

The making of a feminist urban space and commons: the case of Montevideo's Plaza las Pioneras

Scienza in azione

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Abstract. Inaugurated in March 2020 in Montevideo (Uruguay), Plaza las Pioneras is a new minimalist public space in tribute of Uruguay's feminists or 'pioneers'. It is both a city managed public square and an adjacent building given by the city to an assembly of six feminist collectives to administrate and use for the common good. It is a rare example of a feminist urban space and commons. The goal of this article is to analyse the process around the creation and development of the Plaza as well as the actors involved, their role, dynamics and intentions, while using this case study to enhance the concept of feminist urban commons. The article is based on documentary research, 13 interviews and participant observation that took place in November 2022 in Montevideo. It finds that the context specific conditions, as well as the process it emerged from, led to its feminist nature and goals, and also shaped how it is used by feminist collectives to advance their own goals. This may reveal important to understand the production process of feminist urban spaces and commons, as well as their contribution to the feminist movement and to a feminist city. It implies that leadership at the municipal level is a key factor, as are horizontal partnerships between the government and the feminist movement.

Keywords: feminist urbanism; South America; urban citizenship; feminist movement; urban commons.

Feminist urban public spaces and commons are both rare phenomena but, where they do exist, contribute to achieve the goals of feminism and to a more democratic city (SPAIN 2016). In debates around urban citizenship, the right to the city and urban development policy, a gender perspective based on different women's needs and interests is often absent. Starting from the observation that the link between urban citizenship, women's rights and the urban commons remains little addressed, I analyse the emergence, development and functioning of Plaza las Pioneras (Pioneering Women Square) in Montevideo. Both the square and the building are used by several collectives and organizations of Uruguay's feminist movement for activities such as workshops, pre-protest meetings and preparation, cultural events, assemblies and a monthly feminist fair. In addition, the square is also an integral part of the Arroyo Seco neighbourhood and is used by both young and old people for daily social activities. This public space, spontaneously used as any other by the public but also by civil society groups for meetings, classes and performances, is thus a rare example of a feminist urban space and commons as well as of a feminist urban process, the one that led to their production by the municipality.

The goal of this article is to understand the production of the Plaza. It will describe the context of its creation and the political conditions in which it emerged, the process that led to its feminist nature and the way it is now used by feminist collectives to advance their goals. What were the conditions that made possible such a creation? What is different about the process leading up to the inauguration of the Plaza (such as the establishment of partnership and rules)? What factors or elements were key in the path towards this feminist urban space and commons?

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The question of men's and women's relationship to territories and the city is essential to the understanding and construction of metropolitan spaces as much as the enhancement of a feminist or even a feminine perspective in these arenas of local power (LOUARGANT 2015; DARSIGNY *ET AL.* 1994). A feminist analysis unpacks the power asymmetries that characterise all aspects of the city, including the appropriation of space (FENSTER 2005). This type of analysis was employed by municipal government feminists in Montevideo to create a feminist space. I thus find that the mobilisation and coordination of women from civil society with municipal 'femocrats' and professionals/researchers defined and created a feminist public space and commons. These relations and dynamics shaped both their subjects and their means as well as what is to be named, valued, used and symbolized as feminist commons (STAVRIDES 2014). Feminist urban commons can include different forms of collective spaces, such as social and community centres, collective kitchens or nurseries, or shared gardens. These different phenomena can be understood as neither private nor public, but urban spaces collectively produced and appropriated by a community that manages them in a horizontal, participatory and inclusive way. Following this line of reasoning, some authors speak of urban commons (FEDERICI 2019; DE ANGELIS 2012; ANGELUCCI 2019) as spaces of everyday life and the ways in which social relations and political-economic processes influence each other through power structures at different scales. These dimensions intersect and are intersected by a strategy of self-management and production of urban commons such as Plaza Las Pioneras.

