



Spatialising intersectionality: An approach to public space design in self-built neighbourhoods in Cali, Colombia

Catalina Ortiz¹ · Angela M Franco Calderon² · Gynna Millan Franco² · Isabella Jaramillo Diaz²

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Abstract

Standardisation, scarce spaces of encounter, and neglecting social identities when designing public spaces largely contribute to social discontent in neighbourhood upgrading processes. While discussions on intersectionality are mushrooming in urban studies, there is still a gap in understanding how this approach can be applied to public space design in self-built neighbourhoods, which are also the prevalent form of urbanisation globally. In this context, urban designers need to embrace new frames to address this challenge. Using the case of *El Filo* Park in Cali, Colombia, we devised a methodological strategy to deploy an intersectional approach within a highly contested public space. Our proposal transcends the intra-group categories by emphasising territory as an inter-group category. We argue that by adopting a multilayered qualitative approach, complex dynamics shaping these spaces are uncovered and the spatial implications of *interlocking systems of oppression and privilege* faced by individuals and groups with diverse social identities are revealed.

Keywords Public space design · Intersectionality · Self-built neighbourhoods · Participatory design

Introduction

Public spaces significantly impact quality of life, social cohesion, and cultural diversity in cities, and are critical infrastructures for democracy and the development of individual and collective life. Beyond their physical dimensions, public spaces are ‘lived spaces’ infused with meanings, values, emotions, and possibilities (Conley 2012). As they become the stage for social transformation, their design is permeated by political, social, economic, and environmental structures of power, which may pose opportunities but also challenges for different groups of people (Grazian 2004; Stevens et al. 2021). To address this, a plethora of approaches to public space design have appeared, aiming to embrace the needs and aspirations of diverse and often marginalised groups, including women, children, the elderly, the LGBTQI+ community, and people with reduced mobility. Some cases as programmatic design (Aelbrecht et al. 2021), universal design (Nelischer and Loukaitou-Sideris

2022) or adaptive design (Stevens et al. 2021) have been documented in the literature. Nevertheless, when it comes to public spaces in self-built neighbourhoods, these approaches often appear distant from the practical arrangements and everyday realities that shape public life in these areas. This is problematic because by 2050, it is expected that 3 billion people will live in self-built settlements (UN-Habitat 2024). Despite this reality, urban design still needs to expand its methodological and analytical repertoires to address the unique spatial requirements of these urban contexts.

Latin America and the Caribbean (LAC) is still the most urbanised region globally with nearly a quarter of the population living in self-built neighbourhoods, commonly known as informal settlements or *Barrios populares* (popular neighbourhoods). There, solidarity networks work in the construction of basic infrastructure and homes but also in social life in open spaces where boundaries between public and private are constantly negotiated. Yet, public spaces are often the product of self-production strategies and are built according to people’s knowledge, capacities, and affordances in areas where land is usually scarce and contested (Alja’afreh et al. 2022). Public spaces are recognised as places of struggle and resistance where prevailing ideologies and power structures are challenged by alternative expressions and spatial appropriations (Lefebvre 1991) and often become the

✉ Catalina Ortiz
catalina.ortiz@ucl.ac.uk

¹ University College London, London, UK

² Universidad del Valle, Cali, Colombia



spatial representation of political, economic, or symbolic power at the community level. Depending on the context, they are conflict-ridden, perceived as intimidating and dangerous, or marked as no-go areas for some individuals and specific groups (Schmidt and Németh 2010; Valentine 2008; Kamalipour 2020).

Public space in self-built neighbourhoods is in constant dispute and its design is situated in broader processes of neighbourhood upgrading—often led from the top down—which tend to assume that all residents have similar aspirations and needs, leading to the standardisation of spatial responses and contributing to social discontent in the requalification processes (Yeboah et al. 2021). Hence, this paper aims at presenting how an intersectional approach to public space design can help urban designers to deliver more inclusive and accessible public spaces in self-built neighbourhoods. This approach can have a central role in reducing conflict and promoting urban inclusion and values such as respect for difference, empathy, and solidarity in common spaces, as well as meeting needs in terms of livelihood assets and opportunities (Yeboah et al. 2021). Based on the case of *El Filo* Park in Cali (Colombia) as a testing ground to operationalise a spatial understanding of intersectionality, we argue that by adopting a multilayered qualitative approach, complex dynamics shaping public spaces can be uncovered by revealing the spatial implications of *interlocking systems of oppression and privileges* faced by individuals and groups with diverse social identities.

We draw upon intersectionality theories that enable recognising the interconnectedness of social categories and identities such as race, class, gender, ethnicity, and age (Collins 2009; Wong et al., 2017) and show how it can assist designers in analysing and understanding how complex relations between socially constructed identities operate, and how the convergence of the multiple identity markers impacts the claims and disputes over the use of public spaces. In this context, we frame *territory* as an inter-group category to transcend intra-group categories that are often addressed in intersectional analysis (Choo and Ferree 2010) to understand how groups living in the same territory are positioned in relation to each other in terms of power, privilege, and oppression. To unpack this, the article is structured in four sections: the first section reviews the notion of intersectionality as a broad and multifaceted concept and analytical lens followed by a review of its application in urban design and concludes with a revision of the interlocking systems of oppression taking place in public spaces; the second situates the context of the site of analysis by explaining the socio-spatial conditions of the self-built neighbourhood *Pampas del Mirador* in Cali, where *El Filo* Park is located; the third section details the multilayered methodology that we used and explains how each layer reveals more nuanced and deeper aspects of how the interlocking systems

of oppression appear in the perception and use of public space; the fourth section discusses the ways in which the methodology informed and became a tool to negotiate the spatial layout of the public design of *El Filo* Park. We conclude by suggesting the main takeaways of our proposal.

Understanding intersectionality in space and urban design

Contextualising intersectionality in urban spaces enables mapping everyday social environments and connect them to broader systemic and structural power dynamics that govern local settings (McKinzie and Richards 2019). Consequently, integrating intersectionality into urban design can be instrumental for critically examining the myriad interlinked dimensions of social justice and inclusivity in public spaces, which are often influenced by identities and experiences of diverse social groups. The literature on the nexus between urban space and intersectionality can be approached in the following strands.

