Lorenzo Castro
Alejandro Echeverri

BOGOTÁ AND MEDELLÍN
ARCHITECTURE AND POLITICS

In the last 15 years, Bogotá and Medellín, Colombia's two largest cities, have undergone urban renaissances. These are a direct result of a political will to tackle the social, economic and physical segregation caused by the large-scale urban migrations of the 1970s and 1980s, which resulted in informal developments that were often isolated from central urban areas with no infrastructure. **Lorenzo Castro and Alejandro Echeverri** describe the shared experiences and distinct approaches of each city.

TEP/ Departamento Administrativo de Planeación Distrital, Plaza de San Victorino, Bogotá, 2000
opposite: Located in the popular city centre, the Plaza de San Victorino demonstrates the possibility of transforming the city through the recovery of public space.

Municipality of Bogotá, Cycle path network, 1999
below: At almost 400 kilometres (248.5 miles) in length, Bogotá's network of cycle paths offers an alternative way to move around the city.

Rogelio Salmona, Centro Cultural García Márquez, Bogotá, 2008
bottom: The historic centre of Bogotá serves as a backdrop to this project, a gift from the Mexican government to the city as a vote of confidence in its future consolidation.

Following global trends, the majority of Colombians today live in cities. The republic's five largest cities are each home to over one million inhabitants, and eight are home to more than half a million.[1] So, unlike Chile with its capital Santiago, or the UK with London, Colombia does not have one dominant city, but like Germany a network of interconnected cities.

In recent years, its two largest cities, Bogotá and Medellín, have become exemplars of urban and social transformation following their renaissance in the 1990s. Based on local management, and driven by a succession of independent mayors working along the margins of traditional politics, their famed improvement has seen these two cities referenced by numerous architects and city mayors around the world. Without the political will to challenge mainstream ideas, their transformation would have been impossible.

Both cities have made considerable strides towards creating a more accessible and democratic urban environment. Common in their approaches towards improvement were strategies to mitigate the strong social, economic and physical segregation typical of Latin American cities. Both have adopted a bus rapid transit (BRT) system based on the model of Curitiba in Brazil. In Bogotá, the first phase of the BRT has been operational since 1999 (84 kilometres/52.2 miles of a projected circuit of 250 kilometres/155.3 miles). In Medellín the system is currently being implemented, and will deliver high-capacity and high-quality mass transit at a fraction of the cost of a subway. In parallel to providing access through public transport, both cities improved access to public services through the formation of new parks, libraries and other public amenities spread across the entire city rather than concentrating them in formal middle- and upper-class enclaves. This transformation led to Bogotá receiving the Golden Lion Cities Award at the 2006 Venice Architecture Biennale. A decade before, however, the story was much different.

Bogotá: An Urban Renaissance

Throughout the 1980s and the early 1990s, prior to its transformation, Bogotá was inhabited, but uninhabitable. In 1973, the city's population was 2.85 million, in 1985 4.2 million, and by 1993 5.5 million,[2] reaching a scale that seemed impossible to plan and give form to. Much of the city's growth came as the result of informal construction, which today covers over 50 per cent of

the city's urban area. These settlements, while rich through their intensity of urban activity, lack basic infrastructural services, suffer from their unstructured form, and tend to be located in marginal areas where poverty leads to segregation and violence.

Things began to change between 1995 and 1997 during Antanas Mokus' run as mayor of Bogotá, during which he implemented a programme of civic and cultural restructuring that aimed to change the general behaviour of citizens through promoting a culture of mutual respect. This paved the way to reigniting civil society in the city, and improved its citizens' perception of their city and its public realm; moreover, it led to a significant drop in the level of violent crime. During the previous period, Jaime Castro reorganised the city's finances, making the bureaucracy run more efficiently and allowing taxation revenue to be used more productively.

Between 1998 and 2000, under the mayoralty of Enrique Peñalosa, there was a fundamental shift in terms of how city-making occurred in Bogotá and, one could argue, across all of Latin America. At the time, Colombia was facing a severe economic crisis that deeply affected architectural offices hitherto comfortably devoted to the development of projects for real-estate speculation with an absolute disregard for the city. Peñalosa called on the best architects, aware of the importance of their participation in the construction of a beautiful and dignified environment and in achieving a more human-scaled city.

