

# CONCEALED GAZES

The closed balconies of Lima and how they  
affected women's relationship to the public space  
and public sphere

Introduction

Historically, city space has been gendered in a way that the public realm is perceived as unequivocally male<sup>1</sup>. This is a realm where women have been either excluded or allowed restricted access to, mainly through spatial elements that regulate and control their access to and gaze of the public space, while also controlling and regulating who can look at or have access to them<sup>2</sup>. Examples of these are closed or curtained vehicles, special sections in theaters and cinemas closed off by screens, temporarily curtained sections of the street from a vehicle to a building, or closed balconies in domestic and religious contexts<sup>3</sup>.

In the “City of Kings” of Lima, during the colonial and the first republic periods (1620-1842), upper-class women had a unique and complex relationship to the public realm through the second period balconies, also known as closed balconies<sup>4</sup>. The immense distance between the new world and the old continent offered social, spatial and economic mobility to the emerging society, which created the need for women’s role and boundaries to be re-defined<sup>5</sup>. Furthermore, life in Lima has often been described as a continuous masquerade, where upper-class women embodied the dualism of their context, since they were perceived to simultaneously encompass contrasting attributes, for example being the embodiment of “marianism” and “don juanism”<sup>6</sup>. Thus, women’s use of the closed balconies resulted in an extension of this dualism into their relationship to the public space and the public sphere.

1 Ruddick, 1996  
2 Ruddick, 1996; Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2001  
3 Papanek, 1973; Yeoh and Huang, 1998; Mazumdar and Mazumdar, 2001; Smith and Bley, 2013

4 Smith and Bley, 2013; ‘Sucedió en el Perú “Balcones de Lima”’, 2016; Fuentes, 2017  
5 Garcilaso de la Vega, 1617; Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996, pp. 54–55  
6 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506; Martin, 1983, pp. 01–08; Lambright and Guerrero, 2006, pp. 49–66

## Context and necessity

To understand how the closed balcony affected upper-class women's relationship to the public realm, the reasons why it became such an inherent architectonic element of the city and how it affected the entire upper-class's relationship to the exterior must be comprehended. The closed balcony originated in the architecture of the Indus Valley and Sumeria, in modern-day [Pakistan and Irak], which was assimilated by Seljuq Turks in the eleventh century. From there, the Turks spread its use throughout the Muslim territories in the beginning of the twelfth century, and then through the Muslims' conquest of Hispania it reached the Iberian Peninsula by the end of the same century. Finally, in the sixteenth century, the historic Hispano-Arabic use of the closed balcony arrived to America with the Spaniards and Moors that migrated from Andalusia and Extremadura, the first searching for economic opportunities and the later escaping from the religious persecution of the Spanish monarchy and the Catholic Church<sup>7</sup>.

<sup>7</sup> Hurtado Valdez, 2005; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 12–27; 'Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima"', 2016

The construction of *casonas* o *palacios* (mansions) was a complex endeavor<sup>8</sup>. Since there was neither stone nor wood easily available because Lima is located in an arid coastal strip, the *casonas* had to be constructed with the prehispanic materials and techniques of *adobe* (mudbrick) and *quincha* (reed or cane framework) used by the lower classes<sup>9</sup>. Hence, camouflaging the rustic materials and adorning the façade with ornate wooden closed balconies were how the elite conveyed their wealth, status and power, and clearly stated the power structure of the new social order (figure 01). Only they could afford to build a second floor, to import white and dark oak from Guayaquil and cedar from Nicaragua, Ecuador and Chile for the main doors and balconies, to buy glass for the windows panes, to import Sevillian mosaics and velvet upholstery for the interior of the balconies, and to afford the fees of the skilled Moorish and Spanish wood craftsmen<sup>10</sup>.