Intersectionality as concept and approach

Intersectionality, a concept grounded in feminist theory, examines how overlapping social identities, including the triad of race, gender, and class, intersect to create unique modes of discrimination and privilege. This triad has expanded to include a wide range of categories such as sexuality, nationality, ethnicity, ability, age, and religion (Hancock 2007; Collins 2009). Race and gender studies championed these debates for several decades, mainly in the US, emphasising the importance of understanding the conditions of intersecting categories to explain black women's experiences of marginalisation (Hull et al. 1982; Crenshaw 1989, 1991; Collins 1991; Collins & Bilge 2020). Therefore, intersectionality, as a conceptual and methodological approach, stands as a critique of hegemonic power structures and dominant narratives that fuel discrimination and inequalities (Thompson 2002).

Intersectionality stands out in the oppressive power relations shaping socially constructed identities based on categories of difference, often unnoticed by those in marginalised circumstances. Intersectional analyses reveal how structures and institutions engender disparities and benefit a few while putting others at a disadvantage. The primary goal of employing an intersectional approach in public space design is to unveil the multifaceted impacts of intersecting oppression on individuals or groups, particularly within their unique geopolitical context and the local power dynamics within hetero-patriarchal systems (McCall 2005). Preceding intersectionality, the interlocking systems of oppression, born out in the struggles of the Combahee River Collective,



encapsulate how multiple forms of oppression and privilege build personal experiences. Carasthatis (2016) emphasised the “need for an integrative theory of, and an integrative praxis against, multiple oppressions” (p. 162). Their discourse focuses on recognising that identities are not single but multiple and intersecting, a notion not always evident in social theory.

In urban studies, numerous authors have addressed intersectional research from different disciplines and frameworks. For instance, Earnshaw et al. (2018) studied the correlation between intersectional experiences of discrimination, their impact on health outcomes and their role in either increasing or reducing health inequities. Truelove (2019) examined the connections between urban water inequality and insecurity, emphasising their close association with intersecting axes of power such as gender, class, race, ethnicity, and religion. McCall (2005) discussed intersectionality within physical spaces, underscoring the significance of *socio-spatial context* in the lived experiences and claiming that intersectionality involves understanding social relations and identities within diverse historical trajectories and contexts. Analysing simultaneous intersections of discrimination improves the understanding of gender, class, ethnic identities, and territoriality as the locus of communities’ social, political, and human development (Iza Certuche 2018). Intersectionality—more than a set of principles, ideas, or a practical methodological toolkit—is a way of thinking, a mindset, and a political stance towards design practice in constructing more equitable cities.

Interlocking systems of oppression in urban spaces

Intersectional literature suggests that to inquire how systems of oppression operate, the focus should not be on the sum or accumulation of different identities but on understanding how they intertwine to create experiences of oppression or privilege (Franco-Calderón and Ramírez-Torres 2023). As one of the aims of this paper is to unveil how socio-spatial inequalities influence and shape public spaces in self-built neighbourhoods, it is necessary to unravel the intersection of multiple experiences and how existing categories play out in the space.

Gender and space

Gender-based discrimination, particularly against women, is a pervasive issue affecting their experiences within public spaces (Bobbitt-Zeher 2011). Women often face challenges such as stigma, violence, intimidation, structural and interpersonal discrimination with potential adverse effects on their well-being and safety (Lampe et al. 2020). Differential access to public spaces, coupled with gendered urban design, shapes how women navigate and use these environments.

Women’s mobility and access to public spaces are often constrained by multiple factors including cultural, political, and religious considerations, thus reinforcing traditional gender roles that confine them to private and reproductive spaces (Siwach 2020). The presence of gender non-conformity further worsens discrimination, as transgender women face stigmatisation in societies adhering to binary gender systems (Miller and Grollman 2015). In public spaces in self-built neighbourhoods, discrimination against women and transgender women may be more pronounced due to the absence of civic and educational spaces that challenge discriminatory practices and promote inclusion.

Ethnic-racial belonging and space

The discriminatory experiences that individuals of diverse ethnicities or races face within public spaces are influenced by prevailing social biases and power dynamics (Shariff-Marco et al. 2011). These biases often appear in diverse forms, including racial profiling, unequal access to space and resources, differential treatment on ethno-racial grounds (Lehmann 2020; Martino 2017). In self-built neighbourhoods, which are often home to marginalised groups, the interplay of systemic oppression based on race and ethnicity becomes evident through the inequities and discriminatory practices in collective spaces (Rigon 2022). These are not only imposed by dominant societal structures but also by groups or individuals who undergo oppression due to their social identities. Also, the scarcity of resources and limited access to essential utilities intensify the struggles of ethnically and racially diverse individuals (Viveros 2016).

Disability, age, and space

The intersection of age, disability, and other identities exacerbate challenges faced by individuals within public spaces. The experiences of older people with disabilities may be shaped by multiple forms of marginalisation, highlighting the complexity of intersecting systems of oppression (Giordano 2020). In self-built neighbourhoods, the distribution of facilities and essential utilities is often unequal and affects these groups disproportionately. This situation can result in limited access to vital resources, thus worsening disparities and impeding the well-being of older and disabled individuals (Guo et al. 2020) who end up being excluded from collective spaces (Imrie 2001).

