Social Urbanism:
Transformational policy in Medellin, Colombia

Rebecca Chau

Original Submission:
Owen Gutfreund
URBP787.72 Cities in Developing Countries
December 2, 2015

Competition Submission:
Meenu Tewari
GPEIG case study prize
August 31, 2017
1 Introduction

When Medellin entered the public view in the 1990s it was a condemned city at the mercy of violence. By the 2000s, Medellin started making headlines for its urban transformation. In a post-violence context, socio-spatial inclusion became central to the urban strategy.\(^1\) Interventions were deployed through a program called ‘social urbanism’, which was led by the visionary mayor, Sergio Fajardo from 2002 to 2004. Social urbanism can be explained as the a carefully executed vision, distilled into policies that aimed to address social inequality and violence, and restore dignity to the people of Medellin. Success of these actions was contingent on sensitivity to the political context, responsiveness to citizen values and financial viability. The degree of this success can be measured with respect to improvements in mobility, accessibility, ridership, economic growth, crime and safety, user satisfaction, and community perception. Appraising these metrics revealed that social urbanism had few quantifiable social outcomes, but had a deep impact on recalibrating the city of Medellin, and establishing a social fabric amenable to continued transformation.

2 Background

2.1 Context

Medellin echoes many Latin American cities of our time, characterised by rapid growth, informal settlements, violence, wealth disparity, and endemic poverty and inequality. Disparate social stratification is manifest in the two distinct city forms, the affluent formal city to the south, and the informal city to the north and northeast. The informal city has absorbed much of the municipal growth, which has stabilized at an average annual rate of 3%, of which approximately 22% of the structures accommodating this

\(^1\) Peter Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model: ‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 2013, 7.
growth have been erected informally. Beneath the layers of precarious breezeblocks and corrugated iron roofs, resides 50% of the city’s population, whom accordingly buttress a robust informal economy and for the most part live below the national poverty line. The citizens of the comunas have historically been underserved by transportation, which has restricted their participation in the formal economy, and in doing so has limited economic opportunities for the poorest people, perpetuating cycles of poverty. Entangled in these webs of informality has been a culture of violence and disorder that in the 1990s earned Medellin a reputation as most dangerous city in the world, with homicides reaching a peak of 381 per 100,000 in 1991. The criminal stranglehold successfully evicted the State from the informal territories of the city. It was in this context of extreme lawlessness, that inequality burgeoned, and the public realm was conquered by violence and stripped of its public utility, depriving residents of mobility and opportunities to connect and conduct business. It was the severe misery in Medellin that readied the political elite and the comunas for an urban revolution – called ‘social urbanism’.

Figure 1 Comunas in Medellin

---

4 Comunas is a district within the city, see Figure 7 in Appendix
2.2 **Leadership**

Sergio Fajardo – Mayor of Medellin from 2003 to 2007 – was the architect of change. Contrarily, Fajardo has always affirmed that transformation has been by the people of Medellin, for the people of Medellin. It is this collective ideology that defined his mayoral term, and his leading program, social urbanism. For Fajardo, a mayor should be “honest with absolutely no concessions”, possess “knowledge”, “passion”, and a “deep social awareness”. Fajardo was politically independent and an academic by training, which elevated his political agenda from conventional clientelistic politics. With this educational foundation, Fajardo’s ethos was directed towards education – and was accordingly an “intellectual project”, which was unlike conventional political projects of the time. Consequently, Fajardo’s policies were the product of collaborations between “NGOs, the arts, academics, private entrepreneurs, [and] community organisations.” The unconventional taskforce, combined with Fajardo’s vision, joined together to execute social urbanism in the face of seemingly insurmountable urban challenges.

2.3 **Problems**

After prolonged violence, rapid urbanization and sprawling self-built settlements, an assemblage of urban problems arose in the north and northeast communities. Problems stemmed from the state’s general abandonment of informal settlements, which was exacerbated by a governability crisis, where the state was unable to exercise control or maintain social order in these areas. The combination of municipal powerlessness and neglect, allowed social inequality, improper use of public space, and low quality educational infrastructure to proliferate. The implications of neighbourhood degradation, as well as them being fertile beds of crime and violence, stigmatised and isolated the

---

7 Ibid., 41–42.
8 Ibid., 48.
9 Ibid., 49.
10 Ibid.
Consequently, the identity of the comunas became one of violence and a low quality of life, which was affirmed by a 2002 study by the Municipality of Medellin, which found that the aforementioned urban zones corresponded to areas with the lowest Human Development Index. The severe immobility caused by insufficient transportation intensified the symbolic isolation. This is problematic as a “lack of mobility turns geographical marginalization into deep social exclusion... [and] becomes an additional form of social inequality”, thus exacerbating the cycle. Social urbanism was conceived of as the antidote to these problems, and built on both transportation and housing projects that predated Fajardo’s administration.

2.4 Early Interventions

Social urbanism is the refined incarnation of mechanisms that had been underway in Medellin during the 1990s. Three projects, which predated social urbanism were the Medellin Metro, the first Metrocable (Line K) and the PRIMED housing project, which each created infrastructure and participatory frameworks from which the contemporary projects could draw. The Metro was built north to south along the river and opened in 1995 (see Figure 8 in Appendix). As a result, while accessibility was improved within the formal city, access to and from the comunas became more starkly disparate.