This article argues that the Plaza is an example of the struggle against neoliberal and patriarchal systemic oppressions, both in terms of material goods, such as public spaces, and immaterial heritage that includes the preservation, recuperation and dissemination of collective identities. It is in these spaces that political socialisation takes shape, especially when deliberating on the activities to be organised, the modalities of collective coexistence, as well as other projects within the public space. As such, it establishes the importance of feminist urban spaces and commons as providing a fertile ground for feminist claims and initiatives, and allowing women to emerge as actors of innovation, creation and management of the urban commons.

1. Methodology

Both primary and secondary data were collected to document and analyse the inception and process in the creation of the Plaza las Pioneras. I began by collecting internal and public documents concerning the emergence, development and functioning of the Plaza from 2017 to 2022. I collected information (plans and reports) on the specific initiatives documenting the history of the initiative and information on the city, the neighbourhood and its participants. Most information was found on the city of Montevideo website, and on the Plenario de Mujeres del Uruguay and Cotidiano Mujer websites. Annual reports and agreements were provided by Cotidiano Mujer.

After receiving an ethics certificate from the Université du Québec en Outaouais (UQO), in November 2022, I conducted 13 individual and collective semi-structured interviews with municipal government professionals and managers (3), members of the feminist collectives (5), the architects who designed the Plaza (2), the jury members who chose the winning design (3). The coordinator of Cotidiano Mujer provided contacts with a government official and members of the other feminist collectives.

These contacts then provided other names of people involved in the creation of the Plaza, which were selected according to the extent of their involvement. They were asked both objective questions about the creation of the Plaza, as well as subjective questions about their own implication and what the Plaza means to them. The members of the feminist collectives were asked about the activities they organize in the commons, their implications and what the commons means to them and to the feminist movement.

In November 2022, I visited the Plaza 8 times at different times of the day to witness the use made of it by citizens. I took part in participant observation during the November 2022 feminist collective general assembly which included a feminist fair and musical shows throughout the day and night. I was able to observe the interaction between the feminist collective members, and the public users of the Plaza during that day of feminist activities. Notes were taken to document the type of activity, the different themes and content, who were the organisers and the participants, and the dynamics between them.

In terms of data analysis, I employed deductive category application (MAYRING 2000) and direct content analysis of the different qualitative data. I identified key concepts as initial coding categories (POTTER, LEVINE-DONNERSTEIN 1999), and using the urban commons and gendered cities literature determined operational definitions for each category.

2. Results

The Pioneering Women Square was from its inception conceived of as a feminist urban space. Several factors influenced the creation of this space: a progressive openness to self-management, long-standing feminist initiatives and mainstreaming in the municipal government, a strong national feminist movement, exchanges with cities such as Barcelona and Naples, and the general need for more public spaces in certain neighbourhoods.

Montevideo is a city of approximately 1.3 million inhabitants. Since the early 1990s, it has been governed primarily by left leaning Frente Amplio governments, which have introduced social public policy and major governance reforms involving decentralization. The first of these governments created institutionalized spaces to discuss gender equality. In 1991 the Comisión de la Mujer brought together state, political and social actors. With the goal of involving other strategic areas of the administration in gender equality, the Equity and Gender Commission (CEG) was created in 2001 within the Municipality of Montevideo. In the 2000s, the Comuna Mujer programme, by combining participation and decentralization, was key to the coordination of institutional actors and social groups in the implementation of gender equality policies (GONZÁLEZ GUYER, BRUERA 2005). Between 2002 and 2020, the Municipality of Montevideo created and carried out three equality plans mainstreaming equity policy across the city and individual *municipios*.

Consequently, this first gender network created the Women's Commission as a hub: both the Equity and Gender Commission and the women's groups linked to the Women's Commune Programme were promoted, supported and sustained by the technical team of the Women's Commission (RODRIGUEZ GUSTÁ ET AL. 2020). The institutional gender framework strengthened its state component, reaching out to actors previously unaware of gender policies.¹

¹ In 2016, the Women's Secretariat was transformed into the Gender Equality Advisory Division and remained a central hub.

