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CASE STUDY



## The transformation of Medellín into a 'City for Life:' insights for healthy cities

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### ABSTRACT

Medellín, Colombia, managed to turn itself from one of the most violent and unequal places in the world to a more safe, inclusive and healthy city. Medellín is recognized for this transformation and its innovative city planning, design and development. This paper highlights some of the key drivers behind Medellín's transformation and the lessons these factors have for other cities seeking to reduce inequality and violence. We combine one-on-one interviews with key stakeholders involved in Medellín's transformation, with reviews of archival documents, media content analyses and ideas revealed during a six-month seminar on the transformation of Medellín held at the University of California, Berkeley, in 2017. We suggest that a set of inter-related factors, from civil society mobilization, to urban governance reforms to public space investments in the poorest neighborhoods, combined to help transform Medellín's built, social, natural, political and economic environments. While the transformation of Medellín may be ongoing and incomplete, we suggest that the factors analyzed here offer insights for planning more healthy and equitable cities globally.

### ARTICLE HISTORY

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### KEYWORDS

Medellín; Colombia;  
violence; governance;  
planning; healthy cities;  
equity

### Introduction

How does a city turn itself from one of the most violent in the world to a model of inclusion and a *City for Life*? Much has been said and written about the transformation of Medellín, Colombia, over the past twenty or more years (c.f., Fukuyama and Colby 2011, Kimmelman 2012, Vulliamy 2013, Brodzinsky 2014, Martin 2014, Warnock-Smith 2016). Once the most violent city in the world, Medellín was recognized in 2013 as the most innovative city in the world by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Urban Land Institute* and received the *Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize* in 2016 (Lee Kuan Yew 2016). In the 2000s, when many Latin American cities were struggling with growing levels of urban violence and inequality, Medellín was celebrated as an impressive case of urban transformation and a model of successful public initiatives that reduced not only gun violence but also poverty, segregation and inequality (Economist 2014). This article highlights some of the key factors that have contributed to the successful, but still incomplete, transformation of Medellín from the 1990s through 2016.

We identified at least seven key drivers of Medellín's transformation that have contributed to it being labeled a 'City for Life' (UN Habitat 2014) and explore how a critical review of Medellín's transformation can provide lessons for healthy city planning everywhere. 'City for Life' was the slogan of the Medellín municipal government from 2011–15 and the title used for the City when it hosted the 2014 World Urban Forum (UN Habitat 2014). In this case study, we highlight that Medellín's

transformation focused on both processes (i.e., who is included and how are decisions made) as well as products (i.e., the plan, programmes and built form) of healthy city planning and development. We also suggest that Medellín's transformation offers the global health community insights for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals and New Urban Agenda. The seven interrelated factors that together have contributed to the successful transformation of this city from a place characterized as greatly unequal and violent, to one of increasing prosperity for all and a *City for Life*, include:

- (1) Governance continuity & transparency – successive leaders implementing long-range plans and strategies.
- (2) Planning a 'city for life' – centering the social determinants of health in redevelopment.
- (3) Adaptation & innovation – adjusting programs as you learn what is and is not effective.
- (4) Sustained civic engagement – committing to on-going civil society involvement in generating and implementing solutions.
- (5) Integrated projects that include public-private partnerships – working across sectors and spatially integrating services that promote well-being.
- (6) Promoting education & cultural identity – prioritizing youth and culture as ways to ensure all segments of the population benefit.
- (7) Ethics of Aesthetics – investing the most beautiful and functional projects in areas with the

highest levels of poverty and historic divestment.

While many practitioners and governments may be eager to capture the ‘ingredients’ of Medellín’s success, we found that investing simultaneously in people, places and policies is a key principle and lesson from Medellín for cities everywhere.

## Methods

We report on insights from a diverse group of practitioners involved in the transformation and also those studying and evaluating the changes in Medellín from the outside. This ‘inside’ and ‘outside’ perspective of our analyses offers balance and contributes to ongoing policy and planning discourses aimed at reducing urban inequities and violence around the world (CCSPJ 2017). We use evidence, data and debates presented during a 2017 seminar at UC Berkeley that included practitioners, academics, elected officials as well as non-governmental and private sector actors from Medellín. The seminar was organized around key issues, including violence, governance, education, transport, environment and human health, and each panel presented their findings and offered written reflections. More information on seminar content and participants can be found here, <https://iurmedellinseminar.weebly.com/>.

