

**Western University**

---

**From the Selected Works of C. Cody Barteet**

---

2016

**Review of Paul Niell. Urban Space as Heritage in  
Late Colonial Cuba: Classicism and Dissonance  
on the Plaza de Armas of Havana, 1754-1828.**

C. Cody Barteet, *Western University*

boom's quick and fateful crash in the late 1890s and early 1900s.

Readers who are already familiar with the boom's history will therefore recognize several familiar elements and themes in *The Cycling City*, but what sets this book apart is its exceptional research. Friss points out that after the domestic bicycling industry in the United States survived its fitful origins during the early 1870s, the industry expanded quickly. Manufacturers nationwide produced an estimated 5.5–8 million bikes during the course of the decade between 1891 and 1900, and as ease of access to bicycles soared, so did ridership (32). An exhibition of bicycling technology in Chicago held in 1896, for example, drew more than 10,000 visitors. By mid-decade the bicycle (along with scores of diverse urban "cyclists," the subject of chap. 2) transformed cities and lives the world over. *The Cycling City* succeeds especially at highlighting the demographic and racial and class diversity of the first boom, lenses that US cultural and social historians will find useful. Immigrant riding clubs, women riders, African American cyclists, Chinese cyclists, and even heritage or "ethnic" clubs all receive substantial attention here, complicating most existing cycling histories concerned solely with race relations between white and black. By the end of the decade, Friss points out, the US government had even worked to create an exclusive "special report" on the bicycle in its 1900 census (11). The boom also changed the national jobs and economic front. Friss estimates 17,000 employees worked in bicycle shops and factories nationally by the turn of the century. Such details provide just a taste of the legwork Friss conducted in piecing together the boom's story for *The Cycling City*. Within a literature that often adopts a boosterish, nostalgic, and altogether celebratory tone toward the bike boom of the 1890s, Friss is one of the first to take a hard and focused look at its numbers, personalities, places, and diverse organizations from a national perspective, rather than the eastern focus that has dominated so much of the writing on the sport. Scholars, however, may wonder why Friss chose not to include a southern city in his case studies.

The primary source research within *The Cycling City* will also interest historians of material culture. Where bicyclists and bicycling technology enthusiasts might be discouraged by the very few specific bikes, components, and tools discussed in the book, its questions about the larger cultural productions surrounding the 1890s boom (including the era's clothing and ephemera) are where *The Cycling City* really excels. The book shows that Friss

scoured not only the early bicycling industry's immense material culture, including everything from club uniforms and banners, to tool kits and pneumatic tires and maps, but also more traditional historical sources, such as municipal records, newspaper articles, manuscript collections, and diaries. Readers will also appreciate the broad range of visual materials presented in the book, encompassing period photographs and lithographs, as well as maps and charts. Friss also does a nice job providing visual representations of his quantitative research, as when he charts, for example, the usage of bicycles at the intersection of Seventy-Second Street and Broadway in New York on a single afternoon in May 1896 (39). In providing such details without sacrificing story, Friss has produced a truly indispensable volume relevant far beyond his likely readers in urban history. His endnotes also provide several useful avenues for scholars and students eager to pursue further work.

Combining exceptional research and clear-eyed analysis, Friss has produced an accessible yet authoritative account, an accomplishment in and of its own. But *The Cycling City* goes on to accomplish a number of other important tasks. *The Cycling City* expands understanding of the 1890s bicycle boom, offering a richer and more nuanced portrait of its scope and vibrancy. It seems impossible now to tell the story of the US city, the automobile, or the nation's urban landscape without first considering the bicycle craze of the last decade of the nineteenth century. Friss, in other words, has taken an essential step in reinserting the bicycle into American history, where it has too long been treated as a piece of ephemera, a plaything, a child's toy, or otherwise as an anomaly disconnected from the nation's broader urban story.

JESSE GANT

*University of Wisconsin–Madison*

**Paul Niell.** *Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba: Classicism and Dissonance on the Plaza de Armas of Havana, 1754–1828.* Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015. xvi+326 pp.; 72 black-and-white photographs, 4 maps, notes, bibliography, index. \$55.00.

