spaces, and generous stone benches were removed to correspond to an image of modern middle-class civility and contemporary urbanity, and to discourage the activities of its traditional residents.

The conflict over the design of the kiosk led to a much broader reconception of Parque Central. In a series of interviews with Rudolfo Sancho Quesada, the municipality's chief engineer in charge of the renovation, I learned that the final reconstruction was based on the original plans for the plaza that surfaced during the uproar about the kiosk. After 1940, it seems that the municipal engineers decided that the plaza was complete; the fountain was removed to make room for the new kiosk, but there was no further maintenance or restoration. The engineers at that time, in fact, threw away many of the beautiful details of the kiosk, including a statue of Venus that was to crown the cupola. The carved details on the side fountains were never repaired or repainted, and trees were cut down and not replaced.

From the municipality's point of view, the redesign of Parque Central accomplished three artistic objectives and resolved the design flaws of the original plan. The overwhelming monumentality of the kiosk was ameliorated by raising the level of the park and creating a more

balanced sense of scale and proportion. By reducing the amount of seating and number of benches, the plaza became more of a ceremonial center than a residential park. And Parque Central became a celebration of the city, a place for presidents to speak after mass, and with the addition of paving, a *paseo* (walkway) rather than a park.

The new design included an art gallery for national artists to exhibit in the space below the kiosk where the children's library used to be, twenty-four telephone booths along the eastern edge of the park, and a municipal police station to protect the public from escalating juvenile crime. Mr. Sancho reported that at first the public was dismayed that the library was removed, but later appreciated that children's books could now be found in their neighborhood libraries. The shoeshine men and flower stalls were moved to an area in front of the post office, a few blocks away.

Blanca Suñol, an architect with the municipality, developed new regulations and design guidelines for Parque Central to keep it cleaner and safer. When it was reopened, these rules went into effect: Ambulatory vendors would no longer be allowed; all subsequent construction would be restricted to the height of the original buildings (seven meters); and bus stops were replaced by taxi stands. She also identified other changes that contributed to a reduction of crime in the area: The Soda Palace, a center for black-market money changing and other illegal activities, had been separated from the street by a high wall and windows to protect the café's clients; the new users of the park, Nicaraguans, were very poor and therefore did not attract criminals looking for wealthy tourists; and the park's renovation increased visual surveillance because of the open design.

The design objective of Mr. Sancho and Ms. Suñol was to reclaim the public space by displacing the juvenile delinquents and criminals, replacing them with other people, "regular people," who want to be there. Moving the vendors and adding the police would help to keep it cleaner and safer, while height restrictions and extensive paving have changed the character of the park.

Aída de Fishman, the Minister of Culture who commissioned the renovation and reopened Parque Central on March 19, 1994, expressed her design objectives in other terms:

Parque Central is a great big headache. It is the heart of the city, but has been eaten away at the edges. The wooden kiosk, the

fountain, and the fence are gone, and we were left with this great albatross of cement. We wanted to turn it back into a park that could welcome the large masses of people who would come. So we made it into a *plazolita* [little plaza] with a replica of the fountain, because we could not move the original, and retained the Nicaraguan kiosk. I feel satisfied that we have conserved this place and rescued a bit of the city center.

She commented on the conflict over whether to keep the kiosk by explaining that they spent months discussing what the park should be. In the end, the local government took the side of preserving the kiosk, and in order to do so, declared it a part of the national patrimony. She added: "Who is to say what will be considered beautiful in the future? I did not want to be responsible for discarding the past."

Local Josefinos are well informed about the renovation and reopening of Parque Central. I asked a taxi driver what he knew about the renovation of the park, and he replied that Aida de Fishman had renovated all of the parks:

Not only did she beautify the park, which is good, but she restored a place for people to reflect and think. People are sometimes in the city and need to stop to think and reflect. She has created an environment where one can do this. It is important to have such places in the city.