8 Patruco Núñez, 2017  
9 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 39–45; Walker, 2003  
10 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 39–46; Walker, 2003; Hurtado Valdez, 2005; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 29–37; Fuentes, 2017

Figure 01.  
Photographs of the *Palacio de Torre Tagle*, commissioned in 1715 by Don José Bernardo de Tagle y Bracho, 1st Marqués of Torre Tagle. The mansion was designed in the Spanish Baroque style with barroque-mudejar balconies

Furthermore, the balconies enabled the upper-class to physically and figuratively rise above the masses in the streets, and allowed them to communicate with the public space while maintaining their domestic life private as was expected of *gente decente* (noble people)<sup>11</sup>. Additionally, it was a matter of safety to have closed balconies that allowed a clear view and better control of the street, due to the high tensions between social classes, and the constant threat of upheaval and political strife<sup>12</sup>. Moreover, the balconies were important for the architecture of the *casonas*: they served to illuminate and ventilate the rooms of the first floor, and improved their seismic behavior during the earthquakes that constantly shook the city as was proven during the earthquakes of 1655, 1687 and 1746<sup>13</sup>.

When viceroy Manso de Velasco approved the reforms proposed by Luis Godin in 1746, which among other ordinances banned the construction of two story houses and balconies, the elite vehemently refused to comply with them, because outlawing the balconies was an attempt to limit their autonomy, space and power<sup>14</sup>. By the end of the seventeenth century, Lima was already known as “the city of streets in the air” (anthropologist Antonio de la Calancha) (figure 02)<sup>15</sup>. Thus, the balconies became deeply ingrained in Lima’s idiosyncrasy, particularly in the cultural practice of the upper-class<sup>16</sup>.

11 Walker, 2003; Palma Soriano, 2011; ‘Sucedió en el Perú “Balcones de Lima”’, 2016

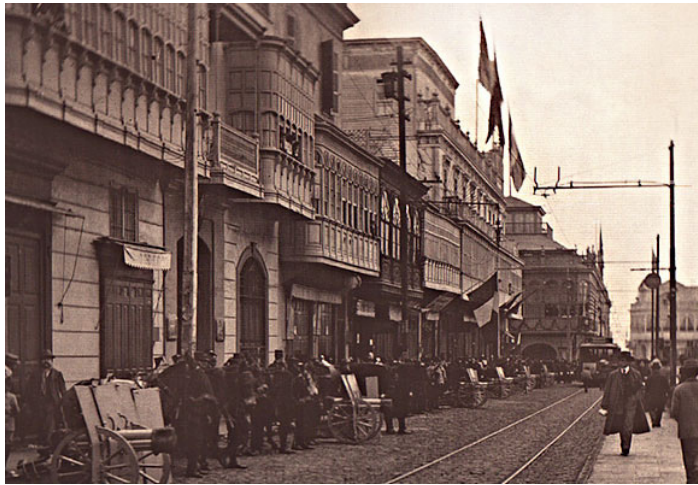
12 Walker, 2003; Hurtado Valdez, 2005; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 38–39

13 Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 38–50; Coch Roura and Agüero León, 2009; Scaletti Cárdenas, 2017 Fuentes, 2017

14 Walker, 2003

15 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, p. 64

16 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 24–27; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 40–50; Fuentes, 2017



Spatial definition and struggle

Figure 02.  
Photograph of "La Calle de los Judios, Lima" in 1918

As one of the main elements of the façade of the *casona*, the balcony, along with the *portada* (main entrance) and the *ventana volada* (window), represented the identity and status of its owner to the city<sup>17</sup>, like the case of the façade of the *Palacio Torre Tagle* commissioned by Don José Bernardo de Tagle y Bracho, 1st Marquis of Torre Tagle when he rose to the post of treasurer of the Spanish fleet<sup>18</sup>. Architecturally, its design focused on creating horizontality and unity through the harmonious composition of five oak or cedar structural elements, which are from bottom to top, the *apoyo* comprised by *canes* (wooden beams) anchored to the *adobe* façade wall, the *antepecho* which comprehends the bottom cornice and wooden panels with a row of small balusters on top, the *ventana/celosia* formed by the swing wooden *celosias* (lattice work) and later by the swing glass plane windows, the *sobreluz* comprised by the top row of balusters, and the *remate*, which is the top cornice, all of which are divided into three overlapping strata: *antepecho*, *celosias* and *balaustres* (figure 03)<sup>19</sup>. Since these elements remain the same through the centuries, balconies are differentiated by their dimensions, color and ornamentation<sup>20</sup>.

