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Plazas of San Diego Texas: Signatures of Mexican-American Place Identity

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San Diego, Texas, unlike its older and larger namesake in Southern California, is not immediately recognizable as an important Hispanic-American place. It does not carry the name recognition of a San Antonio or a Los Angeles. Rather, this predominantly Mexican-American community is typical of small towns in the ranching, farming and oil-producing region of South Texas.

But San Diego is unique in at least one respect: Although it was founded under Anglo-American political authority, its plan follows the Spanish colonial tradition in which a plaza serves as the focus of community life. In fact, San Diego has two plazas, which is unusual for such a small, village-like place. The creation and use of these spaces distinguishes San Diego as one of the dozen or so *Mexicano* plaza towns in South Texas.

The plazas of San Diego, like those in other South Texas towns, are adaptations of the heritage of small town public spaces found in much of Latin America. They have persisted well into this century as social nodes for both local residents and Mexican-Americans throughout the region. Their story reveals how traditional Latino public spaces have survived even in the smallest of settlements along the U.S.-

Padre Pedro Park.
Courtesy Daniel D. Arreola.



Mexico border, and how these places are being rediscovered and preserved.

San Diego is located about 100 miles south of San Antonio and about halfway between Corpus Christi, a port city on the Gulf of Mexico, and Laredo, a border crossing into Mexico. The town emerged in about 1858; when Texas organized Duval County in 1876, San Diego became the county seat and was moved seven miles to its present location along a railroad line. This connection gave San Diego direct access to Corpus Christi, Laredo and the interior of Mexico.

The town is situated on the Rio Grande plain, an undulating landscape of mesquite and woody scrub vegetation that stretches across much of the interior of South Texas. Sheep ranching first dominated the local economy, and San Diego became a service center for surrounding ranches and a distribution point for wool exports. In 1880 the town counted 1,000 residents and included a bank, three churches and a Spanish and English weekly newspaper; five decades later, after oil had been discovered in the region, it boasted a population of 3,500. Today the town is home to nearly 5,000 residents, 95 percent of whom are Mexican-American. It is still the county seat and a service node for the surrounding farming and ranching hinterland.

From the beginning of settlement, San Diego's Mexican population was composed of working class people as well as prominent ranchers and merchants. Mexican Americans have been the entrepreneurial and political elite of San Diego and Duval County, being represented in many businesses from the wool trade to hat manufacturing to lodging, and holding such political positions as county commissioner, judge, assessor, deputy sheriff and justice of the peace.¹

Padre Pedro Park

San Diego's first plaza, created in 1876 when the town was moved to its present site, was intended to be the center of the community. The plaza is clearly an important element in the town plan: It is located near the creek that borders the town; it is set apart from surrounding blocks by 70-foot-wide streets, 20 feet wider than standard streets; and it measures a monumental 200 feet on each side.

The buildings that surround the plaza today reflect its central role in the life of the community. St. Francis de Pabla Church on the east and city hall on the west are anchors that establish the plaza's institutional authority. Such buildings also provide continuity with Latin American plaza traditions; churches and government buildings typically can be found next to central plazas in cities throughout Latin America. Two abandoned merchant houses, the Guerra building, a limestone masonry structure on the southwest corner, and the Levy building, a wood frame structure on the northwest perimeter, testify to former commercial functions on the plaza. Also, several private residences remain along St. Peter and St. Joseph streets. Some were the most prominent homes of their day, illustrating the social gradient typical of Latin America plazas, which traditionally attracted the most affluent residents of a community.

Like plazas in many Mexican towns, San Diego's plaza was without ornament or landscaping when first organized. A photograph taken in 1876 shows the open space filled with *jacales* (or thatch huts), which were typical rural dwellings of northeastern Mexico during that era. Arranged within the space were several *palisados* (or fence-like enclosures), which suggests that the plaza may have

been used as a commons to hold livestock like sheep and goats.

