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City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain (Book Review)

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Lara, Jaime

City, Temple, Stage: Eschatological Architecture and Liturgical Theatrics in New Spain

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This book, in which the author analyzes the world view and missionary methods of the mendicant orders in Mexico through the lens of art and architecture, is a worthy successor to George Kubler's Mexican Architecture of the Sixteenth Century. Like Kubler, Lara is a Yale professor of art and architecture. Using new research unavailable when Kubler wrote a half century ago, the author argues that the missionaries "recycled" rituals and beliefs of native religion to convert them, and that they were ultimately successful.

In chapter one, "The Architecture of Conversion", the author finds precedents for open chapels, walled patios, atrial crosses, single-nave churches and convents in European, Muslim and Mozarabic styles, and Aztec precedents in colonial raised chapels and altars. Chapter two discusses European eschatological beliefs, particularly the prophecies of the Sibylline Oracles, the Psychomachia of the Spanish poet Prudentius and the writings of twelfth-century prophet, Joachim of Fiore. The author argues that the missionaries successfully linked European ideas about the end of time with native eschatology. He also presents evidence that the "fortress churches" of Mexico were not built for defensive purposes. Chapter three discusses city planning. The author emphasizes Christian rather than Roman origins for city planning in the New World, citing the influence of the Cistercians and the writings of the Franciscan Francesc Eiximenis. He concludes that the concept of a New Jerusalem and the Book of Ezekiel were also important influences. Chapter four focuses on the "temple" and proposes that the temple of Jerusalem was the model for churches in the New World. In chapter five, the author shows how the symbolism of the cross brought together the diverse ideas represented in the missionaries' religious structures and connected these ideas to indigenous religious meanings, particularly those surrounding blood sacrifice. In his final chapter the author shows how sacred architecture became a stage for religious drama of conversion. As in the previous chapters, he demonstrates the rich medieval heritage from which the mendicants drew to develop this missionary method, which also had precedents in native religious practice.

The author's conclusion that the natives' conversion to Christianity was complete is weak. The broad horizon of native religion was replaced, to be sure, but everyday traditions survived.

This book is visually beautiful as well as scholarly important. It will be useful to historians and art historians of Latin America and enjoyed by the general reader with an interest in the history and art of the region.

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