

***Archaeological Site Museums in Latin America.* Helaine Silverman, ed. University Press of Florida, 2006. 301 pp.<sup>1</sup>**

Reviewed by Greg Borgstede

This volume represents an important contribution in theorizing a specific type of museum: that associated with an archaeological site. While this is a narrow reading of the contributions to this edited volume—the authors allow for a more expansive definition of “museum”—the overarching effect of the book is to successfully display the wide range of functions, procedures, and ideologies of site museums. While each contributor’s narrow focus on his or her museum of choice may leave broader comparability in museum process and structure unexplored, the idiosyncratic nature of the individual chapters is more than balanced by two excellent discussion chapters at the end of the volume and by the innovative approaches and ideas presented by the authors.

The organizational structure of the chapters in the volume is distinctive. Rather than relying on the traditional approach in volumes on Latin America, which divide the region geographically or historically, the editor instead chose to categorize chapters based on the type of site museum discussed in each contribution. The categories include: museums at monumental sites/sites with monuments; museums at non-monumental sites; the city as site museum; and the landscape as museum. There is a degree of content overlap among these categories. The overlap, however, works to strengthen the concept of “site museum” through repeated re-definition by individual contributors. The reader becomes acutely aware of similarities and differences in how a site museum is understood and defined as the nuances of contextual differences are explored. While these nuances are left implicit and for the reader to develop, the contrasts assist the development of one’s own definition of site museum. Of broader interest, and the next logical step in the analysis and theoretical development of site museum studies, is the definition of the organizational categories—monumental and non-monumental sites, cities and landscapes as site museums. These are left under-defined and an intriguing avenue for future research, both among these categories (for example, what makes a site museum at a monumental site different from that at a non-monumental site?) and as broader heuristics for analyzing different geohistorical contexts (a monumental site in Mexico versus a monumental site in Peru, for example).

Within each of these categories, there are a series of case studies written by practitioners about the site museum project in which they have participated. For site museums at monumental sites, contributions include: Teotihuacan (Mexico), San Lorenzo Tenochtitlan (Mexico), Copan (Honduras), Kuntur Wasi (Peru), Pukara (Peru), Chiripa (Bolivia). For non-monumental sites, contributions include: Coastal Ecuador (Museum of the Lovers of Sumpa; a tourist guide training program) and Peru (San Jose de Moro). The city as site museum is discussed in detail for Cusco, Peru, and the landscape as museum is discussed for Ecuador (Agua Blanca) and Peru (Sican; Cotahuasi Valley). This collection of articles covers a broad expanse of Latin American countries: Mexico, Honduras, Ecuador, Peru, and Bolivia. Impressively, the range of

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backgrounds of the authors includes national archaeologists as well as foreigners (Western and Non-Western).

The range of nations covered in the volume is limited to Latin America. The decision to discuss only site museums in Latin America, and to effectively foreground this fact via the title, is unexplored within any chapter of the volume. While individual authors explore in detail the definition, construction, and ramifications of site museums within specific local contexts, very few explore the relationship of the site museum concept to the Latin American context, specifically. That is, the narrow focus is on local (and national) issues at the expense of the international/regional. This is not necessarily a weakness, but begs the question: why use Latin America as an organizing concept at all?

By framing the discussion of archaeological site museums with Latin America, the volume situates itself within a broader discussion on the unity and disunity of the history, culture, and geography of the region. Incorporation into this dialogue may assist in defining the role of archaeology and history within the nations of Latin America—or it may not; the issue is not addressed in the volume. The inevitable question is: do the site museums of Latin America have something in common that makes them distinct from site museums in other regions? The decision to include only Latin American examples also has the effect of limiting the possibility of cross-cultural comparison. The case studies taken individually or as a whole do not provide a persuasive argument for the unity of Latin America as an analytic category for site museums. The reader is left wondering why Latin America? Why not the developing world? Why not descendant communities? The organization of the volume itself underscores this—the chapters are organized by museum type (monumental, non-monumental, etc.) rather than national (Peruvian, Mexican, etc.) tradition.

The questioning of underlying assumptions such as these is important not just for Western academic audiences, but is of wider significance because these assumptions have broader social and political implications and effects. The process of defining cultural heritage, particularly by trained professionals, and the exploration of how that heritage articulates with local communities in locales such as site museums, can affect cultural identity as well as political and economic reality. The assumptions of the authors need to be made explicit. Is the unity of Latin America in terms of site museums a residue of colonial occupation? If so, then are site museums somehow postcolonial constructions or attempts at disassociating from colonial practices? As Lawrence S. Coben argues in his commentary, many of the contributing authors suggest that site museums are an attempt, at least implicitly, at “social justice” or “economic development” within the archaeological arena. As K. Anne Pyburn argues in her commentary, this type of social action requires very careful consideration and debate. Hopefully that debate will develop as archaeological site museums are increasingly analyzed and theorized. This volume is an excellent step in that direction, to be read not as a handbook of “best practices” for Latin America, but as a comparison of the site museum concept across a number of very different contexts.

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(Routledge, 2004).