



PLAZAS, ZOCALOS, AND SQUARES

Level: high school

Course: Spanish IV

Rationale

The Spanish influence on the New World is seen in the use of the Spanish language, new foods, social and economic structure, and many other important institutions. We should be aware also that the Spanish attempted to greatly influence the physical layout of our cities. This unit will ask students to examine the city square or plaza mayor of important cities in Latin America and, when applicable, the town square/plaza of their own city. Students will discuss their similarities, social function, and historical events which might have taken place in the plazas. Students will also discuss the economic and social role of the plaza today as compared with the plan of the Spaniards.

Lesson Overview

An effort has been made to ensure that students use multiple skills in the undertaking of this unit. Students will read authentic materials in Spanish. They will write descriptions of both historical and fictional events and characters in Spanish, and they will orally present their findings to the class using new vocabulary and expressions associated with the plaza mayores. In addition, an effort has been made to require some electronic research in the project.

Students will select one of the following cities where there is a historically and architecturally representative plaza mayor: Buenos

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Aires, Mexico City, Santiago, Albuquerque, New Mexico, and Santa Fe, New Mexico. Other plazas or town squares can be discussed depending on location of the students, special interests of either students or teacher. Of particular interest to some classes in the Eastern part of the U.S. might be the relationship of the village green to the plaza mayor.

Time Needed

Two weeks for research. Deadlines set for submission of each of the components.

Materials

- * Slides/pictures of important plazas. Almost all Spanish text books have these pictures.
- * A research library with sufficient information on Latin America to find descriptions of travel. A good book on Latin American travel from a bookstore should also have this information.

Procedures

Lesson 1

Students will read background materials provided on the establishment of the plazas. These will include excerpts from the Leyes de las Indias and Miguel Rojas-Mix's La Plaza Mayor: El Urbanismo, instrumento de dominio colonial. In addition, the teacher will show pictures/slides/video of representative plazas.

Teaching Notes

Remind students of their study of the Greeks and Romans in their Ancient History class. The Greek "agora" or "place of speech" was followed by Roman market square, the forum, originally a place of trade. Along with the economic function, the business of state was also conducted in the central square, thus the addition of the houses of government. Temples were often built as the church competed with civic authorities for influence. The presence of the temple or church made the square a "sacred place" and guaranteed the market place essential for legitimate trade.

After a while, the economic activity of the plaza mayor become secondary and this activity was moved to secondary locations or specialized squares that afforded better access. Public monuments were erected which served to unite the past and present and increase the influence of the state. (Ask students about the placement of monuments in their city.)

The Spaniards attempted to regiment in detail the economic, political, and social structure of their new found colonies by defining the structure of the newly established city. In 1573 the Council of the Indies of Seville issued detailed instructions on how to set up a city. These instructions included the choice of an economically viable site, its orientation and defense. The laws prescribed a waterfront square in ports. They recommend proportions of 3:2 "as this shape is best for fiestas in which horses are used." It was proposed

that streets enter the plaza at corners and the middle of each side. The principal church was to be raised high above the ground. Building lots around the plaza were reserved for the church, cabildo(royal government), customs house and hospital.

Webb in The City Square (p. 104) also notes that rules governed the use of plazas. "Indians were generally excluded from the plaza de armas in Spanish-occupied cities and markets were usually segregated from civic functions."

This last statement concerning the exclusion of Indians in the plazas is of particular interest to those students familiar with Albuquerque Old Town Plaza and Santa Fe Plaza where Indians selling their jewelry is one of the main activities and attractions of today's plaza. Students could discuss the issue of "anglos" or other "non-Native Americans" being prohibited from selling in the squares as has been proposed in some plazas.

