Introduction

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Shaping Terrain: City Building in Latin America supports the proposition that cities and their surroundings—suburbs, exurbs, rural or agricultural lands, and wilderness—are best understood as interdependent areas of a continuously transforming spatial continuum whose every modification has an impact on the totality of the constructed environment. Transcending preoccupations with nature intended to define national or regional identity, the essays contained in this book provide lenses focused on the diversity of approaches to the Latin American landscapes and ecosystems which have informed a centuries-long history of settlement.¹

Humanized Landscape

Among Latin America’s indigenous cultures, decisions about the location of settlements were informed by a combination of ecological, agricultural, and religious imperatives, and permanent communities were established around the continental perimeter, where conditions were most favorable for human habitation: the highlands and valleys irrigated by streams carrying runoff from the Andes, the arid lowlands of northern Chile and southern Peru deserts as well as the extensive Brazilian highlands were all preferred to the hot, humid continental interior (figures I.1 and I.2).²

Although Latin America is mostly located in South America, there is also a significant presence in the Northern Hemisphere, including Mexico, Central America, Venezuela, and parts of Colombia, Ecuador, and Brazil, and the region’s most extensive areas occupy a wide strip around the equator. Located on the continent of North America, Mexico is a plateau laced by mountain ranges and rimmed by narrow coastal shelves with the Valley of Mexico midway between them, while Central America
is divided into three sections, the Pacific highlands of Chiapas, Guatemala, and El Salvador, the Maya region north of the highlands, and eastern Central America. The largest landmass in Latin America, continental South America, is often compared to a huge bowl because its relatively flat interior is ringed by high mountains, the Andes ranges along the west coast, the large landmass of the Guiana shield, and extensive Brazilian highlands along the east coast. Interspersed between the Western Andes and a second, third, and fourth range to the east are vast plateaus of which the Bolivian altiplano is the best known example. Although most of Latin America is located in tropical and subtropical latitudes, the South American perimeter with the Andean highlands to the west and the Brazilian
highlands along the Atlantic has a cooling effect, dividing the region into two contrasting but interdependent geosystems that influence the region’s climatic and hydrological patterns. Rich soils from the erosion of the Andes formed the basis for the continent’s most advanced pre-Columbian civilizations: those of the Inca Empire and its predecessors.

The first European explorers were stunned by the lush fertility and dense populations of the newly discovered lands. Columbus himself described the islands of Hispaniola and Tortuga as “a humanized paradise . . . densely populated and completely cultivated, like the countryside around Cordoba . . . not so thickly wooded as to be impassable,” indicating that open space may have been created by clearing or burning. The urban centers, which the Spanish discovered on their arrival, acted as support nodes for reaching new territories that would subsequently be added to the empire.

Despite early reports to the contrary, the notion that the New World was barely occupied took firm hold of the European imagination. As geographer William Denevan has written, the commonly accepted notion that human civilization was sparse at the time of the Conquest was largely attributable to the decimation of native populations by contact with European pathogens during the sixteenth century, to such an extent that even during the nineteenth century they remained depleted, but recent discoveries of the remains of many pre-Hispanic settlements have established that human populations were much larger and more widespread than previously assumed. The misrepresentation of a primeval wilderness was attributable in part to the desire for uncontested extraction of gold and silver, followed by the cultivation of wheat, rice, cotton, coffee, tobacco, indigo, quinine and sugar cane for export, activities that appeared less greedy when the continent was presented as empty and its resources available for the taking. The concept of the new world as virgin territory was reinforced by the belief that nature was separate from humanity and that man-made artifacts were separate from the natural world, distinctions not recognized by the indigenous peoples. In ancient Peru, a huaca or wak’a, a Quecha word meaning “sacred,” was derived from another Quechua word meaning “to wail,” a term used to describe a place for worship, such as hand-built mud pyramids, but by extension also referred to objects perceived to be sacred, such as massive rocks, or feared and admired because they were imbued with supernatural powers. For the indigenous peoples
of the Americas, the transformation of nature was a process in which the human, natural, and divine worlds were inseparable.8

A mixture of economic self-interest, the tragic consequences of the European invasion, and differing worldviews combined to promulgate the notion of the New World as a virgin territory, but while the idea that the Americas were sparsely populated at the time of the conquest has been discredited, the actual number of inhabitants continues to be hotly debated. To suggest how densely populated the Americas may have been, according to some estimates, the central Mexican plateau alone contained more than twice the population of Spain and Portugal combined. To sustain such numbers, the native people of the Andean highland regions, the Mexican plateau, and the Yucatán peninsula would have had to transform all available land into environments suitable for agriculture through earth-moving on a grand scale, which was practiced throughout much of the New World long before the arrival of the Europeans.9 Large quantities of earth and stone were transferred to create various raised and sunken features, transforming terrain otherwise too steep, dry, or wet, including widespread modification for agricultural terraces. Slopes were leveled, or their angle of inclination reduced with fill; embankments, ponds, sunken fields, irrigation canals, underground conduits, ridges, platforms, and raised fields were dug; crop mounds, boundary walls, fences, and markers were built. (figures I.3–I.9) Religious beliefs determined the construction of pyramids representing mountains, and in some regions plazas were built to stand in for the primordial sea and funerary stone steles for trees.10

As the size and economic potential of the conquered lands became gradually more apparent, the Spanish devised a strategy to guide the process of the founding settlements that would consolidate control of the conquered territories and allow their resources to be more efficiently exploited. To guide and regularize the establishment of military posts, missions, and towns, King Phillip II of Spain developed the first version of the Laws of the Indies, a comprehensive guide composed of 148 ordinances to aid colonists in locating, building, and populating settlements. They codified the city planning process and represented some of the first attempts at a general plan. Signed in 1573, the Laws of the Indies were wide-ranging guidelines pertaining to the design and development of communities.11 This model had to adapt itself to the geographical characteristics of the