



UCLG – MEXICO CITY – CULTURE 21

5th EDITION - INTERNATIONAL AWARD

BUENOS AIRES



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Abasto cultural neighbourhood: economic boost and urban regeneration

Abasto is a small sector of the City of Buenos Aires that occupies part of the neighbourhoods of Almagro and Balvanera. Its enormous identity value allows it to be defined by its own inhabitants and the rest of the City's residents, as a Cultural Neighbourhood.

The neighbourhood grew around the old Mercado de Abasto, a wholesale fruit and vegetable market, built at the beginning of the twentieth century, in which a multicultural ecosystem was gradually consolidated, represented by some of the city's most characteristic artistic expression. In the 1980s, the closure of the market led to the abandonment of the area, which began to be occupied by different artists and cultural actors, who transformed it into the heart of the independent culture that emerged with the return of democracy. Today the Abasto area represents heritage, Tango, and Filete Porteño (both Intangible Heritage of Humanity) as well as Argentinian rock, theatre and independent culture (protected by Law 1.227 of Cultural Heritage of the City), migrant communities

and community culture. Of the almost 600 independent cultural spaces in the city, more than 70 are located in the Abasto area, in addition to over 39 institutional headquarters belonging to different collectives.

Beyond the neighbourhood's enormous heritage value, the urban environment features a high number of slums within public spaces, a lack of green spaces, marginality and social segregation. Access to the independent culture on offer and circulation and exchange between different economic agents (cultural, gastronomic or commercial) is limited. Identification of the heritage value of the neighbourhood is fragmented, related to each specific sector, but not its multicultural complexity.

In this sense, Abasto Barrio Cultural seeks to promote the offerings of the neighbourhood's independent cultural sector, as a driver of urban transformation and economic and social development.



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The Covid-19 pandemic restricted the activity of cultural and economic actors in the neighbourhood: cultural spaces closed down and restaurants reduced their activity, among other things, accentuating the deterioration of public space and social segregation.

During the pandemic, this project enabled many cultural spaces to sustain their income. The Ministry of Culture convened a working group, together with cultural spaces and neighbourhood organisations, to define joint actions. The first was Abasto Abierto, through which the Ministry of Culture technically equipped three public spaces so that cultural actors could programme their artistic proposals and charge admission fees. It also carried out the Cultural Streets project, organising programmed street closures so that cultural spaces could carry out their activities in the nearest public space, and Abasto Vivo, producing audio-visual activities in order to sustain the work of managers, technicians and artists. It also established working groups to define actions for the protection and dissemination of local heritage in order to re-establish and strengthen the social fabric.

The Government of the City of Buenos Aires works to strengthen neighbourhood identities together with the city's residents and different local actors. In recent years, it has also strengthened joint work with the independent cultural sector through various strategies. These include tools to facilitate municipal building works and operation, subsidies for creation and production, initiatives to encourage new audiences, professionalisation

tools and platforms to disseminate the activity. During the pandemic, special protocols were developed for operating in public spaces and public space was equipped so that it could be a safe alternative for cultural activity.

Through the Abasto Barrio Cultural programme, the State joins forces with different local cultural actors, providing tools to strengthen the neighbourhood's own cultural activity while at the same time proposing improvements to public space through collaborative strategies.

Through the programme it proposes to solve:

- The lack of coordination between cultural offerings.
- The lack of a relationship between said cultural offerings and the public space.
- The imbalance that exists between the northern sector of the neighbourhood (with more on offer and better quality public space) and the southern sector (with less on offer and more decaying public space).
- The lack of walkability along cultural circuits.
- The lack of greenery, equipment and lighting in the neighbourhood.

In line with the Charter of Rome and Culture 21, the project understands the area from a dynamic definition intimately linked to the cultural construction of the community that inhabits it, encouraging its active



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participation both in the physical realm and the full satisfaction of cultural rights.

The project also understands culture as freedom, capacity for action, collaboration and sustainable development.

The project aligns with SDG 11, in which culture plays an essential role in ‘making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable’. The fourth target of this SDG calls for ‘redoubling efforts to protect and safeguard the world’s cultural and natural heritage’.

