

MEDELLÍN: THE ROOTS OF SOCIAL URBANISM

A Mecca for drug trafficking and urban violence until the 1990s, Medellín is now hailed for its urban and social transformation, embodied in projects widely covered in the media such as its Metrocable, its urban escalators and its library parks. But what were the cultural, social and participatory dynamics at the root of these transformations? How were they mobilised by strategy-minded mayors? And what is the situation today?

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The world's media continues to be thrilled by the "Medellín Miracle", at least since 2012, when the city was dubbed Most Innovative City of the Year by the Wall Street Journal. Thanks to this media coverage, most of the story of the transformation of Medellín is now told in the present tense. Knowledge of the pre-existing context and the factors that made it possible to overcome obstacles is nonetheless essential if we are to fully understand it. The dynamics that were created around community forums, integrated programmes and strategic plans in the 1990s acted as incubators for projects and facilities that are now recognised all over the world.

YEARS OF CRISIS

The 1980s were a complex period for Medellín and Colombia, where numerous combined factors impacted urban dynamics. Between 1978 and 1984, the country went through one of its worst economic crises and witnessed the decline of its productive infrastructure. In such a context, Medellín was highly vulnerable. Extremely

specialised in textile manufacturing and very dependent on this sector, the city collapsed along with these industries, which had marked it with their architectural symbols, and there were negative effects on formal employment.

Despite a more moderate population dynamic in the 1980s, Medellín struggled to absorb the urban growth of previous decades, which

had been marked by large-scale rural flight caused by the civil war, *La Violencia* (responsible for at least 200,000 deaths between 1946 and 1962). The city

saw its population increase fourfold between 1951 and 1985, from barely 350,000 to almost 1.5 million (it now has a population of 2.5 million, with 3.8 million in the entire metropolitan area). Despite the efforts of local and national governments, new arrivals settled illegally and informally, covering the mountainsides with "pirate" neighbourhoods. *El tugurio*, the shantytown, became a familiar feature of the cityscape. Managing emergencies took precedence over planning, which was unable to cope with the impending crisis.

THE 1997 STRATEGIC PLAN
WAS A KEY DRIVER
FOR SOCIAL CHANGE



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The change in the city is creating confidence among young people. Dancers in front of the Moravia Cultural Centre.

Medellín occupies a choice geostrategic position between the Caribbean Sea and the Pacific Ocean, providing access to Central and North America. Smuggling is a traditional activity, and its well-trodden routes allowed drug trafficking to structure itself into a large-scale illicit marketplace. Its growth was fuelled by de-industrialisation, unemployment, the informal economy and informal urbanism. It relied on a generation of young city-dwellers, the sons of rural migrants, who were marginalised in ghettos. Narcotrafficking emerged as an economic alternative, or indeed an opportunity for social promotion and a route to power. Medellín thus found itself at the heart of an illicit drug market, mainly for cocaine, which was globalised at an early stage.

Once a “city at war with drugs”, Medellín became “Cartel central”, with the infamous Pablo Escobar at its core. In addition to the conflict between the Colombian state (allied to the USA) and the drug traffickers, there were struggles between rival cartels and the urban political guerrilla movement, resulting in a spiral of violence. In

1991, this made Medellín the most dangerous city in the world, with 365 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants.

Even after Escobar’s death in December 1993, urban society and culture continued to be marked by the effects of drug trafficking and crime. And yet it was at this most critical point that “alternative futures”, as they were called at the time, began to emerge.

THE STRATEGIC PLAN

Between 1995 and 1997 the *Strategic Plan for Medellín and its Metropolitan Area for 2015* was drafted. The processes and dynamics triggered during its elaboration make this plan into a fundamental reference document.

As never before in Medellín, public institutions, social organisations, the private sector and the University converged to develop the plan. The “Presidential Council for Medellín and its Metropolitan Area”, created by the national government in 1990, brought key players together and launched forums called “seminars for alternative futures”. Between 1991 and 1995, this work



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Several lines of the Metrocable serve the neighbourhoods on the mountain slopes, like Juan XXIII in the west of the city.

led to the drafting of participatory and community proposals collected from “communal forums”.

The *Strategic Plan* included proposals from the private sector, which ran the *Antioquia 21* initiative in 1996 (named after the region of Medellín), but the driving force of the plan was its social, community-led and participatory dimension. This participatory thrust was underpinned by the new Colombian Constitution of 1991, designed as a social pact that recognised all the components of Colombian society and increased the power of the mayors.

Local Development Plans thus fuelled the dynamic. The participation of social and cultural actors was decisive in improving understanding of areas, their populations and their problems, be they small districts or large sectors of the city. In permanent think tanks, set up in 1992, participants discussed education, employment, communication, culture, young people, the role of women, the environment, and local issues, subjects that all featured in the Strategic Plan. They gave rise, for example, to the concept of the “Educating City”, which was taken up ten years later by the mayor Sergio Fajardo and is now embraced far beyond Medellín.