The first evidence that the plaza was more than a space for accommodating animals appears in an 1886 report of a celebration organized to raise funds for improving and adorning the plaza. This account relates how town folk walked around the brilliantly lit space, patronizing numerous food stands, dancing to live music and crowding around lottery stands from early in the evening until midnight.²

The plaza was, of course, the stage for the *paseo* (or ritual promenade), an activity inherited from Mexico and practiced especially by the upper classes that lived close to the plaza. The *paseo* usually was a Sunday afternoon event, although sometimes it became a daily activity. The ceremony typically involved men strolling around the plaza in one direction and ladies circulating in the opposite direction; the men and women acknowledged each other in passing.

The activities that drew the entire community to the plaza were the *fiestas patrias* or Mexican patriotic celebrations, especially the Cinco de Mayo, which celebrates the Mexican victory over French forces in the Battle of Puebla, and the Diez y Seis de Septiembre, Mexican independence day. These celebrations would be swelled by the hundreds of Mexican seasonal workers who came to town during the sheep shearing seasons (April-June and August-

Christmas festival, Padre Pedro Park. Courtesy San Diego Chamber of Commerce.

View of St. Francis de Pabla Church from Padre Pedro Park *kiosco*, 1957. Courtesy Institute for Texan Cultures, University of Texas, San Antonio, *San Antonio Light* collection.



September), providing visible links between the culture of the homeland across the Rio Grande and the Mexican-American town. In 1887, according to one description, students marched to the plaza for the Diez y Seis celebration carrying U.S. and Mexican flags, and an improvised stand was erected to accommodate a speaker and musicians.³

A fire insurance map from the same period illustrates the evolution of institutional, residential and commercial functions around the plaza. By 1885, when the town counted 1,500 inhabitants, the square was surrounded by the town's first Catholic church, seven dwellings and 13 businesses (including a hotel, boarding house, restaurant, barber, tailor, tin shop, two grocery/dry goods stores, a notions store, a general store and two billiard halls).

Today the plaza is called Padre Pedro Park in honor of Father J. Pedro Bard, who served the town from 1877-1920. It includes an elevated, red-tile-roofed *kiosco* encircled by a concrete walkway that intercepts diagonal paths from the four corners of the space and receives two additional perpendicular walkways from the Victoria and Mier street sides of the plaza. In Mexico, most plazas were transformed into gardens with walkways radiating from a central *kiosco* during the Porfiriato (1876-1910), when this plan, attributed to French Renaissance ideas about landscape design, was introduced in Mexico City and then quickly imitated elsewhere.

Presently, Padre Pedro Park is shrouded in live oak and elm trees that give a canopy effect to the space while ground cover consists of grass that is mowed and trimmed regularly by city workers. Three light standards illuminate the plaza and no fewer than 38 benches border the perimeter and walkways, many bearing the inscriptions of benefactors who donated the seats.

Plaza Alcalá

Early in the twentieth century, a second plaza was donated to San Diego by Don Juan de Alcalá, who owned a boarding house facing the new open space. Plaza Alcalá, as it became known, is situated several blocks northwest of Padre Pedro Park.

It is not certain why a second plaza was created in such a small town, but changes in the fortunes of the local elite may have been a factor.⁴ After 1910, the South Texas economy shifted from wool exporting to cotton exporting. Several prominent Mexican-American farmers and merchants bene-

fited from this change, and it is likely they saw the new plaza as a symbol of their stamp on San Diego's landscape.

This economic change was reflected in a shift in the location of the town's business district. The old plaza had been the focus for late nineteenth century wool export activities, but when cotton became king, a new commercial focus emerged a few blocks away on Center Street. By 1932, even though the town's population had increased to 3,500, the number of commercial functions surrounding the old plaza had dwindled from 13 to six. Today, the Center Street core has largely been abandoned in favor of a newer automo-



bile-oriented commercial strip, but the derelict two-story brick storefronts that still line the street testify to earlier commercial prosperity.