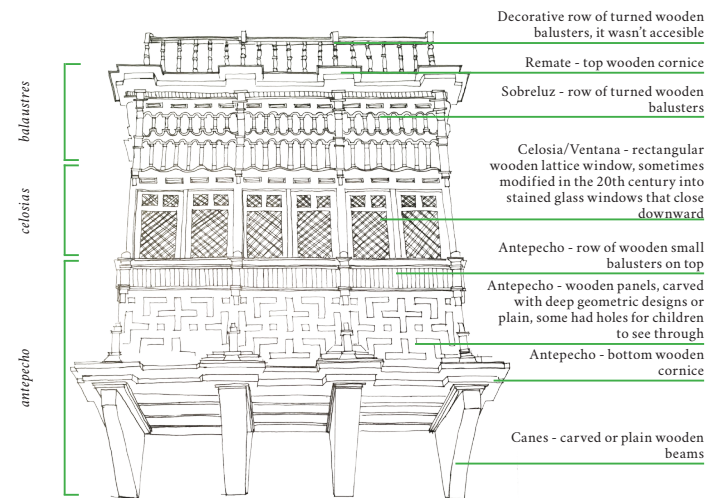


Figure 03.  
The closed balcony's elements explained in an diagram of a balcony of the *Palacio Torre Tagle*

17 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 50–57; Fuentes, 2017

18 "Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima", 2016

19 San Cristóbal Sebastian, 2003, pp. 634–635; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 28–33

20 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 58–66; Fuentes, 2017



Furthermore, from 1620 to 1842 the closed balcony is categorized in three stylistic periods: from 1620 to 1670 the proto-baroque or early renaissance period of which the *Casa de Pilatos* is an excellent examples, from 1670 to 1746 the baroque period to which the *Palacio Torre Tagle* belongs, and from 1747 to 1850 the transition or neoclassical period that has the *Casona Osambela* as an example (figures 04-07)<sup>21</sup>. Its historic evolution was a response to the development of society's architectonic taste and spatial necessities. Thus, socially and architectonically, the closed balcony is an irreplaceable component of Lima's landscape that for centuries shaped the city's volumetric perspective, represented the character of its inhabitants and affected their behavior in the streets<sup>22</sup>.

