

Women's uses and appropriations of public spaces: a case study of two squares in Vila Velha-ES

Usos e apropriações femininas em espaços públicos: estudo de caso em duas praças de Vila Velha-ES

Usos y apropiaciones femeninas en espacios públicos: estudio de caso en dos plazas de Vila Velha-ES

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Abstract

Cities have historically favored the male experience, resulting in public spaces where gender inequality is perpetuated, with women facing social and spatial barriers that



hinder urban uses and appropriation. The relationship of women with public spaces is influenced by several factors, however, the design and urban morphology can facilitate this interaction. This article, therefore, aims to understand the interrelationship between women and public spaces, taking as a case study, two squares located in different socioeconomic contexts of the city of Vila Velha (ES). This is an applied research, structured in three stages: contextualization of the theme, physical-morphological analysis, and behavioral analysis. In addition to the data collection in the field, behavioral mapping techniques, people counting, and interviews were applied. The results reveal that female uses and appropriations in squares are often related to activities of care with children, elderly or pets. The time devoted to leisure occurs simultaneously with the responsibilities still assigned to women. It is noteworthy that specific physical and social characteristics of each context also influence the relationship of women with squares. These observations indicate the need for urban planning that is more sensitive to the female gender and directed to public spaces of permanence.

Keywords: Gender; women; public space; squares; urban appropriation.

Resumo

As cidades historicamente privilegiaram a experiência masculina, resultando em espaços públicos onde perpetua a desigualdade de gênero, com as mulheres enfrentando barreiras sociais e espaciais que dificultam os usos e as apropriações urbanas. A relação das mulheres com os espaços públicos é influenciada por diversos fatores, entretanto, o desenho e a morfologia urbana podem facilitar essa interação. O presente artigo, portanto, busca compreender a inter-relação entre as mulheres e os espaços públicos, tendo como estudo de caso duas praças situadas em contextos socioeconômicos distintos do município de Vila Velha (ES). Trata-se de uma pesquisa aplicada, estruturada em três etapas: Contextualização do tema; Análises físico-morfológicas e Análises comportamentais. Além da coleta de dados em campo, foram aplicadas as técnicas de mapeamento comportamental, contagem de pessoas e entrevistas. Os resultados revelam que os usos e as apropriações femininas em praças frequentemente estão relacionados a atividades de cuidado com crianças, idosos ou animais de estimação. O tempo destinado ao lazer ocorre simultaneamente às responsabilidades ainda atribuídas às mulheres. Destaca-se que características físicas e sociais específicas de cada contexto também influenciam na relação das mulheres com as praças. Tais observações indicam a necessidade de um planejamento urbano mais sensível ao gênero feminino e direcionado aos espaços públicos de permanência.

Palavras-chave: Gênero; mulheres; espaço público; praças; apropriações urbanas

Resumen

Las ciudades han privilegiado históricamente la experiencia masculina, dando lugar a espacios públicos donde perpetúa la desigualdad de género, con las mujeres



enfrentando barreras sociales y espaciales que dificultan los usos y apropiaciones urbanas. La relación de las mujeres con los espacios públicos está influenciada por varios factores, sin embargo, el diseño y la morfología urbana pueden facilitar esta interacción. El presente artículo, por lo tanto, busca comprender la interrelación entre las mujeres y los espacios públicos, teniendo como estudio de caso dos plazas situadas en contextos socioeconómicos distintos del municipio de Vila Velha (ES). Se trata de una investigación aplicada, estructurada en tres etapas: Contextualización del tema; Análisis físico-morfológicos y análisis conductuales. Además de la recogida de datos en el campo, se aplicaron las técnicas de mapeo comportamental, recuento de personas y entrevistas. Los resultados revelan que las utilidades y apropiaciones femeninas en las plazas están frecuentemente relacionadas con actividades de cuidado de niños, ancianos o animales. El tiempo destinado al ocio se produce simultáneamente a las responsabilidades aún asignadas a las mujeres. Destaca que las características físicas y sociales específicas de cada contexto también influyen en la relación de las mujeres con los puestos de trabajo. Tales observaciones indican la necesidad de una planificación urbana más sensible al género femenino y también dirigido a espacios públicos de permanencia.

Palabras clave: Género; mujeres; espacio público; plazas; apropiaciones urbanas

INTRODUCTION

When analyzing the origin of the word “city” in the Neo-Latin languages, it is identified that it is a feminine noun. In literary contexts, some cities are symbolically portrayed as female figures, representing the mother, the young woman, the lover and the prostitute, such as Rome, called “mother of arms and of the law”, and Paris, described as young and glamorous (Risério, 2015, p. 65). However, despite the word ‘city’ being a feminine noun in Neolatin languages and the use of feminine figures of speech to describe it, in practice, cities are not welcoming to women, especially in their movements, uses, and stays in public spaces.

The city is practically masculine because it favors and reinforces traditional gender roles, establishing men’s experiences as the standard and neglecting the barriers it creates for women in urban daily life (Kern, 2021). The difference in power positions between men and women stems from a patriarchal society where women are objects of male oppression (Saffioti, 2015). This segregation of space based on gender makes it necessary to adopt a perspective in architecture and urban planning that is more sensitive to social inequalities, to address and reduce such disparities.

Urbanism, therefore, has never been neutral; it is rooted in a patriarchal capitalist vision that prioritizes the productive activities assigned to men. As a result, reproductive, caregiving, community, and sociopolitical activities continue to be ignored. To mitigate this gender disparity, an urbanism grounded in critical



analysis and recognition of reality based on women's experiences is necessary, which Montaner and Muxí (2021) refer to as feminist urbanism. According to the authors, the solution lies in the perspective of gender equality in urban design, considering that public space must be designed to be accessible to all generations and social classes.

Access to public and social spaces varies based on intersectional factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ability, and sexuality, influencing freedom of movement and the ability to enjoy these spaces (Montaner; Muxí, 2021). The city, as a product of various forms of oppression and inequality, is not designed for groups such as women, Black people, Indigenous people, LGBTQIA+ individuals, and low-income populations, reflecting the power dynamics that structure society (Berth, 2023).

The female body, for example, is often seen as unwelcome and subject to restrictions. Although we may have the freedom to move about, it is not the same freedom and security that men enjoy in the city. While movement is possible, the quality of this access is often overlooked. This creates a false sense of freedom because, in practice, not all urban spaces are accessible to all social groups due to implicit social norms and codes (Berth, 2023).

It is important to highlight that women face a lack of security in public spaces. In addition to concerns about common crimes, there is also the sexualization and violation of their bodies. From this perspective, it is crucial that urban planning considers the experiences of women and other vulnerable social groups, as gender issues are intrinsically linked to ethnic and social inequalities that increase their vulnerability to urban violence.

While sociocultural factors and individual characteristics play a crucial role in how women use and engage with public spaces, it should not be overlooked that spatial elements can enhance interaction with these spaces. Thus, in this context, the present study aims to understand the interrelationship between women and public squares, considering that gender equality is also a priority recognized by the United Nations (ONU, 2015) in its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), outlined in the 2030 Agenda.