Intersectionality as an approach to urban design

Urban planners, geographers, and sociologists who have committed to challenging the perceived neutrality of traditional city-making through new frameworks—from gender-sensitive design and gender mainstreaming in planning to



differential and intersectional approaches—are largely contributing to the integration of the intersectional approach into urban design (Moser 2021; Col lectiu Punt 6, 2019; Sandercock and Forsyth 1992; Sánchez de Madariaga 2004). Relevant works in the literature that reflect the convergence of urban design and intersectionality emphasise areas such as citizen (women’s) participation, public service provision, public policy framing, public space design, housing, and mobility (Beall 1996; Sánchez de Madariaga 2004; Irazábal and Huerta 2016; Castán-Broto and Neves-Alves 2018; Hankivsky and Jordan-Zachery 2019; Kakar, et al. 2021; Rigon and Castán-Broto 2021; Contreras et al. 2021; Col lectiu Punt 6, 2019). However, in the dominant praxis of urban design, the invisibility of intersectional thinking has led practitioners to, inadvertently, continue to assume populations in a single dimension of identity, e.g., ‘woman’ or ‘disabled’ (Levy 2009; Walker and Ossul-Vermehren 2021) instead of considering the effect produced by the combination of factors of disadvantage. The single-identity approach has been useful in addressing the needs of specific groups, but it has failed to consider complex identities, intra-group diversities and inter-group differences that create other dimensions of oppression (Rigon and Castán-Broto 2021) that usually manifest themselves in public spaces.

While debates on intersectionality in urban life are mushrooming, some feminist collectives have adopted a proactive stance in transforming public spaces using intersectional and differential tools for analysis and reflection. They challenge the notion of ‘neutral’ urban design that perpetuates violence and vulnerability for certain social groups at certain times of the day (Landman 2020). These collectives address issues such as insecurity and harassment that other groups such as children, the LGBTQI+ community, the elderly, the homeless, and ethnic minorities may experience in public spaces (Col lectiu Punt 6, 2019). Their work highlights how multiple identities suffering oppression or disadvantages must be at the centre of urban planning and design.

Some local governments have engaged with the challenges of bringing intersectional approaches to urban settings. Far from the context of self-built neighbourhoods, the city of Vienna positioned itself as a paradigmatic example for integrating gender-sensitive care work considerations into spatial design. Since 1988, the city’s planning office has promoted the application of urban policies addressing the daily needs of women in housing, public space design, security, and mobility (Col-lectiu Punt 6 2019). However, commitment to alternative approaches to urban design is seen as challenging for more conservative political positions. The progress that Vienna has made so far is not without criticism and obstacles generating from hegemonic and patriarchal political power (Col-lectiu Punt 6 2023).

In the Latin American context, Contreras et al. (2021) offer an analysis of the situation of public spaces in several

Mexican cities and argue how urban design and planning have favoured the exclusion of the majority over spaces that are directly handed over to consumption, tourism, and gentrification. Their analysis highlights some necessary considerations to create inclusive spaces with an intersectional perspective, regarding accessibility, comfort, and urban furniture, de-gendering the dichotomous relationship of spaces and activities between masculine/feminine (p.37). These endeavours are particularly relevant to understand the complex realities of self-built neighbourhoods marked by informality, material precariousness, and lack of urban infrastructures, and where the diversity of social identities weaves a more intricate picture of inequality and exclusion.

More recently, urban practitioners have turned their attention to the production of guidelines for the implementation of the intersectional approach in urban spaces. For example, the *Intersectionality Resource Guide and Toolkit* (UN-Women 2021) aims to address structural barriers and growing inequalities experienced by women, girls and people with disabilities, to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals to leave no one behind. In the same line, Col.lectiu punt 6 (2023), based on a feminist urbanism approach, have proposed the *Guide for the Integration of the Gender Perspective in Sustainable Urban Mobility Plans* and the *Guide for the Design of Public Spaces with an Intersectional Gender Perspective*. These guides have eased the understanding and applicability of what may seem like theoretical concepts in everyday urban life.

Despite efforts, numerous barriers persist in the inclusion of an intersectional approach in urban design. This challenge extends even further to informal settlements, where urban morphologies and aesthetics lie beyond the influence of architects or urban planners (Samper et al. 2020). Moreover, spatial features typically listed as recommendations for public space design primarily focus on material elements or ‘attractions’ to ensure user appropriation and permanence (Rebernik et al. 2019). However, little attention is given to the methodologies to inform urban design practices in the context of neighbourhood upgrading to deal with the needs and aspirations of the diverse identities these spaces will serve. In this line, our proposal transcends the intra-group categories by emphasising territory as an inter-group category using the case of *El Filo Park at Pampas del Mirador* neighbourhood.

Contextualising public space design: Pampas del Mirador

In Cali, nearly 250,000 people live in precarious self-built neighbourhoods in the western and eastern peripheries (SVSH 2017), where most Afro-descendant and unemployed populations are concentrated (DANE 2018; 2022). This city



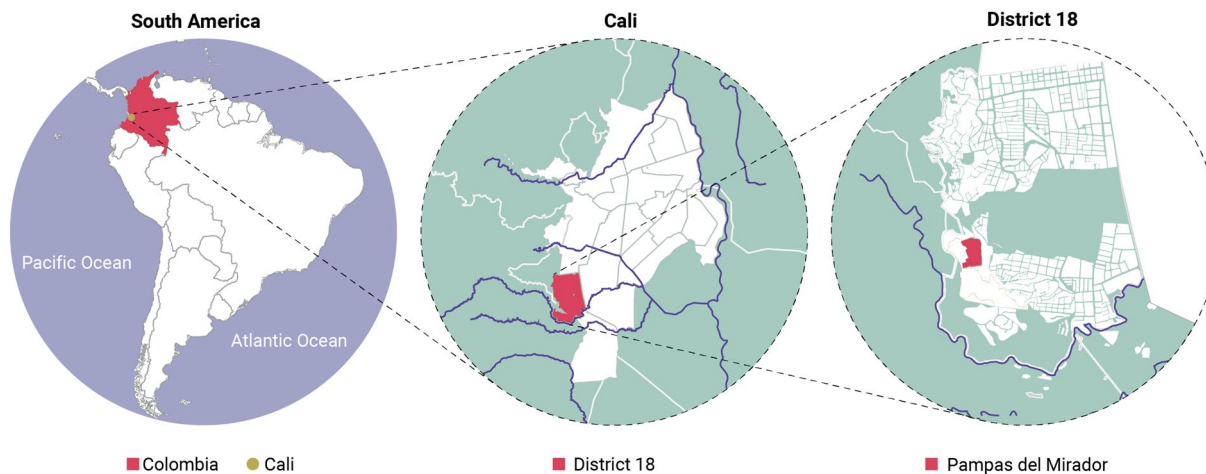


Fig. 1 Location of District 18 and Pampas del Mirador neighbourhood

also hosts more than 225,000 internally displaced people (IDP) coming from rural areas affected by the armed conflict (RUV 2024). Most of the poorest areas of the city, including self-built neighbourhoods, are home to IDPs (Urrea and Franco-Calderón, 2020), as is the case of *Pampas del Mirador* neighbourhood, located in a peripheral area of District 18 (Fig. 1), where about 20% of its inhabitants self-recognise as IDPs (SVSH and Universidad del Valle 2022).