But not everyone agrees that the new design is attractive or that crime has been reduced. Many local users read the artistic intentions of the redesign as a means for excluding them from what they perceived as their place. Older users, such as the three pensioners who moved away from the traffic in 1987, are discouraged and do not understand why the municipality removed the trees, grass, and greenery they loved. I asked one of the men what he thought of the changes. He replied that he liked more green. All the men sitting there agreed that there was too much cement and disagreed among themselves as to whether the absence of vendors made it any cleaner.

"Do you feel safer?" I inquired. One man replied that there may be fewer illegal activities because it is more open, but added:

You still must be careful because of the gangs [*chapulines*]. They are everywhere, and gather here each evening at 5:00 P.M. The open vistas of the new park do not accommodate some illegal

transactions that have now moved inside the Soda Palace, but it is even easier for the pickpockets and juvenile gangs to assault tourists and wealthy citizens.

A young man who has been coming to sit and reflect for more than eight years responded to my question of whether he liked the new design by saying: "No, it is too modern. I liked it the old way, green and more 'ancient.'" Another man overheard our conversation and added: "Because of the new design, it is harder to hide from the police, but even so, there is more prostitution than before." He went on to explain that it is because of all the Nicaraguans: "Costa Rica is not the same with all the foreigners."

Some of the regular users have actively resisted the mandated changes. I spoke to one of the older shoeshine men who was standing on the corner of the park (see Photograph 47). He was busily working on the black boots of a man who smiled hello. I asked him where everyone was. He replied: "Four of the older guys are in front of the post office and there are three more on the Boulevard. And there are some across the street next to the cathedral. They asked for permission to be there."

I asked him how he could continue to work there. He smiled and said, "I have special permission from the municipality." He laughed and so did his client. He added: "I have taken my story to the public." The client then commented: "He is famous, he was on Teletica, Channel 7 television, protesting that this was his workplace."

The design objectives of the municipality have created a new kind of public space, one that excludes many of the traditional users because of the regulations that restrict commercial activities and the lack of shady, comfortable places to sit. The new design with its open vistas certainly looks safer and appears more modern and European with its reconstructed fountain, paved walkways, and promenades. Yet the artistic and symbolic goals of the designers have been only partially realized because of the changing social environment of San José: an increasing number of Nicaraguan refugees have made the park a place to meet family and friends, and gangs of teenagers find it an excellent hangout, close to the Soda Palace where stolen goods and credit cards can be sold or traded, and close to the downtown stores where Costa Rican shoppers and tourists with money can be found.

The artistic expression of the redesign of Parque Central masks the



47. Remaining shoeshine man in Parque Central, 1997

producers' desire to "clean up" (implying clean up socially as well as physically) this central public space by removing the architectural affordances—activity-enabling furnishings such as the arbor, the trees, and the benches—that previously invited older pensioners to spend the day. The cleanup also included restricting commercial activities to other areas of the city, removing the vendors and shoeshine men who had worked there for more than forty years. With these restrictive regulations, new forms of crime and criminals have appropriated the space and taken over the local ecology. It is ironic, to say the least, that the removal of the vendors and shoeshine men, which was intended to increase safety, may in fact have decreased it because of the loss of the local surveillance and sociability they provided. William Whyte (1980), the small public spaces guru, argues for the addition of food vendors and well-placed benches to increase public security in plazas and parks. The example of the redesign of Parque Central does not contradict his findings, even in this Latin American setting.

The conflict over the redesign of Parque Central was just the beginning of an attempt to commodify this site. Parque Central had not been the social or cultural center of the city since the early 1950s, and in 1976,

the government responded by building the Plaza de la Cultura to represent the new interests and political affiliations of the Costa Rican state. Tourism, not coffee, was now driving the Costa Rican economy, and the Plaza de la Cultura was designed to reflect the state's corresponding cultural as well as social aspirations: an indigenous archaeological heritage, a history of public education, and a national program for the arts. But the Plaza de la Cultura failed to fulfill these dreams and instead became a tourist shopping center and a hangout for teenagers and North American pensioners.

