

CITIES AND CULTURE
IN THE COLONIAL PERIOD
IN LATIN AMERICA

Unlike recent proponents of *indigenismo* I shall try to show that the physical phenomenon of the colonial city in Latin America was entirely European in genesis and in form. I shall also review some recent theories concerning the psychology, the transmission, and the reception of European urbanism in colonial America. Finally I hope to set colonial metropolitan centers into perspective with the longer span of archaeological history as well as with events in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

To begin with, two false impressions govern our *idées reçues* about Latin-American urbanism. One is that the cities were all stamped from the same molds of Peninsular bureaucracy. The other false impression is that there are two racially different kinds of colonial city: an Indo-American city-type in Mexico and in western South America, and a different type of European-American city in the Caribbean and in eastern South America. On the visual evidence alone it can readily be shown that neither impression is correct.

I

As to uniformity, a wide range of variation appears in the spatial arrangement of colonial cities. Adaptations, governed by precolumbian settlement plans, occur at Cuzco and Tenochtitlan. At Cuzco today, the Inca system of large walled courtyards persists in the colonial city. The great masonry walls still stand, but they became retaining walls when the courtyards gradually filled up with the debris of Inca housing. Eventually these courtyards turned into platforms for the houses and convents of the colonial city. In this way the preconquest street pattern was preserved. In Mexico City, the colonial plan follows closely the reticulated system of canals separating *chinampas*, as recorded by the *Plano en papel de maguey*, recently shown to be of preconquest date (Robertson, *Mexican Manuscript Painting*, New Haven, 1959).

Elsewhere throughout Mexico the gridiron composition of the sixteenth-century town derives from the *bastides* or new towns of western Europe in the middle ages reinforced by the Laws of the Indies in 1573, prescribing Vitruvian rules for the layout of towns. There are also clusters of houses in slow accretion, resembling the "organic" towns of medieval Europe, especially in Brazil. As Robert Smith has remarked, the Brazilian towns, like those of Portugal, "developed without formal plans in strip formations at several levels...all different, disordered but picturesque" ("Colonial Towns of Spanish and Portuguese America," *JSAH*, XIV [1955], 11). Still another type is the fortress-city of the Spanish Main, as at Cartagena de Indias, Veracruz, Campeche, or San Juan, where the city was encased in a shell of masonry to protect it from seaborne attacks, on the model of the coastal cities of the Mediterranean during the long war against the Turk in the sixteenth century.

II

As to racial differences, no city plan in Latin American colonial usage corresponds to the presence or absence of native peoples, other than in a few precolumbian survivals which are mentioned

above. These survivals merely condition the terrain, without intervening in the processes of European urban life.

Recent writers, however, insist that there is a kind of architectural ornament which corresponds to racial presence (H. F. Wethey, *Colonial Architecture and Sculpture in Peru*, Cambridge, 1949; P. Kelemen, *Baroque and Rococo in Latin America*, New York, 1951). It has been called "mestizo," or half-breed ornament, supposedly distributed from the south-western United States throughout an Indo-American region embracing Mexico, Central America, and western South America. It should be noticed that the term itself is abusive and restrictive. It singles out one ethnic group at the expense of the Indians, Negroes, whites and Asiatics, whose possible contribution it ignores. It presupposes a fusion of indigenous and European themes, where more careful analysis recognizes only the provincial slovening of European themes. "Native" admixtures are difficult to prove: the art in question is characterized by the same prolixity and flatness which recur in provincial or rural designs everywhere in the world, regardless of race.

In Colonial American urbanism, the starting point is always a European form. The motifs of precolumbian art never intrude, until after the emergence of tourist art later in the nineteenth century, when precolumbian themes first were revived for commercial use. During the colonial era, European forms spread out in widening circles of repetition in the American provinces, until they reached the hands of craftsmen with rudimentary skill. In the process of transmission to the farther outposts of urban life, the forms underwent a characteristic flattening and simplification, which Enrique Marco Dorta has designated as "planiform" art. An early example is the transmission from the richly variegated Plateresque ornament at Acolman (1560) to the church at Yuriria in Michoacan (after 1568). Both churches are Augustinian. The fine, bare wall areas of Acolman are filled at Yuriria with a rambling scroll pattern. The finished sculpture at Acolman is coarsened and simplified, by increasing the salience of the relief and by reducing the variety in scale. At nearby Cuitzeo, where the name of an Indian craftsman is inscribed, the ornament is further simplified and emboldened, without any trace of precolumbian intrusions.