Pampas del Mirador emerged in 2001, when a group of people occupied public lands on the western slopes and founded the settlement. The public force tried to evict them several times, but the community reached a tacit agreement with the local government to stay considering that the city had no alternative places or financial resources to resettle them (Universidad del Valle 2021). The first inhabitants decided the spatial configuration of the neighbourhood and divided the land into nearly 500 plots. They agreed to leave the place with the best view for a 0.85-acre park called *El Filo*¹ and a precarious primary school built by the community with the support of the catholic church. Despite the rapid urbanisation of the area, the community kept the park as a free space, even if its infrastructure was poor: two recycled football goalposts, some hand-made benches, and poor lighting.

In 2012, the mayor of Cali promised to build a football pitch, but land titling issues stopped him from keeping his promise. The permanently ‘informal condition’ of *El Filo* led to some groups gradually taking over parts of the park: in the southeast side a group of at-risk youth use and sell drugs, and in the northwest corner, a private fast-food shack was built. In the middle part, the Community Action Board left unfinished infrastructure for the community centre, built

a concrete slab to demarcate the sports arena and installed a fence to prevent further occupations. Progressively, these interventions became barriers to the free use of the park and people from the neighbourhood with different social identities started to become afraid of going there. After 2015, with the park divided by visible and invisible borders, the local leaders felt that trying to recover *El Filo* could compromise their personal integrity because they lacked the power to reclaim the space from drug dealers and private businesses.

This crisis partially changed in 2020 when *Pampas del Mirador* was selected by the Secretariat of Social Housing and Habitat of Cali (SVSH by its Spanish acronym) as a pilot for self-built neighbourhood legalisation, following the recommendation of a group of urban planners from the *Laboratorio de Barrios Populares* (PopuLab) of the Universidad del Valle, of which the authors of this article are members. We were commissioned by the local government to conduct, between August 2020 and December 2022, the technical studies for legalisation and the urban design of *El Filo* Park as a result of the interest of the SVSH in implementing the intersectional approach in settlements’ upgrading in Cali promoted by the Laboratory.

Operationalising intersectionality in public space design: *El Filo* Park

To prevent possible unintended effects, considering the socio-spatial complexity found at *El Filo*, an intersectional approach operationalised through a multilayered methodology was implemented. It started with data collection through qualitative, quantitative, and participatory methods carried out at different moments of the process (Table 1). This methodology went from the physical-spatial understanding of the territory to a more experiential perspective of individuals and their

¹ The term *El Filo* in Spanish means the ridge of a mountain.



Table 1 Multilayered methodological approach to public space design through an intersectional lens

Methodological layer	Data gathering techniques	Purpose
Prefiguring Public Space Design	Community meetings, mapping, physical diagnosis, site analysis (topography, sights, natural features)	Initial engagement with community members
Understanding socio-spatial configuration and perceptions of space use	Geocoded socio-economic survey (census-type)	Understand population demographics, movement behaviours, community participation, use of collective spaces, etc
Mapping interlocking systems of oppression	Semi-structured interviews with social leaders, focus groups with vulnerable social identities, and intersectional mapping sessions with women, children, people with disabilities, LGBTQI+ people and the elderly	Explore and geo-localise experiences of oppression and privileges in public spaces with specific social groups
Enabling recognition and reconciliation	Participatory video (video documentation, storytelling, engagement with lived experiences)	Deepen understanding of intersectional experiences to amplify marginalised and excluded voices within the design final decisions

**Fig. 2** Spatial prefiguration of El Filo Park

identities that enlightened the design process with a deeper understanding of the groups of users, territorial control, and power structures taking place at *El Filo* as the heart of collective life.

Prefiguring public space design: First participatory design stage

As a preliminary design exercise, we conducted a spatial



prefiguration of the public space. We used design parameters such as site visual values, land-use analysis at different spaces and times, types of sports and other recreational activities performed, existing infrastructure and vegetation, vehicular flows, accessibility, and pedestrian paths. This stage included two participatory design workshops using two and three-dimensional tools, where 59 people shared their ideas, needs, and main challenges with the designers. After processing the baseline data, the team systematised the outcomes in an official report and delivered an initial version of the public space design to the SVSH (Fig. 2).

Despite the efforts to address the challenges faced by *Pampas del Mirador* residents, we risked overlooking the complexities of uses, users, and relationships at *El Filo* with a conventional approach to public space design. Standard urban design methods and limited participation, while valuable, fell short to capture the nuanced dynamics, informal, and tacit negotiations (sometimes imposed by some groups over others) that evolved over time to shape the space. If not adequately understood and addressed, the existing complexities could remain hidden in a new park but present in the space, thus perpetuating social exclusion and encroachment by individual interests. Therefore, we deployed other methods to approach the territory through an intersectional lens.

Understanding spatial dynamics in space

Within the process of legalisation of *Pampas del Mirador*, we devised a broader methodological strategy built upon the initial information gathered in conversations with community leaders and workshops attended by residents of the area. This methodological layer introduced the design and implementation of a socio-economic survey, akin to a census, which was applied to 501 houses occupied by 881 families of the neighbourhood between October and November 2021. It was possible to capture complete information (11 sections, 112 questions) from 473 households (58%) and only information on the property (1 section, 10 questions) from 338 households (42%), where the surveyors could not reach out residents (SVSH & Universidad del Valle 2022). The survey, built on the formats used by the local government, included questions around intersectional experiences and all data obtained, were geo-referenced to spatialise the answers. Some information regarding conflict victims and members of the LGBTQI+ community was particularly challenging to capture, especially when the head of the household was inquired about other family members.

