Spain and Its Sun
Urban Ideas, Microhistorical Methods

Petra Ellerby
Western Washington University
The early modern Iberian city was both a physical, palpable place—a location where people lived, worked, traveled, governed—and a construct of thought, a compound product comprised by matter and imagination. Like all complex cultural touchstones, Spanish cities and their ideological representations functioned in concert as well as competition, acting upon each other through continuous cycles of mutual influence. Both halves of this urban equation were integral and impactful; both were unique, if not entirely discrete; and both can be most effectively understood with the aid of an investigative approach that reflects their overlapping organization.

It is the aim of this paper to provide a précis of sorts, an overview of the city and its cultural images. Any holistic attempt to chart these multifaceted systems must employ the aid of diverse sources and varied approaches, and the following sections will (to this end) be arranged around an exploration of evidence both primary and secondary. First addressed are the 'structures' of cities, the tangible sites of everyday existence; next in line is a discourse on the role of ideas and ideology, an investigation into the paths by which cities—both real and imagined—became a symbol, tool, and even weapon of Iberian identity. Each of these analyses are interspersed with perspectives and methods drawn from relevant studies, and the paper's larger layout—one which combines contemporaneous depictions with contemporary analyses and matches physical objects with their mental models—aspire towards a symmetrical treatment that mirrors its subject. It is in the essay's third and final section that this method and its merits are most clearly outlined, interrogated, and understood.1

1. Place2

Christopher Friedrichs' seminal 1995 volume on sixteenth-century cities opens with the grand assertion that a town's walls its essence make. "To understand the early modern [metropolis]," Friedrichs writes, we must begin "by looking at its physical form," by noting and observing its "spires, [...] steeples, towers and rooftops."3 From this vantage, it is a city's "rows," "buildings," "houses," "churches," and "squares" which are of initial interest; here, an "urban topography" of tangible objects provides the primary key to meaningful inquiry.4

Friedrichs' approach is not without significant merit, and his exegetical emphasis on streets and squares is not a modern invention. Indeed, this 'urbs'-oriented understanding has significant historical validity.5 In On the Causes of the Greatness and Magnificence of Cities (1588),6 the Italian humanist Giovanni Botero claimed that European cities' "straight streets," "fine buildings," and "wondrous walls" were a principal

---

1 This compositional strategy is deeply indebted to Richard L. Kagan and Marias Fernando (see esp. Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793 [New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000]).
2 The following two section titles are again drawn from Kagan's Urban Images. 'Space', within this framework, is the social-conceptual counterpart to physical 'place'. See esp. Kagan, Urban Images, 17.
3 Christopher R. Friedrichs, The Early Modern City, 1450-1750 (London: Longman, 1995), 15, 3. (Henceforth 'TEMC'.)
4 Friedrichs, TEMC, 4, 5, 29.
5 Yet more thanks are due to Richard Kagan, Urban Images of the Hispanic World, 1493-1793 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2000), 9, for this handy definition; see below for more on the interplay between a physical/political and urbs/civitas divide.
6 Henceforth 'On the Causes' or 'OTC'.
part of their glory. As Botero argued, citizens flocked to "the city of Thespiae for its excellent statue[es], Samos for [...] its temple, Alexandria for Pharos, Memphis for the pyramids, [and] Rhodes for the Colossus." Venice's success is attributed to its "miraculous site [...] the height of its towers, the richness of its churches, the splendour of its palaces," and On the Causes ties the prosperity of all hypothetical settlements to the convenience of their locations, the fertility of their soils, and their proximity to rivers and other useful waterways.

Within Botero's cultural-cognitive framework, physical facts are the primary stuff of metropolitan self-definition. As TEMC claims and OTC corroborates, urban contexts were understood to be important thanks to their status as ideal material settings where humans, who are "by nature [...] desirous to share [their] goods," could engage in commerce and conversation. At their core, then, early modern cities functioned as optimized 'containers' that allowed for congregation, comingling, "manufacturing, crafts, and trade." Human activity was (of course) a required ingredient, but Friediffs' 'urban topography' served as the principal enabling factor which provided both a means and an impetus for these fundamentally physical activities. Cities were the locus of economic exchange thanks to convenience, the convergence of peoples, and the role of density in enabling trade. According to this materialist perspective, it was an array of tactile traits that drew Spaniards towards their regional cores.

