THE PLAZA IN LAS VEGAS, NEW MEXICO
A Community Gathering Place

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In 1598, escorted by 130 soldiers and an untold number of women and children, Juan de Oñate spearheaded Spanish efforts to colonize what was to become present-day northern New Mexico (Nostrand 1992). On Spain’s northern frontier, as in other parts of its New World colonies, the crown required all new settlements to adhere to royal planning ordinances. King Phillip II’s codification of the Laws of the Indies in 1573 was intended to give order and a sense of familiarity to Spanish urban places (Crouch, Garr, and Mundigo 1982; Suisman 1993). Serving as the village focal point, the plaza mayor (main square) was to be the generative space for the entire community (Veregge 1997). The plan called for streets to radiate out in a centripetal fashion from the central plaza, forming a rigid grid pattern. Founding fathers of frontier settlements, however, rarely abided by more than the spirit of the laws (Arreola 1992). The realities of frontier life rendered many of the ordinances infeasible, and local conditions necessitated deviations.

Many of the early Spanish settlers in the upper Rio Grande region, for example, preferred to reside in ribbon-shaped settlements so they could be close to their fields (Jackson 1952; Knowlton 1969; Smith 1998). With increasingly frequent Indian raids, people were forced to congregate around fortified plazas (de Borhegyi 1954; Jackson 1988). Homes were built side by side and one room deep around an open square large enough to hold livestock and personal possessions. With windows facing the enclosed space, the outside walls offered fortress-like protection against invading forces.

When marauding Native Americans were finally subdued in New Mexico, many of these smaller plazas were abandoned and residents returned to a more diffuse settlement pattern. In governmental, ecclesiastical, or com-
mercial centers, however, the plaza remained the focal point of the
community. These plazas eventually evolved into public spaces that hosted celebra-
tory events, including parades, community affairs, religious activities, and
annual fiestas (Wilson 2001). Over time, these recurring events established
the plaza’s importance to the community. Serving as a cultural ligament
holding the community together, the plaza became each town’s principal
resolana (Romero 2001).

In the hermanito (brotherhood) traditions of northern New Mexico,
resolana is synonymous with resolaneros: men of all ages who gather in the
warmth of the sun or under shady trees on hot summer days to share simple
the word resolana being used to refer to any place where people sat and
talked about life. The word loosely translates to mean a place where people
gather to while away their time, or a place of community gathering. Unfor-
nately, this essential part of community life is being lost as the New
Mexico region undergoes cultural change (Carlson 1990). With the influx
of Anglos into the upper Rio Grande region, many of New Mexico’s His-
pano urban plazas, especially those in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos,
have become commodified spaces for tourists. No longer do these plazas
serve as community gathering places. Local Hispanics have, instead, cre-
ated other resolanas, including Wal-Mart and nearby Native American casi-
longtime resident Hispanics of Taos. The first was overheard to say, “You
know, I don’t ever go [to the plaza] anymore. I’d rather come here [to Wal-
Mart].” The other gentleman responded, “Yes, it’s better here. The [plaza]
is full of tourists and here one runs into a relative or neighbor.”

In Las Vegas, New Mexico, however, the plaza continues to serve as the
city’s main resolana. The plaza is still the heart of the community and
the space that attracts local residents. In this chapter, I demonstrate how
the Las Vegas plaza continues to serve its traditional function as commu-
nity gathering place. I begin with a snapshot of the historical evolution
of the Las Vegas plaza and a comparative overview of the plazas in Albu-
querque, Santa Fe, and Taos. I then present three aspects that illustrate how
the Las Vegas plaza functions today as a community social space: (1) sur-
viving commercial land uses; (2) sponsored community events; and (3) per-
sonal uses of the plaza.

I gathered a variety of sources to tell the story of the Las Vegas plaza.
I conducted extensive fieldwork during the spring and summer of 2000
and 2001, employing personal observations and informal interviews with
local residents, business owners, teachers, students, retirees, church offi-
cials, museum and library personnel, chamber of commerce employees, and local government officials. I used Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps from 1883, 1898, and 1930 to determine historical land use patterns on the Las Vegas plaza. Printed brochures from local chambers of commerce, tourism boards, and city governments were also amassed. I made daily notes and took countless photographs to document the project.

