Setha Low, 'Chapter 6: Spatializing Culture,' in : Setha Low, On the Plaza. The Politics of Public Space and Culture, Austin: University of Texas Press, pp. 127-153.

Part II presents three histories that provide the background for understanding the historical contingencies, spatial configurations, and political symbolism of the Costa Rican plaza. Part III, Ethnographies, analyzes the specific findings gleaned from twelve years of participant observation and interviewing in Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura and develops a series of theoretical frameworks. The concepts of spatializing culture, social and spatial boundaries, and commodification and demystification of public space organize the data and explain the sociocultural patterns found in these significant urban public spaces.

In Chapter 6, I attempt to "spatialize" culture, that is, to physically and conceptually locate social relations and social practice in space. By employing the perspectives of the social production of space and the social construction of space, I demonstrate how public space becomes meaningful reality to users and urban residents. In Chapter 7, I turn to the idea of spatial boundaries and examine how differences in the use of space define social groups and separate ideological differences through the physical realm of spatial relations. These plazas are inhabited by distinct groups of people who change places and uses throughout the day. The distinctions made between and among groups take on spatial form and ultimately have social consequences.

In Chapter 8, I explore how designed spaces are manipulated for political and economic ends under the guise of their artistic contribution to urban improvement. Plazas are a social good that enhances the life and well-being of urban users and residents, but the improvement of the urban fabric is not the only objective of these highly politicized places. I demystify the objectives of landscape design by analyzing the decision-making processes involved in building the Plaza de la Cultura and in redesigning Parque Central.

CHAPTER 6

Spatializing Culture

The Social Production and Social Construction of Public Space

Introduction

Contemporary debates concerning ethnographic methodologies and writing strategies emphasize the importance of characterizing social actors in terms of their experience of the theorized phenomena. The coproducers of the ethnography must be given a voice and a place in the written document, and ethnographic research is increasingly judged by its ability to portray the impact of macro- and microprocesses through the "lived experience" of individuals (Appadurai 1992; Rodman 1992). Thus, an effective anthropological theory of the spatialization of culture and human experience must integrate the perspectives of social production and social construction of space, contextualizing the forces that produce it and showing people as social agents constructing their own realities and symbolic meanings. But it must also reflect both of these perspectives in the experience and daily life of individuals.

By "spatialize" I mean: to locate—physically, historically, and conceptually—social relations and social practice in space. In this chapter, I am using the specific analysis of Parque Central and Plaza de la Cultura to explore the use of the two complementary perspectives of social production of space and social construction of space as tools for understanding how public space in urban society becomes meaningful reality.

To clarify this discussion, it is important to distinguish between these two terms that are often used interchangeably. The *social production of space* includes all those factors—social, economic, ideological, and tech-

nological—that result, or seek to result, in the physical creation of the material setting. The materialist emphasis of the term *social production* is useful in defining the historical emergence and political/economic formation of urban space. The term *social construction* may then be conveniently reserved for the phenomenological and symbolic experience of space as mediated by social processes such as exchange, conflict, and control. Thus, the *social construction of space* is the actual transformation of space—through peoples' social exchanges, memories, images, and daily use of the material setting—into scenes and actions that convey meaning. Both processes are social in that both the production and the construction of space are contested and fought over for economic and ideological reasons, and understanding them can help us see how local conflicts over space can be used to uncover and illuminate larger cultural issues.

The contestation over the meaning of the plazas is the focus of this ethnographic inquiry. The plaza as a site of civic expression becomes a space of opposition and resistance in response to state and local efforts at social control. Steve Pile suggests that when we think of "resistance" we think of "unemployed people marching to demonstrate their plight . . . or a lone man standing in front of a tank as it rolls onwards to Tiananmen Square" (1997, 1); these events "take place," creating "geographies of resistance." I agree that it is critical to understand the material setting of resistance and to document the events that occur on the plaza. But I am arguing that the contest over public space is also about plaza meaning, which reflects differences in a war of cultural values and visions of appropriate behavior and societal order. Discussions of architectural style, plaza design, and nostalgia are equally important indicators of local struggles for political and social control (and resistance to control) of public space. Thus, this ethnography traces historical and contemporary conflicts in the design, use, image, experience, and meaning of the Costa Rican plazas.

There have been many macrolevel approaches to spatialization. David Harvey (1985, 1990) and Manuel Castells (1983, 1989) examine the spatialization of social conflicts, focusing on class-based struggle with state-imposed spatial regimes. They provide historical and contemporary examples of grassroots and labor organizations fighting to maintain control of housing (Castells 1983), urban sacred space (Harvey 1985), and neighborhood real estate (Castells 1983; see also Smith 1991 and Peattie 1969, 1987). In their analyses, the local population is portrayed

as having a role through social movements that resist the control of the dominant classes and planning elite. The concern is with the way in which capital reformulates social relations and space. Within this system, space is constitutive of power, and resistance takes the form of social movements and local activism.

Michel Foucault, in his work on the prison (1975) and in a series of interviews and lectures on space (1984; Rabinow 1984), takes a historical approach to the spatialization of social control through analysis of the human body, spatial arrangements, and architecture. He examines the relationship of power and space by positing architecture as a political "technology" for working out the concerns of government—that is, control and power over individuals—through the spatial "canalization" of everyday life. The aim of such a technology is to create a "docile body" (Foucault 1975, 198) through enclosure and the organization of individuals in space.

Continuing this approach, Paul Rabinow (1989) links the growth of modern forms of political power with the evolution of aesthetic theories and shows how French colonists sought to use architecture and city planning to demonstrate their cultural superiority. He focuses on the ordering of space as a way to understand "the historically variable links between spatial relations, aesthetics, social science, economics, and politics" (Rabinow 1982, 267). James Holston (1989) develops this argument further by examining the state-sponsored architecture and master planning of Brasília as new forms of political domination through which the domains of daily life become the targets for state intervention. These writers successfully illustrate how architecture contributes to the maintenance of power of one group over another at a level that includes both the control of daily movement and the surveillance of the body in space.

Michel de Certeau takes resistance as his starting point, setting out to show how people's "ways of operating" constitute the means by which users reappropriate space organized by techniques of sociocultural production (1984, xiv). These practices are articulated in the details of everyday life and bring to light the clandestine "tactics" used by groups or individuals "already caught in the nets of 'discipline'" (De Certeau 1984, xiv–xv). By tracing out the operations of walking, naming, narrating, and remembering the city, he develops a theory of lived space in which spatial practices elude the discipline and constraints of urban planning. The pedestrian's walking is the spatial acting-out of place, creating and representing public space rather than being subject to it.