Early modern ideas about physicality and politics also tied township structures with the nature of power. Cities served as concrete units of social organization due largely to their geopolitical position, their spatial organization, and their regional (and often trade-related) prerogatives. As James Casey argues in his 1999 survey of Early Modern Spain, these grab-bags of influence were "[m]arked out by walls and privileges, by charters of liberty and separate citizenship rights," standing—thanks to their borders, both physical and political—as "bastion[s] of freedom in a still feudal countryside." Within solid walls, with the aid of topographically-enabled commerce, cities were able to "maintain [internal] traditions of political hegemony" and "were regarded by rulers as integral parts of the hierarchy of power." Hard-won slivers of self-government became closely associated with physical prowess, and the tactical defensibility of well-planned cities made them "the [necessary] partners of the monarchy, [...] the nucleus of the resettlement of the Moorish frontier and, in the civil wars of the fifteenth century, a bulwark against a plundering baronage."

It is in this sense that urban enclaves and their actual bounds became an essential...
ingredient in governmental affairs, and an entity seen as such by residents and rulers alike. From a perspective informed by five hundred years of hindsight, this metropolitan fact—and the processes it enabled—can be understood as a catalyst for societal change, a stepping-stone in the road towards modernity. Shifts in patterns of urban life, residency, demography, and sociopolitical power certainly contributed to a changing cultural landscape, and it is difficult to deny the role of material considerations in this set of important developments.

A city's streets were not, however, the measure of its meaning. Contemporaneous paradigms of societal perception were not limited to the literal, and modern scholarship has moved to incorporate this understanding. The allure of the urban setting certainly involved cold hard facts about population density and the structure of city squares, but these spatial features were deeply intertwined with dreams and depictions of cultural power. Botero's discourse did draw to a great degree upon the physical convenience of cities, the centrality of their structures in the comings and goings of human commerce, but cities were not merely places that enabled economic activity. For Botero himself, they were also—and equally importantly—"the stage on which justice, strength, liberality, magnificence, and other virtues [...] show forth in the greatest glory." Our philosopher may have been indulging an especially civitas-focused impulse when he wrote that a city "does not consist in the extent of its site or the circumference of its walls [and is instead comprised by] the number of its inhabitants and their strength," but this partisan definition does point toward a critical consideration. People moved to cities and cities acted upon (and responded to) people thanks to a set of ideas about what a city was, and meant, and could—or

16 Casey, Patricians and Paupers, 131. See Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook, The Plague Files: Crisis Management in Sixteenth-Century Seville (Baton Rouge, LA: Louisiana State University Press, 2009), for an intimate portrait of Seville's place as both a fundamental and functional unit of political structure.


18 The directional tendency of the above points itself indicates that there was more to a metropole's impact than its physical reality, its ability to provide convenient berth for traders and travelers.

19 Botero, OTC, 3.

20 See note 24 for this term and its origin.

21 Botero, OTC, 9. Patrouch's point about modernization (see note 17) indicates that a city's mental representation is the aspect of its identity which matters most in a sociocultural sense, and OTC's argument operates along similar lines.
perhaps should—be.\textsuperscript{22} As Friedrichs knew, "even a short walk down [a city] street [must teach] us something about the social fabric" of its material reality.\textsuperscript{23}

2. Space

Richard Kagan writes in the preface to his turn-of-the-century study on \textit{Urban Images} that "notion[s] of city [which] accorded precedence to people, not bricks" were "echoed in most sixteenth- and seventeenth-century histories of Spanish cities," while the idea of a city "as [a] physical entity" existed—cf. Botero—"only in competition with the idea of the city as civitas," or community.\textsuperscript{24} Topographical emphases (\textit{urbs}-oriented lenses) can account for only half of the means by which urban spaces were understood in early modern Iberia, and overly narrow or "particularistic portrait[s]" of this compound world elide a whole universe of salience.\textsuperscript{25} In both 1530 and 2023, "attempt[s] to describe the city [merely] as an architectural entity" cede their place to definitions that present urban locales as "gathering[s] of meanings."\textsuperscript{26} Spanish cities can best be described as "sacred spaces," as Casey contends, and "[t]he walls of a town" remain relevant primarily insofar as they "st[and] as a material symbol of its identity."\textsuperscript{27}