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Another example of the provincial American reception of European ornamental conventions occurs near Cuzco. The façade of the Belen church in Cuzco was built before 1696 by an Indian architect of Inca race. It shows no trace of pre-conquest survivals. His forms are based upon those of the New Compania in Cuzco and its derivatives. These in turn owe their inception to North European pattern books originating in the Low Countries, like those by Wendel Dietterlin (1599) and Vredeman de Vries. From Cuzco itself these urbane forms spread in the eighteenth century into the remote villages of the Andean altiplano, as at Lampa (1678-85) or S. Lorenzo, Potosi (1728-44) where the sirens and caryatids, and the twisted columns festooned with grapevines evoke European sources. These Andean portals resemble the Coptic sculpture of Early Christian Egypt and they bear precisely the same relation as Coptic art to the mainstream of European art. Both are provincial derivations by rustic craftsmen based upon much older sources transferred from remote capitals through several intermediate phases of simplification and reduction.

III

If these two false impressions now stand corrected, Latin American cities are European cities, without "racial" intrusions from indigenous or mestizo urban traditions, and they display the same variety of types as European cities. Thus colonial Latin American urbanism is the transatlantic extension of European urbanism.

Yet every thoughtful observer has noted differences which can be ascribed to the intrinsic character of colonial conditions. Several recent studies seek to define these differences. In 1932 Ortega y Gasset described some of the psychological conditions of colonial life. The anthropologist, George Foster, studied the process of "selective giving" by the mother-country in his book entitled *Culture and Conquest* (Chicago, 1960), and in 1962, the historian, Richard Morse, examined the characteristics of the accommodation to American colonial conditions by European settlers, in an essay entitled, "Some Characteristics of Latin

American Urban History," *American Historical Review* (LXVII [1962], 317-38). These three studies in effect map some of the principal cultural differences separating European and American cities.

For Ortega, colonial existence was a specific mode of human experience, having transitional character, but tending towards what he called "autochthonous life." He regarded America entire in 1932 as being on the verge of ceasing its colonial status. Colonialism is defined by men whose culture originated elsewhere. American colonialism thus consists of old means applied to new situations. Eventually the situations become old ones, and the adaptation of means to situations leads to the emergence of autochthonous life in the former colonial setting. As long as the colonial situation exists, Ortega notes the atrophy of refinement and complexity, accompanied by the reinforcement of elemental (or exploitative) drives, in the absence of those "pressures of limited destiny" experienced only in the mother-country or homeland.

George Foster's study of "conquest culture" is devoted to the interaction of donor, recipient, and situation. The mother-country automatically screens outgoing traits, while the recipients in the colony also receive by selective differentiation. The contact situation produces in addition elements peculiar to itself. In the process, conquest culture is stripped down or reduced to fewer forms. For example, export Catholicism becomes ideal dogma, expurgated of homegrown Spanish accommodations. It is parallel to the ideal grid plan of the American cities. It is comparable to the simple and monotonously uniform technology of export culture for colonial use. Foster has also studied what he calls "cultural crystallization." Here, simple priority determines many forms of behavior: an import, if accepted, precludes the acceptance of other rival forms of the same behavior, so that mere precedence can become decisive, regardless of social or psychological factors.

Richard Morse has examined the parallel features of the urban process in all the Americas, North and South. His study reveals profound differences between American and European cities, especially during the colonial era. In America political structures preceded economic ones in the formation

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of settlements. Unlike European mercantile cities, American settlements were primarily exploitative. If the European city can be characterized as centripetal, in drawing the resources of the region to itself, the American city has functioned more as a centrifugal force, in the exploitation of the environment. Hence the American colonial city tended from the beginning towards multiplicity and instability, with many false starts and rapidly shifting lines of development. Only since Independence have the American cities acquired European character in becoming mercantile centers rather than exploitative ones.