The study is of an applied, exploratory, and descriptive nature, adopting a quantitative-qualitative approach. It was divided into three stages: 1) Contextualization of the theme; 2) Physical-morphological analysis; and 3) Behavioral analysis. Based on the literature review and the parameters of the UN-Habitat (2020) public space evaluation tool, physical-morphological elements, both internal and external to the square, were identified as potentially influencing women's relationship with public space. In the third stage, for the behavioral analysis, techniques such as behavioral mapping, people counting (Gehl; Svarre, 2018), and interviews with women frequenting the squares under study were employed.



The spatial scope of this study includes two squares in the municipality of Vila Velha (ES), located in residential neighborhoods with high population density but in distinct socioeconomic contexts. The squares are situated in the Itapuã and Santa Mônica neighborhoods, within the Grande Centro and Grande Ibes regions, respectively. Notably, both squares underwent renovations between 2022 and 2023, have an area ranging from 2,500 to 3,000 square meters, and share similar physical characteristics, equipment quantity, and diversity.

Women and public space

With the arrival of industry, there was a separation between reproductive and productive work, complicated by long hours and work rhythms, resulting in the cultural emphasis that reproduction is an exclusively female function (Tilly; Scott, 1989). A sexual division of labor was established: while women were responsible for reproductive and unpaid work at home, men took on productive and paid work and occupied public and political spaces. This division, based on biological determinism, consolidated a capitalist and patriarchal society, founded on the binary idea of feminine and masculine essences, which defines social characteristics and roles according to these categories. This perspective reinforces the notion that “the place of the female was the ‘natural’ place in the family, in the domestic sphere, in contrast to male spaces” (Aboim, p. 112-113, 2012).

The role of women was challenged by urban growth and migration to urban centers during the Industrial Revolution. Kern (2021) describes how the rapid expansion of cities in Europe blurred social classes and genders, challenging contemporary norms by allowing high-class white women to be mistaken for ‘public women’ or impoverished women. To maintain their social status, these women began to be accompanied by men or older women.

The solution was to create public spaces for women, such as department stores in Paris in 1870. Although these spaces allowed for the presence of women in the public sphere, they were more a response to the consumption needs of capitalism than a genuine pursuit of independence (Kern, 2021). This reflects capitalist logic, where “everything is turned into merchandise”, including urban spaces, which are viewed as places of consumption (Gonzaga, 2021, p. 27).

Understanding the context of Latin American countries is essential, as colonization and slavery created a reality distinct from that of Europe. In the early nineteenth century, the Brazilian elite adopted the lifestyle of the Portuguese aristocracy and European ideas, seeking to be “civilized” like Europeans (D’Incao, 1997). This quest resulted in the imposition of rigid rules for spaces, intended to suppress social interactions that did not align with the ideal of civilization. The poor women resisted these norms, because, according to the author:



This process unfolded with significant resistance from the members of the lower classes, including women, who fought inch by inch for their right to urban space. It should be noted that, for many, the street became a place akin to home where they ate, slept, and earned their livelihood. Women also gathered in squares and plazas to converse, discuss, or socialize, and they often congregated at fountains and water sources, frequently contending for their turn. As the primary caregivers for their families, the freedom of movement and presence in streets and squares was crucial for poor women, who daily improvised informal roles and forged social bonds (Soihet, 1997, p. 366-367).

It is crucial to analyze gender, class, and race together, considering that Black women were already circulating in the streets even before the abolition of slavery. Risério (2015, p. 215) highlights that these women struggled to purchase their freedom and later to support their families. According to Rolnik (1989), the streets were also territories occupied by the enslaved, who performed their daily tasks there. Black women, often involved in the food trade, worked as vendors in the markets, demonstrating their presence and activity in the city's public spaces.

In Brazil, the negative perception of “public women” parallels that in the European context, where the prostitute was viewed as the antithesis of the family woman who stayed at home (Del Priore, 2020, p. 177). At the turn of the 20th century, Brazilian women also played a significant role in factory labor, confronting unhealthy working conditions, low wages, sexual harassment, and prejudice (Del Priore, 2020).

According to Biroli (2018), the sexual division of labor in contemporary society is constantly evolving and affects women collectively, rather than merely on an individual level. Oppression extends beyond the domestic sphere; issues such as income, free time, sexuality, and political participation are also impacted. The association of women with the domestic sphere and the organization of cities restrict their access to leisure, culture, and knowledge, thereby limiting their creativity, and maintaining them in subordinate roles to men (Calió, 2017). Most decision-makers are men, who determine everything from policy to housing planning, and from the location of schools to public transportation, often without considering the impact on women's daily lives (Kern, 2021).

Men and women experience cities differently, with distinct needs and patterns of movement, which also reflect the levels of freedom and security they experience. Women often feel that their presence is unwelcome and have their freedom of movement constrained by urban and gender-based violence (Berth, 2023). Female mobility is influenced by safety concerns, making the city more accessible during the day, when these concerns are reduced (Del Valle, 1997). However, the freedom



to move about is largely theoretical, constrained by implicit social norms that limit women's access to and presence in certain urban spaces (Berth, 2023).

In response to the realization that traditional urban planning does not address women's needs, academics began to explore alternatives that would give voice to these demands, leading to the study of feminist urbanism, or urbanism from a gender perspective. Feminist urbanism, which gained prominence in the late twentieth century, particularly in Europe, is associated with feminist geography, as demonstrated in Gill Valentine's work in 1989. Although recognized by scholars such as Leslie Kern and Zaida Muxí, the concept remains relatively new and not widely disseminated. The discourse on this topic varies by region: in Europe, it is more integrated into urban planning, focusing on critiques of mechanisms of domination and new forms of social participation. In Latin America, where the debate is more recent, research tends to concentrate on urban design and safety data, with less emphasis on patriarchal dynamics.

The concept of "feminist urbanism", with this precise terminology, is still emerging among gender and city researchers. However, it was more definitively established through the work of the *Colectivo Col·lectiu Punt 6*, along with Catalan-Argentine urbanist Zaida Muxí. The Collective defines feminist urbanism from a gender perspective, recognizing that urbanism and urban planning are not neutral, but reflect the values of a patriarchal society (Helene, 2017). This approach acknowledges that urban spaces are designed to perpetuate this model of domination. Feminist urbanism, therefore, advocates for people-centered urban decisions, considering a wide diversity of identities and experiences. The aim is to create spaces that foster community life, avoid segregation, and promote individual autonomy, proximity to services, diversity, urban vitality, and the representation of different groups.

Public spaces must be democratic and ensure safety and accessibility, particularly for the most vulnerable groups. However, these spaces are often neglected in favor of private leisure areas. As a result, public spaces tend to become deserted, which increases the perception of insecurity. Jacobs (2014, p. 30) observes that "when people fear the streets, they tend to use them less, which in turn makes these streets even more unsafe." This same phenomenon occurs in urban squares, where fear of violence and a sense of insecurity lead citizens to avoid public spaces, thereby perpetuating the cycle of insecurity.

When discussing insecurity in public spaces, it is essential to consider the specific fear women have of frequenting them, particularly regarding harassment. Given that data from the research conducted by the YouGov Institute and published by Brasil..., (2016) indicate that Brazil holds a prominent position in terms of harassment in public spaces, it is crucial to recognize that gender inequality affects women in diverse and non-homogeneous ways. Women remain the majority in



activities involving the care of children, the elderly, and people with disabilities, both paid and unpaid.

