

Participatory urban management in the recovery of neighborhood parks in a Peruvian city

Gestión urbana participativa en la recuperación de parques barriales de una ciudad peruana

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Abstract

This paper aims to explain how participatory urban management influenced the restoration of neighborhood parks in the José Quiñones neighborhood of Chiclayo during 2017 and 2018. A mixed-methods research design was used, considering two universes: a population-based approach, comprised of 3,550 residents, and a spatial approach, comprised of five parks. Using purposive exclusion sampling, the final sample included 302 residents and two parks. Observation techniques, surveys, and in-depth interviews were used to collect data, allowing for analysis of both resident behavior and the physical condition of recreational areas. The results show that participatory urban management, led by residents themselves, was instrumental in the physical and social restoration of Alipio Ponce Vásquez Park. Leadership and collective commitment facilitated the maintenance and sustained intervention of the space, promoting the common good. In contrast, in Eloy Ureta Park, a lack of neighborhood cohesion and internal conflicts hampered organization, resulting in the park's deterioration and an unsafe environment. In conclusion, a direct relationship is confirmed between participatory urban management and the restoration of neighborhood parks, as the active involvement of residents strengthens the social fabric, increases the sense of belonging, and contributes to creating healthier and safer public environments.

Keywords: participatory urban management, neighborhood parks, neighborhood cohesion.

Resumen

Este trabajo tiene como objetivo explicar cómo la gestión urbana participativa ha influido en la recuperación de los parques barriales de la Urbanización José Quiñones en Chiclayo durante 2017 y 2018. Para ello, se empleó un diseño de investigación mixto, considerando dos universos: uno poblacional, compuesto por 3,550 residentes, y otro de espacios, conformado por cinco parques. Mediante un muestreo intencional por exclusión, la muestra final incluyó a 302 habitantes y dos parques. Para la recolección de datos, se utilizaron técnicas de observación, encuestas y entrevistas a profundidad, permitiendo analizar tanto la conducta de los vecinos como el estado físico de las áreas recreativas. Los resultados evidencian que la gestión urbana participativa, liderada por los propios residentes, fue determinante en la recuperación física y social del parque Alipio Ponce Vásquez. El liderazgo y el compromiso colectivo facilitaron el mantenimiento y la intervención sostenida del espacio, promoviendo el bienestar común. En contraste, en el parque Eloy Ureta, la falta de cohesión vecinal y los conflictos internos obstaculizaron la organización, lo que derivó en el deterioro del parque y un ambiente inseguro. En conclusión, se confirma una relación directa entre la gestión urbana participativa y la recuperación de los parques barriales, ya que la implicancia activa de los vecinos fortalece el tejido social, incrementa el sentido de pertenencia y contribuye a crear entornos públicos más saludables y seguros.

Palabras clave: gestión urbana participativa, parques barriales, cohesión vecinal.

Introduction

Cities emerge as a result of urban planning based on criteria of form and functionality, developed by professionals who adhere to guidelines established by governmental authorities. However, these processes often overlook the active participation of citizens. Jane Jacobs challenged this perspective of modern urbanism, emphasizing that the involvement of residents is essential for a city to thrive. From her viewpoint, a city should not be imposed from above; rather, it arises from the collective contributions of its inhabitants, with architecture adapting to their way of life (Jacobs, 1961).

Furthermore, a city is not merely a physical space; it is much more than buildings and streets; it constitutes a community of people. Therefore, when there is a lack of social connection and cohesion, and collective interests are not promoted, individual priorities are prioritized, leading to increased dissatisfaction among urban residents (Fernández, 2008).

Moreover, a neighborhood represents a distinct space within the city, characterized by a controlled scale and population. In this environment, experiences and memories are developed, a sense of belonging is forged, and local organizations are nurtured (Ladizesky, 2011).

