

From Institutional to Small-Scale Economic Structures

The Role of Medellín’s Public Utilities and Urban Development Companies as Multi-scalar Economic and Action Agents in the City’s Transformation

Socio-spatial theorist Neil Brenner argues that even as planetary urbanization has expanded and evolved, urban production “remains a fundamentally capitalist process.”¹ As a result, cities worldwide are plagued with social and spatial situations that for critics like David Harvey exemplify the imperfections of the economic model.²

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One of them is the loss of power that central social and administrative institutions – such as municipalities and local governments, have to manage, invest and produce a more democratic and equal city. In Brenner words:

... this dimension of urbanization – mediated, of course, through state institutions, diverse social forces and systemic crisis tendencies at all spatial scales – figures crucially in producing and reproducing contemporary geographies of deprivation, dispossession and marginalization, both within and among urban regions throughout the world.³

Today, and after a recent history of practicing in a rather ‘passive mode’, architects and urban planners worldwide are exploring more active roles to adapt to the consequences that Brenner describes. In this new model, designers go beyond the simple provision of services to become agents of change through alternative means. More importantly, architects are constantly exploring new, previously unquestioned or vaguely understood fields and implications of their endeavor. Understanding the motto that “a building is not necessarily the best solution to a spatial problem” has become critical and is re-shaping the future of the profession.⁴ But as emphasis in the transformative power that architects have to change the status quo (either through built structures or other means like pedagogies, installations, publications, networking, etc) grows, it seems unrealistic to expect a broader and long-lasting impact without engaging with the fundamentally *political and capitalist* dimensions of architectural agency, which are often tied to larger institutions and economic powers.⁵

And so, as bottom-up approaches, guerilla activities and interventions in marginal spaces become more common projects for public institutions and architectural offices, questions about the relationship between so-called ‘peripheral practices’ and more dominant systems arise. The need for strong and constant capital influx

raises an issue that goes beyond the ephemeral impact of some urban interventions, which in many cases may generate civic consciousness but often lack continuity. Thus, the tension that emerges between these two opposing but complementary forces is one that should be studied and analyzed to avoid falling into an all too-reactionary practice where small-scale activism might lose sight of other opportunities through which to generate a more solid and broader social, political and economical impact.

In this sense, Medellín's Transformation Model – that is, the series of successful strategies and institutional changes that the city of Medellín, Colombia, put in place to fight its social crisis, is probably one of the best contemporary cases to analyze. With a combination of multi-scalar, bottom-up and top-down strategies and the institutionalization of participatory mechanisms and budgeting processes, the city has been able to support efforts and turn around from the undesirable situation it found itself four decades ago. Medellín's drastic transformation is both urban, architectural and social, but most importantly, it is innovative in that it generated from a series of alternative and multi-scalar forms of sponsorships that allowed city leaders to re-channel resources and alter the hierarchies that many times overlooked the importance of social investment.

In this article, and as I explore a series of historic situations, novel practices and institutions that led to Medellín's transformation, I hope to establish the importance of finding new and innovative solutions to how public and local governmental entities are funded and administered and the role they play – or could play, as they are critical institutions produced by strong social, cultural and historic contexts and the fundamental organizations by which collective power is translated into a more democratic approach to the right to the city. I also hope to determine that if architects intend to have a broader impact by operating in alternative scenarios, they are accountable for having a deeper understanding of the historic and multidisciplinary processes and organizations put in action well before they are called to operate on the territory.

MEDELLÍN'S TRANSFORMATION MODEL: PARALLEL PRACTICES AND INSTITUTIONS

The ideological beginnings of the transformation of Medellín can be traced to 1989, when under Major Juan Gomez Martinez' governance, the city of Medellín declared a war against drug traffic.⁶ As a result, and after Escobar's death in 1993 and the disintegration of the Medellín Cartel, the city started to work on "waking up its citizens from fear and give them hope".⁷

According to Jorge Pérez Jaramillo, Medellín's current Municipality Planning Director, "the city's search for social justice is based on the redistribution of resources that are not just economic but institutional, cultural and territorial."⁸ To achieve this redistribution, a series of institutions and policies were put into action – some even before the city's current transformation process began. As mentioned by Luz Monica Perez Ayala, former director of the *Agencia de Cooperación e Inversión de Medellín's*, the city's Integral Social Development Model, which has a direct impact on the urban fabric of the city, consists of six areas of action aimed at generating holistic change and improving human development.⁹ Namely, these 6 areas are: high quality education; social urbanism, public space and housing; social inclusion and equity; art and civic culture; security and cohabitation; and competitiveness and entrepreneurial culture. Parallel to these areas, four administrative mechanisms were put in place

to support the process: Planning, Monitoring and Assessment; Finance and Transportation; Political and Social Participation; and Public Communication and Internationalization.