Cities, then, were considered critical not only by virtue of those impacts which early modern Iberians associated with location or layout, and were indeed elevated to a dominant position as a result of human imagination.\textsuperscript{28} The collections of people contained within a city's streets were not forgotten, and the sum of their perceptions and understandings—their 'mental maps,' as it were—accounted for a large share of the identifying material that made a city fully itself at any given historical moment.\textsuperscript{29}

It is clear that these mental representations were constructed primarily on a shared, and often civilizational, scale. Indeed, the city as a sociopolitical unit was understood to be of central corporate

\textsuperscript{22} Pilgrims did flock to Memphis for its pyramids and Rhodes for its Colossus, but the draw of these sites had as much—or more—to do with their cultural significance as it did with their physical presence (Botero, \textit{OTC}, 14). Cf. Casey's description of the city as a "bastion of freedom" (note 13; \textit{Patricians and Paupers} p. 111), a mental designation that was similarly tied with cultural symbolism and physical reality. See also Casey, \textit{Patricians and Paupers}, 121-2, regarding the question of why those who had been "driven out of their own lands" by the transition from agricultural feudalism to enclosed pastureland sought refuge in cities that were more 'imagined refuges' than actual "sources of employment." This gap between factual, physical reality (re: job numbers and food availability) and projected sanctuary necessitated the involved, "heroic work" of charitable brotherhoods and strategic safety nets (Casey, \textit{Patricians}, 122; see also 123-8). Cf. Juan Luis Vives, \textit{On Assistance to the Poor}, trans. Alice Tobriner (Toronto, ON: University of Toronto Press, 1999).

The eighth chapter of Mary Elizabeth Perry's \textit{Gender and Disorder in Early Modern Seville} (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1999) provides another important window into these demographic effects and the social response they eventually engendered.

\textsuperscript{23} Friedrichs, \textit{TEMC}, 5 (emphasis mine). See also p. 23: The importance of walls was "as much psychological as practical..."


\textsuperscript{27} Casey, \textit{Patricians and Paupers}, 112, 113. Emphasis mine.

\textsuperscript{28} . . . eventually becoming one of the most prevalent sociopolitical paradigms or discourses within an early modern intellectual environment.

\textsuperscript{29} Considerations involving the centrality of cultural ideology cannot be ignored, because the one—the rise of cities, the development of urban ideas—could not have occurred without the other.
importance in the composition of Spanish national identity. For Botero, cities were the site of civic virtue, an ideal arena both for self-definition and self-realization; Casey's comment on the relationship between national and municipal power (see note 14 above) implies that peninsular political ideologies found their ultimate expression in the interplay between Crown and city.\textsuperscript{30} (Towns themselves proved to be excellent loci for political theater.)\textsuperscript{31} Even when the delicate dance between monarch and municipality became unbalanced, dissent was formulated through an urban lens, and the ultimate result of the "great wave of revolts of 1519-22 was to reinforce [extant] social hierarchy in Spain,"\textsuperscript{32} "[F]or some time [...] the commonwealth [had been] being redefined as a national rather than a local forum," and the "loss of financial autonomy by [...] town councils as the monarchy sought to keep a closer watch on the budget" proved threatening (to cities) indeed.\textsuperscript{33} Nevertheless, the rallying cry of 1519's comuneros illustrated a desire to return to an earlier, yet still urban, status quo. Discomfited citizens appealed to their royal sovereign not for a revolutionary end but a metropolitan renaissance, seeking instead the restoration of quintessentially Hispanic city government.\textsuperscript{34}

As Kagan chronicles, the notion of city as civilizational self also extended beyond Spain's domestic sphere, reaching past the borders of peninsular Iberia and insinuating itself into an ever-expanding colonial landscape. Ideas about cities and civility scaffolded Spanish identity from an internal perspective, but this exercise in collective definition was also accompanied by an external implication. If cities conferred the stuff of civilization, what might their lack convey?

