

Informal vendors and
the Public Realm

Cusco's ambulantes & the heart of public life: Plaza de Armas

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The public realm plays an integral role in planning. Publicly owned places and spaces that belong to and are accessible by everyone bring people together and are crucial in achieving healthy, socially inclusive communities. However, now more than ever planners are encountering challenges and barriers in the planning and designing of the public realm. The occupation of public spaces by informal vendors is one of them.

In many cities hawkers are usually considered a marginalized population that forms part of a mostly unrecognized, yet widespread, activity that contradicts universal ideas of the modern public space. Thus, the accelerated growth of informal economies in the public realm is usually considered a disruption to the public live and a threat to both order and safety.

Consequently, I wanted to take advantage of the International Experience Award to expand my understanding of this issue as it is absent from the Canadian context. The aim was to research the public realm in a location where informal vendors present a challenge to discover innovative approaches and problem solving tactics.





To study the selected research topic, ***Plaza de Armas***, located in ***Cusco, Peru*** was chosen as the destination. The Plaza, located in the historic centre at the heart of the city, has been the center of public life for centuries and continues to be the place where many historic events and a wide range of community activities happen.

In addition, the Plaza exhibits a blossoming tourism industry resulting from a designation as a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1983 due to the city's cultural, architectural and historical relevance.

Despite its significance, the vibrant Plaza now faces a major challenge: constant presence of a high amount of informal vendors (locally known as “ambulantes” or “comerciantes informales”). As a result, the main purpose of the study was to evaluate the role of Cusco's informal vendors within the City's most relevant public space: Plaza de Armas.

To understand the functioning and importance of the public realm in Cusco as well as its relationship to the informal economies, it was necessary to examine the ambulantes themselves. Therefore it was fundamental to comprehend why illegal vendors engage in such activity, how they utilize the space and how are they perceived by other users including local citizens (Cusqueños), tourists and police.

First, conversations with couple of locals allowed to understand the origins of the ambulantes in Cusco and why they engage in such activity. Residents explained that around 30 years ago the government started advertising tourism in Cusco, ensuring that if people moved to the city and worked near Plaza de Armas they would make high profits from incoming visitors.

Lured by the prospect of a higher income many people sold their land, stock and moved to the suburbs of Cusco. Yet a lack of spending by tourists, the massive migration and a lack of formal employment jobs resulted in increased poverty and led many residents to enter the informal job sector, becoming ambulantes to satisfy basic needs.

Since then this illegal activity provides direct and indirect employment as well as essential services to the majority of the population. Such is the case of an elderly women and a young boy with whom I also engaged in conversation with. Ester, the senior ambulante, is a widow and sells cookies at the Plaza to supplement her small monthly pension. The young boy, selling llama keychains around the square, claimed to be collecting money for a school field trip to Machu Picchu. Both, as many other locals, consider the Plaza de best location to sell merchandise as it is the most accessible and touristic public space.





The presence of the ambulances on Plaza de Armas has influenced the actions taken by the city of Cusco when it comes to the public realm. Concerned by the influx of visitors and ambulantes within the historic center and the public square, Cusco's municipality established a series of bylaws regulating public space.

These bylaws describe compatible urban activities, where these can take place and the improper use of public open spaces. Even though the bylaw does not specifically mention informal economies, they have been used to ban ambulante vending from the historic city center. Still, the existence of these regulations would come as a surprise to many as the informal practice continues despite official sanctions and harsh reprisals.