As a result, Medellín's Integral Social Development Model put into action a series of principles and practices that required - or in many cases were the result of, systematic processes of institutionalization rather than disruptive practices. In this sense, and opposite to what some reactionary practitioners often contend, the central local government played a crucial role in channeling the human, financial and political resources towards the most needed sector of the population. The following are a series of practices and institutions that in time were utilized to support the entire model and which holistic conceptualization can be better understood when one looks for example, at the Organization chart of Medellín's Municipality.

INNOVATIVE, DIVERSE AND CONTINUOUS FINANCING: MEDELLÍN'S PUBLIC UTILITIES COMPANY

It is important to note that in order to apply the public policies and realize the projects that catapulted Medellín's transformation, three things occurred in parallel: a fluid and continuous coordination between the different governmental levels to achieve efficiency, the creation of decentralized and relatively autonomous entities formed by well-prepared specialists and the constant provision of funds from diverse and innovative sources.¹⁰ This last point becomes critical to the future economic sustainability of any social project and to the independence of action of local institutions.

In the specific case of Medellín, it is impossible not to highlight the history and role that *Empresas Publicas de Medellín* – EPM by its initials in Spanish, has had in providing capital for many of the projects realized. Established in 1955, EPM merged four different entities into an independent establishment: Energy, Water, Sewage and Telephone (later Telecommunications); and in 1989, was tasked with a new corporate mandate: to be part of the management and improvement of the city's environment. In 1998, EPM was transformed into an Industrial and Commercial State Company, which means that its assets and income are totally separated from those of the Municipality but that by law it has to transfer a percentage of its income to the financing of public projects.¹¹ The company is also 'a-political' in the sense that its leadership and administration are independent from other public institutions.

From its beginnings, EPM was conceived and administered in an innovative way. By the 1970's EPM had capitalized on the geography of the *Valle de Aburrá* and started to produce cheap energy by building hydro electrical power plants. In time, the company grew by offering its services to other regions and it currently provides services both nationally and internationally. EPM's importance for Medellín's inhabitants became clear when in 1995, under the mayorship of Sergio Naranjo, the possibility of privatizing it was brought to the table. The reaction was a massive mobilization of the political class that brought down the proposal.¹²

Today, EPM's model makes it one of the key participants in the city's project. Its legal and functional infrastructure allows it to act as an autonomous, self-regulated company that at the same time is mandated by law to transfer a percentage of its earnings to the local government. In fact, according to author Françoise

Coupe, “between 2001 and 2011, EPM transferred an average of 50% of their profits to the Municipality, which represented 27% of the local government’s investment.”¹³ In time, EPM became one of the largest employers in the region, and its support to the Municipality helped it tripled its budget from \$770 Million in 2004 to \$1,900 Million in 2011.¹⁴ As an average, in 2010 and 2011, EPM contributed about \$450 Million a year to Medellín’s budget.¹⁵ Today, EPM has assets valued in more than \$19,877 Million Dollars.

It is also important to mention that besides its economic input into Medellín’s social project, EPM also plays an important role in professionalizing bureaucracy – that is, the constant investment in the formation of human capital. In fact, according to a recent study, the average worker of EPM stays in the company for more than 20 years regardless of their benefits and most of the recent directors have moved to become high profile administrator in similar companies around the world.¹⁶

Parallel to EPM’s economic role, Medellín’s Mayorality has put into action a series of private-public partnerships to fund urban projects. For instance, in 2013 an agreement signed between the Mayorality and the Antioquia-Region Inter-union Committee seek to better the city’s central core by acting in four different areas: inhabitant’s control, informal commerce, crime and mobility.¹⁷ In the same entrepreneurial spirit, the Agency of Cooperation and Investment of Medellín and the Metropolitan Area – ACI, was created in 2002 with the intention of managing bilateral and multilateral international cooperation and foreign investments. It’s important to note that just like in other cases, the mission of this agency is tied to the city’s search for social equality as it states that it will “lead the internationalization of Medellín and the Aburra Valley through actions of cooperation, business and investment that help increase the Human Development Index and competitiveness in the region.”¹⁸

Overall, it is important to emphasize the entrepreneurial characteristic of public institutions and their willingness to act as overarching supporters of great part of the city’s transformation. As a result, the State’s vision is one of coordination rather than political and institutional control, which allows for broader collaboration with a series of multi-scalar initiatives that go from large enterprises such as EPM to smaller community initiatives such as the Centers of Zonal Business Development (CEDEZO).