Botero, for one, wrote that those who "live dispersed" tend toward "savage mentalit[j]es and rude customs" best remedied by means of urbanization. As he argued, it was through this logic that "the [Iberians] and the Jesuit Fathers use[d] every means to gather [Indigenous populations] together in the most suitable places, where, following a civilized manner of life, they bec[a]me more easily instructed."\textsuperscript{35} From \textit{OTC}'s vantage, the city can be seen—and indeed \textit{was} seen—both as the locus of civilized and of civilizing life.\textsuperscript{36}

It is no coincidence that this ideological framework was employed for expansionist ends. A Spanish sense of imperial self, buoyed by continental urban culture, became a powerful means of legitimization at home and of conquest abroad. As Stuart Schwartz writes in his illuminating contribution to \textit{The Oxford

\textsuperscript{30} Botero, \textit{OTC}, 3.
\textsuperscript{32} Casey, \textit{Patricians and Paupers}, 134.
\textsuperscript{33} Casey, \textit{Patricians and Paupers}, 136-7.
\textsuperscript{34} “Long live the king,” they cried. “Long live the king and down with bad government!” (Casey, \textit{Patricians and Paupers}, 129-35. See esp. p. 131.).
\textsuperscript{35} Botero, \textit{OTC}, 10.
\textsuperscript{36} Kagan, \textit{Urban Images}, 26. This notion is an old one, an idea deeply rooted in Hispanic history, which "emerged during the course of the medieval Reconquest of Muslim Spain and later had special significance for Spaniards engaged in the conquest and settlement of the Americas." The "crusading memory" seems (in Casey's eyes) to "have played a decisive role in the sense of identity of many Spanish towns," and Botero's treatise again confirms that this continental tendency did not remain confined within its original geographic bounds (Casey, \textit{Patricians and Paupers}, 112). According to \textit{OTC}'s second chapter, the 'Visigothic' Spaniards employed city-life as a defense against invading "Moors," a strategy which is (within Botero's discourse) also justified and dignified via recourse to Roman precedent/antiquity (Botero, \textit{OTC}, 11). The Italian's account is interspersed with endless examples both ancient and contemporary; for \textit{OTC}'s thoughts "On Removing People from Their Own Countries to Our City" as an imperial strategy—a strategy justified via Roman precedent—see pp. 13-4.
3. Study

This paper's progression from the tangible to the theoretical illuminates a process of continuous construction, a stepping, leapfrogging, and building off (or upon) each successive consideration. Cities and their mental reflections functioned as a lens through which societal self-perception could occur, an intellectual framework and sociopolitical lexicon that encompassed all options for action. In Iberia proper, metropoles dotted the physical landscape and dominated political discourse; in the Americas, their image and actuality were employed in as a foundational tool in the effort to construct a New Spain.
These intermingled means, motives, and ends were inextricable within their original context, inextricable in contemporaneous accounts, and any good faith attempt to follow the contours of such a complex constellation must necessarily lead to some corresponding measure of methodological cross-pollination.

The sources and studies employed in the present essay represent a wide range of perspectives and approaches, all of which are necessary—and some of which are, to some extent, contradictory. Friedrichs' emphasis on immersive, experiential scholarship\textsuperscript{43} clashes with a common developmental model outlined by Joseph Patrouch,\textsuperscript{44} although the lackluster determinism demonstrated by J.-P. Rubiés' Worlds of Europeans, Africans, and Americans, C. 1492 belies the more graceful shape that theoretical approaches are able to assume—cf. Kagan, for one, whose deft bridging of image and actuality unearths enormous insights while remaining laser-focused on a very specific set of historical sources.\textsuperscript{45}

Kagan's doubled presentation of urbs (physicality) and civitas (community) is most representative of this essay's structural approach,\textsuperscript{46} although Friedrichs' focus on matter as mind acts, in its own modest way, as an implicit bridge between Urban Images' two subjects.\textsuperscript{47} Casey's treatment is somewhat more traditional and relies on a chronological framework to outline its argument about the shifting relationship between city and Crown;\textsuperscript{48} Schwartz is similarly straightforward, adding an additional element of compositional sanity into this heady (and often abstract) mix.\textsuperscript{49} The primary-source immediacy of Friedrichs' writings\textsuperscript{50} meshes well with Casey's event-based outline, and both function as critical prerequisites for any good understanding of the background and basis behind Kagan's larger scaffold. An alliance of physical situatedness and "collective experience" cannot stand without roots of some sort,\textsuperscript{51} and Kagan's, Casey's, Friedrichs', as well as Schwartz' works endow each perspective with necessary contextual heft.\textsuperscript{52} As is apparent in the manner that these studies have been employed above, the more (to speak frankly) the merrier. Complete accounts must encompass both urbs and civitas, matter and mind, Friedrichs' rejection of overdetermined developmentalism and Schwartz's/Casey's embrace of cities as changemakers.\textsuperscript{53}

\textsuperscript{43} See Cook and Cook, The Plague Files, for a related approach.

