

Crime, Medellín, and Architecture from A to Z

By Lindsay Reichart

“FOR SOME TIME NOW, IF YOU ASKED ARCHITECTS AND URBAN PLANNERS FOR PROOF OF THE POWER OF PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE AND PUBLIC SPACE TO REMAKE THE FORTUNES OF A CITY, THEY’D POINT HERE.” [ON MEDELLÍN, COLOMBIA] MICHAEL KIMELMAN, “A CITY RISES, ALONG WITH ITS HOPES”, THE NEW YORK TIMES, 2012

ARCHITECTURE

Architectural history in the Western world has been predominantly occupied with a few cultures that compose only a fraction of the earth.¹ 20th century philosophers and architects such as Michel de Certeau, Henri Lefebvre, Robert Venturi, and Bernard Rudofsky, among others, have changed the landscape of architectural theory, making the vernacular relevant. Incorporating democratic ideals, architects are using their craft as a tool to shape the way marginalized people live, thus changing the urban ecology.

This abecedary takes us in and out of the streets of Medellín, Colombia, where we can see this craft at work, creating an architectural response that is changing the social climate of the country.

BUOY

A buoy is a floating object that is anchored at a certain point; it can mark submerged dangers or indicate safe passage. Despite its ever-changing environment, the buoy is a constant. Although there has never been a shortage of public space in Medellín, this space was not viewed as a safe place for the people. Once seen as dangerous and unstable, public space is now being accounted for by public architecture as a stable environment that reaches out to the community, providing inspiration and a safe haven for the people of Medellín.

COLOMBIA

Officially “The Republic of Colombia,” the country is located in the northwest region of South America, and is about twice the size of France.² It is bordered

by Panama to the northwest, Venezuela and Brazil to the east, and Peru and Ecuador to the South. Colombia is the only nation of the Americas named after Christopher Columbus.³ The country strongly reflects its past as a colony of Spain, and is thought to be one of the most Roman Catholic countries in South America.⁴ In 1835, Colombia gained independence from Spain, which, in turn, left the country floundering.⁵

DICTATORSHIP

In 1904, Rafael Reyes took office as a military ruler hailing from the Conservative party.⁶ Although Reyes improved the Colombian economy and transportation system, he ruled as a dictator, dissolving congress, declaring martial law, and exiling all political opponents.⁷ Infuriating the Colombian people, Reyes stepped down in 1909.⁸ A series of unstable rulers continued to take office and more violence ensued, leaving 400,000 people dead over a 40-year period.⁹ Disillusioned by the lack of progress under the supposedly democratic National Front party and authoritarian regimes, the Colombian people elected Gustavo Rojas Pinilla to office in 1953.¹⁰ The corrupt dictator was then forced into exile in 1957 by both parties.¹¹ Military and guerrilla groups, along with violence, would continue to plague the country as the drug trade boomed throughout the 20th century.

DEMOCRACY

In 2000, the United States began a controversial aid initiative that supported Colombia with military services in an attempt to control the cocaine trade.¹² In 2002, Alvaro Uribe Velez, an independent, was elected president on the promise that

he would bring an end to the violence.¹³ The government and the guerrilla groups engaged in peace negotiations, and the violent regimes of Colombia began to dissipate. Now, Colombia is slowly bringing life to the democratic process and advancing “towards democratic security and towards democratic prosperity.”¹⁴

ESCOBAR'S CITY

“It was a strange feeling posing for a picture with one of the world’s most notorious criminals. A vacant stare on Roberto Escobar’s face, his arm draped over my shoulder, inspired conflicting feelings, equal parts excitement and disgust.” Brad Cohen, “Pablo Escobar’s Medellín Cartel”, BBC¹⁵

Rising from a lowly smuggler to the top commander of the cocaine industry, Pablo Escobar’s story begins in the slums of Medellín, where he was born and raised. By the age of 30 he was moving 35 kilos of cocaine a month out of the shantytown.¹⁶ Shortly thereafter, ‘Don Pablo’ took over a Medellín newspaper and successfully ran for public office, becoming mayor. He took on community initiatives from building houses for the poor to building a zoo. Medellín was Escobar, and Escobar was Medellín—until December 2, 1993 when he killed himself in the midst of a firefight with authorities.¹⁷ Scores of people were left dead by Escobar’s influence but 25,000 people were present for his funeral, deliberately overlooking his past as a drug trafficker, smuggler, assassin, narco-terrorist, murderer, money launderer, and corrupt politician.¹⁸