Meanwhile, technical studies for a Metrocable, a gondola lift system, were underway throughout the 1990s. The low ridership of the new Metro, combined with the tangible inequality of transportation options, contributed to developing a business case for the Metrocable. As, the conditions were conducive for investment by both the Metro and the municipality. In the early 2000s, this economic viability was furthered by the political

---

13 Peter Brand and Julio D. Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins,” City 15, no. 6 (December 2011): 649.
14 PRIMED / Slum Upgrading Program / Programa Integral de Majoramiento de Barrios Subnormales.
interest of mayoral candidate, and subsequent mayor, Luis Pérez (2001-2003). With aligned interests, the Metrocable was 55% funded by the municipality and 45% by Metro de Medellín, and opened in 2004.\textsuperscript{16} The Metrocable became an integral part of social urbanism as it allowed urban interventions to be linked with transportation and mobility.

Alongside transportation interventions was the PRIMED housing program, which was a regularization strategy applied to developing the informal settlements.\textsuperscript{17} The program addressed the “basic infrastructure of streets, public facilities and public space; home improvements or relocation; and legalization of tenure within a framework of community building and participation.”\textsuperscript{18} Fajardo’s subsequent interventions built off the essential components of this strategy, particularly with respect to citizen participation. These earlier interventions assisted in preparing Medellin for social urbanism and contributed to their success.

3 Social Urbanism

Social urbanism was a suite of policies that began in 2005, which included Integral Urban Projects (PUI) the aerial cable cars – Metrocable, and the Library Parks.\textsuperscript{19} Fajardo developed a sharp vision, imaginatively approached the problem, and delivered concrete policies and projects to ‘change the city’s skin’.\textsuperscript{20} Social urbanism interventions have only delivered some quantifiable successes, but have been effective at restoring dignity to the dispossessed citizens of Medellin. Accordingly, Medellin has attracted international acclaim, and what began as social urbanism has evolved into the ‘Medellin Model’ of urban development, defining Medellin as a model city alongside other exemplars, such as its forbearer, the Barcelona Model.

\textsuperscript{16} The financial agreement was contingent on the Municipality of Medellin underwriting the loan as foreign insurers were fearful of the Metrocable being a potential target for terrorist attacks. Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins,” December 2011, 659.
\textsuperscript{17} Jota Samper, “The Role of Urban Upgrading in Latin America as Warfare Tool against the ‘Slums Wars,’” Critical Planning 19 (2012): 61.
\textsuperscript{20} Dávila, “Being a Mayor: The View from Four Colombian Cities,” 53.
3.1 **The vision**

Social urbanism was founded on: education, inequality, dignity, legitimizing informality, and crime prevention. Education was essential to all objectives, captured by Fajardo’s familiar tune - "Medellin la mas Educada" (or, Medellin, the most educated). The scholastic aspirations defined the tangible interventions for building human capital. Fajardo was clear that “everything [that was] built for the public space [was] linked with knowledge, with culture, with productive development, everything in the end to fight against social inequalities to ensure that we can live together.” Like education, addressing inequality was a mechanism for restoring dignity and obstructing crime. Fajardo focused on empowering individuals by investing in human capital and “build[ing] a society [by] betting on people’s abilities.” In doing so, the goal was to “give the city back to its inhabitants and the inhabitants back to the city”, by rebuilding the fabric of the city that had been quashed by prolonged violence. With the “most beautiful buildings...in [the] poorest areas” and investing in public space, Fajardo hoped to equalize

---

22 Dávila, “Being a Mayor: The View from Four Colombian Cities,” 53.
24 Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 6.
disparity between the formal and informal areas of the city.\textsuperscript{25} Poverty and inequality were acknowledged by the administration as integral to the fight against crime. Poverty can cultivate an attitude, that financial desperation justifies violence, affirming the causality. Thus, in order to break the cycles of fear and insecurity, and replace these with citizenship, inequality and poverty must be addressed. Accordingly, social urbanism is a unique crime prevention strategy within a social inclusion policy framework.\textsuperscript{26} Fajardo’s holistic vision was paired with astute implementation, to deliver outcomes.

3.2 \textit{The approach}

To execute the vision, Fajardo had to cultivate ideological changes, while balancing power and decisiveness with citizen participation. The social urbanism plan was reflective of the post-1980s attitudes towards governance, which embraced citizens in the governance process, and in doing so impressed traditional neoliberal ideologies that under such conditions, citizens share a responsibility for the success or failure of the city.\textsuperscript{27} Concomitant to the civic charge bestowed on the people of Medellin, was the clear division of responsibility between government and the citizens. In this way, the borders of governance were relaxed, and responsibility was spurred by ownership and pride. The intention was to unify an otherwise fragmented society.\textsuperscript{28} The collectivist creed was then fulfilled through participatory mechanisms.

The substantive citizen participation was integral to Fajardo’s approach. It was a combination of participatory budgeting, community oversight committees, and horizontal property rules and regulations. All of which were established within a framework where programme and project managers continually revaluated local needs and desires.\textsuperscript{29} It is through these formal channels that social participation mechanisms could be

\textsuperscript{25} Gilbert, “The City of Eternal Spring,” 52.
\textsuperscript{26} Salazar, “Social Urbanism as a Crime Prevention Strategy: The Case of Medellin, Colombia,” 92.
\textsuperscript{27} Dávila, “Being a Mayor: The View from Four Colombian Cities,” 41.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 53.
\textsuperscript{29} Salazar, “Social Urbanism as a Crime Prevention Strategy: The Case of Medellin, Colombia,” 97.
institutionalised, and safeguarded against the tides of political will.\textsuperscript{30} In doing so, the government ratified its commitment to long-term socially inclusive policy, which encouraged citizen commitment, furthered belief in the state, amassed support, and perpetuated local engagement. \textsuperscript{31} Whereby, limiting “penetration by illegal and criminal agents and their undermining effect on local governance.” \textsuperscript{32} Cultivating civic-mindedness and citizen engagement were necessary proponents for garnering support, however, objectives could only be actualised through formidable leadership.