CENTERS OF ZONAL BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

As mentioned above, Medellín’s tactics for social and territorial integration are based on a series of multi-scalar strategies. Accordingly, social inclusion is not just managed through larger, institutional contributions – such as EPM’s, but is also incentivized at the neighborhood scale. One of these initiatives is the *Centros de Desarrollo Empresarial Zonal* or CEDEZO program (Centers of Zonal Business Development), which is part of a larger strategy by the Municipality to incentivize cultural entrepreneurship called *E-Culture*.

The CEDEZO’s were conceived as articulated associations which goal is to strengthen peripheral economies by supporting the generation of employment, entrepreneurship, development and consolidation of micro and family-owned companies. As its mission states, the CEDEZO’s should:

favor the consolidation of the corporate network in neighborhoods and villages as an alternative to increase the competitiveness and productivity of



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Figure 1: In the Parque Biblioteca Belén the CADEZO occupies a privileged space as it faces and opens up to the People’s Plaza in front of the project.

Figure 2: The interior Water Plaza of the Parque Biblioteca Belén is surrounded by other public programs such as library, exhibit spaces, and classrooms.

Medellín. The program intends to meet specific needs of the entrepreneurs and business people of the city’s different areas by providing training, corporate advise, assistance and market access.¹⁹

Started in 2005, CEDEZO’s objectives were established through a series of community activities that identified 14 major problems in the city’s neighborhoods – among them: lack of money, poor technical training and skills, lack of channels to connect to the formal sector and weak networks. As such, the program emphasizes teaching and training and the importance of going beyond the mere provision of loans to truly act as a holistic catalyst for the success of small businesses through economic and educational support. For example, one of their main programs – the annual Seed Capita contest, calls for citizens to submit their plans and apply for governmental funding.

It is interesting to note that even though the E-Culture Initiative and the CEDEZO’s are important components of the transformation of the Medellín and often part of the program of the library-park buildings, the CEDEZO’s and their supporting spaces are barely mentioned in architectural publications, if mentioned at all. This clearly contrasts with authors’ Myriam Marchan and Oscar Arcos’ opinion, which categorizes the CEDEZO’s as critical spaces “to build social, business

and community networks” throughout the city’s neighborhoods. In a sense, the CEDEZO’s and similar strategies are what permeate the economic strength of institutions such as EPM to the neighborhood scale.

One of the library-parks that does capitalize on the importance of local financing as a way to generate social exchange and public life, is the *Parque Biblioteca Belén* – interestingly, one of the less-published projects among those within the libraries’ system. Designed by University of Tokyo’s professor Hiroshi Naito in collaboration with his studio and the *Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano* or EDU – whose role in the city’s transformation we will discuss later, the building is comprised of three public spaces articulated by a series of volumes that define them. Each of the three plazas has a different theme: people, water and nature. Along the most public of the squares – The People’s Plaza, the building containing the CEDEZO opens up through a series of transparent panels to expose the entrepreneurial projects by the community to the community (Figure 1).

The second plaza, dedicated to water, is contained by the administrative and educational facilities, including the library (Figure 2). The third is a landscaped plaza that provides natural quiet spaces that can be enjoyed by the community as well. All 15 buildings comprising the complex have a residential scale with pitched roofs and built out of brick and wood. The building is thus not an iconographic structure, which may explain why it has not been widely published. Differently from other library-park buildings that often present enclosed spaces, the *Parque Biblioteca Belén* is a good of example of a structure that capitalizes on the relationship between its social and institutional intent, the urban context and architecture.

