

# Studio and the City: A Model for Urban Engagement in Medellin, Colombia

*Designers are not trained sufficiently to achieve positive change for people living in undeserving conditions. Design education has to evolve radically to ensure young designers have the capacity to bridge the gap between design and construction, understand the nuances of diverse sites and territories, and communicate more profoundly with local communities and stakeholders. In short, instill a greater social empathy.*

— Laufen Manifesto <sup>1</sup>

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World population in the 21st century is rapidly urbanizing. By 2010, more than half of all people lived in urban areas. By 2030, 60% of people are projected to live in urban areas and by 2050 that number will rise to 70%.<sup>2</sup> 21st century population growth is largely fueled by the migration of poor people. The United Nations Population Fund suggests three policy initiatives to address this rapid urbanization: 1. Respecting the rights of the poor to the city, 2. Envisioning the use of urban space to reduce poverty and promote sustainability, and 3. Improving the nature and form of future urban expansion.<sup>3</sup>

How can schools of architecture tackle these challenges? I travelled to Medellin, Colombia, to search for answers. I selected Medellin because 1) rapid urbanization has resulted in a proliferation of informal settlements, 2) the city has been hailed for its dramatic turn-around from violent center of drug-trade to model for civic improvement, and 3) there is a history of engagement between the School of Design and Architecture of the Pontifical Bolivarian University (UPB) and the city of Medellin resulting in a transformative program of urban interventions linking city center and informal settlements, former students and faculty in key city government positions, and a cadre of graduates who continue to execute that vision. I began my visit with the hypothesis that the architectural design studios at the UPB must be preparing students specifically to tackle the problems of the informal settlements.

In what ways do students need to be prepared to serve people living in underserved areas? The Laufen Manifesto for a Humane Design Culture, signed by two members of the UPB faculty, Alejandro Echeverri and Alejandro Restrepo, addresses the problems of rapid urbanization, setting forth principles for educating designers (see excerpt above).

Based upon the principles of the Laufen Manifesto, I unpacked the research

question to ask a set of more specific questions. How does the School of Design and Architecture at the UPB prepare students to:

1. Collaborate with other disciplines?
2. Understand the nuances of sites and territories different from their own living situations?
3. Feel empathy with people of different socio-economic strata?
4. Communicate effectively with local communities and stakeholders?
5. Bridge the gap between design and construction?
6. Feel passion for transforming their city and optimism about the future?

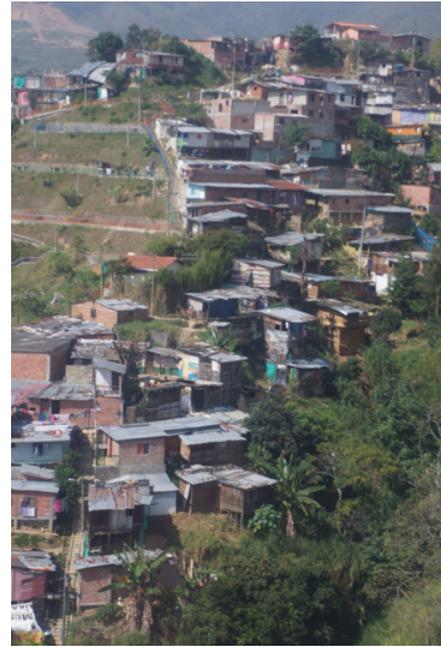
I sought answers to these questions by visiting Medellin to understand the physical and social context, by visiting the UPB to understand the educational context, by reading published materials about the new architecture and urbanism in the city, by participating in a symposium, and by conducting interviews with city officials, architects, faculty, and students to learn about the roles that students of the UPB play in the transformation of the city and how the school prepares them for this work.

### THE PHYSICAL AND SOCIAL CONTEXT

When I visited the city, I experienced the ways in which geography, demographics, economy, and culture combine to produce a beautiful and troubled place. Medellin is a bowl-shaped river valley with business and industry concentrated around the river and layers of residential development stretching up the mountainsides. The city is stratified both physically and socially, divided into 6 zones that correspond to the economic and social strata of the residents. In Colombian culture, there is little mixing of socio-economic classes, rendering Medellin a highly segregated city. The divisive social structure is reinforced by the violence plaguing the city.