LAS VEGAS PLAZA

The first attempt, albeit unsuccessful, to settle the land now known as Las Vegas, New Mexico, was made by Luis Cabeza de Baca and his seventeen sons in 1821 (Fugate and Fugate 1989). By 1823, raiding Native Americans had driven off the pioneering settlers, and the land remained vacant for another twelve years. In the early spring of 1835, twenty-nine men from the nearby village of San Miguel petitioned the Mexican government for a new land grant to secure the 500,000 acres popularly known as Las Vegas Grandes en el Río de las Gallinas (Arrellano 1996). By April of that same year, the land grant was conferred and the community of Las Vegas, officially named Nuestra Señora de los Dolores de Las Vegas Grandes, was founded.

Following the traditions of the Laws of the Indies, the plaza mayor was established on a small hill at the center of the community and streets radiated out from it in a grid pattern. According to Mexican governmental stipulation, the Las Vegas plaza was required to serve as a regional service center and focal point. For the next decade, resident Veguñeños eeked out a largely subsistence living on their small, long-lot plots northeast of the plaza (Arrellano 1996). Through the 1840s, the Las Vegas plaza had only two entrances so that residents could defend themselves behind the fortresslike barricades when under attack (Fig. 2.1).

By the mid-1840s, reports of commercial profits from trade quickly spread along the Santa Fe Trail, and Las Vegas was transformed from a simple agricultural village into New Mexico’s leading commercial center (Arrellano 1996). The increased trade stimulated the local economy; it brought wage-paying employment and large quantities of affordable merchandise from the east. Soon, businessmen, including Don Miguel Romero de Baca, Charles Ilfeld, and Emanuel Rosenwald, established retail operations on the plaza. In 1860, the population of Las Vegas had grown to over one thousand (Citizens’ Committee for Historic Preservation [CCHP] 1999), and six years later, at the height of trail activity, five thousand wagons passed through the Las Vegas area (Vander Meer 1999).
In 1879, the city’s connection to national transportation routes changed again, when the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe (AT&SF) Railroad steamed into town (Meinig 1971). Even though railroad administrators decided to bypass the plaza in favor of a location one mile to the east, where an Anglo subdivision eventually emerged, the plaza’s importance in regional trade and commerce was not diminished (Fugate and Fugate 1989; Gottschalk 2000). The plaza in Las Vegas had become too well established as a commercial center with strong connections to points beyond.

The arrival of the railroad did, however, accelerate migration from the east. Las Vegas grew in importance, and by 1882, its population had increased to six thousand, making it one of the most cosmopolitan cities in the region (Arrellano 1996). In that same year, the now-famous Plaza Hotel opened for business (Fig. 2.2). In 1883, Charles Ilfeld began selling goods in his three-story department store, The Great Emporium (Fig. 2.2). Within a decade, the Las Vegas Daily Optic called it “the largest and finest department house in all the Southwest (Gottschalk 2000: 36).” For the next thirty years, the Las Vegas plaza was a critical site in the economic development of the Southwest, and at the end of the 1880s, Las Vegas had become so important that it rivaled Denver, El Paso, and Tucson as the region’s principal trade and commercial center.
By the early 1900s, that prominence was nearing an end. In the mid-1920s, the local region experienced a severe agricultural depression followed by the Great Depression of the 1930s (CHCH 1999). The area did not see signs of sustained economic recovery until the mid-1980s (Campbell and Strozier 1996). This extended economic slump helped shield Las Vegas from the wrecking ball and outside influences that diminished other Hispanic urban plazas in the state. Today, 918 buildings in Las Vegas are listed on the National Register of Historic Places (more than any other city in the United States), and many of them surround the plaza (CHCH 1999). The town also boasts excellent examples of nearly every residential architectural style built in the United States between 1840 and 1940. In 2007, the National Trust for Historic Preservation ranked Las Vegas eighth in the United States among distinctive destinations because of its dynamic downtown, eye-catching architecture, and cultural diversity. Thanks in large part to the preservation of the architecture around the plaza and the innovative efforts of La Plaza Vieja Partnership, Ltd., the Las Vegas plaza continues to be the city’s main gathering place.

Over the past century and a half, the plaza space has seen many transformations. In 1876, a windmill was erected on the space. The conspicuous structure not only provided a focal point for the community, it also served as gallows for local vigilante groups. By 1880, the symbol of the wild frontier was removed and replaced with a kiosko (bandstand) encircled by trees and a picket fence (CHCH 1999). Today’s plaza with its gazebo under a canopy of mature trees reflects the success of the first historic preservation movement in the 1960s (CHCH 1999).

In the 1980s, a partnership of property owners provided the catalyst for today’s thriving commercial space. The most recent plaza refurbishment was completed in 1991. Today the city invests considerable time and financial resources in maintaining the kiosko and surrounding plaza.