They are also predominant in informal jobs, such as street vendors and recyclable material collectors (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2015). During their leisure time, women often dedicate themselves to unfinished household tasks, and when they frequent public spaces, they often do so accompanied by dependents, such as children or the elderly. This indicates that women's leisure time is often centered around caregiving, reflecting a dynamic of overburdened responsibilities (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2015).

Jacobs (2014) discusses urban safety, emphasizing the influence of natural surveillance, the idea of seeing and being seen. The author addresses aspects such as the importance of urban vitality, advocating for the diversity of uses and the circulation of people on the streets, whether at different times or to create a more attractive and safer city. Gehl (2014) highlights that the sense of security is crucial for people to feel comfortable and enjoy urban spaces. He argues that to make cities more functional and appealing, both perceived and real security must be ensured.

The constant presence of people in public spaces contributes to safety and enhances the value of these areas. The author also asserts that a vibrant city is one that encourages the use of public spaces for walking, cycling, and social gatherings. When well-designed in terms of both physical and aesthetic quality, these spaces not only facilitate recreational activities but also foster social interaction and community life, making urban living more diverse and enriching (Gehl, 2014).

Public space is crucial for women to carry out reproductive tasks that are often performed outside the home environment. However, these spaces are frequently inadequate for such activities, lacking quality sidewalks and appropriate signage, and are not designed to accommodate people with wheelchairs or strollers. Safety in public spaces is directly related to the diversity of activities in neighborhoods and is not achieved through segregation with fences and walls, but through active spaces that are continuously frequented by people (Muxí, 2008).

From this perspective, it is necessary to address insecurity and gender inequality on different scales. The United Nations Office for Project Services developed the Parks for All: Suggestions for Gender-Responsive Urban Parks (UNOPS, 2020) guide, which provides guidelines for creating safer and more inclusive spaces. The document highlights the importance of participation, emphasizing the need to diversify participatory processes to include minority groups in planning, an approach that the authors refer to as gender-sensitive planning.

Integrating public management, public policies, and urban planning is crucial for achieving these goals on a macro scale. Another relevant aspect addressed



is Spaces and equipment, which recommends the inclusion of courts for various uses and age groups, shaded seating areas for those accompanying children, and adapted family bathrooms. The guide also emphasizes the need to create spaces that foster social interaction, relaxation, and physical activity, ensuring comfort and safety for women and caregivers in general.

In addition to these guidelines, it is imperative to assess the quality of public spaces, with a specific focus on squares, which are the subject of this work. Well-designed spaces, equipped with appropriate facilities and meeting community needs, are essential for ensuring their effective and inclusive use. Therefore, the UN-Habitat (2020) *Public space site-specific assessment: guidelines to achieve quality public spaces at the neighborhood level* tool is used in this study. This tool aims to help architects understand the five dimensions of a quality public space: safety, inclusion, connectivity, accessibility, and sustainability.

Female uses and appropriations: a case study of Agenor Moreira and Haroldo Rosa squares in Vila Velha (ES)

The municipality of Vila Velha is in the Metropolitan Region of Grande Vitória, in the state of Espírito Santo and is home to about 467,772 inhabitants, covering an area of 210,225 km² (Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística, 2022). In this research, two squares in the city Vila Velha were selected as a case study, both located in densely populated residential neighborhoods (neighborhoods Itapuã and Santa Monica- identified in Figure 1), renovated in 2022 and 2023, with similar physical characteristics, but different socioeconomic contexts. The square Agenor Moreira (2,540 m² or approximately 27,357 square feet) is in the neighborhood of Itapuã, with high per capita income and population density (185 inhabitants per hectare), where women represent 53% of the neighborhood's population (Figure 2). Haroldo Rosa square (2,880 m² or approximately 31,017 square feet) is in the neighborhood of Santa Mônica, a low-middle class neighborhood with high population density (180 inhabitants per hectare), where women represent 54.4% of the neighborhood's population (Figure 3).

It is noteworthy that, in 2019, the municipality of Vila Velha received external funding from the Fund for the Development of the Plata Basin (Vila Velha, 2019 approved by the Federal Government and allocated to works of the Urban Requalification and Environmental Improvements Program (Vila Velha, 2019). Using this funding, the municipality managed to requalify approximately 20 squares in a short time (Municipal Management 2021-2024). The projects were developed mainly by the technical teams of the Structural Works and Projects Secretariat and the Urban Development Secretariat, without establishing a participatory process with the residents of the involved neighborhoods.



a) Localização de Vila Velha -ES

b) Mapa de localização dos bairros

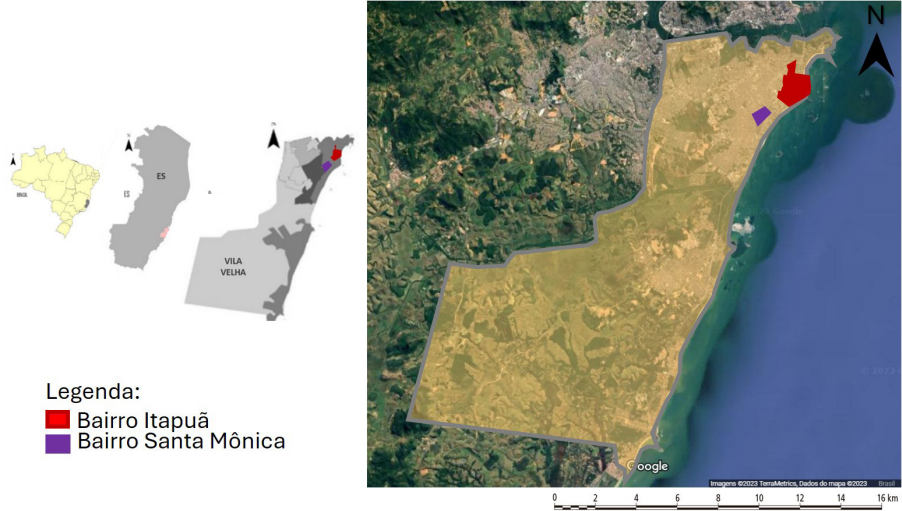


Figure 1: Map showing the locations of the neighborhoods Itapuã and Santa Mônica, respectively. Source: Authors, with the assistance of Google Earth, 2023.

a) Vista de satélite do bairro Itapuã

b) Vista de satélite da praça Agenor Moreira



Figure 2: Map showing the location of Agenor Moreira Square. Source: Authors, with the assistance of Google Earth, 2023.

a) Vista de satélite do bairro Santa Mônica

b) Vista de satélite da praça Haroldo Rosa



Figure 3: Map showing the location of Haroldo Rosa Square. Source: Authors, with the assistance of Google Earth, 2023.



The *Parque para todas e todos: sugestões para a implantação de parques urbanos com perspectiva de gênero* (UNOPS, 2020) emphasizes that the development of infrastructure projects must ensure the equitable participation of all groups in decision-making, including legal consultations and active listening to their needs. Gender-sensitive planning aims to ensure that everyone has a voice and equal opportunities in these processes, with meetings held in accessible locations and attention given to the diversity of identities. Participation is also essential in monitoring and evaluating the implemented measures, to identify problems and find solutions.

