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# CULTURA IN THE MODERN CITY: THE MICROGEOGRAPHIES OF GENDER, CLASS, AND GENERATION IN THE COSTA RICAN PLAZA

Setha M. Low

City University of New York – United States of America

**Abstract:** *This article examines the microgeographies of everyday life in Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura, two plazas located in the central city of San José, Costa Rica. These locales are created by the individual temporal and spatial attributes of plaza users whose daily movements and activities define these spaces. The growing differences of these locales in terms of the users' class, gender, and age, and their corresponding social activities, is reinforced by differences in local interpretations of the concept of cultura. These social, behavioral, and ideological differences have created spatial boundaries such that people do not cross from one locale to the other; the users do not overlap, and their representations of cultural life are seen as competitive and mutually exclusive. Based on ethnographic evidence, I suggest that this differentiation is a constructed spatial representation that symbolizes the changing nature of Costa Rican ideology and culture. The contrasting and often conflicting images of the two plazas reflect important differences in class-orientation, gender participation, and generational values that separate contemporary Costa Ricans socially, and politically. In San José, Costa Rica, cultura is often discussed as a value from the past, a cultural ideal that is desired, but that conflicts with aspects of modern life. In order to discuss how cultura remains a cultural theme in the urban plaza the everyday life and social behaviors of Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura are compared. In this comparison time, space, and social activity change the meaning and interpretation of cultura reinforcing the contrasting metaphors expressed in the physical design of each.*

**Keywords:** *class, cultura/culture, gender, plazas, public space, spatial analysis.*

**Resumo:** *Este artigo examina as microgeografias cotidianas no Parque Central e na Praça da Cultura, duas praças localizadas no centro da cidade de São José, Costa Rica. Estas localidades são criadas por atributos temporais e espaciais individuais dos usuários da praça cujas atividades e movimentos diários define este espaço. As crescentes diferenças destes locais em termos de seus usuários, classes, gêneros e idade, bem como de suas correspondentes atividades sociais, são reforçadas pelas*

*diferenças das interpretações locais do conceito de cultura. Estas diferenças sociais, comportamentais e ideológicas criaram limites espaciais de tal maneira que as pessoas não cruzam de um local para outro; os usuários não se justapõem, e suas representações de vida cultural expressam a competição e a exclusão. Baseada em evidência etnográfica, sugiro que esta diferenciação é uma representação espacial construída que simboliza a natureza cambiante da ideologia e da cultura costarrriquenha. As imagens contrastantes e freqüentemente conflitivas das duas praças refletem importantes diferenças de orientação de classe, identificação de gênero e valores geracionais que separam os costarrriquenhos contemporâneos do ponto de vista social e político. Em São José, Costa Rica, a cultura aparece com freqüência nos discursos como um valor do passado, um ideal cultural desejado, mas que entra em conflito com aspectos da vida moderna. Para discutir como a cultura permanece como um tema cultural na praça urbana, o cotidiano e os comportamentos sociais no Parque Central e na Praça da Cultura são comparados. Nesta comparação, tempo, espaço e atividade social mudam o significado e a interpretação de cultura, reforçando as metáforas contrastantes que vão expressas no desenho físico de cada um.*

**Palavras-chave:** *análise de espaço, classe, cultura, espaço público, gênero, praças.*

This article examines the microgeographies of everyday life in *Parque Central* and *Plaza de la Cultura*, two plazas located in the central city of San José, Costa Rica. These locales are created by the individual temporal and spatial attributes of plaza users whose daily movements and activities define these spaces. As Alan Pred has demonstrated:

Since each of the actions and events consecutively making up the existence of an individual has both temporal and spatial attributes, time-geography allows that the biography of a person may be conceptualized and diagrammed at daily or lengthier scales of observation as an unbroken continuous *path* through time-space subject to times of constraint. In time-geographic terms a *project* consists of the entire sequence of simple or complex tasks necessary to the completion of any intention-inspired or goal-oriented behavior. (Pred, 1984, p. 256).

The paths and projects of individual plaza users are presented as a series of population counts, movement maps, and behavioral maps organized by time and day within each plaza. The overlap of the movement and behavior maps combined with ethnographic description identify a series of distinct locales that are defined by class, age, and gender.

The growing differences of these locales in terms of the users' class, gender, and age, and their corresponding social activities, is reinforced by differences in local interpretations of the concept of *cultura*. These social, behavioral, and ideological differences have created spatial boundaries such that people do not cross from one locale to the other, the users do not overlap, and their representations of cultural life are seen as competitive and mutually exclusive.

Based on ethnographic evidence, I suggest that this differentiation is a constructed spatial representation that symbolizes the changing nature of Costa Rican ideology and culture. The contrasting and often conflicting images of the two plazas reflect important differences in class-orientation, gender participation, and generational values that separate contemporary Costa Ricans socially, and politically. These differences can be understood through the use of Richardson's concept of *cultura* in the plaza and Costa Ricans ongoing public discourse about culture.

In his study of the plaza in Cartago, Costa Rica, Miles Richardson (1978, 1980) is able to link phenomenologically different places by contrasting the cultural importance of being "proper" in the plaza with being "smart" in the marketplace.

The terms, *cultura* (culture) and *progreso* (progress), which appear frequently in the conversations of people talking about the qualities of life in small Spanish-American towns, come close to expressing the contrast. *Cultura* is the victory of Spanish-American civilization over nature and over the bestial aspects of human behavior. The plaza, by its very greenery and by its behavior, leisurely strolling under the trees, epitomizes *cultura*. (Richardson, 1980, p. 226).

He resolves the different images of public life as being separated, yet integrated, by space and experience. Miles Richardson is concerned with how we know how to behave and experience places differently while maintaining a sense of continuity of the experiential world.

This article expands Richardson's analysis of the plaza as a place of *cultura* by comparing the two central plazas, located a block away from one another, as different and competing expressions of *cultura* in San José. The ethnographic examples illustrate the way in which differences in users, social activities, built environment, and symbolic intentions reinforce the contrast between the two places. I argue that it is the difference between the plazas and

between the users and their activities that constructs the perceived boundaries between the two places, and that these spatial boundaries mark social and political locales which have become naturalized and “concretized” over time. Even though they are located almost next to one another, they represent distinct facets of Costa Rican culture--the traditional, Spanish, hierarchical, predominantly older male, Catholic culture of the past; contrasted to the modern, younger, male and female, North American culture of the present. Although symbolic elements of each force their way into both plazas, the hegemony of the traditional or the modern ideology of *cultura* remains. Yet the class and culture tensions, and fears about social contact and public expression, continue unresolved highlighting the political nature of these cultural expressions.

In San José, Costa Rica, *cultura* is often discussed as a value from the past, a cultural ideal that is desired, but that conflicts with aspects of modern life. In order to discuss how *cultura* remains a cultural theme in the urban plaza the everyday life and social behaviors of *Parque Central* and *Plaza de la Cultura* are compared. In this comparison time, space, and social activity change the meaning and interpretation of *cultura* reinforcing the contrasting metaphors expressed in the physical design of each.

## Rhythms of everyday life

Three specific kinds of data were collected and analyzed to describe everyday plaza life: population counts by gender on a typical (not a holiday or rainy day) week-day and Sunday, movement maps by gender at two hour intervals on a typical day, and behavioral maps of group activities by time and place. These counts and maps provide quantitative data and physical evidence of plaza users’ activities supplementing interpretations made based on qualitative sector observations, participant observation, and unstructured interviewing. Taken together, these data identify the locales, paths, and projects that mediate the actions of individual plaza users with the social structural differences and spatial boundaries observed between the two plazas. Thus, individuals produce these social and spatial boundaries by their everyday plaza routines and practices.

## Population counts

The plazas were counted in fifteen minute intervals alternating between fifteen minutes before and fifteen minutes after the hour in each. Counts were recorded on a clipboard, transferred to a summary sheet, and then added together by category to complete the analysis. Two people counted at a time, one recording women and the other recording men whenever possible. The results are presented in the following series of population count charts and compared by day of the week and by plaza.