In 2015, the Mesa Municipal de Igualdad de Género (Municipal Board for Gender Equality) was created with the aim of generating a space for the articulation of these actors. The Gender Governance Mechanism, initially the Women's Commission, then the Women's Secretariat and now the Advisory Division for Gender Equality, was transformed and institutionalised, increasing its legitimacy and capacity to influence (AVAS 2019). The creation of the Plaza occurred within the context of the significant expansion since 2014 of a gender equality framework, with an increased participation of feminists in local politics and administration.

At the heart of this project is Silvana Pissano. In 2015, this elected city councillor was named director of the city's urban development department. During the five years as head of urban development, she took on urban feminist projects such as renaming streets with notable Uruguayan women's names, the creation of a trans house, of a public space dedicated to LGBTQ diversity. More importantly, she touted 'urban feminism' publicly as part of the city's branding. According to the department's formal account, "in 2018 it defined a priority work process that would allow the design and construction of a square conceived from a *feminist point of view* and capable of providing a place for and recognizing the contribution of the female pioneers" (INTENDENCIA DE MONTEVIDEO 2020, 38). She worked directly with the municipal gender equality advisory division, which included several women from the feminist movement, to think about common strategies involving gender equality and urban development. A key element of Mayor Daniel Martínez's mandate (2015-2020) was to implement 150 new and recovered public spaces. In Silvana's first year, she began studying the needs of certain *municipios* in terms of public spaces and proceeded in selecting a building in the middle of a city block in *municipio* C owned by the city. This was part of her efforts to recuperate abandon spaces and turn them into spaces for public meetings and leisure. As an industrial neighbourhood in the 19th and 20th century that grew into a commercial and residential one, Arroyo Seco did not have any parks or public spaces. Therefore, there was a definite need for a public square. The space chosen was a depot and workshop area. At the turn of the 20th century it was the end of the line for tramways, subsequently a bus station and then, once bought by the city, was turned into a workshop and warehouse for bus repairs. Silvana is the one who saw the possibility of creating a feminist space for pioneering women on this site. She envisioned the potential of this piece of land open on three sides and came up with the idea of creating a public space in honour of Uruguay's feminist "pioneers". It was clear to Silvana and the feminists she was working with that the creation of this square fit into the goal to feminise the city with both a feminist approach and reference.

It is important to mention that in 2017 the feminist movement organised the first massive march for Women's rights day with 400,000 women in the streets.² One feminist stated that "it was like an awakening". This awakening was influenced by the green bandana feminists wave in neighbouring Argentina. Along with their huge numbers, what stood out was the large numbers of adolescents and youths among the demonstrators – a new "feminist generation" (WHITTIER 1995) that had grown up in a relatively sheltered environment and seemed perplexed at having to fight for rights they thought were long secured as a result of the struggles of their mothers and grandmothers (POUSADELA 2021). For its creators, the Plaza not only answers an important urban need for the neighbourhood, but also a link to Uruguay's past struggles and a space for the renewed feminist movement to meet and organise.

²Previous marches only managed to gather three or four thousand protesters.

The Las Pioneras project began to take shape in 2018, when the urban development department defined its development process that would allow the design and construction of a square conceived from a feminist perspective and capable of offering place to value the contribution of the pioneering women.³ They proposed the creation of a public space in which diverse groups and proposals could converge and be forged in a vision of equality and diversity. A public space that would represent not only “what is possible” in the present, but expressing a message of multiple resistances, and struggles for rights, capable of becoming a common good to be created and managed by society (INTENDENCIA DE MONTEVIDEO 2020, 39).

Given the hierarchical nature of the municipal administration,⁴ and the progressive openness of both the city council and the executive team, the project had no problem being approved and Silvana strategically presented its progress to the mayor’s executive team. At this point, there was no reference to the building adjacent to the proposed square. This came later in the elaboration of the project. The first phase to create the square was to issue a public tender for its design to architecture firms. Working with the Advisory Division for Gender Equality, her team elaborated a call of submissions to design the public space. She also set up an evaluation committee of a representative of this division as well as five architects. They included Silvana, Fabiana Castillo from the city’s gender equity team, Cristina Bausero for the Society of Architects, Mercedes Medina from the Faculty of Architecture (Universidad de la Republica) and Angela Perdomo chosen by the candidates. All of them women and feminists.

