

## BOOK REVIEW

*Mesoamerican Plazas. Arenas of Community and Power.*  
Kenichiro Tsukamoto and Takeshi Inomata, editors.  
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figures, index, bibliography. \$65 (cloth).

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Plazas have stimulated the interest of Mesoamerican archaeologists for decades, although they have been traditionally considered as merely vacant spaces crafted by the building activity of nearby pyramids and palaces. Accordingly, the study of plazas in Mesoamerica has been, by far, a field traditionally owned by art historians, architecture historians, and epigraphers. Despite the crucial location of plazas in Mesoamerican settlements, archaeologists have largely neglected valuable information about the role and functions of plazas with regard to community-making processes and power negotiations. This stance was challenged by the seminal article of Takeshi Inomata (2006) on plazas in Classic Maya societies as political theaters, which broke new ground applying performance theory to the study of Maya plazas.

Following this line, *Mesoamerican Plazas, Arenas of Community and Power* is a groundbreaking collection of essays edited by Kenichiro Tsukamoto and Takeshi Inomata that contests the commonly assumed conceptualization of Mesoamerican plazas as by-products of construction activity and labor invested in immediate monumental architecture. The essays presented in this volume concern, according to Tsukamoto and Inomata, “the broad issues of lived experiences of people and the political processes that they participated in” (Pp. 3) and not only the analysis of seemingly empty spaces. Following the editors, the interests and specific goals of the volume are (1) to examine the politics of public space and public events, (2) the study of physicality of plazas attached to their ideational and abstract aspects, and (3) the inquiry of meaning in plazas as part of specific historical and social contexts. Accordingly, the vol-

ume presents eleven chapters divided into three sets of essays, each one covering diverse datasets from different temporalities and geographic areas in Mesoamerica, although grouped under main theoretical inquiries. The editors caution that, instead of following a typical ordering of chapters that would have emphasized continuities in time periods or geographic regions, they have schemed the contributions of this volume in a manner that the central theoretical and methodological issues of every chapter are highlighted according to general themes.

In addition to the essays that discuss specific datasets, the volume presents an introductory chapter by Inomata and Tsukamoto, and a closing commentary by Jerry D. Moore. In their introduction, Inomata and Tsukamoto claim that their interest in the study of plazas derives from the significance "of bodily actions set in specific historical and material settings" (Pp. 5) as a framework for understanding power relations and community-making processes. As stated by Inomata and Tsukamoto, the inquiry of plaza functions, meanings, and histories in this volume is pursued from the theoretical perspective of practice theory and performance theory. Within this framework, specific examinations of bodily practices, creation of political subjects, shared experiences, historical trajectories, and space uses are discussed in more detail in every chapter encompassed by recurring broad large concepts throughout the book.

Part I titled, "Plaza Constructions and Public Events," examines through three chapters the politics of public spectacle and building activities as constituents of power relations and identity formation processes. Takeshi Inomata's chapter on the construction and early trajectories of public spaces at Ceibal, in the Maya lowlands, focuses on the significance of plazas for communal life intimately attached to community-making enterprises. The main plaza of Ceibal, the earliest sedentary settlement in the region whose origins are dated ca. 1000 BC, did not emerge by chance as part of surrounding monumental construction, but was a well-planned feature that required high investments of labor aimed to foster the group identity of a newly established settlement through specific ritual practices and public gatherings. Following this thread, the

essay of Tatsuya Murakami on social identities and urban renewals at Teotihuacan, Mexico, argues that transformations in plazas and courtyards were consciously planned to offer spaces for creating a Teotihuacan identity in multi-scale levels, from domestic-neighborhood milieus to the Teotihuacan political entity as a whole. According to Murakami, the stylistic unification and the standardization of architecture during a major urban renewal project at Teotihuacan ca. AD 250 were aimed to create integrative facilities as state strategies for generating a new identity that overrode earlier diverse cultural traditions. Part I closes with a chapter by Kenichiro Tsukamoto on the role of plazas as arenas for power negotiation and identity formation among diverse elite groups at the Maya site of El Palmar, in Campeche, México. Although El Palmar had a main group with well-defined public plazas that fostered polity identity, ruling elites accentuated social differentiations and the emergence of a "privileged identity" by means of restricting access to specific spaces. In a like manner, second tier-elites and lesser groups modeled their own local identities in outlying plazas. The chapters of Part I emphasize the role of plazas as stages embedded with deep political and ritual connotations for community constitution and identity formation, two processes that do not unfold as a homogenous trajectory, but that intertwines the elaboration of a shared political ethos as well as the emergence of local identities attached to more discrete loci.

