

Tacámbaro, Ario de Rosales y Grazales: a humanistic geography perspective of elsewhere, placelessness and personality

Luis Miguel Herrera Bejines^{1*}

¹Western University, Canada

Abstract: This paper explores two landscapes from Michoacán, México, Tacámbaro and Ario de Rosales, from a humanistic geography perspective. Specifically, the landscapes are analysed following three key concepts, known as elsewhere, placelessness and personality, observing how they intertwine with each other. The overarching articulated argument is that while every town shares their sameness, including its epitome districts, as they are all built by the city mapping model imposed by the king, Philip II, they also create a sense of elsewhere, placelessness and have their personality. The Spanish town Grazales is included in this analysis to share its sameness.

Key Words: *placelessness, elsewhere, personality, Ario de Rosales, Tacámbaro, Relp, Hopkins, Tuan*

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Introduction

It is not surprising to discover that most towns in Spain share a little plaza, a Cathedral or church and a City Hall within a close radius. However, it is not until one realizes that not only Spanish towns but nearly all former Spanish colonies incorporate the same urban characteristics that human geography occurs. Places such as the province of San Antonio de Palé in Equatorial Guinea, the department of Boyacá in Colombia, or even the state of Michoacán in México share the same urban features in every little city within. The state of Michoacán (Michoacán de Ocampo) is in the West-central part of México. The Pacific Ocean bounds it to the Southwest and by the states of Colima and Jalisco to the West. It also limits Guanajuato to the North, Querétaro to the Northeast, the state of México to the

* Correspondence address

Address: Western University, 1151 Richmond St, London, ON N6A 3K7, Canada.

Phone: (1) 519 697 6001 | Email: lherrer@uwo.ca

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east, and Guerrero to the South. Morelia is the capital of Michoacán. This analysis focuses on two Michoacán towns, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro. The following research questions were considered to expand upon these notions: Why do most towns built by Spanish kingdoms worldwide have similar appearances? What is the relationship between Human Geography and the Spanish towns? To answer these questions, it is convenient to dwell on the source that connects them to follow through with the argument of this analysis.

The geographer Dan Stanislawski argues that Spain was the least inattentive country to urbanise Western Europe because it had little to no experience in planning cities or towns. This was a skill that the country needed to develop and implement with its expansion to new territories in the American, African, and Asian continents. Furthermore, because “[t]owns were needed for control, for distribution of goods, for taxes, labor, and conversion to Christianity” in the newly conquered soil, the need for planning and mapping was urgent (Stanislawski, 1947a, p. 94-95). In other words, as the Spanish Crown was expanding its territory, the need to build towns and convert native Indians to Christianity was a necessity that required a prompt reaction. While it is known that the native communities conquered were well-organized and had their own government, social hierarchies, and organizations, they could not survive the Spanish massacre.

When the Spanish arrived, they demolished not only people but towns and everything as they started their settlements (Stanislawski, 1947a). Instead of helping develop sustainable ways of living for the indigenous people, their *modus vivendi* was destroyed. However, it is worth mentioning, as Stanislawski points out, that Michoacán, the home state of the Tarascan natives, was the only place where the submission of the indigenous communities was done somehow peacefully. After the entry of Nuño de Guzmán to this region, “[the] Indian political and social order was shattered by looting, torture, and savage reprisals for fancied disobedience. In one year, the Tarascan state was converted from one of prosperity and friendly submission to virtually a shambles, with chaotic but rebellious remnants” (1947, p. 139). It seems that the fear of the natives made them run away instead of confronting their torturers.

The arrival of bishop Vasco de Quiroga in 1537 to Michoacán, a man of law who fought, worked, and cared for the indigenous, would positively impact the destiny of the Tarascan communities, helping, educating, and building hospital towns for them. One of the first issues he encountered was that many indigenous peoples had fled into the mountains, and “[h]e brought them back to the urban living and re-established their settlements, with craft specialization by villages” (Stanislawski, 1973b, p. 139). When the bishop oversaw the communities, there existed a mutual understanding and collaboration among them since they would trade their goods and products, keeping all communities perfectly balanced. However, one should not forget that while the method of colonizing the Tarascan natives was not by force but through ideology, as Louis Althusser (2014) may suggest, the purpose was the same. To restate, regardless of the approach, the main objective of colonisation was to receive tributes from the natives, to control them and to Christianise them.