The Spaniards attempt to codify the city planning of their newly "found" cities met with limited successes. The fact is that most of the major plazas of Latin America anticipate, by as much as a century, those of Spain. When Hernan Cortés arrived in Tenochtitlán in 1519 the Spaniards were absolutely amazed at the well laid out city with causeways and central ceremonial plaza. Tenochtitlan was even twice the size of Seville, then Spain's largest city. Note: here the teacher might want to read from Cortés' or Bernal Diaz del Castillo's detailed description of Tenochtitlan: Historia Verdadera de la Conquista de la Nueva Espana.

Advice which did serve the colonizers well can be found in "la Cedula del 1568 al Virrey del Peru, don Francisco de Toledo" where advice is given for the fortification of the town and plaza.

Elegido el sitio del lugar donde han de poblar, dareis orden de que edifiquen sus casas haziendo con ellos alguna manera de fuerza, donde si conuiniere se pueden defender ellos y sus ganados si los Indios los quisieraen ofender.
(Rojas-Mix p. 59)

We see in many New World settlements the strategic military importance of the plaza de armas. Strict rules governed the placement of buildings and streets to ensure the safety of the citizenry. Just as the wagon train circled to give protection to the pioneers, the town square could easily be protected by barricading the limited entrances to it. Note-Students may want to examine the military appropriateness of their historical plaza and discuss instances when it might have been under siege.

Lesson 2

Students will research their particular cities and plazas. They will identify the important buildings and draw a plan of the plaza identifying buildings and streets.

Teaching Notes

Students will most likely find a description of the principle buildings on the plazas in a travel book dealing with their city. Caution students to select only the major plazas unless they have access to special collections or sources. Maps listing the streets and boulevards of the cities should also be available in travel books and many libraries. If possible, interviews with people from the cities would lead to some beneficial contacts. It might be possible to gain this information through electronic mail contacts, especially the interest group listservs.

The diagram or map of the plaza can be discussed orally and compared with other student projects. Another idea might be to do a large “mock-up” of the city complete with cut-out figures of individuals and buildings. A tour of the city square and interviews with the figures found on the plaza, although an ambitious project, would afford opportunity for participation by more students.

Students might also be asked to produce a audio walking tour of their square in Spanish describing architecture and interesting historical happenings or characters. A video interview with role-playing tourists might comment upon the “life” in the plaza.

Lesson 3

Students will be asked to research an important historical, political, or social event which took place in “their” city or even somewhere in the country. They will then imagine they were witnessing the “celebrating of the event in the plaza”. This might be an important political event or even a memorable social event. The event must be authentic. Give some background on the historical importance of the event or celebration.

Teaching Notes

This might include the annual celebration of independence, the winning of a war or battle, the marriage of a sovereign, the protest of a social situation, the winning of the World Cup. The importance here is for students to see how the plaza functioned as a meeting place for celebrations or the call for social action. Sometimes these were “orchestrated” by the government and sometimes they were more spontaneous. Ask students to describe the setting and explain their emotions using reviewed vocabulary. Examples: emocionante, feliz, enojo, tristeza, orgullo, muchedumbre, manifestar. Review both nouns and adjectives, use of ser and estar, preterite-imperfect. This exercise will also require students to briefly examine the history of their city or country putting their imagined emotional feelings in a historical and cultural context.

Lesson 4

Students will imagine that their great-great grandmother lived in an apartment overlooking the plaza mayor and walked through the plaza daily. Students will make a list of ten people who she would meet daily and describe why they were in the plaza.

The student will then describe ten individuals they meet daily in their walks in the same plaza. Names should be given to all characters. The question of how and why the type of people who visit the plaza has changed should be discussed here.

Teaching Notes

It would be helpful here to focus on the change in economic function of the plaza and how that has influenced the kind of people who frequent the plaza today. Remind students of how the original Greek and Roman plazas were used as markets. When the market aspect of the plaza changed, so did the character of the plaza, the types of buildings found there, and the population.

