

Reading the Public Realm in Postcolonial Los Angeles, or a Tale of Two Cathedrals, Cultural Politics, and Urban Representations

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On Sunday, September 21, 1997, Cardinal Roger Mahony consecrated the site of the new seat of the Roman Catholic Archdiocese in downtown Los Angeles, the Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels, which will replace the embattled former Cathedral of St. Vibiana. The event, as much as civic as a religious occasion, drew praise from a wide range of quarters: Pope John Paul II's envoy in Washington; the president of the National Conference of Catholic Bishops, the Most Reverend Anthony M. Pilla in Cleveland; as well as various Protestant leaders and civic officials. More importantly, this event not only marked the addition of another important architectural project to downtown LA's landscape, but also the production of an emblematic urban spectacle.

The spectacle of the ground-blessing contains the intersection of three interrelated and on-going projects involving the social construction of LA's civic identity: need for the City of Los Angeles to develop an

identifiable image of itself as it competes in increasingly aggressive global markets; the need for the Catholic Church to redefine itself in light of the new millennium and its multi-ethnic constituency; and the need of Latino communities in Los Angeles to gain cultural and political voice in an era of demographic growth. The debates that have emerged surrounding the new Catholic Cathedral illustrate how processes of urban development are also struggles over the politics of identity that shape the production of contemporary civic and public spaces.

This paper will trace the events surrounding the new Cathedral of Our Lady of the Angels in downtown Los Angeles in order to illustrate how notions of culture, the public, architecture, and urbanism inform the collective image of contemporary cities. This paper is an outgrowth of my research on contemporary Los Angeles and the cultural politics that are shaping the urban landscape of this global city. While this research was conducted under the auspices of my home discipline, Architecture, the work is indebted to Cultural Studies methodologies.