To support findings from the 2017 seminar, we also conducted background research on the transformation of Medellín, reviewing the media coverage and published literatures in English and Spanish. Finally, a series of interviews with leaders, participants and close observers of the transformation of Medellín were conducted. Interviewees were selected to provide a range of perspectives from politicians, planning professionals, academics, and activists. We used a snowball technique for selecting interviewees, asking each seminar participant to recommend others who were involved in the transformation process. We also identified key informants through a content analyses of media coverage and evaluations of interventions spanning the years of 2004–2016. The interviews were open-ended, and asked each interviewee to describe what they thought were the key events and processes behind Medellín’s transformation, what were the reasons behind the changes, what were the strengths and limits of the transformation, and what lessons they took away from participating in or observing the transformation? To preserve the integrity of perspectives shared, we provide select quotes from interviews and seminar discussions throughout the paper with permission from participants. A full list of interviewees can be found as an appendix.

## Background: Medellín’s urban crisis & early efforts to recover

Medellín is Colombia’s second-largest city, with a population of over 3.5 million people.

The city is the capital of the department of Antioquia, and is located in the Aburrá Valley, a central region of the Andes Mountains in South America. The Medellín River bisects the city and its terrain is characterized by steep hillsides leading down to the valley floor. The poorer districts, or comunas, tend to be on the hillsides and most of the commercial activity and services are concentrated towards the valley floor, East and West of the Medellín River (Figure 1).

Medellín’s economy grew rapidly in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on the basis of manufacturing and financial services (Sánchez Jabba 2013). This contributed to large population in-migration of people from rural areas, where national conflict between left wing guerrilla and right-wing paramilitary groups displaced millions of residents and threatened agricultural jobs. As Medellín’s industrial sector declined and the economy slowed, many migrants could not find formal employment and there was a steep rise in socio-economic inequality. By the 1980s, paramilitary groups and drug cartels fought over control of space and illicit markets, and rates of violence in the city began to spike well above national levels. Poverty, drug trafficking and the heavy-hand of the military combined to give Medellín the infamous title in the 1990s as the murder capital of the world (Vulliamy 2013).

In 1989, several presidential candidates and politicians were assassinated by drug gang leader Pablo Escobar, such as the former Governor Antonio Roldán Betancur and the former Mayor of Medellín Pablo Peláez González. These same narco-terrorist groups threatened to use violence to control national and local politics. In 1991 the homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants in Medellín was 381, the highest in the world and in any other city in the last 25 years (Brodzinsky 2014) (Figure 2). Yet, by 2011 Medellín had a murder rate of 70 per 100,000 inhabitants, and by 2015 this figure was reduced to 19, (the Colombian homicide rate in 2015 was 20/100,000), no longer appearing in the top 50 most violent cities in the world (Consejo Ciudadano para la Seguridad Pública y la Justicia Penal (CCSPJP) 2017). In the 1990s Medellín also had the highest extreme poverty index, equivalent to 19.4% of the population and in 2002, over 36% of the population was living in poverty (Figure 3). By 2015, the percentage of the population living in poverty fell to 14.3% and only 3% of the population was living in extreme poverty (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b).

