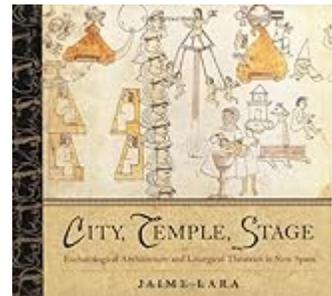


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Jaime Lara. *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain.* Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2004. x + 312 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-268-03364-4.



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Published on H-Urban (December, 2005)

Moveable Cities

In *City, Temple, Stage*, Jaime Lara has set a formidable task for himself. Lara, chair of the Program in Religion and the Arts at Yale University Divinity School, sought to re-examine the missionary efforts of several generations of Franciscan friars as they began their evangelical enterprise in New Spain during the sixteenth century from the perspective of art, architecture and what might be termed spectacle. He makes a strong case that the mendicant friars “recycled” (p.15) much more of Aztec religion than has been acknowledged in the scholarly literature.

This is a beautifully produced book, filled with hundreds of illustrations and maps that help the reader understand Lara’s big idea. Indeed, chapter 2 contains sixty-six photographs of murals, paintings, architectural features, church interiors and drawings. In six well-written chapters, Lara discusses “three categories of related symbols to demonstrate the convergences of metaphors and cultural expression in the New World—namely those of the city, the temple and the stage” (p. 9). While acknowledging the pioneering work of other scholars such as Robert Ricard, George Kubler and John McAndrews, Lara wants us to see another aspect of the Spanish conquest.[1] That is, the similarity of ideas, symbols, build-

ings and public events that encouraged the Franciscans to believe they could resurrect a New Jerusalem on the smoking ruins of Tenochtitlan.

In the six or seven decades after Cortes destroyed Aztec hegemony over central Mexico in 1521, Spanish missionaries had a unique opportunity to reshape the spiritual landscape they encountered. Mendicant friars roamed the region, building Christian churches, monasteries and chapels using, in many cases, the very stones and materials from conquered Aztec temples. The Franciscans brought a medieval worldview with them, one that saw an opportunity to literally re-create the Holy City of Christianity in Mexico, to build a city in which the major episodes of the Savior’s life could be played out in an endless cycle that pre-figured the return of the Redeemer and the end of time. The friars encountered a deeply religious population in Mexico and they seized the opportunity to tailor Christian dogma to the indigenous belief system. Lara points out that that was not unusual, citing well-known missionary activity in Asia, Africa and other places where Christianity took on a distinctly local flavor.

I found chapter 3, “The Indian Jerusalem,” to be the

most interesting aspect of Lara's ideas. He focuses on city planning and the meaning contained in the building of new Spanish towns, especially Puebla. Begun in the 1530s, the town became a virtual replica of Jerusalem, even to the detail of street planning and naming. Thus, the builders sought "tangible visualizations of the heavenly or historical Jerusalem" (p.107) for their Mexican urban centers, following ideas that had circulated in Spain since the times of the Reconquest. Lara cites the prophetic writings of Fray Francisc Eiximenis (1340-1409) as a basis for the Franciscan ideas about town-building in New Spain. His 1499 encyclopedia, *Christendom*, imagined a perfect Christian city in a checkerboard design with plazas, twelve gates, divided into four quadrants, each with its own churches and chapels. Thus the missionaries in sixteenth-century Mexico saw themselves creating godly cities awaiting the return of the Redeemer. Lara also asserts that city planning and urban development, at least in the sixteenth century, can be traced back to medieval Spanish design, especially in the building of new towns during the military campaign against the Moors.

Much of what the Franciscans built and taught to the conquered peoples in Mexico was easily absorbed because of the striking similarities between Christianity and indigenous beliefs. This is not an especially new idea, but Lara gives us hundreds of detailed images to bolster his argument, especially in regard to how the friars used religious plays, events, celebrations and architectural design to meld indigenous beliefs with Christian dogma. His is a very serious, striking and compelling discussion, one that scholars of the Spanish conquest will evaluate for some time. However, whether or not this means that the Indian peoples of Mexico fully and unreservedly accepted Christianity in all of its ramifications is a point that the author cannot fully resolve. Perhaps this is asking too much, but a logical extension of his complex presentation in this excellent book would be to try to answer this vexing question for his readers.

The freedom that the early missionaries had to pursue their own program of conversions and construction began to be reined in after 1585. Ecclesiastical authorities, newly arrived bishops, and the coming of the Inquisition all conspired to cool the initiative of the friars to do things their own way. The colonial church became more structured and more controlled in the seventeenth century and afterwards. The northern frontiers still offered relative freedom from such authority, but not for long. Lara points out that the missionary activities of the friars was "surprisingly collaborative and creative" (p. 204), involving Nahua Christians. These newly converted were active participants in the creation of new religious traditions in New Spain. Whether this syncretism represented the triumph of Spanish Christianity or the persistence of a local religious paradigm remains a central question to be answered. However, by showing us Aztec jaguar knights in the military retinue of St. Michael, as painted in the murals of Puebla churches, Lara has added unexpected nuance to the discussion.

City, Temple, Stage will be of great interest to students of Latin American urban development, art and architectural history, as well as late medieval ecclesiastical thought. Printed on high quality paper stock with beautiful illustrations and an extensive bibliography that underscores years of dedicated research, *City, Temple, Stage* will become a major research tool.

Note

[1]. Robert Ricard, *The Spiritual Conquest of Mexico: An Essay on the Apostolate and the Evangelizing Methods of the Mendicant Orders in New Spain, 1523-1572*, trans. Lesley Byrd Simpson (1933; reprint, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1966); George Kubler, *Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century* (1948; reprint, Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1972); John McAndrew, *The Open-Air Churches of Sixteenth-Century Mexico* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1965).

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Citation: Craig Hendricks. Review of Lara, Jaime, *City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain*. H-Urban, H-Net Reviews. December, 2005.

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