Spanish-American village anatomy

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More than 45 years ago Dan Stanislawski sought to identify the underlying character of 11 towns in Michoacán, Mexico (Stanislawski 1950). He hypothesized that regional differences in the physical environment would have the greatest impact on shaping the personality of each town. The methodology used by Stanislawski to test his hypothesis relied principally upon 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 his original thesis, his fieldwork and reflective analysis revealed that culture and first effective settlement had a more profound influence on a town’s character than the physical environment. Despite being almost five decades old, anatomically plotting the land use patterns within a village is applicable today and can still reveal many cultural traits of a community.

My research focuses on how diagnostic features on the landscape in Spanish-American communities bears witness to cultural change. In determining the contemporary cultural composition of Spanish-American-established communities in southern Colorado and New Mexico I employed a similar, albeit
slightly modified, approach to that of Stanislawski. As I mapped 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. My analysis was based upon examining the anatomical
design of over 25 communities throughout southern Colorado and New Mexico.

The literature indicates that traditional Spanish-American settlements tend
to have a distinct appearance (Figure 1). Commonly they are linear in shape
with the Catholic church providing a focal point, have earthen open-air irrigation
ditches that traverse the community bringing water to long-lot croplands, and the
commercial activity is usually a solitary family-run store/post office. After
inspecting my plots, I concluded that where the Spanish-American culture
continues to dominate, the traditional town anatomy is maintained. However,
where outside cultural influences, especially Anglo, have made inroads into the
community, the settlement's morphology assumes a distinctly different
appearance (Figure 2). They tend to become more nodal in shape with
numerous side streets. No longer is the Catholic church a focal point for the
community; multiple churches (especially Protestant) are scattered throughout
the village. Commercial activity is concentrated in an easily defined business
district with multiple specialty shops offering a limited variety of goods or
services. The surrounding croplands are more commonly watered with cement-
lined irrigation ditches or increasingly by center-pivot sprinklers.
One Spanish-American diagnostic feature not captured by plotting a town's anatomy is the Penitente *morada* (worship house). 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 reveal this cultural artifact I augmented my plots with personal interviews. Ironically, despite decades of papal condemnation and strained relations with the Roman Catholic church, the resident Catholic priest proved to be the most fruitful contact introducing me to a key informant within the community. After gaining that person'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 in New Mexico. I later discovered that by mentioning that experience to other Penitente brothers as I traveled throughout New Mexico and southern Colorado, my inquiries were met with much less suspicion. In the end I revealed a network of communication that has existed between moradas for generations. This allowed me to determine where active moradas exist and where they have been abandoned due to Anglo-introduced services. The Penitente experience illustrates that, despite Anglo-induced changes, communication between brotherhood chapters continues and the strong sense of community and cultural identity that has existed for decades among the Spanish-American population is still alive today.

As Dan Stanislawski learned over 45 years ago, plotting a town's anatomy
can help identify its cultural identity. My research illustrates that an anatomical understanding of a community can also aid in revealing patterns of cultural change.

References

Additional Readings


Figure Captions

Fig. 1-The anatomy of a traditional Spanish-American settlement.

Fig. 2-The anatomy of a Spanish-American-established settlement that has been modified due to Anglo cultural influences.
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by

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Paul F. Starrs, Editor
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Dear Paul Starrs,

As per your e-mailed response dated July 3, 1997, enclosed please find my submission to the Geographical Field Notes section of The Geographical Review for your consideration. As you recommended, I have tried to emphasize the field investigations portion of my research thus targeting the piece as a field note rather than a record note.

Any changes deemed necessary can easily be accommodated, including the maps. Additionally, if needed, I will gladly provide a list of "Further Readings". If you have any questions or comments please contact me at the address or phone number listed above.

In keeping with the requirements of the Geographical Review 1) this manuscript is not under review elsewhere; 2) it will not be submitted to any other publication while The Geographical Review considers it; 3) the contents of this manuscript have not been submitted elsewhere; and 4) the text is not under copyright.

Sincerely,

Jeffrey S. Smith