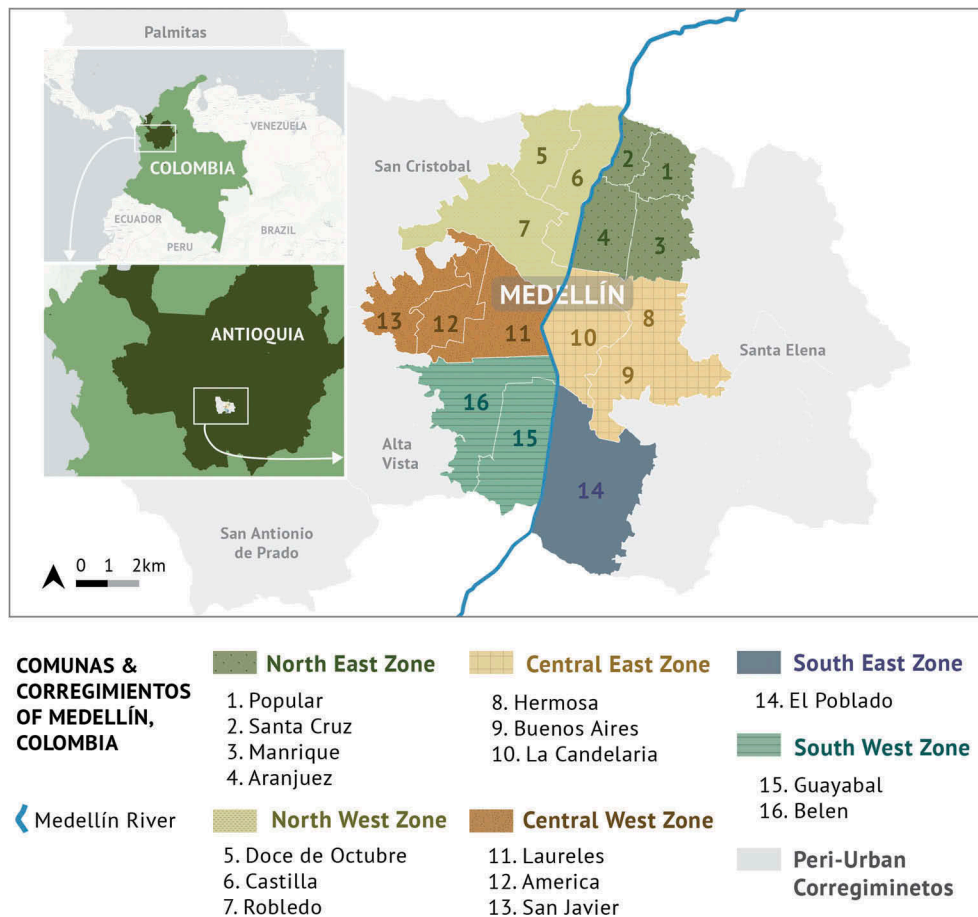


Figure 1. Medellín and its districts.

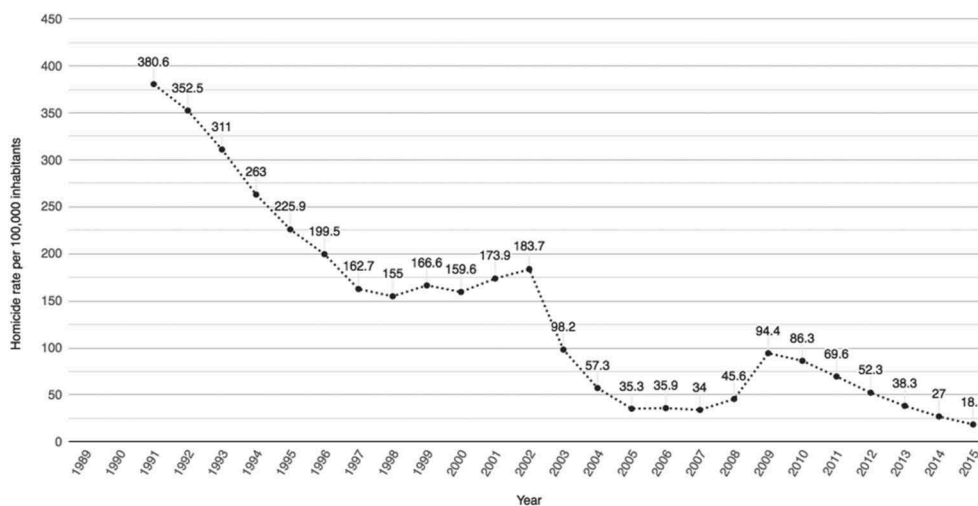


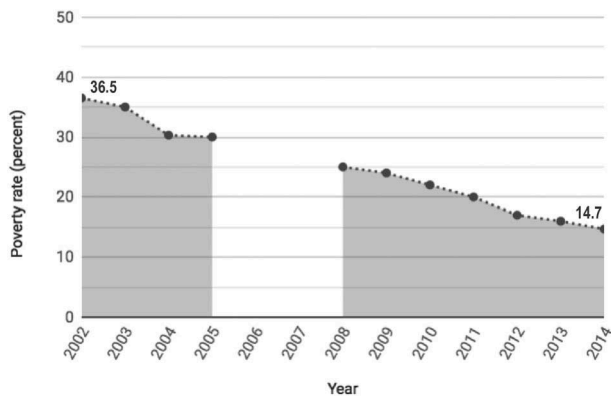
Figure 2. Homicide rate per 100,000 inhabitants, Medellín, Colombia, 1991–2015 (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b).

Medellín experienced the collapse of its industrial economy in the late 1970s and by the 1990s unemployment reached 22% (Betancur 2007). However, by 2014 the city's economy had recovered and unemployment was reduced to 8.8% (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b) (Figure 4).

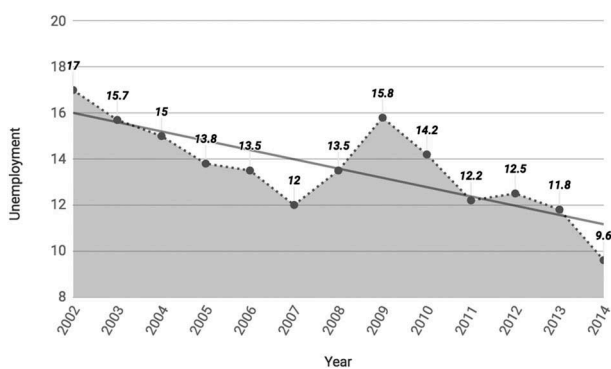
The new Colombian Constitution of 1991 ushered in political reforms that began to radically transform governance. The Constitution defined Colombia as a 'social state under the rule of law,' or *estado social*

*de derecho*, which was accompanied by new rules mandating decentralized municipal governance, participatory democracy, a recognition of ethno-cultural diversity, and a mandate that local governments develop plans to explicitly serve the needs of the urban poor (Piedrahita and González 2010).