Plaza Alcalá is located on Collins Street one block west of Center. It occupies a large city block measuring some 250 feet on each side, somewhat larger than Padre Pedro Park. In 1932, nine dwellings and three businesses (including the boarding house) surrounded the plaza on three sides; there was no church on the plaza and the western flank was an open field. At the center stood a high *kiosco* (since removed and replaced by a rectangular platform) where musical ensembles

performed, both local bands and orchestras that toured from Mexico. Surrounding the *kiosco* were wooden benches; later some of this seating was covered to shield audiences from the sun when the plaza became used for other celebrations. Unlike Padre Pedro Park, Plaza Alcalá is strictly a space in which special events are staged; the plaza never had the garden-like ambiance created by shade trees, walkways and commemorative benches. Today it is more reminiscent of an athletic field or playground than a traditional Mexican plaza.

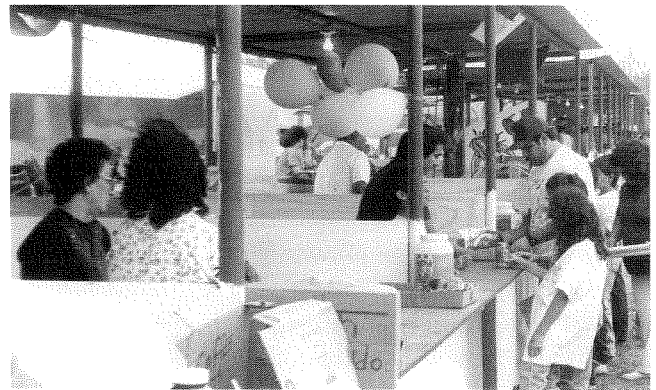
The special event that has marked the Plaza Alcalá since early in the twen-

tieth century is the Feria de San Diego. Fairs were common in South Texas plaza towns during the early twentieth century; the festivities often were held in the fall after the cotton harvest and might have lasted for several days. These celebrations, like the *fiestas patrias*, were said to have attracted ranch families from across the region. One account of the *feria* at Plaza Alcalá recalled that food stands, lottery booths and a roulette table defined the perimeter of the space in addition to the requisite musical ensemble stationed on the central *kiosco*.⁵

Right: Pan de Campo festival, Plaza Alcalá. Courtesy San Diego Chamber of Commerce.

Opposite page: Central San Diego in 1932. Graphic by Pankaj Vaid, base map courtesy Barker Texas History Center, University of Texas, Austin.

Below: Plaza Alcalá. Courtesy Daniel D. Arreola.



Legacy of Plaza Space

Today, *fiestas* and special occasions are still celebrated on the plazas in San Diego, but the traditional function of these spaces as social nodes has changed. While the traditional plaza was the place to see and be seen, this function has largely been replaced by other social activities. For example, the formal *paseo* has largely disappeared from Padre Pedro Park as attitudes towards courting have changed and as modern entertainment media, like television and videos, have become popular. Similarly, San Diego's commercial heart has moved from Padre Pedro Plaza to the Center Street district to a new state highway that bypasses the old town center.

Perhaps because the town has remained small, Padre Pedro Park, with its garden landscape, is still used as a social node by the local residents, even if less frequently than in the past. Importantly, it also persists as a formal plaza with the parish church and city hall on its periphery. These institutions bring town residents to the plaza weekly, if not daily.

Plaza Alcalá remains the site of San Diego's Pan de Campo Fiesta, the modern-day version of the early twentieth century Feria de San Diego, which may be one of the longest-lived celebrations carried out in a plaza in the region. The *fiesta* represents an increasingly rare confluence of a traditional celebration and space: A recently published directory of Hispanic-American culture listed only six South Texas towns with Mexican-American festivals.⁶ Moreover, most South Texas towns stage these and other festivals in new city parks that are larger and more accommodating to crowds than the historic plazas.