To appreciate the character of the Las Vegas plaza, I shall now inspect how plazas have evolved in other Hispanic urban centers of northern New Mexico. While Las Vegas fell from the state’s leading commercial center into economic ruin, the cities of Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos (see Fig. 2.1) followed distinctly different paths. Due, in part, to the promotional efforts of Fred Harvey and the AT&SF Railroad in the 1870s, outsiders discovered the enchanted Hispanic plazas in these communities (Cullen 1992). In the mid-1930s, the marketing of New Mexico’s unique cultural imprints (including its Hispanic plazas) was adopted by the state’s newly founded Tourist Bureau (Andrés 2000). In a relatively short time, the success of its Heritage/Ethnic Tourism promotion scheme reinforced
each city’s unique cultural identity (Morley 1999; Mulligan 1992). Moreover, Santa Fe and Taos emerged as popular exotic destinations because of the reputations developed for these places by well-known authors like Willa Cather, Robert Frost, and D. H. Lawrence (Weigle and Fiore 1982). By the 1960s and the early 1970s, throngs of tourists had found the region’s attractive climate, abundant sunshine, and rich culture appealing. The Old Town plazas in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos became primed for Anglo invasion. “Spatial mestizaje” aptly describes the cultural and racial blending that has become evident on the plazas in these cities (Wilson 1994).

The residential and commercial spaces around these plazas have experienced an invasion and succession of land uses. Newcomers, often Anglo, bought property for a fraction of its market value and built shops and expensive homes. This increased the value of the land around the plaza, which in turn caused property taxes to rise. Higher taxes combined with willing buyers convinced many Hispanos to sell their property and move out. Today it is rare to find commercial space that does not cater to the tourist industry on the plazas in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos. Most Hispano residents in these cities avoid the plazas because they have become theme malls and contrived, reconstructed tourist sites (Andrés 2000; Cullen 1992; Rodríguez 1998).

Unlike in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, the plaza in Las Vegas, as I have noted, continues to serve as a gathering place for the local Hispano population. Three elements illustrate this function: (1) surviving commercial land uses; (2) sponsored community events; and (3) personal uses of the plaza.

COMMERCIAL LAND USES ON THE PLAZA

In 1993, Daniel Arreola found that the buildings and commercial activity surrounding plazas in San Diego, Texas, were strong indicators of the role these spaces played in community life. A 1902 map of the plaza in Old Town Albuquerque unquestionably reveals that the businesses around the square served the resident population. Of the eighteen spaces dedicated to commercial activity, four were saloons/bars, four were grocery stores/food markets, three were boardinghouses, two were barbershops, one served as a post office, and one as a public school (Andrés 2000).

While the San Felipe de Neri church continued to anchor the north side of the plaza, by the 1950s, commercial land uses around the Albuquerque plaza had changed dramatically. Barbershops, grocery stores, the post office, and the public school were replaced by restaurants and curio
shops. In 1972, the number of eateries had increased to eight, with 85 tourist shops. By 1980, there were ten dining places, 104 curio shops, and eighteen art galleries (Andrés 2000).

Fieldwork in the summer of 2001 revealed that nearly all the commercial activity catered to tourists. Of the thirty-eight commercial units that fronted Albuquerque’s plaza, twenty-six were curio shops, four were restaurants, four were art galleries, and one was a newly established visitor information center. Moreover, in the 1960s, 116 people resided on the plaza in Albuquerque. By 1980, that number had dwindled to about two dozen (Andrés 2000), and today it is hard to find any residential space on Albuquerque’s Old Town plaza. Similar patterns of commercial succession and residential erosion are found on the plazas in Santa Fe (Cullen 1992; Morley 1999) and Taos (Rodríguez 1998).

By contrast, commercial activity around the Las Vegas plaza has consistently functioned as an integral part of the resident Hispanic activity space. An 1883 map, for example, shows sixty-four commercial spaces fronting the plaza (Table 2.1). Of these, sixteen offered general merchandise/hardware, seven were saloons, six were grocery stores/food markets, and two were restaurants. No commercial establishments offered goods or services that catered to tourists. An 1898 map reveals that, with the exception of additional office space and fewer general merchandise stores, grocery stores, and saloons, the land uses around the Las Vegas plaza remained largely the same, suggesting that the commercial activity catered to the resident population. Analysis of a 1930 map reveals again that there were few changes in the types of businesses on the plaza, except for the lack of saloons, reflecting the influence of Prohibition (Table 2.1). Likewise, none of the specialty businesses identified were targeted at tourists.