Fajardo took bold but considered action, without the paralysis of political indecision. Fajardo described his projects to be the decisive diagnoses of problems and rapid execution of remediation. While mayors are not able to seek a second consecutive term in Colombia, Fajardo was vehemently confident in his conviction to act without fear of his policies being slated with the changing of the guard. Instead of succumbing to political folly, he entrusted the public to vote for administrations that would keep his projects alive – which proved to be a shrewd decision.\textsuperscript{33} Fajardo believed “…in this context it is good to have power” and instead of being disarmed by historical corruption or the burden of authority, he used his power to “lead this transformation”. \textsuperscript{34}

Fajardo united citizens and the administration in a multipronged approach, which actively sought and valued local input, but applied it in a measured manner to remain impactful at a municipal level. Fajardo’s approach was the unlikely marriage of communitarianism, citizen participation, strong municipal power and action, which established the foundation of all policies that came thereafter.

3.3 Policy Initiatives and Projects

Social urbanism, in material terms, included Barcelona-esque improvements of places, transportation, and social services. It was based on the Barcelona Model of urban

\textsuperscript{30} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 100.
\textsuperscript{32} Ibid., 98.
\textsuperscript{33} Dávila, “Being a Mayor: The View from Four Colombian Cities,” 50.
\textsuperscript{34} Ibid., 51.
development of the 1990s, which used “immediate scale architectural and urban space interventions[,] deployed with the intention of reconstructing the urban fabric and rearticulating a sense of place, local identity and spatial equality.”\textsuperscript{35} The Latin offspring however, was distinctive in its violent past, requiring a socially inclusive overlay.\textsuperscript{36} The three core initiatives that formed the material scope of social urbanism, included library parks, the Metrocable, and to a lesser extent housing, which built on, and was supported by, Fajardo’s vision and approach.

Library parks (parque bibliotecas) are cultural centres, public spaces, libraries, classrooms, child-care facilities, galleries, auditoriums and administrative areas, intended to create safe social spaces for people of all classes to interact, whereby reducing social segregation. Library parks were the “most beautiful buildings”, and were located in the “poorest areas”, which intended for the projects to transcend the basic services, to cultivate dignity and disrupt channels of violence.\textsuperscript{37} The projects were part of high-profile design competitions, and in most cases designed by Colombian architects, to emerge from the landscapes as symbols of the ‘new Medellin’. Each building cost approximately US$6 million and was executed in conjunction with local businesses.\textsuperscript{38} This was an investment in physical, social and symbolic outcomes. It created space where people could interact and the necessary services to facilitate individual growth, while simultaneous affirming the return of the state to the comunas.\textsuperscript{39} Conceived during Fajardo’s term, five library parks were completed by 2008, and an additional four have been constructed thereafter.\textsuperscript{40} Library parks were part of a broader strategy of Integral

\textsuperscript{35} Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 3.
\textsuperscript{36} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{37} Gilbert, “The City of Eternal Spring,” 52.
\textsuperscript{38} Gilbert, “The City of Eternal Spring.”
\textsuperscript{39} Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 5.
\textsuperscript{40} The parks include, Parque Biblioteca Espana, Parque Biblioteca Belén, La Ladera Parque Biblioteca, Parque Biblioteca San Javier, Parque Biblioteca Tomás Carrasquilla, Parque Biblioteca Doce de Octubre, Parque de Biblioteca Manuel Mejia Vallejo Guayabal, Parque de Biblioteca Fernando Botero, and Parque de Biblioteca José Horacio Betancur San Antonio Prado. Maria Esteves, “Shaping New Urban Environments in Latin America: The Case of Medellin, Colombia,” 2012, 163.
Urban Projects (PUIs), which “centred [development] around transport projects but aimed at urban upgrading through [a] combined strategy of mobility, environment, housing and public space.”

Transportation was an integral piece of social urbanism, and in particular the Metrocable. In 2004, soon after Fajardo’s inauguration, the first Metrocable was opened (Line K), which was to the credit of his predecessor Luis Pérez. It was the first aerial cable car system to be used as public transportation. Social urbanism constructed an urban renewal strategy (including security, police stations and housing) around the Metrocable and built a second line (Line J) in 2008. In 2010, a later administration built a tourist route (Line L). The Metrocable was established to fill the mobility gap – building Line K to the northeast and Line J to the west – and to connect the comunas, via the Metro, to the economically prosperous downtown (see Figure 8 in Appendix). Whereby providing an alternative to the buses, and the occasional taxi, operating on the comunas’ deficient road networks.

The Metrocable was selected as it is affordable to construct and operate, affordable for users, technically simple, and minimises land acquisition. As a result the projects were funded through normal capital investment budgets, provided by both Metro de Medellin and municipal finance (for basic information about each line see Figure 9 in Appendix). In line with Fajardo’s vision, the Metrocable projects aimed to

---

44 Ibid., 648.
45 Metro de Medellin based its contribution on future returns from increased ridership projected over a 10 to 15-year period, and supplementary social investment. Aside from residual debts resulting from gross mismanagement.
address inequality through mobility, established participatory channels for residents, and provided a mechanism for the state to re-establish a presence in organised crime territory.  