A PUBLIC URBAN DEVELOPMENT ENTERPRISE: THE EDU

The importance of efficiently channeling, implementing and overlooking the physical investments done through municipal funding sources such as taxes, self-generated income and transfers from companies like EPM, led to the emergence of a central institution that could organize, design and oversee the physical manifestations of the city’s goals. Thus, under a similar legal frame than that of EPM, the *Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano* - or EDU (the Development Urban Enterprise) was conceived as “an industrial and commercial, State-owned enterprise of the municipal order” with administrative and financial autonomy.²⁰ Initially created



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Figure 3: For example, the Comuna 13 PUI’s proposal for the neighborhood’s restoration included projects of environmental protection, recreation, education, culture, security, health and service. The escalators in the picture provide better and easier access to the specific zones of the community.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Brenner, Neil, David J. Madden, and David Wachsmuth. 2011. "Assemblage urbanism and the challenges of critical urban theory". *City*. 15 (2): 225-240.
- 2 Harvey, David. 2012. *Rebel cities: from the right to the city to the urban revolution*. New York: Verso.
- 3 Brenner, Neil, David J. Madden, and David Wachsmuth. 2011. "Assemblage urbanism and the challenges of critical urban theory". *City*. 15 (2): 225-240.
- 4 Awan, Nishat, Tatjana Schneider, and Jeremy Till. 2011. *Spatial agency: other ways of doing architecture*. Abingdon, Oxon [England]: Routledge. p.28.
- 5 The Parque Biblioteca España is a good example of the importance of continuous economic support and the necessity to think beyond punctual, one-time interventions. One of the most representative and published projects of Medellín's transformation together with the city's metro and cable car systems, the library is for many people the most symbolic project of the city's conversion. Yet recently, a detachment of parts of the library's stone façade due to water infiltration and other construction-related issues, presented a series of problems that the city was trying to fix before various international events that highlighted the city's transformation took place. Just after 6 years of its inauguration and an investment of almost 5 million Euros, in January 2014 the library lied covered with black textiles to avoid any possible wall detachments falling onto its public spaces. With a large sign outside that read: "Al fin y al cabo, somos lo que hacemos para cambiar lo que somos" ("After all, we are what we do to change who we are"), the building was undergoing an important restoration that some argue might cost as much as one third of the project's initial construction. Needless to say, the once successful design of the building was now being highly criticized for its elevated maintenance costs.
- 6 To better understand Medellín's crisis, it is important to note the following brief historic remark: the Valle de Aburrá, where the current city of Medellín is located, was discovered in 1541. In time, dispersed settlements emerged along the river that crosses the valley and in 1675 the village was consolidated as La Candelaria de Medellín. Territorially, the Metropolitan Area of the Valle de Aburrá was established by law in 1980 and together with other 8 municipalities it includes Medellín, which has a population of 2,3 million people (2008) and an area of 380 square kilometers. Since the beginnings of the XX Century, Medellín was known as the industrial city of Colombia. The city's location makes it one of the most important stops along the Pan-American viaduct, an strategic connection between the north, center and south of Colombia. Unfortunately, due to the economic collapse of the urban industrial model and the increase of worldwide demand for drugs in the 60's and 70's, Medellín became a city in decay and a major center for drug trafficking. Not surprisingly, one of the most notorious and powerful drug cartels was the Medellín Cartel – led by Pablo Escobar. At the time, the city had some of the worst violence, corruption and poverty indexes in the region and in 1990 it was declared one of the most dangerous cities with the highest homicide rate in the world. Under these circumstances, the city became a fragmented, hard-to-manage territory full of disparities - the most evident being the disparity among formal and informal settlements along the valley's hills.

Figure 4: This urban space, part of the PUI in the Juan Bobo area, shows a plaza, skate park and urban agriculture garden located in front of the new residential buildings for on-site displaced families.

in 1993 to oversee the construction of the San Antonio Park project, the company evolved to become the *Promotora Inmobiliaria de Medellín* or Medellín's Property Development Company in 1997. By 2002, and with Medellín's transformation underway, the company acquired its current name and was tasked among other assignments with the execution of the PUI or *Proyectos Urbanos Integrales* (Integral Urban Projects).

According to author Diana Puerta Osorio, the PUI's are not only physical projects but also a series of action tools conceived "in a political framework that surpasses the provisions of modern urbanism."²¹ Consequently, the PUI's are structured under three main types of intervention: physical, social and institutional – and the EDU has designed, coordinated and headed the efforts behind many of them. For Alejandro Echeverri, director of the EDU during Fajardo's period and the driving force behind its Social Urbanism project, the PUI's "are not just buildings – they are holistic projects that include a diversity of programs" that have been developed through complex processes that many times involved the collaboration of governmental institutions, local communities, private companies and academia.²² In an interview with John Octavio Ortiz, current Sub-Manager of the Design and Innovation branch of the EDU, he emphasized the point by arguing that as part of EDU's mission, in every PUI they actively engage all the stakeholders: community, private companies and the State. In fact, for many of the projects, the institution rented a space in or near the neighborhood. "This strategy aims to achieve the necessary conditions to ensure the sustainability of each plan," he mentioned.

