

# Reclaiming green space in Lima

In a crowded city, natural spaces bring people together and protect against climate change

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**The city of Lima faces an enormous challenge. Its population has grown from 8.2 million to 9.6 million in the last ten years. As the city expands and density increases, it becomes more challenging to ensure citizens' quality of life.**

Green areas in Lima have been replaced by grey infrastructure in the form of roads, sports facilities and shopping malls, among other developments. The World Health Organization (WHO) recommends 9 m<sup>2</sup> of green space per citizen, but Lima now averages just 3.5 m<sup>2</sup> per inhabitant, and less than 3 m<sup>2</sup> in most districts. We desperately need more access to nature.

So in December 2019, we launched an ambitious initiative to revitalise public space in the capital. Limeños al Bicentenario (marking 200 years since Peru's proclamation of independence) is a programme that aims to transform public areas with low-cost interventions such as planting trees and greenery, and creating places for adults to sit and young children to play. It also aims to build social cohesion by engaging residents to maintain these newly renovated areas while simultaneously improving the city's resilience to climate change.

Since the project began, we have developed 11 sites covering over 19,000 m<sup>2</sup>. We have planted 237 trees, installed 270 pieces of urban furniture such as benches and play equipment, and inspired 510 people to volunteer. Limeños al Bicentenario has also formed connections with a Lima95 initiative called *Salidas seguras* – meaning 'going out safely' – which brings caregivers with young children together in groups, to give them more confidence to explore the city's public spaces.

The renovated areas are attractive for infants and toddlers, who can explore shrubs and greenery planted at their height, and interact with sensory materials such as rocks and gravel. The new spaces also serve adults, who can sit and talk in the shade of trees. Unlike many public spaces in the city, these are designed to be accessible for elderly and disabled people.

Limeños al Bicentenario is also helping to make Lima better able to cope with climate change. We have identified heatwaves, droughts, floods and mass migration as the major climate-related risks facing our city. The growth of grey infrastructure at the expense of green areas has worsened the risk of

heatwaves in particular. The urban heat island effect is estimated to add up to 3.5 °C in parts of the city during periods of very hot weather.

To mitigate this, we aim to plant 4 million trees by 2030. Trees also help to reduce air pollution, which in Lima averages 2.8 times the WHO's recommended level. We carefully choose plant species that grow well in our climate, such as the Peruvian pepper tree (*Schinus molle*), yellow elder (*Tecoma stans*), crimson bottlebrush (*Callistemon citrinus*), sea hibiscus (*Hibiscus tiliaceus*) and flame tree (*Delonix regia*). In the past many parks have used grass, which is not ideal because it requires a lot of water.

### Three examples of Limeños al Bicentenario

All the interventions of the Limeños al Bicentenario initiative aim to improve habitability, manage the environment and encourage social cohesion. We approach these aims in various ways, depending on the needs of each neighbourhood. Here are three examples.

**Monserate Canal** The old canal had long ago fallen into disuse and been filled in. This left a collection of informal houses – home to around 40 families – cut off from the rest of the neighbourhood, effectively marginalising them. The renovated space has now become an extension of the neighbourhood plaza, connecting the marginalised community to the other homes. We planted trees and shrubs and installed play structures. We also held workshops for local people on caring for urban greenery and exploring nature through art. The aim is to encourage families with young children to get to know each other and organically form a network of mutual support.

**Lomo de Corvina** Many neighbourhoods in Lima have communal kitchens, a practice imported by migrants from the Andes. These are shared spaces where several women get together to cook meals which they sell at a low price, earning a livelihood while providing affordable food. The practice grew in popularity during the Covid-19 pandemic. One communal kitchen typically feeds over 100 families. In a space next to one communal kitchen near the

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Photo: Courtesy of Reinhier van Oorsouw/Bernard van Leer Foundation

coast in the south of the city, we combined sensory play elements for children – such as wind chimes and telescopes to look at the boats on the ocean – with creating an urban vegetable garden. We provided training for the women who run the kitchen on making compost with food waste, planting crops and organic pest control. This intervention has been especially well received, and we are now replicating it in six other areas of the city. Being close to the communal kitchen, where local women are cooking, makes the space feel safe for young children. It reduces organic waste, produces healthy low-carbon food, and encourages citizens to interact and develop a shared identity around a vision of local sustainability.

**Teniente Paiva** People used to park their cars in this cul-de-sac near a main road in heavily built-up central Lima. We have turned this into a pedestrian area with colourful murals and a variety of wooden street furniture for toddlers to play on and adults to sit on and rest. Alongside 13 trees and 900 plants and shrubs, there are seven planters where a group

of local residents are growing lettuce, radishes and squash. Since the renovation in April 2021, it has become a popular meeting place for older people as well as for caregivers with young children.

As Mayor, I recognise that our experiences of recovering public spaces within the Limeños al Bicentenario programme are allowing us to learn about the incredible stories of citizens who love their city. For example, in Teniente Paiva I was able to meet Charo, a resident committed to improving the quality of life of her family and neighbours. Under her leadership and with the municipal team, we took a street that had been invaded by cars and transformed it into an accessible, recreational and active public space. Nowadays the neighbours in Paiva can enjoy flowers, vegetables and trees that are growing fast and attract birds. Families with babies, small children and elders get to know and learn from each other, by playing, exercising and talking. The city is alive when its citizens, starting from the youngest ones, enjoy and love it.

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