Thus we are confronted with an apparent paradox. Although American colonial cities are distinctly European in genesis and in form, they functioned unlike European cities. They were exploitative rather than mercantile. They were composed of simpler and more ideal elements than in the mother countries. They were populated by men who were living out a portion of European history upon new soil. The outward forms and the historical antecedents were European, but the inner organization and the functions became American and colonial rather than European. This split between form and function, between European origins and New World actions, continues today, even despite the modern conversion of the cities to manufacturing and trade. As Morse has put it, "the exploitation of the land, which was settled from the town during the latter's centrifugal phase, created forms of rural social organization which largely lacked inner coherence and roots in the soil. Now that the city has become centripetal, it attracts massively and unselectively from the rural zone. As the Latin American city once sowed, so now does it reap."

IV

We still have not examined one categorical difference among the American cities we are discussing. It concerns the difference between a metropolis and a large provincial city. Absolute demographic size is irrelevant. Small cities have generated the principal events of history more often than the megalopolis. Some provincial cities are larger than the metropolitan centers from which they take orders.

Absolute political autonomy is also irrelevant. New York is a true metropolis, but it is ruled from Washington on many matters. In Latin America, Mexico City and Lima were true metropolitan centers, as we know by their works and influence, but both were ruled from Madrid. For our purpose the metropolis is the true regional center of events, where binding decisions are made in a dense concentration of power, decisions that affect whole networks of other settlements. The existence of a metropolis is usually manifested by its visible productions. Its physical equipment tends towards uniqueness. It is costly, intricate, and exemplary, while that of the provinces is imitative, derivative, and merely typical. Archaeology and the history of art are often concerned with detecting and demonstrating this order of differences among the cities of the past. As to present events, the hierarchy of cities is clearly marked by the hierarchy among political powers. The city where binding orders are issued for many states occupies another echelon than the city which commands only within its own political or regional frontiers.

The capital cities of colonial Latin America belong only in this second echelon of regional capitals. They were subject to orders from Europe, but in almost all practical respects they served as true metropolitan centers, with nearly autonomous concentrations of power and faculties of decision. About eight of them can be surely identified. Mexico City was the viceregal capital. No other city in New Spain enjoyed its powers or priorities. The same was true of Guatemala, in the successive cities occupied by that capital. Lima was a new city, flourishing as the metropolis of the central Andes and southern South America until late in the eighteenth century. Bogota and Quito were regional capitals from an early date. Rio de Janeiro, established in 1567, displaced Bahia as the Portuguese colonial capital only in 1763, so that it, like Buenos Aires and Havana, did not attain metropolitan rank until late in the eighteenth century.

Astonishing variety marked the architectural culture of these metropolitan centers. Mexico, the Antilles, and Central America maintained throughout the colonial era a strongly Hispanic architectural character based upon Andalusian models quite unlike South America, where North and Central European models

were always more important than they ever were north of Panama.

Thus Quito in the sixteenth century achieved an erudite architectural style of erudite character, based upon Italian and North European sources. In Lima Portuguese and North European ornamental forms became acclimatized after 1650. In Quito and Bogota German and Austrian architects introduced central European forms beginning in the seventeenth century.

If Lima and Cuzco enjoyed an architectural florescence after 1650, Mexico City did not acquire a distinctive urban style until the eighteenth century, in a remarkable wave of building under Andalusian tutelage, directed by Jeronimo Balbas and later by Lorenzo Rodriguez. The *estípite*, an architectural order much used in façades and on altarpieces, became a speciality of metropolitan design much imitated in the northern provinces, as far afield as eastern Texas, at San José de Aguayo and in Santa Fe in New Mexico, where the Castrense altarpiece was the work of craftsmen from Zacatecas.

The case of the *estípite* points to an interesting phenomenon. The Peruvian colony experienced a remarkable artistic florescence in the seventeenth century, based upon twisted columns and broken entablatures which became canonical elements of the architectural ornament of the eighteenth century. The newer *estípite* forms, which enjoyed such great vogue in eighteenth-century Mexico, were characteristic of New Spain alone, and were ignored by the artisans of the South American colonies. Here is a clear case of the operation of metropolitan taste in two great cities, each defining the range of ornamental practice in its own sphere of influence during periods of affluence separated by a century.

