

TEXAS HIGHWAYS—PLAZA LIFE—MALLORY

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Plaza Life

Hangin' out in South Texas' Hispanic Plazas

OR

Hispanic Plazas

Hangin' out in South Texas' 'outdoor living room'

Native Chilean Emilio Salcedo relaxes on a bench in the dappled shade of live oaks in San Antonio's Main Plaza. He waits for noon mass in America's oldest cathedral sanctuary, San Fernando Cathedral, which faces the plaza. (37) I join his vigil. Emilio says he works for a mining company in El Paso, where he now lives. He's in San Antonio en route to a mine in Mexico.

As we chat, we watch youngsters in Sunday finery scamper around a broad, circular fountain spraying water plumes toward a blue Texas sky. We glance at couples feeding pigeons, at a snow-cone vendor scooping shaved ice, at old-timers lined along a low, limestone ledge which edges the plaza's lush plantings.

"This plaza feels just like home," he confides, and I understand. For years, on travels south of the Rio Grande, I've always gravitated to downtown

plazas—pleasant park-like places where people of all ages meet and greet and just hang out, day and night. Whenever I'm in South Texas, where Hispanic heritage runs almost three centuries deep, I reconnect with plaza life.

“All across Latin America, you find plazas like this,” Emilio explains. “The plaza is the center of life in our cities.”

No wonder. A set of 16th century Spanish ordinances, called the Law of the Indies, required a main plaza (*plaza mayor*) at the heart of each New World settlement.

Measuring no less than 200 by 300 feet, the plaza consisted of a square or rectangular open space encompassed by four principle streets. Other town streets extended from the plaza in all directions in a grid pattern.

Structures facing the plaza typically included a church, governmental building, and businesses. Prominent citizens often lived on or near the plaza. Larger towns frequently incorporated smaller plazas (*plazuelas*) in outlying neighborhoods.

Originally bare and unadorned, Hispanic plazas hosted military maneuvers, horse races, celebrations, and markets. Some featured a public well or fountain.

During France's brief occupation of Mexico in the 1860s, Mexican Emperor Maximilian and his wife, Carlota, permeated plazas with the ambiance of a French Renaissance garden. By the late 19th and early 20th century, a typical Mexican plaza boasted garden-like settings—filled with trees, flowerbeds,

walkways, and a *kiosco* (a gazebo-like pavilion) used for musical performances.
(above grafs from 7, 15, 16, 22, 26)

Throughout Texas history—in places as far flung as El Paso and Nacogdoches—many towns incorporated plazas from the Hispanic tradition into their layouts, though many have been altered over time.

Today, most traditional Hispanic plazas remain in South Texas. That's according to a study by Arizona State University geography professor Daniel Arreola, who identifies more plaza towns in South Texas than in any other U.S.-Mexico border region. His scholarly new book, *Tejano South Texas; A Mexican American Cultural Province*, describes plazas as one of several cultural attributes that define Hispanic South Texas. (above grafs from 15, 16, 20)

Unlike many historic plazas in Spain that did not evolve as community public spaces, writes Professor Arreola, Spanish-American plazas became the social hubs of their communities—hosting fiestas, political rallies, musical performances, and social gatherings. People-friendly plazas made the perfect proving ground for the Spanish tradition of the promenade or *paseo*.

In the *paseo*, young men moseyed in one direction around the plaza, eyeing eligible young women strolling in the opposite direction...with attentive parents watching nearby.

Longtime Laredo historian and archaeologist Rose Trevino fondly recalls *paseos* in her native Mexico and in Laredo, where she's lived since age 13. "The plaza was *the* spot for people watching. People's houses were very small and crowded, so the plaza became the community's outdoor living room," she says.

“We don’t have *paseos* any more, but the plaza is still a great place for hanging out with the family.”

The paseo may be passé in South Texas. But my favorite of Laredo’s several plazas, San Agustín Plaza, retains much of the charm of a traditional Hispanic plaza.

As the region’s only 18th century plaza, San Agustín rests where Don Tomas Sanchez established Laredo in 1755. (15)

Trees and shrubs fill this peaceful place, tucked along the banks of the Rio Grande a short walk from Nuevo Laredo, Mexico via Bridge #1. Red-brick walkways emanate from a pillared masonry *kiosco*. Locals and tourists relax on concrete benches chiseled with “In Memory of...” followed by cherished local family names. A larger-than-life statue, donated by Mexico, honors General Ignacio Zaragoza, hero of the May 5, 1862 Battle of Puebla, Mexico, an event celebrated as Cinco de Mayo. (Laredo’s Mexican Consulate hosts Cinco de Mayo festivities each May 5 on San Agustín Plaza—plus a Diez y Seis de Septiembre or Mexican Independence Day celebration, September 15, 2002, and a Christmas event in December.)