Thus, community-driven actions within the neighborhood possess significant potential to transform and revitalize the city, as the residents themselves better understand the particularities and needs of their environment. By organizing into social collectives, they strengthen local proposals that are difficult to achieve in larger urban contexts, where disconnection among neighbors is often greater. In this way, neighborhood inhabitants identify their issues and can support or oppose state initiatives aimed at improvement. When they organize collectively and assume an active role, they are recognized as social actors (Murillo & Schweitzer, 2011). For this reason, any neighborhood intervention must involve residents committed to collective well-being; participation allows them to engage in social, structural, and community decision-making.

Similarly, interactions among residents are strengthened through local groups, which play a key role in decision-making regarding the design and renewal of community public spaces. In the neighborhood context, these spaces include pedestrian pathways, green areas, and outdoor meeting points that nourish coexistence and neighborhood identity. Neighbors gather and socialize. In this context, public space becomes a vital element of the city, integrating diverse people, cultures, activities, and communities, and providing identity to both the city and its neighborhoods. This is evident in neighborhood parks, which function as spaces of freedom where activities of rest, recreation, and social gathering take place (Ladizesky, 2011).

On the other hand, Borja (2013), in a study on public spaces in neighborhoods of Santiago, Chile, identified that their use is related to appropriate structural and configurational conditions, which favor the presence of a diversity of users of different ages and genders. Various activities promoting play, conversation, sports, walking, and resting are observed, as well as an increase in the time spent both in the morning and at night.

Regarding participatory urbanism, this emerging trend in urban management focuses on the active involvement of citizens in transforming the built environment. It arises as a strategy to create urban spaces managed and created from and for the community, strengthening social capital and allowing the ideas, dreams, and needs of residents to materialize in real places that they use, inhabit, and desire to improve their neighborhood (Hernández, 2007).

In Latin America, a more open and inclusive approach has been adopted in city planning and management, promoting processes of participatory urban management. Hernández (2007) highlights that the population has ceased to be a passive actor and has become a key agent in transforming urban space, influencing access to basic services, housing policies, and the conservation of public areas. Complementarily, Miranda (2004), in her work on neighborhood councils, analyzes experiences of social participation in designing urban policies, such as public hearings in Argentina, collaborative processes in the state of Miranda (Venezuela), and participatory mechanisms in Montevideo. These initiatives shape models of urban governance centered on neighborhood action. In the case of Peru, citizen participation has primarily been expressed through participatory budgets, highlighting examples such as Villa El Salvador and Carabayllo—within the framework of the Popular Habitat program—and the Laderas de Chillón project, all under management schemes driven by local communities themselves.

In Chiclayo, there is limited municipal intervention to address certain urban problems, prompting residents to take the initiative and develop actions in their neighborhoods, such as self-organization and the formation of citizen collectives that, although supported by the local government to formalize their activities, often limit themselves to representational and administrative functions, without actively engaging in the design, execution, or

maintenance of urban projects. This lack of coordination with the local government causes neighborhood interventions to not address the real needs of the community, generating resident rejection and affecting the sustainability of public spaces.

Conversely, some residents, tired of waiting for municipal responses, have managed to self-organize to solve their own problems, driven by a new form of citizen participation and organization that reinforces neighborhood unity and collective responsibility in reclaiming public spaces.

Considering all of the above, this research focuses on those cases where the recovered spaces have preserved their character of unrestricted public access, enabling residents and citizens to freely enjoy their facilities. A clear example of this is the neighborhood parks of the José Quiñones Gonzáles urbanization, located in the western sector of the city of Chiclayo, which had long been in conditions of abandonment, deterioration, and insecurity. However, thanks to participatory urban initiatives driven by the residents themselves between 2017 and 2018, these public spaces were revitalized and recovered, highlighting the leadership and commitment of the community in this process.

Methodology

This research adopted a mixed and comprehensive approach, giving equal importance to both quantitative and qualitative data in the analysis process. The studied phenomenon was approached through interviews, observation sheets, and surveys administered to the residents of the area.

