

The courtyards of Cordoba in Spain.

Social functions of private spaces in historical neighbourhoods

Carlos PRIEGO GONZÁLES de CANALES, Luis Rodríguez-Morcillo BAENA & Jürgen H. BREUSTE



Fig. 1: Courtyard of a single-family dwelling (Priego, C.)

Zusammenfassung

Städtische öffentliche Räume bieten seit Langem ideale Rahmenbedingung für Sozialisationsprozesse und Austauschmöglichkeiten zwischen den Bürgern. Dieser Beitrag zeigt jedoch, dass auch bestimmte private Räume, wie Hof-Häuser der Stadt Cordoba (Spanien) gleichwertig zu öffentlichen Räumen anzusehen sind und alle sozialen Leistungen bieten, die normalerweise urbanen Räumen zugeschrieben werden.

Dieser Artikel untersucht den Diskurs der Bürger von Cordoba über Häuser mit Innenhofgärten. In der Studie wurden Befragungen mit fünf

Diskussionsgruppen unterschiedlichen Alters, Geschlechts und mit unterschiedlichen Wohnorten (Häuser mit Innenhofgärten im Vergleich zu Wohnblocks) durchgeführt. Die Ergebnisse zeigen, dass die Innenhöfe der Stadt Cordoba eine unvergleichliche Umgebung für sozialen Austausch innerhalb der Nachbarschaften bieten. Die Hof-Häuser stellen für deren Bewohner einen Raum der Begegnung dar, der ein hohes Maß an persönlicher Entwicklung und Wohlbefinden gewährleistet.

Schlüsselwörter: Lebensstil, Wohlbefinden, historische Stadtviertel, Innenhöfe von Cordoba

Abstract

Urban public spaces have long been considered an ideal setting for processes of socialization and interaction between citizens. This paper, however, shows how certain private spaces, such as the courtyard houses of the city of Cordoba (Spain) are on a par with public spaces and provide all the social benefits to the users, normally attributed to urban spaces. This article examines the discourse of citizens of Cordoba regarding houses with courtyard gardens. The study was conducted with five discussion groups comprised of people of different ages, sex and place of residence (houses with courtyard gardens versus blocks of flats). We conclude that the courtyards of the city of Cordoba provide an unparalleled environment for social interaction within neighbourhoods and a space where residents encounter all that they need to achieve a high degree of personal development and well-being.

Keywords: Life style; Well-being; Historical neighbourhoods; Courtyards of Cordoba

1. Introduction

Studies carried out in Spain by CORRALIZA (2000) on urban public spaces have shown the important role of open urban spaces regarding their use and perception by different cultures. Regarding the cultural perception of these spaces, WARD (2002) states that in the last century, Northern European countries began to view public spaces as settings for cultural exchange and the expression of both personal and cultural diversity. The identity of urban spaces is intimately linked to the social relations that take place within them; be they of a spontaneous nature or the result of commercial, religious and political activity or even the effect of fashions (CANTERO et al. 2000). Studies conducted by MARANS and SPRECKELMEYER in 1981 and later extended upon by WEIDEMANN and ANDERSON in 1985 examined the relationship between the objective conditions, subjective experiences and satisfaction of residents with their environment. These authors demonstrated the importance of the correlation between the physical and social elements of neighbourhoods and the quality of life of their residents.

Other studies have also analysed resident satisfaction as a dependent variable, or as an indicator of quality of life in neighbourhoods. Studies on resident satisfaction with their living environments have been conducted at the national scale (MARANS & RODGERS 1975; CAMPBELL et al. 1976; DAVIS & FINE-DAVIS 1981) and at the local scale (GALSTER & HESSER 1981). The study by PRIEGO et al. (2009) explores citizens' satisfaction with their most immediate natural environment. In the study, the authors conclude that both the education and socioeconomic status of users are variables that influence how citizens use and enjoy urban green spaces.

Other researchers have examined residential satisfaction in different types of neighbourhoods including low-income areas (FRIED & GLEICHER 1961) or public housing developments (YANCEY 1971; AMERIGO & ARAGONES 1990).

However, upon reviewing the literature, we found that few studies examine the correlation between aspects of traditional neighbourhoods and resident satisfaction. The use, perception and satisfaction of residents living in traditional neighbourhoods or the typology of dwellings are therefore socio-cultural aspects that warrant further study.