It was not until 1573 that the Spanish king, Philip II, issued a compilation of Ordinances in which he detailed the city planning model that would be established in the new lands. According to Alex Mundigo and Dora Crouch, this compilation was made out of 148 Ordinances, “dealing with every aspect of site selection, city planning and political organization; in fact, the most complete such set of instructions ever issued to serve as a guideline for the founding and building towns in the Americas, and probably the most effective planning documents in the history of mankind” (1977, p. 248). In other words, Philip’s Ordinances provided the

essential geographical, physical, and political conditions to develop cities in the conquered territory.



Figure 1. The analysis of Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro takes place in the State of Michoacán, México.

Source: Earthstar Geographics/CONANP, Esri, HERE, Garmin, FAO, NOAA, USGS, EPA.

In relation to the city planning model, the urbanization development model strictly followed royal orders. All new towns built on the American Continent were supposed to be designed according to Philip II's instructions, as Stanislawski explains:

The cathedral of inland places should not be placed at the plaza, but at some distance . . . and so that it can be seen from all sides because it lends greater adornment and authority, and arrange it in such fashion that it is raised above the ground level so that steps will approach it. Near it, on the main plaza, the palace, the town hall, and the customs house should be built so that they do not detract from the cathedral but give it greater importance. (1947b, p. 104)

The instructions of Philip II and the importance of the specifications drawn up for the new settlements provide a better understanding of why most towns in the American, African, European, and Asian continents where the Spanish Empire stretched its tentacles have a cathedral or a church, a plaza, and a City Hall.

These architectural complexes mentioned, according to American journalist Grady Edward Clay, are known as epitome districts. These epitome districts, in his words, are “[s]pecial places in cities [that] carry huge layers of symbols that have the capacity to pack up emotions, energy, or history into small space” (Clay, 1973, p. 38).

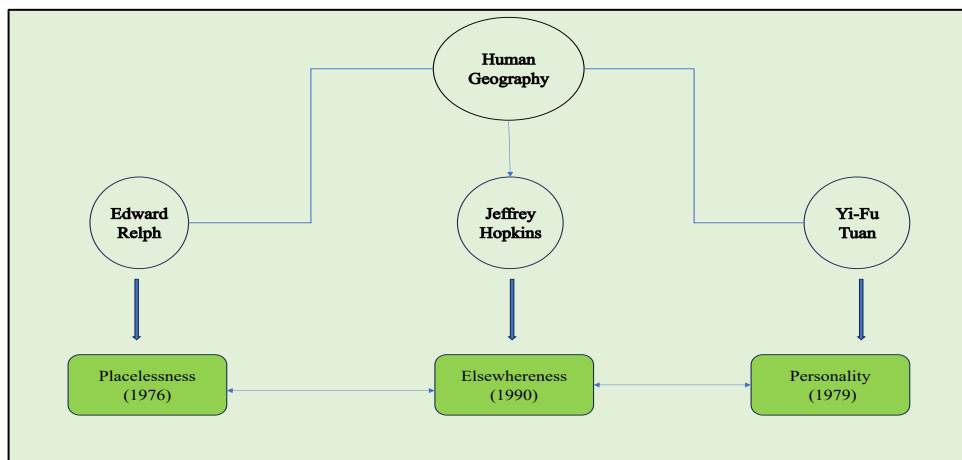


Figure 2. Mind mapping of the main concepts and sources used in this analysis.

Source: Elaborated by author.

In essence, these epitome districts can serve as a replica in miniature placed by the Spanish Empire in each town and city built across its conquered lands all over the world, reflecting the energy, emotions, history, and pride of the Spanish *conquistadores*. Before starting the analysis, however, defining the concepts applied to this study is essential.

To conceptualize and understand the notion of space, one must first figure out its dimensions since measuring it is easier. Once the space has been proportionally measured, the administration of it becomes manageable. But even beyond that, once the landscape has been personalized, urbanized, and made into cities, humanist geography starts to play a role—or at least one of its many roles. Therefore, these cities become places, and these places become homes for people. However, most of the towns established on the American continent were not products of pure imagination; one can argue that the main cities in almost the entire continent were somehow replicating or emulating European metropolises. For instance, in the case of México, one can mention Guadalajara, Valladolid, Salamanca, Compostela, Jerez, Zaragoza, Ciudad Real, Zamora, Nueva Italia, León, Mérida, Aragón, Ceuta, Córdoba, Durango, San Sebastián, Soria, among many others that the extension of this page is not enough to list them all.