From 1990–95, a new Presidential Council for Medellín (Consejería Presidencial para Medellín) institutionalized participatory processes to design and implement new civic projects. In 1996, a new



**Figure 3.** Percent of Medellín population living in poverty, 2002–2014 (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015a).



**Figure 4.** Medellín percent population unemployed, 2002–2014 (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b).

long-range Strategic Plan for Medellín and the Metropolitan Area was drafted as was a new Municipal System of Planning. These procedural reforms instituted a new ethos of direct democracy, which began to be practiced within Colombia's cities (Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) 2001).

In 1993, the Integrated Slum Upgrading Program of Medellín (Programa Integral de Mejoramiento de Barrios Subnormales en Medellín) or PRIMED, was established with the aims of reducing violence in the city's poor areas through a redevelopment partnership between the municipality, the national government, and financing from the German government. This was one of the first targeted approaches to reduce violence and inequality by engaging the urban poor in generating integrated, multi-sectoral planning solutions. The PRIMED projects aimed to reduce violence using place-based and people-focused investments, such as improved housing quality and tenure, infrastructure (water, roads, sanitation etc.), schools, health centres and reducing environmental risks, such as landslides and floods (Betancur 2007).

While PRIMED was somewhat short-lived, it was consistent with the goals and procedures of the *Consejería* and the *Plan Estratégico*, or strategic plan of 1990, and all of these plans and programs set in motion new, meaningful community engagement

processes that were intended to design and implement multi-sectoral, integrated urban improvement projects in the city's poorest and most violent neighborhoods, or comunas. Emerging from these efforts was a municipal effort in the early 2000s called *Proyectos Urbanos Integrales*, or Integrated Urban Projects (PUIs) (IDB 2011). The PUI also aimed to be both process and product focused, and institutionalized community-based public workshops and leadership building in the impoverished comunas. The PUI brought together neighborhood residents and all sectors of municipal government in the design and implementation of projects that would spatially link transport, parks, streets, walkways, public spaces, and social and economic services (Puerta 2011). A new generation of community leaders emerged from these projects who, as engaged citizens, began to hold subsequent municipal administrations accountable and publicly defend the long-term development objectives set forth in the city-wide plans and neighborhood projects. Thus, one response to the crisis of violence in Medellín was new governance, citizen engagement, and investments in public spaces in the poorest neighborhoods, using public and private resources.

### Key component 1: governance continuity & transparency

Municipal decentralization and autonomy was mandated through the 1991 Colombian Constitution, and this contributed to more independent local elections and participatory processes in Medellín (Guerrero 2011). These factors also contributed to greater public demand for continuity of municipal projects, even as municipal leadership changed, and increased transparency of the actions within local government (Falleti 2010). Mayors were first elected in 1988 for two-year terms, eventually gaining the four-year tenure of today (Figure 5). Elected, rather than appointed Mayors shifted the balance of power and allowed for more independent leadership than from leaders previously appointed by the central government's political party. Many of Medellín's elected mayors from at least 2000 broke from traditional party affiliations to gain public support, which also held them more accountable to a larger and more politically diverse set of interests (Arenas and Alonso 2013).<sup>1</sup>

Also in the 2000s, a new political movement emerged that helped hold elected officials accountable and forced different leaders to implement previously negotiated plans and projects. The new movement, known as *Movimiento Compromiso Ciudadano* (Citizens' Commitment Movement) included a new coalition of public voices from academia and non-governmental institutions. The coalition helped define 'social urbanism,' which emerged as an approach to improving public space and the physical upgrading of the poorest neighborhoods with the explicit aim of