To carry out this research, we selected the houses with courtyard gardens of historical quarter of the city of Cordoba (Spain). Rather

than being simply architectural structures, these courtyard gardens provide a space for social interaction and cultural expression, accommodating a lifestyle that is specific to this particular urban environment and in which the boundaries between the private and the public sphere are blurred.

2. Courtyard gardens of Cordoba

The historical quarter of the city of Cordoba (Spain) has numerous houses with courtyard gardens. Rather than being simply architectural structures, these courtyard gardens provide a space for social interaction and cultural expression, accommodating a lifestyle that is specific to this particular urban environment and in which the boundaries between the private and the public sphere are blurred. With the arrival of the Muslims to Cordoba (711 A.D), courtyards took on greater importance and came to incorporate new elements such as fountains and gardens to recreate the Muslim vision of paradise. Since that time, courtyards have acquired a social function as a place to engage in social relations, gather with family members and neighbours in the outdoors and enjoy nature within the confines of one's home.



Fig. 2: Courtyard of a single-family dwelling (Priego, C.)



Fig. 3: Courtyard like corridor of multi-family dwelling (Priego, C.)



Fig. 4: Courtyard of a multi-family compound (Priego, C.)

The courtyard gardens of Cordoba have changed little over the years, but stand out for their variety. One type of courtyard can be found in stately homes, convents or former hospitals. A second type is of more modern construction, while the third corresponds to courtyards in traditional homes. This last type of courtyard can be found in private dwellings, the majority of which are inhabited by several families that care for their courtyard garden throughout the year.

The courtyards of Cordoba not only reflect a unique and traditional way of life, but are one of the most popular and folkloric events that take place in the city in the month of May. First held in 1918, the festival of the courtyards of Cordoba seeks to promote the intangible heritage of humanity. The festival emerged in a spontaneous manner following the arrival to the city of a rural population that brought with it a simple lifestyle based on community relations. For several weeks during the month of May, residents in houses with courtyards open their homes to visitors so that they can enjoy the splendour of their gardens and a lifestyle that has been handed down over the centuries in the heart of Cordoba’s historic quarter.

3. Objectives of the study

The general objective of this study was to gain greater insight into the perceptions and attitudes of the citizens of Cordoba regarding the city’s traditional courtyard gardens and shed some light on how they are (and have been) used on a daily basis and for social purposes. In addition to this general objective, a series of specific objectives were set out as follows:

- Determine the social and symbolic significance of the city’s courtyards for the citizens of Cordoba.

- Explore differences between people living in dwellings with courtyards and those who do not reside in dwellings of this kind.
- Gain insight into general attitudes towards the courtyards as regards their social, economic and festive functions and as a space of coexistence.

4. Methodology

In order to achieve the above objectives, discussion groups were chosen as the most appropriate qualitative method for the study. The discussion groups were comprised of 5-6 participants (group I had only 5 participants). One session was held for each group in which participants were asked to talk about aspects they believed to be most relevant to the topic at hand.

Three structural variables were taken into account when designing the groups; i) citizens who reside or do not reside in the historic quarter of Cordoba, ii) citizens who participate or do not participate in the “Pacios Cordobeses” courtyard competition and iii) the age of the participants.

GROUPS WHOSE MEMBERS DO NOT RESIDE IN THE HISTORIC QUARTER OF CORDOBA (NON-RESIDENTS)		
GROUP I	<p>Age: 22-30 years of age</p> <p>Size of group: 5 individuals</p> <p>Sex: 3 males, 2 females</p> <p>Place of residence: Outside historic quarter</p>	<p>Educational level: Minimum secondary education or first-cycle vocational training. Maximum university diploma or vocational training.</p> <p>Occupation: Active population (employed or unemployed).</p>
GROUP II	<p>Age: 45-60 years of age</p> <p>Size of group: 6 individuals</p> <p>Sex: 2 males, 4 females</p> <p>Place of residence: Outside historic quarter</p>	<p>Educational level: Minimum primary or middle school education. Maximum secondary school or vocational training.</p> <p>Occupation: Active population (employed or unemployed) or inactive population (housewives or retirees).</p>
GROUPS WHOSE MEMBERS RESIDE IN THE HISTORIC QUARTER OF CORDOBA (RESIDENTS)		
GROUP III	<p>Age: 35-50 years of age</p> <p>Size of group: 6 individuals</p> <p>Sex: 2 males, 4 females</p> <p>Place of residence: Historic quarter of Cordoba</p> <p>Competition: People who have participated in the courtyard competition at least three times in the last 15 years.</p>	<p>Type of dwelling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Single-family dwelling with courtyard. Minimum three members in household. - Multi-family compound with a shared courtyard: minimum 2 or 3 people.
GROUP IV	<p>Age: Over 50 years of age</p> <p>Size of group: 6 individuals</p> <p>Sex: 6 females</p> <p>Place of residence: Historic quarter of Cordoba</p> <p>Competition: People who have participated in the courtyard competition at least three times in the last 15 years.</p>	<p>Type of dwelling:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Single-family dwelling with a courtyard: minimum 3 people. - Multi-family compound with a shared courtyard: minimum 2 or 3 people.