The least formal of the residential areas are found highest on the hills, with no city water above an elevation of 1,800 meters. Here, there are rough shacks with outhouses. As development descends towards the river, the buildings are increasingly consolidated with the use of durable building materials, the construction of additional levels, and connections to utilities. The informal developments are plagued with a variety of problems including unstable land, steep inclines, tremendous distances to jobs and services, difficult access, lack of utilities, lack of education, and lack of security. In the least privileged areas of the city, the public realm was destroyed by rival gangs that took control of territories, holding sway over the residents and effectively curtailing their ability to move freely in the streets and passageways of the informal settlements. The gang control and violence makes it extremely hazardous for non-residents to venture into these areas, further reinforcing the socio-economic segregation in the city.

Members of the privileged upper class sought refuge by constructing an elaborate private realm, living in gated communities, shopping in enclosed malls, and traveling the city by car. The streets were given over to the automobile. The divided city lacked public space in which all of its citizens could come together and enjoy civic life in peace and safety. This was a problem that architects and urbanists could wrestle with.



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Figure 1: Informal development in the Northeast zone, photo by author.



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### THE EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT

There are two schools of architecture in Medellín, one at the public National University of Colombia, the other at the private Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana (UPB). This research focuses on the School of Architecture and Design at the UPB because of the conspicuous role that its faculty and graduates have played in tackling the urban problems of Medellín.

The UPB is affiliated with the Catholic Church, with students generally from the upper social strata. The beautiful campus of the UPB is an artifact of the elite culture of privatization of public space. The campus is accessed by presenting identification at a guard booth and passing through a turnstile at the security gate. Once inside the secured area, the socially elite student body enjoys a lively campus with active streets, plazas, and cafes.

The School of Architecture and Design is open-air, with broad corridors connecting classrooms, and a large café that spills out into the entry plaza. The physical facilities foster both planned and spontaneous face-to-face exchange. Some of my interviews took place in this café and benefitted from spontaneous interactions.

The Architecture curriculum is organized into the categories of General Education, Projects, Research, Urbanism, History and Theory, Representation, Technology, and Professional Practice. The Projects category includes required studios focused on housing and urban space. Every studio includes one credit of theory. Students study research methodology and engage in three research projects. The area of urbanism comprises four courses.<sup>4</sup>

Students graduate as architects, ready for practice. Notable aspects of their preparation to tackle the particular problems of their city include extensive coursework and a design project in urbanism, a housing studio, and research expertise. Although well-prepared academically to deal with the problems of their city, most students graduate without exposure to the people and communities and physical places of the informal settlements. One exception to the educational norm is the studio of Juan Ricardo Mejia, in which he works with students in the neighborhoods.

Another exception, the Servicios Civil de Arquitectura (Civil Service of Architecture), is an optional track for students in their final two years of professional studies and offers a rare opportunity for students to learn how to work

Figure 2: the School of Architecture and Design of the UPB, photo by author.

with people in underserved areas. The vision of the center is to contribute to the comprehensive training of future professionals by combining social service with other areas of professional knowledge. The students engage in community outreach to provide technical assistance to low-income populations and non-profit institutions. The objective is to improve the quality of life of people by constructing a fairer and more humane city. Projects have included the design of early childhood centers, a proposal for public space in the Copacabana sector, community and recreational spaces in the North Eastern Zone. In addition to offering students academic and professional experience, the workshop offers life experience as students confront the effects of economic, spatial, social, and cultural fragmentation in their city.<sup>5</sup>

### THE ROLE OF THE SCHOOL IN THE URBAN TRANSFORMATION

By the early 1990's, the city of Medellin was ready for change. A political change, the new Constitution of 1991, established the Area Metropolitana del Valle de Aburrá Medellin (AMVA), an entity created in 1980 that brought together 9 municipalities under one planning umbrella, as the authority responsible for the environment and public transportation in the metropolitan area of Medellin.<sup>6</sup> The administrative structure was in place for large-scale planning. The death of Pablo Escobar in 1993 ended the reign of violence of the notorious drug lord over the city, and shifted control of the drug trade to numerous smaller players. It was time to reclaim public space for the citizens of Medellin.

In the same year, a young and energetic architect, Jorge Perez Jaramillo, became Dean of the UPB. Perez was a graduate of the UPB in the 1980's. At that time, Barcelona was in the midst of an urban transformation spurred by the democratization of the country, a program of urban change that promised to reclaim public space for the citizens. The process of urban transformation involved the collaboration of government, academics, and professionals. Perez was influenced by Manuel de Sola Morales, who led the Urban Lab in Barcelona.