The names of these cities are not a mere coincidence; in fact, the replica of these new cities named after those European ones only recalls the resemblance that these places had with the original towns. From this resemblance, the concept of elsewhere, coined by the Canadian geographer Jeffrey Hopkins, comes to mind. Hopkins explains how it “varies in degree depending on the resemblance continuum of characteristics and/or uses between the original or referent artifact or place and its imitation, be it vaguely reminiscent or a near-perfect duplication and depending on the spatial strategy of its designers/users” (1990, p.4). To elaborate, anything that looks like the original was implanted or transplanted into another space or place can be encompassed within this concept. One can even add that any city planning model brought or borrowed from colonizing countries interlinks the concept of elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990).

Another crucial concept considered is placelessness (Relph, 1976), which weighs a lot in this analysis since this is, in a certain way, where most people have fallen into in everyday life. The geographers David Seamon and Jacob Sowers explain that for Edward Relph, the author of *Place and Placelessness* (1976), a genuine place is that one has its distinctiveness among others; however, when this same “place is being gradually overshadowed by a less authentic attitude (...) he called [it] placelessness” (2008, p. 46). In other words, as Seamon and Sowers further emphasise, for Relph, placelessness is “the casual eradication of distinctive places and the making of standardized landscapes that results from an insensitivity to the significance of place” ([quoted in 2008, p. 46] Relph, 1976). Having processed this concept and the way it will be applied to the analysis, one can say that the familiarity of the structure of a place or various places makes us feel that we are in a “placelessness” (Relph, 1976).

The last concept discussed and applied to this analysis deals with the personality of a place. While most people perceive places as no different from one another, the Chinese-American geographer Yi-Fu Tuan argues that places do have their sense of being. In fact, as Tuan suggests, “[l]oosely speaking, the personality of place is a composite of natural endowment (the physique of the land) and the modifications wrought by successive generations of human beings (1979, p. 445). Therefore, places occupy more than just spaces; they become personified and acquire a personality of their own. Even though the towns analysed are similar in composition, they all have their own personality and singularity. Figure 2 simplifies the definition of the concepts and their authors of all the concepts presented in this section.

Methodology

The mere coincidence that nearly all former Spanish colonies incorporate the same urban characteristics has led to a myriad of questions, particularly one that seeks to find the source that originates the sameness of Grazalema, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro. For this reason, this research applies a positivism approach aligned with the hypothetico-deductive science model that builds on validating a priori hypotheses and investigations by manipulating variables and measures. The results of these hypothesis testing help to elucidate and progress science. The primary focus of positivism approach is to examine the explanatory or causal relationships between variables in the study, as it is accomplished in the natural sciences (Park et al., 2020). Through this approach, this paper introduces the topic and establishes the hypothesis that Grazalema, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro have a clear reference to the Spanish King Philip II's Ordinances in which the essential geographical, physical, and political conditions to develop cities in the conquered territory were provided. While this is not the central focus of this analysis, it was important to include it because it allows for an overall understanding of the source of the city mapping model and complements the humanistic geography approach used in this study. As part of the positivism approach, maps are used to reference the epitome districts from each of the towns analyzed, along with historical context that contrasts and supports the hypothesis.

Nonetheless, this research will base its research criteria and focus primarily on the humanistic geography method, which allows the interpretation of the space, the place, and the city mapping models of Grazalema, Tacámbaro and Ario de Rosales and their connection with one another through these three key concepts, known as, elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990), placelessness (Relph, 1976) and

personality (Tuan, 1979). This method will also help to understand the emotional connection between humans and places and how this interaction creates this sense of belongingness within its inhabitants. With empirical examples, the study shows how these concepts intertwine among the three towns described above, as seen in the following pages. As for the number of samples, this study solely focuses on Grazales, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro; however, in the future, a more extensive sampling can be used by expanding the concepts, the towns or even the geographical area of the study.

Results and discussions

To replicate or emulate something such as a car, a building or even another person, one must have an idea about its features and composition. In fact, Hopkins' concept of elsewhere dwells on this idea of naming the new settled places after those of Europe, and, as he further explains, “[Europeans] brought with them their culture(s) and with it their sense of place(s)” (1990, p. 4). Therefore, it is not surprising to see these similarities with the Spanish settlers in the American continent, especially when discussing how epitome districts (Clay, 1973) were supposed to be built in any new town. Following Philip II's city planning model and looking at the small town of Grazales, Spain, this study will analyze Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro, two towns in the state of Michoacán.