Under the head "Plazas in Broader Spatial Contexts," Part II examines the importance of physicality and meaning as parts of a recursive relation in Mesoamerican plazas. Methodologically, this part seems to offer promising guides for researchers focused on studying plaza activities since it provides broad interpretations of uses, functions, and historical trajectories of plazas on the basis of specific techniques for sampling and data collection. In this regard, the study of Ann Cyphers and Timothy Murtha on early open spaces at Early Preclassic San Lorenzo, Veracruz, México, is illuminating in respect with their methodological approach. The main goal of Cyphers and Murtha is to identify buried open spaces, not visible today due to the later observable architectural remains, through an extensive coring pro-

gram that dug 279 boreholes on the San Lorenzo plateau. The analysis of the datasets provided by the borehole stratigraphy allows Cyphers and Murtha to infer about the changing shape of the San Lorenzo plateau throughout time, as well as different scenarios for inclusiveness and exclusiveness in open spaces during the development of San Lorenzo as a rector center in connection with large sculptural programs. In the following chapter, Marijke Stoll applies proxemics for studying the role of small-scale plazas in the Mixteca Alta region, Mexico, in terms of capacity, location, and their role in the integration of shared ideologies and ritual practices, albeit in a decentralized manner that de-emphasized the role of large, central plazas. The chapter by Rodrigo Liendo Stuardo, Javier López Mejía, and Arianna Campiani, focuses on the social construction of public spaces at Palenque and Chinikihá, Mexico. It also follows a proxemics approach while trying to portrait Palenque and Chinikihá as capitals of autonomous political entities with centripetal attraction in terms of public gatherings and exemplary monumental civic-ritual compounds, although other lesser settlements within the region, which reproduced the format of monumental architecture of major sites, had open spaces with larger plaza capacities. Kara A. Rothenberg follows with a chapter on using soil chemistry for interpreting plaza spaces and the activities that took place on them. Drawing on the case of the Late Classic site of El Palmarejo (AD 300-900), Rothenberg concludes that there was a functional differentiation in the plazas of this settlement, although similar ritual artifacts were found on them. Rothenberg stresses the importance of combining excavation and chemical data for developing a more accurate picture of past activities in spaces where macroscopic evidence may have disappeared. Using datasets from south-central Veracruz, Alanna Ossa closes Part II with a comparative study on Classic (AD 300-900) and Postclassic (AD 900-1521) plazas in terms of size, accessibility, and context. Based on statistical simulations, Ossa stresses that during the transition from Classic to Postclassic times there was a clear break in construction patterns and space meanings in the area; whereas Classic period centers had small plazas functioning with integrative roles probably for reduced audiences

of a broader social network, large and more open Postclassic plazas seem to lack attraction for surrounding settlements. Part II emphasizes the importance of space in plaza studies, debunking the traditional assumption that larger plazas equate centers with more centripetal power. Variations in size, openness, and monumentality must be assessed through a thorough contextualization that takes into account the historical trajectories of particular settlements, underpinned with data yielded by different lines of evidence and not only space or architecture studies.

Finally, Part III, titled "Plazas and Images," collects three chapters focused on the role of iconography in conveying political messages in plazas as part concrete historical milieus. The chapter of Javier Urcid and Arthur Joyce examines the political implications of the transformations on Monte Albán main plaza during 500 BC-AD 200 by following a hermeneutical approach since images, visual narratives, surrounding buildings, and architectural designs of Monte Albán main plaza are accredited as holders of quasi-textual narratives. Of particular interest for Mesoamerican iconography studies is the novel interpretation of the famous so-called "danzantes" of Monte Albán as members of a sodality hierarchized around age-grades. The destruction of the narrative programs of the main plaza is, according to Urcid and Joyce, a clear sign of a political upheaval which in turn brought new architectural narratives to Monte Albán. William M. Ringle's chapter on the significance of the depiction of feathered serpents in plazas and patios argues in favor of a pan-Mesoamerican elite behavior of investiture and regal inauguration. Drawing on iconographic, archaeologic, and ethnohistoric evidence, Ringle crosscuts temporalities and geographic areas to argue that civic plazas at cities that can be identified as prototypical Tollans, which were the result of an ideological metaphor that transformed residential patios into a common polity space, particularly during rituals of investiture, providing an ideological dimension that integrated the polity as a whole under an open shared space that recalled the household patio. Finally, Amara Solari discusses how 16th century Maya of Izamal, Yucatán, Mexico, molded symbols and ritual practices imposed by the Spanish colonial regime during 16th century through activation of memory and the recalling of ancestral tradi-