The social population comprised 3,550 residents of the José Quiñones Gonzáles Urbanization, from which a sample of 302 individuals was selected using a quota sampling method: 140 inhabitants near the Alipio Ponce park and 162 residents close to the Eloy Ureta park. On the other hand, the structural population initially included five public parks within the urbanization but was intentionally reduced to two, selected by exclusion, as these spaces proved to be the most representative and comparable to each other.

Regarding the surveys, they were administered to residents in the vicinity of each park to understand their perceptions and evaluations of the use of these spaces. The collected data were processed and analyzed using descriptive statistics with Microsoft Excel, allowing for the examination of frequencies and percentage distributions to synthesize information and detect trends in usage patterns according to sociodemographic characteristics. For ease of interpretation, statistical tables and graphs were created.

Interviews conducted with neighborhood leaders and residents were analyzed through a qualitative matrix, in which responses were organized by recurring themes. Relevant excerpts were grouped under categories such as "perception of space," "neighborhood participation," and "community trust." This matrix facilitated a systematic interpretation of the content and allowed for the identification of relationships between discourses and processes of public space appropriation.

For the collection of information on the studied parks, the observation technique was employed using a structured sheet, supplemented with photographic records, pedestrian flow counts, and graphical sketches of the site. Data collection was performed through direct measurements on-site, and for analysis, digital tools such as AutoCAD and GIS (Geographic Information System) software were used. These resources allowed for the extraction of precise data on areas, surfaces, percentages of green areas, adjacent urban profiles, and facilities present in the parks, thus facilitating an objective characterization of spatial conditions.

Concerning shadow analysis, a mapping of tree species was conducted using satellite images. Subsequently, with SketchUp software, the distribution of trees within each park was modeled to conduct a detailed study of sunlight exposure and shadow projection at two times of day throughout the four seasons of the year.

Finally, to develop a physical-spatial diagnosis of the parks, an instrument based on morphological criteria, usage, and social interaction was applied, designed to evaluate places with low urban community dynamics. It is noteworthy that this methodology was based on the approach proposed by architect Rangel (2002), who establishes the conditions that public spaces must meet to promote activities of social cohesion. For this research, this methodology was adapted to incorporate specific criteria and current regulations applicable to the analyzed neighborhood parks.

Results

A. Physical analysis of public spaces

The connectivity indicator evaluates the degree of integration of public space with the road network of the urbanization. In the case of Alipio Ponce Park, following the physical intervention carried out in 2018, there was a notable increase in both the number of users and circulation within the space. This increased influx favored

recreational activities and significantly contributed to the revitalization of the urban fabric in the José Quiñones Gonzáles neighborhood, thanks to the appropriate connection between its streets and parks.

In contrast, Eloy Ureta Park has limited connectivity, as its primary use has been reduced to serving as a transit route to shorten distances to major arterial roads. This weak integration, combined with its physical deterioration, has led to a considerable decrease in appropriation by neighbors and has weakened its role within the local urban structure.

Figure 1

Distribution of the Alipio Ponce Park plan and the Eloy Ureta Park plan



Note. Area of Alipio Ponce Park 805 m², area of Eloy Ureta Park 7,470 m²

Edges

This indicator evaluates the elements that define public space in relation to its urban boundaries. In Alipio Ponce Park, after its recovery in 2018, a favorable configuration of its edges was observed: 74.10% of the facades are composed of doors and windows, favoring visual and social interaction. Only 25.10% corresponds to opaque walls, and there are no vacant lots, contributing to the safety and activity of the streets. Furthermore, the road section was improved by incorporating ramps that facilitate accessibility for all individuals.

In contrast, Eloy Ureta Park presents a less favorable configuration: only 32.5% of the facade area has doors and windows, while 67.5% consists of opaque walls. Additionally, 25% of the park's boundary corresponds to a vacant edge designated for parking, and 75% of the surrounding streets lack pavement. These conditions hinder the connection between the park and its immediate surroundings, limit neighbor interaction, and weaken the relationship with the green space.