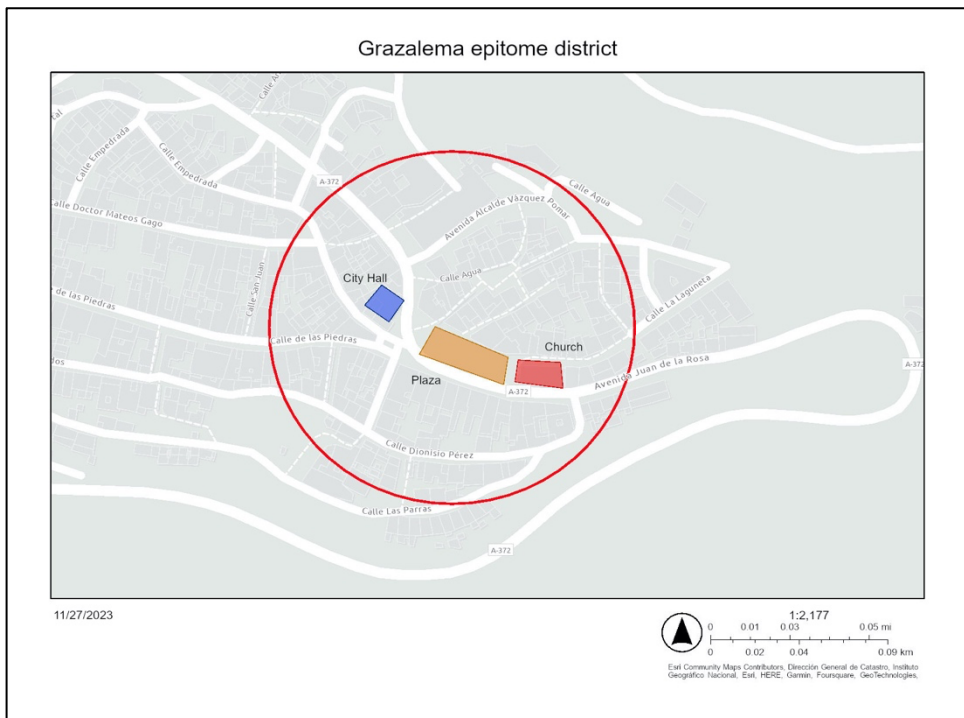


Figure 3. Map of Grazales and its epitome district.

Source: Dirección General de Catastro, Instituto Geográfico Nacional, Esri, HERE, Garmin, Foursquare, Geo Technologies.



Figure 5. Map of Ario de Rosales and its epitome district.

Source: Esri Community Maps Contributors, CONANP, Esri, HERE, Garmin, Foursquare, Geo Technologies, Inc, METI/NASA, USGS, EPA, US Census.

This sense of knowing in which urban spaces a person is situated comes from the idea of what Henri Lefebvre explains as representations of spaces through which architects and planners try to present an impartial and systematic view of how the city is planned out (1991, p. 301). These are precisely the feelings that one acquires upon arriving in these towns. The symmetry and likeliness of these towns are unquestionable. It seems that one knows where one is standing, not because of the town but precisely due to the sense of elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990).

Visiting Tacámbaro for the first time can be stupendous because the town is small, the air is fresh, and the wind from the mountains through the streets is a little cold. And while one knows that Tacámbaro is different from one's hometown, this feeling of being in a similar place lies in one's senses. The same can be said about Grazelema, Spain, that, even if it is one hundred miles away from Tacámbaro or any other town built by the Spanish settlers, the same sensation is felt. Therefore, if anyone goes to a small town in México and then visits another small town in Spain, like Grazelema, the visitor will feel the sensation of elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990) or, as one would call it, *déjà vu*. In fact, these two towns, Grazelema and Tacámbaro, have the City Halls, the plazas, and the churches within a close periphery, as the maps show. Another place that reflects elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990) is the town of Ario de Rosales, Michoacán.