The third, much smaller component of PUIs was housing. Juan Bobo, an in-situ re-housing project, which received a best practice award for housing in 2013. It included, upgrading 220 low quality dwellings along a riverbank into four to five story blocks, with complementary public spaces. The project was executed in close consultation with the community and based on voluntary agreements, meaning that no forcible relocations occurred. The municipality and the state funded the upgrade, with no financial burden placed on residents. While internationally acclaimed, this project has not been widely emulated, nor was it integral to the social urbanism agenda. The library parks were the chief interventions in PUI, and when combined with the Metrocable, they form the pillars of social urbanism.

Social urbanism married these infrastructure investments with a holistic social strategy. The Zona Nororiental (north-eastern area) pilot project of social urbanism is perhaps the best way to understand the two. The HDI of the region was the lowest in the city. In response, the municipality invested US$325 million (from 2004 to 2007) into the construction of the Metro, Metro de Medellin operates at a profit. Ibid., 652; Brand and Davila, “Aerial Cable-Car Systems for Public Transport in Low-Income Urban Areas: Lessons from Medellin, Colombia,” 4.


49 Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 5.
150 hectares, serving approximately 150,000 people, surrounding Metrocable Line K. The funding was split between social programs and infrastructure. 80% was distributed to 290 social programmes, including healthcare, education services and protection of children in volatile households, mental health and legal assistance for victims of human rights abuses, support for communities challenged with reintegration of ex-militants, access to recreational, cultural and sports for youth, and facilitation of participatory budgeting. The remaining 20% was allocated to infrastructure, including 125,000 square metres of public spaces, library parks, playgrounds, eighteen new parks, 3,235 meters of pedestrian sidewalks, sixteen pedestrian bridges and underpasses, and 300 social housing units, of which 92% of the associated manual labour was sought locally.\(^{50}\) The investment yielded, a 300 per cent increase in the Andalucía High Street, entrepreneurial events produced total sales of 150 million Colombian pesos, and twenty-five community events involved over 300,000 men and women.\(^{51}\) The Zona Nororiental exemplifies the unique interrelationship between all aspects of social urbanism, and how the complex social vision was translated into practical projects during Fajardo’s term and beyond.

### 3.4 Legacy

Social urbanism represents a suite of policies that exist in a continuum of change, which is ongoing to this day. Predating Fajardo, was the first Metrocable, and PRIMED, the socially inclusive housing policy. Similarly, social urbanism has inspired subsequent policies, in both successive mayor’s Alonso Salazar Jaramillo (2008-2011) and Aníbal Gavaria Correa (2012-2015), who have both retained a social lens. Most notably, Salazar built an outdoor solar-powered escalator.\(^{52}\) The escalator is a cheaper alternative to the Metrocable, costing only US$7 million, and provides 12,000 local residents an alternative

---


\(^{52}\) Called escaleras elécticas
way to ascend the 384 metres, replacing over 350 stairs.\textsuperscript{53} The longevity of the social urbanism ideology is one indicator of success, but many more metrics need to be evaluated when quantifying the value of social urbanism.

**Figure 5 Escaleras Electricas Medellin**\textsuperscript{54}

### 3.5 Commendations

Social urbanism has received numerous international accolades, and been the object for critique of many sceptics. Understanding and measuring success is integral to ensuring Medellin’s long-term prosperity, and for the application of the ‘Medellin Model’ globally. Success of social urbanism was contingent on, its sensitivity to the political context, and its responsiveness to citizen values and financial viability. The degree of success can be measured with respect to improvement to mobility, accessibility, ridership, economic growth, crime and safety, and user satisfaction and community perception.

The 1991 Constitution created a political context amenable to social urbanism. Mayors were awarded greater autonomy, independents were accepted in the political arena, and citizen participation was endorsed.\textsuperscript{55} The outcomes included, positioning mayors to take legitimate and intimate control of their municipalities, allowing mayors to be ‘mavericks’ emancipated from clientelistic bipartisan politics, and establishing frameworks for citizen participation.\textsuperscript{56} Without the restraints of political allegiance, Fajardo could assemble an intellectual advisory of “neoliberal technocrats, left-leaning

\textsuperscript{53} Gilbert, “The City of Eternal Spring.”
\textsuperscript{56} Dávila, “Being a Mayor: The View from Four Colombian Cities,” 40; Gutiérrez et al., “The Importance of Political Coalitions in the Successful Reduction of Violence in Colombian Cities,” 3147.
intellectuals, the media and a broad chunk of the private sector” whose ‘scientific assertions’ came to define the rhetoric, and in doing so garnered public support. As such, the constitutional amendment empowered Fajardo to make impactful decisions that were based on the merits of social urbanism, and not entangled in political idiocy, and involve citizens in a meaningful way, to deliver effective and appropriate interventions. Political timeliness, would not have yielded results had it not been coupled with the readiness of the population.

Social urbanism “summon[ed] new citizen energies” and capitalised on the collective desire for change. Alonso Salazar described this desire as “a social movement [that] came to life within the city that was dedicated to the resistance of the drug trade and violence.” Which deferred the “intra-elite confrontations” and enabled effective state building. Without these impediments, and with mitigation of violence at the forefront of the agenda, Fajardo was able to “redistribute wealth without appealing to the discourse of anger or aggression.” To these ends, Fajardo used the financial and human capital of the private sector to improve conditions on the urban periphery. Private schools supported public schools, design firms and universities offered resources to public projects, and taxes were raised to generate additional funds. Born from social necessity, collectivism enabled Fajardo to implement progressive taxation and contribute to funding substantial social changes.

Without adequate economic resources Fajardo’s vision, approach and policies would have remained a utopian ambition. Instead, progressive taxation was combined with funding from the publically owned utility company, Empresas Públicas de Medellín.

