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# Minga as a placemaking tool in peripheral neighbourhoods. Co-design experience in Calderon, Quito\*

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## ABSTRACT

This article explores the role of local vernacular socio-spatial practices in co-design and placemaking in Calderon, a peripheral urban parish in Quito, Ecuador. Using a case-study method and transformative paradigm theory, the research employs a mixed-methods approach for data collection and analysis. The focus is on 'Minga', a collaborative community effort manifested in two forms: 'community mingas' organised autonomously by communities, and 'megamingas' coordinated by public institutions. Community mingas enhance residents' sense of belonging and pride, empowering them in shaping public spaces through a bottom-up approach. In contrast, megamingas exhibit top-down organisation with limited community engagement, raising concerns about social impacts. The study underscores mingas' potential for social cohesion, cultural expression, and sustainable development in urban design. It emphasises the nuanced understanding needed for fostering active participation and addresses challenges such as sustaining community ownership. Despite yielding immediate benefits in public space enhancement, sustaining long-term engagement is crucial. The study concludes that mingas offer a valuable avenue for residents to actively contribute to public space improvement, fostering shared responsibility and long-term sustainable development in low-income neighbourhoods.

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co-design; public space;  
sense of place; minga;  
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## 1. Introduction

Many participatory processes engage urban design practices and local strategies, especially when the discussion brings socio-economic changes in a community. Placemaking is one particularly important tool in efforts to activate deprived neighbourhoods, particularly with regard to supporting active street life. The practice of placemaking is a complex and multi-faceted approach to planning, designing, and managing public spaces (Beretić, Đukanović, and Campus 2022). However, in low-income communities,

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especially in cities of the Global South, these processes are challenged by factors such as budget, administration, management, contested practices, or regulatory procedures.

Prevailing conceptions of public space in such urban areas often do not fit or achieve formal, official, and regulatory frameworks or municipal ordinances. Many of the existing vernacular activities developed in these public spaces are informal, dissident, and radical (Medina Gavilanes and Cano-Ciborro 2022), and often involve informal commerce. The lack of state presence in terms of providing basic social services, quality public space, and infrastructure in low-income neighbourhoods, produces contested and conflictive spaces in which communities negotiate among themselves not only the use and occupancy of a given place but also the mode and temporality of its use (Lowe 2016; Roy 2011).

In certain African and Indian cities, for example, urban informality is seen as a set of rules and norms that differs from those of formal institutions – more a series of encounters and transactions that connect spaces, economies, and social processes than fixed regulations (Assaad 1996; Roy 2005). In Latin American cities, informality is similarly implicated in relationships of spatial practices (Cano-Ciborro and Medina 2023; Clichevsky 2000; Duhalde 2014), which are usually dissident and depart from the ground – streets, specific public areas, communities, and single sites. In this paper, we examine the function that local vernacular socio-spatial practices play as tools for co-design and placemaking, particularly in supporting a ‘Sense of Place’ through local collective experiences. Specifically, we examine the Andean practice of *Minga*, a community-practice that, among other collective goals, activates public places around a common good in a variety of senses. For that, we study this spatial practice in a neighbourhood of Quito, Ecuador: Calderón.

### **1.1. A brief approach to minga**

As a case study, we examine practices of minga in the parish of Calderon, on the northern periphery of Quito, a neighbourhood whose residents have long practiced traditional forms of urban design through mingas. Neighbourhood residents, a great majority of whom migrated to Quito from rural areas across the country, have performed minga activities for decades to improve their living place and to strengthen the sense of place in the community, despite the many factors that strain community development like low incomes, lack of municipal budgeting, and shortage of formal administrative supports.

Minga is known in the Andean communities as a communal process of action that mobilises collective participation towards a common good. The word *minga* comes originally from the Quechan word ‘mit’a’, ‘*minka*’ or ‘*minccacuni*’, dating to the pre-Columbian era, and refers to the practice of collective work for the community as a whole or a particular individual within it who in exchange offers food and beverages to participants (Castillo Loor 2022). It also refers to ‘turn’, signifying a collective work that is part of several practices throughout the Andean region, and it mobilises social labour through reciprocity (Orlove 1977). *Minga* is associated with Amerindian indigenous communities located in the Andes Mountain chain, spanning from Chile to Colombia. The most important aspect is the collaborative work that everyone does, presenting a fundamental fact that unifies families and communities in a particular environment (Pazos 2012).

Mingas have been mainly organised by community representatives on the basis of identified needs of the community. Works usually last for a few days and the implementation scale typically corresponds to the size of the given district but it is mostly small scale within the urban scope. However, when the community requires an exceptionally large scale of work, or the risk of the work is particularly high, official institutions implement *megamingas*, which duration is longer and developed activities are also more specialised.

In this article, we centre our discussion on the implications of mingas developed in a specific neighbourhood in Calderon, and how its practice perception has provoked among residents, potential implications of considering minga as a community placemaking tool. In structure, the article proceeds, in section two, to discuss methods and data collection of the study area, including our mode of approach to sense of place, placemaking, co-design, and minga. Next, in sections three and four, we discuss results from mingas that have been developed in a variety of contrasting situations in Calderon, each sharing the same underlying purpose of collaborative work within a community, through a theoretical framework related to placemaking, co-design, and sense of place. Section four highlights how mingas operate in complex urban contexts. Here, we contrast two types of mingas, ‘mingas’ and ‘megamingas’, being the former characterised more by community-driven design and practice, while the latter’s structure is more top-down approach. In the fifth section, we discuss the data collected, highlight key findings of minga, sense of place and co-design, and present the resulting values. Finally, we conclude by discussing how mingas may empower low-income and peripheral communities in the Global South cities and, further, how they may also be understood and activated as viable co-design tools for urban areas (Antaki and Petrescu 2023) with similar characteristics, allowing local residents to engage directly with public space use and occupancy.