Furniture

In Alipio Ponce Park, neighborhood management improved both the design and maintenance of urban furniture, which is in good condition, with durable and high-quality finishes. The lighting installed in the park and its pedestrian accesses contributes to creating a safe and comfortable environment. Additionally, the park includes spaces for social gathering, such as seating and a pergola, as well as areas for congregation and collective activities, highlighting the grotto of the Virgin and the civic area. However, it lacks a zone designated for children's play. These conditions promote safety, community use, and strengthen social ties.

On the other hand, the furniture in Eloy Ureta Park, mainly made of concrete, is in fair condition, showing clear signs of lack of maintenance, especially in the sports platform and green areas, which appear deteriorated and neglected. This park also lacks a children's play area, limiting its use and reducing opportunities for social interaction among neighbors.

Figure 2
Current condition of Alipio Ponce Park



Figure 3
Current condition of Eloy Ureta Park



Green space

This indicator refers to the percentage of public area covered by tree mass, taking into account the volume generated by the foliage. When this coverage exceeds 10%, the space is considered to have an optimal level of vegetation. In Alipio Ponce Park, following the participatory intervention process, the proportion of green coverage drastically decreased, reaching only 1.2%. This reduction was due to the removal of five *Ponciana* trees, approximately 20 years old, which implied the loss of one of the main environmental qualities of the space. This loss negatively affected user experience, both visually and in terms of the park's habitability.

In contrast, Eloy Ureta Park presents a green space of 18.17%, falling within the parameters considered optimal for vegetative coverage.

Figure 4
Green space of Eloy Ureta Park



Note. Image extracted from Google Earth

Solar protection

This indicator evaluates spaces that provide coverage against solar exposure, either through tall vegetation or physical elements incorporated into the park's design. In Alipio Ponce Park, following the recovery carried out in 2018, five Ponciana trees were removed, significantly reducing shaded areas. According to the modeling software used for shadow calculations, coverage decreased by more than 50%. Currently, the constructed pergola is the main source of shade, providing up to 21% coverage, especially in the afternoon during summer, while the least shade is recorded in the morning during spring, at only 11%. Direct field observation confirmed that the pergola is the most used shaded space by neighbors.

Conversely, in Eloy Ureta Park, the analysis of the percentage of shade at different times revealed greater coverage in the afternoon, reaching 24% during spring. In contrast, the lowest level of shade was recorded in the morning during summer, at just 12%. During autumn, winter, and spring, morning shade remained consistent.

Uses and activities

This indicator recognizes neighbor behavior in the use of public space to identify their modes of appropriation and frequency of use after the physical recovery in 2018. In Alipio Ponce Park, passive use predominates, with conversation being the most common activity, representing 32.1% of interactions, with the pergola being the most utilized spot for this activity. Conversely, physical exercise has the lowest incidence, at just 1.5%, a result related to the park's small scale. Regarding usage frequency, 38.23% of people engage in daily activities, and 36.90% visit the park weekly.

In the case of Eloy Ureta Park, active use predominates, with play being the most frequent activity at 24.2%, while biking accounts for the lowest percentage at 3.2%. Regarding frequency, 70.17% of neighbors engage in daily activities in the park, while 14.50% visit it monthly.

These results highlight clear differences in usage dynamics between the two parks. Alipio Ponce Park functions as a space oriented toward social gathering and relaxation, focused on passive activities, which responds to its design, scale, and furniture. In contrast, despite its deterioration, Eloy Ureta Park maintains an active recreational function, indicating a greater everyday appropriation, albeit with limitations in the diversity of uses.

Figure 5
Flows and activities in Alipio Ponce Park



Note. Greater intensity of pedestrian flows towards the pergola located in the central area

B. Participatory urban management

Communication methods to promote participatory urban management

In Alipio Ponce Vásquez neighborhood park, 58.6% of surveyed residents indicated that participatory urbanism initiatives were primarily disseminated through door-to-door visits; additionally, 20.7% mentioned the use of social media, 11.4% cited loudspeakers, and 9.3% referred to general assemblies. Conversely, in Eloy Ureta Park, 59.3% indicated that loudspeakers in busy areas were the most utilized method, followed by 29.0% who mentioned door-to-door visits, and 11.7% who participated in general assemblies held in the park, where megaphones were used to extend the reach.