In a more ethnographic effort to link human agents and resistance to domination, Pierre Bourdieu (1977) looks at the spatialization of everyday behavior and how the sociospatial order is translated into bodily experience and practice. He proposes the key concept of *habitus,* a generative and structuring principle of collective strategies and social practices, which is used to reproduce existing structures. In his examples, the Kabyle house becomes the setting in which body space and cosmic space are integrated through metaphor and symbolic homologous structures. Through the experience of living in the spatial symbolism of the home, social structure becomes embodied and naturalized in everyday practice. Since the concept of habitus, like Foucault's *dispositif* and De Certeau's walking, spatially links social structure to the human body and bodily practices, the possibility of individual resistance to these practices becomes more apparent.

These theories of spatialization provide a basis for working out how spatial analysis would satisfy the anthropologist's need to link experience, practice, and structure. Nonetheless, it is difficult to derive ethnographic research strategies solely from these conceptual approaches. One intermediate step is to identify domains of action and endeavor that allow for empirical analysis. I have chosen to concentrate on the historical emergence of the space, the sociopolitical ideologies and economic forces involved in its production, including the role played by planning and architecture professionals in its design, the social use of the space, and its associated affective and symbolic meanings. To categorize these domains in terms of their generative processes, historical, sociopolitical, economic, and professional understandings refer to social production of space; social use and affective meanings refer to social construction of space (Richardson 1982). I must point out, however, that it is always necessary to keep in mind that this sorting is somewhat illusory. I agree with Henri Lefebvre (1991) that social space is a whole and that any one event or illustration has within it aspects of that whole. The complex and contradictory nature of space is that "space is permeated with social relations; it is not only supported by social relations but it is also producing and produced by social relations" (Lefebvre 1991, 286, cited in Hayden 1995, 31).

In this chapter, then, I examine the theorizing power of these perspectives by focusing on the ethnography of the two Costa Rican plazas. Applying these analytic tools to the ethnographic material, I demonstrate that there is a relationship between the circumstances of

the production of public spaces such as plazas and people's experience of them; that this relationship is dialogic rather than dialectic, in spite of the high degree of conflict and contestation often found in the Costa Rican plazas; and that the plazas act as containers, thus permitting resistance, counterresistance, and change to occur publicly and with relative safety. In addition, the negotiation of the form and meaning of spatial representations is illuminating as a public forum for the working out of larger conflicts stemming from the growing impact of globalization, increased tourism, and the struggle by both individuals and the state to maintain a distinct cultural identity.

The Ethnography of the Spanish American Plaza

Parque Central represents Costa Rica's Spanish colonial history in its spatial form and context. Its relatively long history spans the colonial, republican, and modern periods, and a number of historical photographs and portrayals of earlier periods of plaza design and social life were available in local archives. During the research period of 1985 through 1987, Parque Central was a vibrant center of traditional Costa Rican culture, inhabited by a variety of largely male workers, pensioners, preachers and healers, tourists, shoppers, female sex workers, and people who just wanted to sit and watch the action. This chapter focuses on this fieldwork period. When I returned in 1993 and 1994, the plaza was under construction: the cement kiosk was being renovated and the surrounding benches, pathways, and gathering spaces were in the process of being redesigned. By 1997 it had reopened, and its design and use had changed, as discussed in Chapter 8.

The Plaza de la Cultura, a contemporary plaza only one block east and one block north of Parque Central, is a recently designed urban space heralded by Josefino boosters as an emblem of the "new Costa Rican culture." Because it was opened in 1982, I was still able to interview individuals involved in its design and planning, while at the same time it could be studied as a well-established place. The Plaza de la Cultura proved to be an excellent comparison to Parque Central, providing contrasts in style of design, spatial configuration, surrounding buildings and institutions, activities, and the kinds of inhabitants and visitors. It is a site of modern consumption, a so-called landscape of power (Zukin 1991). North American culture is consumed by Costa Rican teenagers carrying radios blaring rap music, and North American tourists "consume" Costa Rican culture by buying souvenirs, snacks,

theater tickets, and artworks as well as the sexual favors and companionship of young Costa Ricans.

These two urban spaces were socially produced—planned, built, designed, and maintained—in different historical and sociopolitical contexts, and both were constrained by limits imposed by the available resources as well as by the central government's political objectives. The environments thus produced are observably different: Parque Central is a furnished and enclosed space of trees, paths, and benches, while the Plaza de la Cultura is an open expanse with few places to sit, providing a magnificent open vista leading to a view of the National Theater.

These plazas were also socially constructed through contested patterns of use and attributed symbolic meanings. The social uses of the plazas, which at first glance appear similar, are fundamentally different in the age, sex, ethnicity and interests of the users. The degree and form of social contestation and conflict between the regular users and the agents of the municipal government—the police, the planning agency, and the directors of surrounding institutions—also vary, most visibly in terms of the kind of spatial control that is maintained. Even the experience of "being-in-the-plaza" (Richardson 1982) is distinct and voiced in different ways in the two spaces.

The differences in the plazas' material production and experiential construction have created very different urban spaces that are distinct in physical design as well as use, and that are controlled, experienced, and thought about differently by both users and nonusers. These distinctions provide a vehicle to contrast the ways in which urban space is socially produced, both materially and metaphorically, and socially constructed, through experience and social interaction.

Parque Central

The plan and urban design of Parque Central was part of the establishment of the Spanish American colonial empire, which repeatedly created a type of urban space that has continued to be "produced despite the vicissitudes of imperialism, independence and industrialization" (Lefebvre 1991, 151). Its history is a perfect illustration of the production of space in Spanish American towns based on the 1573 *Orders for Discovery and Settlement,* as characterized by Lefebvre:

> The very building of towns thus embodied a plan which would determine the mode of occupation of the territory and define

> how it was to be reorganized under the administrative and political authority of urban power. . . . The result is a strictly hierarchical organization of space, a gradual progression outward from the town's centre . . . from the inevitable Plaza Mayor a grid extends indefinitely in every direction. Each square or rectangular lot has its function assigned to it, while inversely each function is assigned its own place at a greater or lesser distance from the central square: church, administrative buildings, town gates, squares, streets . . . and so on. (1991, 151)

Lefebvre characterizes the building of Spanish American towns such as San José as the "production of a social space by political power—that is, by violence in the service of economic goals" (1991, 151–152). While I agree with his theoretical analysis, the details of the origins of the plaza-centered grid-plan town deserve further examination.