In *Parque Central* there is so much activity on Sunday that it is hard to see any pattern other than differences in the number and location of men and women. Men and women are spatially separated into distinct concentric rings, with women usually seated and men standing (see Plan of *Parque Central*, Map 1). On Sundays at 10:00 a.m. the band plays drawing a large crowd of men, women, and children who stand on the kiosk or sit on benches to listen. Sunday morning is the only time when there are a large number of people there, yet compared to the crowd at 4:00 p.m., there are still fewer women and children present: 30% women at 10:00 a.m. compared to 34% women at 4:00 p.m., and 16% children in the morning compared to 23% children at 4:00 p.m. (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Parque Central* Sunday, August 3, 1986

AGE	0-12	10-19	20-39	40-59	60-79+	TOTALS
Gender	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8:00 am	2 4	5 16	14 8	35 7	15 7	71 35
10:00 am	18 24	7 19	36 50	149 32	92 7	302 132
12:00 am	4 10	8 18	23 17	37 4	25 1	97 50
2:00 pm	14 9	27 42	49 30	49 19	7 4	146 104
4:00 pm	24 27	27 28	165 69	70 31	20 1	306 156
6:00 pm	5 12	4 12	36 34	46 15	13 0	104 73
Totals						1026 557

The total number of people in *Parque Central* on a Sunday, is twice that of a week-day, composed of families and couples, rather than single males: 35% women on Sunday as compared to 20% women during the week (See Tables 1 & 2). Children (ages 0-12) make up 10% of the population on Sunday, compared to 3% during the week, while teen-agers and children together (ages 0-19) make up 23% of the Sunday population, and only 6% on a week day. The Sunday crowd also fluctuates widely reflecting the presence or absence of local entertainment such as the band playing or the “soccer” man bouncing a ball with his head that attracts spectators (See Table 1). On Sunday there are women in the park throughout the day, making up as much as 40% of the total population at 2:00 p.m (See Table 1). During the week, on the other hand, most women are at home or work in the morning, and do not go out until after the main noon meal is served. There is a steady increase in the proportion of women users throughout the day with the largest number of women (37%) present at 6:00 p.m. (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Parque Central* Thursday, July 31, 1986

AGE	0-12	10-19	20-39	40-59	60-79+	TOTALS
Gender	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8:00 am	0 0	1 0	22 3	35 0	36 1	94 4
10:00 am	3 3	0 1	31 9	43 3	53 0	130 16
12:00 am	2 1	1 2	34 12	85 11	41 4	163 30
2:00 pm	4 4	5 4	21 8	79 15	26 5	135 36
4:00 pm	4 5	3 8	12 15	75 9	32 1	126 38
6:00 pm	1 6	3 0	60 29	27 13	14 4	105 62
Totals						753 176

*Plaza de la Cultura* is spatially organized quite differently from the concentric circles of separated men and women in *Parque Central* (see Plan of *Plaza de la Cultura*, Map 2). Instead people arrange themselves in a series of tiers from the most visually exposed to least visually exposed: the most exposed is highest tier next to the National Theater and the Gran Hotel, the second is the

transitional space between the main plaza and the lower level, and the third is the grassy area in front of the lower area where the tourist office, art gallery, and gold museum are located. The first tier is made up of families, single men and women, and couples; the second, middle-aged and older men; and the third, young single men. Edge zones are particularly important and desirable, especially along the railings and on the pipe benches. The edge along Central Avenue is dominated by teen-agers at night, but during the day the composition of who occupies it often changes.

There is also a clear pattern of sun and shade distribution of users and spectators. On sunny days girls and women eat their lunches sitting in the shade of the fringe of trees along the side of the National Theater, while men stand under the trees in the area in front of the National Theater. Students in uniforms, both male and female, and some men reading papers occupy the small bench seats in the shade of the fig trees along the shopping arcade. Only young men sit on the sunny benches along the back ledge watching those cross the plaza.

Table 3. *Plaza de la Cultura* Sunday, August 3, 1986

AGE	0-12	13-19	20-39	40-59	60-79+	TOTALS
Gender	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8:00 am	1 2	2 3	2 5	0 2	0 1	5 13
10:00 am	3 4	2 7	7 6	2 0	2 0	16 17
12:00 am	11 15	4 7	5 18	4 4	0 0	24 44
2:00 pm	8 13	12 12	17 12	7 2	2 0	46 39
4:00 pm	13 14	26 26	30 19	3 8	3 1	75 68
6:00 pm	21 19	30 36	16 14	5 10	4 1	76 80
Totals						753 176

On Sundays *Plaza de la Cultura* is used by more women than men (52% women overall) even in the early morning (See Table 3). Children under 12 years of age make up 25% of the total population, and teen-agers from ages 13 to 19 make up another 33%. This unusual population pattern of 52% women

and 53% teen-agers and children on Sundays, compared to 35% women and 12% teen-agers and children on week days, provides further evidence that the plaza is perceived as an appropriate and comfortable place for families, and even more importantly, mothers and children to relax and play when they have leisure time (See Tables 3 and 4).

On week days the most dramatic change in population composition is the appearance of mothers and children in the afternoon (See Table 4). Mothers are free after lunch and their young children are out of school, so they bring them to play in the fountain, chase the pigeons, and then sit on the shaded benches and planter ledges. By 6:00 p.m., on a beautiful evening, *Plaza de la Cultura* is full of people. On the lowest tier next to the tourist office, couples sit and hold hands, while a young adult crowd fills the second and intermediate levels. On the main plaza, teen-agers gather along the planter edge: boys play soccer interrupted by flirting with girls or sing accompanied by a blaring radio. Other young people fill the fountain edges, and a few older men and couples remain seated under the fig trees. The population counts reflect these changes: the largest percentage of women and children (46%) can be found at 2:00 p.m., but the plaza remains 37% female even at 6:00 p.m.

Table 4. *Plaza de la Cultura* Thursday, July 31, 1986

AGE	0-12	13-19	20-39	40-59	60-79+	TOTALS
Gender	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____	_____
8:00 am	0 2	0 0	10 2	9 0	2 1	21 5
10:00 am	0 4	9 7	9 2	13 4	10 1	41 18
12:00 am	0 3	0 2	51 19	16 3	4 0	71 27
2:00 pm	8 12	4 5	25 15	7 7	6 3	50 42
4:00 pm	8 8	11 7	18 9	10 5	2 0	49 29
6:00 pm	6 7	27 17	32 15	4 3	2 0	71 42
Totals						303 163



The population patterns found in *Plaza de la Cultura* are not unlike that of *Parque Central* except that there are many more women and teen-agers and children on a week day afternoon and on Sunday. In *Parque Central* the percentage of women and children increases on Sunday, but not to the degree of *Plaza de la Cultura*, since it is still perceived as the domain of men and workers. The total population of *Plaza de la Cultura* is also much smaller, only a third of the number of people counted at *Parque Central* on Sunday (503 compared to 1576), and half of the number of people counted in *Parque Central* on a week day (466 compared to 939).

Overall, then, *Parque Central* retains the largest number of people, both on Sundays and on week days, while *Plaza de la Cultura* has the highest percentage of women, teen-agers and children both during the week and on the week-end. Based solely on the population counts, gender and age differences by day and time define the two public spaces.

## Movement maps

Pedestrian movement in the two plazas is another way to describe the rhythms of everyday life. Movement maps were created by recording the pathway of each pedestrian during a fifteen minute or thirty minute observation period. Vicky Wulff Risner, a dance ethnologist at the Library of Congress, worked with me to develop a simplified system of notation based on her extensive research experience recording dance in its cultural context. She worked out a system that recorded pathways used as well as gender and estimated ages of the observed pedestrians. The entrances were rotated throughout the observation period, and notes were made of who was sitting in the plaza at the time and other significant behavioral details (e.g. the pedestrian shakes another man's hand as he walks through).

Movement maps were collected from 8:00 a.m to 6:00 p.m. in both plazas. Maps 3, 4, and 5 record observations in *Parque Central* on Thursday, July 31, 1986, a day that started out cloudy and damp, but became sunny in the afternoon. At 8:00 a.m. a few men were moving from northwest to east, and east to west and southwest, while only two women, a young woman and an elderly woman in a couple, journey in a southerly route across the park. By 10:00 a.m. more people are crossing and circling moving from the northwestern to eastern pathway that faces the Cathedral. There are still more men than women, and

only men are exiting at the southwestern corner (See Map 3). By noon the direction of movement shifts significantly as the majority of people exit at the southwestern corner: these seem to be men and a few women catching the buses home that stop along Fourth Avenue (See Map 4). The afternoon is the busiest time with many more women moving through, mostly in an eastern to southwestern direction. Between 4:00 and 6:00 p.m. the flow of people reversing their morning journey reaches its peak. People exit both east and west, but the western exit is used predominately by young men going to the bars located on the western-northwestern edge of the park (See Map 5).

The movement maps from Wednesday, June 18, 1986 on *the Plaza de la Cultura*, Maps 6, 7, and 8 record a similar pattern with an increase in activity from the morning to the early afternoon. There is one popular pedestrian pathway from the southwest corner near the entrance to the Gran Hotel and the National Theater to the northeast corner on Central Avenue that is used as a shortcut by people moving in either direction (See Map 6). At 4:00 p.m., however, there is a lull when a sudden rain storm temporarily stops all activity. Only four young men venture out into the rain during the half hour observation period (See Map 7). But by 6:00 p.m. activity has picked up again. A secondary pathway from northwest to southeast emerges with men walking in either direction, from Pops ice cream store on Central Avenue (northwestern corner) to the lower level of the plaza and Second Avenue where there is a bus stop that services the eastern part of the city (See Map 8).