Beginning with quality architecture, a city can generate a culture that permits a harmonious and inclusive urban existence for an entire society. In Bogotá, this quality civic architecture was then overlapped with a network of public transport and cycle routes, along with other specific projects, to generate a city that is integrated, continuous, open and accessible to everyone, inclusive, environmentally sustainable and capable of facilitating a sense of civic pride and stewardship among its citizens. This, in turn, helped to ensure the continuity of such programmes and their adoption by different local authorities.

Given the size of Bogotá, both in terms of population density and surface area, and its physical and social fragmentation, the intention was to create a complete and unique image of the city that, rather than ignoring socioeconomic differences between its territories, was capable of bridging these through the design of a series of iconic urban elements associated with cross-city systems. In the case of the TransMilenio, an articulated BRT system, a national public architectural competition was held to define those elements with a specific identity that were spread across the entire system and the entire city. It was accompanied by the development and construction of a network of bicycle paths, aimed at mobilising 10 per cent of people through this city-friendly transportation. This strategy helped in saving energy, reducing fuel consumption, reducing both air and noise pollution, and in providing a healthy, low-cost and democratic means of private transportation. Under these conditions it was possible to rethink the use and spatial qualities of the city, a fundamental task for the architects involved.

In parallel to the design of cross-cutting urban elements, a second form of democratisation came through the development of a manual for the construction of public spaces which aimed to achieve a consistency in the elements that make up such spaces, from furnishings to paving and urban plantings.[3] These started to be developed prior to Peñalosa's term as mayor, but it was not until then that they were developed with the required significant technical details to be put into practice. Through repeated use the manual can be employed to construct the materiality and the specific image of the city, while allowing for local variations and creating spaces in which all citizens feel welcome and treated as equals. It has become a fundamental reference, used by each project architect to produce a coherent image of the city through a consistent standard of design, and has allowed for the recovery of hundreds of kilometres of sidewalks previously occupied by street pedlars and parked cars.

Despite the role of the public space, and in particular the plaza as the place where we construct the identity and culture of a society, for many years Bogotá, despite its population growth, generated no new spaces of this type and, what is more, neglected those it already possessed. In response, a plan was formulated for the recovery of existing public plazas and the construction of new ones, such as Plaza de San Victorino, Plaza España, Plaza-Monumento a los Caidos, Plaza de La Rebeca and Plaza de La Hoja. At the same time, a plan for parks and green spaces was developed focusing on three different scales: the metropolitan, the urban and the neighbourhood. The plan saw to the improvement of over 700 parks through masterplans or projects by more than 120 architects. Consideration of

Daniel Bermudez, Biblioteca Pública El Tintal, Bogotá, 2000
opposite: This library, located in the southwest of the city, was envisioned on a site where a former and unused garbage collection plant used to be located. It forms part of the network of libraries planned for Bogotá that have already been built.

Leonardo Álvarez, Colegio Porfirio Barba Jacob, Bosa, Bogotá, 2009
below: The Porfirio Barba Jacob College is part of a programme for the construction of more than 70 public schools in different parts of the city.

TEP/Departamento Administrativo de Planeación Distrital, Alameda de Bosa, Bogotá, 2000
bottom: This public space project, which functions on two levels, was assisted by the consolidation of the existing working-class neighbourhoods along the Tintal 3 Canal. It also led to the creation of a network of tree-lined promenades.

Under the Peñalosa mayoralty, many architects regained a civic conscience, realising that they could play a fundamental role in creating a city worth inhabiting.

parks as a system allowed for the recovery of the geographic relationships between the Eastern Hills and the Bogotá River to the west, with a new primary ecological structure. While the interventions were very basic, such as the design of trails, urban boundaries, sports facilities, playgrounds, furnishings and plantings, they restored the architects' ability to propose areas that dignify the lives of citizens, generating a significant impact.