---

59 Francis Fukuyama and Seth Colby, “Half a Miracle,” Foreign Policy, no. 186 (June 5, 2011): 27.
61 Dávila, “Being a Mayor: The View from Four Colombian Cities,” 53.
EPM. EPM statutorily must transfer 30% (often more) of its profits each year to local social investment projects, which in 2011 amounted to over US$300 million. Without this, the costly social programs integral to social urbanism would not have been viable. Fiscal might, a politically affable environment, and citizen readiness all contributed to improved urban life in Medellin. The benefit of each intervention is challenging to decipher, as is quantifying their successes.

Social urbanism has undoubtedly manufactured a miracle, however measuring the impacts is challenging. Before defining individual metrics, one should acknowledge the overall success – a transformation from a city destitute and choked by violence, to one that is aspiring and prosperous (see Figure 6). Social urbanism was intended to be a multifaceted mix of PUIs and transportation improvements, making individual factors largely indistinguishable. As the “precise measurement of the social and economic consequences... is difficult...[as the] impacts are not direct and mechanical, but derive from a social-spatial context that is itself constantly changing, [and with] limited data availability in informal sectors of the city, [it] makes the measurements of trends problematic, not to mention the issue of attributing causality.” Instead, to illuminate the indicative relationships I will appraise the impacts of the library parks and the Metrocable.

---

63 In 2011 EMP’s total assets amounted to approximately US$10 billion. It provides electricity generation and distribution, water and sewage, and telecommunication services. Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model: ‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 5.
64 The renovation of Comuna 13, which houses 135,000 residents cost US$155 million over a three year period. Which accounts partially for why total municipal spending doubled between 2004 and 2008.
65 Brand and Dàvila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins,“ December 2011, 654.
Library Parks

Library parks were intended to break down social barriers and provide cultural and educational amenities to support impoverished communities. The first consideration therefore is, do people use them? 1.4 million visitors frequented the library parks over a five-month period. Of which, only 10% is estimated to be local residents, the remainder being local and international visitors, particularly from Latin America. Similarly low local use has been estimated in the associated public spaces.67 Contrarily, others surmise that the quality of architecture has enriched the atmosphere, increased safety, and enhanced the overall quality of life of residents.68 Unfortunately, these metrics do not illuminate success or failure of any specific nature. The Metrocable can be examined with greater rigor, however is nonetheless an assemblage of inferences, and should be considered only indicative of success.

Metrocable

To determine whether the Metrocable has been successful, improvement to mobility, accessibility, ridership, economic growth, crime and safety, user satisfaction and community perception will be examined. Despite the complexity of definitive measurements, the prevailing discourse will inform the determination of success.

Mobility

Mobility and motility were the chief objectives of the Metrocable.69 “Limited mobility constrains participation in urban life in general, and opportunities [to] expand work

---

68 Ibid.
horizons, social and leisure activities, [and] political and civic engagement.” As such, mobility is a form of capital that requires access, competences and appropriation. The first measure of success is whether the program addressed each of these criteria.

Competences refer to, whether or not users have the skills or knowledge required to use available transportation systems. Through citizen culture programs (cultura ciudadana) prospective users were trained in appropriate user behaviours, and were provided with information about how queue and purchase tickets. Appropriation refers to what actions are taken in response to the transportation options, and whether they are utilized. The third factor is access, which can be ‘constrained by options (the system of transport and communication available) or by the conditions of that access (cost, logistics, etc.)’. Mobility cannot be addressed without consideration of these three factors. The Metrocable was designed for appropriation, and consideration was given to building competences in potential users. Accessibility is a more complex equation requiring additional extrapolation.

Accessibility

Accessibility is also defined by the quality of transportation, how well it connects origins and destinations, its geographical accessibility, and its facilitation of employment, education and social opportunities. The Metrocable has improved journey times and comfort. For example, for Line K, the 2.1km journey is cut from over an hour, to fifteen minutes. However, this needs to be scaled according to the walking distances, and queuing times, which can be over an hour during peak periods. Accordingly, advantages are more substantial in cost, than in time. The Metrocable provides combined tariffs

---

70 Ibid., 649.
71 Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins.,” December 2011, 650.
72 Gilbert, “The City of Eternal Spring.”
73 Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins.,” December 2011, 649.
74 Ibid., 654.
75 Ibid., 655.
with the Metro and bus, on average saving 33% per cent compared to two-bus journeys. As a result, multimodal long distance travel has improved markedly, but for those travelling a single bus journey it remains marginally more economical to take the bus. For Medellin, affordability has been a longstanding barrier to transportation, especially for women. As a result, 70% of trips are essential (44% work, 26% education), and out of economic necessity one third of these are on foot. Mode share has remained consistent with pre-Metrocable conditions, indicating that the non-essential trips that have the potential to improve participation in life have not been generated. Given cost and time, the Metrocable is inclined towards formal sector workers (e.g. construction, manufacturing and services), with long north to south commutes, and tourists. While providing accessibility between the informal north and formal south has fulfilled the central objective, it is remiss to ignore the associated inequalities. Informal sector workers, and those whose journeys diverge from north to south commutes – in particular children, youth, housewives, the elderly and the infirm who are dominant in the catchment – have received minimal benefits. Likewise, the restriction of bulky loads on board the Metrocable further constricts the employment sectors that can capitalise on the improved service. It is evident that while the Metrocable improves access, via cost and time for formal sector workers, the appropriation by the majority of the population is limited by suitability of the route, cost of travel and restrictions for use. Despite its limitations, Line K has been a success.

