

# PUBLIC SPACES AND GENDER IN SPANISH HISTORICAL CENTRES: THE ALAMEDAS OF SEVILLE AND SANTA CRUZ DE TENERIFE<sup>1</sup>

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Public space is studied taking into account a gender perspective that makes visible, on the one hand, the reasons that can determine the differences between men and women using it (Ortiz, 2007: 13); on the other hand, it analyses the actions that would contribute to achieve a greater equality in terms of presence and participation. This analysis focuses on the differences and similarities that present the use and appropriation of two historical and symbolic places of the cities of Seville and Santa Cruz de Tenerife, after the various physical interventions they have undergone: the alamedas of Hercules and of Duque de Santa Elena, respectively. These are grounds that have faced major transformations that are justified by the necessity to revitalize areas or urban sectors that have lost dynamism, as well as to improve inhabitants' life quality. Such an appeal to both the individual and the collective wellbeing lays the foundation for action; this action is thus endowed with legitimation and social consensus. However, the reorganization and creation of new public spaces does not always guarantee either a better right to use them nor greater opportunities for inclusive appropriation. Therefore, this analysis seeks to show how measures taken by the administration for the renewal and production of new spaces of relation, although promoting the diversification of the users, does not seem enough to accomplish the development of the dynamics of usage or of a more inclusive appropriation.

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Using a qualitative methodology based on direct observation as well as on interviews to users, the access, enjoyment and meaning of current citizens to the studied spaces are analyzed. The main source of information has been the recognition and systematic computation –at different days and times– of users and the activities they developed, as well as conducting open questionnaires which asked for the reasons that led to the use of these spaces, the experiences that took place in them and other features on the frequency and dynamics of use.

## **I. PUBLIC SPACES, GENDER AND CITIZEN RIGHTS**

Among the factors that have influenced the modification of open public spaces, it is worth mentioning the changes experienced in the family structure and lifestyles, the perception of insecurity or the emergence of new leisure and entertainment centers (Martinez, 2003; Rebughini, 2001; Sorkin, 1992) Indeed, contemporary city planning has tended to create fields based in security rather than in the interaction, more in the homogeneity and the promotion of consumption than in the social heterogeneity and plurality of uses (Fleury, 2007), more in its potential as useful elements for urban competitiveness and commercial interest as an image that symbolizes the prevailing economic values rather than in civic identity and integration. Still, there is no denying that such collective meeting places of free access are essential to the functioning of democracy (Fraser, 1990; Marston, 1990; Mitchell, 1995), while the availability of good quality public spaces and the possibility of using and enjoying them is a citizen's right.

Many argue these spaces propitiate the feeling of belonging to a community and to a better life quality. This comes to say that it is necessary to consider these areas for everyday life in urban planning and management, as they are an essential part of the basic sociability of individuals, families, or groups of people (Roman, 1995; Jiron, 2007: 175). Thus, the city and its neighborhoods must have spaces that allow and encourage the presence of and appropriation by citizens understanding that not all use them with the same intensity and in the same way. Age may explain differential access to places and the acquisition of diverse experiences (Hopkins and Pain, 2007). Gender is not a homogeneous or easy category, so it is necessary to consider its intersection with other variables (Valentine, 2007), although it has a strategic analytical interest when addressing the issue of the presence / participation of men and women in everyday public spaces.

## **II. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES IN THE USE AND APPROPRIATION OF THE ALAMEDAS IN SEVILLE AND SANTA CRUZ**

The alamedas of Hercules in Seville and of Duque de Santa Elena in Santa Cruz de Tenerife, have been chosen because they are and have been significant spaces in the social life of their respective cities standing as symbolic places and important social venues both for the residents of nearby residential areas and for the inhabitants of the rest of the city since their inception. These are recently redeveloped areas with designs that share the peculiarity of forming large open spaces, as well as easy internal and external access for pedestrians that have been conditioned to the development of diverse recreational practices.