Amidst the general lack of data on informal settlements, the survey provided new information of the demographic and spatial profile of *Pampas del Mirador*. For instance, it yielded data on the perception of safety in public spaces by gender, disability, and ethnic-racial identity, as well as community participation according to the various social

identities of the respondents, such as being a victim of the internal armed conflict or a community leader, which in the Colombian context could pose a major risk. However, the survey excluded the experiences of adolescents, children, or elderly individuals who are not heads of households and are economically or caregiving-dependent on their families. It also overlooks the experiences of LGBTQI+ individuals, who often prefer to conceal their identities to avoid discrimination or harassment.

According to the survey results, *El Filo* is an area where most residents exercise caution, and the perception of insecurity in public spaces remains high (Fig. 3) despite their long-term residency. During the survey visits, the team observed spatial dynamics that required further investigation, such as the constant presence of groups of young people exhibiting intimidating behaviour towards their neighbours and controlling certain areas.

Based on these observations of the space and the experiences of heads of households, further analysis was needed to focus on understanding how these spatial dynamics and perceptions of insecurity affected the overall community and the well-being of vulnerable groups within the neighbourhood and at *El Filo*. This included examining the impact on children, women, the elderly, and LGBTQI+ individuals. Additionally, the role of community leaders and their influence (or not) on mitigating these issues.

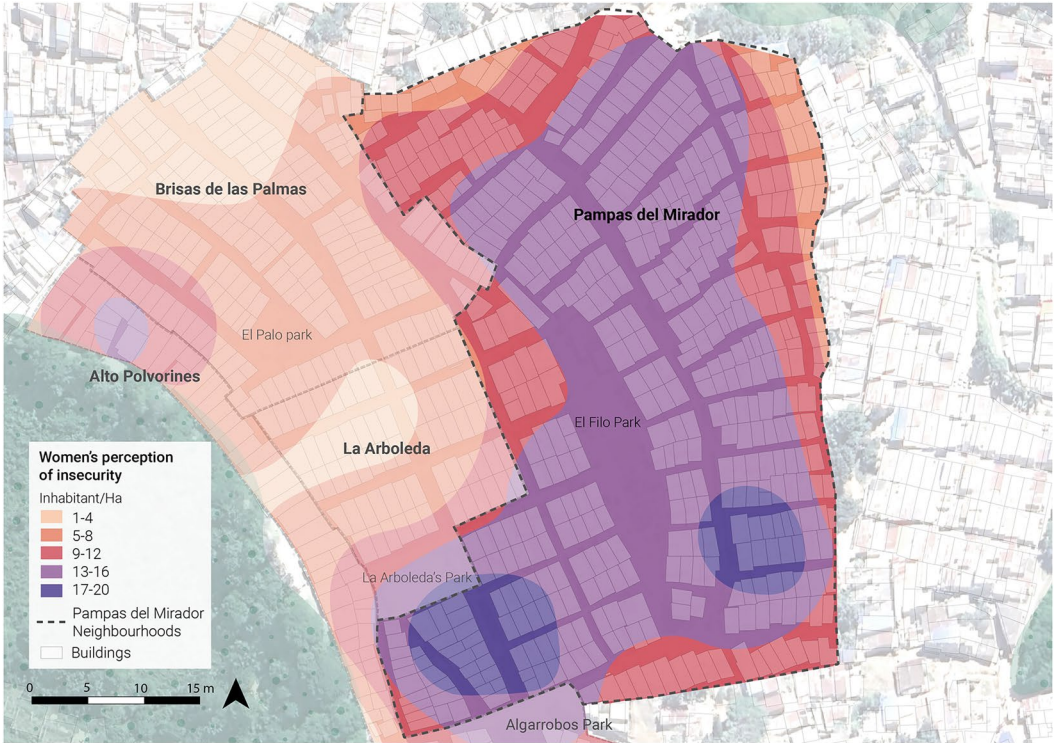
Mapping interlocking systems of oppression and privileges

Mapping oppression and privileges constituted a new layer of analysis that enabled spatialising the experiences of the neighbourhood inhabitants. We took transect walks and conducted semi-structured interviews (12) and focus groups with mapping sessions (4) to collect more individual and group experiences of five specific groups: social leaders, women, the elderly, children and young people, and members of the LGBTQI+ community. These methods allowed us to get more details about the daily uses of public spaces, activity schedules, and groups of users. At the neighbourhood scale, mapping sessions entered in Geographic Information System (SIG) helped us identify places of oppression and privileges experienced by individuals and peer groups (Fig. 4).

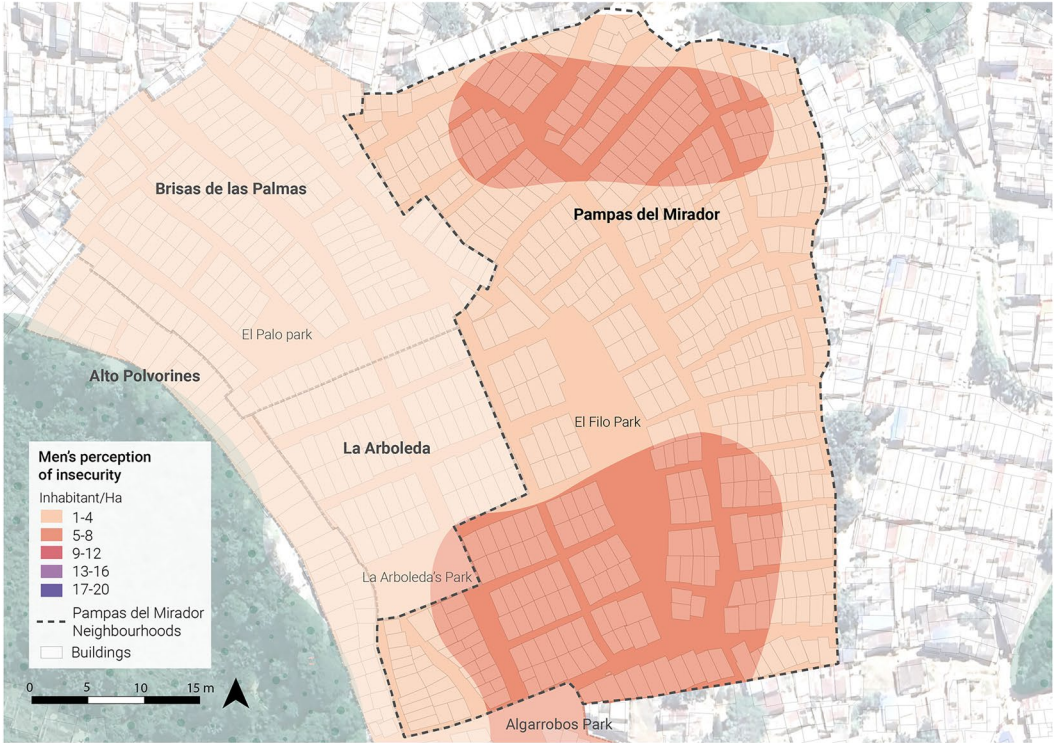
With greater detail, this same exercise at the local scale, at the park, revealed the multiple discriminations that the intersectional lens has made visible (Fig. 5).