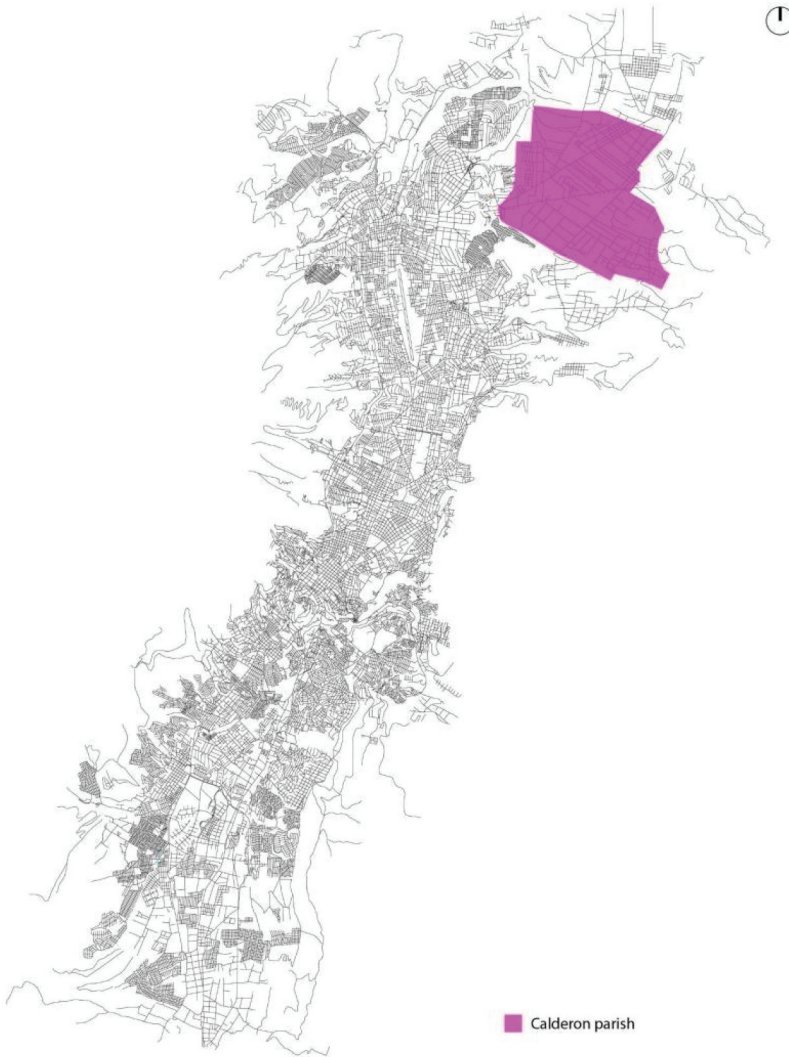
## 2. Methods and study area

This paper is based on the results of the research conducted in collaboration between University Departments in Ecuador and Italy.

This pragmatically-oriented research combines a case-study method, transformative paradigm theory (Creswell and Creswell 2022), and a mixed-methods approach (Creswell and Creswell 2022; Groat and Wang 2004). Procedures of the mixed methods approach include: qualitative and quantitative data collection, analysis, and elaboration of both forms of data. Quantitative data is collected before qualitative, but the process of analysis between each is iterative, with a higher value given to the qualitative data.

### 2.1. Study area

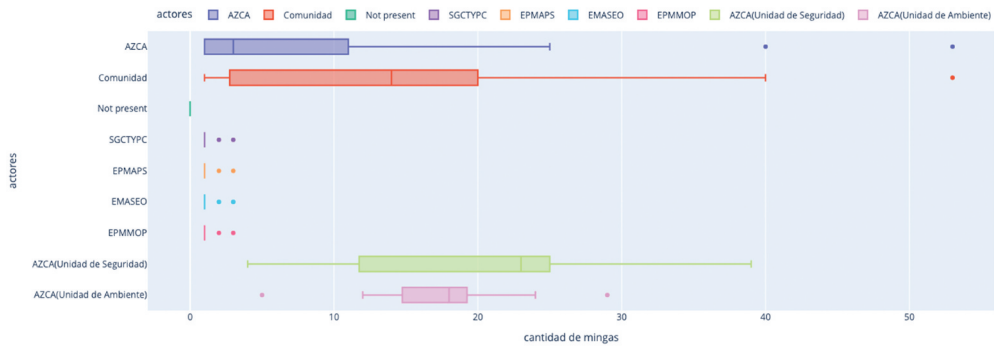
To answer the research question, this study analyzes community mingas and megamingas developed in Calderon parish (Figure 1) from 2010–2022.



**Figure 1.** Quito map highlighting Calderon parish.

## **2.2. Methods**

In terms of thematic framework, the first phase of this research associates the definition of the scope of the study method. The conceptual framework was initially developed through an overview of the existing literature on the practice of minga and the fields of co-design and placemaking by consulting scientific article databases using specific keyword searches for: 'Minga', 'Placemaking', 'Co-design', 'Sense of Place', 'Collective Practice in Public Space', 'Shared Experience' and 'Informal Urban Design'. In the first stages of this research, we use a method of content analysis to systematically define key elements of minga and placemaking/co-design practice. Moreover, the findings are supplemented by the literature concerning contemporary discussions and recommendations in the topical framework.