Before the renovation, both Agenor Moreira (S1) and Haroldo Rosa Square (S2) had broken equipment and furniture, which was not suitable for use, and showed signs of abandonment and vandalism. They were mostly used as passageways and for walking pets. With the renovation, Agenor Moreira Square (S1) received new amenities, including a pet area, a playground, a renovated sports court, LED lighting, a new sidewalk, an access ramp, bike racks, molded concrete benches, chess tables and an artistic mural (Figure 4). These improvements brought significant benefits to the site, increased the usage and appropriation of space, and contributed to greater urban vitality. On the other hand, Haroldo Rosa Square (S2), located in a low-income neighborhood, underwent renovations that improved the infrastructure of the playground, the sports court, and the outdoor gym; however, the changes were less extensive (Figure 5).

AGENOR MOREIRA SQUARE (S1) BEFORE AND AFTER RENOVATIONS

a) ANTES (2020)

b) DEPOIS (2023)

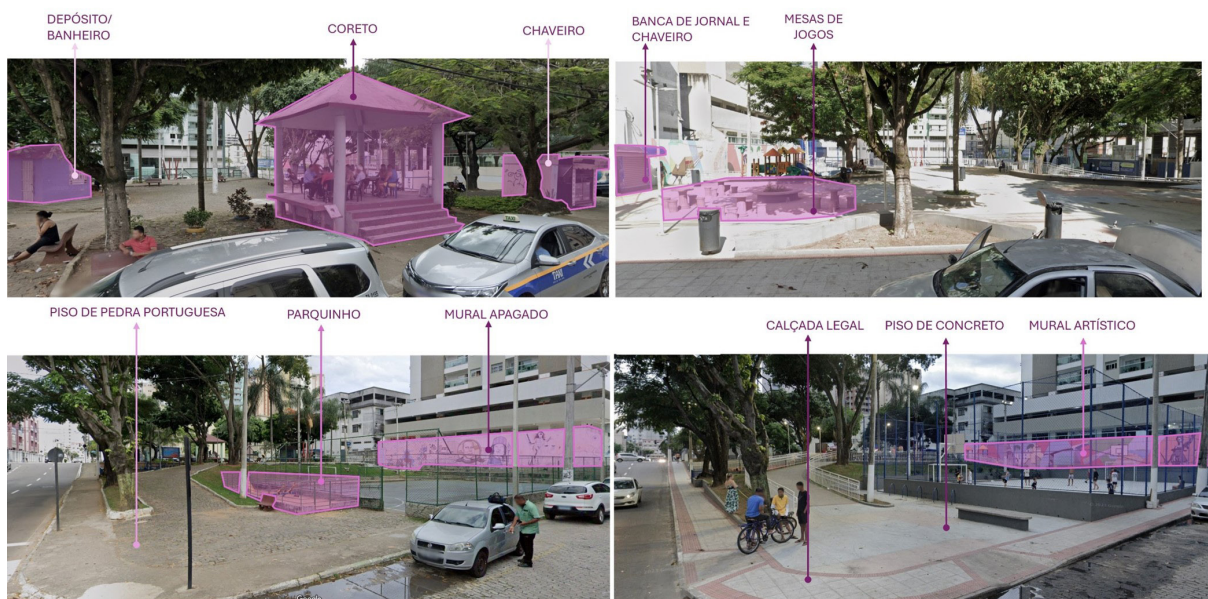


Figure 4: Images identifying the interventions made in the Agenor Moreira Square.
Source: Authors, with assistance of Google Street View, 2023.



HAROLDO ROSA SQUARE (S2) BEFORE AND AFTER RENOVATIONS

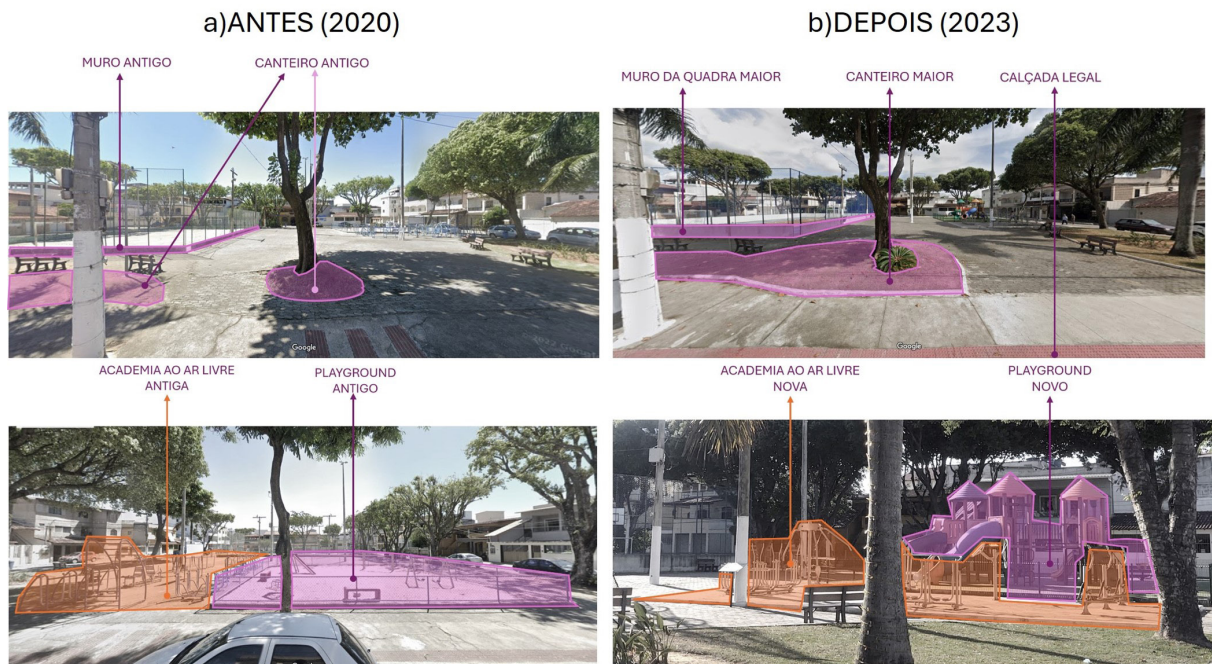


Figure 5: Images identifying the interventions made in the Haroldo Rosa Square. Source: Authors, with assistance of Google Street View, 2023.

The physical-morphological survey was based on UN-Habitat's public spaces assessment tool (2020) which is divided into five dimensions: Use and users; Access and accessibility; Amenities and furniture; and Comfort and Safety. Analysis parameters were established based on these dimensions, covering both internal and external aspects of the square. Social interaction in public space is closely linked to opportunities for access and use, which depends on a coherent internal design as well as an adequate external design — referring to the streets and traffic in the area (Alex, p. 126, 2008). The integration with the urban fabric, which refers to the connection between the various spaces, including the square and its surroundings, is one of its original fundamental functions (Alex, 2008).

When analyzing the dimension Use and users, which is influenced by the external design, it is observed that both squares are in residential neighborhoods. However, in Agenor Moreira Square (S1), multifamily dwellings predominate, with buildings of several floors, whereas in Haroldo Rosa Square (S2), single-family dwellings of up to three floors are predominant (Figure 6). Although both squares are predominantly surrounded by residential areas, S1 also features some commercial and mixed-use establishments, as illustrated in Figure 6.