PERIODS	PROTO BAROQUE / EARLY RENAISSANCE		BAROQUE		TRANSITION / NEOCLASSICAL			
	1620 - 1670		1671 - 1746		1747 - 1850			
GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS	Plan shape	Rectangular floor plan or L-shaped floor plan.	Rectangular floor plan with straight, six-sided or octagonal corners, or L-shaped floor plan.	Rectangular floor plan with straight, octagonal or rounded corners.	Location on the facade	Center of the facade over the entrance, or on the corner.	Across the facade, or placed symmetrically or asymmetrically on the sides of the entrance, or on the corner.	Across the facade, or placed symmetrically or asymmetrically on the sides of the entrance.
	Dimensions	h = 3.20m - 4.00m l = 3.00m - 8.00m w = 0.80m - 1.70m	h = 3.20m - 4.00m l = 3.00m - 8.00m w = 0.80m - 1.70m	h = 3.20m - 4.60m l = 3.80m - 20.00m w = 0.80m - 1.70m	Color	Painted olive green or varnished in a natural clear tone.	Painted olive green or varnished in a natural clear tone.	Painted in dark colors, mainly dark brown.
	Number of balconies	01 - 02 balconies	01 - 02 balconies	01 - 05 balconies	STRUCTURE			
	<i>Ayojo</i>	The balcony rested on exposed <i>carros</i> (wooden supporting beams), which were fixed to the adobe wall of the facade.	The balcony rested on <i>carros</i> (wooden supporting beams), which were fixed to the adobe wall of the facade. The <i>carros</i> were covered on the sides and bottom with wooden panels.	The balcony rested on <i>carros</i> (wooden supporting beams), which were fixed to the adobe wall of the facade. The <i>carros</i> were completely covered with wooden panels.	<i>Antepedcho</i>	Plain wooden panels, made of <i>curtro colmillos</i> or of <i>canutillo</i> , or of alternating plain and openwork panels. Above them there is a row of small wooden balusters.	Wooden Panels in the rococo style with curved edges. Above them was a row of small wooden balusters that became less common. On the inside, the walls were covered in sevillian mosaics.	Panels in the with central ornamentation. On the inside, the walls were covered in sevillian mosaics.
	Windows and <i>Casosos</i>	Rectangular wooden lattice swing windows known as <i>casosos</i> , or swing solid panels placed over the <i>antepedcho</i> .	Rectangular wooden lattice swing windows placed known as <i>casosos</i> over the <i>Antepedcho</i> .	Counterweight glass windows known as <i>ventana de guillichina</i> .	<i>Sobretuiz</i>	Row of wooden balusters to better ventilate and illuminate the balcony. Or wooden panels better ventilate and illuminate the balcony, with round edges in the same design as the <i>antepedcho</i> .	Row of wooden balusters to better ventilate and illuminate the balcony. Or wooden panels better ventilate and illuminate the balcony, with round edges in the same design as the <i>antepedcho</i> .	The use of glass modified the structure of the balcony, the <i>sobretuiz</i> was removed when the windows became larger.
	Remate	Smooth wooden cornice	Smooth wooden cornice or wooden ornamented cornice	Smooth wooden cornice				

Figure 04. Chart of the closed balcony's evolution by period

21 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 58–78; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 51–82; Arrieta Álvarez, Scaletti Cárdenas and Segovia Rojas, 2017  
 22 Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 38–82



Figure 05.  
Photograph of *Casa de Pilatos* (the *celosias* were replaced in the XX century), Lima in 2016



Figure 06.  
Photograph of *Palacio Torre Tagle*, Lima in 2014



Figure 07.  
Photograph of *Casa de Osambela*, Lima in 2014

In the design of the aforementioned casona, the closed balcony was an important space spatially and symbolically, as it was “an extension of the house...projected towards the exterior but maintaining the privacy of the domestic space in a way that wasn’t accomplished by other architectural elements”<sup>23</sup>. Spatially, the balcony functioned as extension of the first floor *salas* (living room and reception space) into the street (figure 08). Through the doors of the ample space of the *salas*, the balcony’s close width of 0.84m-1.70m and lower ceiling of 2.95m–3.50m created an intimate, comfortable space<sup>24</sup>. Inside of which, different ambiences could be created by controlling the illumination and ventilation with the *celosias*, from private and secluded to open and integrated with the street, the *salas* or both<sup>25</sup>. Its main functions were to increase the size of the social area, to connect women decently to urban life, and to create a space propitious for women’s intimacy, for *tertulia* (social gatherings) and *balconear* (to look and communicate with the street), as “[balconies] should always be ample enough to comfortably fit a chair”<sup>26</sup>, and to improve the ventilation and illumination of the *salas*<sup>27</sup>. Thus, it was a space in-between outside and inside, which connected the domestic and public realms, and created new possibilities and frustrations in women’s relationship to the public realm.