Groups that suffered from discrimination became actively involved in pioneering projects, such as the *Integrated Slum Upgrading Programme of Medellín* (PRIMED), launched in 1992, which recognised and took charge of the city’s slums. The creation of “Civic Life Nodes” foreshadowed the return of public authority to these districts.

TODAY

Although other factors played a part, the *Strategic Plan* defined lines of action and structure-forming projects that were implemented from 1998 onwards via various municipal plans. Their names may have been changed, they may have been used to serve political and urban marketing strategies, and their architectural aesthetic may have been overstated, but they all contributed to the city’s transformation.

Poverty and inequality have not disappeared from Medellín; indeed they remain decisive factors. Behind all the spectacular architecture, there is a familiarity with, and a technical capacity for, negotiation and dialogue between the various stakeholders. This capacity is gradually weakening, and it needs to be redefined if Medellín wants to continue to move towards “social urbanism”, a concept now recognised all over the world. ■

FURTHER READING

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INTERVIEW

“SOCIAL AND URBAN PROJECTS HAVE CHANGED THE FACE OF MEDELLÍN”



Ximena Covaleda B.,

Architect UNALMED (National University of Colombia, Medellín)
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PHOTO: XIMENA COVALEDA B.

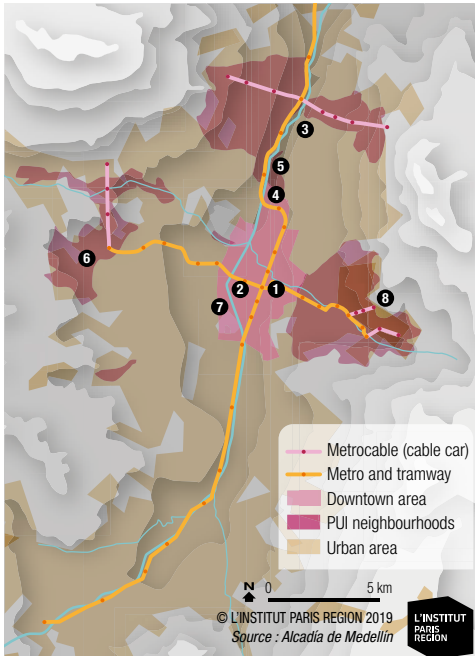
Medellín has changed dramatically in the last 20 years, from a city plagued by violence and urban informality to a prize-winning model for social and educational urbanism. How did this start off from your point of view?

Ximena Covaleda B. The transformation of Medellín began in the 1990s with the social and urban project PRIMED (Integrated Slum Upgrading Program of Medellín). The numerous actions in public services included many small-scale projects such as playgrounds. Actions were broadcast publicly in the

weekly TV program *Arriba mi Barrio* that showed the people and the problems of neighborhoods, and how their change was conducted.

In 1994, the transformation continued with *San Antonio's Square* ❶, in the very south of the downtown area. By the end of the 1990's EPM (Medellín's municipal public utilities company) developed *The Barefoot Park* ❷ near its headquarters. As a valuable new public space, it became a famous resting and gathering place. These two places were the background of all future projects in the city.

SECTORS AND PROJECTS OF TRANSFORMATION



The transformation of Medellín has relied on visionary and strategic mayors. Could you tell us more about some of the major projects they first carried out in the poor neighbourhoods?

X. C. B. As Medellín's first mayor of this century (2001-2003), Luis Pérez Gutierrez kick-started the urban and social revolution in one of the deprived shanty districts in the northeast of the city when he built a cablecar line to connect the citizens of this sector to the metro system.

Mayor Sergio Fajardo (2004-2007) developed a strategy to improve the poorest, mostly peripheral neighborhoods. *Juan Bobo* ❸ creek served, as for example, as a pilot project for the environmental and social housing program to replace slums. Several poor city neighbourhoods were the subject of the PUI program (Integral Urban Projects), which combined a public library, a Cedezo (small-business local development center) and local public spaces. A *School's quality program*, with 10 new facilities, was also developed.

A large abandoned lot in the northeast, along with the nearby Universidad de Antioquia's main campus and the Botanical Gardens, has been transformed into the higher-knowledge-concentration area, including a newly built science museum and

METAMORPHOSIS

exhibition hall: the *Explora Park* ④. The area is well connected to the city center and Carabobo pedestrian street in the South, and to Moravia in the North. The latter, a densely settled neighborhood, saw in 2009 the opening of the *Moravia Cultural Center* ⑤, designed by architect Rogelio Salmona.

