FOREWORD

Devra Weber

The book you are holding is about Los Angeles' historic heart, the Plaza, the Placita, a space of contested memories, forgotten histories and their reclamation. The Los Angeles Plaza is personal and evocative for those who grew up in the city. The book triggered my own memories of growing up in L.A. By the early 1950s, my Los Angeles-born father was taking me (and my pet of the moment) to the annual blessing of the animals at the Placita church. My mother took me to Olvera Street's Christmas posadas, after days of carefully rehearsing songs of the posadas from a tattered songbook. Filtered through the eyes of my Anglo bohemian parents and Chicano neighbors, the Placita, Our Lady Queen of the Angels Church, and Olvera Street played a central part in forming my notion of Los Angeles and my sense that it was at its core a Mexican city. The realization that some of my notions were based on myths, stereotypes, and orchestrated dreams—well, that would come later.

The Los Angeles Plaza expands an understanding of the city for all readers. Estrada's own multigenerational familial memories of the Placita were and are a jarring disjuncture from the institutional histories imposed on him during school trips that obliterated the Mexican L.A. he knew. The book challenges such institutional memories through an evocation of historical

conflicts over the use and meaning of the Plaza and surrounding space. It tracks the performances of contradictory public narratives and the evolving coexistence of conflicting narratives and usages of space. The Placita was and is a place where Mexicans, Italians, Chinese, Japanese, African Americans, Anglos, Filipinos, and people of other countries, regions, and locales came together, fought, and organized. The book goes beyond the built spaces to encompass the story of how people actively interacted with and shaped the meaning of this place. And in so doing, people resisted the homogenization of the Plaza pushed by varying demands of dominant city powers and kept alive the political, contrary, and vibrant sense of interactive space.

Olvera Street, manufactured as an “authentic Mexican shopping street” for tourists, was simultaneously a place where Mexicans shopped next to tourists. The mythical Olvera Street failed to overwhelm the lived space of the Placita, which remains a center for politicians, labor organizers and other activists, dancers, musicians, tourists, lovers, and families who congregate on Sundays. The Placita is a starting point of demonstrations and city celebrations. The church is again a sanctuary for immigrants. The development of the Pico House, the Chinese American Museum, and the conservation of *América Tropical*, the David Alfaro Siqueiros mural located on the exterior wall of Italian Hall, is reviving the history that mirrors that of our city.

It is fitting that this book is coming out in 2008. Los Angeles has become one of the most diverse cities in the world. With more than two-thirds of county residents either immigrants or their children, Los Angeles is home to the largest number of diasporic populations in the world of at least five countries. The city is rent by problems of poverty, proliferation of low-wage jobs, crises in affordable housing and in education, and increasing congestion in an out-of-control freeway system. It is also home to progressive coalitions pushing to develop a livable city and one in which all who work here can also live. These coalitions have produced living-wage ordinances and other proposals to address the city’s ongoing challenges.

The question of the future of Los Angeles looms. Developers are munching on downtown areas such as the Figueroa corridor and have ripped out working-class enclaves to make room for upscale condominiums. There are Champs Élysées-like commercial visions for Grand Avenue. Gentrification is spreading into the old neighborhoods of Boyle Heights and Pico Union. The questions of who determines the city’s future, what it will look like, and

who or what will dominate our public spaces are central to political, social, and economic agendas. The Placita remains an important city core adjacent to the Los Angeles River and the Cornfield, which are soon to be developed into a park. The Los Angeles Plaza eloquently speaks not only of our collective past but to our collective future.