Tab. 1: Characteristics of Discussion Groups

The study was designed in this manner to obtain the maximum amount of information from people of Cordoba about an issue on which it was assumed that different groups had varying opinions. For this reason, more importance was given to the variable "live in the historic quarter in a courtyard house or live outside the historic quarter in a flat".

5. Attitudes and perceptions of citizens towards the courtyards of Cordoba

The significance of courtyard houses for the citizens of Cordoba is a complex topic that encompasses many aspects of both their social and personal lives. Although the courtyards have a special significance for all the groups, clear differences can be observed due to the specific characteristics of each social class represented by the groups.

5.1 Cultural heritage

While the discourse of non-residents (Group I, II) places greater emphasis on aspects having to do with their social life and the heritage value of the courtyard houses, residents (group III, IV, V) attach more importance to personal and private aspects. The reason for this difference could be due to the fact that the members of the first group (non-residents) do not own courtyard houses, nor do they have easy access to them. Although the courtyard houses are privately owned, placing importance on the social and heritage value of these dwellings is a way for non-residents to make this type of dwelling their own.

For the group of older adults (Group II) courtyard houses are the most important festive tradition during the month of May in Cordoba. Courtyard houses are viewed as being an element of their cultural heritage that must be preserved and promoted through measures to encourage young people to live in them. The courtyards are perceived in terms of cultural tradition. As the members of this group state, courtyards are more than just an architectural structure, but serve to safeguard traditions. For this reason, the courtyard festival is a very popular event and a meeting place for social interaction.

W: They are part of our history, our heritage, what happens is that they are not built... They are something more than just a structure, they are what they are, I mean, houses with courtyards and then the tradition of the festival... (Group II)

According to this group, the courtyards are synonymous with adopting and respecting traditional architectural structures and the urban legacy left by the Romans and Arabs. Preserving this tradition therefore means accepting one's own culture and interacting with one's ancestors. Respecting the lifestyles and traditions handed down over the generations (in this case the courtyards) is a way to reunite with one's ancestors and link the past to the present. For this group, the annual courtyard event symbolises the veneration for and remembrance of ancestors whose memory is kept alive through the courtyard houses. In short, the annual ritual encounter with ancestors transcends generations.

The three groups of residents (Group III, IV, and V) make few references to the heritage value of their dwellings, although they do attach importance to the fact that they own such homes. The group of middle-aged residents who participate in the competition (Group III) view the courtyard houses as being part of the city's heritage and believe that is important to implement measures to facilitate and promote their conservation. In contrast, the older women in

Group IV do not make mention of the heritage value of their homes, whereas the group that does not participate in the competition (Group V) places more importance on the lifestyles and customs attached to these dwellings rather than their value as architectural heritage. In short, the three groups differ in terms of how they perceive the heritage value of these dwellings, their role as owners and the use to which they are put, with the most marked differences being found among older women.

According to the group that does not participate in the competition, the courtyard houses represent a traditional way of life that the festival has kept alive. The members of this group identify these homes with the image of an elderly woman caring for and adorning her courtyard and without whom both the house and the courtyard would merely be a lifeless architectural structure.