As confidence in the civic capacity was building up, it seems that mayors enlarged their scope of actions to transport, facilities, public space and greening projects in other parts of the city ?

X. C. B. Under the mayor's mandate of Alonso Salazar (2008-2011), the South American Games of 2010 took place in Medellín, for which the city improved its sport facilities zone. Other great achievements were the *Buen Comienzo* program, the construction of nurseries in the peripheral neighborhoods, and the new mobility strategies. The latter were formulated and implemented through an inter-modal connected urban public transportation system, including cable car, metro train, tram system and a publicly-owned bus system. The northwestern Comuna 13 ⑥ saw the construction of the *escalators* project. Mayor Anibal Gaviria (2012-2015) developed the so-called *Uvas* (Articulated living units). Taking place in many boroughs of Medellín, the program took advantage of large open spaces that surrounded

EPM's numerous water tanks all around the city. These spaces were then equipped with urban furnishings and transformed into successful public neighborhood squares. Another project, *River Parks (Parques del Río)* ⑦, has started to be realized along the Medellín River in order to connect both riverine districts of the city. Once the vehicle traffic along both sides of the river has been tunneled, its surface will (hopefully) be transformed into a linear park.

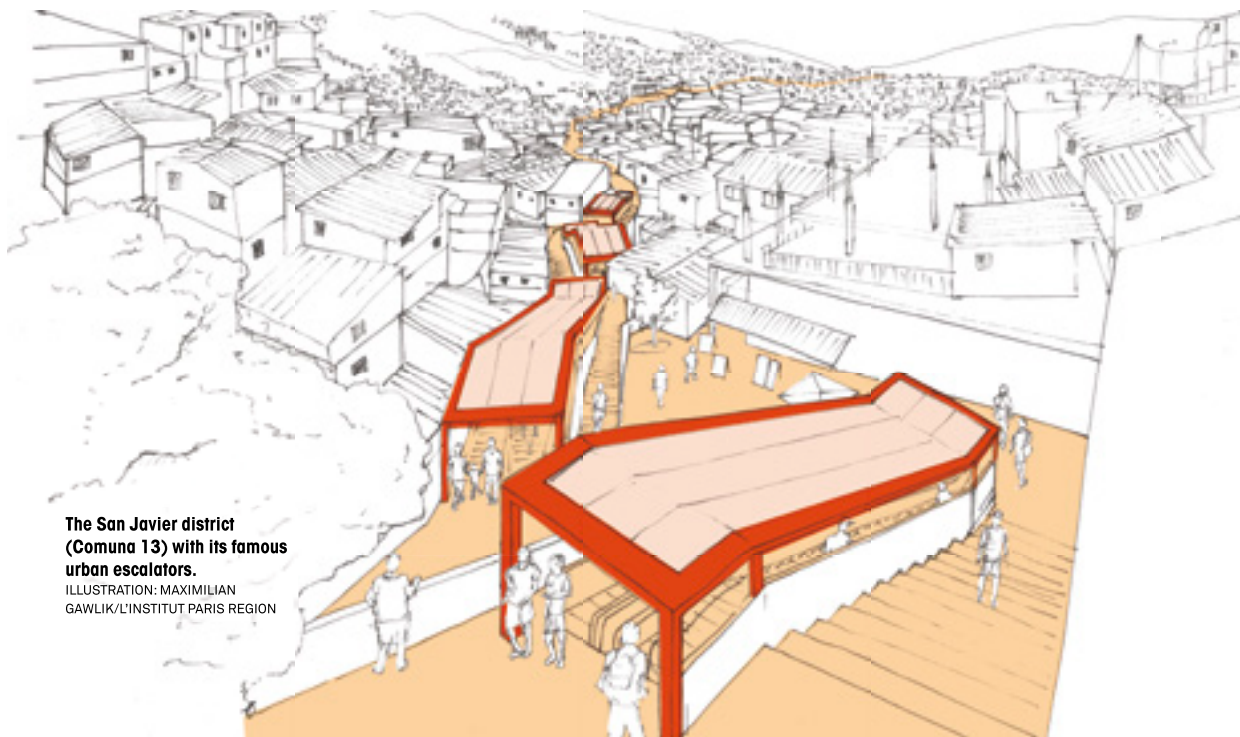
Finally, the *Metropolitan Green Belt* strategy proposed to contain and control the urbanization at the top of the hills: for example by creating the *Circunvalar garden* ⑧ in the central and eastern hills, that will articulate with the metropolitan green belt. The future will tell us if all these projects will have a lasting and structural impact on Medellín's development. ■

Interview by Karim Ben Meriem and Paul Lecroart

Further reading

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The San Javier district (Comuna 13) with its famous urban escalators.

ILLUSTRATION: MAXIMILIAN GAWLIK/L'INSTITUT PARIS REGION