**Figure 2.** Actors involved in mingas in Calderon, between 2010 and 2022.

The second phase of data collection and analysis using quantitative data overlapped to a certain degree with the first phase. These quantitative data concern primarily the number, character, and stakeholders of minga held in Calderon during the period 2010–2022. We run a number of tests associated with the collected data visualisation to compare outputs as graphs, specifically for Figures 2 and 4. We made use of quantitative text analysis using topic models, and time frames.

As in the direction of ‘urban research’, Friedman (2015, 81) argues, ‘must consider people, place and well-being and for such research you could not help but be part of the moment and the place’. In keeping with this insight, we approach our research observations as part of a constant and ongoing process of engagement.

Aiming to advance discussions on the role of collective practices like minga and its potential to generate a sense of place, the authors, while not directly participating in the mingas, conducted numerous casual interviews with community leaders, resulting in a nuanced, multifaceted perspective on the dynamics of mingas. These interactions fostered a close relationship with the community, enabling a deeper understanding of the social and cultural contexts in which these activities take place, as well as the impact these practices have on the community. Through these interviews, firsthand accounts and insights from organisers and participants were gathered, shedding light on the motivations, challenges, and outcomes associated with these communal efforts. This methodological approach not only enriches the study’s context but also enhances the reader’s understanding of the intricate processes and communal bonds that underpin mingas. By synthesising these diverse sources of information, this research offers a comprehensive analysis of mingas, highlighting their significance in urban community development and the promotion of social cohesion. This approach ensures a well-rounded exploration of mingas, presenting them as a vital component of community dynamics and urban practices.

### 3. Results

We divide the results into two subsections. The first presents a theoretical background, while the second shows data on minga analysed for the Calderón case. In the second subsection, we examine the nature of mingas and megamingas, the stakeholders and

levels of participation, as well as the type of minga predominant in the case of Calderón and their respective environmental and security implications.

### ***3.1. Minga as a placemaking tool and collaborative experience of co-design***

The practice of minga emerged first within the context of subsistence agriculture in which extensive investments of labour are periodically demanded well in excess of the capacity of a single household (Faas 2015). In this context, delayed reciprocal exchange as mutual aid becomes incentivised (Collaredo-Mansfeld 2007). Hence, for a number of social scientists, mingas can be seen as unique examples of the Andean people's historical cooperation capacities that have played significant roles in political mobilisation and social movements (Mayer 2018). In this process, there is a displacement of people in terms of geography, ethnicity, and economics that mobilises labour to reach the community's goal (Rico Alen 2013).

The shared basis of minga labour is 'a sort of human-built commons' (Mayer 2018, 124), although it is not always based on the commons (Collaredo-Mansfeld 2009; Faas 2015). Anthropologist Faas (2015) outlines three types of mingas: the first functions as a delayed reciprocal labour exchange whereby labour rotates among partners. In the second type, village leaders recruit labourers and provide material goods in exchange, such as gifts, feasts, cash, and crop shares. The third, finally, functions as a kind of labour tax.

This collaborative tool has become an expression of cultural identity, which has also encouraged social groups to claim it (St John 2024). In recent years, minga has been portrayed more often as a form of solidarity work for a community, rather than abstract and alienated work as part of capitalist production, followed by an increasing interest in developing rural sectors in terms of productivity and human intellect. The mutual benefits of communal work, in producing faster and more efficiently among other benefits, strengthens the communitarian and collective work that seeks social utility as a common good (Avalos-Reyes and Castillo 2014). The minga became part of the communal strategies within the diversity of forms that currently acquire the popular and solidarity economy. Additional studies have explored the relationships that emerge between this work and the cultural Andean spaces (Avemañay Mullo 2012), for engaging in a collective working space, to promote intercultural education, and practice traditional customs (López Cortés 2018). This is an effort to execute social practices and by observing the daily life of locals in a community, their environment becomes a referee in the placemaking and the socio-political participation of people through this work (Jurado Alvarán and Botero Gómez 2012).

Jurado and Botero's study of the Supia community in southern Colombia examines an exceptional case of minga in terms of geographic location, in which participants in the practice come from places outside their usual territories. The authors also identify that during this work, peasant participants incorporate strategies of popular economy from other social groups and territories, expanding the social process to include broader social movements of the region like those of students' and women's groups (Rico Alen 2013). Hence, the relationship between minga and people goes beyond a geographic, ethnic, and economic aspect; it consolidates a collaborative relation for mobilising a common good

that endures through time on a continued basis of mutual reciprocity. However, some recent research argues that the harmony of that relationship can be disturbed by the recent emergence of megagaminga (Testori and D'Auria 2018).

Nevertheless, *time* and *space* factors determine this type of transaction within minga work. Communities gather to work on a specific space (the construction of a house, the improvement of a street, the implementation of elements in a playground for a neighbourhood) and invest their time in fulfilling this purpose. Thus, for this article minga is understood as a spatio-temporal phenomenon focused on the human-made commons.

Contextualising minga within contemporary urban design research, we argue that the practice is an extraordinary collective social form that can enhance placemaking practice and co-design process. Moreover, it has the potential to generate a sense of place through each action. With the purpose of making places for people, the 'making places' tradition is an approach to urban design that simultaneously refers to urban space as an aesthetic entity and as a behavioural setting (Carmona et al. 2012). Developed within theories of making places, placemaking is a complex and multi-faceted approach to planning, design, and management of public spaces. Placemaking is a process of making public space a living place, embracing, and respecting all experiences that produce all sorts of consequences on daily life; it is a process of creation of a place and the philosophy of acting in it (Beretić, Đukanović, and Campus 2022; PaPs 2003). Placemaking as a theoretical framework can thus be read in alignment with what minga produces in practice.