In Ario de Rosales, as depicted by Figure 5, one can observe the three iconic places that have been reiterated throughout this analysis: the church, the plaza, and the City Hall, all relatively close to each other. The heart of the town lies where one can find these three features, which would be very difficult to see in big cities. The reason behind this is that they are complex and gigantic cities. For instance,

one can argue that Mexico City, at one point, was planned out just like these little towns, which can also be said about Los Angeles, Bogotá, and Buenos Aires; however, as the cities started to grow, their expansion diluted the way they were mapped out. At this point, it would be difficult but crucial to observe these same towns before they became the cities they are now. But to have the sensation of elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990) seems to have the same connotation as being in a non-place, since, according to the geographer John Agnew, “[e]verywhere is increasingly alike as we all spend more of our time (...) [in places like] airport lounges, shopping malls and on the internet, living lives increasingly without any sense of place” (2011, p. 8). One can partially agree with Agnew’s statement when he utters that “[e]verywhere is increasingly alike (...),” nevertheless, the fact that all look almost the same also resembles Hopkins’ concept of elsewhere. In fact, just as the small towns analyzed here, Hopkins’ idea of elsewhere (1990) and John Agnew’s concept of non-place (2011) show a replica or the exact model, in a certain way, which can be expected when one goes in an airport, in a small Spanish town or in a Mexican town.

Similar to Tacámbaro, Ario de Rosales was a picturesque and fascinating town because it was still relatively small compared to Morelia, the capital of Michoacán. As explained before, the same feeling of orientation one would feel in Tacámbaro, Ario de Rosales is considered a *déjà vu* because its anatomy makes the visitor feel familiar with the place. Walking through the heart of the town, one can observe the plaza, the church, and the City Hall relatively close to each other, as they are in Tacámbaro or Grazelema. This is the beauty of these towns; they seem so alike that one cannot get lost, and they are certainly a replica of the original, a picture taken elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990) and placed in a somewhere of the American, African, or Asian continent.

For Edward Relph (1976), the loss of singularity of place leads to placelessness as they all look the same, with no difference from one location to another (Relph, 1976). To exemplify, businesses like Starbucks, Tim Hortons, McDonald’s, Burger King, and Wendy’s have become a product of placelessness since there is not much alteration between one store and the next. The same can be said about Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro, and even Grazelema, because these places ended up being the same, to a certain extent. As previously mentioned, one does not seem to experience much distinction from visiting one place to another. While Anne Buttner and David Seamon (1980, p. 171) may believe that one sees these towns as an observer who explores a place with no minimum sense of attachment to them, one can say that just like McDonald’s and Wendy’s, the expectations and the sensation of these towns are about the same.

Furthermore, Ario de Rosales, Grazelema, and Tacámbaro are certainly similar because all three places have a plaza, a city hall, and a church within a short distance. The sameness of these two towns corroborates Relph’s concept of placelessness because each town always has a premeditated urban structure. Although one may notice a minuscule difference because of its people, weather or geographical location, the towns undoubtedly provide that sense of placelessness. The same can be argued about the 113 municipalities that form part of the state of Michoacán; they all reflect the sense of placelessness (Relph, 1991) since they all have attached within their radius the three prominent landmarks that have been repeatedly identified in this analysis. Furthermore, in these epitome districts, “(...) one may observe formal and informal rituals, symbolic activities: the organization of folk festivals ranging from parades to inaugurations from unveilings to auctions to rallies to funerals and swearings-in” (Clay, 1973, p. 39).

In fact, if discussing Clay's arguments, it is agreed that all significant celebrations coming from Spain are still celebrated nowadays in almost all cities and towns developed by Spanish settlers. For instance, consider Christmas Eve. Undoubtedly, most churches celebrate a midnight mass not only in Spain but anywhere that the Spanish *conquistadores* stepped in and brought their religion. Therefore, if a group of individuals transport themselves from one church in México to another in Chile or Spain, attending the same mass at the same time, especially if it is in Spanish, one can argue that this is a representation of placelessness (Relph, 1991) would be the same. This means that it does not matter where one is, whether it is a town like Grazalema, Tacámbaro or Ario de Rosales, the feeling of sameness will be equal. The argument made in this paper may sound far from reality, but the towns not only in Michoacán but also in México, Spain and most Latin American countries have the same feeling, the feeling of placelessness (Relph, 1991).