Jacobs (2014) argues that diversity of uses is essential for the vitality of urban spaces. She contends that the combination of residential, commercial and cultural activities in an area contributes to the security and dynamism of neighborhoods. Public spaces that accommodate a variety of functions and attract different groups





Figure 6: The upper section shows aerial images of the Agenor Moreira Square (left) and Haroldo Rosa Square (right). The lower section features land use maps. Source: Authors, with the assistance of QGIS software, 2023.

of people throughout the day and night become livelier and safer. The continuous presence of people and social interaction fosters a more welcoming and efficient environment. In the analyzed squares, a predominance of residential use is observed; however, Agenor Moreira Square (S1) stands out due to its surrounding commercial activity, including food trucks and stalls, and playground equipment, which makes it more frequented by users.

In the surroundings of S1, the buildings facades are monotonous and inactive, reflecting the predominance of vertical residential constructions (Figure 7). In contrast, the facades around S2 (Haroldo Rosa Square) are visually permeable, characterized by the openings of doors and windows in the surrounding buildings (Figure 8). It is noteworthy that active and permeable facades can contribute to the sense of security for those using the public space (Gehl, 2014).

The classification of facades can be approached from various perspectives. Gehl (2014) distinguishes between active facades — those that promote social and engagement by incorporating elements such as shop windows, doors, and commercial areas, contributing to vibrant and dynamic streets — and passive facades, which are more closed off and offer less interaction with public space, resulting in less stimulating environments for pedestrians. In addition to this classification, an additional analysis was conducted, including the monotone facade, characterized by a sequence of similar facades that create a repetitive and

monotonous effect, and the inactive facade, exemplified by blank walls that do not contribute to urban vitality and lack openings for public space. To understand the relationship of the building with the public space, the number of openings-doors, gates and windows was mapped.

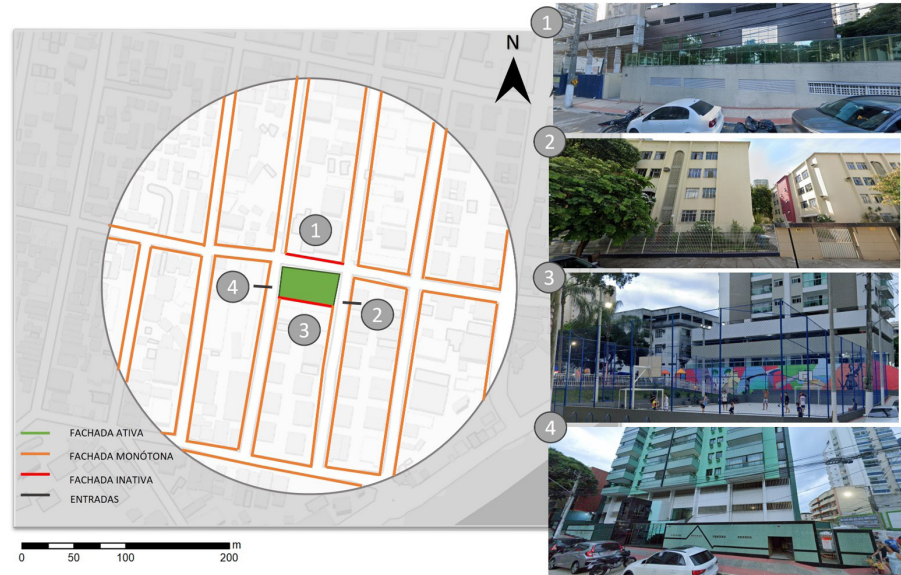


Figure 7: Map of the facades within a 200-meter radius of Agenor Moreira Square (S1). Source: Authors with the help of QGIS software and Google Street View, 2023.

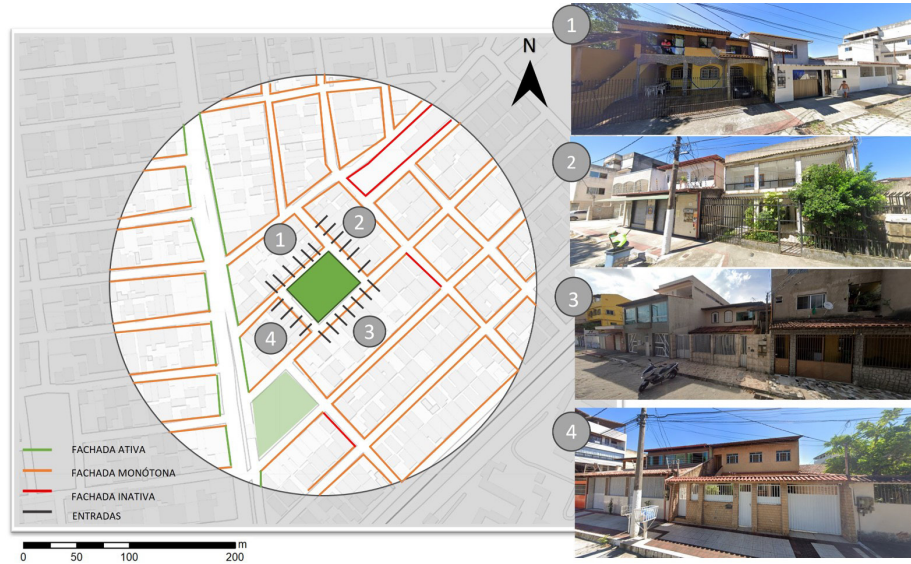


Figure 8: Map of the facades within a 200-meter radius of Haroldo Rosa Square (S2). Source: Authors with the help of QGIS software and Google Street View, 2023.

Regarding *access and accessibility*, it is essential to recognize that the emerging debate in academic research and public policy formulation emphasizes the importance of integrating the gender perspective with other social markers



such as race, class, age, and disability through an intersectional¹ approach. This integration is fundamental to address the complex inequalities involved in creating a truly democratic urban space.

S1 has been improved after the renovation, making circulation more accessible for all users. However, challenges remain, such as the accessibility of equipment and furniture, and a lack of parking spaces for people with disabilities. In contrast, while S2 has had its perimeter paving renovated, the surrounding sidewalks at both squares remain inaccessible, and the square's paving continues to be interlocking, which complicates movement, particularly for the elderly, pregnant small children, wheelchair users, and strollers.

Considering that among modes of transportation, women use public transportation (43.5%) and walking (32.5%) more frequently, while men use more individual transportation, especially private cars. Women with lower family incomes tend to walk more and use buses, whereas, higher-income women opt for individual transportation, according to the 2017 Origin and Destination Survey (São Paulo, 2020). It is imperative to consider access to the squares. In this context, it is important to highlight that both S1 and S2 have a bus stop nearby, which enhances and democratizes access.

In the section on *amenities and furniture*, S1 Square is notable for its the diverse range of equipment and the presence of linear and shaded seats, especially near the playground and the sports court, in accordance with the recommendations of UNOPS (2020). However, the Unops guide also recommends including spaces for physical activities for the elderly, which is available in Square S2, but not in S1. In addition, the guide advises the creation of playgrounds and sports courts that cater to different age groups and allow a range of activities, avoiding specialized markings and specific structures for a single sport practice, promoting diversified and inclusive usages for all genders. While both analyzed squares feature playgrounds for young children and multi-sport courts for soccer and basketball, they would benefit from additional amenities, such as at least one family restroom with facilities for children and a designated area for diaper changing.