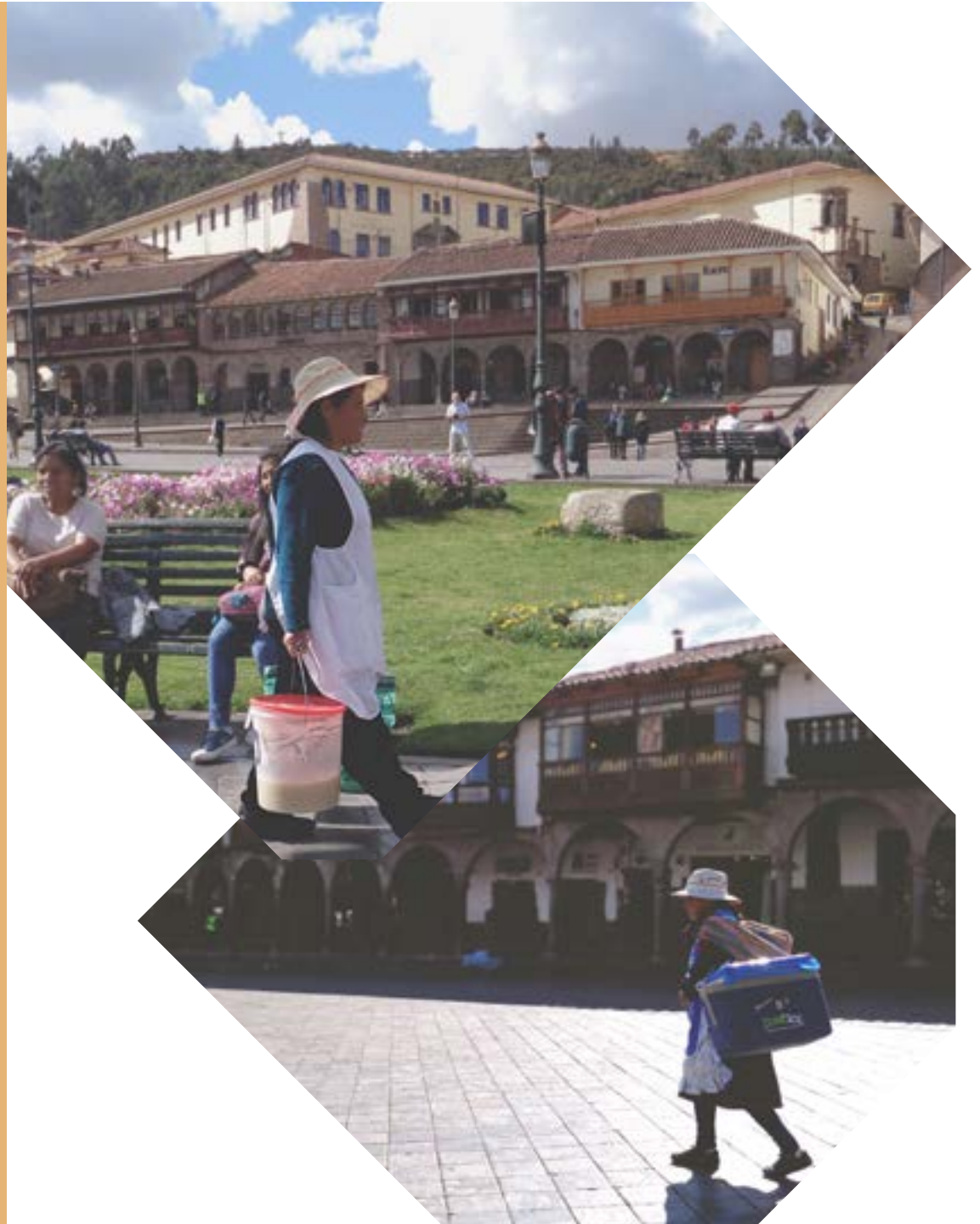
Acknowledging that it was likely impossible to eliminate street vendors from public spaces, municipal authorities took a new approach and developed the “*Seguridad Ciudadana*” (also known as Serenazgo or Serenos).

These are a special police division in charge of maintaining the order, peace and security around the city but only have jurisdiction over the ambulantes. Their purpose is to promote organized forms of informal vending and regulate behavior within and around the City's main public spaces through constant policing.

Interestingly, the continuous presence of “serenos” within the Plaza not only helps regulate the vendors but also affects the sense of security of both tourists and local workers alike. For the many visitors that stop by the public square, the uninterrupted presence of these policemen provides a false sense of security.

The perception of security is argued to be false because if a criminal offence were to happen, the serenos have no jurisdiction to act on the matter and would have to contact either the Tourism Police or the National Police.

Similarly, the presence of serenos within and around Plaza de Armas also affects the dynamics between the store workers and the ambulantes. The special police ensures the “proper” behavior of the illegal vendors around the Plaza stores, banning them from a particular location if necessary. Because of this, many of the workers of the surrounding stores are not concerned about the vendors.





Overall Plaza de Armas, an integral part of Cusco's public life, not only preserves the ability to bring people together but also demonstrates the concept of collective ownership and accessibility by "allowing" the local ambulantes to make a living despite the illegal nature of the activity.

In terms of planning, the Plaza clearly demonstrates the difference between how a public place or space is intended to function versus how it is actually used. In the case of Cusco, the square has acquired new uses created by the ambulantes to satisfy their own personal needs.

Yet unplanned changes in uses by this particular group also affected the actions taken by city authorities. This resulted in constant policing, enhanced perception of the ambulantes as a nuisance and negative impact on their sense of belonging.

Even then, the presence of these illegal vendors within Plaza de Armas has a big impact on how people experience and make meaning of their experiences within this public space.

The ambulantes influence community identity, local character and sense of place as they have become associated with the vibrancy and uniqueness of the Plaza. In addition the illegal activity facilitates social cohesion between the vendors as they know and help each other.

As the heart of Cusco and the prime stage for public life within the city, Plaza de Armas demonstrates place-making can be achieved despite challenges and speaks to innovative measures and approaches.

Canadian planners could learn and get inspired by public spaces like Plaza de Armas to create welcoming public places and spaces that have shared meaning. Sometimes unplanned activities that can be considered to be a public nuisance can actually contribute to a vibrant, inclusive and accessible public realm.