23 Scaletti Cárdenas, 2017

24 Scaletti Cárdenas, 2017

25 Arrieta Álvarez, Scaletti Cárdenas and Segovia Rojas, 2017

26 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, p. 60

27 Fernandez Muñoz, 2007; Palma Soriano, 2011; Scaletti Cárdenas, 2017, p. 21

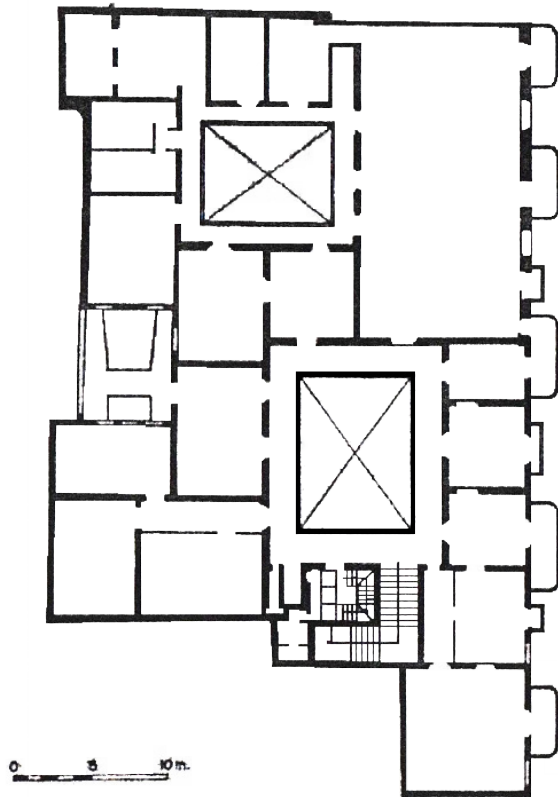


Figure 08.  
Floor plan of the first floor of *Casa Osambela*

Symbolically, the balcony was connected to the feminine spaces within the *casona*, particularly to the *estrado*<sup>28</sup>. This room was located in the ground floor, joined to the *sala principal* and it opened to the private patio, “covered with fine fabrics, velvet, carpets and cushions, and separated from the *sala* by a step and a delicate railing, and it was exclusively for women; only close family men were allowed to enter”<sup>29</sup>. Both spaces belonged to the female semi-private realm of the home, were of Hispano-Arabic descent, had primarily a social function, were furnished with the comfortable soft materials associated with female domesticity, such as velvet and silk, were set overlooking the traditional male public space, to which they were connected but also separated, similarly to Adolf Loos’ “female marked theater boxes in the Moller and Muller houses”<sup>30</sup>, and provided women with closer access to social life than traditional female spaces<sup>31</sup>. Hence, the balcony was a gendered space that represented what society perceived as women’s limited place and role in the home, while creating a situation where they could explore beyond their assigned role.

28 Patruco Núñez, 2017

29 Frezier, 1982, p. 218

30 Colomina, 1994, p. 248

31 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506; Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, p. 31; Patruco Núñez, 2017

## Social norms, decency and morality

The reality of Lima's upper-class women was vastly different from the life of their contemporaries in Europe, as was documented in the diaries of the travelers of those centuries<sup>32</sup>. The first Spanish women who immigrated to America at the beginning of the sixteenth century did so not because of domestic or religious ideals, but out of economic need or to advance socially. To achieve these goals, they were forced to break with many of the dominant paradigms that previously bound them, and learn to negotiate the all-encompassing influence of the colony's two founding institutions: the Catholic Church and the Spanish Bureaucratic Apparatus. In time, the *criollas* and the Spanish women who made up the upper-class developed the ideology of *acatar las leyes pero no cumplirlas*, where they publicly obeyed the Church and respected the law but at the same time devised clandestine channels to live in line with the reality of their new land<sup>33</sup>.

