

MESSAGE IN THE PLAZA: LANDSCAPE, LANDSCAPING, AND FOREST DISCOURSE IN HONDURAS*

JOBY BASS

ABSTRACT. As visible, material expression of human activities and goals, the landscape communicates as well as reflects. Specific landscapes communicate specific messages within the public sphere of which they are a part. In Honduras, many plaza landscapes have seen recent changes in form and in what they communicate. Once open, treeless spaces, many Honduran plazas are now filled with trees. These trees often support signs announcing the virtues of forests, linking the trees themselves to the official discourse on forest issues and illuminating the role of public-space landscapes in influencing public perception. This article points out the links between such iconographic landscapes and the complex, multitiered environmental issues that are part of environmental conditions and their perception by local actors.

Keywords: forest discourse, Honduras, landscape, landscape perception, plaza.

Tegucigalpa, Honduras, December 2001. A city bus—retired from its former life as a school bus in Minnesota—crawls along with the traffic, pumping out diesel exhaust. Under the driver's side window is a bumper sticker whose message, like the other messages in this landscape, offers some insight into the contemporary thought and culture of Honduras. Its message is also, I believe, pertinent to a consideration of forest issues and perception in Honduras: "We'd better plant some trees or we're screwed."

A repeat-photography study I conducted in Honduras examined landscape change in a portion of the country between 1957 and 2001 (Bass 2003; see Figure 1). The photographic pairs generated for each site, separated by a period of forty-four years, can be compared to assess change.¹ One basic finding of this project was that all of the photographic pairs, including those of town plazas, show increased numbers of trees. As public spaces, plaza landscapes offer insights into both the observed increase in trees and some of public discourse on forest issues and change.

The underlying thesis of this study of landscape and environmental perception is that plazas in Honduras also serve as landscapes of environmental communication and play a role in communicating specific messages about forests and forest issues in the country. The plazas' success in disseminating forest messages is reflected in the contrast that exists between actual landscapes and how people perceive and talk about them.

* The author would like to thank the late Terry Jordan-Bychkov, Bill Doolittle, Bill Davidson, and Steve Hoelscher for supporting my research interests. Scott Brady kindly read and offered comments on an earlier draft of this article. The editors of the *Geographical Review*, Douglas Johnson and Viola Haarmann, and anonymous reviewers offered helpful comments and suggestions that greatly improved the manuscript. Financial support was provided by the Tinker Foundation, Study Abroad Programs at the University of Texas, Austin and the Peninsula Community Foundation. Most important, I would like to thank the many Hondurans who invited me into their homes and lives and from whom I learned much.

✪ DR. BASS is an assistant professor of geography at the University of Southern Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi 39406.