I connect with local tour guide Sam Johnson who walks me past historic sites on the plaza. The first, San Agustín Catholic Church, was founded in 1760, making it one of the state’s oldest churches. The present French Gothic Revival brick structure was built in 1872 and restored in 1989. Sam shows me the outline of the previous stone structure (1768) visible in an outside brick patio. (8, 27)

Sam and I peek into the 18th century Ortiz House, also on the plaza, the home of the Washington's Birthday Celebration Museum. Exhibits display memorabilia from Laredo's tribute to George Washington, held each February for more than a century.

Down Zaragoza Street on the plaza's south side, we visit the Republic of the Rio Grande Museum, a project of the Webb County Heritage Foundation. It's housed in the former headquarters of the Republic of the Rio Grande, a self-declared nation that came and went in 1840, the museum chronicles that ill-fated attempt at local self-governance. Outside the museum, Sam hops aboard a rubber-tire trolley to guide visitors on a two-hour, bilingual tour of Laredo's many historic sites. (Tours run Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Saturdays year-round. The foundation, 500 Flores Avenue, also offers a self-guided walking tour brochure of historic sites.)

I stroll next door to the 208-room La Posada Hotel, site of an early *casa judicial* (government building). Constructed in 1916 as the Laredo High School, this Spanish Revival building features a fountained courtyard and elegant eatery, the Tesoro Club. Across Flores Street, another La Posada restaurant, the Tack Room Bar & Grill, occupies the Victorian residence of A.M. Bruni, prominent 19th century rancher and entrepreneur and namesake of Laredo's Bruni Plaza.

Plazas also carry on Hispanic tradition in several historic border towns downstream from Laredo.

Tiny San Ygnacio (founded 1830) boasts a historic district that's listed on the National Register of Historic Places. It's anchored around Blas Uribe Plaza

(Plaza del Pueblo), which remained a simple, open space until the 1950s.

Today, the plaza sports native and non-native trees, benches, and a gazebo. A small white-steepled church flanks this gathering place, as do several of San Ygnacio's many 19th century sandstone structures. One such building, now restored as a residence, served as the fort in the 1950's movie *Viva Zapata*, starring Marlon Brando. (18, 25, 32)

Scenes in *Viva Zapata* also unfolded farther downstream on Roma's Memorial Plaza, the heart of one of Texas' most intact Spanish colonial towns. The plaza sprawls mall-like down Convent Street from the 1854 Our Lady of the Refuge Church to a bluff overlooking the Rio Grande. During the last half of the 19th century, with Roma booming as the river's westernmost port, a prosperous commercial district built up along the plaza. Noted German architect Heinrich Portscheller built several of these well-proportioned, two-story buildings. Many have been restored, and others are currently being restored, as is the plaza itself. (12, 33)

Still farther downstream, another former river port, historic Rio Grande City, also has a mall-like plaza. In 1848, founder Henry Clay Davis patterned his town after the state capitol. But unlike Austin, a plaza runs down the main street, Britton Avenue, which descends from the Starr County Courthouse to the Rio Grande. Filled with historical markers, walkways, fountains, and a *kiosco*, the tree-covered plaza features an unusual site. In 1924, Catholic priest Gustavo Goldback built a replica of the grotto shrine of Our Lady of Lourdes in France, complete with a Paris-forged statue of the Virgin Mary.

Back in San Antonio, mass is over at San Fernando Cathedral, and worshippers fill Main Plaza.

Main Plaza was originally called *Plaza de las Islas* (Plaza of the Islands). Fifteen Spanish families gave it that name after journeying here from the Canary Islands in 1731 to establish Villa de San Fernando, Texas' first civilian settlement.

By 1750, the islanders had completed San Fernando Cathedral, (later expanded and currently undergoing further expansion). They located the plaza and church between Spain's two existing installations established in 1718—the Mission San Antonio de Valero (now the Alamo) and its protective fort, Presidio de San Antonio de Bexar. Eventually, both the mission and fort got their own plazas.

Today, what's left of the presidio's Plaza de Armas (Military Plaza) is home to the 1749 Spanish Governor's Palace, the first seat of Spanish government in Texas and perhaps the grandest Spanish colonial building in the state. Alamo Plaza began looking like a traditional Hispanic plaza in the late 1800s and now features shady sitting areas, a bandstand, and the grand 1936 work of Italian-born sculptor Pompeo Coppini, a marble cenotaph bearing the names of those who perished in momentous 1836 battle at the Alamo. (1, 36, 37, 39,)

Hanging out at these three downtown plazas—plus nearby Milam Square, a recently-refurbished plaza next to San Antonio's bustling *mercado* or market—I

recall what long-time San Antonio historian Mary Ann Noonan Guerra once told me.

“It was on our plazas that the greatest changes always took place—changes in governments, commerce, and just ordinary life. The Spanish originally decreed that the plaza serve the citizenry ‘for their use and entertainment.’ That’s the way it’s always been and continues to be.”

Those words ring true as I watch a youngster on Main Plaza bite into a steaming ear of fresh corn-on-the-cob, served from a street cart like I remember it from trips to interior Mexico—drizzled with chili powder and a squeeze of lime.

If this lively Sunday in downtown San Antonio is any indication, plazas, indeed, remain a cultural touchstone, connecting South Texans to their rich Hispanic heritage.