During the last 10 years, Medellín's governmental programs have been accompanied by EDU's involvement in neighborhood restoration proposals, environmental protection plans and recreational, educational, cultural, security, health and service projects (Figures 3). In total, the EDU has built more than one million square meters of urban and architectural projects which involved the participation of more than 550,000 persons through more than 21,000 public activities and workshops.²³ Currently, and due in part to its large success, the company is expanding its activities to form the Sub-Management of Design and Innovation, which will operate as an urban, innovation and sustainability laboratory.

In a visit to EDU's offices, I was personally struck by the quality and professionalism of the work. The EDU is very far from many Latin American cities'

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governmental design and construction institutions. In a long conversation with the design director and his multidisciplinary team, it was very gratifying to see how comprehensive the approach to each of the projects was. In the words of Ricardo Arias, president of the National Monetary Fund of Colombia: “EDU’s role is critical because it bring together and articulates all the social sectors involved in decision making”.²⁴

One of the most successful, yet again less-published projects designed by the EDU, is the Integral Neighborhood Intervention Project in *Juan Bobo* – a precarious settlements built along the stream from which it acquired its name. In an initial survey, 80% of the houses showed structural problems and a third were built within the flow area of the stream. Of the total dwellings, 50% accessed the water system illegally, 35% accessed electricity in the same way and all the houses dumped their sewage directly into the stream.²⁵

In this case, EDU’s independence from bureaucratic processes facilitated the making of “all types of agreements, strategic alliances and joint ventures” with public and private organizations.²⁶ The EDU was also responsible for managing budgets linked to physical interventions, social responsibilities such as training local communities, and the inter-institutional coordination costs.

The project’s first steps included the creation and organization of neighborhood committees, collection of physical and socio-economic information and most importantly, gaining the trust of the community. Once the area of intervention was defined, the recovery of the stream presented the biggest challenge (Figure 4). To do it, out of the 300 families that were part of the project, 90 were resettled into new homes built within the site and 95 existing houses were retrofitted. In total, 1,200 persons were benefited from the project, which included new residential buildings of 5 to 9 floors, 2 community halls, 12 commercial facilities and 5,600 square meters of public space.²⁷ During my visit with municipal workers and after 4 years of ‘intervention’, the social, physical and economic transformation of the zone is evident.

FINAL THOUGHTS - LET’S MAKE IT CLEAR: IT’S NOT JUST ABOUT ARCHITECTURE

In current times, where as in the practice of architecture, paradigms are changing, it is valid and important to look beyond pragmatism and into utopian possibilities. But as architects look to expand their role, it becomes critical to recognize the broader context and institutional framework in which we actually operate to be able to visualize further possibilities. Consequently, it is important to note that in an attempt to impact the most needed, the new ‘agency model’ seems to tolerate issues such as urban informality as it accepts it as a radical urban condition rather than an intolerable circumstance. But as Medellín’s case probes it, some of the urban and social transformations regarded as most positive, seem to be the ones that start to connect the *barrios* or slums with the rest of the ‘formal’ city by adding new infrastructure and services, and therefore formalizing and regularizing such neighborhoods. In this sense, activist-architects need to be careful and realize that “in this acceptance of informality it is all too easy to forget that to live informally is to live precariously” and that many times the only way to truly implement and sustain micro-urban interventions is through planned and centralized institutional initiatives.²⁸

For example, one key role that institutions have is the continuous measure of impact of social and urban initiatives – something difficult to achieve without the