Furthermore, Placemaking is a tool for authentic space production, with the specific character of the location in mind – a sense of place (PaPs 2003). Influenced by Heidegger's philosophy, Norberg-Schulz's (1979) concept of dwelling is probably the most significant and influential in terms of sense of place research in the domains of architecture, urban design and placemaking. Promoting local values and the quality of people's relationship with the place, a sense of place is inseparable from place identity research, which has a wider scope. Cohen (1999) defines culture as a social process where people create meaning to give themselves a sense of identity with the place. Other authors highlight the perception of place and awareness of environmental perception, making 'sense of place', 'place attachment' and 'place identity' central in contemporary urban design studies (Carmona et al. 2012). All these terms involve physical setting (from built form to the natural environment), activity (from land use to behavioural patterns and sensory perception), and meaning (from cultural associations, perceived action, and attraction to qualitative assessment). Therefore, we consider the terminology and use of the term 'sense of place' to examine the effects of minga on the quality of people's relationship with the place, that in this case, is Calderon.

Lastly, in this work, we include Manzini's definition of co-designing (Manzini and Coad 2015) as an activity that promotes and supports contradictory and open-ended processes, a definition certainly in line with the ethic of minga practice. The contradiction arises around a variety of stakeholders involved. The notion of 'co-design' is, indeed, relevant to what this contribution envisions, because it is 'what gives emerging design the possibility to operate as a real agent of change' (Manzini and Coad 2015, 61). Analysing minga as co-design practice, we focus on figures and social mechanisms for localised communications that enable the implementation of the action.

### **3.2. *Minga and megaminga***

Mingas, as indicated, are collaborative practices rooted in Latin American indigenous traditions, where communities unite to achieve common goals through collective effort. A ‘minga’ involves local residents working together on tasks like farming, construction, or community improvement projects. Mingas are scenarios that contribute to the improvement and development of the parish, especially in public spaces. Here, they are identified as an articulating element in the socio-spatial construction of community space. They are an instrument to generate spaces for integration, meeting, and self-growth of the community to help one or more persons collectively. They are a kind of co-design, with self-organisation rules and places, in which service design (Manzini and Coad 2015) is a product of the community itself, without a need for an external facilitation process. In terms of scale, we can say that mingas are more local and focalised to a neighbourhood scale.

However, in many cases, the inclusion of more specialised works and technicians is needed, due to the nature of activities that these communities demand. This is added to the lack of or deficient investment of public and official institutions in the creation, management, and maintenance of public and communal spaces, especially in peripheral and low-income neighbourhoods. Moreover, when neighbourhoods are densely populated, it also represents an appealing zone for local politicians to generate public works. This scenery sets up the coercion for developing megamingas. A ‘megaminga’ is an amplified version of a minga, one that engages multiple communities in larger-scale initiatives with public and official institutions, usually part of local governments. Hence, while mingas are usually organised and developed by local communities, recently public institutions and official organisations have increasingly begun to take on this organising role. Megamingas are usually developed as a collaboration between the municipality and the community leaders. As they are coordinated by the state, public employees use their time effectively because they need to fulfil activities in time; this efficiency strains between the worldly schemata of pay work. In this rigid scheme, there are some specific tasks that compel neighbourhood capacities related to adaptation and transformation (Dore 2023; Faas 2017) to the local spatial reality, as well as to the residents’ participation (Gadhoke et al. 2019).

All the same, both practices emphasise solidarity, mutual aid, and shared responsibility, fostering a strong sense of community and collective empowerment.

### **3.3. *Pre and post-phases of mingas***

Mingas can be a long process not only in their preparation but also in their evaluation. Hence, we present the pre- and post-phases of a minga as critical components that ensure the success and sustainability of these communal work efforts. The following is an overview of how each phase typically works:

#### **3.3.1. *Pre-phase: planning and organization***

- Identification of Needs: The first step involves identifying the specific community need or problem that the minga will address. This could range from infrastructure

- improvements to environmental conservation, cultural activities, or other communal tasks.
- Community Consultation: A participatory meeting is often held where community members gather to discuss the identified needs. This meeting serves to socialise the objectives of the minga, ensuring that everyone understands the purpose and importance of the task at hand.
  - Task Allocation: Based on the number of participants and the scope of the work, tasks are divided among the community members. This may involve assigning roles such as coordinators, labourers, or those responsible for providing materials and tools.
  - Logistics Planning: Organisers determine the necessary resources, such as tools, materials, and food for participants, and plan how these will be procured and distributed. They also set a date and time for the minga, taking into consideration factors like weather, availability of participants, and urgency of the task.
  - Mobilisation and Communication: Effective communication is essential in the pre-phase. Organisers ensure that all participants are informed about the time, location, and nature of the work. This may involve door-to-door announcements, public notices, or digital communication channels, especially WhatsApp chat groups and Facebook pages.