Comparing the movement maps of *Parque Central* and *Plaza de la Cultura* adds another dimension to the way in which the spaces are used and experienced differently. The maps describe “rivers” of movement that make up time-geography paths, segregated for the most part into male and female spheres. When integrated with participant observation field notes and photographs of people walking, the movement maps indicate that there are two major types of people in each plaza: those who are traveling through the space; and those who have taken up residence by sitting on a bench or leaning on a wall. Many people move from one category to another, of course, but overall there seems to be a residential and a transient population on both plazas.

What is noteworthy, however, is the manner in which the two groups interact with each other, which is different in each plaza. In *Plaza de la Cultura*, people take up residency in large part to watch the non-residents and other residents move through the rivers and along the paths. In *Parque Central*,

however, the residents much are less interested in the non-residents who move through the space. This difference in group interaction illustrates a kind of “closed-society” versus “open-society” behavioral ecology. *Parque Central* with its internally focused groups of men, talking and reading and not necessarily interacting with passers-by, could be characterized as a closed-society, socially and spatially bounded by cultural rules and notions of tradition and *costumbre* (custom). *Plaza de la Cultura*, on the other hand, consists of outwardly focused groups of men and women, who are constantly looking around, talking to passers-by, and frequently break out of the group to meet someone or to join another group.

The design of the *Plaza de la Cultura* certainly reinforces this openness and increases the possibilities of interacting across groups; while the shaded, enclosed corners of the pre-1994 *Parque Central* provide more privacy and seclusion. But the differences observed in the interaction and movement patterns express more than just the design of the space: here is an example of the landscape architecture and the cultural rules reinforcing each, and it is difficult to segment out the extent to which each playing a determinant role.

## Behavioral maps

Although the plazas are very different in history, design, and representation, the daily activities that occur there are similar. Yet the people who perform these activities are again quite different. These different groups of people define the public space of the plaza in terms of their distinct social worlds. This difference is significant in that these users – and their distinct social worlds – socially construct an “out-of-awareness” (non-discursive) boundary maintaining system. For instance older men and women, female prostitutes, shoeshine men, and gamblers are almost exclusively found in *Parque Central*. On the other hand, tourists, young women and children, students in uniforms, teen-agers with boomboxes, and North American pensioners are almost exclusively found on *the Plaza de la Cultura*.

The following description of a sunny week-day in January, 1987 illustrates the similarities and differences. Observations were made continuously and in timed samples recorded on behavioral maps from 8:00 a.m. until 10:00 p.m., although the majority of activity occurred during the late morning, afternoon and early evening. A few of the behavioral maps are included to illustrate the

points made, however, the bulk of the maps were used as the data base for this summary. The maps were drawn on 8 ½ inch x 11 inch plaza plans using black ink and colored pencils to record various ongoing behaviors and locations of individuals. Since the colored pencil data could not reproduced here, circles and written descriptions are used in an attempt to convey the richer data of the originals.

## Parque Central

In the *Parque Central* morning is a time for men to sit and read the newspaper. By 10:00 a.m. almost every bench is filled with an adult man reading his paper (See Map 9). The shoeshine business in the northeast corner is slow, and vendors of fruit and the lottery are not doing much business. The passers-by are mainly on their way to the bus or shopping. The most active person is the municipal employee who sweeps the sidewalks and picks up fallen leaves and trash.

By noon the tempo has picked-up (See Map 10). The men on their benches are joined by friends with animated voices as the walkways fill with men and women meeting for lunch or catching the bus home. The healer starts his routine in the northwest corner and the missionaries set up under the arbor. One group of elderly men leave the *Parque Central* at this time to go home for lunch and siesta and do not return. Others leave, but will return after their lunch. As one seventy year old man said: "The plaza is now my place of employment now that no longer work. I am underfoot at home. The house is my wife's domain, and I feel better being out of the house during the day."

In the afternoon, a few older women appear bringing their children to the library, shopping with friends, or resting from a busy morning in town (See Map 11). The shoeshine business is at its peak as middle-class men stop to get their shoes shined on their way back to work. Sometimes, during the mid-afternoon, "Vicky" begins his routine with a guitar and hat telling sordid jokes on the kiosk platform. Vendors of ice cream, peanuts and snowcones circulate along the edge of the crowd. The police walk by in pairs, stop and watch for awhile, and then continue on their patrol of the street.

By 4:00 p.m. most of the older men have left and young and middle-age couples meet in *Parque Central* for coffee and/or to take the bus home. The number of women is the highest at this time, still only making up about twenty to

thirty percent of the population, but very different from the all male reading period of the morning. At 6:00 p.m. the light begins to fade and the air is cooler (See Map 12). A new group of vendors with carts of hot corn or skewered beef appear on the edge of the sidewalk. As couples circumambulant around the kiosk, they stop to buy food and talk to the vendors drawn by the smell of the sizzling grilled beef.

At 7:00 p.m. it becomes quiet. The shoeshine men have left for the day, and only a few couples, some single young men and the vendors remain. If it is a nice evening, more people will wander by on their way to the Rex Cinema or to have drink in the Soda Palace. A small group of street kids run by trying to beg money from a passing *gringo* and tired young prostitutes sit under the arbor waiting for business. By now the lines of the buses are not as long and tired workers wait in groups talking about the day or buying lottery tickets from the corner vendors. Later in the evening, between 9:00 and 10:00 p.m., *Parque Central* is almost completely deserted except for one or two solitary men sitting on the benches or walking slowly down the paths. Even later, men from the countryside, drunk and sleepy may find their way from the cheap bars surrounding the central market to sleep relatively undisturbed on the park benches until morning.

## Plaza de la Cultura

In the *Plaza de la Cultura* the day also starts slowly. During the morning there are very few people, usually just a couple of men or male tourists reading a newspaper in the sun, and a group of green uniformed plaza employees who sweep and empty the trash cans. Sunday is a little busier with the artisan market for the tourists, but even then there is little activity.

About noon the older North Americans, known as *gringos verdes*, or “green” Yankees, appear in their baseball hats, sunburns and smiles (See Map 13). They will stay for most of the afternoon waiting for girls or watching those that walk by. These men are a mixture of regular tourists who come each winter to enjoy the weather and *pensionados*, North Americans who have elected to retire to Costa Rican fulltime, and who claim tax and other benefits from the Costa Rican government with their guaranteed monthly pension from the United States or Canada. Students, young office workers, and friends sometimes stop to have their lunch in the plaza or buy ice cream at the near-by

Pops and sit a moment to finish eating. Tourists are in the cafe having lunch or wandering in front of the National Theater buying souvenirs or taking pictures.

By 2:00 p.m. the pace quickens as more and more office workers return to work walking through on their way from the bus stop. Young mothers and children stop to look at the fountain or to play with the pigeons during a shopping outing. Students, finished with classes stop to meet friends while they are still in their school uniforms. On some afternoons a clown and his wife/assistant, or a Peruvian musical group may come by. The clown performs almost in the center of the plaza attracting children and their parents as well as the downtown office crowd. The Peruvian singers play in the tourist area and draw a crowd of tourists and young adult Costa Ricans. Later an evangelical group with guitars, singing popular songs in praise of Jesus might entertain a bored teen-age crowd.

At 4:00 p.m. the *gringos* leave for their afternoon coffee and rest, and many of the families start on their way home (See Map 14). By 5:00 p.m. or so, however, teen-agers in blue jeans begin to appear (See Map 15). They play music on portable radios or tapedecks, dance, and even start soccer games on the far end of the main open space. They are the major occupants until the National Theater opens at 8:00 p.m. Sometimes there are special evening events, such as a tribute to local high school bands or a radio interview of teen-ages who are there. If there is no performance at the National Theater, the plaza becomes quiet by 8:00 p.m. as the teen-agers leave to go on their evening destinations. Later in the evening, after 9:00 p.m. single men, gather on the lower plaza near the theater ticket window to meet and talk. Groups of young men often wander by, or stop to smoke marijuana. In a few cases policemen passed by and arrested one of the young men either for drinking or having drugs on him. The encounters, however, were brief and carried out in hushed tones. The atmosphere in the lower plaza is more relaxed than frightening, as the men share their thoughts and wait to meet friends.

It is apparent from these two descriptions that the activities of reading, talking, eating, and meeting friends are the same. Both plazas are dominated by men and their related activities of reading, sitting, watching and talking in the morning, and accommodate women, families and children, and couples in the afternoon. They both have vendors who sell flowers, food and trinkets; people who provide personal services; entertainers who sing or clown; and preachers of various denominations. They are both surrounded by cafes where users can

go to get inside from the rain or sun or where non-users can simply survey the scene. They both have a small number of people who want to lay claim to the space, but who are considered by some to be undesirable occupants of the space such as beggars, prostitutes, homeless people, drug dealers and gamblers. Police who patrol and maintenance people who clean up the trash are also there representing the municipal social order.

