



**Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba:  
Classicism and Dissonance on the Plaza de Armas  
of Havana, 1754-1828 (Latin American and  
Caribbean Arts and Culture Publication In)**

*Paul Niell*

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According to national legend, Havana, Cuba, was founded under the shade of a ceiba tree whose branches sheltered the island's first Catholic mass and meeting of the town council (*cabildo*) in 1519. The founding site was first memorialized in 1754 by the erection of a baroque monument in Havana's central Plaza de Armas, which was reconfigured in 1828 by the addition of a neoclassical work, El Templete. Viewing the transformation of the Plaza de Armas from the new perspective of heritage studies, this book investigates how late colonial Cuban society narrated Havana's founding to valorize Spanish imperial power and used the monuments to underpin a local sense of place and cultural authenticity, civic achievement, and social order.

Paul Niell analyzes how Cubans produced heritage at the site of the symbolic ceiba tree by endowing the collective urban space of the plaza with a cultural authority that used the past to validate various place identities in the present. Niell's close examination of the extant forms of the 1754 and 1828 civic monuments, which include academic history paintings, neoclassical architecture, and idealized sculpture in tandem with period documents and printed texts, reveals a "dissonance of heritage"—in other words, a lack of agreement as to the works' significance and use. He considers the implications of this dissonance with respect to a wide array of interests in late colonial Havana, showing how heritage as a dominant cultural discourse was used to manage and even disinherit certain sectors of the colonial population.

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