This approach worked to improve neighbourhoods through a system of participative planning where communities developed their own projects with technical assistance offered by over a hundred young architects. The project led to the construction of wells, stairs, neighbourhood access roads, sidewalks and local parks as part of the Obras con Saldo Pedagógico (Works for Educational Purposes) programme. Surveys were made of conditions in different neighbourhoods, and the neighbourhoods were then formalised through the development of basic infrastructures.

As in the case of public infrastructure, the importance of architectural design was carried across to the development of public buildings in order to transmit civic values and to help ensure their appropriation by the city's inhabitants. A network of public libraries was created in metropolitan parks or in new parks designed by architects. The libraries were intended as cultural centres and strategically located to be accessible to poorer neighbourhoods. Another plan saw the development of new schools to serve 100 per cent of all school-age children, using international standards and in many cases surpassing the architectural quality of the city's existing private schools, fuelling children's imagination with architecture worthy to be upheld as the future of the city. Other new constructions included centres for senior citizens, nurseries and playgrounds, together with cultural centres.

Under the Peñalosa mayoralty, many architects regained a civic conscience, realising that they could play a fundamental role in creating a city worth inhabiting. This opened up an important space for the participation of architects in many cases as leaders or participants in interdisciplinary groups working to define systems, or as designers of quality public buildings. The transformation of Bogotá over the last 15 years, and above all during Peñalosa's period in office, resulted from a number of progressive policies and projects. During this time a host of public competitions led to the redesign and renewal of more than 1,300 parks and 57 schools.

Lorenzo Castro and Ana Elvira Velez, Jardin Botanico, 2008
right: The Jardin Botanico (Botanical Gardens) are located in a strategic renewal sector, together with projects destined to be part of a system of facilities along the metropolitan fringes of the Medellín River. The urban redevelopment of the surrounding sector involves the margins, once defined by high walls that defined enclosures, obscuring visibility by 100 per cent.

La Quintana Library Park, 2008
opposite top: The library connects two districts with the linear park creek La Quintana.

Carlos Pardo, Public School, Santo Domingo Savio, Medellín, 2009
opposite bottom: The school redefines the urbanity and public services of this hillside neighbourhood.

Medellín: Social Urbanism

As in the case of Bogotá, metropolitan Medellín, home to some 3.5 million inhabitants, is plagued by profound physical, social and economic segregation. The north and the highlands of the eastern and western slopes are home to half the population, who live in conditions of extreme poverty. This is contrasted by the middle and upper classes in the centre and south of the valley, who inhabit the flat areas that make up the formal city.

During the 1990s, civil society began to organise itself, initiating an important series of social and cultural projects as a reaction to the violence in the city, and beginning a process of urban renewal in the centre. In 2004, under the leadership of Mayor Sergio Fajardo, the city began to implement structural changes integrally combined with educational, cultural and entrepreneurial programmes designed to 'change the skin' of various neighbourhoods located in the most critical areas of the city.

Today, Medellín's is a 'tale of two cities' – and two opposite realities. Social urbanism was proposed as a tool to mitigate these serious problems of inequality and segregation, and to connect, integrate and coordinate the city through an instrument of physical and social inclusion. Architecture and urbanism were the primary tools for working with the community to implement a process for the recovery of the city's neighbourhoods. Through multidisciplinary teams, these projects sought the best-quality designs, and improved the relationship of design with its context through combining actions at the large scale, such as public transport infrastructures and facilities, with actions at the small scale, such as trails, pedestrian bridges and neighbourhood parks.

In order to precisely identify the areas in which to intervene and to define an order of priorities, designs evolved from a deep understanding of the territory in its broadest and most complex sense, and of the relationship between natural, cultural and urban conditions. Each project was required to start with a holistic vision to form a connecting strategy to physical, programmatic and social interventions. Physical continuity was sought between different interventions to ensure complementarity. Through adding programme, the city sought to build new networks of public facilities for low-income neighbourhoods strategically located throughout the territory. From a social perspective, the goal was to identify processes and dynamics that emerge from the community and from different stakeholders, working to foster local participation and appropriation before, during and after the interventions.