These results demonstrate that, in both neighborhood parks, the most effective and employed communication channels to promote participatory urban management were direct and community-based methods, facilitating close interaction and involvement of neighbors.

Figure 6
Neighborhood councils of the José Quiñones Urbanization



Note. Images provided by the Central Committee for Urban Works José Quiñones Gonzales

Initial problems for neighborhood organization

Initial conflicts in both neighborhood organizations reflect common weaknesses in participatory processes. In Alipio Ponce Park, problems were primarily organizational, with difficulties in reaching agreements affecting 35.7% of participants, as well as coordination issues reported by 29.3%. In contrast, in Eloy Ureta Park, the greatest challenges were attitudinal and structural, with a lack of initiative and critical vision prevailing at 33.3%, along with leadership-related issues that affected 27.8% of residents.

Social commitment

A greater social commitment was evident in Alipio Ponce Park, where neighborhood participation was characterized by cooperation and collective responsibility. In this case, 54.3% of neighbors rated social commitment as good, while 28.6% considered it excellent, highlighting collaboration and task fulfillment. In contrast, in Eloy Ureta Park, a weak organizational culture was observed, marked by apathy, noncompliance, and a lack of active participation, as 49.2% of neighbors rated commitment as poor and 31.5% considered it fair. This difference suggests that the success of a neighborhood organization largely depends on the real and ongoing involvement of its members.

Leadership in participation

Leadership proved decisive for organizational success. In Alipio Ponce Park, an active and effective leader achieved concrete objectives; 55.7% of neighbors rated the leadership as excellent for accomplishing the park's recovery, while 37.9% considered it good for fostering neighbor integration. In contrast, in Eloy Ureta Park, the absence of solid and representative leadership hindered the consolidation of collective efforts. There, 45.7% of neighbors rated the leader's management as fair, 30.2% indicated that no true leader existed, and 24.1% considered it poor due to a lack of concrete results in the park's recovery.

Figure 7

Meeting of the Coordinating Team of "Alipio Ponce Vásquez" Park with the Mayor of Chiclayo — 2018



Note. Images provided by the Coordinating Team for Urban Works José Quiñones Gonzales

Social impact following the improvement of the neighborhood park

In Alipio Ponce Vásquez Park, the social impact following the recovery of the public space is perceived as clearly favorable, according to 85.0% of respondents. Among the most highlighted aspects are increased social cohesion, strengthened mutual support, and an enhanced sense of safety. However, 15.0% rated it as fair, attributing this to uneven participation in neighborhood activities.

In contrast, in Eloy Ureta Park, not only was the opportunity to recover the space lost, but the process also generated internal divisions that weakened neighborhood organization. In this case, 58.6% of residents noted that the impact was null due to the lack of project completion, while 41.4% rated it as negative, highlighting internal conflicts and a lack of unity among residents.

These results illustrate that, beyond the physical outcome, the participatory process can generate profound social impacts, which can be both positive and negative, depending on community dynamics and the management of neighborly relations.

Figure 8

Photos of Alipio Ponce Park before its intervention, year 2017



Note. Images provided by the Coordinating Team for Urban Works José Quiñones Gonzales

Discussion

Citizen participation initiatives guided the development of this research from an approach that integrates both social and urban phenomena, a dynamic that is becoming increasingly relevant today. In this context, emerging urbanism arises from social interactions, manifesting in self-organization processes that tend to be collective and continue to expand through support networks. Therefore, citizen participation plays a fundamental role in actively shaping the city (Freire, 2009).

The active involvement of residents in the interventions carried out in neighborhood parks not only physically transformed these spaces but also strengthened their sense of belonging to the environment and stimulated daily use. As Ladizesky (2011) states, “the square, as the primary collective space of the neighborhood, only acquires its meaning when it is appropriated by the population” (p. 81).