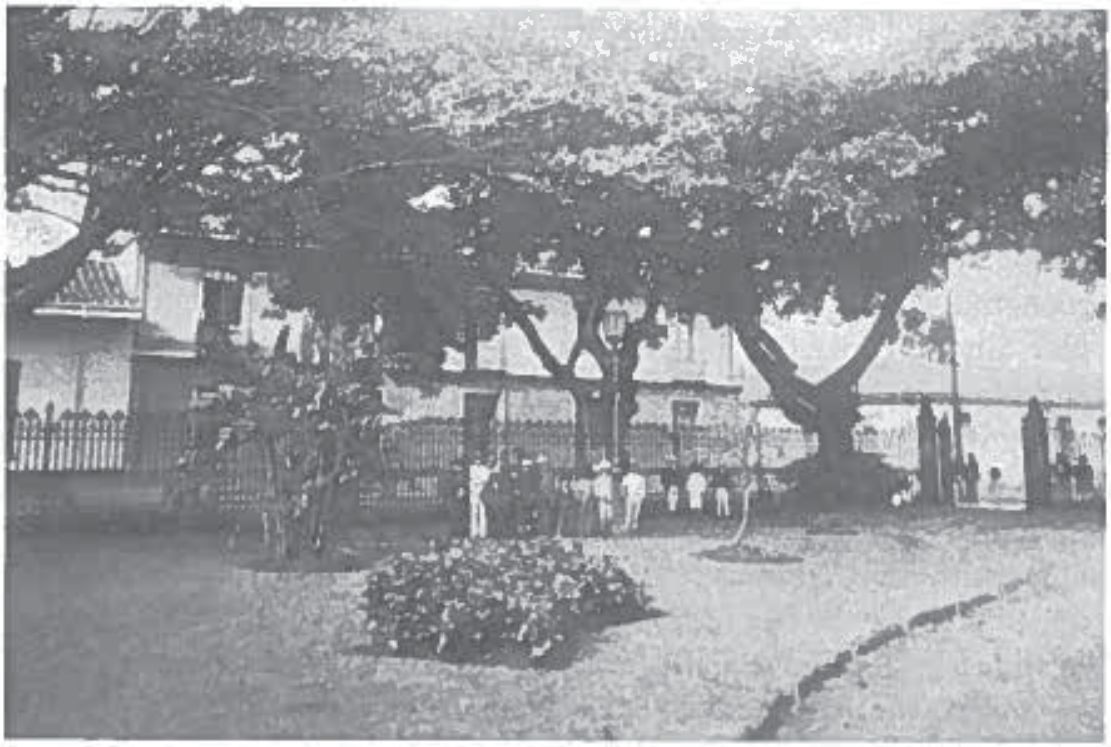
I argue in Chapter 5 that the Spanish American plaza and grid-plan town are syncretic spatial forms derived from European architectural traditions of medieval *bastides,* and the Mesoamerican plaza-temple complexes and urban plans of the cities encountered during the conquest of the New World. Many of the earliest Spanish American plazas were in fact superposed on the ruins of their Aztec or Maya antecedents. The European and Mesoamerican plaza designs had similar aims: both were produced to display military conquest and market domination by the conquering rulers, whether those rulers were Aztec, Maya, or Spanish. Therefore, although the Spanish American plaza is a product of colonial control that was consciously produced as a means of spatial domination, its form also derived from indigenous forms of political and economic control expressed in the Mesoamerican plaza-temple complex. Since the spatial relations of plaza to buildings, hierarchy of spaces, and functions of the plaza remained the same from the Mesoamerican to the Spanish American plaza, the symbolic meanings of the spatialized material culture reflect aspects of both cultural histories.

Parque Central retained its colonial form and meaning until the mid–nineteenth century, when it was redesigned to become the civic center of San José. By the late nineteenth century it became the social center for elite families who met after attending mass at the Catholic cathedral on Sunday mornings and Friday afternoons. It is from this late-nineteenth-century period that there is textual and photographic evidence of class-based social constructions of the appropriate use (and appropri-

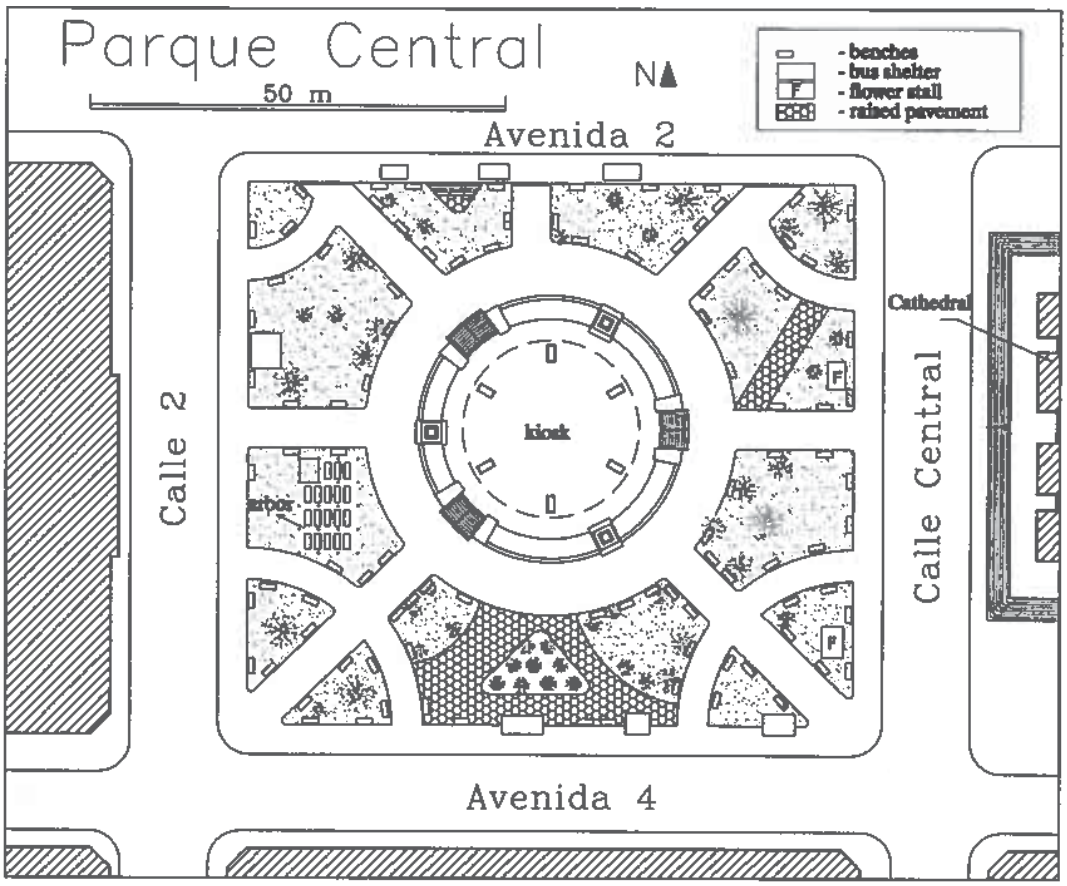
ated use) of public space. The accumulated wealth of coffee growers and a republican government made up of landed elite began to impose a class-based conception of public space and spatial representation.