The interventions, in turn, were defined through strategic urban projects, each with its own project manager responsible for opening up channels of communication and coordinating relations between the different actors and institutions involved. These projects were developed by a decentralised public institution that formed part of the organic structure of the city and which offered special dedicated multidisciplinary technical teams. Since 2004, the city has developed architectural and urban projects including libraries, educational facilities, social housing in risk areas, and a number of parks.

At the local scale, Medellín looked to construct the best possible buildings in some of the city's poorest neighbourhoods, claiming the symbolic value of architecture as a physical expression of new public policies for education and culture. Border regions of exclusion were converted into permeable places for integration. The new facilities, awarded through public tenders, focused on the creation of spaces of encounter that serve as urban landmarks and gathering spaces for the community. The first phase of the programme included five library parks: Belen, España, La Ladera, La Quintana and San Javier, catering for 72 of the city's districts, creating 21,393 square metres (230,272 square feet) of built space, including playgrounds, internet access and reading rooms, and 71,643 square metres (771,158 square feet) of public space. The project also included 10 new public schools and the renovation of 132 existing schools that are part of the Open School programme, benefiting 418,000 students, and generating 65,000 square metres (699,654 square feet) of built space and 189,300 square metres (2,037,608 square feet) of public space. Educational programmes were developed to activate and manage these new spaces, such as entrepreneurship, sustainability and art programmes.

At the urban scale, integrated urban projects (IUPs) were executed in areas of elevated marginalisation and violence, identifying and prioritising a set of neighbourhoods as early intervention models, framed within a six-year programme. The Northeastern zone of Medellín was selected as the first stage for the implementation of the pilot project in five areas. This sector presented the lowest quality of life and human development

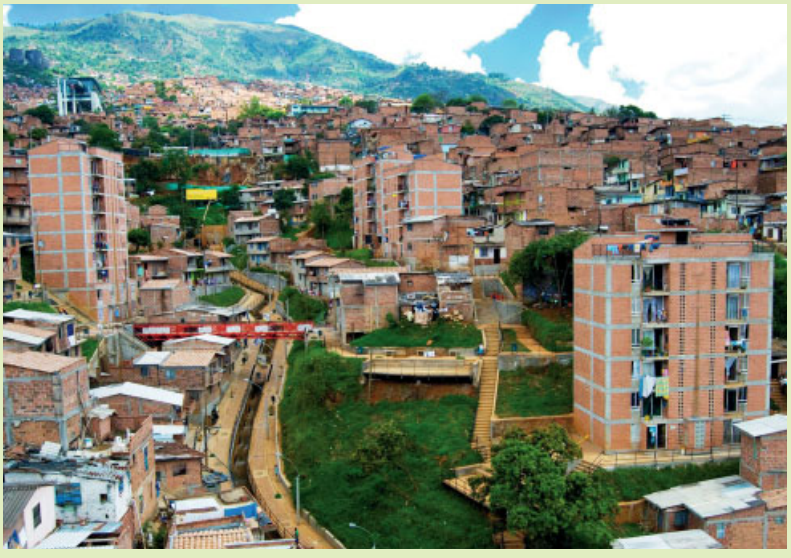
Architecture and urbanism were the primary tools for working with the community to implement a process for the recovery of the city's neighbourhoods.

EDU Design Workshop, Medellín, 2008
below: The city's urban development institute created this pedestrian bridge connecting the neighbourhoods of Andalucía and La Francia.

EDU Housing Workshop, Northeastern Integrated Urban Project (IUP), Medellín, 2008
bottom: Interventions focused on mitigating risks and improving environmental conditions, the construction of new four- and five-storey residential buildings in the valley for relocated families, and improvements to dwellings that were not in a critical condition.

Alejandro Echeverri, Explora Science and Technology Park and the Carabobo Promenade, Medellín, 2008
opposite: One of the flagship projects is the Carabobo Urban Promenade in the city centre; 3.5 kilometres (2.17 miles) in length, it connects the traditional city centre with the 'New North'.