Regarding the *comfort* dimension, both squares offer a pleasant environment, that is clean and features shaded areas, trees and natural sounds. However, S1, being surrounded by two main streets, is affected by the intense vehicle flow and traffic noise. In contrast, S2 is surrounded by local streets and has a lower car traffic, with predominance sounds from people and birds.

In the context of *safety*, S1, while presenting factors that contribute to a sense of insecurity — such as the presence of blank walls and heavy traffic — also features

¹ Intersectionality, a term coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw in 1989, describes the overlap and intersection of various forms of discrimination and oppression, with a particular focus on the experiences of Black women. However, this concept has since expanded to encompass other social markers, fostering a broader discussion on the complexity of the relationships that produce inequalities and vulnerabilities.



aesthetic and infrastructural elements. Additionally, the presence of informal trade within the square attracts people, contributing to its activity. On the other hand, S2 is used in a more intimate manner, serving as an extension of the residential areas for local families. In this square, groups gather for events such as barbecues and residents take care of the space.

The squares are well preserved, showing no signs of vandalism or depredation. Soares and Saboya (2019) highlight that abandoned and neglected spaces, characterized by litter and damaged furniture, can increase the feelings of insecurity, leading users to avoid the area and making it more susceptible to criminal activity. In S1 there is occasional police patrols, however there are no police stations nearby. While the presence of authorities may deter crime, it is important to recognize that some people, such as black women, may feel unsafe due to a history of targeted police.

In a study conducted by Carvalho (2022) on police violence against women, it was observed that 83% of the victims of police lethality were black women. The author analyzed a sample of news reports, revealing that women experience daily violence perpetrated by public security agents. This violence occurs in public spaces, and manifests both in physical and verbal form. Verbal aggression is characterized by a sexist, racist, and transphobic connotations (Carvalho, 2022).

In Table 1, the main characteristics of each analyzed square are summarized and grouped according to the dimensions considered.

Dimension	S1 (Agenor Moreira Square)	S2 (Haroldo Rosa Square)
Use and users	Predominantly multifamily residential neighborhood with monotonous, inactive vertical facades. It has transient commerce within the square and hosts small seasonal events.	Predominantly single-family residential neighborhood with buildings up to three stories. The facades are monotonous and inactive. There are no formal or informal commercial activities.
Accessibility	The surrounding sidewalks do not comply with the ABNT NBR 9050 standard and are poorly maintained. Inside the square, the pavement is smooth and non-vibrating, with paths measuring 1.50m or wider.	The surrounding sidewalks have irregularities, a lack of tactile signage, and obstacles, making it difficult for people with disabilities to navigate.
Amenities	The square features a playground, sports court, pet park, game tables, and a newsstand.	The square features a playground, sports court, and outdoor gym.
Comfort	The square is well-shaded with ample trees but lacks vegetation diversity. It is well-maintained and clean. Natural sounds of birds and wind can be heard, but the predominant noise comes from vehicles due to heavy traffic.	The square is well-shaded and has a greater variety of vegetation. Maintenance needs improvement, with a broken trash can and the court in a state of disrepair. The residential area is quiet, allowing natural sounds such as the wind and birds to be heard.
Safety	The square is well-maintained, with no apparent vandalism but without internal security cameras. The lighting within the square is adequate, though the surrounding area lacks sufficient lighting. The facades are predominantly blank. Police patrols are frequent, with vehicles occasionally parked.	The square shows some signs of vandalism on a few trash cans and on the court, although the equipment is in good condition. There is a security camera in the square. The surroundings have no blank walls, with residences facing the public space, promoting natural surveillance.

Table 1: Comparative Analysis of the Physico-Morphological Characteristics of the Analyzed Squares. Source: Authors, 2023.



In the behavioral analysis, people counting, and behavioral mapping techniques were employed, following Gehl and Svarre (2018), with a 15-minute interval. Analyses were conducted on both weekdays and weekends, during the morning (9:00 AM and 10:00 AM), afternoon (4:00 PM and 5:00 PM), and evening (7:00 PM and 8:00 PM) shifts. Data collection was performed concurrently in both squares, and the observations are depicted in the behavioral maps shown in Tables 2 and 3.



Table 2: Behavioral maps of weekdays and weekends (morning, afternoon, and evening) for Agenor Moreira Square (P1). Source: Authors with the assistance of PowerPoint software, 2023.

In S1, during the mornings, both on weekdays and weekends, the court presented little movement, when observed the use was of children and their guardians. In this turn, it was commonly seen more elderly women taking care of children and elderly men playing at the chess tables. In the afternoon and evening, movement increases, with emphasis on greater use of the court at the weekend, in the afternoon. It was also observed that adults and elderly people also attend S1 for quick purchases at the newspaper stand or bakery located nearby.

During the day, on weekdays, S1 is widely used for women carrying bags and benefiting from the ease of movement provided by the shaded area. At night, S1 becomes livelier, with the presence of food trucks and recreational activities for children on weekdays and weekends.



On the weekend, the number of people in S1 increases and, although many families attend the square, the proportion of men is higher (about 66% men and 34% women), despite more women being observed at the playground. Girls were sometimes seen in the center of the square, playing with skates or ball, under the supervision of guardians who were sitting at the tables set by the food trucks. In S1, the transitory commercial activities (stalls and food trucks) operate in the late afternoon and evening, offering opportunities for food and recreation. It was also observed that these businesses are run by women.