With the failure of the Plaza de la Cultura, and continuing complaints from tourists and middle-class *Josefinos* about the run-down state of Parque Central, the municipality turned back to the problem of the redesign of the oldest and most illustrious central plaza. By 1993 many of the parks and plazas in San José had been renovated. Aída de Fishman's tenure as Minister of Culture coincided with the tenure of her husband, Luis Fishman, as Minister of Public Security, and the two of them working together were able to accomplish an extensive overhaul of downtown public areas.

Mrs. Fishman's objective was to rescue San José based on the lessons of other large cities, and she selected the worse part of downtown to begin her project. Her plan included changing municipal laws to make landlords responsible for their buildings and the sidewalks in front of their properties. She cleaned the city, moved the street vendors, and, beginning with streets that connected the public spaces, created walkways and promenades that linked the various plazas.

Rudolfo Sancho reports that businessmen claim their sales have doubled in areas near the renovations and that this increase in business has provided even more money to continue their work. Even the land surrounding Parque Central is valued at almost twice its prerenovation price. The municipality now has a plan to expand and reclaim parks throughout the city based on the evidence that doing so will attract business and people as well as increase land and housing prices. Currently 50–60 percent of the funds used to renovate parks and plazas come from private sources—from business organizations, industry groups, and business districts interested in improving their facades and streetscapes—and the municipality now contributes a larger percent of tax revenues to the maintenance budget. According to Mr. Sancho in 1997: "It is much easier to get money than three years ago because of the success of Parque Central and Parque Morazán."



The response of the general public and users to these changes has been mixed at best. On July 22, 1991, before the park renovations had been approved, there was a violent protest by street vendors who had been removed from the sidewalk in front of the Municipal Building at Eighth Street and Second Avenue, a block from Parque Central. Eight people were injured and forty-three were detained. This protest was the first in a series of confrontations between the vendors and the municipal officials who were trying to clear the sidewalk for pedestrians and shoppers. Businesses surrounding Parque Central (and Plaza de la Cultura) were complaining that street vendors were blocking their entrances and unfairly competing by selling lower-priced goods.

This same conflict has also erupted in other cities; for instance, there is an ongoing legal battle between the Times Square and 42nd Street Business Improvement District (BID) and an organization of sidewalk vendors who held an open-air market on Fridays in front of Bryant Park in New York City. The struggle is over whether the vendors can continue to hold their market after the renovations and private reorganization of Bryant Park are completed. The vendors and the shoeshine men removed from Parque Central also protested, and, as in the case of the shoeshine man mentioned above, took their case to the public through television and newspaper interviews.

Individual users also responded negatively to the "cleanup" aspect of Mrs. Fishman's campaign. An older man gave me a typical answer to my question of what he thought of the new park:

It is fine, but the trees are missing and there is no place to sit. There are no cultural activities, and no permanent program for these activities. The band no longer plays here, and even though there is an art gallery there are not enough exhibits. The gallery is usually closed, and the art that they show is too elitist for most people.

He went on to say that there is not as much religious activity now, and that all the protesters, sinners, and community activists are no longer here. He added: "This is what is missing."

Another part of the cleanup is reflected in the observation that many of the Costa Rican pensioners have moved to the Boulevard, an area a few blocks north of Parque Central where trees and benches have been added. They say that they miss the arbor with the drunks and evangelists, the music in the kiosk, and the dances where even those without

money could go to celebrate the New Year. "It is important to have a place to see your friends and family who you would otherwise not see," one man added, and went on to say that it is sad that this no longer occurs in Parque Central. They say that they no longer feel comfortable there and have moved their socializing away from the ceremonial center of the city. There are some groups who still meet in the park: young Nicaraguan domestic workers gather on Sunday to visit with family and friends, and juvenile gangs gather in the late afternoon, but the traditional users—regulars, pensioners, vendors, and workers—no longer feel at home and are certainly no longer accommodated there.

Thus, some users are subliminally aware of the increasing commodification of their public spaces and remember with growing nostalgia when plazas were places for people to meet. The meeting place of the past has become the marketplace of the future, where the goods that are exchanged are representations of the nation and city, and the creation of public space has become part of the imagineering of a city.

