



## New Spain's Second City: Architecture and Urbanism of Puebla de los Angeles

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Review of Juan Luis Burke, *Architecture and Urbanism in Viceregal Mexico: Puebla de los Angeles, Sixteenth to Eighteenth Centuries*, New York: Routledge, 2021, 232 pages, 50 b/w illus. ISBN: 9780367531614. *Architecture and Urbanism* surveys the urban development of Puebla de los Angeles, Mexico, tracing the growth and expansion of this colonial city during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries up to the economic crisis and decline in the eighteenth century. Because it showcases underutilized regional archives, Burke's book is an essential point of departure for any scholar or student interested in Ibero-American architecture.

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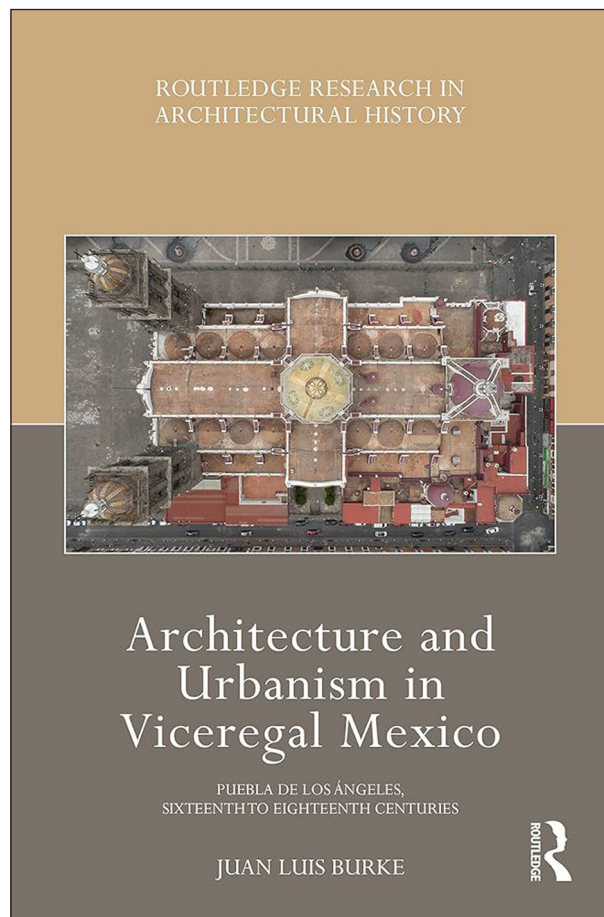
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*Architecture and Urbanism* offers an indispensable introduction to the rich, underutilized archives and libraries whose documents narrate the urban history of early colonial Mexico's second city, Puebla de los Ángeles. Burke presents a coherent narrative about the development of the city's urban form and principal monuments, integrating Spanish-language scholarship and regional archival sources with English-language literature. The book begins with a 1799 encomium by the *criollo* historian don Mariano de Echeverría y Veytia, which praises Puebla as an urban center home to illustrious Spanish citizens. This conventional opening in the genre of early Ibero-American history aligns with the author's chief objective: to examine how the city's material fabric articulated the aspiration toward

unity at the core of the ideal Christian republic. Burke argues that "the city was a locus of collective identity-forging that arose from processes of continuous negotiations and exchanges" (3). Puebla offers a remarkable case study because its historical urban core contains a dense arrangement of colonial-era monuments, including nearly one hundred churches and convents, hospitals, municipal buildings, domestic and stately residences, and the oldest library in the Western hemisphere, the Biblioteca Palafoxiana (founded in 1646). The city's historical center, the sector initially reserved for Spanish residents was declared a UNESCO World Heritage Center in 1987 in an effort to safeguard the "cultural authenticity" of an ethnically diverse city still reckoning with the material and social legacies of Spanish domination (see <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/416>).

As a survey of the urban development of Puebla, the chronological arc of *Architecture and Urbanism* follows the growth and expansion of the city during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries up to the economic crisis and decline in the eighteenth century. The Spanish founded the city in 1531 in Cuetlaxcoapan, then a grassy floodplain located at