It was clear to whoever read the tender, it was a working process that was intended to be a feminist space and the proposals were up to the task. The tender was feminist because it was written by feminist women. What makes processes feminist is that there are feminist people thinking about it. We imagined things that hadn’t been done before.⁵

The public tender was explicitly interested in approaching the project from the perspective of feminist urbanism. In its goal, the project’s specifications stated the proposal “as a tribute to remember and value the mark left in Montevideo by the first Uruguayan women who fought for women’s rights.”⁶ The rules required that the proposal take into account the tribute to the pioneering women as an integral part of the design of the feminist space.

It goes on to invoke the importance of urban feminism in considering the square’s design:

with the aim of enriching the content of the Right to the City, reflections from feminist urbanism start from the fact that both space and gender roles are interrelated and socially constructed. Therefore, space cannot be considered gender neutral. Space is not neutral; space conditions men and women differently. In this sense, the gender perspective refers to the assigned roles that make women and men experience and perceive spaces and cities differently (MUXÍ MARTÍNEZ 2009). Mainstreaming gender in spatial design is a matter of social justice (INTENDENCIA DE MONTEVIDEO 2020, 10).

³ Considered as all those who laid the foundations for equality to be a possible goal and enabled, through their struggles, so many others to have a place in the construction of history.

⁴ The general director hierarchically defined the public space (it was one of the citizen demands) and decided to combine the demand for public space with the goal of honouring the pioneering women.

⁵ Interview with a municipal gender equality professional.

⁶ V. <<https://montevideo.gub.uy/noticias/urbanismo-y-obras/llamado-a-propuestas-para-plaza-integradora-las-pioneras>> (07/2023)



It is important to highlight the references to the Barcelona based architect Zaida Muxí, whose writings influenced the Barcelonan model of feminist urbanism. What is equally interesting is the importance given by the different stakeholders to the process and not only to the result. Architects were asked to think about how to make this space function a reference for the feminist movement. Those involved consider a feminist process as a process of collective thinking, of valuing everyone's place and thoughts.⁷

Out of the 23 proposals submitted, the jury members were won over by the minimalist design of the square with no equipment or structures presented by one of the candidates. This was considered feminist in that it did not direct the public to certain activities or uses of the square. People are allowed to decide how they want to use it. The space was

imagined as one where women appropriate the space as a collective since women are immersed in a collective that is society, which is united and mixed, and in this place they are because it is a space that does not condition you. The lack of conditioning... is also a form of freedom, and that shared freedom seems to me to be what women bring as an influence on urban space.⁸

The winning architecture team considered that "Plaza Las Pioneras should not be a posthumous memorial to outstanding personalities but a living tribute to a plural, democratic and egalitarian society where the protagonists are the different generations, both those who have left a symbolic legacy and all those who contribute with their actions everyday." The winning proposal integrates a mirrored panel in which everyone can reflect themselves, and "makes the present and the past come together, because the past is in the memory of the reason for the square, which were the pioneering women. And, in turn, it is in the present of those who are looking in the mirror today, who are part of that society that we want to be egalitarian, equal and free"⁹

⁷Interview with a municipal gender equity professional.

⁸Interview with a jury member.

⁹Interview with a jury member.



At the end of 2018, an open call was made to feminist collectives to develop and present proposals for the collective management of the building adjacent to the public space Las Pioneras. Creating a feminist commons space was meant to be an empowering process for the collectives with the guidance of the urban development and gender equality team. Silvana used her knowledge of urban commons experiences in Barcelona and her contacts in the Faculty of architecture at the Universidad de la Republica to consider creating an urban commons out of the adjacent building. An architecture professor used her contacts in Naples to help the city think of a legal arrangement and framework inspired by experiences of urban commons in Naples.¹⁰ This demonstrates a certain experimentalism in the presence of an adaptive and iterative approach to designing the legal processes and institutions that govern urban commons.