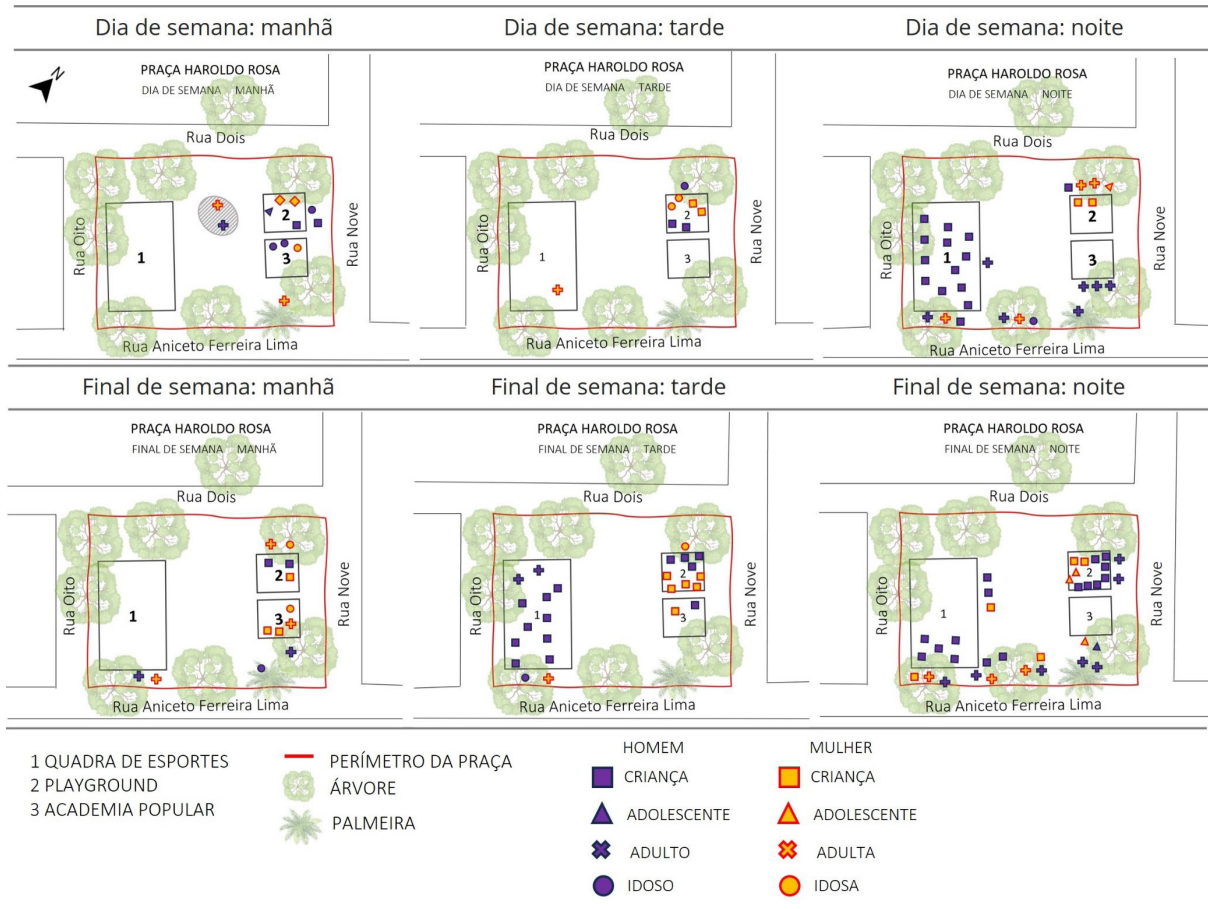


Table 3: Behavioral maps of weekdays and weekends (morning, afternoon, and evening) for Haroldo Rosa Square (S2). Source: Authors with the assistance of PowerPoint software, 2023.

In S2, during the weekend, activities follow a dynamic similar to S1. In the morning, children were observed at the playground, accompanied by their guardians, as well as adults and elderly people socializing or resting on the benches of the square. In the popular gym, the presence of elderly and children using the devices stands out. In the afternoons, it was noticed the most expressive use of children and adolescents on the court, with some responsible allowing them to play autonomously. At night, a higher number of adults supervised the children compared to the afternoon period. It is remarkable that, especially among the elderly, S2 is considered an extension of their residences, used, for example, for barbecues on weekends, as was observed in one of the visits.



It is noteworthy that, in both S1 and S2, a higher concentration of women at the playgrounds, especially in the morning and afternoon shifts, regardless of the day of the week. In the evenings, both on weekdays and weekends, men are more prominent, often supervising children. In sports activities, the courts are predominantly used by boys, while girls tend to play in other areas of the square.

In both squares, a higher number of people was observed on weekends compared to weekdays. Similarities in female behavior were noted between the two squares. Women are observed performing multiple roles, particularly in activities related to childcare, as well as reading, conversing with other mothers, using their phones and engaging in physical exercise. It is worth noting that the public space reflects what occurs in the private sphere, with women multitasking in various roles simultaneously.

By counting people in both squares, it was found that the male presence is higher, representing about 60% of the total number of visitors. In terms of age group, a lower number of adolescent girls was observed compared to boys of the same age. As for the elderly women, it was observed that they tend to use the squares more in the morning, mainly helping with childcare. Elderly men were playing cards and board games in the square or observing the surroundings.

During the behavioral analysis stage, interviews were conducted with women who visit the squares at various times and shifts. The results revealed that women attend S2 daily, whereas they visit S1 between one and two times a week. In both S1 and S2, most women mentioned that they use the space always accompanied by family members. The interviews also confirmed the observations noted in the behavioral maps, emphasizing that many women visit the squares primarily to care for children or their pets.

In both squares, when asked what would make them feel safer and comfortable in the public space of the square, it was found that most of them associated the increased sense of security with the presence of authorities, video monitoring cameras, police patrols and the presence of people, especially families. In S1, the responses also mention the positive impact of the renovation on safety, as well as the presence of stalls, food trucks and a more engaged community. In S2, the women who responded highlighted the tranquility of the environment and the familiarity among visitors as key as positive aspects. These answers are illustrated in the word clouds shown in Figure 9.

When asked about the aspects that could be improved in the square, the answers included activities and equipment aimed at children or elderly people, rather than at themselves, as shown by the word cloud in Figure 9. Other answers included a greater variety of toys for different age groups, activities for the elderly (in the case of Agenor Moreira square), better use of the sports court, including group of children and girls, as well as physical activities with the assistance of a professional. The need for improvements in security and



maintenance of spaces was also mentioned, and the presence of stalls and street vendors was positively highlighted.

"O que te faz sentir segura ou confortável em um espaço público como a praça?"



"Na sua opinião, o que poderia melhorar na praça? Tem alguma atividade que você gostaria que existisse na praça?"



Figure 9: Word cloud from the square Agenor Moreira (P1) on the left and Haroldo Rosa (P2) on the right. Source: Authors, with assistance of the site Wordcloud, 2023.

When asked about the area of the square that they consider more pleasant, both in S1 and S2, the participants also associated this preference to the children's play area. In the case of S1, they highlighted the fact that the playground accommodates children under three years old, is fenced, and is located away from the street. In both squares, areas with benches under the shade of three canopies were noted as pleasant, as well as central spaces that are wider, free from visual obstacles, allowing mothers or guardians to easily supervise their children.

Regarding the less pleasant places, although most women were unable to specify any, in S1, the pet area was pointed out due to the odor, the area near the wall because of poor lighting, and one of the corners where there is a crowd of homeless people. In S2, there is concern about the increase in drug users in the square and the deterioration of the sports court, caused by lack of maintenance and the presence of vandals.



Regarding the difference in how men and women use the square, in both squares, the responses revealed that women tend to visit the space almost always in connection with childcare. While men have a more relaxed approach, sometimes enjoying the time and having drinks with friends. Some noted a male predominance on the sports court, and others highlighted activities more oriented towards a male audience, such as playing cards. Indeed, during the visits, women were observed attending the squares mainly for family-centered activities, while men were seen socializing and engaging in leisure activities with peers of the same age group and interests.

Both squares showed improvements after the renovation; however, the difference in investment between the square in a higher-income neighborhood and the one in a lower-income area. Agenor Moreira square (S1) underwent significant enhancements in terms of aesthetics, lighting and equipment, which attracted temporary commercial activities and, consequently, a larger number of users. In contrast, Haroldo Rosa Square (S2) received only superficial and insufficient upgrades.

It is worth noting that the location of the square also influences its use, as Agenor Moreira square attracts visitors from neighboring areas. Additionally, there are aspects that still need improvement in both squares, such as accessibility in the surrounding areas, especially on sidewalks. It is essential to consider that the analysis of the square cannot be separated from the urban context, and encouraging walking is crucial, given that women frequently use this means of getting around in public spaces. To achieve this, accessible sidewalks are necessary, with suitable width for elderly people, those with disabilities and strollers, for example.

In addition, the equipment in the squares does not accommodate age diversity, featuring playgrounds designed exclusively for young children and sports courts limited to activities such as football and basketball, lacking informal play areas, as recommended by Alves; Costa (2020). Behavioral analysis revealed that these courts are often dominated by men, especially adolescents and young people. Young girls and women tend to take less ownership of public spaces, especially in sports facilities. A report on gender-sensitive planning found that 70% of girls and 44% of boys avoid sharing spaces with older boys, with 82% of girls and 47% of boys facing rejection in their attempts; girls encounter sexual harassment and threats or acts of sexual assault (Alves; Costa, 2020).