## TRANSFORMATION OF MEDELLÍN: TIMELINE OF EVENTS

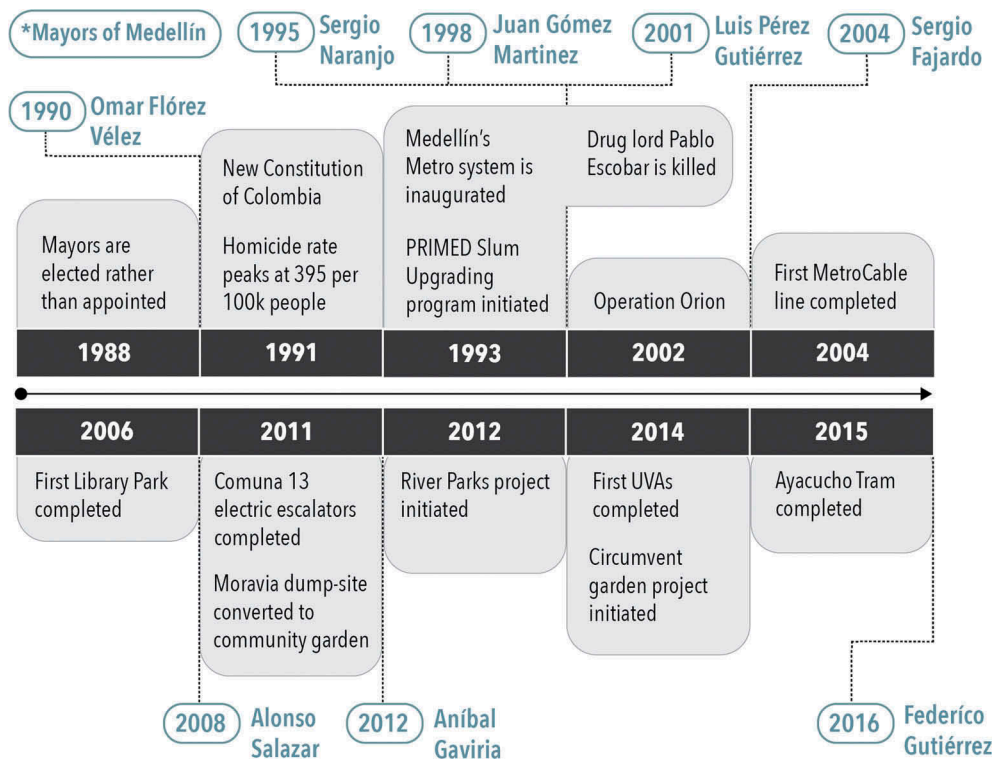


Figure 5. Timeline of key events in Medellín's Transformation.

addressing violence and socioeconomic inequalities. This movement, of which Mayor Sergio Fajardo was a key leader, also helped increase civic engagement and reject the traditional clientelistic practices of the political elite (Arenas and Alonso 2013).

As city mayors became responsible for complex urban issues such as health, education, housing, security, etc., they began to rely on the actions of their predecessors for success and public approval. For example, the now famous Metrocable aerial cable car that connects hillside poor communities to the entire city, was initiated by Mayor Luis Perez but completed and inaugurated by Mayor Sergio Fajardo in 2004, with four additional cables implemented under three subsequent mayors. As former Mayor Gaviria noted:

*We must greatly appreciate the governments of the transformation, those of the last fifteen or twenty years, but we must also greatly appreciate the governments of what I would call the containment, that is, the governments that contained crime. At that time, one looks at Medellín and perhaps river parks were not being built, nor were library parks being built, nor was the Ayacucho tram being built, nor were quality schools being built. Maybe the investments and the works and the programs and projects were not as big, as visible, nor as many as the subsequent governments. But why? because those governments were dedicated to containing an absolutely overwhelming violence. And I believe that historical judgment must value both those governments*

*of containment and the subsequent governments of physical transformation.*

According to a review by the Inter-American Development Bank, Medellín has had a relatively high quality of political transparency with almost no major corruption scandals compared to other Colombian cities (IDB 2011). Political transparency is a challenge for all municipalities, in rich or poor countries; democracy or not. What was different in Medellín was the crisis of violence (and the public planning processes that aimed to address it), the commitment to avoid past corruption and a constitutional and legal commitment to civil society engagement. In Colombia, as in many Latin American countries, the roles for and expectations of government in poverty alleviation, development and service provision is quite high (Franz 2017). The increased transparency was also in-part a response to earlier efforts by the central government to use police and military personnel in high-violence areas of the city, such as the *Orion Operation*. The Orion Operation was widely criticized by human rights and other social justice groups for its brutal treatment of the urban poor. One alternative response was an integrated pacification effort launched in Medellín with the national government that negotiated a paramilitary ceasefire in 2002 and demobilization in 2003 (Abello-Colak and Pearce 2015).

## Key component 2: planning a 'city for life'

Urbanization in Colombia, as in many other Latin American countries, has been mostly informal, without the direct participation of the state. Yet, in Medellín urban planning has been transformed into a practice focused on reducing violence and promoting well-being (Brand 2013). Violence reduction was integrated into land use planning, housing, recreation and economic development, such as through the *Planes de la Consejería Presidencial para Medellín, Vivienda y Recreación para Acabar con la Violencia*. Thus, urban planning and the essential conditions for a vibrant and healthy city were recognized early on as key to violence reduction (Muggah *et al.* 2016). Jorge Perez, former Director of Planning for Medellín, points to the important role played by local universities in this effort:

*The planning tradition in Medellín is one that has emerged from local capacity building efforts; through the strengthening of local universities emerged a revolution of urban thinking – students and young architects that were dreaming of a new Medellín. Through the universities we have been creating special attitudes, special knowledge, but also people – and when you have social capital you can transform reality. When you have local knowledge and local research you have better chances of finding real solutions.*

From 1998 to 2007 three different Mayors, all in succession, helped lead planning projects such as Parque de los Pies Descalzos, Parque de los Deseos, Plaza Mayor, Biblioteca España and Plaza de Cisneros, where the urban poor participated with designers to co- create new public spaces in the most deprived areas of the city. This in essence flipped traditional planning on its head by not only including the poor in decisions that were in their community, but by the state investing in major civic projects in the city's poorest areas. This would become a signature aspect of Medellín's 'social urbanism,' which included meaningful resident participation to plan for and implement social and physical changes in the poorest areas of the city as its highest priority (Sotomayor and Daniere 2017). Projects of this time began to define urban planning as primarily concerned with improving life for the poor, and included new social housing, safe public space, schools and early childhood education, hospitals and sport centers. By 2012, planning and municipal policy became defined as an approach called the *City for Life*, which put life and equity at the center of municipal governance (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b) (Figure 6).