Today, despite the fact that billboards sponsored by the Bridge Street merchants association and the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce beckon travelers on Interstate 25 to shop at the Old Town Plaza, the space has not been transformed into a tourist site. Instead, fieldwork reveals that the commercial land uses around the plaza continue to serve as integral spaces for resident Veguеños.

The fifty-one spaces fronting the plaza in 2001 saw a variety of commercial and private uses, including seven general merchandise stores, five restaurants, three commercial offices, and six vacant spaces (Table 2.1). One of the best indications of the continued vitality of the plaza in serving the local population’s needs is the prominent position of the church on the space. The original church of Nuestra Señora de los Dolores stood on the south side of the plaza until Archbishop Lamy sold the building in 1869
TABLE 2.1—LAND USE ON THE LAS VEGAS, NEW MEXICO, PLAZA

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>LAND USE</th>
<th>1883 (NO.)</th>
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<th>1930 (NO.)</th>
<th>2001 (NO.)</th>
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<tr>
<td>GENERAL MERCHANDISE/HARDWARE</td>
<td>16</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>GROCERY/FOOD STORE</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RESTAURANT/CAFÉ</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SALOON/BILLIARDS/DANCE HALL</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OFFICE SPACE</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APARTMENTS</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
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<td>2</td>
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<tr>
<td>GOVERNMENT/COURTHOUSE</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
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<td>TAILOR/MILLINERY</td>
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<td>—</td>
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<td>CRAFTS/TRADE SERVICES</td>
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<td>1</td>
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<td>DRUGSTORE</td>
<td>—</td>
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<td>CHURCH PROPERTY</td>
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<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANTIQUES/CURIOS</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VACANT SPACE</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>—</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>64</strong></td>
<td><strong>53</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
<td><strong>51</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


(Gottschalk 2000). In 1938, space on the northwest side of the plaza that now houses the parish hall was acquired by the church and has remained in its possession since (Huchmala 2002). Equally telling is the fact that fifteen private dwellings are also found on the plaza. This is in stark contrast to the plaza spaces in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, where apartments are all but absent. That both religious and residential land uses are still found on the Las Vegas plaza is remarkable, considering the prime space they occupy.

In 2002, only two businesses on the Las Vegas plaza offered goods that were even remotely targeted to tourists (Plaza Antiques and the Asian Showcase Imported Gifts). According to the Las Vegas Chamber of Commerce, a number of business proprietors on the plaza want to see more tourists frequent their shops, but they are much more concerned about keeping
their loyal local customers and, therefore, have not converted their product lines to focus on curio items (Vander Meer 2001).

SPONSORED COMMUNITY EVENTS ON THE PLAZA

As land uses illustrate the distinctive character of the Las Vegas plaza, so, too, do community-sponsored events. In Hispanic American communities, the central plaza is the preeminent space for social interaction (Arreola 1992; Low 2000). Hosting public events and community activities such as parades, music performances, horse races, patriotic commemorations, religious celebrations, and even public executions has long been one of the recognized functions of a plaza. As individuals gather to witness and participate in activities, a strong sense of community and civic loyalty is fostered. Historically, all Hispanic urban plazas of northern New Mexico served this multifaceted purpose. Today, however, in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, plaza events sponsored by local governments and organizations are, by and large, directed at tourists. The plaza in Old Town Albuquerque hosts weekend Wild West demonstrations, including mock gunfights on Sundays. Moreover, each year all three cities host multiday arts and crafts festivals and creative arts events. Santa Fe’s annual Indian Market and Crafts Fair is the plaza’s largest public event, with well over one thousand vendors offering goods to thousands of tourists. With the increased popularity of these annual events, the cities of Albuquerque and Santa Fe outlawed non-Native Americans from selling jewelry under plaza awnings to preserve the authenticity of the tourist attraction (Andrés 2000; Morley 1999). Ironically, as Sylvia Rodríguez (1998) reports, these events were established by Anglo boosters decades ago for the explicit purpose of attracting customers to the plaza during the height of the tourist season.

The Las Vegas plaza, on the other hand, hosts numerous community-sponsored events intended for residents. In 2001, some eighteen community-wide activities were held on the plaza, including the Doggie-Do Days sponsored by the local Humane Society, Fire Prevention Awareness Week, car shows and road rallies, and various religious celebrations. Certainly, these events could be held in other public venues, yet the plaza is the first choice for all public events in the community, according to city officials (Garduño 2001).