Ridership

76 In 2011, the Metro’s single tariff was Col$1750 (US$0.97), and the frequent travellers tariff was Col$2000 (US$1.10). Compared with the single bus fare of Col$1500 (US$0.83) Ibid., 659.
77 Ibid., 655.
Ridership on the Metrocable Line K has been a resounding success. Currently 43,000 trips are taken each day, which puts the system at capacity during the peak hours. Line J, was not designed with the equivalent consideration for urban morphology, urban density and integration with the broader network. The comparison between Line K and J elucidates the importance of contextual design in generating ridership. Further, despite high ridership on Line K, less than 10% of trips in adjacent barrios use the Metrocable to Metro mode, and walking remains the predominant mode share. Into the future, technical limitations of the system mean that Line K cannot increase capacity beyond 3000 passengers per hour. As a result, the Metrocable has captured high commuter ridership, but scope for expanding this to other sectors of the population is limited by access as well as and capacity. Surrounding the stations, economic growth metrics can also be evaluated as a measure of success.

**Economic growth**

Property value, businesses and employment are other measures of success, despite not being directly stipulated in the social urbanism objectives. In the immediate vicinity around the station, particularly along Line K, moderate increases in land and rental prices have been observed. As well as increasing formal property transactions and the emergence of a handful of estate agents – albeit as part of a broader city trend. Alongside advances in the property market, new businesses have arrived, including shops, bars and restaurants. With improved amenity, slum tourism has been spurred, created jobs for local youth, who tour visitors around the Metrocable and library parks. Correspondingly between 2004 and 2009, the average family income in these areas increased, suggesting that the opportunities were captured by locals, as well as reflecting

---

80 Ibid., 655.
81 Ibid., 652.
82 Ibid., 655.
83 Ibid., 660.
citywide economic prosperity.\textsuperscript{84} ‘New businesses however, have been limited to micro-scale enterprises and local markets, as poor connections to municipal institutions and markets has inhibited growth and the potential for improving poverty and inequality.’\textsuperscript{85} Further, the conclusions are based on datasets aggregated at the comuna level, which lack the detail to strongly correlate distance to the Metrocable and the level of prosperity.\textsuperscript{86} Observationally, economic growth has been concentrated in the immediate vicinity of the stations, with little resounding benefit across the comunas.\textsuperscript{87} By contrast, measurable benefits have been recorded with crime.

\textit{Violence}

Violence and perception of order have been two benefits of social urbanism. A rigorous natural experiment undertaken comparing data from 2003 and 2008, found homicide reductions of 66\%, and 74\% fewer reported violent events.\textsuperscript{88} The results support observational and citizen perceptions of lessened insecurity.\textsuperscript{89} In contrast, visitors tend to more acutely sense the spatial limitations of institutionalised space, which are concentrated at the station nodes.\textsuperscript{90} As a by-product of safer public spaces, neighbours have greater opportunities to interact and develop trust, which cultivates a culture of social order, and protects against intrusions of violence.\textsuperscript{91} Similarly, the Metrocable created a gateway for the state to enter the informal arena, and re-establish control.\textsuperscript{92} In short, social urbanism has been “successful as a crime prevention strategy that effectively
contributes to the well-being of socially excluded households, encourages pro-social
behaviour, improves trust and community integration in high risk neighbourhoods, and
reduces opportunities and incentives for offending.”93 However, in isolation
transportation cannot sustainably eradicate violence, as was proven by the 2009 spike in
homicides.94 Infrastructure must be complemented with strategies to intervene in drug
trafficking and create opportunities to cater for the oversupply of unemployed youth.
Further, detractors also warn about drawing correlation between crime and social
urbanism given the complex causal relationships.95 Nonetheless “social urbanism has laid
the groundwork to build communities with greater capacity to resist renewed and
uncontested subordination to illegal groups and criminal organizations.”96 Despite the
convolution of causal relationships, it is reasonable to deduce a connection between the
Metrocable and associated urban improvements, and improved sense of order.

Symbolic value

Intangible, but perhaps of greater significance is the symbolic value of the Metrocable.
The spectacle of the Metrocable has become a point of pride for residents.97 Supported by
a 2014 survey, where the people of Medellin voted the Metro system the best business in
the city, and giving an approval rating of 99% to the network, and 96% for system
management.98 This is compounded by evidence of community self-esteem and feelings
of inclusion.99 As citizens develop stronger feelings of respect, the government in turn
gains legitimacy and the trust of its constituency.100 Despite the dubiousness of mobility,

94 After 2002 homicide rates continued to drop, but in 2009 these spiked after a leader of organized crime and ex-
paramilitary leader ‘Don Berna’ was extradited to the United States. This incident is widely accepted to indicate
that while crime had been declining in the 2000s, that it was in large part a consequence of crime monopolization
and less so a representation of the eradication of organized crime.
95 Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model: ‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin,
Colombia.” 13.
social-change/.
100 Ibid., 657.
accessibility and economic growth, the Metrocable has gained substantial ground in safety and community perception of the urban realm.

Evaluation

There is nothing revolutionary about a gondola, but Medellin’s unique application for public transportation in steep urban topographies, to deliver improvements to mobility, accessibility, state-control, and security, and muster public trust and support, is a world first.\textsuperscript{101}

The technology has been emulated globally, in Rio de Janeiro, London and Caracas, which indicates its operational success.\textsuperscript{102} It is the supplementary successes essential to social urbanism that are inconclusive. Strictly, ridership is high, uptake by local residents hovers at 10\%, travel times have been reduced, multi-tariff systems keeps costs low, immediately adjacent land markets have seen a marginal boost, new businesses have been unlocked, and state control has been reinstated. However, benefits have been disproportionately allocated to formal sector workers, and the physical environments immediately surrounding the station. Arguably, as a result there have been negligible impacts on the socio-spatial inequality across the city.\textsuperscript{103} In this vein the human development and quality of life indexes in the comunas have not produced outcomes higher than municipal trends.\textsuperscript{104} The hard metrics, don't paint an inspiring picture, however the spirit that rumbles in the city tells a different story.

