Medellín has overcome diverse challenges as the once most violent city in the world, a status that was the result of decades of uncontrolled immigration, urban expansion, economic crises and years of violence due to illegal commerce, drug trafficking, conflicts and social inequalities. Over the past three decades, Medellín has undergone a remarkable transformation, through collective leadership, strategic and participatory planning, and diverse catalytic urban projects. Uncontrolled and vast urban sprawl has resulted in large expanses of informal settlements occupying the risky, peripheral hills along the borders of the urbanized, sloping topography that characterizes the city. Through a wide and complex process of social dialogue, participatory planning and institutional transformation, Medellín has overcome extreme rates of inequality, brought accessibility to the city for all and built civic and public life through innovative projects.

After the difficult times of the early 1990s, with support from its academic and social institutions and private stakeholders, Medellín has built upon a tradition of planning to become an urban lab for the construction of public life with the aim of inclusive, peaceful and sustainable development.

Social Innovation and Accessibility

Medellín strongly believes that educational, civic and...
cultural transformation can bring positive change for the city. One strategy for accessibility and inclusion is a huge investment in multimodal public transportation. This investment includes the recently inaugurated Ayacucho Tram that complements existing transportation options offered by the Medellin Metro (Metro de Medellín), bus rapid transit (Metroplús), public shared bikes (EnCicla), and a gondola cable car system (MetroCable).

The Articulate Life Units (Unidades de Vida Articulada) programme (2012-2015) is a project where citizens are invited to co-create community centers. Citizens become involved in the building of cultural, recreational and sports venues, many of which are adapted from existing utility water tanks that occupied large plots of previously inaccessible, green areas in the middle of precarious neighbourhoods.

A Tradition of Long Term Planning

Medellín has come a long way from the years of the Presidential Counselling (Consejería Presidencial) (1990-94) and the Strategic Plan of 1995-97. The new long-term Land Use Plan of Medellín (1999–2027) is the result of citizen discussion and agreement and has been approved by eighty percent of the City Council. The plan represents a vision for the future together with strategic redevelopment projects such as the Medellín River Parks project and its Urban Renewal Master Plans (Macro Proyectos Urbanos del Río), which cover the entire city and help to ensure continuity in the city’s urban transformation despite changes in leadership.

The Metropolitan Green Belt (Jardín Circunvalar de Medellín) is an intervention along the urban-rural edge of the city that seeks to simultaneously address several ecological, social and economic issues that include: controlling urban expansion; mitigating risks of landslides and groundwater; improving the conditions of settlements; generating new public spaces; and connecting the hillside and the city through multi-modal transportation infrastructure, thereby improving accessibility to jobs and education.

The “compact city” model prioritizes urban redevelopment inside the city’s urban fabric by identifying thirty-three strategic redevelopment areas close to the Medellín River. Medellín River Parks aims to promote green urban development, environmental restoration and connectivity throughout the city. The strategic objective is to bring the river back to the citizens as the main structure of the urban ecosystem by capitalizing on its pollution control program, optimizing its current role as a central corridor for regional and urban multimodal mobility (including non-motorized modes), and creating quality public spaces and parks.

Medellín has come a long way from its past, but fundamental challenges persist.

Resources


Jorge Pérez Jaramillo, an architect, was the planning director of Medellín during the period of 2012-15, and is currently a visiting Fellow of King’s College 2017.
Medellín River Parks

Photo Credit: Juan Manuel Uribe