Historical texts, retrospective interviews, and diaries from this period describe Parque Central as a place where the elite would gather and stroll in the evening; at night it was locked and patrolled (Fernández Guardia 1985). However, this elite image is contested in other sources. For instance, photographs from 1870 show workers in open shirts and barefoot boys resting in the plaza (see Photograph 38), and a well-known 1915 portrait of middle-class men with their children sitting on the ledge of the fountain captures a barefoot boy standing on the side of the scene (Banco Nacional de Costa Rica 1972). Photographs from 1917 of street scenes along the fenced edge of the plaza include barefoot campesinos as well as well-dressed urban businessmen (Banco Nacional de Costa Rica 1972); and novels of the period describe street children and poor people living in or along the edges of plaza (Trullás y Aulet 1913).

This conflict between the images of Parque Central as an elite strolling park or a socially heterogeneous public gathering place has contin-



38. Historic photograph of workers in Parque Central, 1870



1. Plan of Parque Central

ued, manifesting itself most recently in the ongoing resistance to the replacement of the original 1890 kiosk. In 1944, a giant cement kiosk, which housed first a disco nightclub and then a children's library, was donated by Anastazio Somoza. By now, daily users have incorporated the cement kiosk into their spatial pattern of activities. It makes a convenient stage and a place to continue business on a rainy day. Children play on its ledges, and it is large enough to hold the orchestra and audience for the weekly Sunday concert (see Map 1).

However, as recently as the spring of 1992 there was a movement by a group of citizens to tear down this cement structure and reconstruct the original Victorian one; the conflict was so controversial that it provoked a series of well-attended town meetings. The cement kiosk and its current uses do not fit many Josefinos' idea of the appropriate architecture for the ceremonial and civic center of the city. Yet the citizens who are attempting to reconstitute Parque Central in its elite turn-of-the-century image are not the daily users or the municipal designers, but are professional and middle-class Josefinos who yearn for an ideal-

Middle-class businessmen and nonusers, however, have generated political pressure to increase the number of police in order to remove "undesirables." Concerned about the increase in crime and vagrancy, which they associate with the ongoing economic crisis, these citizens perceive the resulting rise in the number of people working in the plaza and of homeless people who hang out there, as well as their associated activities, as reflections of their fears. The state therefore is attempting to constrain these uses in several ways. The police maintain open surveillance from the top of the cement kiosk, thus repeating and reiterating Parque Central's colonial history as a public space originally produced as a spatial representation of state domination and social control (see Photograph 39). In addition, there are plainclothes policemen looking for drug dealing and the selling of stolen goods. A young couple moving through the plaza who stopped by to ask what I was doing turned out to be plainclothes police. There are also municipal agents, representing a different kind of state control, who require vendors to pay for the right to sell on city streets and in the plazas. If vendors do not have the money to pay for a license—a frequent occurrence—they forfeit their proceeds for the day.

Many of the older men in the park are Costa Rican pensioners who come to spend the day on their regular benches with a group of cronies.

39. Police surveillance in Parque Central

One pensioner, Don Carlos, says that he is eighty-six years old. He comes to the plaza every day about ten in the morning, after having his coffee, bread, and cheese—"something to nourish one"—at home. He sits with his friends on the southwest corner until the afternoon, and then returns home to eat a late meal. When he was younger, he was employed by the civil police and at one time had worked as a guard in the plaza. He opened the gates at six in the morning and closed them at ten at night. When I asked how the plaza had changed, he replied: "The plaza was more strict before; they locked the gates at night. People of all kinds can come here now, but not before. It was a very polite place then, and not everyone was allowed in." So, access to the plaza is apparently controlled less openly and more subversively than it used to be.

Another example of symbolic contestation in Parque Central lies in the number of evangelical healers and preachers who hold prayer meetings in the shady arbor and healing services on the northwest corner. These evangelical healers and preachers are the result of the influx of North American missionaries who have come to San José to convert Catholic Costa Ricans to various Christian sects. Protestant practitioners and their adherents can be interpreted as symbolically contesting the religious hegemony of the Catholic cathedral that flanks the eastern side of the plaza. Although the original Parque Central was designed as the "front garden" of the Catholic church (Richardson 1978), the diversity of religious beliefs and practices has now reconstituted the space as one of broadly defined religious heterodoxy. The presence of various religious sects, from Hare Krishna followers to born-again Christians, in front of the city's major Catholic institution challenges the professed state Catholicism of the plaza's spatial symbolism.

The experience of the plaza users who say that they enjoy the spectacle of the healing ceremonies—to which successful cures draw large crowds of believers—also contests the hegemony of state Catholicism. One of the more successful healers—a man called the "Christian" who dresses in a robe of rough sackcloth tied with animal skins—appears about noon each day on the northwest corner of the plaza. A crowd of passersby quickly gathers around the raised plant bed where he stands. As the circle forms, he calls out: "Who wants to receive Christ and be healed?" (Photograph 40).

There is no unified experience of being in Parque Central, but fragments of its social production are reproduced in the everyday practices

40. Christian healer in Parque Central

and feelings of its users. Many of the older men express considerable affection for and attachment to the plaza; often the sense of being comfortable is based on memories of being in the park at an earlier time or in different circumstances. One elderly man expressed his feelings when he began to cry upon seeing a giant palm cut down and reminisced about how it felt to sit in the shade of that tree.