This information revealed intersections where oppression and inter-group expressions of power took place. For instance, for a person who self-identifies as an Afro-descendant trans woman victim of the armed conflict, episodes of hate and rejection at *El Filo* were more direct and





(a)



(b)

Fig. 3 a Women's perception of insecurity. b Men's perception of insecurity





(a)



(b)

Fig. 4 a Oppression and privilege places mapped in Pampas del Mirador. b Oppression and privilege places mapped in Pampas del Mirador



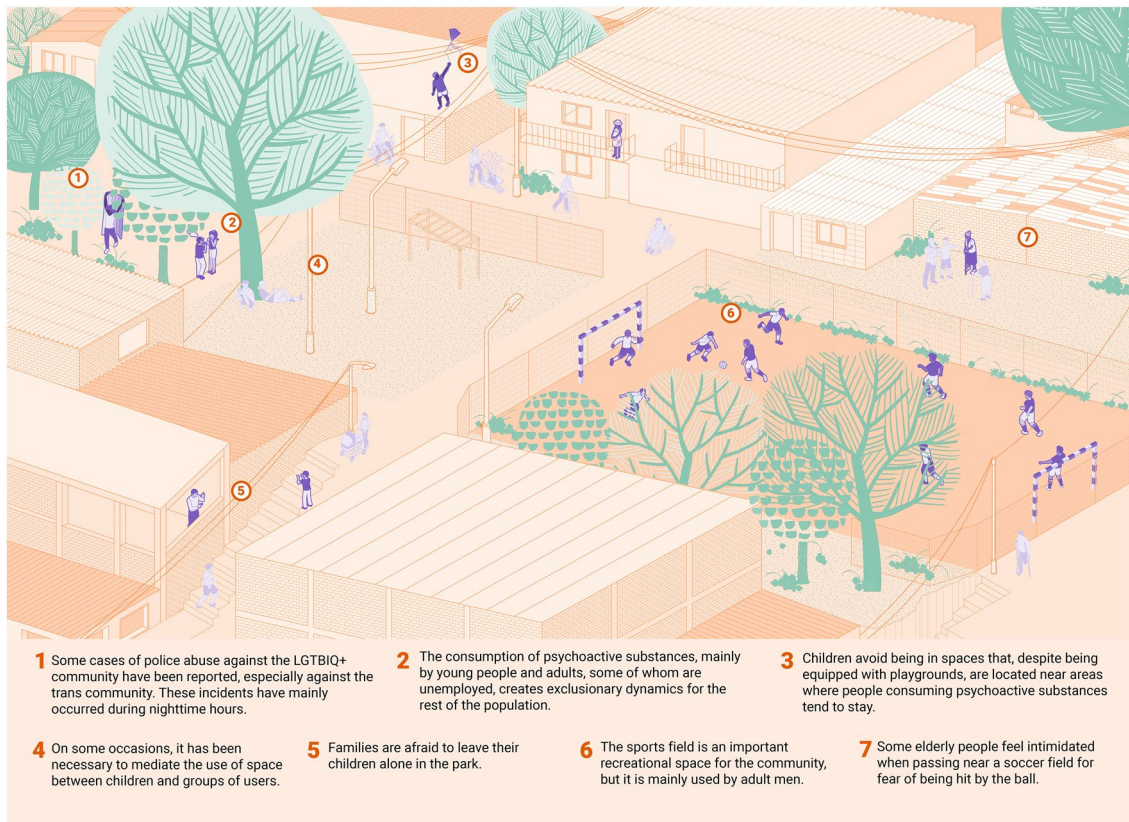


Fig. 5 Oppression and privilege places mapped in El Filo Park

common than for mixed-race women who also identify as victims.

“After 9 pm, some of my friends and I have experienced harassment by the people who should provide security: the police... I prefer not to go through the park when it’s dark” (Afro-descendant Trans woman, 43 years old, personal communication, March 23rd 2022).

“I try to go for a walk, but in many areas of the neighbourhood, I feel unsafe or discriminated against... some people call me “negra” to offend me... I don’t care because I am happy to be who I am...” (Afro-descendant women, 62 years old, personal communication, March 22nd, 2022).

During the mapping session with elderly women, most of them pointed out that *El Filo* was a place where, depending on the time of the day, experiences of intimidation and well-being were at play: *“I go through El Filo to get home after my senior citizen activities. The guys doing drugs are there regularly, I greet them, I don’t discriminate against them, and I hope that they also treat me with respect....” (Women, 65 years old, personal communication, March 22nd, 2022).* Mixed experiences show that

this was a space of contrasting realities that easily shifted from an arena for community cohesion to a place for vulnerability and unease.