tions that involved ritual activity in four-sided places. Solari claims that the production of spaces is intimately connected with bodily choreographies imbued with mnemonic connotations; in that sense, ritual activity in plaza-like spaces was used by early colonial Maya as a means for cultural resistance and new identity formation. The chapters of Part III, although in a discreet manner, deal with the significance of images as pivotal constituents of plaza spaces, but also with the conceptualization of plazas as entities able to be read in a text-like mode in which metaphors and mnemonic devices interplayed to foster cultural continuities and adapt to new societal scenarios.

In the final commentary of the volume, Jerry D. Moore highlights the contributions of the studies collected in this book, as well as the methodological challenges that many of the approaches followed by some of the authors pose for the advance of Mesoamerican plazas studies. Above all, Moore calls for a comparative inquiry in order to avoid misleading routes of inference. Moore advocates for interregional comparative studies that address large theoretical concepts and cross-cultural variations.

As already noted, the chapters of *Mesoamerican Plazas* covers a wide range of topics and methodological stances, but some concrete theoretical issues guide their thread of inquiry an interpretation. One is the question of identity and identity formation and its connection with the creation of inclusionary and exclusionary spaces. Authors like Tsukamoto, Cyphers and Murtha, Rothenberg, and Urcid and Joyce emphasize the role of plazas as differential gradients that offered varied spaces for the constitution of multiple identities on disparate scales, whereas the datasets and interpretations of Murakami, Inomata, and Ringle emphasize the role of plazas in the creation of group and communal identities. These views, however, are not necessarily contradictory. According to the theoretical stances of the volume, both group and local identities forged in plaza spaces did not emerge as part of structural machinations from top, or as negative effects of power, but as the outcome of negotiations of social relations in which plazas not only functioned as the infrastructure, but also were recursive entities in the practices

of creation and transformation of social realities.

Another significant topic arising from the different chapters of this volume is the projection and/or disconnection of residential domestic patios into open public plazas. Although terms such as 'public' and 'domestic' may be charged with Western connotations, variations in restriction and access in open/enclosed spaces crosscut all the chapters of the volume and encourages new research guidelines aimed specifically to tackle this issue. For instance, Rignle's interpretation on public plazas as metaphors of residential patios, poses new venues for research in terms of conceptualizing labels that usually have been taken for granted in archaeological research, but which have been elaborated in the Mesoamerican past on the basis of metaphors and narratives embedded with deep symbolic meanings. In contrast, Inomata's study on the earliest stage of the main plaza of Ceibal, which was consciously designed as part of a public ceremonial center without having any precedent in the Maya lowlands, shows how in specific historical contexts places for collective gatherings emerged without transitioning, even metaphorically, from the household to the communal level. Some other recurrent categories of analysis in the volume are those of built environment, built landscape, and bodily experience. In fact, and just as stated in the introductory chapter, the "lived experiences of people" inferred through the interaction of bodies, spaces, and meanings, and its consequences on power relations, are the inquiring continuum that pervades all the essays. The bodily experience, as a category of analysis, is not reduced to proxemics or to calculations of plaza capacities in the essays of this volume. Instead, these methodological approaches are integrated into a broader theoretical scope in search of transformations and continuities in Mesoamerican plazas.

Although the volume covers widespread geographic areas, the lack of essays on the Maya highlands and the Pacific Coast of the Maya area is noticeable, particularly if one considers that recent large-scale projects in those areas have addressed with special interest the importance of plazas in settlement planning. In any case, *Mesoamerican Plazas* is a welcome intellectual production for Mesoamerican studies; its chapters open a new

framework for developing research designs focused specifically on plazas, and set the groundwork for future archaeological investigation in terms of new theoretical approaches and innovative methodological proposals.

### Reference Cited

Inomata, Takeshi

2006 "Plazas, Performers, and Spectators: Political Theaters of the Classical Maya." *Current Anthropology* 47 (5): 805-842.