Women, however, often express a sense of unease and are rarely found sitting for very long, especially during the week. A woman who sat down next to me gave me her explanation when I asked her if she came there often. She replied: "No, but I am resting because my package is heavy." She said that she lived in an outlying suburb and was on her way home. "I normally only come to the plaza on Sunday," she commented. I asked her why. "Because there are a lot of unemployed men here and women

are usually working, or if they are not working, they are in the house. Sunday is when women come to Parque Central with their children."

Younger adult men are often found working in the plaza. One man was running his real estate business from a bench: "With the high price of rent, the electricity, water, and everything else, it is difficult to stay in business. Here my clients can find me, and I do not have all these other expenses." Other regular plaza workers include the food, candy, flower, lottery ticket, and newspaper vendors; shoeshine men; gamblers; sex workers; and day laborers waiting for pick-up work in the morning. These working users are territorial about their spaces and defend them both from new workers trying to find a workplace and from casual passersby. When asked about their work, they express satisfaction with their working conditions, and in the case of the shoeshine men, intend to hand down their work location to their children or friends.

Other plaza users come to participate in the illicit world of gambling and the trading and selling of stolen goods. One rainy day, while standing on the kiosk, I watched a well-dressed young man sit down, take off his watch, and show it to the man currently running the "shell game." The man gave him some money while taking the watch. They proceeded to play until the young man finally lost the game, handing the money back to the gambler, who now had both the watch and the cash. As the young man walked away I went up to him and asked him what had happened. He said not much, that he had traded his watch for cash to gamble, but had lost everything. He said that he knew that he would be more successful next time (see Photograph 41).

According to some plaza users, more sex workers now work in Parque Central. One afternoon I was working on a map sitting next to a man who asked me what I was doing. After I told him, I asked him who the women were in front of us. He replied: "Prostitutes, young prostitutes. They come every evening. There seem to be more [of them] than ever now out of economic necessity." I also asked him about why there are so few women in the plaza. He replied that there is increasing unemployment and that the unemployed men in the plaza make women uneasy: "It is the government's fault. Have you heard that they want to build 80,000 houses? You could not even do it physically! And the price supports for farmers and manufacturers just do not work."

Even the clowns who work in Parque Central are concerned about the economic conditions of people who use it. In an interview with two clowns, I commented that they had cut their performance short the day

41. Gambling in Parque Central

before. The older clown responded by saying that they do not make much money in Parque Central and do better at the Plaza de la Cultura: "Because the people of the Plaza de la Cultura are of a higher social class, and are richer . . . there are more tourists and foreigners. Here in Parque Central they do not have the resources." An older man who had overheard us walked up and said: "I am a pensioner, and I enjoy the clowns and would like to give money, but I do not have enough to even support myself. That is how we are."

The experience of being in the plaza is sensory as well as social. When I returned to study the plaza during the dry season, I noticed that a group of pensioners had moved from the benches on the southwest corner, where I had always seen them, to the inner ring of benches near the kiosk. Until that point the territories of different groups of people had been quite stable in terms of both location and time of day. When I asked them if I had been mistaken to assume that their preferred bench was on the southwest corner, they told me they had sat on that corner for the past five years, but that the noise and fumes from increased bus traffic had become intolerable. The inner ring had benches where it was quieter and smelled better. I also noticed subtle sensory changes in the environment throughout the day: the bird songs early in the morning

and at sunset, the bells of the cathedral at noon, and the smell of roasting candied peanuts and meats that announced the vendors who catered to the evening movie-theater crowd. These sensory perceptions are part of the cultural landscape that is valued, yet these sensations are also being changed.

Thus, the ethnographic evidence for the transformation of Parque Central into a workplace and a place mainly for pensioners and unemployed men during the weekdays shows how the space is being contested by the conflicts over the nature of social and spatial representation in the urban center. The struggle over the design of the kiosk, the number of police and the kinds of state control, the increasing territoriality of the vendors and shoeshine men, the discomfort of women and children, and the heterodoxy of religious practitioners illustrate how individuals and groups resist and counterresist the consequences of the larger sociopolitical, economic, and historical forces.