Figure 6. Medellín city for life model (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b).

## Key component 3: adaptation & social innovation

The innovations in Medellín emerged, in part, because its leaders and residents learned from and adapted strategies from other contexts and cities for their communities. Mayor Pérez visited Bilbao, Spain, and found the inspiration for the first Metrocable. Medellín's leaders built a partnership with Spanish designers that would influence a series of projects, including the famous Spain Library Park in Santo Domingo (Franz 2017). Mayors in Bogota were already recognized as some of the most innovative urban planners and managers in the world, and inspiration within Medellín would come from the capital city as well. Though Medellín's transport innovations differ from Bogota's use of Bus Rapid Transit, Medellín has borrowed lessons on sustainable mobility and cycling from Bogota, including a public bike scheme called *EnCicla* and urban cycling events such as *Ciclovia* (Fukuyama and Colby 2011). The Medellín River Parks project, proposed by Mayor Aníbal Gaviria, is inspired by cities worldwide that are recovering bodies of water and surrounding ecosystems as public spaces, drawing from examples like the Cheonggyecheon in Seoul, Madrid and Chile.

Innovative transport and urban infrastructure ideas adapted everyday technology for local good. This form of social innovation is exemplified by the well-known Metrocable system, the first of its kind to employ ski lift technology for public transport, electric escalators that ease mobility in the Comuna 13 neighborhood, and community centers called Articulated Life Units (UVAs) (Brand and Dávila 2011). The Unidades de

Vida Articulada (UVA) are community facilities concentrated in poorer hillside neighborhoods that re-purpose water storage tanks as useable public space.

These innovative yet simple investments, though not specifically framed as violence reduction interventions, have contributed to safer and more accessible public space throughout the city. In a longitudinal study conducted between 2003 and 2008, researchers found that the decline in homicide rates was 66% greater in neighborhoods that received a Metrocable line compared to those that did not. Neighborhoods with Metrocables also saw a 75% greater decrease in reported violence between the two time periods (Cerdá *et al.* 2012). As Cerdá noted in an interview, ‘We observed a lot of new things happening around the cable cars that we thought could be important for violence reduction, like improvement of the built environment, creation of small businesses, creation of areas where people could talk and build trust amongst one another.’

#### **Key component 4: sustained civic participation**

In the wake of social urbanism and the PUI projects, the Medellín government began actively engaging residents through ‘imagination workshops.’ Many workshops were co-facilitated by the Urban Development Agency (or EDU), which is a municipal agency that helps design, manage and implement strategic neighborhood upgrading projects. EDU planners focused on developing strong community-based relationships by dedicating hundreds of hours to participatory planning activities and negotiating small truces between the municipality, local leaders, and youth gangs (Sotomayor and Daniere 2017). The EDU planners also had to manage the inevitable displacement that came with some public works projects through on-going community negotiations over sale of land and resettlement areas within upgraded neighborhoods. However, according to Brand (2013), EDU planners ensured projects ‘were undertaken with the intimate participation of residents, no family was forcibly rehoused, all transactions were by voluntary agreement, and there was no significant cost for those families as municipal budgets and multiple subsidies were focused on the project (p. 5)’

In order to build and maintain civic capacities, Medellín developed the *Parque de la Vida* (*Park of Life*), a community center created through an alliance between the University of Antioquia and the Mayor’s Office of Medellín to train residents in public engagement, conflict resolution and citizenship. The center also links civic engagement to public health, and offers programs in healthy behaviors, telemedicine, and provides workshops for developing public policies among disparate social groups (parquedelavida.co). As Eliana Martínez, Professor of Epidemiology at the University of Antioquia noted:

*The Parque de la Vida created a unique partnership that allows residents to learn from and with University de Antioquia students across many subjects, while also recognizing that health isn’t something that just happens in a hospital, but rather health starts with community, democracy, peace, art, music, culture and other social factors.*

Medellín is also one of the largest cities in the world engaged in *participatory budgeting* (Uran 2009). With paramilitary groups controlling most local institutions and a state with limited credibility, participatory budgeting became one way to re-engage citizens and build trust by allowing communities to discuss their priorities and vote on how municipal resources ought to be allocated in their neighborhood (Hajdarowicz 2018). Participatory budgeting can also be a way for youth to understand how government can work for, not against, their interests. Transparency and accountability are enhanced by the fact that close to 5% of the municipal budget is allocated through the civic process of participatory budgeting. From 2005 to 2015, the annual participatory budget increased from roughly 60 to 151 million Colombian Pesos (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b) (Figure 7). The allocation of the participatory funds for community driven projects is managed by a group of popularly elected neighborhood planning representatives called *Juntas Administradoras Locales* (JALs) (Guerrero 2011).