- 7 John Octavio Ortiz, Sub-Manager of Design and Innovation of Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano. Interviewed by the author. January 22, 2014. Medellín, Colombia.
- 8 Jorge Perez Jaramillo, Medellín’s Planning Director. Interviewed by the author. January 20, 2014. Medellín, Colombia.
- 9 Alcaldia de Medellín, 2012. Medellín Laboratory: An Exhibition of Ten Ongoing Practices. Mesa Editores, p. 22.
- 7 John Octavio Ortiz, Sub-Manager of Design and Innovation of Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano. Interviewed by the author. January 22, 2014. Medellín, Colombia.
- 8 Jorge Perez Jaramillo, Medellín’s Planning Director. Interviewed by the author. January 20, 2014. Medellín, Colombia.
- 9 Alcaldia de Medellín, 2012. Medellín Laboratory: An Exhibition of Ten Ongoing Practices. Mesa Editores, p. 22.
- 10 Idem 16. p. 63.
- 11 About EPM: History. Link: <http://www.epm.com.co/site/english/Home/AboutEPM/History.aspx> Last Accessed: 07/27/2014.
- 12 Maclean, K. 2014. The Medellín Miracle: The Politics of Crisis, Elites and Coalitions. Policy and Practice for Developmental Leaders, Elites and Coalitions. Working Paper. Link: <http://www.dlprog.org/publications/the-medellin-miracle-the-politics-of-crisis-elites-and-coalitions.php>. Last visited: 09/15/2014.
- 13 Francoise, C. 2010. Medellín: Contexto Institucional y Cambio de Paradigma Urbano, in Davila, J. ed. 2012. Movilidad Urbana y Pobreza: Aprendizaje de Medellín y Soacha. DPU. p. 57.
- 14 Idem 13, p. 28.
- 15 Idem 18. p. 251.
- 16 Varela, E. 2009. Estrategias Para La Expansion y Modos de Gestion en EPM Medellín. Estudios Politicos, 35, Instituto de Estudios Politicos, Universidad de Antioquia. P. 145
- 17 Idem 16, SA. p. 57.
- 18 Idem 13, p. 183.
- 19 Idem 13, p. 133.
- 20 Idem 16. p. 62.
- 21 Idem 13, p. 73.
- 22 Alejandro Echeverri, Architect, Professor and Former Director of Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano. Interviewed by the author. January 22, 2014. Medellín, Colombia.
- 23 Idem 16. p. 135.
- 24 Idem 16. p. 237.
- 25 Idem 13, p. 28.
- 26 John Octavio Ortiz, Sub-Manager of Design and Innovation of Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano. Interviewed by the author. January 24, 2014. Medellín, Colombia.
- 27 Idem 13, p. 28.
- 28 Fabricius, Daniela. 2011. Looking Beyond Informality. Architectural Design. 81 (3): p. 146.
- 29 The Gini coefficient is a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent income distribution among city’s residents and is the most commonly used measure of inequality.

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required resources and continuity. For instance, the Gini coefficient - a measure of statistical dispersion intended to represent income distribution among city's residents and commonly used to measure inequality, is still very high in Medellín. At 0,54, the Gini index of the city is one of the highest in Colombia and Latin America.²⁹ In a sense, Felipe Hernández is right when he argues that the question that still remains with projects like Medellín's urban renewal is if visibility and mobility truly change the balance of power that triggers the emergence of inequalities. In his own words:

But the geographies of power and wealth are only marginally changed. The territorial distribution of wealth has not been rebalanced [...] Without such change, architecture would be complicit in maintaining the existing social order. Visibility and mobility may well lead to inclusion, as is being widely argued, but the poor are still poor and ghettoized.³⁰

This last point brings to the table one of the major challenges in the *barrios* of Medellín: the amount of people still being 'forcefully' displaced by informally institutionalized organizations – typically drug gangs. In 2012, 9,941 persons were affected by this situation, 80% in various *comunas* that are still under the secretive power of armed, yet invisible groups. During my visit to *Comuna 13* this became evident when I interviewed a resident and former community leader. To my questions of what did he think about the urban renovation of his neighborhood, he responded "it's beautiful, but still today, and spite of the large investment in the plazas, I have to pay a daily 'vacuna'" - or 'vaccine' - a bribe, to the controlling militia so they would "let him live and work."

In conclusion, the lessons from Medellín do not lie solely in the power of individual or small-scale architectural and urban interventions, but also in the strong organization, institutionalization and collaboration of the political, social and governmental agents that allowed them to happen and who constantly assess their true impact. The pivotal role that architecture played in Medellín's transformation is undeniable, however it was partly the expression and afterwards manifestation and materialization of such system. The role that institutionalized knowledge – as is the case of the EDU, or the constant provision of economic support by EPM, are reminders that architecture is dependant on external factors that we cannot obviate. This becomes critical in places, where as in Medellín, the only way to continuously fight and support change is through constant social and urban investment. And so, as times change and a new paradigm emerges, let's remember that architecture's history is full of examples of good intentions and bad outcomes and that many times the solution to a spatial problem is not just a building but something far-reaching.