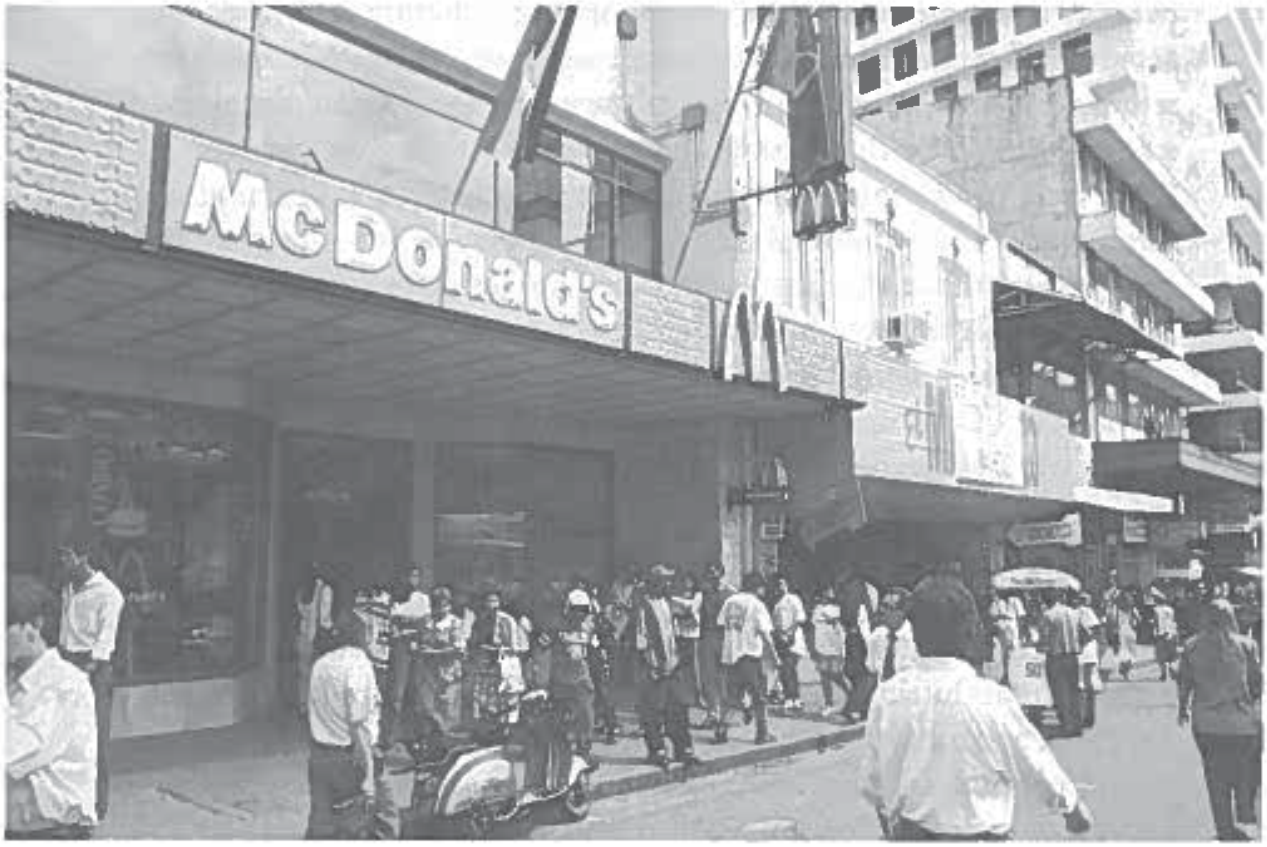
Plaza de la Cultura

The second case study, the newly built Plaza de la Cultura, sheds further light on these processes by allowing us to observe how a new public urban space was created and defined, only to be appropriated by a group of users different from those for whom it was intended.

The Plaza de la Cultura is a modern paved plaza reminiscent of the futurist design of the Pompidou Center in Paris (see Photograph 42). Beneath the plaza are subterranean museums, exposition spaces, and the Costa Rican tourist center, entered from the northern edge by a series of grassy, sloping steps. The plaza is bordered on the south by the National Theater; on the west by the Gran Hotel; and on the north and east by busy shopping streets lined with McDonald's, Burger King, Pizza Hut, Sears, photographic supply stores, bookstores, as well as other local businesses (see Photograph 43). The few trees are in planters lining the western edge alongside the hotel shops, which include a newspaper stand carrying the *Miami Herald,* a clothing store, and a shop that sells the renowned Costa Rican ice cream, Pops.

The building of the Plaza de la Cultura, introduced in Chapter 3, was an inspiration of the Minister of Culture. At one time, Costa Rica's world-famous collection of Precolumbian gold artifacts was stored in the Central Bank of Costa Rica. In 1975 the head of the Central Bank convinced the Legislative Assembly to allocate funds to build a Gold

42. Pompidou Center in Paris, France



43. McDonald's next to Plaza de la Cultura

Museum in order to display the collection as a celebration of indigenous Costa Rican culture. The plan was supported by the "Liberationists," members of the political party in power at the time. The National Liberation Party (Partido Liberación Nacional; PLN) represents a politically liberal coalition of professional, middle-class, and working-class Costa Ricans, in contrast to the Social Christians' Unity Party (Partido Unidad Social de Cristianos), a more conservative party that grew out of earlier political coalitions, including the landed gentry and coffee-growing elite.

The Minister of Planning and the head of the Central Bank selected the land around the National Theater, already partly owned by the Central Bank, as an appropriate site for a cultural center that would accommodate tourists and visitors to the new Gold Museum. Of the thirteen lots needed for the project, three were owned by the Central Bank, two by the National Theater, and the remaining lots were registered to individual citizens or their heirs. According to Edgar Vargas, the architect/planner heading the project, the state purchased the corner lots for 6,500 colones per square meter, and the rest for 5,000 colones per square meter. They tore down the old, turn-of-the-century houses and retained the *balcones* (balconies) for use in the shopping structure known as "the arcades." Then they cleaned up the area and put a fence around it. Some structures would remain: the new plaza would incorporate the already existing *parquecito* (little park) Juan Mora Fernández in front of the Gran Hotel and the shopping structure (Coto 1982). Everything else was demolished, including Librería López (a bookstore), Optica Rivera (an optician's office), Casino Española (a gambling spot), and other small businesses as well as the homes of a few older residents.

This initial design was radically changed and expanded. According to Minister of Culture Guido Sáenz, when he went to the site to survey the progress of the demolition, he saw the National Theater sitting in an open space created by the destruction of the surrounding buildings. In an instant, he said, he realized that it would be a much more powerful plan to have an open public plaza, with the Gold Museum underground, so that there was an unobstructed view of the National Theater. Thus, the architectural plans for the original Gold Museum were scrapped, and a new phase of planning and design began.

The planning, design, and building of the Plaza de la Cultura began in 1976 and was finished with its opening in 1982. Although some of the buildings selected for demolition, such as the turn-of-the-century houses

mentioned above, were deemed of historic significance, the plan moved forward despite local protest. More vigorous protests were expressed in the media, which criticized the government for spending money to put the Gold Museum underground (an expensive and difficult feat of engineering) when a particularly harsh rainy season prevented the project from moving ahead on schedule.

Both the location choice and the design program were produced by a combination of local sociopolitical forces and global, particularly North American, capital. When the plaza was conceived in 1976, global capital was already fueling the Costa Rican economy and the IMF restrictions would soon be in place. Foreign as well as local interests influenced the siting of the plaza—placing it next to the major tourist hotel and the National Theater and in the center of North American businesses such as McDonald's, Burger King, and Sears, where there was the greatest tourist activity. The design, on the other hand, was influenced by the political ideology of the National Liberation Party, which was under the leadership of a new professional class that desired a representation of Costa Rican culture as both modern, drawing upon contemporary European idioms of design, and indigenous, based on the Precolumbian past.

The spatial form and design, however, were ultimately determined by a team of three architects who had won the design competition for the original plan, the above-ground Gold Museum. The architects themselves, although all Costa Rican, represented Costa Rican, European, and North American design training blended to create what they defined as a new Costa Rican design idiom. From my interviews with them, it seems that each had a different vision of the plaza. Further, they produced design features best appreciated from a male point of view (see Map 2).