*Plaza de la Cultura: Art Space or Tourist Market?*

As discussed in Chapters 3 and 6, the idea to build the Plaza de la Cultura is said to have been the inspiration of the Minister of Culture, Guido Sáenz, in 1976. The head of the Central Bank of Costa Rica had gotten the national Legislative Assembly to allocate the funds to build a museum to display their world-famous collection of Precolumbian gold artifacts that were housed on the second floor of the Central Bank. The museum would represent pride in indigenous Costa Rican culture and was supported by the National Liberation Party. The land around the National Theater was selected by the Minister of Planning, Oscar Arias, and the head of the Central Bank as the site that would easily accommodate tourists and would represent a new center of culture in San José.

The outcome was a modern space that most Costa Ricans did not understand or like. The Central Bank's goal was described thus in the plaza's inaugural brochure:

This Plaza de la Cultura that we inaugurate today unites the forces of Costa Ricans interested in humanizing the city, embellishing it, preserving the National Theater, and giving it the space required. To work on culture is a tradition of the Costa Rican people. . . . Economy and culture are closely bound, and

their union is represented in this plaza that will become the center of our city (Naranjo Coto 1976, 1; my translation).

The architects' design objectives were more diverse but focused on creating a space "like they have in New York": a large open space where meetings can be held and demonstrations can occur. Ironically, the open plazas of New York City are often underutilized and become filled with illegal activities that drive other kinds of users away. This Costa Rican open-plan plaza has, in fact, attracted illegal activities and vendors, as well as teenage soccer games, tourist shopping, and various kinds of sexual cruising. The attempt to bring culture to the center of the city through the artistic expression of landscape architecture has not produced anything near an ideal representation of civic space. And as of my last visit in January 1997, the plaza was closed and fenced off awaiting the completion of a technical renovation.

In terms of the commodification of public space, the Plaza de la Cultura is an even clearer example of the kind of imagineering that is taking place and illustrates the role of landscape design in the creative destruction of forms of society (Rutheiser 1996; Sorkin 1989). A residential, small-scale commercial neighborhood was transformed into an advertisement for Costa Rican culture. At the same time, this transformation generated new investment opportunities for foreign capitalists to expand their interests in tourism and tourist-related activities. The disguise for this commodification of a public space was the sociopolitical ideology of the National Liberation Party. The leadership of the new professional class wanted to represent Costa Rican culture as modern, drawing upon modern European idioms of design, but also as indigenous, based on the Precolumbian past. North American capital influenced the siting of the plaza next to the major tourist hotel and in the center of North American businesses (i.e., McDonald's, Sears) and tourist activity. Thus, the siting, spatial form, and ultimately the design of the Plaza de la Cultura came from a combination of ideological and economic forces rather than solely from the artistic intent of the designers.

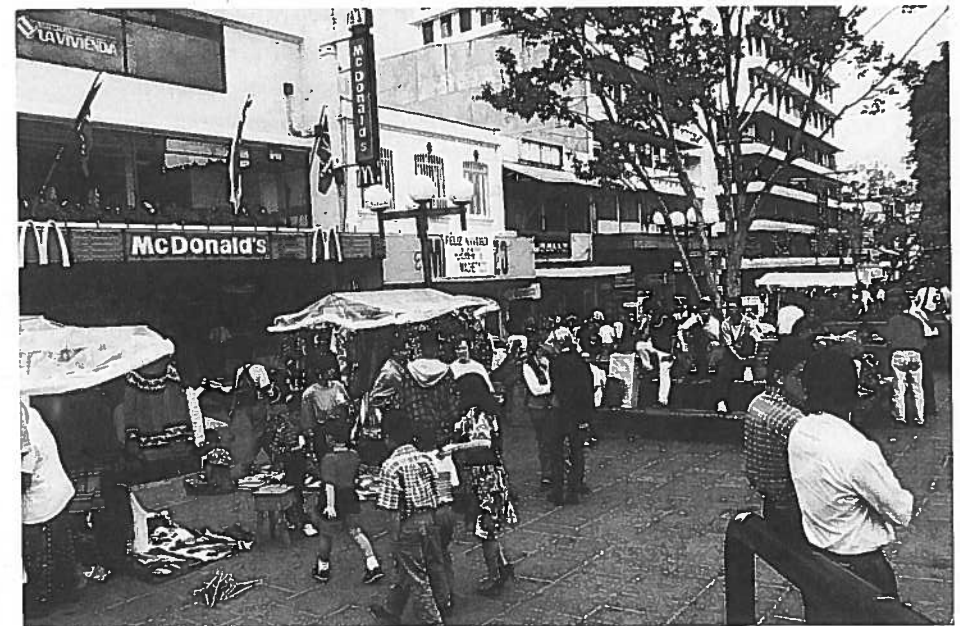
The most intense representation of the commodification of the Plaza de la Cultura is its takeover by foreign vendors. The plaza was opened in 1982, and during my first three field trips in 1985, 1986, and 1987, the only vendors on the plaza were part of a tourist market jointly approved by the municipality and the Gran Hotel located on the small plaza in front of the National Theater. These vendors paid for permission to sell