Perez recognized the applicability of the Barcelona model to the problems of Medellin and seized a moment when the city was ready for change. Perez organized a conference in Medellin, bringing architects from Barcelona to the UPB. This international dialogue was the first step in creating among students and faculty at the UPB a sense of optimism and a belief that urban transformation was possible in Medellin. This face-to-face meeting strengthened the ties between Medellin and Barcelona. Several graduates of the UPB went to Barcelona for PhDs, gaining expertise in urbanism and research. Important features of the Barcelona model were the architect-led process and the collaboration between government officials, academics, and professionals. Research in urbanism was valued as a foundation for action and movement between government, academia, and the profession was fluid with permeable boundaries. Perez created an urban laboratory for research and practice at the UPB, the Laboratorio de Arquitectura y Urbanismo (LAUR), modeled on Sola Morales's Urban Lab. An early project of the LAUR was a design for a new public space for downtown Medellin, the Parque des Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Park), constructed in 1999. The park, designed by UPB faculty and students Felipe Uribe, Ana Elvira Velez, and Giovanna Spera, reclaimed a highly visible downtown public space for the citizens of Medellin. The idea of going barefoot in the city emphasized the fact that this park was a place where people could feel relaxed and secure in the public realm.<sup>7</sup>

In 2004, a new mayor, Sergio Fajardo, a professor and the son of an architect, came



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Figure 3: Parque des Pies Descalzos, Felipe Uribe, Ana Elvira Velez, and Giovanna Spera, 1999, photo by author.



4

Figure 4: Línea K MetroCable connects informal settlements to the metropolitan area's transit system running along the river valley.

into office, exemplifying the close link between government, academy, and profession. He envisioned the urban redevelopment of Medellín as a comprehensive strategy to improve mobility, governance, and education while reclaiming public space and green areas for all citizens.<sup>8</sup> Fajardo's concept of social urbanism involved rebuilding civic culture along with the physical improvements. He implemented the extension of the Metro, the physical and social connective tissue of the envisioned united city, up the mountainsides of the informal settlements with a system of gondolas, the Metro Cable. He deployed the Metro as an agent of physical change, catalyzing development around transit stops, and cultural change, incorporating a program of arts and literacy along with education in civic behavior.<sup>9</sup> While advocating an interdisciplinary approach integrating physical and social change in all of the urban projects, Fajardo articulated a key role for architecture in healing the city:

*People who say that a beautiful building does not improve the quality of education do not understand a critical issue. In Medellín we have to build the most beautiful buildings in places where the State's presence has been minimal. The first step towards quality in education is the dignity of space. When the poorest child from Medellín arrives at the best classroom in the city, we send a powerful message. If we give fine libraries to the poorest neighborhoods, these communities will feel proud of themselves.<sup>10</sup>*

A graduate and faculty member of both the UPB and the School of Architecture of Barcelona (ETSAB), architect Alejandro Echeverri came to serve as chief planner in the municipal government under Mayor Sergio Fajardo. He was General Manager of the Urban Development Corporation (EDU) Municipality of Medellín from 2004 to 2005 and Director of Urban Projects of the Municipality of Medellín from 2005 to 2008.<sup>11</sup> He led the design of the Northeast Integral Urban Projects (PUI), initiated by the municipality under Fajardo's leadership in 2004. The Northeast PUI links three informal settlements to the primary public transit system by means of the Metro Cable, incorporating marginalized communities into the fabric of the city. The PUI leverages the opportunities of the Metro Cable by centering civic development around the new stations. High-visibility libraries, schools, recreation centers, and outdoor public spaces have been inserted, creating zones of civic space around the transit stations. The broad objectives were to transform education and culture, as well as physical urban space, to decrease violence, improve security, and foster civic pride by creating beautiful buildings and spaces. Architects were selected for these high-profile commissions by competition, opening opportunities for young, local architects skilled in creating and communicating striking designs. Echeverri formed interdisciplinary teams of architects, engineers, communicators, and social workers. He cited one of the necessary characteristics of the people who worked on the urban integral projects (PUI) as passion, a conviction that they could contribute to the transformation of their city. He led teams of recent university graduates in a collaborative teamwork process.<sup>12</sup>