Social leaders, especially women, also expressed frustration at no longer being able to use the park due to safety concerns: *[El Filo] was our place because we worked there a lot with the community [and] there was a politician who helped us to build the court. [After the pandemic] I never went up there again because of the young people; going there scares me (Social leader, female, personal communication, March 22nd, 2022).* Due to the challenges that residents identified with the use of the space by the group of at-risk young people, social leaders explicitly expressed during transect walks their wish to control access to *El Filo* as they were doing with smaller spaces *“to allow only people we know are good and want to make good use of the space.”* However, these controls have created tensions between leaders and residents that feel like they have to ask for permission to use common places.

Using the intersectional lens to uncover and specialise individual and collective concerns, and power disputes for territorial control in both scales, led to a better understanding of how the interlocking systems of oppression and privileges operate through the exclusion of certain people and



groups and how this knowledge could be used to create a space that promotes reconciliation and respect for difference.

Enabling recognition and reconciliation

In parallel, we deployed a strategy that served a dual purpose: to strengthen trust and encourage community engagement in the park design process. On the one hand, we built timelines with various groups of residents to map the trajectories of community settlement (Fig. 6). Through the memory and narratives of the 92 participants from *Pampas del Mirador* and the three neighbouring settlements, we were able to have a historical context much closer to the lived experiences of the residents that shaped this area of the city. The timelines evolved into extensive discussions about collective efforts and allowed the community to witness and take pride in their achievements. This activity enabled the identification of significant places and decisive moments for the community on their journey towards building a *popular* habitat, sharing stories of struggle, efforts, and challenges that created scenarios of solidarity and reconciliation among neighbours.

On the other hand, to deeply engage with the stories of individuals previously identified through observation and active engagement with the community, PopuLab designed a participatory video strategy called “Intersectional Lives” to capture the voices and lived experiences of people who were not always the focus of attention or participation in the neighbourhood. The process included social leaders, individuals from the LGBTQI+ community, people with reduced mobility, older adults, and those who belong to an ethnic group-race. With the data and information gathered during the implementation of the first phases of the multilayered methodology, the participatory video allowed us to explore the types of oppression faced by individuals with multiple identities at *El Filo*.

By involving individuals (6) whose life stories were particularly difficult for being who they are in creating video narratives, we were able to document and share their personal perspectives through their own experiences. This provided us with qualitative data that captured the complexity of social interactions and spatial dynamics taking place at *El Filo*. For example, a community leader with reduced mobility, who also has to move around the neighbourhood for caregiving duties, shared: “*I don’t use El Filo because there are no ramps for my wheelchair... I hardly ever go to the park...*” (Participatory video interview, June 6th, 2022). The process of documenting and reflecting on camera about their lived experiences highlighted the inequitable spatial practices and the territorial control within which these types of situations are immersed. However, beyond the opportunity to document very intimate and personal reflections and experiences of oppression in audiovisual format, one of the cycles of the participatory video included territorial screenings or public displays of the final videos (Fig. 7).

More than 50 people attended two screenings held across *Pampas del Mirador* and its surroundings; the audience was able to see and hear, for the first time, the difficulties of being a woman, a trans woman, a person with reduced mobility, or elderly in the neighbourhood. Screenings turned into collective spaces for residents to reflect on their own attitudes towards others who are more vulnerable and how to take personal actions to mitigate them, especially in the public space.

Designing *El Filo* Park through an intersectional lens

Designing from an intersectional perspective helps going beyond the single dimensions of identity by including a deeper understanding of how power structures are deployed

Fig. 6 Timeline building



Fig. 7 Screening of the participatory video



in public spaces. In turn, it allows us to explore how the intersection of factors of disadvantage works in those spaces for individuals and/or groups. The multilayered method we propose contributes to operationalising an intersectional approach to negotiate the spatial layout of *El Filo* Park. Learning from the incremental approach of self-building neighbourhoods, each stage contributed to deepening our social engagement. Beyond mainstream participatory design, having community-based organisations and key social leaders as official partners was crucial to gain trust with the community and learn together how to refine the methodology. Our proposal transcends intra-group identity categories by emphasising territory as an inter-group category using a combination of methodologies as explained before. While identity is not a fixed category, fluid and in constant change, bringing the spatial dimension to the design process in self-built neighbourhoods is key to address the internal disputes of scarce common spaces.

Bringing an intersectional lens to our public space design methodology required new strategies of visual representation to discuss with community members and negotiating with designers. For instance, geocoding survey information enabled putting the neighbourhood ‘on the map’ of the city as well as revealing the socio-demographic conditions that otherwise get hidden in merely morphological accounts. In a similar fashion, showing a gendered, racialized, and aged approach to the perception of insecurity allowed all the participants to acknowledge their relative privileges and multiple cases of oppression in the use of public space. Likewise, mapping and zooming the inter-group dynamics in space from a tridimensional perspective (Fig. 5) revealed the existing conflicts and exclusions that take place there, raising the unintended consequences of a mainstream approach of the public space layout. Using participatory video became a very powerful process not only for deepening everyday stories of the interlocking systems of oppression and privileges;

the making and public screening of the videos also became a pedagogic space for enabling recognition and reconciliation among community members otherwise invisible. In turn, they saw the design of the park as a chance to reconcile the tensions across groups.

These activities revealed fears, aspirations, and cultural features of the neighbourhood’s residents that became the basis for the final urban design layout. The workshops, interviews, and other data gathered during the process enabled a more responsive design to meet the needs of a diverse population. For instance, the focus groups with children and elderly people made it possible to conclude that there was a need for a sports programme for senior members and a kid’s skate team as potential users, for which there is no space in the current park. As an answer to expanding possibilities of recreation to a wider population, the final design reduced the size of the football court to enable the practice of other sports and passive recreation. It introduced a second sports area that included an outdoor gym for all age groups (Fig. 8). In the area near the primary school, a large playground was added to separate the kids from the multi-purpose court to ensure their safety. Ideas from people who migrated to Cali from rural areas were also integrated, such as including community gardens combined with composting projects, as a way of strengthening community ties and managing organic waste. The elderly and social leaders said that a typical practice of indigenous cultures was the ‘inter-generational exchange of knowledge’, and, in the project, this tradition became the basis for proposing educational activities for improving coexistence among at-risk youth and the community.