One architect imagined it to be a plaza where men could watch women walk by, and he designed a vast paved open space, providing the longest sight line in the city for watching women (see Photograph 44). Another architect saw the plaza as a meeting place, symbolically linked to other plazas in the city by a second grid, with pedestrian walkways and trees. He imagined young men leaning on the outside rails of the perimeter piping and put a foot rail just where a man's foot might rest. The third architect was concerned that the new plaza be a significant open space: "Costa Ricans have their gardens and their parks, and they have their special places, but they do not have a center for jugglers, music, political

2. Plan of Plaza de la Cultura

meetings, and large gatherings like in New York." He wanted an open space for public performances: "But we did not want a huge dry space, so we put in trees along the edges."

These different social imaginings and representations of space were integrated to create a rather eclectic space with a modernist style—a design idiom that many Costa Ricans did not like or understand. When the plaza first opened there were spontaneous demonstrations by people who came and tore out the plantings, started fires in the trash cans, and tried to destroy as much of the furnishings as possible. There is even conflict over the meaning of these demonstrations: it is not entirely clear, either from the media reports or from firsthand accounts, who the demonstrators were or what exactly they were protesting, but the media interpreted them as protest against the plaza's stark modernity.

Nonetheless, the plaza appears to be successful in terms of the objectives of the architects: the unusual modern and empty urban space produced by these sociopolitical and economic forces and professional

imaginings has been rapidly appropriated by groups of users. The vast open space is used by street performers, religious singing groups, political speakers, and teenagers break-dancing or playing soccer (to the delight of the third architect). These are all users who did not have a public place before this plaza was constructed, since these activities are not well accommodated by the parklike atmosphere of Parque Central.

In addition, the small plazas created by the designers in front of the National Theater and the Gran Hotel are used by officially licensed vendors with semipermanent stands from which they sell local crafts to tourists. The Gran Hotel generates a seemingly endless stream of tourists who sit on the edges of the plaza watching people from the safety of the hotel's sidewalk café. Women and families bring their children, who run after pigeons and play in the fountain during the afternoon, while in the late evening the plaza becomes a "cruising area" and social meeting place internationally known through guidebooks such as the *Spartacus Guide for Gay Men.*

But, from interviews with key informants and conversations with users and friends, one learns that this tranquillity is disrupted by a number of illicit activities that make people perceive the Plaza de la Cultura as

44. Sight line for women-watching in Plaza de la Cultura

an unsafe and unpleasant place to be. This perception is reinforced in a number of ways: the newspapers regularly run articles reporting frequent mishaps and transgressions and criticizing the municipal government's management. The hotel bouncer remains posted at the edge of the plaza, ready to protect his customers from the sight of beggars or poor people looking for a place to rest. Official uniformed police stand outside the National Theater and refuse entrance to anyone who looks as if they might cause trouble or incite a disturbance, and when a young man ran by and grabbed a gold chain from the neck of a girl, the police were everywhere within seconds. The intensity of social and spatial control appears even greater than in the Parque Central, more visible, more intensely contested, and as yet unresolved.

The experience of being in the Plaza de la Cultura produced by these conflicting forces is characterized by considerable ambivalence. Nonusers uniformly describe the plaza as dangerous, scary, and uncomfortable. The media seem to have influenced many potential users in ways that I find hard to understand, since the bright, sunlit plaza seemed unthreatening to me. Mothers and children do come to this plaza to play with the pigeons or to splash in the low fountain. Many more young men and women, often students, stop by to meet one another or to have lunch or an ice cream cone in the afternoon sun than can be seen in the Parque Central. Tourists seem quite secure and comfortable.

Yet many of my students at the Universidad de Costa Rica were uncomfortable and unwilling to go there, even for a field visit. The one female student who finally did visit was afraid the entire time that a thief was waiting to take her purse. Friends told me that there was drug dealing and that it was a terrible place to be. Most nonusers cited examples of robberies, pickpocketing, or uninvited sexual proposals that someone they knew had experienced there. For people who were not familiar with the Plaza de la Cultura, it was not a place to visit, and certainly not a plaza that represents the positive aspects of Costa Rican culture.

Frequent users also had criticisms of the space, even though they admitted to spending a considerable amount of time there. For instance, an artist who said that he spends too much time in the plaza told me that he thinks it is poorly designed: "It should have had a roof—a roof where artists could work and things could happen. This plaza is useless when the weather is forbidding, and it is usually forbidding. We might as well have had a football stadium here."

Another frequent user—a young man—when asked how he liked the plaza, said that he preferred the Parque Morazán, a small park a few blocks northeast. He said that just young people come to the Plaza de la Cultura and they make a lot of noise and commotion. "Like what?" I asked: "They have radios blaring, shout, and make a scene," he replied. He prefers the other park, where it is quiet.

Another man, who was sitting with his girlfriend, complained: "The plaza should be for cultured things, not for rudeness, drugs, or radios." He went on to recount all the performers who had come to the plaza: "The ball man who bounces a ball with his body. The doll, an old woman, who sells violets. A 'crazy' man who acts like a truck—these are special. But a plaza is for sitting, watching, talking . . . for music, meetings, and groups, but not for the rest of this stuff." He went on to say, "If you have a bar and let the wrong kind of person in, even one, then more will come and it will be too late."

People who work in the Plaza de la Cultura express some of the same ambivalence about working there. While the clowns prefer the crowd because they can collect more money, the vendors complain that they are charged a high fee for putting up a stall in the tourist area. These stalls are carefully regulated by the municipal government and have expanded in numbers over time. During most of the time that I observed the vendors, they sat around, talked, and smoked cigarettes while waiting for the busy Saturday craft market held in front of the National Theater. During my visit in December 1993, however, the plaza was crammed with stalls and vendors, most of whom were illegally selling clothes and souvenirs from other Central American countries. It seems that a Guatemalan vendor, who was fined for selling without a permit, sued the city and is bringing his case to court. He is arguing that the plaza should be a "free market" with no charge for selling in this "democratic" country. So even the vendors are resisting the control of the city to regulate their means of making a living. The Plaza de la Cultura also has a few child workers—young shoeshine boys in front of the Gran Hotel and children who sell gum and candy—who are illegal under Costa Rican law. These young boys—about seven to nine years old—are not found working in Parque Central.