on the plaza at the price of 50 colones per day (see Photograph 48).

By 1991, however, the plaza was jammed with sidewalk vendors. On February 24, 1991, Juan Fernando Cordero of *La Nación* wrote a feature article on the surprises of the Plaza de la Cultura, pointing out that vendors speak English, cash travelers' checks, accept international credit cards, and bank in dollars. He further comments that no one would have thought that the plaza would become 5,000 square meters of commerce and spectacle, rather than a place of rest and escape from work. By October 18, 1992, the "plaza of surprises" was described as the "plaza of chaos." The editorial points out that the plaza represents such an enormous investment financially and politically that the vendors, criminals, drug dealers, and undocumented workers should not be allowed to appropriate the space.

By November 3, 1992, the vendors were forced to leave by the joint efforts of the municipality and the Minister of Public Security, Luis Fishman. They dislodged the vendors by immediately expelling those who did not have proper papers and by allowing those who were members of the National Independent Artisans Association (ANAI) to remain until they could find a place to relocate. The president of the ANAI,

48. Foreign vendors on Plaza de la Cultura



Marco Vinicio Balmaceda, protested that these expulsions would leave five hundred families homeless. Luis Fishman, however, stated that the majority of the illegal vendors came from two South American countries, implying that they were not Costa Rica's responsibility and should return to their native countries. Only a few vendors remained, and those had permission from the municipality to do so. But when I returned to San José in 1993, the plaza was again packed with vendors. It seems that the ANAI had succeeded in getting an injunction for associated vendors to remain on the plaza until the issue was adjudicated.

The story ends with the Central Bank's proposal to put a fence around the entire plaza, with gates that would be closed in the evening. On January 18, 1995, there was an open meeting to discuss issues of security on the Plaza de la Cultura. Representatives of the National Theater, the foundation that administers the plaza, the Colegio de Arquitectos, and the International Council of Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), an international historic preservation organization, were available to present their proposals to the public. The fence was proposed as only one possible solution to the daily invasion of hundreds of vendors and delinquents who vandalize the place. Vanessa Bravo of *La Nación*, however, reports in her January 19, 1995, feature article that there was opposition to fencing the plaza, and that other solutions would be found to improve security. By 1996, the Plaza de la Cultura was closed for renovations, and it had not reopened by January of 1997 when I was last there. I am sure that its lengthy closing, its refurbishing, and increased policing upon reopening are the result of this local conflict. Commodification in this case is commercialization, that is, the transformation of an art space and meeting place into an open marketplace—and back again, if the current renovation and closure are successful.

### Conclusion

Returning to the analysis of public space as a site of protest, it is possible to illustrate all three outcomes through the examples of Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura. When manifest protest by demonstration threatens the state, public space is closed—sometimes gated—and policed, as exemplified by the attempt to fence in the Plaza de la Cultura. Even though the plaza administrators decided not to fence the open plaza in 1995, I would anticipate that some part of the plaza, perhaps near the National Theater and Gran Hotel, will ultimately be fenced and gated, as well as policed, to protect the middle-class residents and tourists.