### ***3.3.2. Post-phase: reflection and evaluation***

- Completion of Work: After the minga, the community, guided by organisers, assesses whether the work was completed according to plan. This includes checking the quality of the work and ensuring that all tasks were carried out as intended.
- Celebration and Recognition: Often, the completion of a minga is followed by a small celebration or social gathering. This serves to recognise the hard work of participants and to reinforce community bonds. It may involve sharing a meal or holding a small ceremony.
- Evaluation: The community or organising committee reflects on the effectiveness of the minga. This may include discussing what went well, what challenges were encountered, and what could be improved in future mingas.
- Documentation: Some communities document the outcomes of the minga but always done in megamingas, either through written records, photographs, or reports. This helps in maintaining a history of communal efforts and can be useful for future planning or for reporting to municipal authorities or other stakeholders.
- Maintenance and Follow-Up: Depending on the nature of the work completed, there may be a need for ongoing maintenance. The community may plan follow-up actions to ensure the sustainability of the improvements made during the minga.
- Feedback Loop: Sometimes, participants give feedback to organisers with the purpose to understand their experiences and to incorporate their suggestions into future mingas. This activity can ensure continuous improvement and encourage greater participation in subsequent efforts.

Together, the pre- and post-phases of a minga ensure that the communal effort is well-organised, effectively executed, and that its benefits are sustained over time. Yet, not all these phases are followed or carried out to the script, neither in mingas nor megamingas.

**Table 1.** Actors involved in Calderon Mingas since 2010.

Community Leaders	Inhabitants
<b>AZCA</b> Administración Zonal Calderón Calderon Zonal Administration	<b>EPMMOP</b> Empresa Pública Metropolitana de Movilidad y Obras Públicas Metropolitan Public Company of Mobility and Public Works
<b>EMASEO</b> Empresa Pública Metropolitana de Aseo de Quito Metropolitan Public Sewage Company of Quito	<b>EPMAPS</b> Empresa Pública Metropolitana de Agua Potable y Saneamiento de Quito Metropolitan Public Company of Potable Water And Sanitation Of Quito
Secretaría De Ambiente Secretariat Of Environment	Agencia Metropolitana De Control Metropolitan Control Agency
<b>AMT</b> Agencia Metropolitana De Tránsito Metropolitan Transit Agency	Policía Nacional National Police
Empresa Eléctrica Quito Quito Electric Company	

### 3.4. The practice of minga and megaminga in Calderón

Calderon has developed both mingas and megamingas in recent years. Community leaders, public institutions, and the local government (Table 1), have increasingly been drawn into a continuous process of coordination that, in 2010, became official and formalised and continues into the present.

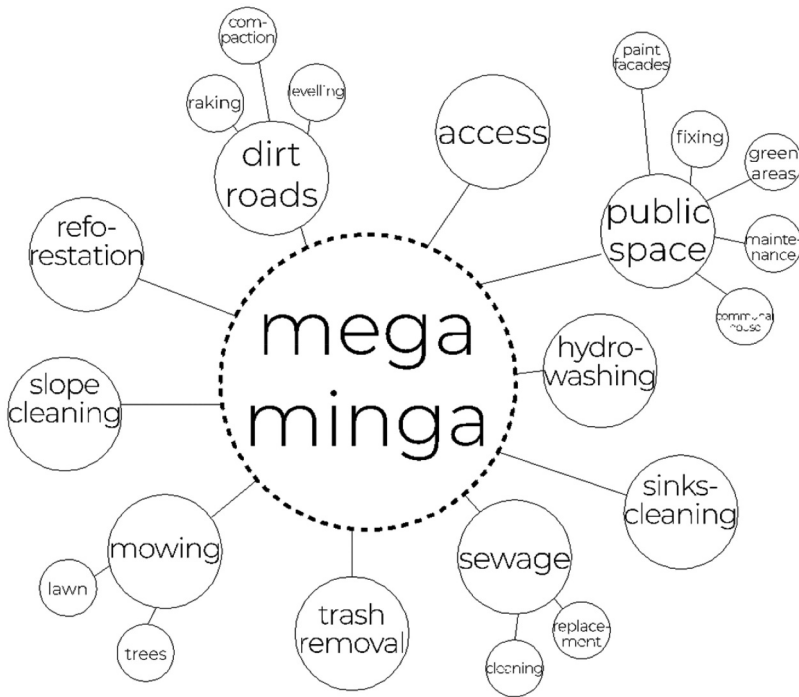
This process was initiated formally through meetings between the community leaders and the General Secretariat for Territorial Coordination and Citizen Participation (SGCTYPC, *Secretaría General de Coordinación Territorial y Participación Ciudadana* for its acronym in Spanish). The result of these processes between local government and community leaders is to identify the main parish's needs and places in order to seek out strategies to intervene. Once the two parties decide on these aspects (Figure 2), they then coordinate with the local population to implement planned activities, scheduling, and strategies to create specialised teamwork. The actors plan specific activities with the purpose to empower locals to participate actively, hopefully producing place attachment, but also, as a political platform from the official institutions.

To visualise integrally, we categorised these activities as mingas' performances (Figure 3) during the period of 2010 to 2022. The most frequent ones were public space (maintenance, adequate infrastructure, green areas), access points (roads, signage, zebra crossing), dirt roads (levelling, compacting streets, raking), reforestation, slopes and gorges cleaning, mowing, trash removal, sewage (cleaning and replacement of manholes), sink cleaning, and hydro washing of water tanks.