What seems more important, however, is not that the activities are the same – although this sameness may indicate some common cultural response to the use of public space – but that the activities take on such different forms and meanings, and are performed by such different people. For example, the cafes of *Parque Central* are populated only by men--when a woman enters one of these cafes it causes a minor stir. The cafes on the *Plaza de la Cultura*, on the other hand, are frequented by both men and women, usually tourists and upper or middle class Costa Ricans. The prostitutes in *Parque Central* are young female Costa Ricans who are professionals and who solicit men of all ages and nationalities. The young women who meet men in *the Plaza de la Cultura*, however, call themselves *tourras*, which I was told means that they engage sex for a nice meal or clothes, but not for money or as a professional occupation. The tourras are involved mostly with older men, often North American pensioners or tourists, who come to Costa Rica searching for very young women, and for a sexual, and sometimes loving relationship. The expectations of both older men and young women vary from romantic to mercenary, and the reality of the relationships vary as well.

Other examples of the contrast in the expression of social activities include what is sold: tourist items, popcorn, and balloons in the *Plaza de la Cultura* and lottery tickets, food and newspapers in *Parque Central*; the difference in the green uniformed maintenance men in the plaza and the municipal maintenance man's rag shirt in the *Parque Central*; the presence of a large number of foreigners in the *Plaza de la Cultura* and the absence of many foreigners in *Parque Central*. The contrast can be summarized as the emerging social divisions of young and old, foreign and local, lower and middle class, and male and female now spatially and temporally distributed across the two plazas.

These differences in expression reiterate the historical and physical comparison, that of the separation of an identification with modern North American or international culture in the *Plaza de la Cultura* and the maintenance of a more traditional Costa Rican identity in the *Parque Central*. Taken together,

yet separated and bounded by their difference, the two plazas express the contemporary dimensions, contradictions, and tensions of Costa Rican culture.

The new plaza built only one block northeast of *Parque Central* was to be a reflection of contemporary culture, based on different values and by its difference created a “symbolic space,” a “spatial boundary” between the images of Costa Rican *cultura* produced in these two places. The social boundary that separates these two worlds is one that is constructed more by the contrast than by any physical or social barrier that exists between the two plazas. In fact, one would think that the shoeshine men, the pensioners, the couples and the vendors would travel between the two plazas depending on weather, business and amount of crime or disturbance that might exist in *Parque Central*. Yet, the residents of *Parque Central* remain firmly in place and regard the new plaza as suspect. They say that the new plaza is an uncomfortable place where the “wrong” people hang out, while the residents of the *Plaza de la Cultura* describe *Parque Central* as dark and dangerous. One explanation of this separation of the two places is that the new plaza, in fact, was created to reconstitute Costa Rican culture with a different image in an attempt to disenfranchise the older more traditional representation of social life presented daily in *Parque Central*.

Thus, the contrast between the two plazas is significant; their histories, design, and users are in many ways distinct. Within the *Parque Central* there is very little contested space in that a long-term pattern of users and activities has built up over the years. New activities such as the Christian healing are accommodated either at the edges of the plaza or through the reallocation of space in time. The *Plaza de la Cultura*, however, is still a highly contested arena; tourism and the Costa Rican image of *cultura* conflict with the nightly appropriation by “cruising.” The separation between the two plazas is a cultural gulf with older retired and working men dominating one scene and students, young women, women and children, tourists and teen-agers recreating on the other. Both are Costa Rican representations of *cultura*, however, they represent different versions of that cultural goal. There is an invisible boundary between them, yet, their commonalities link them. Culture is not some homogeneous set of rules for life, but is made up of conflicting and fluctuating images and aspirations.



## Conclusion

The behavioral maps complete the time-space descriptions begun with the population counts and movement maps. While the movement maps describe paths that link individuals walking with gender segregation in the *Parque Central*, the behavioral maps record individual projects such as men shining shoes, elderly pensioners meeting to talk, or teen-agers playing soccer. The accretions of multiple paths and projects located in space and time link the individual activities to age, gender, and class differences found in the two plazas. Over time these differences become naturalized, as has been argued by Bourdieu (1977), and perceived as social reality. Thus, individual paths and projects are transformed into cultural norms for behavior re-enacted in daily social practices.

These microgeographies help to demonstrate how plaza meanings are socially constructed through historically constituted social practices, political ideologies, users' behaviors, group activities, and urban design to represent and reproduce different aspects of Costa Rican culture. This social construction occurs through the historical and sociopolitical forces that created each plaza and through the paths and projects that create the distinct social worlds presented here. These differences are reinforced by the social practices of the people who inhabit these spaces.

The social and spatial boundaries that separate these two spheres that are so physically close, yet so culturally different, are social constructions and meaningful at the level of lived experience of everyday life. They provide clues as to the significant schisms in what otherwise seems like a very homogeneous culture.

For example, culturally ideal gender roles in which the woman/housewife stays at home, and the man/provider goes out to work and to the public realm of the plaza are breaking down with women needing and/or wanting to work in response to changes in the political economy. The cultural norms of *Parque Central* restricted women's attendance to Sundays and late afternoons accompanied by their partners or children, leaving them without a public space. Thus, *Plaza de la Cultura* has become an important alternative space and a means of expressing this new cultural definition of gender roles.

In a similar vein, the social status of being a teen-ager has become more important with the influx of North American capital and culture that includes age-specific modes of dress, music, and behavior. Before the 1970's most teen-

agers were working adults. I remember interviewing adolescents from 1972 through 1974 who said that after the sixth grade (age 12 or 13), that they were expected to go to work. In the countryside and in very poor urban households this expectation may still hold, but in the city most San José teen-agers go to school and many hang-out to meet their friends. The *Plaza de la Cultura* provides the new public space necessary for this change in culturally proscribed behavior, and its open design allows for the possibility of dancing and playing soccer in the urban center.

The increasing social divisions and socioeconomic inequality resulting from the impact of global market forces, the influx of North American capital, local economic crises, and shifts in modes of production also have resulted in segmenting and redefining the Costa Rican class system. This segmentation can be seen in the differences in cultural ideals reflected in the notion of *cultura*. The traditional myth that *Costa Rica es diferente*, that Costa Rica was historically a country of small farmers that produced an egalitarian class structure, has been disrupted by obvious differences in wealth, increasing segregation of residential neighborhoods, increasing unemployment and underemployment, and dismantling of the legislated safety net of social security, basic food subsidies, and other social welfare programs. Older Costa Ricans will still tell you that “we are all middle-class” if you ask about class structure, but increasingly young people and the disenfranchised point out that things are changing, and that while everyone may be the same politically, that they no longer are in terms of wealth. These changes in class are also expressed in the discourse concerning behavior and activities in the plazas and are captured in the cultural metaphor, and social sanction, of *cultura*. Thus, class, gender, and age differences separate these two social and spatially bounded domains, as well as the cultural notion of *cultura*.