Intangible benefits exceed these metrics. With a reduced perception of travel time, “spatial marginalisation” and the “notion of geographic periphery” have shifted.\textsuperscript{105} The statue of the Metrocable has compounded the atmosphere of inclusiveness, which has

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{101} Cañón-Rubiano, “Transport and Social Exclusion in Medellín. Potential, Opportunities and Challenges,” 38.
\item \textsuperscript{102} Ibid., 39.
\item \textsuperscript{103} Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 9.
\item \textsuperscript{104} Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins..,” December 2011, 656.
\item \textsuperscript{105} Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 7.
\end{itemize}
stimulated local pride and self-esteem.\footnote{Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins..,” December 2011, 658; Schwab, “New Public Open Spaces and Old Prejudices: Public Space Uses in the Centre of Medellin,” 632.} The prevailing public opinion has been that life has been recovered after political turmoil and lawlessness.\footnote{Gutiérrez et al., “The Importance of Political Coalitions in the Successful Reduction of Violence in Colombian Cities..,” 3147.} The restoration of civic spirit can be considered a latent resource, which could engender long-term changes. Conversely, the profound social unity could dissipate if the structural causes of poverty, inequality, and violence are not substantially addressed. While success is disparate and largely intangible, the substantial return on investment given the low capital and operating costs, and international acclaim, cannot be ignored as a measure of success.

Medellin has captured global attention for its transformations, and in particular for social urbanism. It received the World’s Most Innovative City prize in 2013, and was selected as the host city for the 2014 World Urban Forum.\footnote{Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model: ‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 2.} The prize is awarded by the American Urban Land Institute, and sponsored by Citigroup and the Wall Street Journal. The three partners select the final three nominees, and the first prize is awarded by popular vote. The citizens of Medellin accounted for 70% of votes, delivering in a landslide win.\footnote{Citigroup Inc., “Wall Street Journal and Citi Accounce Medellin Wins ‘City of the Year’ Global Competition,” Citigroup, March 1, 2013, http://www.citigroup.com/citi/news/2013/130301a.htm.} What the award elucidates is that Medellin’s growth is uniquely endorsed by both capitalist interests and local citizens – despite Medellin being one of the most unequal cities in the world.\footnote{Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model: ‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 2.} Accordingly, beyond the concrete metrics, the residents’ perception of their city and is equally to engendering long-term change.\footnote{Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins..,” December 2011, 654.}

3.6 Criticism and future challenges

The counterarguments to social urbanism assist in outlining the challenges for the future of Medellin. Doubts emerged as a response to Medellin receiving the innovative city
award. The backlash included, reports from the UN Human Rights Commission the national government approaches to reducing violence, which predated social urbanism, but were integral to Medellin’s present prosperity. The Archbishop who raised questions concerning “crime impunity, the appalling state of prisons, the recruitment and sexual abuse of minors, poor educational levels, and continuing high levels of poverty”, similarly stifled applause. The leading adversarial arguments, question the inclusiveness of projects and places, persistence of inequality and poverty, appropriate responsiveness to informality and the longevity of solutions.

Participation was central to the design and usage of social urbanism, but scepticism has arisen about the substance of these strategies. Repeated in the literature is the inclusiveness of the early projects, but dwindling thereafter. The question of improvement ‘for whom’, becomes pertinent when anecdotes depict incidences where public events are closed to street vendors, whereby limiting the opportunities for local residents to benefit from new economic activity. Current leadership needs to ensure that complementary policies encourage local entrepreneurship and informality, in order to maximise and distribute the benefits.

When addressing inequality and poverty, policies can either empower individuals to change their own circumstances or provide ongoing support. Fajardo aimed to do the first, and in a decade since, substantive outcomes have not been observed. Whether this speaks to the ineffectiveness of policy or sluggishness of structural changes, is difficult to decipher. Irrespective of the causes, over 80% of the population is part of the three bottom groups of Colombia’s socioeconomic class hierarchy, which is indicative of persistent socioeconomic exclusion. The prominent criticism Fajardo has received is that

---

112 Brand, “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model:‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellin, Colombia,” 12.
113 Ibid., 12–13.
115 Schwab, “New Public Open Spaces and Old Prejudices: Public Space Uses in the Centre of Medellin,” 635.
inequality and poverty have been sidelined in the media, and concealed behind transformational narratives. The current challenge is to ensure that poverty and inequality remain central to discourse and associated policy, as do the unique needs of informal communities.

Comunas are “in persistent flux and change, constantly redefining their relationship with the formal.” Fajardo’s participatory approaches took heed to the alternative paradigms synonymous with informality in the comunas. Successive administrations must continue to be respectful of this “internal logic” in developing policies. The challenges are to establish when formal perceptions are applicable to the comunas context, and to interrogate the limitations of formal aspirations and the “singular idea of progress.” This perceptive feat requires policy-makers to strip themselves of their “bourgeois gaze”, and balance between dismissing comunas as “slums”, and “romanticizing poverty and transforming [them] into...theme park[s]”, which is to “both de-historize and de-politicize its experience.” Respect for context, and in this case the counterintuitive dialogue of informal settlements will assist in improving overall city outcomes.