Jorge Perez Jaramillo followed Echeverri into government, taking on his role as Sub-director of planning for AMVA from 2004 to 2008 and currently serving as Director.<sup>13</sup> Perez has reinforced the link between academy and government. UPB graduates and faculty have been instrumental in designing the urban transformation. A list of the 8 most important strategic projects<sup>14</sup> includes the two MetroCable projects carried out by Echeverri, Línea K MetroCable en la Comuna Nor-oriental of 2004 and Línea J Metro Cable Comuna Occidental of 2008. Four other high-profile buildings on the list were designed by UPB graduates and faculty:

1. Orquideorama del Jardín Botánico, 2006, Plan B Arquitectos + JPRCR

Arquitectos. The Botanical Garden, formerly a gated park reserved for the wealthy elite, was opened to the public as part of the effort to create urban space where citizens from all social strata can come together as a community. The Orquideorama is a highly visible pavilion in the Botanical Garden, offering an outdoor public space where visitors can enjoy the extraordinary semitropical flora of the region. Plan B Arquitectos is led by Felipe Mesa, a graduate and faculty member of the UPB with a PhD from Barcelona, and his brother, Federico Mesa, also a graduate of the UPB.



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2. El Colegio en Santo Domingo Savio, Obranegra Arquitectos, 2009. This school is a product of the “Medellín, the most educated” program promoted by Mayor Sergio Fajardo. The district of Santo Domingo Savio is located in the violent and impoverished northeastern area of Medellín. The roof of the building was conceived as a new public space for the community. Obranegra Architects is led by three graduates of the UPB, Mauricio Zuluaga Latorre, Nicholas Velez Jaramillo, and Carlos Pardo Botero, also on the faculty at UPB.<sup>15</sup>

3. El Parque Explora, Alejandro Echeverri, 2007. The Explora Park is an interactive science and technology museum adjacent to the Botanical Garden.<sup>16</sup> Alejandro Echeverri, is a graduate and former faculty member of the UPB.

4. Las piscinas de la Unidad Deportiva Atanasio Girardot, Paisajes Emergentes, 2010. The swimming pools are part of the sports complex built for the South American Games of 2010. Paisajes Emergentes was comprised of three graduates of the UPB, Edgar Mazo, Sebastian Mejia, and Luis Callejas, now on the faculty of Harvard GSD and principle of LCLA.<sup>17</sup>

These are only a few examples of the many projects designed by graduates and faculty of the UPB that dignify the lives of the underserved population of Medellín with architecture.

#### **HOW THE UPB DOES (AND DOESN'T PREPARE STUDENTS TO SERVE AS AGENTS OF URBAN TRANSFORMATION**

Under the deanship of Jorge Perez Jaramillo, the School of Architecture and Design became a center for urban research and action. The initial step of bringing

Figure 5: Orquideorama del Jardin Botanico, Plan B Arquitectos + JPRCR Arquitectos, 2006, photo by author.

international architects and urbanists for a conference at the school raised awareness among students and faculty, transferred knowledge from Barcelona, brought passion from the architects of that city, created a spirit of optimism for change in Medellin, and fostered an ongoing cultural exchange in which UPB students went on for advanced degrees in Barcelona and other European cities. As Dean, Jorge Perez Jaramillo was a charismatic leader who instilled a sense of optimism in students and faculty.<sup>18</sup> The faculty's research and teaching of urbanism has informed practice in the city. The overarching concept of restoring civil society by rebuilding the public realm clearly comes from architects schooled in urban values. In all of my conversations in Medellin, I sensed a deep commitment among architects to bring those urban values to the service of their beleaguered and beloved city. The feeling of optimism was palpable. This is the passion that Alejandro Echeverri cited one of the necessary characteristics of the people who worked on the urban integral projects.