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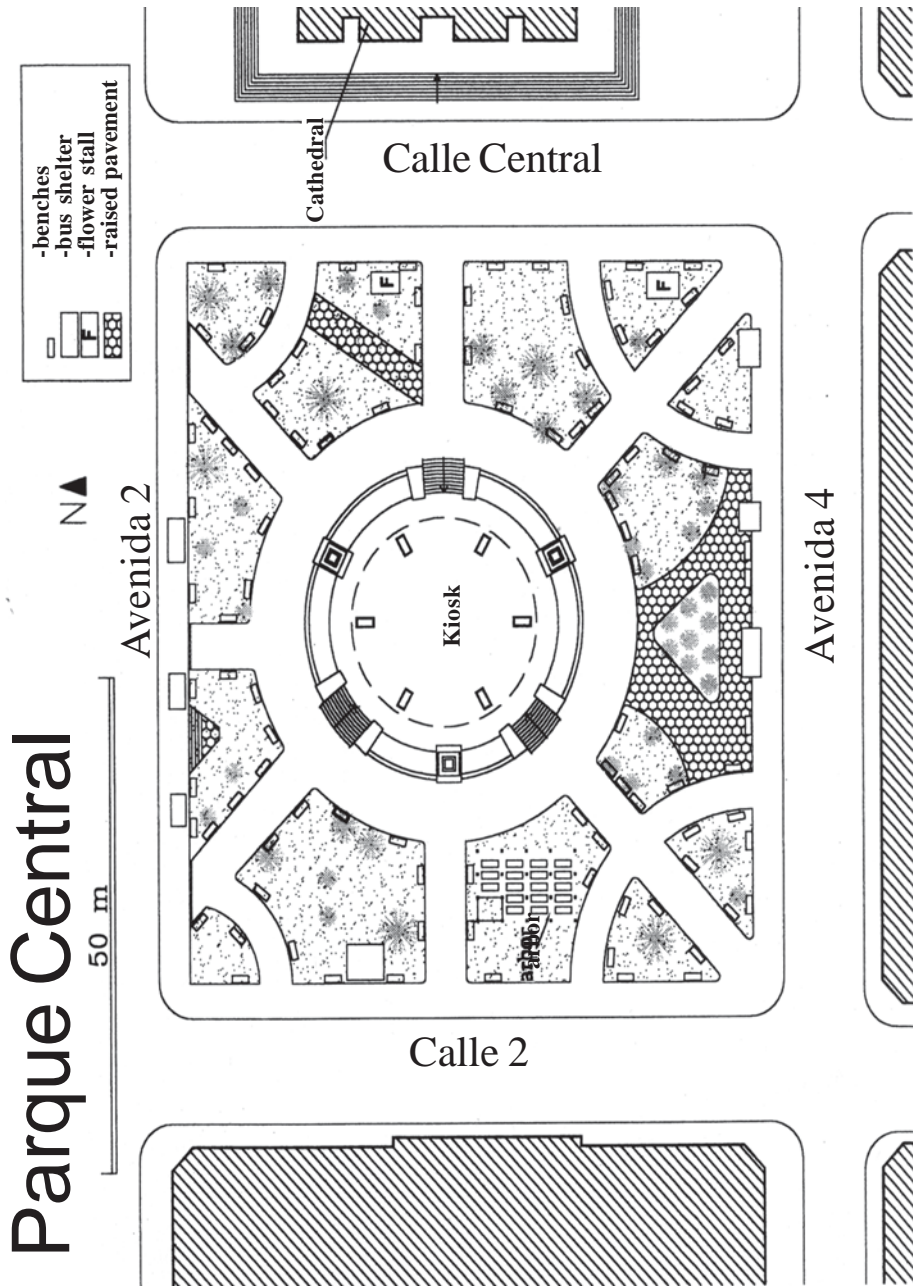
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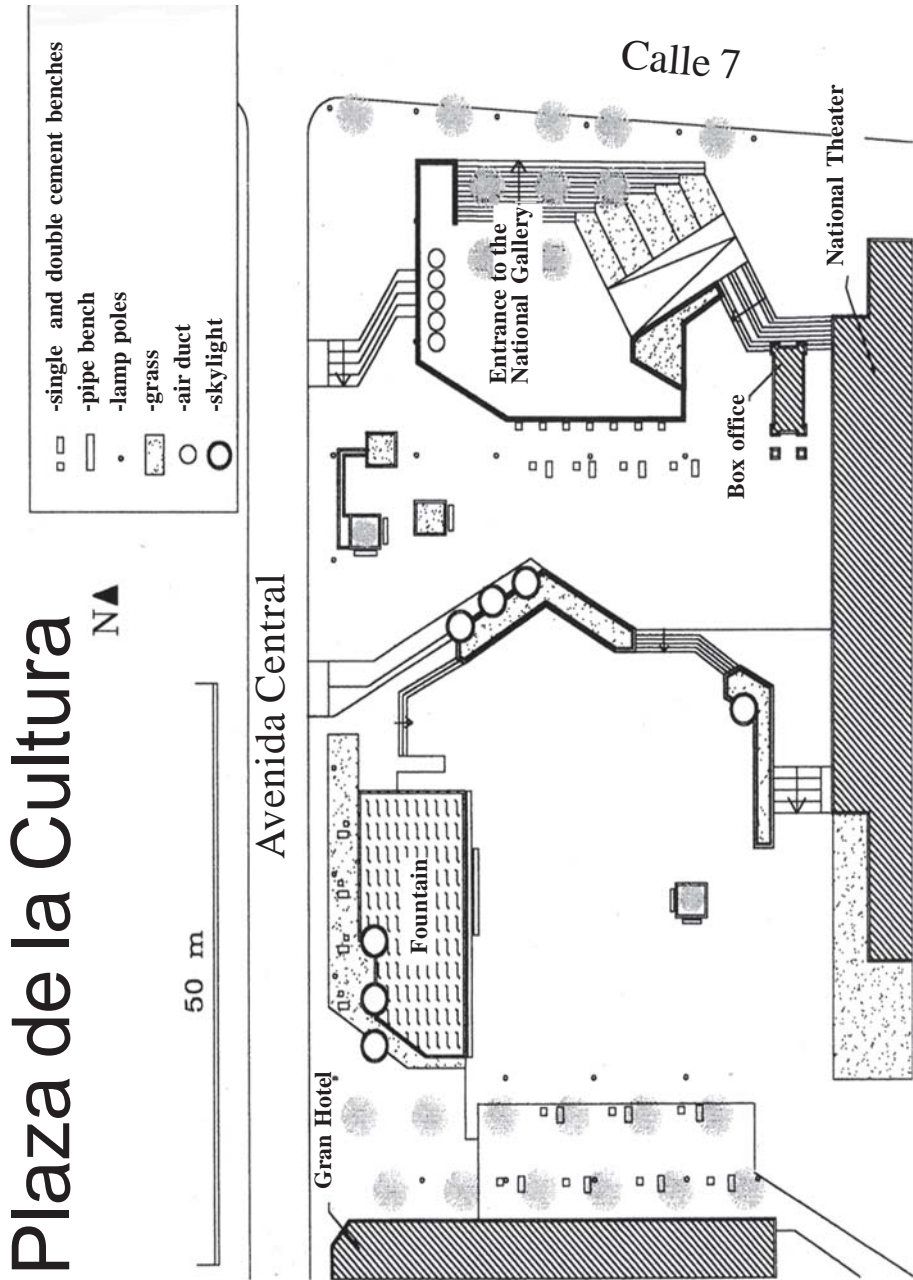
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