32 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506; Radiguet, 2001

33 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506; Martin, 1983, pp. 35–72;  
Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996, p. 56

According to the norms of colonial society and the expectations of the Church, women didn't have the agency to negotiate the streets alone: they had to be accompanied by either male relatives, older female relatives, or servants and slaves<sup>34</sup>. The only exception to this were the *tapadas*: upper-class women who attained the freedom to move throughout the streets by wearing the self-imposed *saya* (Peruvian skirt) and *manto* (two shawls, one to cover her shoulders and the other to cover all her face except one eye) (figure 09), at the price of relinquishing their identity and being perceived as indecent and immoral by the rest of society and the Church (figure 10)<sup>35</sup>. This perception was so widespread that the government tried unsuccessfully to ban the use of the *manto* in 1561, 1582 and 1583, and archbishop Toribio de Mogrovejo also tried to push a ban in 1601<sup>36</sup>.



34 Garcilaso de la Vega, 1617; 'Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima"', 2016

35 Poole, 1998; Barua Lanchippa, 2018

36 Martin, 1983, pp. 299–309; Rodilla León, 2004, pp. 84–85

Figure 09.  
Painting "Going to church" by Francisco Fierro Palas in 1879



Figure 10.  
Painting "Las Tapadas" by Johann Moritz Rugendas in 1844

Thus in Lima, where the perception of being *gente decente* was of utmost importance, the only option for upper-class women to relate to the public realm in a moral and decent manner was through the use of closed balconies (figure 11). In the balconies, women were protected from the sexualized male gaze that followed them around the city and saw them as an object of sin by the celosia, which acquired its name from the word *celos* (jealousy) because it prevented men from feeling jealous by hiding the women, depictions of this gaze can be seen in many of the works of Leonce Angard and Johann Moritz Rugendas<sup>37</sup>. At the same time, the women hidden in the balconies became the object of men's fantasies and fetishes, as they imagined what indecencies these mysterious women were participating in behind the *celosias*<sup>38</sup>.

37 Poole, 1998; Rashidi and Rostankowski, 2009; 'Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima"', 2016  
38 Radiguet, 2001; Palma Soriano, 2011; 'Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima"', 2016



Figure 11.  
Water color of *Procesión del Jueves Santo por la Calle de San Agustín* by  
Francisco Fierro Palas, Lima in 1832

Although the closed balconies were designed to allow women contact with the outside world while maintaining the privacy and honor of their family, the activities that took place in them and that sparked men's imagination weren't always of a domestic nature. This doesn't mean that the expected everyday activities didn't take place: women *balconeaban*, socialized with friends and relatives, lounged and spent time with their children. Still, immoral and sometimes illegal activities were contained by the same space: women plotted political schemes, traded clandestine information and engaged in illicit love affairs<sup>39</sup>. Therefore, the balconies that women inhabited were a space of double morality, of freedom and restrictions. Even though they allowed women to participate in public life while ensuring their decency and respectability, they also produced the right environment for scandalous and indecent behavior.

39 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506; Martin, 1983, pp. 95–127; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, p. 38; Palma Soriano, 2011; Smith and Bley, 2013



## Control and power struggle between genders

Lima's colonial society saw the balconies as "an architectonic solution to consolidate the family's privacy, and to zealously protect women while allowing them to be part of public life"<sup>40</sup>. Yet, since the dimensions of their balconies were the extent of the public space that they could physically access, their presence in public life was static<sup>41</sup>. Also, the balconies restricted the scope of what upper-class women could look at and who they could choose to communicate with, while remaining within them<sup>42</sup>. Besides, as women weren't visible in the public realm, their voices were rarely heard which left them invisible and powerless in the established male public sphere<sup>43</sup>. Thus, the balconies were intended to not only to protect women but also to restrict their access to the public space and to exclude them from the public sphere.