Following the Barcelona model, UPB faculty, including Echeverri and Perez, have moved from academia into city government, fluidly combining careers in government, academia, and practice. As city planners, Echeverri and Perez have served as enlightened clients, conceptualizing projects and organizing design competitions for critical elements of the urban transformation. The UPB studios teach students to be successful competition-winners, rendering them successful at obtaining high-profile commissions. While this does not necessarily prepare them to understand the situations and needs of the populations they serve, it does equip them to offer high-profile architecture, which is a way of dignifying the informal settlements and the lives of their residents. Furthermore, competitions are viewed as the most democratic means of selecting architects, capable of recognizing emerging talent and avoiding political patronage.<sup>19</sup>

An alternative educational track, the *Servicios Civil de Arquitectura*, prepares students to serve as communicators on interdisciplinary teams. This is a key role in the PUI, where the success of projects depends heavily upon buy-in by community stakeholders. Unfortunately, at the UPB, this path seems to be separate from the typical architectural education, producing students who may consider themselves more social workers than designers. However, it is an important model, as it brings the UPB students into the informal settlements and engages them in dialogue with the residents of communities very different from their own. This program violates the norms of socio-economic segregation and tackles the challenges of bringing outsiders into the violent gang-controlled spaces of the informal settlements. The students' security is a result of the instructor's ability to negotiate with the gangs for safe passage.<sup>20</sup> The success of this program clearly depends upon the leadership of an individual with deep commitment and unusual social skills. The *Servicios Civil de Arquitectura* seems to embrace nearly all of the points outlined in the *Laufen Manifesto*. The students are learning to play a role in collaborative interdisciplinary teams. The program takes them outside of their own spheres and compels them to interact with people different from themselves in unfamiliar places. Students must learn to understand the nuances of sites and territories different from their own living situations. And, opening a dialogue with others is a first step in building empathy. The curriculum is designed to teach students to communicate effectively with local communities and stakeholders. In conversation with the coordinator of the program, it was clear that she effectively bridges the gap between design and construction. In her consulting work on project teams, she serves as liaison between developer and

community members, spending time on site before, during, and after construction. As we toured a large residential development together, she reflected on the successes and failures of the project.

## CONCLUSIONS

ACSA schools are currently seeking ways to engage with communities both at home and abroad. Some programs, such as the University of Oregon's Sustainable Cities Initiative and the University of Maryland's Program for Action Learning in Sustainability, are creating models for student engagement in urban areas of their home state. Other programs, such as Columbia University's labs, engage students in urban problems around the globe. This case study sought an educational model that might inform other schools as they develop programs to tackle issues of sustainable urbanism both locally and globally.

I traveled to Medellin to investigate a School that sparked real and ongoing change in a city facing current challenges of rapid urbanization and poverty. I was familiar with the influential role that graduates of the UPB have played in an urban transformation well aligned with the UN's three policy initiatives, 1. Respecting the rights of the poor to the city, 2. Envisioning the use of urban space to reduce poverty and promote sustainability, and 3. Improving the nature and form of future urban expansion. I arrived in Medellin with the notion that the architectural design studios at the UPB must prepare students for practice by engaging them in community service projects that address the problems of the informal settlements. I imagined that the UPB program would address the educational principles created by Echeverri, Restrepo, and others in the Laufen Manifesto. My interviews with students and faculty quickly disabused me of this simplistic view and introduced me to the more complex ways in which the School prepares graduates for influential roles in urban change.

Key factors for success are:

1. Close connection between urban theory and practice
2. International exchange of ideas
3. Fluid boundaries between academia, practice, and government
4. Strong design culture in school and government
5. Atmosphere of optimism and passion for improving the home city
6. Opportunity to prepare for a role in social change in an optional program that introduces students to the people and sites of underserved communities

There are also some missed opportunities. There is a bifurcation of design and social engagement in the academy. Students tend to enter practice well-prepared theoretically and technically, with a high level of skill in design and representation, but most students lack a direct introduction to the sites and territories and people of underserved communities. The two examples of studios that engaged communities seemed to be more dependent on strong individual faculty leadership than on any institutional commitment. However, there is much to overcome in the Colombian culture before elite architecture students can readily build empathy for the residents of the informal areas of their city by engaging with people of lower socio-economic strata in their dangerous territories. Schools in the US face far milder social challenges when engaging students in community

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service studio projects. Another missed opportunity is the apparent lack of interdisciplinary studios. The strikingly interdisciplinary nature of the design teams on the integral urban projects, teams that include sociologists and communicators along with architects and engineers, is not replicated in school. Of course, this is not surprising, as the UPB clearly faces the same structural issues as US universities, with daunting administrative hurdles to interdisciplinary collaboration.

I did not find in Medellín a studio model that neatly embodies the principles of architectural education for a humane design culture articulated in the Laufen Manifesto. However, my investigation of education at the UPB offers a set of principles for creating an educational culture that engages the school with the city in a close and productive relationship that can lead to urban transformation.

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