Places are not just places. When talking about places, one also refers to their personality. Humanist geographer Yi-Fu Tuan (1979) states that places, like human beings, acquire unique signatures over time. While Tuan refers to the personality of a place as having two aspects, awe and affection, this part of the analysis will focus on affection. As in the case of places, towns also acquire a sense of personality, and no one would negate that Tacámbaro, Grazalema and Ario de Rosales have their own personalities that evoke affection. As Tuan states, "a place that evokes affection has personality in the same sense that an old raincoat can be said to have character" (1979, p. 466). Then he further claims that "[s]o to a place, through long association with human beings, can take on the familiar contours of an old but still nurturing nanny" (1979, p. 446). Having this in mind, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro not only "evoke affection" but also offer comfort and, in a certain way, identity to their inhabitants.

The personality of a place extends beyond the physical and visible aspects. As a matter of fact, one really figures out the personality of a place by, as Mike Crang infers, "turning to literature or the arts as being ways people can express these meanings" (1998, p. 109). Through art, people can show how their places are, look or even behave. For instance, one can look at the famous novel of James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922), through which the author exposes a single day of Leopold Bloom's life, but more importantly, the writer describes in detail the vibrant personality of the capital, Dublin. A single reading of the novel would not be sufficient to understand not only the characters but also the city's personality, and, as James Joyce details, through sounds, smells, and symbols, the reader becomes more and more immersed in the visualization of Dublin and how it evolves into fun and enjoyable place.

Similarly, Julio Cortázar's novel, *The Hopscotch* (1966), parallels the lugubrious nightlife in Paris and the fascinating city of Buenos Aires. As a matter of fact, when one reads Cortázar's literature, Buenos Aires and Paris become splendid and full of life. A non-familiar reader of Cortázar would think that the writer is describing Paris instead of Buenos Aires and vice versa because, at one point, these cities interweave. Paris and Buenos Aires in Cortázar's literature express a sense of personality. Likewise, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro have developed distinctive personalities over the years.

Surrounded by mountains, Ario de Rosales is a cosy and welcoming town. As one arrives at the municipality, one feels tranquillity and peace because one is absorbed by the town's atmosphere. Moreover, when walking through the streets of Ario de Rosales, there is a particular sentiment, described as the essence of the morning breeze, that embraces its local people and visitors. Just as the raincoat

develops its personality, peculiar smell, and singularity over the years (Tuan, 1979), Ario de Rosales has established a character of its own by being a town where time seems static and life goes easy because of its tranquillity. On the other hand, Tacámbaro's personality is more of a touristic city in which there is an influx of tourists all year round. As a matter of fact, the city is in a strategic place where people from surrounding towns must go through it to get to other towns. This city is famous for being the entrance of "Tierra Caliente" because if one drives for fifteen minutes to the next town, the weather changes from 25 to 40 degrees. One can say, then, that Tacámbaro's personality is one of a business town (or man) because of the constant influx and outflux of people and goods that the town deals with daily. Comparing Tacámbaro to Ario de Rosales, one can argue that Ario de Rosales could be what Carl Gustav Jung (1976) calls the introverted town, whereas Tacámbaro would be an extroverted town. To explain, Tacámbaro's personality is more of an outgoing, cheerful person, and Ario de Rosales' represents a quiet and shy person.

Conclusions

As articulated throughout this paper, while most conquered towns in the American continent had their government, belief system, and urban developments, with the arrival of the Spanish, all the structures disappeared, leaving the natives in despair. Nonetheless, the city planning model sent by the Spanish king, Philip II, gave the essential elements to urbanize Grazelema, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro, and as stated before, the American, African, and Asian continents. Through the city planning model imported from Spain, the new landscape imposed by the Spanish colonizers to the New World made an impact on the towns built in México that even nowadays, this same model can be ubiquitously perceived from North to South and from East to West in most towns—even beyond the state of Michoacán. Therefore, the feeling of elsewhere (Hopkins, 1990) and placelessness (Relph, 1976) felt by a town with its personality (Tuan, 1979) may sound repetitive but represents the experience that one can feel when visiting any town built by the Spanish city planning model, including The Philippines in Asia and Equatorial Guinea in Africa. The feeling of being somewhere else, or as Hopkins coins it, elsewhere (1990), the sensation that one has not moved or changed from the town one was two nights ago to the town one is now because of the sameness of the structure or as Relph describes it, placelessness (1976), and at the same time, acknowledging the fact that regardless if these towns are so alike and make people feel no difference as they visit them, these towns still include, as Tuan inquires, their personality (1979). Grazelema, Ario de Rosales and Tacámbaro are towns that provoke a *déjà vu*; nonetheless, as contradictory as it sounds, they have something distinctive after all: Philip II's city planning model.

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