



Title

Reintroducing a forgotten figure: the Square Custodian

Educating agents that take care of parks in Río Cuarto (Argentina) fostering living together amongst residents

Basic data

City: Río Cuarto

Country: Argentina

Number of inhabitants: 157.010

Topics: Values education , Civics, Quality of urban living , Parks and gardens , Work placement, Citizen participation.

Principles of the Charter of Educating Cities: 1, 4, 5, 8, 9, 10, 11, 14, 15, 20

Summary

Land-use planning has historically been under the responsibility of the municipal and/or provincial government, and was developed without taking into account the wishes and needs of the citizens. This explains, in part, the existence in Río Cuarto of non-functional public spaces that are not appreciated by the local residents. The community's indifference and lack of care have led to the deterioration, even abandonment of squares and parks, where vandalism is common and where there is a feeling of lack of public safety



Civic values at parks and squares of Río Cuarto

In order to overcome this situation, the City Council of Río Cuarto decided to reverse this urban dynamic and to propose actions that could make people value public spaces as meeting places of inclusion where residents can experience coexistence, tolerance, and joint the construction of a collective spirit.

In 2016, through the program **Reintroducing a Forgotten Figure: the Square Custodian**, the local government re-established the figure of the "square custodian" as a focal point for the area in issues related to the care and maintenance of parks and squares in Río Cuarto. In the past, the square custodian was responsible for maintaining the pavements, street lighting, urban furniture and the landscaped areas of city squares. Through this new program, the square custodians have also acquired the role of educating agents and transmission belts of local policies in order to foster good habits amongst residents. Thus, in addition to taking care of the square, they are in charge of identifying and prevent anti-social behaviours and/or acts of vandalism, fostering coexistence and acting as multiplying agents for municipal educational campaigns (health, culture, tourism, etc.). In order to undertake these functions, the square custodian receives special training.

Objectives

The Municipality of Río Cuarto is aware of the importance of the residents' collaboration, businesspeople, politicians, municipal employees, institutions, foundations, NGOs, etc. in promoting public space. To do so other municipal programs that take place in parks and squares have joined this project, which as a result improves the initiative as a whole.

- To reintroduce the figure of the square custodian, giving them a role as educating agents.
- To maintain and strengthen the public spaces with the help of citizens' participation.
- To foster values of respect, coexistence, solidarity, the defence of the public interest, etc., amongst the citizenry.
- To build an integrated city that fosters the appropriation of and care for public space by the citizenry and the sustainable development.

Methodology

The program is part of the city's Strategic Plan. At first the local government adopted the reintroduction of the square custodian and identified the number of jobs that could be created bearing in mind the technical and financial resources available. Then a training course for 40 square custodians to become qualified intervention agents was organized. The training course was focused on first aid, local tourism, motivation, prevention of drug addiction, and mediation and conflict resolution.



The local government also made a detailed inventory of more than 250 green spaces in the city and their current state. The resulting report included the description of the pavement, street lighting and urban furniture, landscaped areas and children's play areas.



Based on this diagnosis, the Municipality planned the refurbishment of the green spaces over a period of 4 years and the assignment of the square custodians, beginning with the squares that were most used by the citizens.



In order to foster citizen participation and to promote and strengthen the Program other existing initiatives were integrated into it. This reinforced the new vision and function that the Municipality wants to give to the parks and squares. Thus, the "Sponsoring Squares and Green Spaces" Program offers the chance to establish sponsorship and/or volunteer agreements with residents and public and/or private bodies committed to doing maintenance tasks in the green space of choice, thus reinforcing the work of the square custodian. Through this program, some entities have also offered to provide urban furniture, playgrounds and machines for physical exercise, etc. The "Inclusive Squares" program facilitates the installation of elements, such as planters with aromatic plants or Braille messages for the blind and/or seeing impaired so that they can guide themselves by using their sense of smell and touch. On the other hand, the "Participatory Squares" foster citizen participation in issues that affect the development of green spaces in the city.



Social and urban context

The Argentinean city of Río Cuarto has a surface area of 64.25 km² and is located on the banks of the Cuarto River.

It is a dynamic agricultural-livestock raising region. With more than 150,000 inhabitants, it is the second most populated city in the province of Córdoba. It is an important commercial and services hub for the central region of Argentina.



View of Río Cuarto

Assessment

The launch of the project took place in August 2016. There are now 40 square custodians in Río Cuarto, 6 of which are municipal employees, 34 of which are hired through a public tender. There are 26 squares and 8 green spaces under the supervision of the custodians.



The response of the citizenry to the activities in the squares, in which there is a custodian, has been very positive. The City Council has programmed different actions, such as, for example, tree planting or maintenance and reorganization of squares with residents and custodians, with private companies or non-profit entities, and, in some cases, with the disinterested participation of artists. All these activities foster teamwork amongst the private and public sector and the participation of the citizenry to the benefit of the common good.



The sponsoring system of squares and green spaces is also growing in importance and size as it becomes better known. There are more and more residents and entities interested in getting involved. The current average is two sponsors per month.



Future proposals:

We plan to steadily implement the Program over a 4-year period in all the green spaces in Río Cuarto. The goal is also to ensure that all green spaces have a custodian and the participation of at least one sponsor per square or park.



Improved public spaces for better living together at the city

Contact

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