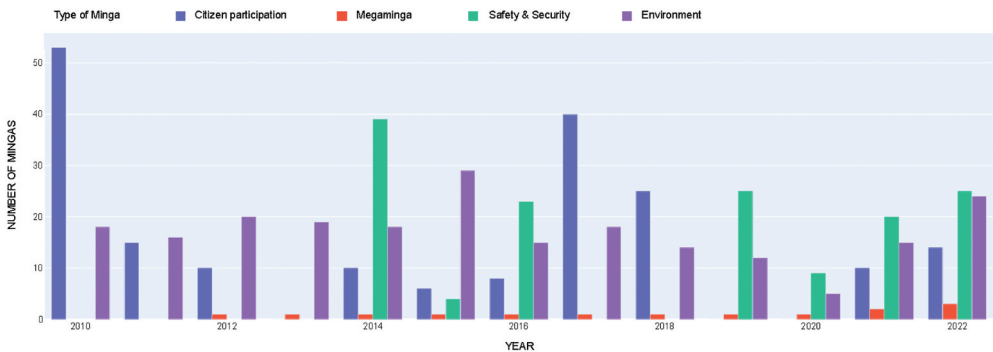
Additionally, we categorised mingas and megamingas into three types: 1) citizen participation, 2) safety and security, and 3) environment (Figure 4). In all of them, local inhabitants collaborated in easier and more manageable tasks like cleaning, painting, planting small plants, and likewise, while public institutions participated with more specific knowledge or/and equipment – i.e. machinery, materials, tools, and experts in different fields like electricians, gardeners, plumbers, etc.

#### 3.4.1. Citizen participation mingas

*Citizen participation* includes residents' support for specific tasks that are not specialised or technical and aid the work of public institutions. The objective is to



**Figure 3.** Main activities in megamingas.



**Figure 4.** Type of Minga in Calderon, between 2010 and 2022.

achieve social cohesion by motivating the community to participate and recover public spaces. Some of the activities are cleaning the exterior of dwellings, recreational, educational, and sports areas; painting playground equipment and urban furniture; donating objects to technicians for specific works such as brooms, garbage bags, shovels, brushes, paint, and spatulas; gutter cleaning and garbage collection, etc.

In addition, people receive training through workshops on topics like fire prevention, awareness and guidance on the planting process, care and maintenance of planted trees, and maintenance of public spaces. The community is also involved in processes of public

space regulations with merchants, in activities of economic reactivation, in the development of cultural and artistic events, and visits to kiosks and stores that offer local products.

### 3.4.2. Safety & security mingas

*Safety & Security* refer to activities, works and tasks concerning the protection of inhabitants related to natural hazards, delinquency, and infrastructure issues. In some occasions, inhabitants collaborated with Calderon Zonal Administration (AZCA – *Administración Zonal Calderón*) and the security unit, in works like recovering public spaces damaged by social protests, a particular concern following uprisings in October 2019<sup>1</sup> and June-July 2022<sup>2</sup>; painting zebra crossings; implementing signage for transit and placemarks; and recovering specific public spaces like sidewalks, parks, and viewpoints for prevention of landslide emergencies on steep slopes.

When there are megamingas, public institutions participate with machinery and technicians specialised in high-skill or high-risk tasks like lighting public spaces, levelling dirt roads, planting trees in gorges, and so on.

The following [Figures \(5–7\)](#) present minga activities related to the maintenance of some of the most important public spaces in the neighbourhood in which inhabitants actively participated.

### 3.4.3. Environment mingas

*Environment* refers to activities related to natural and green space areas. As in the previous one, when there are megamingas, inhabitants collaborate with AZCA and the environmental unit to develop tasks that might take risk because of geographic



**Figure 5.** Safety and security minga. Community painting graffiti done by local gangs. Source: Calderon community.



**Figure 6.** Safety and security, and environment minga. Inhabitants actively involved in the maintenance of public spaces. Source: Calderon community.

conditions, like gullies, gorges, rivers, etc. Still, in these kinds of mingas and megamingas, most of the activities include the recovery of streams and green areas; planting native trees; transferring trees to a planting site, especially in gorges; recovery of vegetation and flora; reforestation of native species in public spaces and embankments. It also involves workshops for residents to train them in planting trees and other street vegetation, plant care and maintenance, and guidelines concerning the installation of urban gardens.

#### **3.4.4. Some minga specifics**

Over the years, mingas in Calderón have addressed a range of needs, with a primary focus on the maintenance of public spaces. A significant instance of this occurred in December 2019 at the Central Plaza of San Miguel del Común neighbourhood, where community members engaged in general cleaning and the care of existing vegetation. These efforts were part of the preparations for a public nativity scene competition organised by the Zonal Administration of Calderón. The event not only fostered community spirit and collaboration, but also showcased the area's strong cultural traditions. The Andean Folkloric Dance Group, comprising approximately 20 young people, actively participated in this activity, aiming to present their nativity scene for the competition. Their involvement highlighted the cultural richness of Calderón and underscored the importance of communal efforts in preserving and enhancing public spaces. Such mingas exemplify the community's commitment to maintaining their environment and promoting cultural expression, illustrating how communal activities can strengthen social bonds and preserve cultural heritage. The participation of the Andean Folkloric Dance Group in the nativity scene competition testifies to the



**Figure 7.** Environment minga in the Gillies of Ciudad Bicentenario neighborhood. Source: Calderon community.

community's vibrant cultural life and the vital role of public spaces in facilitating cultural and social activities.

Another minga was done in the same year but at a different spot in the neighbourhood, specifically on Colibrí Street, next to the local cemetery entrance 'El Descanso Eterno'. This minga was organised prior to the visit of a municipality authority, and included the paving of Colibrí Street. Various groups from the San Miguel community participated over the weekend, with around 30 people.