In terms of the limitations, although it was not possible to conduct workshops or interviews with drug users, their families and close friends kept them informed about the process and the community proposed an open square and a facility in the south side of the park to allow them to participate as



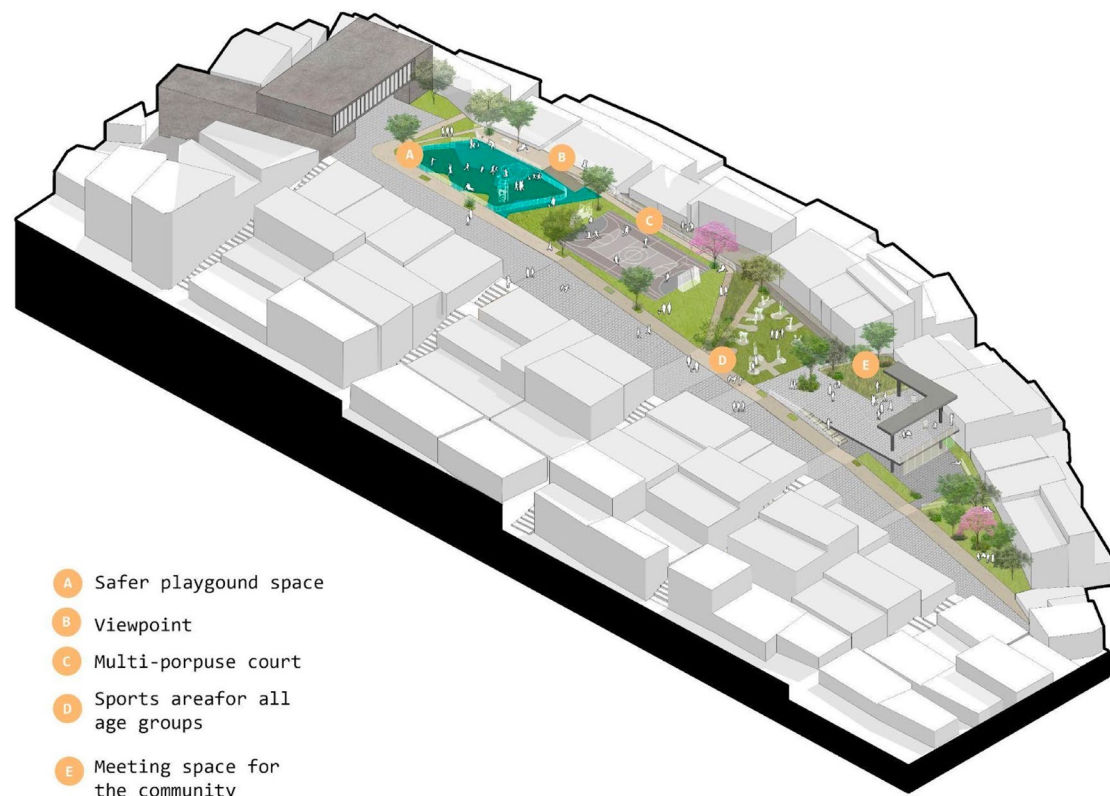


Fig. 8 Final design of El Filo Park

users of the park. In sum, while the methodological proposal contributed to reveal the spatial implications of an intersectional approach by revealing the spatial practices of inter-group oppression and privileges at micro-scale; it is important to keep in mind that we are referring to design interventions targeting the most vulnerable population at the urban level that experience structural oppression, territorial stigma, and de facto exclusion from the right to the city. Therefore, an intersectional approach is also situated in a broader systemic and structural power dynamic in space.

Conclusion

Bringing a justice-based vision for social transformation into urban design practice is crucial. In this article, we have explored intersectionality as an approach to the design of public spaces in the context of upgrading programmes in self-built neighbourhoods in Cali, Colombia. We discussed how adopting a multilayered qualitative approach allowed us to uncover complex dynamics shaping these spaces and reveal the spatial implications of *interlocking systems of oppression and privileges* faced by individuals and groups with diverse social identities. This approach is necessary to critically challenge unequal power relations that arise within

communities and are expressed in the use of public space. Additionally, it is essential to challenge the assumption that in public space design all residents have similar aspirations and needs, when in fact, their differences are shaped by their multiple and intersecting social identities. While the emerging literature on intersectional approaches to urban design calls for expanding ideas of political representation and recognition, our work, inspired by these debates, expands on revealing its spatial dimension by proposing a methodological strategy that combines tools from the built environment and qualitative methods, to translate into practice a spatial understanding of how the convergence of multiple identity markers determine the use of public space and in turn its design in self-built neighbourhoods. We have illustrated this strategy with a case study of *El Filo* Park, a contested open area in a self-built neighbourhood on the western hills of Cali, where the multi-layer methodology engaged various community members. In doing so, rather than only ensuring marginalised voices are heard, we have devised an approach for those voices and myriad identities to have a direct impact on the shaping of the public space.

Urban designers need to rethink the ways in which they find how power and identity operate in urban space and use other tools. Ignoring the spatial practices of oppression and privilege in the upgrade of self-built infrastructure

can deepen spatial injustice, discrimination, and local disputes. Adopting an intersectional perspective requires the urban designer to acknowledge the intricate and complex power dynamics that influence public spaces and actively engage in the design process to address them. We offer a repertoire of methodological strategies to uncover how community integration and disputes may take place in public spaces in contested territories. We showed how embracing an intersectional participatory approach enabled us to build trust between the local government and communities. The advocacy work of the public university was critical, with the mediating role of urban designers. By using an intersectional perspective, Cali has become a pioneer city in applying this approach to the urban design strategy of territorial planning projects. We close this paper calling for the need to deconstruct the urban designers' and planners' current gaze upon city-making, especially those engaged in self-built neighbourhoods, to adopt similar approaches in their own contexts and to promote the right to the city. Thus, achieving this requires a cognitive shift of urban designers and other spatial practitioners to embrace the unique spatial requirements of the self-built city designed by its inhabitants.

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Data availability Data associated to the article is available at <https://populab.correounivalle.edu.co/>

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