Six collectives answered the call. Within a deliberative process framework, these feminist collectives elaborated the rules of operation of the space through a formal declaration of use and management. They began with the premise that the management of the houses located in Las Pioneras square should be based on a form of governance that involved the direct participation of the collectives, both in the use and in the management. Accordingly, the organisations committed themselves to guaranteeing an open use for the diversity of feminist women's expressions and organisations (ASAMBLEA DE COLECTIVOS FEMINISTAS 2019).

An agreement was signed between the municipality and the collectives that made up the Assembly of Feminist Collectives: Plenario de Mujeres del Uruguay (PLEMUU), Cotidiano Mujer, Las Puñadito, Encuentro de Feministas Diversas, Colectivo Habitadas and Colectiva Elefante. The Assembly of Feminist Collectives committed to collectively manage the building and elaborate a declaration of use for the "common good". This includes organising activities in defence and affirmation of women's rights in their diverse expressions and forms of organisation, which have as a principle to fight against racism, xenophobia, fascism, homophobia and all forms of violence.

¹⁰She was looking for new ways to transfer the management of the publicly owned building to the collectives. For example, in 2018 the department of urban development presented a series of conferences, which brought together various kinds of knowledge, not only expert knowledge, but also experimental knowledge, called "Urban Dialogues", featuring the French philosopher and co-author of *Commun. Essai sur la révolution au XXIe siècle*, Pierre Dardot.

The agreement outlined the work around the promotion of the commons (INTENDENCIA DE MONTEVIDEO 2020), thus highlighting the municipality's commitment to implementing new forms of self-management or co-management of public spaces and to rethinking the existing instruments, promoting those capable of broadening the possibilities of decision-making over the public sphere as part of the deepening of urban democracy. In the same vein, the department of urban development recognized the challenge of breaking away from traditional institutional tutelage and replacing it with a different management model.¹¹

In this new model, the collectives possess the autonomy in the definitions and contents of the use and enjoyment of the space and have the institutional backing to carry out the project. For example, they do not pay taxes or for utilities. Public authorities play an important enabling role in creating and sustaining the co-city. There is a mutual trust between the municipality and the feminist collectives.¹² This is an example of an enabling state as it assigns the state a role in facilitating the creation of urban commons and supporting collective action arrangements for the management and sustainability of such commons (FOSTER, IAIONE 2016). In turn, the feminist collectives are responsible for the maintenance of the building and for the restaurant space. There are feminist assemblies on a monthly basis and a small group of collective representatives responsible for the direct management of the building.

The overall aim for the Las Pioneras building is to become a meeting place for the neighbourhood and the city, where different activities can be carried out within a multi-sector space, where the dimensions related to equality, care, the environment, popular economy, etc. can be integrated (INTENDENCIA DE MONTEVIDEO 2020, 47). There is a symbolic appropriation of space: it is a space, it is a resource, and it is a meeting space. "I feel the space as my own space."¹³ For other feminists, it is "a space for women where you can breathe feminism, where you can learn about feminism, where women are given a voice and where a form of tolerance for diverse feminisms has been generated".¹⁴

In July 2020, the Municipality of Montevideo inaugurated the building managed by the six feminist collectives in Plaza Las Pioneras. In the founding document of the feminist assembly, there is a recognition and highlighting of their role in promoting feminism in the city through the occupation and valorization of public spaces. They propose to

rethink the city from a feminist perspective, meaning to stop producing spaces from a productivist and mercantilist logic. Putting people at the centre means highlighting the diversity of experiences and needs, without the homogenisation of uses and activities in urban space. We propose the caring city. To inhabit the city is to be able to find and make connections. Connecting feminist struggles with other initiatives. The challenge is that we manage to articulate all these proposals to be interlocutors in the design of the city (CELIBERTE 2020).