5.2 An enormous privilege

Those who live in courtyard houses are viewed as being privileged. As with the question of heritage, a distinction can be made between the public and private sphere of this type of dwelling. According to one of the groups of non-residents, it is a privilege to live in these exclusive homes as they permit their owners to come in contact with nature. Furthermore, non-residents highlight the high heritage value of these homes, equating them with other important cultural and artistic monuments. The group of young non-residents (Group I) expressly refers to courtyards houses as a privilege, highlighting the fact that the courtyard festival is the only one of its kind in all of Andalusia. They also believe that the owners of courtyard houses are privileged to live in such a unique architectural setting and place such dwellings on a par with the Mosque-Cathedral of Cordoba; declared a world heritage site. They view the courtyard houses as being unique and equate them to other world famous monuments. The unique nature of the courtyards is further corroborated by the fascination and awe of visitors, thus reinforcing the idea that those who live in such an exclusive and enchanting setting are privileged.

W: ...But I don't think that the Eiffel Tower is better than the courtyards, for example. Because, even though the Eiffel Tower is a very pretty tower, there are lots more towers. It's like what someone was saying before, that the courtyards are one of a kind, they are one of a kind, you said so before, they are one of a kind. There aren't any other courtyards anywhere in the world.

M: The courtyards are only in Cordoba. (Group I)

The most widely-extended feeling among residents is that living in a house with a courtyard is a privilege that people who live in barren and unwelcoming urban areas replete with blocks of flats are unable to afford. Indeed, these residents consider themselves to be just as privileged as people who live in houses in the middle of nature and believe that their elaborately decorated courtyard gardens provide a "ray of hope" for those who live in crowded, built-up areas. They also feel privileged to be able to preserve a unique, small-town way of life (that of the historic quarter and its spatial organisation) in their very own neighbourhoods; a lifestyle which is gradually being lost. In contrast to the confined and cloistered lifestyles so typical of large cities, quality of life is a concept that is associated to these homes.

M: ...well, yes, I am one of the few privileged people that can be counted on the fingers of your hand, in the sense, [...] Think about the people who live in Madrid, in Barcelona, in those huge blocks of concrete...

W: It's a little ray of hope that we offer them. (Group III)

5.3 Personal development

The courtyard houses are closely linked to the personal development of those who live in them. For the group of older non-residents (Group II), the courtyard gardens are viewed as an extension of those who plant and care for them and an opportunity for family members and neighbours to collaborate together. The true meaning of these dwellings lies in the enjoyment gained from caring for these gardens; a sentiment that is even stronger among those who had courtyard gardens during their childhood.

M: I really like the courtyards, the trees and plants. For me they're ... and when I was a kid, a child, I have six brothers and sisters, I had 300 flowerpots in my house, they were mine, not my mother's. They were mine, I took care of them, I painted them and that was just wonderful, nowadays no one does that. (Group II)

The three groups of residents view the courtyard houses as being of special importance to their personal development, albeit in a different manner. For the group of young adults who participate in the competition (Group III), the courtyard houses are a reaffirmation of the fact that they are owners of these spaces, while taking care of them is viewed as a manifestation of their creative ability. For the group of older women (Group IV) who take part in the competition, the courtyards provide the opportunity to put their gardening know-how to use, while the competition gives them the chance to integrate into a society which views them merely as housewives. For the group of residents who do not participate in the competition (Group V), the courtyards are a form of self-affirmation that distinguishes them from other citizens who are unable to enjoy the pleasures the courtyards offer.

5.4 Socialisation

Social interaction is one of the dimensions that respondents with courtyard houses comment upon most in their discourse. But this dimension does not hold the same meaning for all the groups. The non-residents groups (Groups I and II) and the residents who do not participate in the competition (Group V) refer to social interaction in terms of privacy and strong ties with others. Here we include privacy because although it occurs in the private domain, it is another form of social interaction, that is, another aspect of socialisation. For example, the younger non-residents (Group I) consider owning a courtyard house is synonymous with being in constant contact with nature. The older non-residents (Group II), however, state that the courtyard gardens encourage interaction with neighbours, but they do not make reference to family relations within the garden setting itself. In the opinion of the residents who do not participate in the competition, life in the courtyard garden is an extension of the rooms of the house, which depending on the weather, takes place either indoors or outdoors within the natural setting of the courtyard. Hence, they consider courtyard houses to be very versatile for socialising with friends and family.

W: That's beautiful. Can you imagine what it's like to get home when it's not open to the public and realise that all of this is mine, that you live among flowers? That's just great! (Group I)

However, the two groups of residents that participate in the competition (Groups III and IV) develop social ties of a different scope. They highlight relationships with friends, families and across generations in addition to broader social relations such as those they engage in with visitors, the public administration and other citizens with whom they share their knowledge.