By engaging in such activities, the community members showed their commitment to enhancing their environment and preparing for significant events, representing the communal spirit central to the concept of minga. The common goal and collective effort is tangibly seen in the public spaces, which fosters not only the local development at a small scale but also, improves social cohesion.

#### **4. Discussion**

While minga presents a promising approach to urban design for low-income peripheral neighbourhoods, there remain challenges as well, such as those related to inclusivity, power dynamics, and potential cultural appropriation. Simultaneously, megamingas are

seen as a tool for institutional instrumentalisation for different purposes (Dore 2023), like more specific and high risk works in neighbourhoods, interinstitutional organisation, large-scale impact, and political visibility.

In both cases though, there is a parallel structure of power held mainly by community leaders. For instance, universities in Ecuador have a scholarship quota for ethnic minorities groups, where candidates need to prove their identity. In some cases, it is the community leaders that send a list of young people to these universities, as they are an official body recognised by the municipality. To be part of this list, the young would need to participate in a certain number of mingas and megamingas. In a similar instance, there is an exchange of participation in mingas and megamingas to access a grave in a cemetery grounds. One of the people that participated in our casual interviews, indicated that he and his father participated in 45 mingas, 15 from which was his father and 30 himself. It is notable that mingas can have an extended influence on social affairs, as it shapes a *community-driven* practice and creates a political capital for the parish. Yet, when the population is active, they also have the power to audit the community leaders' practices, which can balance the power (Faas 2017; Freire 2000; Joanis 2014).

To this extent, we distinguish between the ways mingas and megamingas typically have deep-felt impacts on communities. As mentioned above, mingas are typified by local organisation and local impacts whereas megamingas are larger not only in scale but also in organisation and approach and tend to be more often organised through official channels in the local government or public institutions. Hence, residents likewise tend to have a different perception, appreciation, and use of these place tools. In the next section, we present open-ended, unstructured, semi-structured and face-to-face interviews with community leaders, local inhabitants, and traders in Calderon, specifically in the neighbourhoods of Carapungo and San Miguel del Común.

#### **4.1. Community mingas and Megamingas: collective experience and co-design practice**

The effects of megamingas on Calderón's residents vary, with the local council using megaphones and public institutions providing resources. However, residents feel less involved in megamingas due to their large scale, perceiving their contribution as minimal. This detachment leads them to expect public workers to handle tasks, viewing these as the workers' responsibilities rather than community efforts. In contrast, mingas involve residents actively in improving their neighbourhood, motivated by personal use of community facilities like the Community House. Mingas typically involve maintenance or beautification tasks, which encourage participation due to the immediate visible results and the symbiotic relationship between communal efforts and shared resources (Antaki and Petrescu 2023; Hector and Botero 2022).

A notable example of a successful minga is the creation of a sports pitch for children, demonstrating the potential to meet various community needs. Gender roles also influence participation, with women organising and preparing meals, while men engage in physical tasks. However, conflicts can arise between participants and non-participants, leading to social exclusion and tensions. Non-participants may lose respect within the community, while organisers might use participation as leverage, leading to inequitable

exchanges and power struggles. In addition to the self-organising aspects of the co-design process, the diversity of people (elderly, women, teenagers, etc.) participating in the community is noticeable (Figure 5). Although Calderón has not experienced significant conflicts, the potential for such issues underscores the need for transparent, fair practices to maintain community cohesion.

#### **4.2. Effects of minga on social tissue**

Mingas in Calderón lead to immediate benefits, such as rehabilitated spaces that see increased use, particularly by children. These efforts also serve as a social force, preventing adolescents from engaging in negative behaviours. However, sustaining these benefits is challenging due to a lack of ongoing community ownership and insufficient public investment. The motivations for participation vary, often driven by leadership and communal pride, with factors like security and lighting affecting perceptions of safety in rehabilitated spaces. Nevertheless, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted planned mingas, but the community's resilience is evident as participation has resumed. This practice continues to be an inclusive mechanism, especially for young people, highlighting its role in community well-being.

In contrast, megamingas have less impact due to residents' sense of detachment. As a result, co-design practices in megamingas are more institutionalised rather than emerging from local traditions. This detachment is tied to the level of care and affection that the community feels, affecting their engagement. The concept of space as a dynamic and evolving entity (Lefebvre 1991), shaped by the relational particularities of its inhabitants, challenges the rigid views of urban planning. This perspective aligns with a more uncertain and temporary outlook on urban design (Watson 2014), making it difficult to quantify or regulate.

Over the past two decades, this approach has gained traction in human geography, urban planning, and architectural scholarship (Cano-Ciborro and Medina 2023). Minga co-design is driven by affections, which mobilise and define the community's capacity to endure (Deleuze 2005). This resistance to official planning, complemented by Rancière's notion of dissidence (Deleuze 2014; Foucault 1978), reveals that mingas often challenge dominant power structures and contribute to the construction of residents' own spaces, rooted in invisible affections and hidden spatial dimensions. Observing the spatial practices of Calderón's residents through mingas reveals that, contrary to normative assumptions, their actions often challenge dominant power structures and contribute to the construction and visibility of their own space.