ESCALATOR

A 1,260-foot escalator ascends through one of the poorest and most violent urban



Top left: Courtesy of EMBARQ Brasil. Top right: Courtesy of Sergio Gómez

communities on the hillside of Medellín.¹⁹ It symbolizes the accumulation of capital, technological advancement and the large scale renewal projects taking hold of the city. The sheen of the metal escalator contrasts with the dilapidated structures that surround it—promising revitalization, but forewarning the impending change the escalator will bring, as Medellín embraces the democratic individualism that capital is inevitably conflated with.

FAJARDO

Recent mayor, Sergio Fajardo, the son of an architect, has pulled Medellín from the wreckage left by Escobar and the drug cartels. Fajardo, a mathematician turned civic servant, took office in 2004 when the city was plagued by violence created by the infamous drug cartels that called it home.²⁰ “Drug trafficking was like a bomb that exploded in the country 30 years ago, and the epicenter was Medellín,” recalls Fajardo, insisting that the inequality between the rich

and poor fueled this fire despite the lip-service the cartels paid to the people.²¹ A highly educated man himself, Fajardo found the answer to Medellín’s problems in academia. Fajardo has promoted the construction of beautiful public buildings in rundown neighborhoods, attacking the social decomposition brought on by the drug cartels, and restoring a sense of civic pride. Now, Fajardo is preparing for the 2014 presidential election, and he will attempt to carry these values with him to the Palacio de Nariño.

GOVERNMENT

“The measure of a government is whether it helps create prosperity for the many, security for all, and a better world for our children.” Drew Westen, “Talk About the Role of Government”, *The New York Times*²² Fajardo is not alone in these plans, nor is he the only visionary Medellín has to offer. Planning guidelines, initiatives and anti-terrorism programs such as Plan Colombia and MOVICE (Movimiento de Víctimas de Crímenes de Estado) are being enacted through architecture as a safe and effective interventions to rehabilitate Colombia’s past.²³ Medellín’s current mayor, Anibal Gaviria, has endless infrastructural and architectural dreams, from an electric tram along the hillsides to a greenbelt of public buildings along the river.²⁴ These public-minded improvements are meeting



Top left: Courtesy of EMBARQ Brasil. Top right: Courtesy of Sergio Gómez



schools, public plazas, transportation and parks from the center to the outskirts of Medellín.²⁸ The private and the public have been unified under the umbrella of E.P.M., critically changing the social climate of Medellín for the better.

INTERDEPENDENCE

What is the key to Medellín's success? The city's transformation has proven to be a derivative of the interdependence of the built environment and the socioeconomic ecology—realizing that the rich neighborhoods are not independent from the barrios, and that education is not independent from the drug cartels. New libraries and gardens are installed within the violent spaces of Medellín's past, providing safe alternatives and outlets for the people. By recognizing the importance of the connections between the use of space and social actions, violence has been reduced drastically.

Medellín's demands for rehabilitation.

HAVEN

"Medellín's Makeover: From Drug Trafficking Haven to Award Winning Place of Smart Urban Design," (Marco Werman's 2013 PRI piece).²⁵

INFRASTRUCTURE

In Medellín, urban planners have focused on infrastructure as a tool to tackle larger issues within the urban ecology. The state-owned Empresas Públicas de Medellín supplies water, gas, sanitation, telecommunications and electricity to the epicenter of the city, and is mandated to provide these same services to the vast illegal shantytowns on the outskirts as well.²⁶ This provides a safety net unique to Medellín—and is unheard of in Colombia's other cities such as Bogotá.²⁷ The E.P.M. has been critical to the development of the city as a whole, redistributing their roughly \$450 million dollars in profit a year from the city center towards building

JARDÍN BOTÁNICO

The Medellín Jardín Botánico is a breathtaking example of public architecture. Completed in 2005 by the local practice Plan B Architects, the garden complex houses a science museum, aquarium, and the Orquideorama: a wood and steel canopy whose structure reflects that of an orchid—the very plant it is used to grow.²⁹ Each structure has

a relationship to one another and to the street. This relationship has been critical in bringing life back to the street as a safe place for pedestrians and retailers ala Jane Jacobs who brought awareness to the importance of the relationship between street presence and safety.³⁰

KNOLLS

Knolls, small hills, dot the botanical garden—each a small part of the larger hilly landscape of Medellín. This relationship can be read as a metaphor for Medellín's development of smaller urban projects at a neighborhood scale to illuminate the urban fabric of the city in its entirety.