After having gone through a process of physical deterioration and appearing of marginal activities, the reform of alameda de Hercules -finished in 2008- meant its consolidation as

a place for leisure and commerce, but also for creative impulse and protest. The remodeling of the alameda of Santa Cruz, also opened in 2008, has similarly generated new dynamics of use favored by its physiognomic transformation and integration into a large urban park along with two other bordering public places. In the recovery and beautification of both alamedas, there is an evident concern for building spaces that represent emblematic urban models with designs that seek to improve the image of the city. Following recent changes, the use and appropriation of these areas have been reactivated, although there are some differences between the two, regarding attendance patterns, forms of appropriation, dominant age groups, and gender.

A close analysis on the greatest peaks of affluence reveals there are different frequency times that seem to be conditioned by the different city's location of each alameda. In that of Santa Cruz, it is located in the business and shopping center, close to the port area, having more dynamism and diversity on weekdays and in the mornings; thus, it coincides with the busiest activity in the urban center, which adds additional input from port movement and «cruisers» who arrive in the city. In Seville, however, the flow is more intense in the evenings and on weekends, related to its transit urban location –between the historical center, the northern sector of the city, and the historical riverbed– as well as its role as a large leisure space.

Regarding the forms of appropriation, it is worth of attention that chief modalities are the same but with different weights. Resting and conversation are the most frequent activities in Santa Cruz; meanwhile, walking and chatting are dominant in Seville. Playing and childcare, however, appear next in both places.

As for age groups, the most numerous set in the two examples is that of adults, alone or accompanied by persons of a similar age or by children whom they supervise in play areas. Other age groups do not coincide in the two places, as children and young people predominate in the case of Seville while elders do in Santa Cruz.

The peculiarities in the layout and provision of furniture and other items in each alameda (benches or playing areas) influence in the variables of attendance and appropriation already mentioned, but certainly a key aspect regarding frequenting and forms of use is gender.

In a first approximation we can say that gender differences are noticeable in both alamedas. In Seville there is a balance between men and women; there are no signs of exclusive patterns in the activities they carry because most of the cases are family groups whose importance can be partially related to the physical and socioeconomic changes undergone by the residential environment. So, if this space had been a citizen's emancipatory icon in previous decades (Lees, 2004) or of countercultural movements, the largest influx of people has softened this role, although some inclusive, tolerant or equitable behaviors are still noticeable in the way the space is used.

In the alameda of Santa Cruz, males predominate in all the observations carried out. It is, however, a difference that corresponds to the prominent influx of retirees who come to sit outside and chat, especially in the mornings. Nevertheless, male superiority masks the true representation of adult women of reproductive age, whose numbers, as in Seville, are equal to or even slightly higher than those of men from the same age group in the various observation periods. Adult women are present accompanying and playing with young children, particularly in the evenings and on holidays. Therefore, the differences are caused by the very

low numbers of elderly women. It is rare to find them resting or chatting because reproductive work carried out at home or helping out in the homes of their children are a daily reality for many of them; that limits their opportunities for recreation, which loses quality as it is mediated by their responsibility in caring for others.

### **III. CONCLUSIONS**

Throughout the fieldwork one can suggest that the transformations that have given shape to these two alamedas point to certain types of users, behavior patterns, and recreational practices. In respect to users, a clear analogy can be established between the two spaces in the frequency increase, as well as in the diversification of profiles; one of the profiles that have to be highlighted is that of family groups, which have been favored by the introduction of specific playing areas for the very young, as well as expanding the pedestrian area for transit and ride. These issues affect the presence of adults of both sexes showing a similar importance in the two alamedas.

As for the relationship between social practices and categories of gender and age, a male bias -responding to the relevance retired men have acquired- appears in the alameda of Santa Cruz, but not in that of Seville. If we pay attention to the activities or ways of appropriation, the differences between the two examples are more influenced by age than by gender. The traditional division of tasks is neatly perceptible among elders and less so among adults. Although various provisions and new furniture are incorporated (playing areas for children, benches, vegetation ...) and thus possibilities of entertainment and leisure are enlarged, the basic conflicts between needs and endowments are still detected. This lack of design quality for everyday sociability expresses the fact that in the redevelopment carried out a concern for aesthetic criteria has prevailed upon the functionality, an aspect undergone by men and women alike.