the confluence of three rivers. Chapter 1 discusses the city's foundation and the shaping force of the *cabildo*, the legislative and administrative body responsible for Puebla's public infrastructure and for organizing civic events. The regulations implemented by the *cabildo* established the patterns of Spanish settlement in the city's urban core (*traza*) and confined Indigenous settlers, poor Spaniards, and Africans to neighborhoods (*barrios*) around the periphery. Chapter 2 offers an original reading of the Via Crucis processional circuit, showing how the spatial practices of religious ritual provided an alternative topographical experience of the city that enlivened the Christological ideals embedded in its gridded urban form. The first half of chapter 3 focuses on the adoption of classicism in the city and is followed by a concise architectural reconstruction of the Casa del Deán. Finished in 1580, the Casa del Deán is situated one block from the Palafox Library, which preserves the architectural treatises by Vitruvius (1552; 1582) and Serlio (1573), among others, that Burke discusses at the beginning of the chapter. Today, the Casa del Deán represents one of the oldest surviving urban palaces in Mexico, and it was the former residence of Tomás de la Plaza, who was the dean of Puebla's cathedral in the mid-1500s. Two stately rooms preserve cycles of polychrome murals that speak to the circulation of Christian humanist texts and ideas in Puebla. Rediscovered in the 1950s, the murals barely missed the wrecking ball in 1952 and were restored in 2010. Chapter 4 is devoted to ecclesiastical architectural patronage, focusing on monuments, including the cathedral, seminary, and San Pedro's hospital. According to Burke, the hospital best exemplifies the role of the city's most influential patron, Juan Palafox y Mendoza, who served as the city's bishop from 1640 to 1655, as a sponsor of civic monuments and charitable institutions. Unfortunately, Burke's analysis of the impact of Palafox's diocesan reforms on the city's urban planning and rural parishes is hampered by the fact that the diocesan archives in Puebla have been closed to researchers despite a 2021 promise to catalog the collection and open it for consultation. Chapter 5 examines the city during the period of the Bourbon reforms from 1680 to 1790. This era of surging criollo micropatriotism was marked by tensions between sumptuous monuments in the vernacular Poblano Baroque, on the one hand, and the economic crises and epidemic diseases that throttled development and resulted in significant population losses. The chapter opens by surveying the monuments with facades ornamented in the style of the Poblano Baroque, monuments that in contrast to Mexico City's buildings, which relied on *tezontle* or volcanic stone, incorporated red bricks, glazed tile, local gray basalt, and white stucco. Next, Burke considers two of Puebla's most well-known monuments, the Rosary Chapel in the church of Santo Domingo and the Tonanzintla church located in an Indigenous barrio on the edge of the nearby town of Cholula. The interiors of both monuments are richly ornamented in gilded and polychromed plasterwork, and their

extravagance belies the era's systemic urban poverty and the exodus of its citizens. Burke's urban history extends up to the 1790s, leaving readers to wonder about the afterlives of the city's colonial-era buildings and raising new questions as to why particular monuments were preserved, repaired, or demolished during the Republican period and the Mexican Revolution.

At moments, Burke's meticulous inspection of the built environment could have been enriched by his engaging with other media such as music, particularly given that a body of scholarship has emerged on cathedral music from New Spain and modern recordings of sacred music from the Puebla Cathedral's sacred archive have been produced (see Jesús Ramos-Kittrell's 2016 *Playing in the Cathedral* for more on this topic). Musical performances took place in many of the built spaces that Burke analyzes, where the interplay of urban site, design, decoration, and ritual coproduced notions of civic or religious identity. Furthermore, the city's archives not only provide ample textual documentation allowing researchers to chronicle the adoption of classical ideals and built forms but also many records by Indigenous authors, and I wish that the book had directly engaged with these sources. Puebla and the region boast a substantial corpus of records in Nahuatl that would have enhanced the Burkes's argument and helped facilitate a greater sensitivity with respect to issues of Indigenous representation in a city that continues to struggle to recognize the historical and contemporary contributions of its Indigenous inhabitants. These documents show that Indigenous inhabitants were crucial agents in the urban development and formation of Puebla's civic identity from the moment of the city's inception, as Lidia E. Gómez García has demonstrated in *Los anales nahuas de la ciudad de Puebla de los Ángeles, siglos XVI y XVIII*. Burke invites future research in this area by providing crucial framing for situating such projects in transatlantic conversations; however, readers are left asking how cross-cultural interactions drove the adoption of new building typologies or shaped urban policies beyond instituting segregation.

Despite these drawbacks, Burke's *Architecture and Urbanism* will be an essential point of departure for any scholar or student researching this magnificent city during the colonial era or urbanism in Latin America. This book introduces anglophone readers to Puebla's vast archives and research on the city by Mexican scholars. Each chapter has a separate bibliography and can thus be read independently, making it perfect for classroom audiences.

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**Competing Interests**

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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