LA LADERA

Medellín's new library, the León de Greiff Library on la Ladera (the hillside), has become the center for social change in the city. The trio of buildings fan across the hill, overlooking Medellín and encouraging conversation among citizens, as well as educational and recreational activity and the development of an understanding of the digital culture amidst the hills of the Medellín slums.³¹ Libraries have been a major focus of urban planners in Colombia, with examples such as the four-million dollar España library. These structures not only function as community centers, but as tools for the development of the Medellín people with education.

MORAVIA

One of the last buildings designed by Colombian architect Rogelio Salmons, the Moravia Cultural Development Center has promoted positive development through creative placemaking. The center provides a community space for music, art and cultural activities as a means for

improving the quality of life. Here, the citizens of Medellín have the opportunity to sit in one of the 300 seats of the auditorium and watch a play, view one of the local art exhibitions, or use one of the 30 soundproof cubicles to hone in on their musical talents among gurgling fountains reminiscent of Colombia's colonial past.³²

ORQUIDEORAMA

"The Construction of [the] Orquideorama [is derived from] the relation between architecture and the living organisms. It should not make any distinction between natural and artificial, on the contrary, it should accept them as a unity that allows architecture to be conceived as a material, spatial, environmental organization that is deeply related to the processes of life."³³

OUTSIDE

"New Yorkers don't hold hands; we just don't do that outside. But you can see that happening on the High Line, and I think that's the power that public space can have to transform how people experience their city." Robert Hammond, "Building a park in the sky" TED Ideas worth spreading³⁴

PUBLIC SPACE

We do not experience the world outside of our homes vacantly; we absorb a variety of ideas, opinions, and experiences from a seemingly fixed designed environment. However, these spaces are not fixed—they are constantly morphing due to the political and economic theories that permeate the surface materials. These experiences in the public space situate us in the world and give us the power to act politically; they can open our views, guide our experience, engage us or prevent us from engaging with the public ecology. The people of

Medellín now have the opportunity to function in the public sphere as the fear of their drug ridden past dissipates.

PERIPHERY MADE PRESENT

In Medellín, architectural initiatives such as the escalator and library are eliminating the polarization that follows the core-periphery model. As prosperity has grown and continues to grow worldwide, core regions have gleaned a majority of the profit and benefits. Despite the fact that there are fewer people functioning within the core (the wealthy), the population of the periphery (the poor) remains largely ignored. They are immersed within the slums and despite these less-than-savory conditions, the population of the periphery continues to grow without suitable resources. In Medellín, however, people are given the same access to water, electricity, gas and sanitation that one would receive in the city center. This support gives Medellín a certain advantage over the core-periphery model. Initiatives such as the escalator are inviting people into the city center and others out of the city center—and with future plans for a tramway along Medellín's hillside, the lines between the core and periphery are becoming blurred, making the shantytown evermore present on the city stage as these shortcomings begin to be resolved.

QUASI-MOORISH

Medellín has an extensive history with Spain as one of many colonial outposts. Although Colombia has since been emancipated, it retains many traditions and designs from the Spanish occupation. Opened in 1945, La Plaza de Toros La Macarena is one such place. The traditional Spanish bullfighting ring is used to celebrate a distinctly Andalusian

tradition. Comparable to the Moorish Medina Azahara ruins of 912 in Cordoba, Spain, La Plaza de Toros La Macarena is surrounded by traditional horseshoe arches, each arch supported by a voussoir. These traditional architectural elements are over a thousand years old but they are still relevant today. The roof is now a retractable roof, and the plaza features pop concerts as well as bullfights. These traditional elements are not left in the past; rather, they are incorporated into Medellín's present.

QUESTION

How do the citizens of Medellín view their colonial past? How do they view their more recent troubled independent past? What symbols will they continue to carry with them of this past? Do these symbols hinder or enrich the production of Medellín's new identity?