Types of ambulantes

Despite being heavily regulated due to its heritage relevance and high tourists levels, Plaza de Armas was the prime site for informal vendors. At least seven different kind of ambulantes were recorded and identified. Types differed by the product, good, or service offered and these include:

Food Vendors
(ie. Jell-O, cookies, candy)

Merchandise Vendors
(ie. Selfie sticks, key chains)

Photographers
(ie. Take photos at popular tourist spots)

Tour Sellers
(ie. Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu, Cusco City)

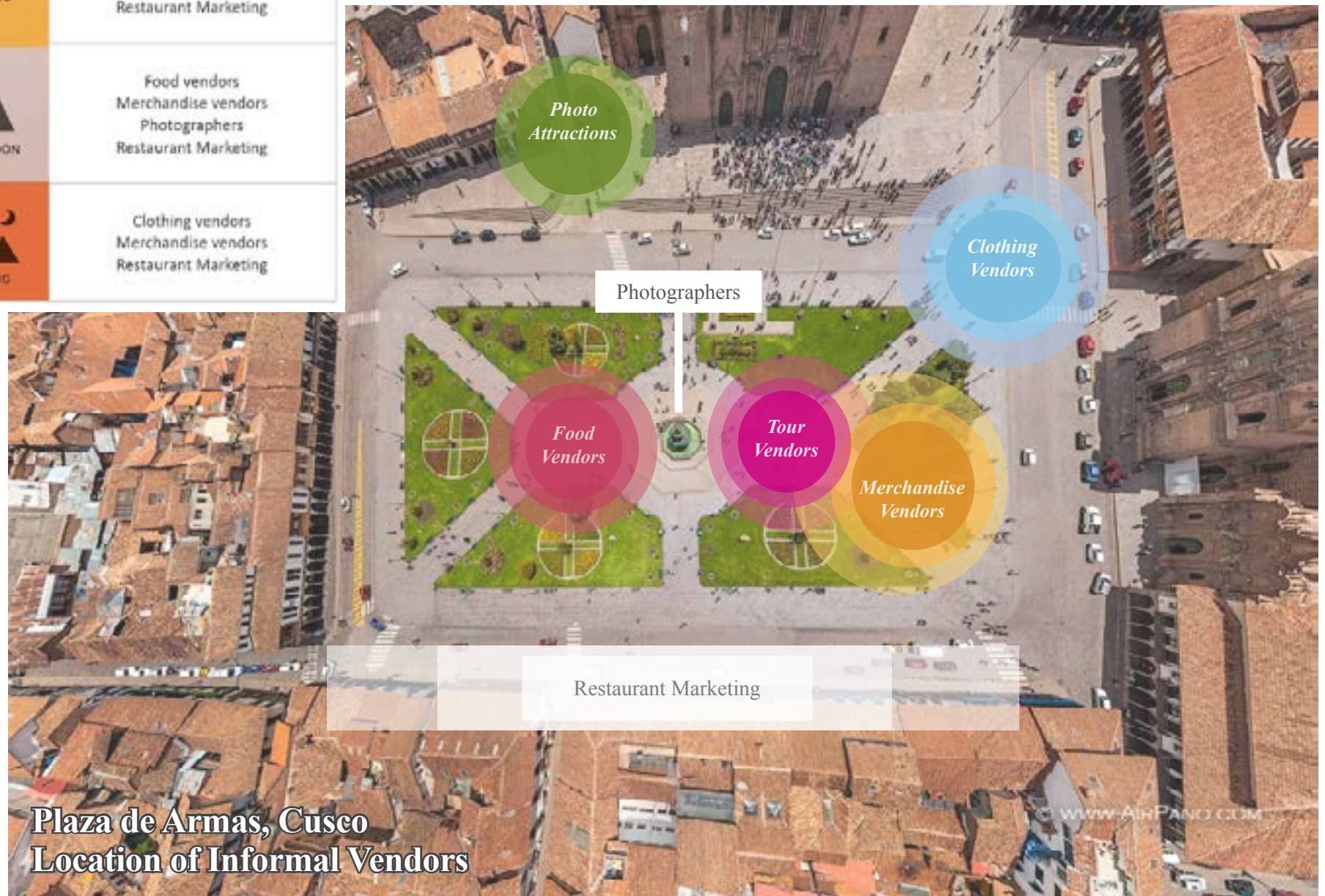
Photo Attractions
(ie. Dressed in traditional clothing for photos)

Clothing Vendors
(ie. Hats, mittens, scarfs)

Restaurant Marketing
Get tourists to eat at nearby restaurants



Time of Day	Type of Vendedor Ambulante
MORNING	Food vendors Merchandise vendors Photographers Tour sellers Photo Attractions Restaurant Marketing
AFTERNOON	Food vendors Merchandise vendors Photographers Restaurant Marketing
EVENING	Clothing vendors Merchandise vendors Restaurant Marketing



Plaza de Armas, Cusco
Location of Informal Vendors