Likewise, in relation to the 2030 Agenda, through this project culture plays a key role in addressing urban regeneration challenges. In this sense, the presented initiative places culture at the heart of local development while fostering resilience by promoting the active participation of citizens and cultural agents in neighbourhood development.

The project is strongly related to Agenda 21 insofar as culture reinvents itself in the face of adversity, such as pandemics, becoming a form of collaborative, resilient, supportive and community- and citizen-based culture. Culture is a key part of processes of social reconstruction.

The project takes as its premise the satisfaction of cultural rights, incorporated into the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, impacting on the development of urban dynamics and new uses for public space. It is based above all on the right of citizens and cultural actors to have equal access to manifold, high-quality cultural offerings, to freely

give voice to their artistic expression and their own cultural identity, and to participate in the design and evaluation of policies within the framework of a cultural democracy.

The objective of the project focuses on the cultural and urban regeneration of Abasto through changes in the use of public space, aiming to consolidate the neighbourhood as the independent culture district, extending its cultural offering to public space and strengthening different identity traits, thus creating a sense of belonging through culture and strengthening cultural rights hand in hand with the community and other relevant actors, through collective work.

The project proposes:

- To extend independent cultural offerings to public space, giving it greater visibility and diversifying audiences.
- To reinforce the cultural identity of the neighbourhood.
- To strengthen social ties, creating spaces where people can meet and building citizenship.
- To promote the socio-cultural diversity of the neighbourhood, making the cultural activity of the different collectives that live there visible.
- To democratise processes related to managing public space and state resources allocated to culture.
- To improve the quality of life of residents.



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Development of the project is divided into two main lines of action, which in turn include different tools and initiatives: the development of a Collaborative Management Plan and a Public Space Improvement Project.

From the perspective of Collaborative Cultural Management, the project offers different working strategies to strengthen the special features of local cultural offerings. The strategies are divided into three groups:

1. Strategies to strengthen independent cultural activity and encourage new audiences
2. Community outreach strategies
3. Strategies for the occupation and transformation of public space through cultural activity.

As part of these strategies, joint activities are organised between the Ministry of Culture and local cultural actors, through public calls for proposals (previously agreed upon with the cultural actors of the neighbourhood), from resources are directly derived or technical support is given for the implementation of different initiatives, including the following:

- **Fiestas Abasto:** three special events are held every year, in public spaces, to give a metropolitan scope to the neighbourhood's cultural offerings. The technical and logistical programming is carried out by the Ministry of Culture while the artistic curatorship is supervised by neighbourhood cultural spaces. During the festivities, migrant collectives are also

involved through initiatives related to art and gastronomy.

- **Heritage and identity:** working groups are held with different neighbourhood actors, producing an agenda that covers fundamental issues related to the dynamic construction of social identity.
- **Calles Culturales:** different transitory pedestrian-only schemes are programmed in streets with the highest concentration of cultural spaces, so that they can extend their activities to the public thoroughfare.
- **Abasto Vivo:** cultural spaces carry out artistic-cultural projects in audio-visual format to increase the scope of the neighbourhood's cultural offerings.
- **Abasto Abierto:** cultural activities are held on different stages in public spaces characteristic of the Abasto area as well as initiatives open to the community carried out in their own cultural spaces. The latter are organised jointly, on the last weekend of each month, and are held with symbolic tickets at very low prices, encouraging the engagement of new audiences and support for the activity.
- **Abasto In-Situ:** the proposal is to create site specific works of performance art, in public or non-conventional spaces, based on cultural identities and neighbourhood heritage.
- **Club Abasto:** cultural spaces reinforce their social role in the neighbourhood by providing a joint and coordinated



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programme of educational activities for children and adolescents during school breaks.

In this way, the state presents itself as a vehicle for developing the proposals of the independent sector as well as providing tools for strengthening local identity.

Currently, the project includes more than seven state organisations and over 40 independent cultural spaces, institutions and neighbourhood collectives, across a small range of blocks, containing 78 independent cultural spaces as well as diverse and expanding dining options, as it is, at the same time, one of the urban spaces with the greatest social heterogeneity, with at least 39 spaces belonging to diverse collectives.