Some examples of characters who would frequent the plaza 150 years ago might include: government ministers, the economic leaders of the city, an alter boy on his way to help with mass, a beggar hoping for the generosity of a well to do citizen, a soldier on his way to guard the government headquarters, a street cleaner with broom and shovel in charge of keeping the plaza clean for the day, a family on its way to hear a speech by the president of the country. The characters interviewed during contemporary times would reflect the probable change in importance of the plaza, although in many Latin American cities the function of church and state are still very much represented in the plaza. Today's characters might include a soldier again, this time guarding against terrorist attack, tourists with cameras, lottery seller, pickpocket(carterista) preying on the tourists, a group carrying banners to protest an event.

Teachers might want to show pictures of "madres de los desaparecidos" with their vigil in Buenos Aires from "La Historia Oficial" and explain that the plaza has always been a theater for public expression. This might also be the opportunity to discuss the social function of the plaza, past and present. Although the evening "paseo" with its strict social customs has given way to the traffic jam in most of the Latin American plazas and those found in the U.S., it still might exist in some form or function today. As Rojas-Mix says, "La plaza, era, realmente el patio de una gran casa: la ciudad. Es el punto en que todo el mundo se encuentra." p. 115) The teacher might take time now to discuss where students today "hang-out" and even the similarities between today's "cruising" and yesteryear's "paseo."

Lesson 5

Students will establish a "key-pal" with a Spanish speaking student in one of these cities. A discussion of what function the plaza has in their lives will be discussed and reported upon.

Teaching Notes

Questions for discussion might include how often students visit the plazas? Why do they visit? Do they go with friends or with family? Has the plaza changed much in recent year? Are there special celebrations on the plaza? E-mail request for key-pals could be extended to both social study and Spanish classes.

Lesson 6

Students in Albuquerque will take the "walking tour" of Old Town with a Spanish speaking docent. They will also attend the November Albuquerque Museum exhibit featuring Santiago de Chile's Plaza de Armas and the Albuquerque's Old Town Plaza.

Teaching Notes

This activity is, of course, particular to those teachers living in some proximity to Albuquerque, New Mexico. An adaptation might include interviews with members of the community historical society, a tour of a historic architectural district in your town, or a tour of a museum which has exhibits of city planning and urban history. Other interesting sources of information might include grandparents, historians, and architects/city planners.

Conclusion

A summary discussion in Spanish should follow where some of the following pertinent questions are discussed first in small groups and then as a class.

What was the original purpose of the plaza mayor?

What important elements of colonial society were represented there? What buildings represented these elements?

Why has that function changed?

How is that change manifested?

What are some occasions when the plaza retains some of its "origins"?

Do you often go to the plaza? Why? Who do you see there.

What has taken the place of the plaza?

Would your "ideal" city contain a plaza and what would it be like?

Should your city's historical culture be represented there? How?

Vocabulary

catedral	cabildo	ayuntamiento
hospital	correo	zócalo
aduanas	monumento	cuartel
circulación	paseo	manifestación
vendedor ambulante	limpiabotas	vendedor de lotería
guardia	cura	carteristas
kioskos	fuentes	forma cuadrado
café al aire libre		

Bibliography

Rojas-Mix, Miguel. La Plaza Mayor El Urbanismo, instrumento de dominio colonial. Barcelona: Muchnix. 1978

Interesting discussion of the failure of Spain to impose its will on city planning.

Gibson, Charles. Spain in America. New York. Harper Row, 1966

Classic study on imperial Spain's problems in administration of colonies. Widely available

Webb, Michael. The City Square. New York. Whitney Library of Design. 1990

Good discussion of Mexican squares and current practices throughout world to “re-invent” the square.

Rothstein, Fritz. Beautiful Squares. Leipzig. Leipzig, GDR. 1967

Some historical background.

Correa, Sofia. Texto para la Exposicion Santiago, Albuquerque 1895-1995 Santiago. 1995

Draft of museum description of exhibit.

WWW Sites of Latin American countries, especially those whose Government Tourist Office sponsors the URL site.

Your local historical society.