RENEWAL

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed it is the only thing that ever has." Margaret Mead³⁵ Jane Jacobs inspired the people of New York's Greenwich Village to fight against the upsurge of neighborhood organization in the 1960s and '70s.³⁶ Along with her fellow community members, Jacobs was able to beat back the encumbering politics to save their space, which was home to their work, play, family and community relations. The 'blighted' area prevailed against the razing proposed by the city and continues to thrive in its characteristically West Village oddities, from misshapen blocks and oddly angled streets to examples of architecture from every decade over the last hundred years.³⁷ Will the unique oddities of Medellín be able to survive the urban renewal process

or will the “ambitious and photogenic” buildings overtake the informality of Medellín’s neighborhoods?³⁸

SOCIAL HOUSING

Despite the progressive developments that disregard the core-periphery model, Medellín still has its shortcomings, and social housing is one of them. New housing is being developed on the city’s periphery, isolating residents from the new amenities the city has to offer, as well as their livelihoods. Rather than detangling the housing mess left by Medellín’s past, developers are glazing over the city and building on the outskirts.³⁹ Not only are these structures inconvenient, they are unsafely located next to a number of landfills.⁴⁰

THOUGHTLESS

“We’re still not thoughtful in terms of social housing [and] mixed neighborhoods,”

Veronica Ortiz, *Murcia of Arquitectura y Espacio Urbano*.⁴¹

TRUST

The tenuous design process is slowly revitalizing pockets of the landscape, developing a sense of trust, between the government and the people that was left unstable after Colombia’s tumultuous history. Areas that were once patrolled by militia and were too dangerous for the police, are now thriving with walkways lined by restaurants, clothing stores and schools, leading to major public projects such as the España Library. These large projects, among the smaller developments, act as a sign of the mutual yet tenuous transition the people and the government are making from fear to trust.

UNCERTAIN

It is uncertain whether Colombia will be able to sustain this architectural renaissance inspired by democratic ideals or if it will be seduced by the promises of drug lords, guerilla groups and dictatorships yet again.

VIOLENCE

Just 20 years ago the annual murder rate in Medellín was 381 people per 100,000. In New York City that would be an unimaginable 32,000 murders a year.⁴²

WANING

Today, the murder rate is 60 per 100,000—much lower, but still not even close to the 5.6 per 100,000 murder rate in New York City.

XYSTUM

Xystum is an architectural term meaning alley. An alley is a narrow lane often designated for pedestrian use; however, in Medellín, the alley was formerly a haven for drug-lords and a space rife with violence and fear. Pedestrians could not use the streets for fear of being one of the casualties from the drug trade. Although skepticism lingers, the streets are more comfortable, people can linger and experience the essence of Medellín due to the innovations of a younger generation.⁴³

YOUNG

Forty-three percent of the world’s population is currently composed of people under 25, and 60 percent of people under 25 live in less developed countries.⁴⁴ In Medellín a number of these young people are architects, and they have used their knowledge as power to instigate development and positive change for the future. In an effort to unite

fragmented communities, laws were passed at the national level by President Alvaro Uribe to require that the majority of public buildings be proposed via competition.⁴⁵ Due to the low budgets of these projects, many proposals are from young local architects looking to get their start.⁴⁶ This initiative has mobilized the young architects of Colombia to change their urban landscape. JPRCR Architects and Plan B, both firms with principals under 30 and out of Medellín, won one of these competitions and developed the Orquideorama, a breathtakingly intricate structure previously mentioned in 'JARDÍN BOTÁNICO' and 'ORQUIDEORAMA'. The Medellín Museum of Modern Art addition, by local firm Ctrl G, also led by principals under the age of 30, is another example of a major public project by local young architects.⁴⁷ These projects bring hope to the Colombian population, promise for the future, and an appreciation for cultural institutions as a necessity for the community of Medellín.

ZEAL

Colombia is now pursuing trade agreements abroad, with countries such as The United States, Japan, and China. In doing so, infrastructural improvements have become critical to the success of these trade agreements. As Colombia heals the wounds of decades of violence, the opportunities seem endless. Although the future is unknown, in the present, the manipulation of the spatial environment has been critical to subduing Colombia's violent past. Not only can this method continue to change Medellín, it can provide a model for other spaces encumbered by a violent past.