In this dissertation I examine the social functions of neighborhood plazas by tracing the development of a Classic Maya (AD 200-900) ritual and residential complex at the ancient city of Xultun, Guatemala. In ancient as in modern times, public open spaces were essential to urban life; yet their functions and meanings could vary within and among societies. Using archaeological and architectural data from three plazas and an adjacent residential complex, I identify a shift towards increased public spaces in the Late Classic period, and link this to the rising importance of displays of power for Xultun’s growing population.

Located on the northern periphery of Xultun, Los Aves, the focus of the study, is an architectural group consisting of a central residential area with three adjacent plazas to the east, west and northwest. During the Early Classic (AD 250-600) period, only one of the plazas had been built and the layout of the complex was balanced between public and private space. Residents carried out domestic activities within six modest patio groups and used a round platform in the western plaza, Plaza Colibri, for group rituals.
The construction of two new plazas during the Late Classic period (AD 600-900) dramatically changed the composition of Los Aves, tripling the amount of public space. Dominating the neighborhood was a new, larger plaza, Plaza Tecolote, with monumental, ritual architecture that opened to the south towards the city center, easily accessible to those outside of Los Aves. An increase in population at this time necessitated the construction of more domestic structures within the house groups, reducing the amount of proximate patio spaces. Such activities now took place in a new, smaller plaza, Plaza Loro, located in the northwest of the complex, that contained broad steps for seating.

In the Early Classic period, Los Aves contained equal parts public and private space, while in the Late Classic period public plazas dominated. I argue that as populations grew, public displays of power became increasingly important, and new, larger plazas were built to accommodate these events. This development broadens our understanding of Classic Maya urbanism.