For its part, the Public Space Improvement Project is the result of studies, surveys and collaborative working groups organised by the Ministry of Culture and the General Directorate of Urban Anthropology of the Department of Urban Development of the City.

Based on this work, it transpires that the least valued aspects of the neighbourhood are the lack of green spaces, the deterioration of public space and safety as well as the lack of connections between different parts of the neighbourhood. The most highly-rated indicators are accessibility and cultural offerings.

The project has a positive impact on the following variables:

- Public space as a common good: a new institutional framework for the development and production of all local cultural expression, especially independent culture.
- An urban space to strengthen multiculturalism and interculturalism.
- Mixed governance between the state and local actors to reach a consensus on decisions, responsibilities and jointly build local identity.

The urban intervention includes the creation of bio-cultural corridors, which connect significant points of cultural activity, and are notable for an increase in pedestrian walkways, the incorporation of absorbent surfaces and native vegetation, public mural and sculptural art, artistic and ornamental lighting, and signage. Pedestrian lighting is also being reinforced and pedestrian walkways throughout the area are being upgraded to improve walkability.

The public art programme is being carried out together with local artists or with established female artists who define their artistic proposals in collaboration with different socio-cultural segments of the neighbourhood: children from public schools, older adults from neighbourhood cultural centres, teenagers or neighbourhood organisations.

In general, the city's residents and tourists. More specifically, residents, cultural actors (independent) and the neighbourhood's



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commercial sector. The project targets the entire population from infants to senior citizens.

The biggest obstacle so far has been the various restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Thanks to the programme, cultural spaces were able to move to public spaces, achieving audience numbers that they would not have been able to accommodate in their own spaces. Programmes taking place in public spaces were adapted to the various official protocols in order to carry out the activities, despite the restrictions, in full respect of health and safety.

Direct consequences expected after implementing the planned activities:

- Increased funding for independent cultural spaces and artists in the City of Buenos Aires (through various calls for proposals).
- Increased cultural activity in public spaces and in cultural spaces themselves.
- Increased job opportunities for artists in the sector.
- Diverse, heterogeneous, plural cultural offerings.
- Greater visibility for independent cultural offerings and more visibility at metropolitan level.
- Engagement of new audiences.
- Works and improvements to public space.

Changes in knowledge, attitudes, skills and behaviours resulting from the following:

- Quantitative data on variations in cultural activity in the area through Data Cultura;

- Quantitative and qualitative data on social problems by means of the Urban Anthropology team (Ministry of Urban Development);
- Qualitative data on cultural activity as a driver of local development by means of the consolidation of working groups that periodically produce impact assessments with cross-cutting working groups.

19 cultural spaces participated in the first Abasto Abierto 2020 call for proposals. Today, 40 spaces are participating.

In the midst of the pandemic and with maximum health restrictions in place, cultural venues were able to charge admission fees in public spaces. Ninety-five per cent of the budget of the call for proposals was allocated to technical equipment.

The first season of Abasto Abierto was attended by around 7,490 people over two months, while during 2022, the project reached more than 60,000 people.

Based on the Theory of Change methodology, indicators are being constructed to evaluate the programme, taking into account the following variables:

1. Diversification of the audiences who consume culture in the neighbourhood
2. Interactions between the different actors
3. Cultural consumption in the neighbourhood
4. Amount of resources allocated to independent culture



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The key factor lies in the innovation of the proposal. Its approach is innovative as it contemplates an integrated multidisciplinary approach involving various actors and proposes a model of mixed governance together with local actors, to manage the area in all its complexity and various dimensions, based on the concept that the area is for the common good. At the same time, it reinforces the culture of proximity, which is decentralised, at a territorial level, and implemented by the community's own residents and cultural agents.

The continuity of the programme is provided by its comprehensive approach and collective work. Works to improve and transform public space, foreseen by the project, will enhance the value of the natural through route that connects the north and south of the neighbourhood, solving the fragmentation and degradation, providing a sense of safety and spatial quality. A cultural corridor will be created that will strengthen the use of public space in a sustainable manner.

On the other hand, the network of cultural spaces increasingly boosts the neighbourhood's cultural activity, expanding and diversifying audiences, which leads to an increase in cultural consumption and economic advancement for the sector.