Moreover, organized community interventions allow for significant changes in the quality of public space, far beyond what individual and isolated actions can achieve. This is evident when comparing Alipio Ponce and Eloy Ureta parks: the former exhibits better spatial conditions that promote neighborhood use, while the latter shows signs of deterioration and neglect due to scattered interventions. As noted by Ladizesky (2011), the absence of suitable furniture and poor layout lead to discomfort, reducing continuous use, contributing to deterioration, and increasing the sense of insecurity in these spaces.

Similarly, the configuration of the boundaries surrounding the parks— the edges— significantly impacts the experience of the space. In the case of Alipio Ponce Park, its surroundings consist of houses that face the green area, promoting interaction between residents and the public space. This arrangement encourages daily use of the park and creates a smooth transition between private realms and community life. Soft edges activate the environment and infuse vitality into the transitional zones between public and private (Gehl, 2010). In this context, the constant presence of residents in the park fosters vitality and dynamism, as well as reinforces the sense of safety due to their active role in observing and caring for the public space (Jacobs, 1961). This highlights the importance of edge design in the dynamics and safety of public space.

Most activities in the analyzed neighborhood parks occur during the day, leading users to seek refuge from the sun and thermal relief, making shade—especially that provided by trees—essential. In Alipio Ponce Park, the pruning of large trees during its construction eliminated shaded areas, so a covered pergola was incorporated as a solution. In contrast, Eloy Ureta Park retains lush trees only in an area maintained by active neighbors, while other sections lack shade and remain abandoned. As Gehl (2010) points out, public spaces must consider adverse climatic conditions and include elements that protect from heat, rain, and wind, with green areas being key to enhancing the urban experience and mitigating negative environmental impacts.

On the other hand, Montoya (2018) argues that institutional distrust generally undermines citizen participation, rendering collective processes ineffective; however, this position is not supported in the present analysis. In this case, although it is acknowledged that this distrust can hinder participation—evidenced by 59.3% of Alipio Ponce residents reporting they felt no municipal support, and only 17.1% expressing concern about it—this did not prevent them from successfully carrying out their participatory project and completely recovering the park. In fact, 78.6% of respondents rated the park's structural quality as excellent, highlighting aspects such as its beauty, safety, lighting, and high community use, while 21.4% considered it good.

Finally, the findings align with the theories of public space (Gehl, 2010; Jacobs, 1961), which assert that these places promote safe urban life through collective appropriation. Accordingly, 85.0% of respondents reported a positive impact on their daily lives, highlighting increased neighborhood cohesion and a sense of safety due to mutual acquaintance among residents.

Conclusions

Participatory urban management significantly influences the recovery of Alipio Ponce Vásquez and Eloy Ureta neighborhood parks, located in the José Quiñones Urbanization in Chiclayo, during the period of 2017-2018. The results show a favorable impact in the case of Alipio Ponce Park, thanks to sustained management, social commitment, and active participation from neighbors throughout the process, oriented toward a common goal. In contrast, recovery was not achieved in Eloy Ureta Park due to various negative social factors that hindered community organization, which posed an obstacle to the development of participatory urbanism.

Additionally, it is clear that there is a direct relationship between the recovery of neighborhood parks and participatory urban management. When the community successfully implements effective organizational and management mechanisms, conducive conditions for the revitalization of public spaces are created. This relationship is confirmed by evidence collected during fieldwork, which shows how the active involvement of the community allowed them to recover and transform their environment, with Alipio Ponce Vásquez Park serving as a clear example of this collective process.

Ultimately, municipalities become key partners that collaborate with cohesive and committed citizen collectives to achieve common goals aimed at improving quality of life. This is highlighted by the residents of Alipio Ponce Vásquez Park, who recognize that municipal assistance was possible due to the persistence of the neighborhood leader, constant citizen participation in relevant forums, and the willingness of both parties to coordinate and work together in the recovery of public space.

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