Paul Niell's *Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba* methodically documents the interplay between the visual arts—including two-dimensional objects, three-dimensional sculptures, and architecture—and political and ideological agendas in late colo-

nial Cuba. Although such themes have been analyzed in many historical and geographical contexts, Niell's text makes an important contribution to the Hispanic American discourse as he provides analysis and coverage of a grossly understudied area in Latin American and Caribbean studies: the art and architecture of colonial Cuba. Niell addresses issues of heritage and dissonance in these urban spaces by focusing on the ceiba tree and its symbolisms among disparate Hispanic, indigenous, and African works created during the years 1754–1828.

*Urban Space* focuses on two aspects of heritage: creation and dissonance. After defining heritage in chapters 1–3, in chapters 4 and 5 Niell addresses issues of dissonance that arose from the tensions created by Cuba's many peoples seeking to formalize a common heritage. In his definition the author draws on theories about heritage from the fields of cultural anthropology and geography, particularly concepts presented by David C. Harvey, Brian Graham, Gregory J. Ashworth, and John E. Tunbridge, to contend that heritage is more than a site or location or a discrete set of customs, traditions, and the like. Rather, it involves "how and why societies 'presence' the past" through various tropes, activities, rituals, constructions, and the like (4). However, creating a heritage often privileges one group's ideas about history over another's, thus creating dissonance. Raising issues of inclusion, exclusion, appropriation, and disinheritance in discussing the creation of a heritage in nineteenth-century Cuba, Niell considers both the dominant and subversive narratives developed by the country's distinct peoples.

Chapters 1 and 2 address the creation of a colonial heritage in Cuba through the built form and its accompanying civic culture, wherein the arts, history, language, religion, and politics merged in the forging of Havana's culture. These chapters establish the context for chapter 3, which discusses the importance of the ceiba tree to Havana's identity and culminates in the building of El Templete (The little temple) in 1828. The monument marks the site of the lost ceiba tree where supposedly the first town council of Havana was established in 1519. As Niell notes, the creation of the structure is immensely complex, as Havana's civic elite, clergy, and political officials all had connected but competing agendas. These distinctions appear in the building's architectural rhetoric and the three history paintings housed inside the building. The paintings by Jean-Baptiste Vermay complemented the narratives of heritage creation by depicting scenes that occurred under the ceiba tree: the forming of the first town council and the first Mass. Vermay's last paint-

ing of El Templete's inauguration brings these distant foundational events to the nineteenth-century present and depicts many of Havana's leading citizens and officials. Through his discussion of the paintings and El Templete, Niell effectively documents how heritage was formalized in Havana.

The author shows that the heritage of El Templete was not hegemonic, however. Recognizing the parallel importance of arboreal imagery in European, indigenous, and African cultures, in chapter 4 Niell analyzes how Vermay depicted trees in his El Templete paintings and how Havana's local aristocrats appropriated popular themes associated with arboreal imagery in European visual culture, such as genealogical or family trees, to affirm their authority in Cuba's colonial heritage. The ceiba, a tree indigenous to the Americas as well as Africa and Asia, embodied this arboreal imagery for Cubans. In addition to the many uses of the cotton-like fibers in its seedpods, Amerindians also invested the tree with many religious symbolisms, including those connected to ancestor veneration. But for Havana's European and Creole peoples, the tree was an iconographic representation of the colonial territories that they were attempting to possess. Similarly, in chapter 5 the author explores issues of Afro-Cuban racial anxiety in nineteenth- and twentieth-century Havana through the ceiba tree's multivocal symbolisms. Niell considers how Afro-Cubans applied elements symbolic of their African diaspora to the ceiba tree's multilayered Amerindian and European iconography.

In *Urban Space as Heritage in Late Colonial Cuba*, Niell offers a compelling case to support his claims that through a sequence of circumscribed events related to the ceiba tree, the heritage of El Templete, and more broadly Havana, "is given concrete form, identities are reinforced, and a sense of place is established" (239). Yet, as he rightly notes, political regimes, ethnicities, cultures, and so forth change. Thus, heritage changes as groups attempt to negotiate the past and the present. Niell's recognition of shifting narratives about places, peoples, and institutions is fitting in light of the changing policies of the United States toward the Cuban government. His text will not only enliven the current discourse in Hispanic American studies but it is also timely and sure to be of interest to both area specialists and nonacademics alike as we attempt to decipher this moment of renewed cultural exchange.