¹¹ This collaborative governance implies a shift in the traditional public administration model. According to Arena (2012) the "one-way paradigm" whereby a "citizen's demand is followed by an institutional response" has to be substituted with a "shared paradigm" where "citizens become protagonists of community life along with the local government, which has the entrepreneurial role to make civic energies emerge and the role of regulating and coordinating the actors that participate in the governance".

¹² For example, in 2022 when an anti-abortion group requested to use the Plaza for a public demonstration, the city refused and gave a heads-up to the feminist assembly.

¹³ Interview with a feminist in one of the collectives of the assembly.

¹⁴ Interview with a feminist in one of the collectives of the assembly.



3. Discussion of results

Plaza las Pioneras is unique as an inclusive feminist urban space, a post-industrial and post-modern public square, a feminist urban commons and as a process of feminist municipal politics and urban development. In a short period, the Plaza has also become a reference point for the feminist movement. A place where they feel safe and welcome to develop their activities and congregate. During my observation of

the day of movement and cultural activities organized by the feminist assembly, it was clear that the participants and members of the public felt safe and welcome. Activities such as a feminist flea market/fair, feminist workshops and musical shows took place alongside members of the community chatting and drinking maté, roller skating or rehearsing dance moves in front the mirror.

The creation of the Plaza was made possible in the context of a progressive city with 30 years of left leaning governments that values public spaces and innovative experiences. A key element leading to its creation was the embeddedness of gender equality in the fabric of the municipal government and a state that includes different kinds of gender equality expertise and networks among its civil servants. These formal and informal networks possessed common goals and led to a feminist urban development that rethinks the city through a feminist and participative approach. An addition element was the presence of feminist directors in the municipal executive council who shared the goals of a more inclusive and democratic city. Without a doubt, the leadership, the feminist and urbanistic understanding of the director of urban development, Silvana Pissano, was key in orchestrating both the process and its outcome. The renewal of the feminist movement is another element that justified a public space available to movements, collectives and organisations as a resource to develop and pursue their claims.

The elaboration and creation of Plaza las Pioneras involved a feminist process that led to its feminist nature and goal. It involved debates and discussions about the nature, the form and the use of the square and building, applying and co-creating feminist knowledge to urban development and recognising the differentiated interests and needs of women. Different from other cities that have rendered tribute to women, the feminist nature of both the form and content of the space was front and centre and was not secondary to technical urbanistic aspects.

The process will undoubtedly make it possible for the feminist movement to carry out specific activities, also creating new meeting places that can transform the representations of women in the city. The idea and goal of the square as a meeting place for feminist activists and organisations, as well as between the feminist movement and the community, came up in all interviews with the feminist collectives.

In the context of a political right-wing wave in Uruguay and Latin America, Plaza Las Pioneras has the potential to contribute to a better understanding of feminism among the public through everyday conviviality. Having a space of one's own facilitates exchanges and working together on projects or public events. It fosters a greater number of gatherings and projects involving different generations of feminists.¹⁵ It thus seems to be a game changer in the consolidation of the feminist movement, both symbolically and in terms of resources. The latter is especially important to the new generation of feminist collectives, some of which are not territorially based and have no offices, as it provides them with a space for meeting and activities. Therefore, it contributes to a more feminist city in several ways. First, with the simple public presence of feminism as a point of reference for the movement and for the public, for gathering and for meeting. Secondly, providing a shared and common resource to the feminist movement as a whole (and not only the collectives that manage the building) for their activities, visibility and organisation. Symbolically, it pays tribute not only to pioneering women but also to feminism itself, by embodying the former as an example of defying the established norm through their struggle to inhabit the public space and the political space, thus transforming the symbolic place of women in the city.

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¹⁵ This was observed by the researcher at the monthly assembly and day of activities, which included workshops highlighting the different forms of knowledge and experience of different feminist collectives (such as cyberfeminists, teenagers and preteen feminists and feminist psychologists) as well as different cultural performances from traditional choirs to feminist hip-hop.

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