Blocks of flats are interpreted by the young residents as lonely places inhabited by an anonymous multitude compared to the harmonious coexistence that occurs within courtyard houses. These dwellings and the urban setting in which they are located form a whole comprised of family members and neighbours; a sort of hamlet which provides the security and love that is missing in the multitude.

Another level of social interaction is that which occurs between neighbours who come together to care for the courtyard garden and share their gardening know-how. Through this social interaction, knowledge about gardening techniques is passed down from generation to generation by mothers and other close relatives. In this way, courtyards also serve to maintain family traditions and customs alive. The courtyard competition also stands out in the discourse as an occasion to engage in social relations of this kind since the event encourages the sharing and transmission of knowledge about gardening. During the competition, social interaction occurs with people from all over the world, to whom the dwellers often transmit their knowledge. This role is further reinforced by the satisfaction and social recognition they gain from doing so.

6. Conclusions

This research study shows how the typology of a particular type of dwelling, the courtyard houses of Cordoba, positively influences personal development and enhances the quality of life of its dwellers.

The citizens of Cordoba attach special importance to the courtyard houses as they not only provide a setting for social interaction, but also a sense of community. The courtyard gardens are an important social event that encourages social relations and the conservation of cultural heritage, while providing a sense of identity that goes beyond the identity attached to the city's historic monuments.

Our analysis has shown that courtyard houses are not simply dwellings inhabited by people, but reflect a lifestyle full of close and varied social relations based on community values. The courtyard houses of Cordoba symbolise a past in which people lived in close contact with one another in large multi-family compounds with other families of their same social status.

Contact with nature and enhanced quality of life

Today, the courtyard gardens are the setting for a wide range of social relations and activities that lend them their particular meaning and significance. In the private sphere, courtyard houses offer numerous advantages. These include providing a space to come in contact with nature and stimulate the senses, contemplate and care for plants and flowers. These are all activities that those who dwell in these homes hold to be a privileged; a privilege they share in common with inhabitants of other courtyard houses. Unlike the lifestyle in blocks of flats, living in a courtyard house is considered to be therapeutic and synonymous with quality of life.

Courtyard houses and the personal development of their inhabitants

In terms of social relations, the courtyard is a space for families and neighbours to gather and interact on a day-to-day basis. For women, the courtyard is also a place to relax, but is perceived more as a space to do some gardening or decorate either alone or in the company of other family members. The courtyard is also a setting for family celebrations associated to rites of passage or weekend leisure activities, which are almost always enjoyed in private removed from the gaze of others. Thus, the courtyard is a place where owners

and friends interact socially, achieve personal development and preserve cultural heritage. Accordingly, the courtyard constitutes an important element for personal development.

The courtyard as a place for community relations

In this study, we have made a clear distinction between type of dwelling and the relations or activities engaged in by those who use them. While those who live in houses with a private courtyard interact with neighbours who dwell in similar homes, residential townhouse developments that share a common courtyard engage in social relations that are more characteristic of blocks of flats.

This study, however, shows how certain private spaces, such as the courtyard houses of Cordoba, are the primary places where the neighbourhood residents interact (Groups III, IV and V). For the owners of this type of dwelling, caring for and decorating their courtyard garden, particularly for those who take part in the courtyard competition, improves relations among neighbours and helps to create a sense of community and strengthen social ties. Exchanging gardening know-how and materials, chatting about the best way to care for plants and flowers or discussing the competition are activities that bring neighbours together on an almost permanent basis; a situation that sometimes even includes family members who are not involved in caring for these gardens.

In this study we show that the courtyards of Cordoba compete with the city's public green spaces not only in terms of bringing citizens in contact with nature, but in terms of the social benefits they provide. The article reveals that those who live or care for their courtyards, maintain them in good condition or take part in the courtyard competition attain greater personal satisfaction than people who live in other kind of houses without courtyards or private gardens. In cities, like Cordoba, where historic neighbourhoods have few green and social spaces and where citizens can not interact and keep in contact with nature, courtyards play an important role in the social life of the neighbourhoods where they are found as they provide a space in which to interact, exchange information, forge identities and come in contact with nature; but most importantly, they are a space for personal development and well-being.

We consider that further research is needed to improve our understanding between owner satisfactions of the courtyards with nature of their houses. In historic neighborhoods of Cordoba, the only contact some citizens have with nature is in the courtyards of their homes.

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