\textsuperscript{44} Cf. pp. 8-9 for Friedrichs' rejections of "highly misleading" teleological tendencies.

\textsuperscript{45} I.e., the volume's titular urban images. Indeed, Kagan's work is a textbook example of a successful attempt to address, consider, and encompass physical as well as ideological/intellectual/identity-oriented considerations. See page 17 for a superlative summing-up of related concepts.

\textsuperscript{46} Defining a city as "a gathering of meanings" certainly helps to span the spectrum from physical to conceptual... (Kagan, Urban Images, 17).

\textsuperscript{47} See note 23.

\textsuperscript{48} But is, nevertheless, an excellent and indispensable source. Cf. Patricians and Paupers' interaction with/inclusion of political-historical background info (to pick but one example, pp. 118 provides a very detailed outline of elite entrenchment in mid sixteenth-century municipal governments).

\textsuperscript{49} Schwartz's very reasonable outline proposes to "view the early creation of Iberia as a joint process and a dialog," emphasizing a (eminently comprehensible) common set of ideas and beliefs (Iberian Atlantic 147).

\textsuperscript{50} Once again, cf. Alexandra Parma Cook and Noble David Cook, The Plague Files, which is very intentional in its archival focus. "We have chosen in this narrative to let the protagonists' voices be heard as much as possible," they write; it is through this technique that the Cooks' "microhistory" comes alive (Cook & Cook, The Plague Files, 12). "Our hope is that by staying close to the words of the protagonists [...], today's readers can enter, if only briefly, into their world"... (13).

\textsuperscript{51} Friedrichs, TEMC, 7.


\textsuperscript{53} Friedrichs, TEMC, 8, 9; see Casey, Patricians and Paupers, 117-137 for a well-crafted chronology of the development (and devolution) of early modern city government.
rich synthesis disallows misleading overinvestments in "grand narratives" and granular details alike, acting as a guardrail against explanatory hubris.54

But, fundamentally, the ideal analysis is a compound analysis because the same is true of its chosen focus. This process of mutual illumination, an interaction which mirrors that of the city and its twinned forms, most fully illustrates the importance of including diverse and even divergent understandings.55 Considering both Kagan and Casey is an especially productive act not only in that it prevents methodological isolationism but also because it reflects the nature and complexity of each scholar's shared subject. Of course, this paper's particular prerogative is tilted towards an emphasis on intellectual history, and it is in that ideological realm that a comprehensive perch proves most critical.56 But multimodal approaches to compound concepts can also enrich social, political, or even military-historical perspectives, and the impracticability of addressing every angle in every article can be redressed by means of acknowledgment and interaction.

As Botero wrote in the preface to his now-familiar treatise, cities are "like little worlds constructed by man within the great world created by God, and just as the contemplation of Nature leads to recognition of the greatness of God, in the same way the study of cities affords a special sign of man's excellence."57 Botero's grandiose analogy, in which God and Nature are replaced by Man and City, captures the central assumption embedded within the present paper's stated aim. Spain and its cities contained an ambiguous, ambivalent collection of metropolitan ideas, some which were certainly far from "excellent," but it is beyond dispute that cities as physical and ideological units were a critical part of Iberian culture. That microcosm, treated microhistorically,58 captures an image of such significant sociological weight that it can be used—as OTC indicates—to understand the whole.

"What is greater than the sun?" Botero asked. Yet where else "are the force of its light and heat better demonstrated than in the concave space of a tiny mirror"?59 But if only one point of the mirror is admitted into a given analysis, how misleading must that reflection really be? And what, in the end, could be more fitting than an inquiry which follows its subject?

---

54 Friedrichs, TEMC, 11. Keeping in mind, of course, that cities/city-concepts themselves cannot act as an exclusive key to Spanish history...
55 Neither can exist while the other doesn't survive.
56 I.e., in service of a more accurate, more internal/emic understanding of the ideas early modern Iberians understood.
57 Botero, OTC, 3, 4.
58 Yet cohesively/comprehensively!
59 Botero, OTC, 4.
References