An example of how the Las Vegas plaza serves as a community gathering place is seen every Fourth of July, when the city sponsors its annual American Independence Day celebration (Fig. 2.3). For more than eighty-five years, the plaza has served as the focal point for this event, which in-
People enjoying music, food, and conversation on the Las Vegas, New Mexico, plaza during the 2001 Fourth of July celebration. Photograph by J. S. Smith, 2001.

includes, for example, music and dancing, food stands, novelty booths, a float parade, various entertainments for people of all ages, and the always popular Fiesta Queen pageant (Fig. 2.4). The multiday celebration has grown into the city's largest and most popular community event.

Pulsing music from a bank of loudspeakers is a cornerstone of the weekend. People dance and sing along with live bands, which play popular songs from a variety of genres, including rock, jazz, and Tejano, but the audience seems to come alive when the traditional Spanish New Mexican songs are played (Fig. 2.5). Of thirty-two bands that performed at the 2001 celebration, twenty were from the Las Vegas vicinity. On the final day, an open microphone session encouraged local bands to showcase their talent. Furthermore, some forty-eight booths lined the plaza; a vast majority of these stands offered novelty items or locally prepared food rather than arts and crafts.

The majority of the people who participate in the annual event, as either spectators or vendors, come from Las Vegas' immediate vicinity, and most of the people I spoke with reside in Las Vegas. However, many of the visitors from outside the region indicated they were former residents who returned each year to help maintain their ties to the community. Clearly, the
Las Vegas Fourth of July celebration is a product of local residents and intended to serve the local population. In addition to community-sponsored events, residents continue to use the space, a reflection of the plaza’s distinctive character.

PERSONAL USES OF THE PLAZA

Arguably the best indicator of how well a plaza serves as a gathering place is the extent to which residents use the space on a daily basis. In Hispanic American communities, the daily lives of people unfold on the public plaza, and the space serves as an integral landscape that reinforces the local culture (Bressi 1993; Low 2000). In Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, however, the central plaza no longer holds the appeal it once had for local Hispanics. On one research trip to Old Town Albuquerque, I spoke with an unidentified elementary school teacher who was on a field trip with her students. She related that the annual field trip to Old Town was one of the most tangible ways for students to visualize and appreciate their cultural heritage. She added that few of the families of the students had ever been to the plaza.
In Las Vegas, by comparison, the plaza is used daily by resident Vegas-ños. Not only are people attracted to the surrounding commercial shops, but residents also use the open space for highly personal reasons (Fig. 2.6). On numerous visits, I have documented folks sitting on benches and conversing, people walking their dogs, kids playing on their way to and from school, older residents sitting on the benches soaking up the sun, and young adults cruising the plaza’s perimeter. It is not uncommon during the warmer months to hear political groups call for action or see young couples getting married on the steps of the kiosko (Vander Meer 2001). The Las Vegas plaza, unlike the plazas in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, daily continues to attract local Hispano residents.

CONCLUSION

A former editor of the New Mexico magazine El Palacio believes plazas are the heart of many New Mexico towns. Plazas contribute to the Old World ethos that pervades communities throughout the state, and they are...


the places where people converge to “participate in those activities . . . [to] express their membership within the community” (Nestor 1988). Unfortunately, the plazas in many of New Mexico’s urban centers no longer serve the traditional function of community gathering place. In Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, the plazas have become contrived, appropriated, and commercially developed spaces directed to tourists more than to local residents. By contrast, the traditional character of the Las Vegas plaza has not been lost.

An analysis of maps from 1883, 1898, and 1930 helped me establish that the land uses around the Las Vegas plaza served the resident population during those years. Fieldwork in 2000 and 2001 revealed that little had changed on the Las Vegas plaza, despite efforts by the local chamber of commerce and a merchants’ association to attract more tourists. The space still accommodates the demands of resident Vegueños.

While community-sponsored events could be held almost anywhere in the city, the Las Vegas plaza is the venue of choice. Residents are more strongly connected to the plaza than to any other parklike setting within the city. The important role that the plaza plays in community life is captured every year at the city’s Fourth of July celebration. The multiday event
attracts thousands of residents who come together as a community to listen to live music performed by local bands, consume food made by local vendors, witness the float parade, and enjoy the Fiesta Queen pageant.

Finally, local Hispanics continue to use the plaza for personal activities. People walk dogs, folks linger on benches, and young couples are wed on the plaza. Unlike the Hispanic urban plazas in Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Taos, where tourists reign supreme, the Las Vegas plaza remains the community’s *resolana*. Asserted to be New Mexico’s best-preserved plaza (CCHP 1999), Old Town in Las Vegas is the heart and soul of the community, and it remains an emblem of Hispanic cultural identity.