Spanish-American Village Anatomy

Jeffrey S. Smith


Stable URL:
http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0016-7428%28199807%2988%3A3%440%3B2.0.CO%3B2-B

Geographical Review is currently published by American Geographical Society.

Your use of the JSTOR archive indicates your acceptance of JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use, available at http://www.jstor.org/about/terms.html. JSTOR’s Terms and Conditions of Use provides, in part, that unless you have obtained prior permission, you may not download an entire issue of a journal or multiple copies of articles, and you may use content in the JSTOR archive only for your personal, non-commercial use.

Please contact the publisher regarding any further use of this work. Publisher contact information may be obtained at http://www.jstor.org/journals/ags.html.

Each copy of any part of a JSTOR transmission must contain the same copyright notice that appears on the screen or printed page of such transmission.

JSTOR is an independent not-for-profit organization dedicated to creating and preserving a digital archive of scholarly journals. For more information regarding JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.
GEOGRAPHICAL FIELD NOTE
SPANISH–AMERICAN VILLAGE ANATOMY
JEFFREY S. SMITH

About fifty years ago Dan Stanislawski sought to identify the underlying character of eleven towns in Michoacán, Mexico (Stanislawski 1950). He hypothesized that regional differences in the physical environment would substantially shape the personality of each town. The methodology he used to test his hypothesis relied principally on plotting the anatomy of each village. He mapped the street pattern, central plaza, government buildings, community church, and commercial activities (crafts, stores, and services). Instead of confirming the original thesis, Stanislawski’s fieldwork and reflective analysis revealed that culture and first effective settlement had more profound influences on a town’s character than did the physical environment. Although a well-aged technique, anatomically plotting the land-use patterns in a village is applicable today and reveals many cultural traits of a community.

My research focuses on how diagnostic features on the landscape in Spanish-American communities bear witness to cultural change. In determining the contemporary cultural composition of communities that were established by Spanish Americans in southern Colorado and New Mexico I employed an approach that is similar to, if slightly modified from, Stanislawski’s. In mapping the morphology of each community, I noted its shape (paying particular attention to the road network), the characteristics of local irrigation ditches, the location and denomination of the community church(es), and the extent and qualities of commercial activities (Figures 1 and 2). My analysis was based on an examination of the anatomical design of more than twenty-five communities throughout southern Colorado and New Mexico between 1993 and 1996, and my findings have been corroborated by field research conducted since then.

A sizable literature argues for a distinctive appearance of traditional Spanish-American settlements (see Further Reading, especially Jackson 1952; de Borgheryi 1954; Simmons 1969) (Figure 1). Commonly, they are linear in form, with the Catholic church as a focal point; they have earthen, open-air irrigation ditches that traverse the community bringing water to long-lot croplands; and commercial activity is confined to a solitary, family-run store/post office (Figure 3).

After inspecting my sites, I concluded that where a Spanish-American culture continues to dominate, a traditional town anatomy is maintained. But where outside cultural influences, especially Anglo, have made inroads into the community, the settlement’s morphology assumes a distinctly different appearance (Figure 2). It tends to elongate and becomes more nodal, with numerous side streets. No longer is

* Dr. Smith is a visiting assistant professor of geography at Kansas State University, Manhattan, Kansas 66506–0801.
the Catholic church a focal point for the community; multiple (especially fundamentalist Protestant) churches are scattered throughout the village. Commercial activity is concentrated in an easily defined business district, in which multiple specialty shops offer a limited variety of goods or services. The surrounding croplands are more commonly watered with cement-lined irrigation ditches or, increasingly, by center-pivot or linear-move sprinklers.

One Spanish-American diagnostic feature not captured by plotting a town's anatomy is the Penitente morada (worship house) (Figure 4). Penitentes are pious lay brethren who were historically infamous for emulating Christ's suffering during Lenten services. Due to past persecution, the typical morada is inconspicuously located, and its nondescript form renders it nearly invisible. To locate these cultural artifacts I augmented my plotting with personal interviews. Ironically, despite decades of papal condemnation and strained relations with the Roman Catholic church, resident Catholic priests proved to be the most fruitful contacts for introductions to key informants in the communities. After gaining an informant's confidence, I had little difficulty penetrating the brotherhood network.

Serendipitously, one elder Hermano invited me to witness an Easter celebration at his local morada near Grants, New Mexico, in 1996. I later discovered that by mentioning that experience to other Penitente brothers as I traveled throughout New
Fig. 3—The community store in San Francisco, Colorado. (Photograph by the author, 1997)

Fig. 4—The Penitente morada in Ojo de Gallo, New Mexico. (Photograph by the author, 1997)
Mexico and southern Colorado, my inquiries were met with much less suspicion. In the end I tracked a network of communication that has existed among moradas for generations. This allowed me to determine where active moradas exist and where they have been abandoned and replaced with Anglo-introduced services. The Penitente experience illustrates that, despite Anglo-induced changes, communication among brotherhood chapters continues and that the strong sense of community and cultural identity that has existed for decades among the Spanish-American population is still alive.

As Dan Stanislawski learned nearly five decades ago, plotting a town’s anatomy can help identify its cultural identity. I am in the process of plotting out more communities and using geographical information systems analysis to aid my continuing analysis. My research illustrates that an anatomical understanding of a community can also aid in revealing patterns of cultural change.

Further Reading