The Pan de Campo Fiesta, celebrated on the first weekend in August, attracts some 6,000 visitors, more people than the town's resident population. Activities include traditional music like *conjunto* (accordion musical combo), dances, folk arts and crafts, games, and especially *tejano* (Texas Mexican) foodways. The central competition of the fiesta is the famous *pan de campo* (country baked bread) cooking contest.

Both Padre Pedro Park and Plaza Alcalá remain symbolic spaces, reinforcing the heritage of an earlier era. Changing social awareness, enhanced by such special events in the plazas, may signal the rediscovery of the Mexican plaza as a social space in towns across South Texas. In Laredo, San Ygnacio, Eagle Pass, Del Rio, Brownsville, Roma, Rio Grande City and other places local historical societies and chambers of commerce have spotlighted plazas in self-guided brochures and maps that circulate to the public. San Diego has commissioned a study to incorporate Padre Pedro Park into a historic district focused on the plaza and adjacent historic buildings like the Guerra mercantile. These preservation efforts may be a vehicle for the revitalization of these traditional spaces.

The plazas in San Diego and in other South Texas Mexican-American communities may not mirror the dynamism of public spaces in larger immigrant centers like Los Angeles or Miami. Nevertheless, they represent an important dimension of the larger world of Latino public spaces. Mexican town plazas are more common in South Texas than in any other U.S. border region, reinforcing the area's Latino demographic dominance. The small-town nature of these spaces resembles the social role of plazas throughout much of small-town Latin America;

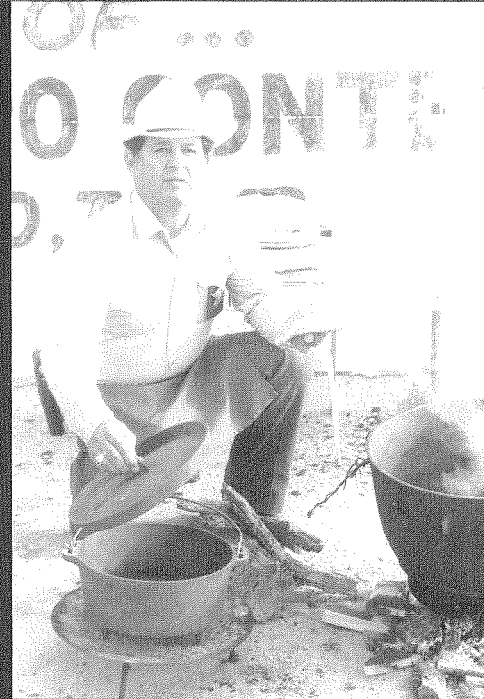
thus, these spaces mirror the living heritage of this public space tradition.

That plazas are being restored, rejuvenated and celebrated here suggests the recognized importance of this symbolic space to Mexican people in the region and their desire to formalize and give visible expression to a pride of place.

Notes

1. Arnaldo De León, *The Tejano Community, 1836-1900*, (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982).
2. *San Antonio Express*, 15 May 1886, 4; *San Antonio Express*, 26 November 1886, 2.
3. Cited in Arnaldo De León, *Social History of Mexican Americans in Nineteenth Century Duval County* (San Diego, TX: County Commissioners' Court, 1978).
4. Some other South Texas Mexican-American towns have multiple plazas, and the tradition of several large plazas and smaller *placitas* or *plazuelas* is common throughout Mexico.
5. Peter Saenz, "History of Feria de San Diego," *Duval County Picture* (14 September 1988).
6. Joe S. Graham, *Hispanic American Material Culture: An Annotated Directory of Collections, Sites, Archives and Festivals in the U.S.* (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989).

Christmas festival,
Padre Pedro Park.



Pan de Campo Fiesta,
Plaza Alcalá.



Christmas festival,
Padre Pedro Park.



Christmas festival,
Padre Pedro Park.

Photos courtesy San Diego
Chamber of Commerce.