#### **Key component 5: integrated plans & public-private partnerships**

Collaborative public-private sector relations in Medellín have helped advance and sustain the city’s response to violence and to plan and finance transformative projects. Many projects and social programs were made possible through financial support of the Public Enterprises of Medellín (Empresa Públicas de Medellín) and the Metro Enterprise (Empresa Metro). EPM is the only public utility provider and is mandated by its charter to return 30% of its net profits to the city of Medellín for social and community-based projects (Bateman *et al.* 2011). The success of EPM and the revenue sharing arrangement with the municipality is one of the most important public-private sector partnerships in Medellín and a key factor in understanding how many of the innovative, equity-focused projects and programs in the city have been financed (Sotomayor and Daniere 2017).

Yet, the strength of its main private sector group, founded in the 1970s and known today as the Sindicato Antioqueño alongside the ProAntioquia Foundation set up by the business sector in 1975, also provided strategic direction and financial resources to the city’s transformation (Guerrero



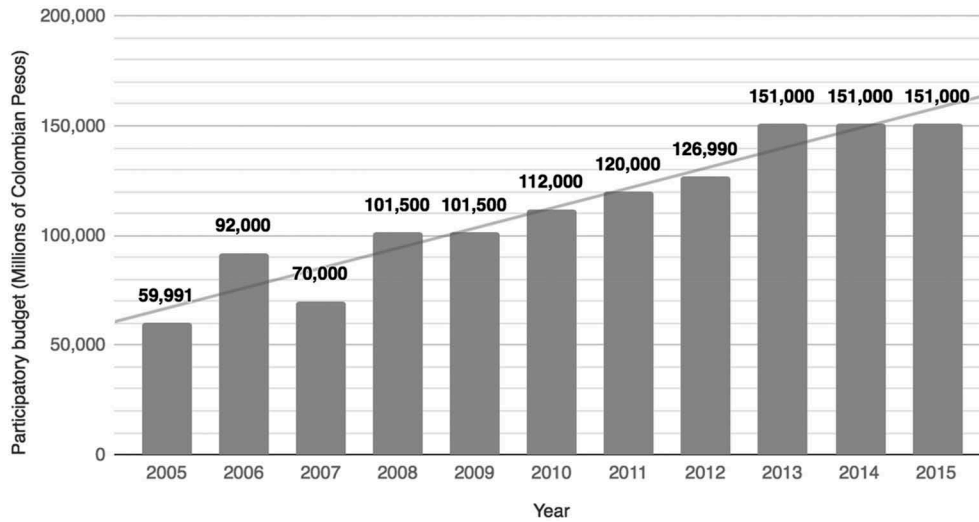


Figure 7. Medellín participatory budget per comuna, 2005–2015 (Alcaldía de Medellín 2015b).

2011). The public and private sectors coordinated in the 2000s to reshape Medellín’s economy around a set of interlinked clusters that built on the city’s industrial past while fostering emerging markets, including professional services, health tourism, and information technology. The cluster initiative generated substantial increases in municipal tax revenue (Restrepo Santamaría 2011).

Perhaps most emblematic of partnerships that contributed to integrated projects in Medellín is its transport system. Medellín remains the only city in Colombia that integrates a train (Metro de Medellín) with aerial gondola cable cars (Metrocable), Bus Rapid Transit (Metroplús), Trams (Ayacucho), Electric Escalators, non-motorized cycle-only (EnCicla) lanes and pedestrian-only bridges and pathways. According to Carlos

Cadena Gaitan, Professor at EAFIT (Escuela de Administración y Finanzas e Instituto Tecnológico) University:

*Getting people to use transit and bicycles demanded an integrated, multi-modal system. While still imperfect, especially with regards to pedestrian safety, Medellín has succeeded in transforming its transport system to be accessible for all.*

Another place-based innovation that combines physical and social programs are *Cedezos*, or Centers of Zonal Development. These centers are located in the library parks throughout the city, and are information and access points that bring together almost all the potential services that are available to support micro entrepreneurs in the comunas. The centers