Eight such metropolitan centers functioned actively in Latin America at the end of the eighteenth century. I shall enumerate them again: Mexico, Guatemala, Havana, Bogota, Quito, Rio, Buenos Aires, and Lima. All were once distinguishable from one another by clear-cut differences. Today it is difficult to tell one commercial or banking center or upper-class suburb or proletarian slum from another. The twentieth century has erased the visible colonial differences with interchangeable units of monotonous identity. All eight survived as cities, but only three of them

still function as metropolitan centers. To be metropolitan is to affect events beyond national boundaries. Such are Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro. Among the others, Bogota still has intermittent influence as a regional capital on carefully delimited matters, but it does not function, like Paris, London, or New York, as a center of decision upon a wide range of practical and aesthetic choices. To repeat, only Mexico City, Buenos Aires, and Rio de Janeiro still occupy this rank. None of the Central American or Caribbean cities answers the metropolitan definition any longer. One might debate whether to include one of the Andean capitals, but no one of them clearly emerges at metropolitan rank. Further discussion of the point is invidious, and it is preferable to remain with these three uncontested world-capitals, because the point I wish to make is unaffected by adding only one or two cities more to the metropolitan category. The point is that since the Wars of Independence the number of metropolitan centers in Latin America has dwindled from eight to three. We may therefore deduce a corresponding diminution in the cultural diversity of Latin American life, and in the range of choices being freely made.

When we now look back beyond the Conquest into the long perspectives of precolumbian time, it is striking to see that the process of diminution in cultural diversity was under way there too. We have taken the criterion that metropolitan urban centers display a behavior both semi-autonomous and exemplary. This criterion allows us to recognize only three metropolitan centers today, and eight in the late colonial period. By the same token we can identify at least thirteen such cities as of the first millennium A.D., and only two as of the period of the Discovery and Conquest. In 1000 A.D., Lima did not exist, but there was Pachacamac. Havana did not exist, but Puerto Rico was metropolitan in character, even if lacking great urban aggregations. Eastern South America was insignificant in this frame of reference. But there were great urban concentrations in the Valley of Mexico, on the Gulf Coast, and in Oaxaca. Yucatan and the Guatemalan highlands both had many large urban centers, like the northern, central, and southern divisions of Peru. The northern Andes lacked large urban complexes.

By 1500 A.D. this diagram of great regional diversity had

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been radically altered by the emergence of the Aztec confederacy and the Inca empire. Only Tenochtitlan and Cuzco gave binding decisions. The arts of vast regions showed the uniform rule of taste spreading from the two capital cities. They were not in contact, but during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries they achieved, each in its sphere, a reduction to uniformity among many previously divergent cultural entities.

It would be wrong, however, to identify the imperial unification of ancient America with the twentieth-century unity imposed by technology, industry, and money economy. The two are radically different. But the contrast allows us to see clearly that the Iberian colonization of Latin America was prepared for by the Inca and Aztec states, and that it actually continued part of the process initiated in the fifteenth century.

There are two kinds of cultural conformity. One is internally necessary, as in the twentieth century, when different peoples adopt the same technology, because it works better and more cheaply than what went before. The other kind of uniformity is externally imposed by conquest and colonization, when different peoples are driven into the same mold by *force majeure*.

The exceptional character of the Spanish Conquest arises from its combination of attractive technology with external force. The pain of Conquest was constantly eased for native peoples by the attraction of new ways of doing hard work, as when steel tools, draft animals and heeled vehicles abruptly altered all indigenous ideas about stone-age labor.

Colonial cities and their culture present a broadly variegated spread of achievements, which were too long concealed under the conventional interpretation of monolithic colonial uniformity. I hope to have suggested here how the initial uniformities of Spanish and Portuguese colonial culture rapidly altered in different directions, to produce an astonishing range of regional cultural variants, nearly matching the diversity of the classic age of the precolumbian civilizations.