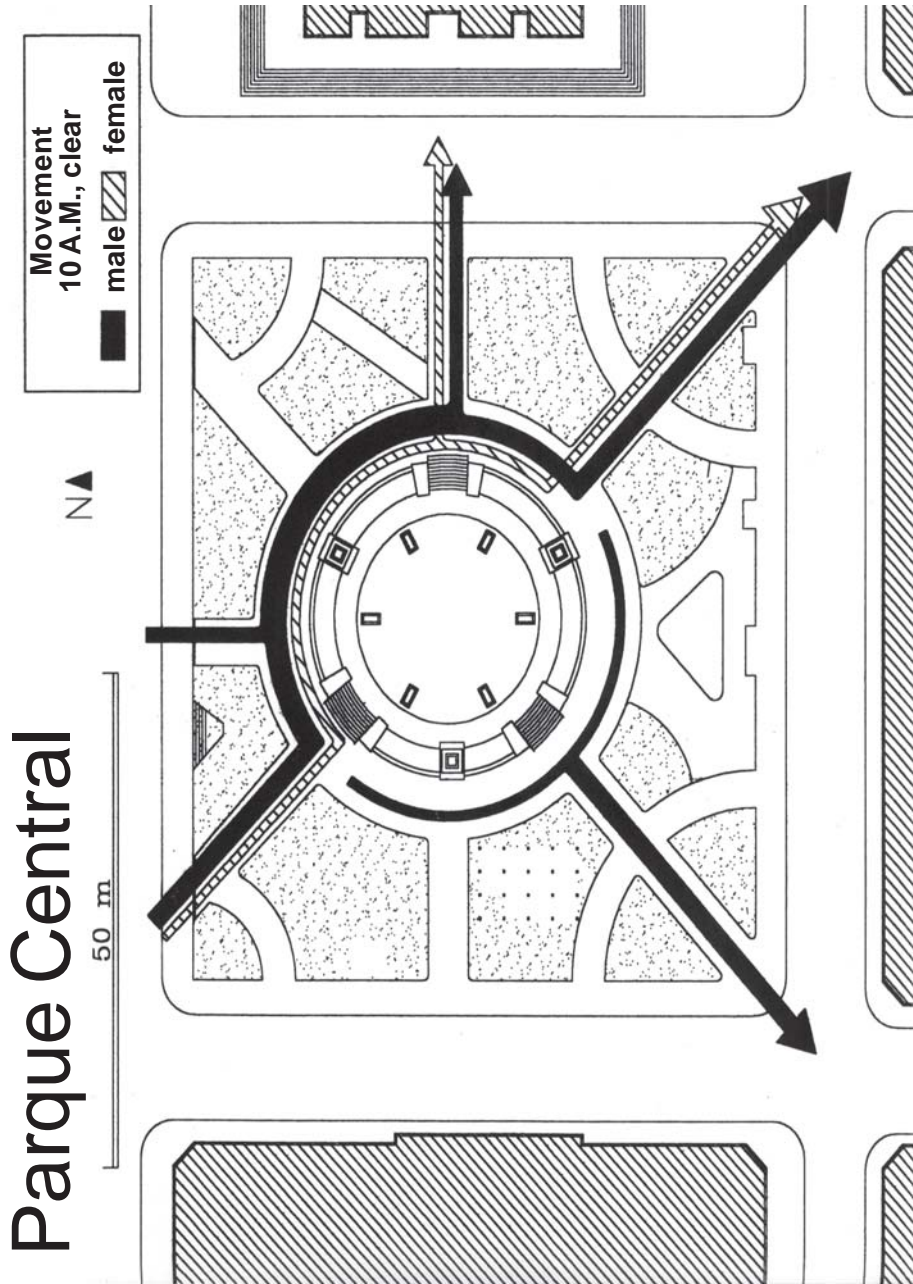
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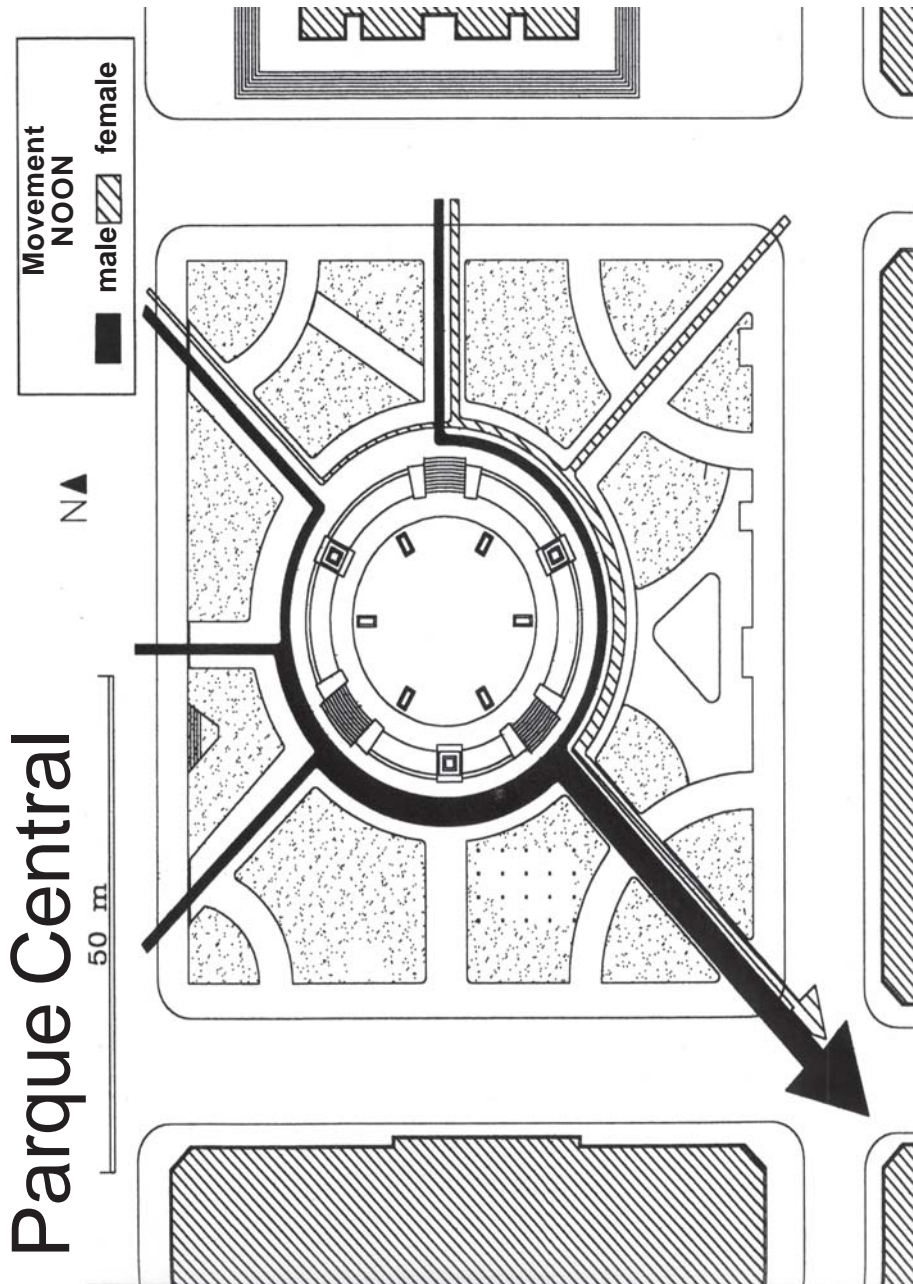
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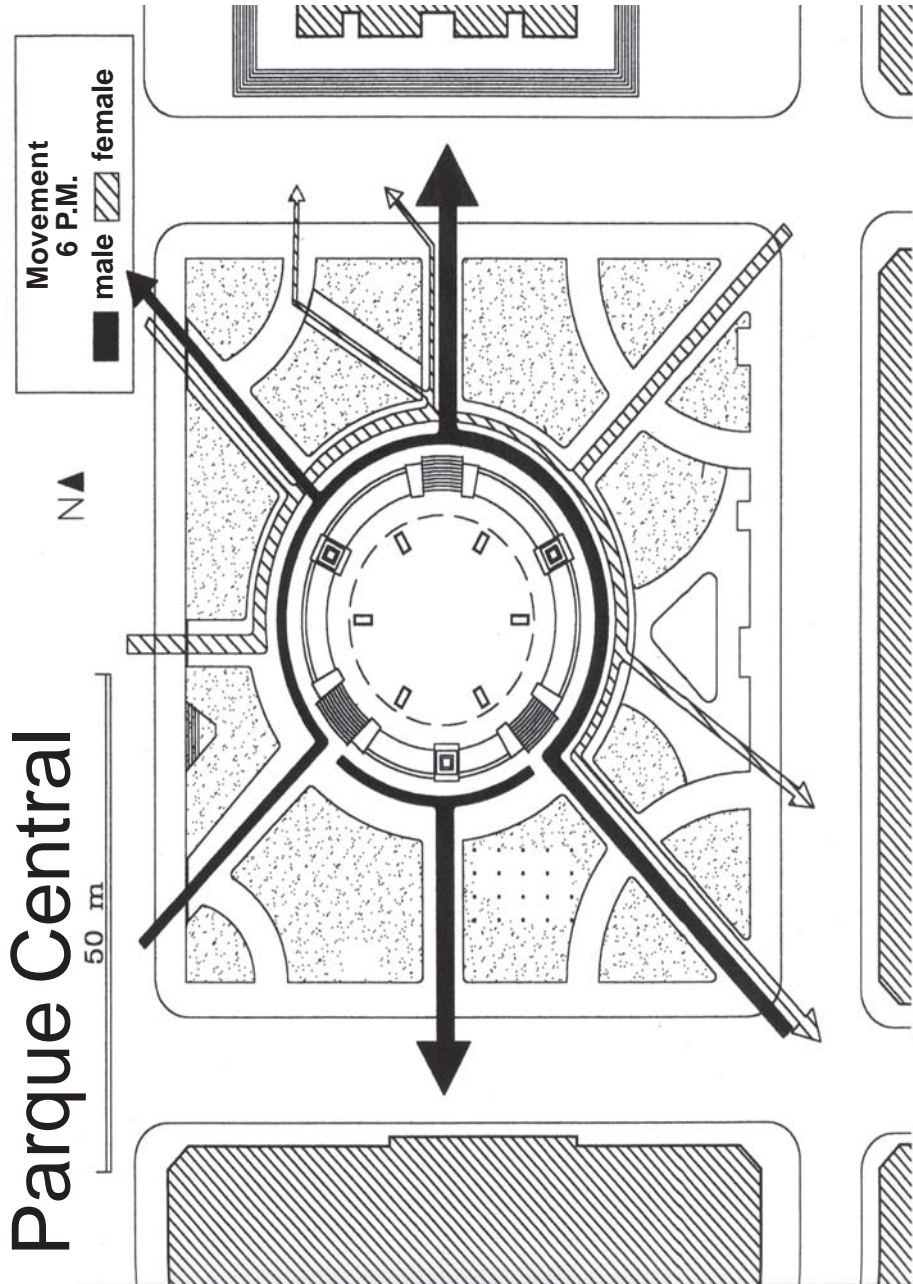