40 Orrego, 2010

41 Rashidi and Rostankowski, 2009

42 "Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima", 2016

43 Martin, 1983, pp. 95–127; Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996, pp. 54–70

Nevertheless, under the ideology of *acatar las leyes pero no cumplirlas* the upper-class women who were limited to the balconies in order to relate to the street found ways to benefit from their situation<sup>44</sup>. Since upper-class women had made *balconear* a local custom and it was socially acceptable to spend large amounts of time doing it, women had complete visual control of their surrounding streets (figure 12). They could keep track of the movement of not only of their husbands and relatives but also of the whole upper-class and of the indigenous people, which in the city's unstable and volatile social and political climate was extremely useful information<sup>45</sup>. Furthermore, most of the upper-class women, who were deeply involved in politics and fascinated by intrigue, took advantage of the time spent socializing only with each other inside the balconies to build large information exchange networks, so between all of them they could see most of the city<sup>46</sup>. Moreover, the closed balconies allowed women to choose whether to watch the exterior anonymously, hidden behind the *celosias/ventanas*, or to more actively engage with urban life by opening them to show themselves<sup>47</sup>. Hence, while women had to obey the societal rules that restricted them, they weren't mute victims. They appropriated the space used to control them, and found power, control and influence where previously there hadn't been any.

44 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506; Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996, p. 56

45 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982; Walker, 2003

46 Tristan, 1839, pp. 498–499; Martin, 1983, pp. 299–309; Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996

47 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 70–71; San Cristóbal Sebastian, 2003; Fernandez Muñoz, 2007, pp. 38–39; Arrieta Álvarez Scaletti Cárdenas and Segovia Rojas, 2017



Figure 12.  
Photograph of Jr. Camana 217, Lima 2016

The citizens moving through the streets were aware that the probability of being watched by hidden eyes from the balconies was high, since by the eighteenth century in a grid of sixteen by sixteen blocks there were approximately 4000 balconies<sup>48</sup> and as Father Bernabe Cobo observed “It is here so well received the use of balconies, that there is no middle-class house that doesn’t have one and the mansions of the upper-class have many”<sup>49</sup> (figure 13). Because of this, people had to plan ahead which routes they would take when navigating the streets specially when engaging in dubious activities, *calesas* (horse or mule drawn calash) became almost indispensable for upper-class families to move discretely, and as women spent more time inside the balconies, their functions expanded from social activities to also include domestic ones, such as embroidering, answering letters or reading novels<sup>50</sup>. Ergo, the possibility that upper-class women’s could be watching the public space modified the behavior of the people they looked at, while the possibility of exerting control anonymously modified the behavior of the on-lookers themselves.



Figure 13.  
City plan of Lima in the 1750's by Jacques-Nicolas Bellin

48 Hurtado Valdez, 2005

49 Cobo y Peralta and Jiménez de la Espada, 1890, p. 308

50 Tristan, 1839; Lewin, 1958, p. 39; Patruco Núñez, 2017

## Conclusion

The closed balconies extended the dualism of the context of upper-class women's life in Lima during the colonial and republican periods (1620-1842) into their relationship to the public space and the public sphere. As a spatial element of Hispano-Arabic descent, the balconies were meant to restrict and relegate women to the private domestic realm<sup>51</sup>. But in Lima, because women appropriated and transformed them into multifunctional spaces, the balconies became instrumental in women's partial inclusion into the public realm, which was more than many of their contemporaries had during those periods<sup>52</sup>. Furthermore, the balconies presented women with an immediate answer for their longing of public life within the perceived decency expected of them; while in the long term it allowed them little space to have a voice, which left them outside of the public sphere and of the institutional power system, where men had all the power to decide what was right and wrong<sup>53</sup>. It is only in the age of modernity, when society's mentality slowly changed, that women uncovered themselves and left the space of the balconies to express their voice, and initiate their struggle to directly enter the public realm<sup>54</sup>.

51 Fiol Cabrejos, 1982, pp. 58–66; 'Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima"', 2016

52 Tristan, 1839, pp. 479–506

53 Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996, pp. 54–70; 'Sucedió en el Perú "Balcones de Lima"', 2016

54 Denegri Alvarez Calderon, 1996, pp. 68–70

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