The intention was to provide the city with a network of public spaces that improved pedestrian mobility, allowing people to meet and move through a quality public realm.



index (HDI) in the city. The area was chosen for the creation of the first public gondola lift system integrated with the subway. The new base stations were essential in defining the overall strategy of physical intervention.

With the aim of enabling a physically and socially sustainable model of implementation for a city in which the majority of slopes and valleys are occupied by marginal housing, the first pilot housing project was developed along the Juan Bobo stream. Such natural environments, including hills and streams that have been invaded by informal settlements, are referred to as 'invaded urban ecosystems'. The intervention in this area increased the quantity of public space from 0.5 square metres (5.3 square feet) per person to 6 square metres (64.5 square feet) per person, and succeeded in legalising 100 per cent of housing, 80 per cent of which was informally constructed.

The intention was to provide the city with a network of public spaces that improved pedestrian mobility, allowing people to meet and move through a quality public realm. For those neighbourhoods located on the slopes, inhabited by populations with the lowest incomes in the city, a gondola lift system and an articulated BRT were developed, both of which were integrated with the existing subway network and aimed to improve the quality of life and accessibility in these communities.

All of the strategies mentioned above were part of a broader policy of social urbanism that sought to generate a qualitative leap forward from the traditional understanding of neighbourhood improvement. The policy employed such tools as IUPs to bring structural changes to strategic sectors of poorly consolidated neighbourhoods, and the design of habitats within fragile natural systems to achieve the definitive integration of marginalised communities. Currently, these programmes continue to develop under the political leadership of Mayor Alonso Salazar.

Conclusion

New strategies for intervention flourished through the processes of independent political leadership beginning first in Bogotá (inspired by the revitalisation of Barcelona's neighbourhoods in the 1980s and 1990s) and thereafter Medellín (largely inspired by the Favela-Barrio project in Rio de Janeiro that began in 1993). Today, Sergio Fajardo, Antanas Mokus and Enrique Peñalosa belong to the green party, but all were first elected as independents. The technical teams, including architects and urban designers, were similar in both cities; however, it is important to note that architecture and urban interventions were not an end in themselves, but were tools to express the political intention of municipal programmes.

In Medellín there was a greater focus on specific territories with a singular architecture, or 'protagonism in pieces and its connections'. Integral urban projects and punctual interventions sought to improve public spaces and housing, and to generate a new image of the city through providing new symbolic references. In particular, interventions improved frontier areas, converting them into permeable and more desirable neighbourhoods. This approach differed from that of Bogotá, where the focus was more on systems or networks and included cross-cutting systems of transport, like the TransMilenio, pedestrian corridors and cycle routes, always emphasising the quality of the new civic buildings and public spaces that act as icons in the reinvention of the city's image.

Despite their different approaches, the end result was similar in both cities. In the past 15 years, both have played host to a dramatic democratisation through enabling a level of social integration. In both cases, providing quality urban infrastructure and amenities in the poorest and most violent neighbourhoods has provided those residents with a sense of equality and a feeling of stewardship within their own city. This change in residents´ image of their city, and their new-found sense of belonging, have transformed Bogotá and Medellín from being 'uninhabitable' to today being the hip and trendy belles of the ball. ⍙

Notes

1. Bogotá 8,840,000; Medellín 3,370,000; Cali 2,730,000; Barranquilla 1,950,000; Cartagena 1,200,000; Cúcuta 920,000; Bucaramanga 566,000; Ibaqué 518,000.
2. See www.banrep.gov.co/blaavirtual/revistas/credencial/enero2001/colmundo.htm.
3. The Manual de diseño y ubiación de elementos en el espacio público (Manual for design and location for elements in the public space) was developed in 2000, during Enrique Peñalosa's term as mayor, and was composed of three parts: 1) Cartilla de Andenes (streetscape design); 2) Cartilla de Mobiliario Urbano (urban furniture); and 3) Cartilla Manual Verde (green landscape).

The authors would like to thank Juan Sebastian Bustamante and Natalia Castaño for their collaboration on this text.