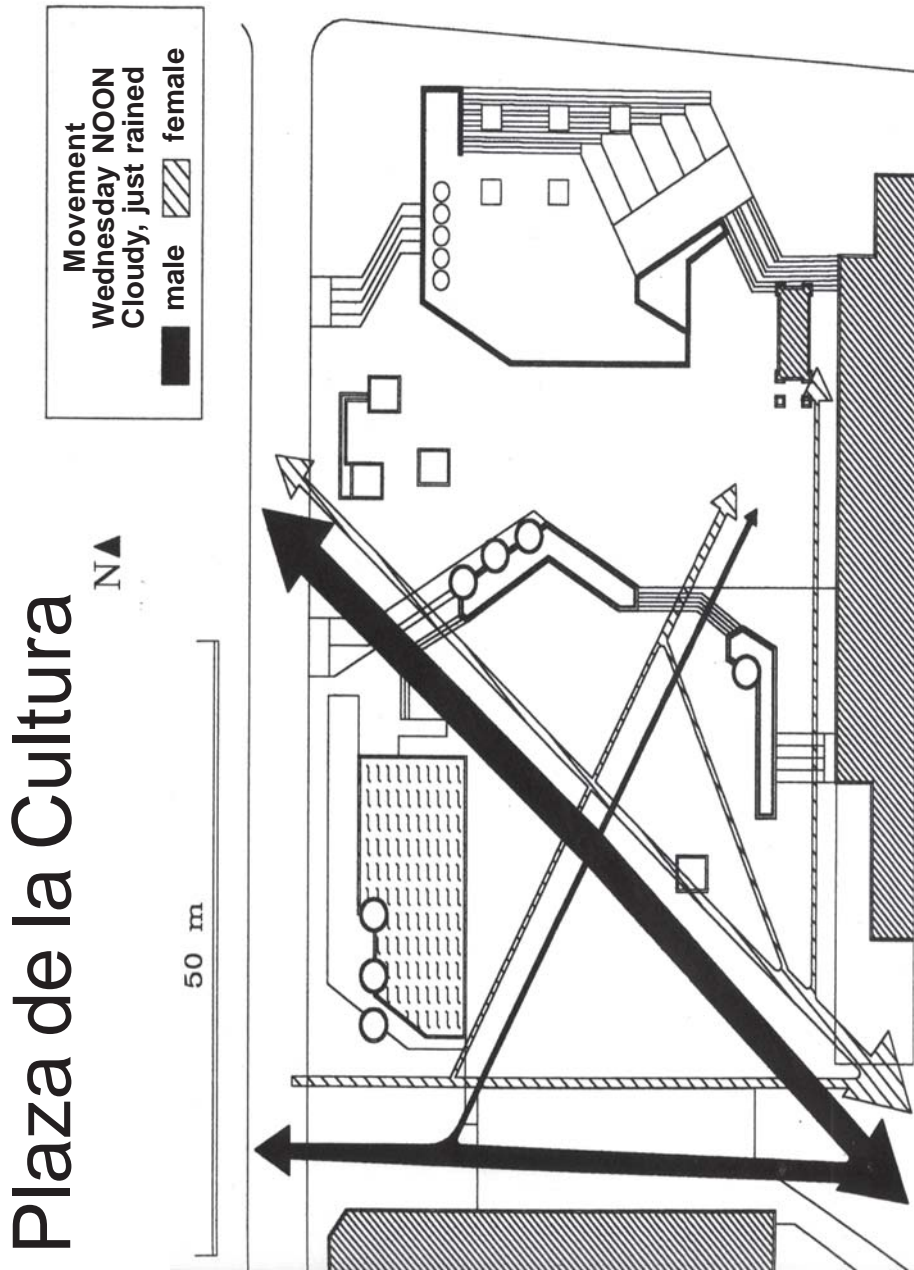


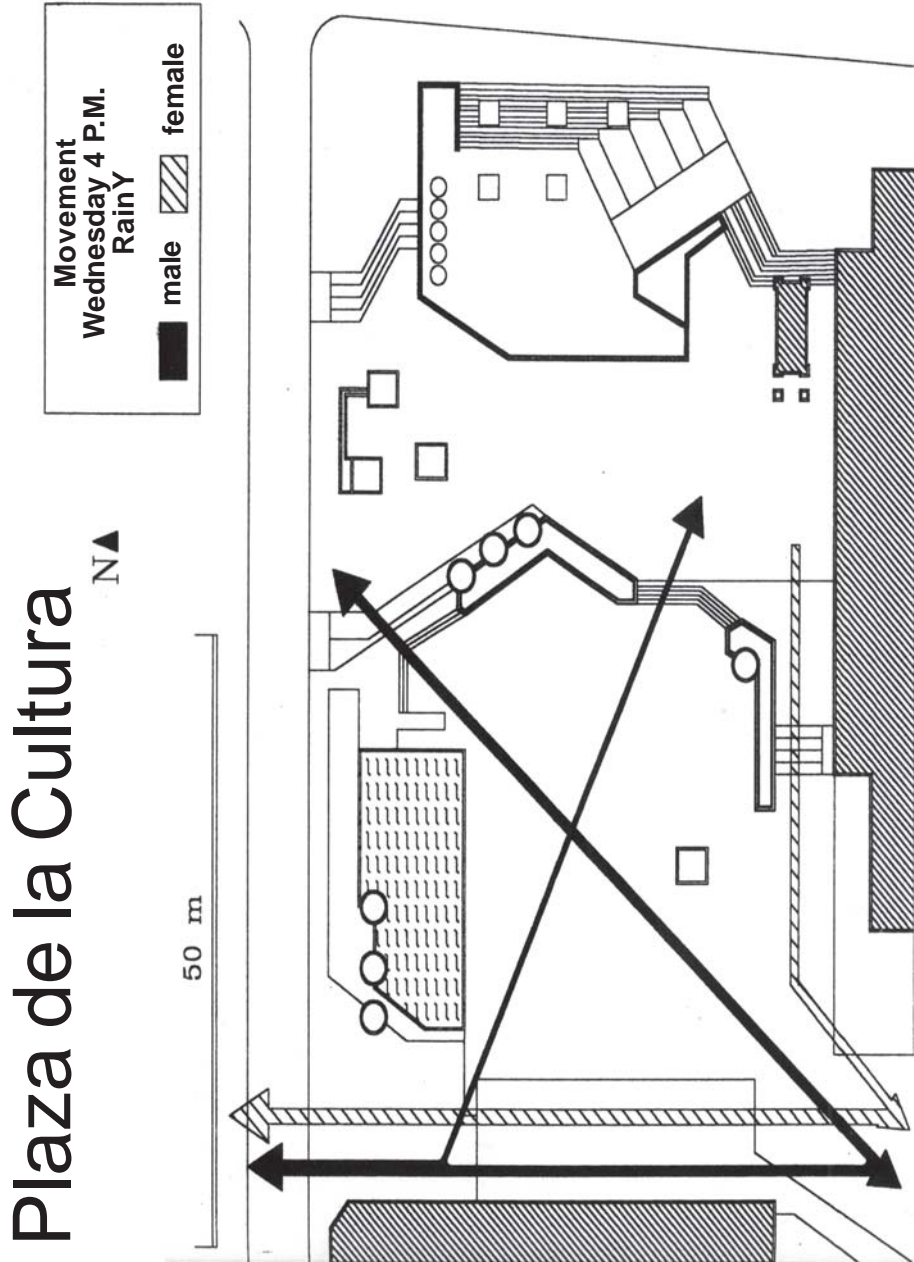


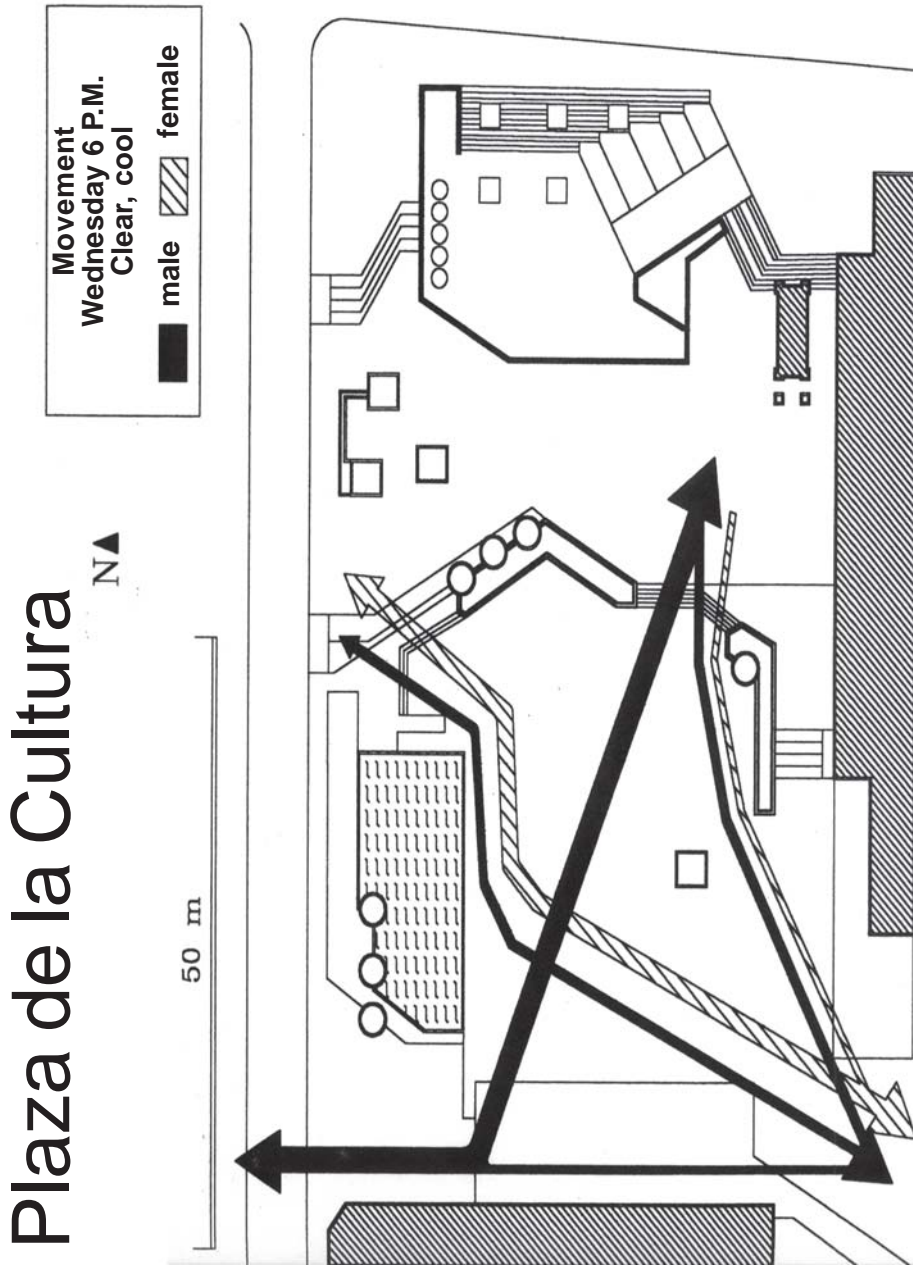