Regarding the shaded rest areas recommended by Alves and Costa, (2020), the interview participants also acknowledged their importance. Considering that women remain the primary caregivers, often performing unpaid reproductive work, it is essential to provide appropriate spaces for those caring for children, the elderly, and others. As the square serves as a leisure area, women frequently engage in multiple activities simultaneously, such as childcare, socializing, eating, using their cell phones, and reading. Therefore, creating multifunctional spaces, including sheltered playgrounds — identified by interviewees as a necessity — is



crucial. Additionally, it is important to promote activities that draw women to the space, for both personal leisure and physical exercise.

Regarding security, participants emphasized not only the need for cameras and policing, but also the importance of the presence of people to enhance the sense of safety. This aligns with the concept of urban vitality and the “living city,” which suggests that constant presence in public spaces at various times of day and week contributes to safety (Gehl, 2014; Jacobs, 2014). While the issue of safety is complex and necessitates more in-depth studies that correlate gender, gathering data on the physical space and considering users’ opinions are crucial for developing effective urban planning and design.

The study reveals that male presence still predominates in the squares. Montaner and Muxí (2021) highlight that safety and balance issues in public spaces, often dominated by male groups, can be mitigated by adopting a gender equality perspective in urban planning. They argue that a just city should implement criteria that benefit all generations and social classes, viewing squares and streets as arenas where rights and duties are manifested. Such spaces must be inclusive and respectful of diversity. Additionally, the presence of women in public spaces, as observed at Bryant Park in New York, is a safety indicator. The study suggests that the ideal ratio of women to men is 52% to 48%, respectively. A decrease in this ratio may indicate a deterioration in park safety (Gehl; Svarre, 2018).

From these results, several guidelines for planning more inclusive public spaces for women can be established:

Investing in accessibility is crucial to ensure that people with disabilities or reduced mobility, as well as pregnant women, women with young children, and those using strollers, have full access to public spaces. This includes the implementation of ramps, suitable sidewalks, regular paving, and tactile signage. Expanding sidewalks and improving access also facilitates the movement of people on foot, particularly women carrying children, strollers, and bags.

Enhancing the safety of public spaces through adequate lighting, video surveillance cameras, and an increased female police presence contributes to creating safer environments for all citizens.

Offering a diverse range of activities and spaces that cater to the needs and interests of various community groups is essential. This includes areas for leisure, culture, sports, and recreation. Additionally, promoting the square for commercial activities, such as stalls and other community services, can help attract more women.

An inclusive infrastructure, featuring equipment and furniture for all ages, including playgrounds for younger children, public gyms, family restrooms with baby-changing facilities, and shaded benches. The latter is particularly important,



as women often need to sit while accompanying children and making purchases.

Encourage active community participation in the planning, design, and management of public spaces, ensuring that all voices are heard and considered. Community representatives should oversee the maintenance and safety of public areas, acting as spokespersons to the authorities and advocating for an inclusive and welcoming environment for all citizens.

Promote education and awareness campaigns on issues of inclusion and diversity in public spaces to stimulate the creation and adaptation of public policies to women's needs.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The analysis of urbanism reveals that it was never truly neutral, being based on a patriarchal and capitalist vision that prioritizes productive activities traditionally associated with the male gender, while neglecting care, reproduction, and sociability activities. To address this gender inequality in urban planning, it is crucial to adopt a critical approach that acknowledges reality from women's experiences, promoting an urbanism that is genuinely inclusive and accessible to all generations and social classes.

Access to public spaces is influenced by intersectional factors such as age, gender, socioeconomic status, race, ability, and sexuality, which shape freedom of movement and the ability to enjoy these spaces. The city, shaped by various forms of oppression and inequality, often fails to adequately cater to marginalized groups, reflecting unequal power relations. Therefore, it is essential to rethink urban design to ensure that public spaces are truly inclusive and safe, promoting a diversity of activities and the continued presence of people, rather than relying on physical barriers and segregation. This approach not only expands freedom and security for all social groups, but also contributes to a more equitable and welcoming urban experience.

Public spaces should be more utilized and appropriated by women, and access to them should be safer and more accessible, as recommended by the UN (2005) in two of its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The main contribution of this work was to highlight the situation of women in public spaces and understand the reasons that lead them to either appropriate or avoid these areas. Some factors that may discourage women's use and appropriation of public spaces include the sense of insecurity that these spaces convey, often due to urban design that is not inclusive of women, as well as insufficient lighting, broken equipment, and underutilized environments.



When examining the squares of Agenor Moreira and Haroldo Rosa, notable differences were observed in physical context, perceived safety, and women's use of space. Women were seen performing multiple roles as they appropriated the public spaces, such as watching children in the playground, walking their pets, using their cell phones, and engaging with the community. However, male presence remained predominant, with distinct differences in the use of areas like playgrounds and sports courts. It is worth noting that men tend to frequent local businesses more and often remain alone in the square, whereas women are typically accompanied by their children or friends.

The Agenor Moreira square has a larger audience, including more women frequenting its spaces, compared to Haroldo Rosa. Although the morphological aspects suggest that Haroldo Rosa square could offer a greater sense of security for women —due to the higher presence of permeable facades and lower traffic side streets — the importance of connectivity, integration into the road network, neighborhood demographic density, and mixed-use surroundings is evident for promoting greater use and appropriation.

In the two squares analyzed, socioeconomic status was not the main factor influencing women's appropriation of public spaces. It was observed that the interaction of women and other users with the squares varies according to their specific characteristics. Agenor Moreira Square, with its informal trade offerings and seasonal events, attracts not only residents but also visitors from other neighborhoods, creating a more active and diverse environment that encourages greater use by various groups, including women. In contrast, Haroldo Rosa Square is more intimately used by the local community, functioning as an extension of the surrounding homes. This difference in use suggests that while socioeconomic status has an impact, the configuration and functionality of public spaces also play a crucial role in how these spaces are appropriated by women.

Women consider the presence of authorities, security cameras, and a cohesive community as key factors that contribute to their sense of safety in the squares. They suggest improvements in the variety of playground equipment, supervised physical activities, and overall security. Regarding the environment and infrastructure needs, women appreciate features such as shade, benches, spacious areas free of visual obstacles, and the location of playgrounds. The presence of trees and arboreal vegetation were also highlighted as important for comfort in the squares.

The results advanced the understanding of gender dynamics in urban public spaces and highlighted the importance of community participation, particularly by women, in urban planning projects. However, limitations included the sample size and the analysis being restricted to only two squares, indicating a need for broader and context-sensitive studies. It is recommended to expand the research to include additional squares in various cities, considering other gender identities and dimensions of diversity.



The results of this study have significant implications from both practical and theoretical perspectives. Practically, the findings can inform future projects aimed at creating more gender-sensitive urban squares. This includes addressing the needs of children, adapting public policies to better meet women's needs, and promoting active female participation in urban planning processes, including decision-making related to the design and management of urban squares. The study highlights the importance of incorporating gender-sensitive approaches in public space design to acknowledge and address the diverse needs and experiences of women.

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