Medellín has evolved through social urbanism, but to prevent devolution back to crime and lawlessness, the sustainability of these projects must be reviewed. Concerns have arisen about the quality of construction and high maintenance costs of the library parks. For example, a year after the Parque Biblioteca Espana was completed it had already visibly deteriorated. Of greater concern is the ability to control the re-emergence of violence. Consistent investment needs to be placed on furthering social

---

117 Colombia has six levels of socioeconomic class. Ibid., 3147.
119 Ibid., 187.
119 Ibid., 186.
123 “Giancarlo Mazzanti Builds an Icon to Foster Optimism in Medellín, Colombia, with His Parque Biblioteca España,” Architectural Record 196, no. 11 (November 2008): 138.
inclusion, and eventually eliminating the drivers of violence. To these ends, public funds have been allocated to new education and job opportunities particularly for youth, to prevent their victimization or participation in crime. Ongoing investment will be required to bolster urban transformation, and provide opportunities for further growth.

3.7 Opportunities

In this climate of success, opportunities for branding, tourism and global replication have emerged. Social urbanism has become synonymous with Medellin, and unintentionally created a transformative brand, and made the comunas a tourist attraction. Branding attracts investment and tourism, which supports community development, and activates the ‘social forces the challenge social exclusion and unrest’. In this way, branding can be an ‘economic and social tool’ that can be harnessed to stimulate positive changes, which internally perpetuates investment appeal and development opportunities.

In the rapidly polarizing and violent cities of Latin America, the Medellin Model is being considered by governments to solve similar sounding problems. First and foremost consideration must be given to context, and the specific community and social conditions.

Already the Metrocable has been built in Caracas, Rio de Janeiro and other Colombian cities. What was evident even in the Line K and Line J projects was that there are “specific minimum conditions in terms of urban morphology and population density” necessary to deliver improved “living conditions, economic opportunities and social inclusion.”

Branding, tourism and replication, are three focus areas for Medellin moving forward, all of which have great potential to deliver development goals.

4 Conclusion

Social urbanism was a duel effort of physical and social interventions, founded on the notions that violence is an economic and social problem. Materially, to address inequality large-scale investment was made through library parks, the Metrocable, public spaces, housing, and complementary social programs. Improving the public realm challenged stigmatization and cultivated pride, identity and belonging, “materialise[d] the idea of inclusion”, and illuminated Medellin on the world stage. While all interventions have been an operational success the social impacts remain unclear. What can be deduced is that infrastructure alone cannot challenge inequality and poverty, but its symbolic value can be profoundly powerful in changing a city. In the longer-term this citizen energy needs to be harnessed and supported through continued investment in social infrastructure. Or over time “the spectacular nature of the aesthetics of the cable-car systems [will] lose its appeal against a backdrop of unmitigated poverty”, and risk recidivism of violence. The positive branding that has overflowed from Medellin’s global success should be harnessed to promote development outcomes, and not be a distraction from endemic social issues. It is challenging to determine whether there have been substantial social benefits from social urbanism. What is clear is that the more people in Medellin, now believe in Medellin, trust their leaders and are optimistic about the future. The collectivist attitude, which provides a remarkable social foundation for substantial changes, is an affirmation that policies like social urbanism, can challenge ingrained urban paradigms and begin new narratives.

135 Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins,” December 2011, 647.
136 Ibid., 658.
Appendix

A1. Comunas of Medellin

Figure 7 Comunas of Medellin

Licensed under creative commons – no citation required
A2. Transportation map Medellin

Figure 8 Transportation Map\textsuperscript{139}

A3. Basic Information: Metrocable lines

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Line K</th>
<th>Line J</th>
<th>Line L</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Launch date</td>
<td>August 2004</td>
<td>March 2008</td>
<td>February 2010</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Construction time</td>
<td>14 months</td>
<td>15 months</td>
<td>10 months</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Length</td>
<td>2072 m</td>
<td>2782 m</td>
<td>4469 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Commercial speed</td>
<td>5 m/s</td>
<td>5 m/s</td>
<td>6 m/s</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of pylons</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>31</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of stations</td>
<td>4 (incl. Metro station)</td>
<td>4 (incl. Metro station)</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No. of cabins</td>
<td>93</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>27</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Distance between</td>
<td>60 m</td>
<td>60 m</td>
<td>340 m</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installed capacity</td>
<td>3000 passengers/hour</td>
<td>3000 passengers/hour</td>
<td>1200 passengers/hour</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Estimated total cost (US$2003)</td>
<td>US$24 million (at average)</td>
<td>US$47 million (at average)</td>
<td>US$21 million (at average 2009 exchange rate)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cost per kilometre</td>
<td>US$11.6 million</td>
<td>US$16.9 million</td>
<td>US$4.7 million</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Municipality: 55%</td>
<td>Municipality: 73%</td>
<td>Municipality: 38%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sources of finance</td>
<td>Metro: 45%</td>
<td>Metro: 27%</td>
<td>Regional Govt: 17%; Min. Transport: 9%; Other: 2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Metro de Medellín.

Figure 9 Metrocable lines – basic information table.  

140 Brand and Dávila, “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins.,” December 2011, 653.


Brand, Peter. “Governing Inequality in the South Through the Barcelona Model: ‘Social Urbanism’ in Medellín, Colombia,” 2013.


Brand, Peter, and Julio D. Dávila. “Mobility Innovation at the Urban Margins.” City 15, no. 6 (December 2011): 647–61.


Gutiérrez, Francisco, María Pinto, Juan Carlos Arenas, Tania Guzmán, and María Gutiérrez. “The Importance of Political Coalitions in the Successful Reduction of