Mingas represent a valuable avenue for residents to actively improve public spaces, but sustaining their impact requires addressing challenges related to community ownership and long-term engagement. The diverse motivations and dynamics revealed through interviews highlight the need for nuanced approaches to fostering inclusive participation and ensuring the lasting impact of mingas. When considering mingas and megamingas as potential tools for co-design and placemaking, both practices align with urban design frameworks. They engage with the aesthetics of space and influence behavioural settings, making them important in shaping urban environments and daily life. However, mingas and megamingas differ in their execution and impact. Two distinct forms of practice are evident: institutionalised (megamingas) and flexible (community mingas). While both

approaches are experimental, they differ from traditional urban design practices. Institutionalised practices like megamingas are organised top-down, even when local needs are identified by representatives. Although they hold potential as a co-design tool, megamingas often focus on urban space and neglect social aspects, limiting their effectiveness. Co-design should involve ongoing facilitation to address the community's cumulative needs and strengthen connections between new interventions and existing contexts. While post-megamina monitoring exists, efforts in Calderón have primarily focused on planning and execution, with insufficient attention to long-term community effects. To make megamingas an effective co-design tool, greater emphasis is needed on fostering collective cultural experiences rather than simply meeting government and community goals.

Mingas, as placemaking tools, demonstrate higher levels of place attachment, leading to spaces that become integral parts of daily life. This suggests a higher potential for long-term sustainability, as people are more inclined to maintain spaces they feel ownership over. While this effect is observed in Calderón, we cannot argue this statement is generally true because the sample of researched cases should be much larger and concentrated exclusively on the post-minga effects.

## 5. Conclusions

Minga holds transformative potential as a placemaking tool in low-income peripheral neighbourhoods, empowering communities, enhancing social cohesion, and promoting sustainable development. It embodies a collective spirit that transcends individual interests and fosters shared responsibility. In urban design, a collaborative approach that incorporates minga connects residents directly to decision-making, reflecting their unique needs and aspirations, which fosters ownership, pride, and commitment to the long-term sustainable development of their neighbourhood, as demonstrated in Calderón.

To this extent, we have found that mingas differ significantly from traditional urban design projects. They are community-driven, indigenous practices rather than top-down urban planning. Unlike conventional projects managed by professionals, mingas are grassroots initiatives led by community members in planning, organisation, and execution. This participatory process emphasises collective decision-making through consultation and consensus. Typically launched to address immediate needs like road repairs or public space cleanups, mingas directly benefit the community. They emphasise mutual aid, where work is done collectively for the common good without monetary compensation, in contrast to the paid labour typical of traditional projects. Mingas also hold deep cultural and social significance, strengthening social bonds, communal values, and preserving cultural heritage by promoting traditional building methods and materials while addressing economic constraints. In contrast, traditional urban design projects focus on long-term development aligned with broader urban policies, akin to megamingas, where there is also a sense of detachment from these practices.

An important aspect of mingas is their categorisation into citizen participation, safety and security, and environment, which reveals a strong commitment to local development in low-income communities. Findings show that safety and security mingas are more numerous, showing their importance to the community in the current socio-economic

state of the country. However, organisational patterns and pre- and post-implementation phases show no significant differences based on the type or topic of the mingas or megamingas.

Additionally, this research has found that mingas are an effective form of co-design, contributing to the quality of public spaces by addressing local community needs, fostering belonging, pride, and cohesion. Nevertheless, broader participation is needed to ensure diverse perspectives are included and avoid potential conflicts with non-participants. Mingas prove to be a pragmatic and efficient placemaking tool that generates a sense of place. When integrated with other urban processes, mingas can significantly impact low-income neighbourhoods in Global South cities and beyond. Originating from indigenous Andean communities, this urban tool can be adapted to other communities needing similar spatial practices and socio-spatial bonds but with also similar socio-economic context, especially where the State is absent or deficient.

Despite its benefits, minga has evolved since its early use in subsistence agriculture and the recent emergence of state-coordinated megamingas. This evolution affects the process and the stakeholders involved. Both mingas and megamingas contribute to the improvement of the quality of public space from a spatial point of view, but the social aspects are significantly different. While mingas enhance public space quality through co-design and shared experience, fostering belonging and local pride, megamingas stem from institutional decision-making with top-down community engagement. The complex questions for further research revolve around the different levels of people's engagement in megamingas, post-minga effects, and forms of place attachment. This research is challenging due to the scale of megamingas and the fact that only a small proportion of participants may regularly use the affected public spaces.

Prioritising people over infrastructure, mingas are more than just a utilitarian practice; they embody social interaction, cultural exchange, and aesthetic qualities – key aspects of successful placemaking. However, this raises an important question: how do we 'control' mingas – their frequency, topics, or quality of execution? Perhaps some questions are best left unanswered. Planning is inherently about the future, which is uncertain. Mingas exemplify this uncertainty by adapting to the changing dynamics of a neighbourhood, spontaneously selecting topics, and organising activities in line with the community's collective social, creative, and management capacities. Attempting to 'control' this process risks silencing the community's authentic voice.

## Notes

1. The October 2019 protests that lasted 12 days (2–13 October), started after the then president Lenín Moreno signed off on austerity measures that eliminated a US\$1.3 billion gasoline subsidy. Transport drivers, students, and later thousands of indigenous, carried out a series of protests and riots especially in Quito, and Calderon neighbourhood, for being the northern entrance to the city, was also the scenery of protests at blockading the Pan-American highway. In these protests, security forces used excessive force against protesters and journalists, including direct and close-range use of tear gas canisters, as well as savage beatings and arbitrary detention of protesters.
2. On June 13, 2022, a wave of demonstrations against the economic policies of the Ecuadorian president Guillermo Lasso started as a result of rising fuel and food costs. Indigenous activists organised and participated in the first protests, which were later joined by workers

and students who were also impacted by the price rises. As in October 2019, Calderon inhabitants also blocked the Pan-American highway with barricades and trucks. Lasso proclaimed a state of emergency because of the protests, which lasted 18 days.

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