49. Remodeled Parque Morazán

In Parque Central, when manifest spatial appropriation by socially marginal groups was successful, the park was briefly closed down and redesigned in such a way as to discourage its continued use by “undesirables.” And many of the conflicts in Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura illustrate how latent protest by means of symbolic representation transforms the public space into a contested arena. Thus, culturally significant public spaces are forums for working out political, economic, and social conflicts that can not be resolved by more direct verbal means and, as such, provide rich material for ethnographic analysis and cultural interpretation.

The renovation of Parque Central is only one of a series of park restorations that took place between 1990 and 1997. According to Rudolfo Sancho, the renovation of Parque Morazán in front of the Holiday Inn changed the way the municipal government thought about the politics of public space—even though the Holiday Inn did not participate because its administrators wanted a parking lot, not a park (see Photograph 49). The response from the public was tremendous and generated money to renovate La Merced in front of Hospital San Juan de Dios as well as Parque Central and the neighboring park, Plaza Viquez. The money for these renovations came from the municipal government, from

industry and business contributions, and from Venezuela. Public monies previously had been spent on public spaces in the suburbs; now they were being invested in the city. And according to Mr. Sancho, users have expressed their satisfaction with the renovations by respecting the new plantings and by writing letters to the newspapers about how pleased they are with the changes.

Presidents are also learning to use public space to document their achievements and concretize their contributions through the medium of plaza design. President Daniel Oduber initiated building the Plaza de la Cultura, while President Rodrigo Carazo took the credit for its opening in 1982. President Oscar Arias created the Plaza de la Democracia in front of the National Museum to fulfill a promise made during his political campaign (see Photograph 50). And President Rafael Calderón claimed responsibility for the renovation of Parque Central. These new

50. Plaza de la Democracia, 1997



51. Oscar Arias

plazas and plaza renovations were presented as gifts to the capital city to enhance citizens' enjoyment of everyday life. They were designed specifically to bring culture and art (Plaza de la Cultura) as well as democracy (Plaza de la Democracia) and social equality (La Merced, Parque Central) to the central city, and to represent these ideals in the urban landscape.

But these public plazas also communicate the political objectives of their sponsors. Plaza de la Cultura represents the political aspirations of a maturing professional elite that incorporated foreign capital investment and tourism as the basis for a healthy economy. Plaza de la Democracia underscores President Oscar Arias's political investment in the Central American peace process, for which he received the Nobel Peace prize and international acclaim (see Photograph 51). And the renovation of Parque Central responds to President Rafael Calderón's neoliberal mandate to clean up San José in order to become a world-class tourist city that enhances rather than detracts from Costa Rica's image as an ecotourist mecca.

Thus, plazas are politically motivated artistic expressions designed to represent the donors' and contributors' objectives and social ideals. At the same time, they are commodities given in exchange for political or economic power and support. This exchange is intended to reinforce middle-class values as part of an unstated, ongoing "bargain" between urban citizens and the state, even if these values exclude many traditional public-space users. If the plazas do not conform to these political objectives, or are not valuable as political currency, then, as I have documented, they are redesigned or public access is threatened.

This story is not unique to the plazas of San José, Costa Rica; examples such as the plaza in Taos, New Mexico (Rodríguez 1998), or Santa Fe, New Mexico (Wilson 1997), and Tompkins Square in New York City (N. Smith 1996) demonstrate some of these same dynamics. And it is not surprising, given that public works have always been the domain of politics. What is significant, however, is that public spaces are important arenas for public discourse and expressions of discontent. If they are closed or redesigned in response to protest or spatial appropriation that does not fit within the narrow cultural guidelines of "modern," "middle-class" or "appropriate" behavior, then where will this protest be located? Further, what are the consequences of erasing from public space its disorder and disorderly populations? Is this erasure and redesign of spatial form an additional kind of "historical amnesia" (Wilson 1997, 313) that accompanies the myth making of tourist and historic-preservation forces? Central public spaces of most cities are becoming increasingly homogenized, middle-class, and state-controlled representations because of similar amnesiac and sociopolitical forces.

## PART FOUR Conversations