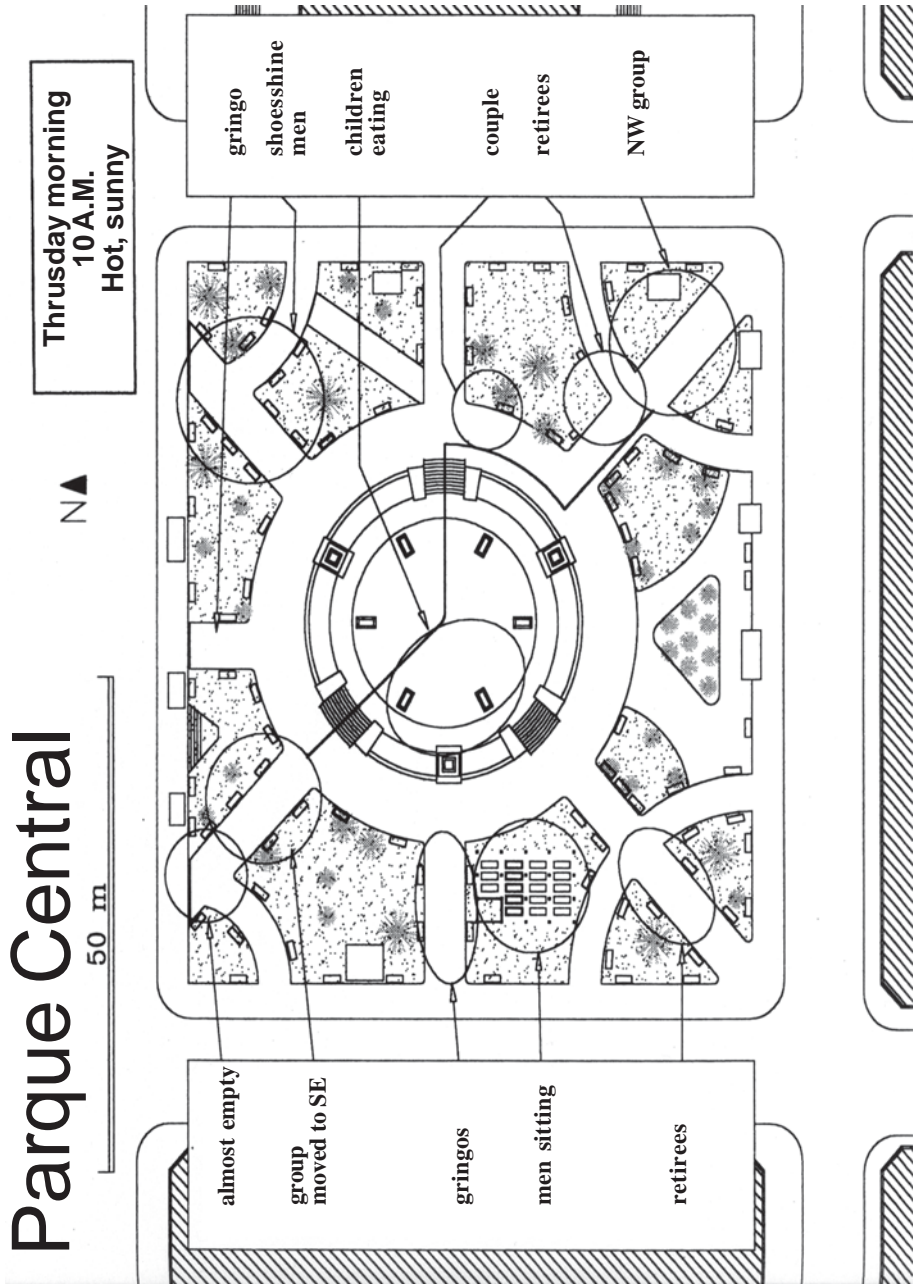


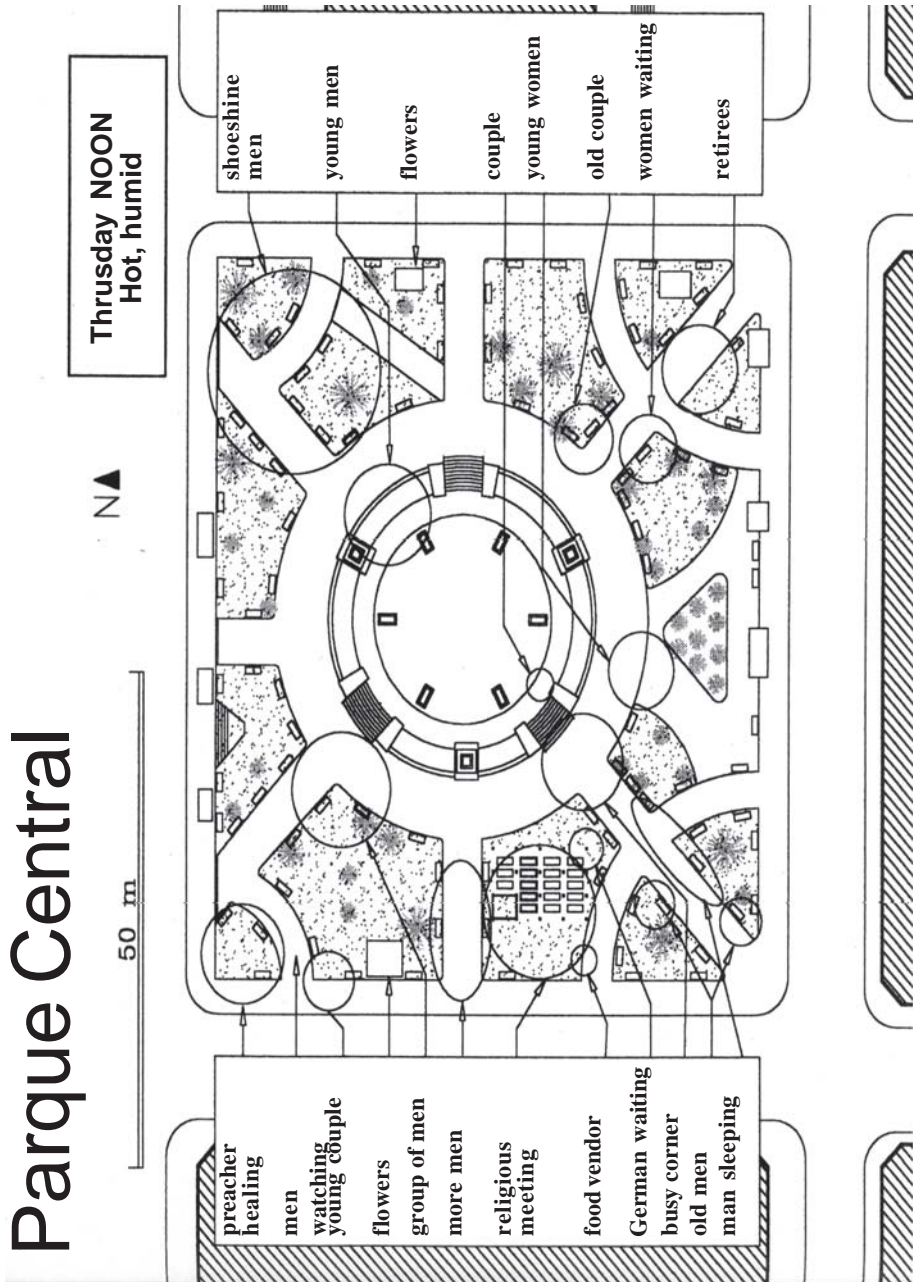














# Parque Central