However, there are those who are happy with the plaza, often for very specific reasons. For example, two North American men whom I interviewed in the café next to the plaza said that they like the plaza for one simple reason: it has the best girl-watching view anywhere in San

José. One offered this observation: "You can watch them all the way across the plaza on the left to the end of the hotel plaza. It is a long walk—and the girls are the best here, mostly upper and upper middle class . . . I mean the best for watching. I prefer the lower-class and country girls. They are friendlier, warmer, and it comes from the heart—not stuck-up like the upper-class girls." The two men talked on, complaining that the benches in the Plaza de la Cultura were not comfortable and that there were no good places to sit, but saying that they meet there every day as part of their daily routine. Another retired North American commented that although the plaza pipe benches were uncomfortable, he liked how friendly the young girls were, and he knew he would find young people there. The Plaza de la Cultura is also near the McDonald's, which is another teenage hangout: "Imagine a middle-aged guy like me hanging out in a McDonald's in Kansas City to meet girls. I would be arrested."

Probably the happiest group are the teenagers who hang out in the evenings along the pipe railing. One young man said he found the spaciousness appealing. "Here," he said, "we feel at home." When I asked two young men what they were doing in the plaza, they replied: "Passing the time, shooting the breeze. What do young people do in the U.S.?" Before the creation of this plaza, the teenagers were not a visible part of any park or plaza. You could see them walking down the streets or in couples kissing or quietly talking in Parque España or Parque Morazán. But now they have their own space, designed in a way to create a stage for their nightly performances. And they have successfully appropriated this public space for their activities in the evenings. But, as in Parque Central, the visible presence of the Gran Hotel bouncer and the Guardia Civil (civil police), who question the youths and in some cases stop or detain them, contests their symbolic dominance.

Compared to Parque Central, this recently designed urban space represents and accommodates more modern spatial practices based on youth, foreign capital, tourism, and an ideology of liberal modernism—framed by the localized discourse about the safety and comfort of the plaza. The Plaza de la Cultura is more about the "consumption of culture" than the working landscape of Parque Central. Most important, the forces that produced this new plaza are reflected in its design and social use as well as in the ambivalence about being there. The teenagers and tourists are comfortable, while other Costa Ricans either fear the plaza

or wish that it was quieter, calmer, more shaded and sedate.

But in both cases, Parque Central and the Plaza de la Cultura, there is a relationship between what is experienced and socially constructed by the users, and the circumstances that socially produced the space and its current physical form and design. For example, the North American tourists and pensioners gravitate to and feel comfortable in the open plaza that was designed as a Costa Rican advertisement for foreigners, and teenagers identifying with North American rap culture make it their hangout. On the other hand, both tourists and "cool" teenagers avoid the shady Parque Central that in 1992 still retained the parklike design created by the 1890 Costa Rican elite, who reflected an earlier version of Costa Rican culture. The architectural design and furnishings of these plazas are subject to interpretation and manipulation by the users in such a way that the designs and material conditions of these two worlds become cultural representations to the users themselves. Thus, the contestation of the design, furnishings, use, and atmosphere of a plaza becomes a visible public forum for the expression of ongoing cultural conflict and social change. The increasing social differentiation and distance between classes, the widening values gap between age groups, and the changing definitions of gender roles are all captured in the discussions and disagreements over plaza behavior and use. These social changes are investigated further as microgeographies of culture, class, age, and gender in Chapter 7.

Conclusion

In these two examples of Costa Rican plazas, I illustrate how an anthropological approach to the study of urban space would work ethnographically. I have focused on the historical emergence, sociopolitical and economic development, patterns of social use, and experiential meanings of plaza life and design as a means of empirically working out the implications of the broader perspectives of social production of space and social construction of space. The ethnographic illustrations highlight sociopolitical forces, spatial practices, symbolic meanings, and efforts at social control that provide insight into the conflicts that arise as different groups attempt to claim and define these urban spaces. Further, these processes elucidate how the forces and limits of the social production of space and social construction of space are engaged and contested in public space.

To summarize how these complementary perspectives work analytically, I return to the example of the recent conflict over the design and style of the kiosk in Parque Central. As I mentioned, from 1990 through 1992 the city held a series of town meetings to discuss replacing the 1944 modernist cement kiosk with a replica of the previous Victorian wooden one. Many Josefinos argued that the Victorian kiosk was a better representation of Costa Rican cultural values because it evoked a nostalgic image of bourgeois decorum and *cultura* (culture; see Low 1997b; Richardson 1982, and Chapter 7 of this work). Others, however, argued that the 1944 cement kiosk was part of the city's patrimony and should not be torn down, but instead preserved and improved.

Ultimately the forces for historic preservation won, and the cement kiosk has been restored as the central design element in a redesigned plaza that opened in 1994. This vignette illustrates several key points: (1) the cultural importance of the design of the kiosk, as shown by the fact that citizens staged demonstrations and the government responded with a series of open town meetings; (2) how these two images of a kiosk were materially produced in different historical and political periods and retained symbolic meanings from the periods of their material production; (3) how these spatial representations have taken on new social meanings in the recent struggle between modernization and historic preservation forces in San José; and (4) how this conflict highlights the importance of spatializing culture and human experience as a strategy for understanding people's negotiation of cultural values and representations of those values. Thus, the conflict about and local resistance to change in plaza design tells us about the social divisions and cultural disjunctures in Costa Rican society, and illustrates how the politics of public space attempts to manage these divisions and disruptions and their symbolic expression.

Another important aspect of this sociospatial analysis is the highlighting of the "visible" and "invisible" in public space. Many of the illegal activities that occurred in Parque Central—the prostitution, the drug dealing, and the gambling—were apparently tolerated within the confines of this plaza. The dense foliage and tree cover provided places for clandestine activities that were in some sense "invisible" to the cultural gaze. But with the development of the Plaza de la Cultura as the new ceremonial and cultural center, these same activities were "exposed" by the modern landscape architecture, open design, and increased so-

cial scrutiny. The increased visibility of these activities creates an atmosphere characterized by ambivalence, fear, and increasing social sanctions. When faced with the invisible made visible in public space, the state reacts with increased social controls, and if this strategy does not work, it abandons the public space, building a new one where "culture" can be represented in a more pristine form. This effort at social control through design is explored further in Chapter 8.

These insights leave me with a number of questions. Will the public spaces in San José become like those in New York City, with police and guard dogs to keep out homeless persons and drug dealers or designed with benches that do not allow sleeping and ledges with spikes so that you can not sit? Will the plazas of San José become emblematic of social conflict over the presence of disenfranchised people like People's Park in Berkeley, California (Mitchell 1995), or Tompkins Square in New York City (N. Smith 1996)? Or will the public spaces of San José become centers of so much conflict that they become uncomfortable places to be even in a participatory democracy?