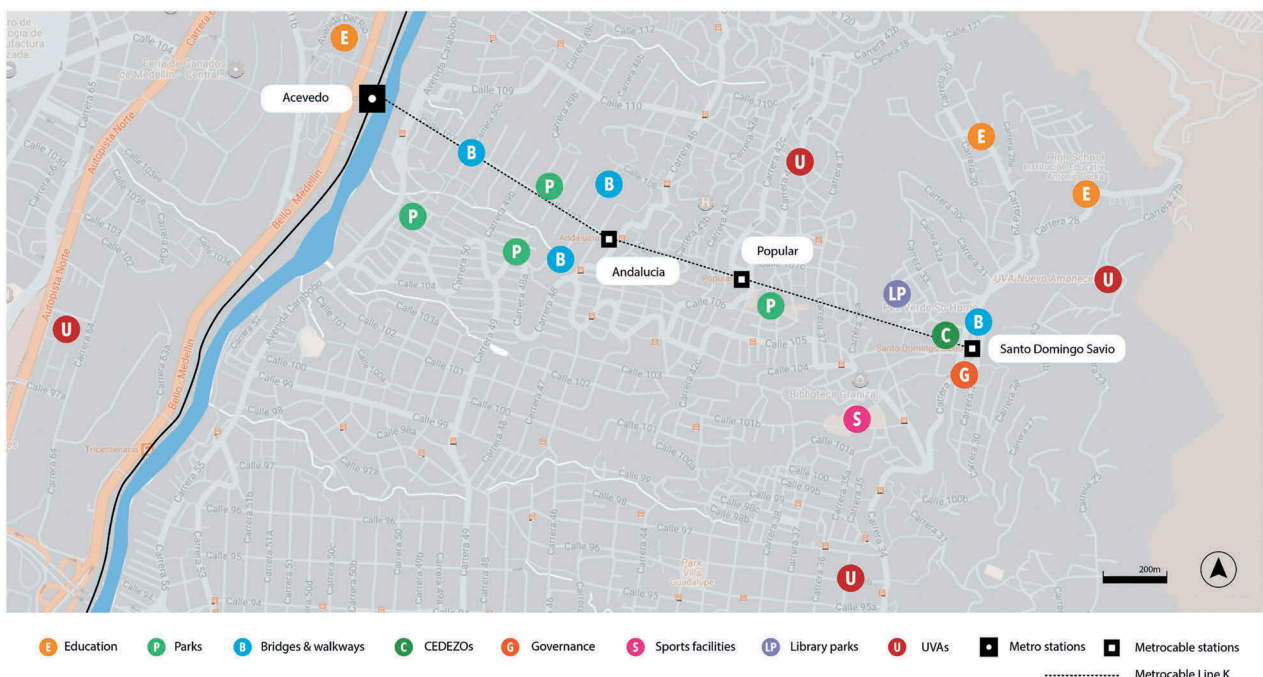


Figure 8. Metrocable in comuna 1 and integrated community projects (Urbam, EAFIT University 2014).

provide information about potential sources of credit, training, government contracting and small business development (Bateman *et al.* 2011). In Comuna 1, where the first Metrocable was installed, new neighborhood parks, schools, UVAs, sports facilities and *Cedezos* were developed, with many local residents employed in these facilities (Figure 8).

Food security is another example of building partnerships. In 2009, Medellín became the first city in Colombia with a unit dedicated to Food and Nutrition Security, which is managed by the Secretary of Social Inclusion and Family. The program focused on sustainable and equitable rural-urban supply chains and targeting four low-income comunas. The municipal program connects urban neighbourhoods with poor, small-scale farmers in the surrounding department of Antioquia. The program has lowered costs for urban consumers, ensured urban accessibility to high-quality food, while also increasing rural farming income. New, direct-to-consumer markets have been constructed in the comunas, managed by local associations (Food & Agriculture Organisation 2016).

### Key component 6: education & cultural identity

While *Paisas*, the local name for citizens of Medellín, have historically had a strong sense of identity, prior to the city's transformation residents tended to identify more with their neighborhood rather than the city as a collective. Combining investments in education with a renewed appreciation of local and Colombian culture has also been a key feature of the city's transformation to a peaceful, welcoming and inclusive municipality. Like with transport, the city invested in building new, high-quality educational facilities and included innovative programming and hiring local residents as educators and staff. One program, called *Buen Comienzo* or 'Good Start', combines early childhood education, food security and child nutrition (Sotomayor 2015).

Medellín's approach to education builds from a Latin American philosophy (e.g., Paulo Freire's Critical Pedagogy, Marco Raúl Mejía Jiménez, Lola Cendales González, etc.) that education doesn't start or stop inside of a classroom. In this model, education is often in communities and public spaces and can act as a means toward individual, social and political transformation – not just knowledge acquisition. As Barcelona Professor Joan Benach noted about social justice in Medellín:

*The story is about a transformed citizen, young and old, participating in the politics and re-creation of their city. Culture, art, music all play a role, as do having public places to come together in the poorest neighborhoods. The city's commitment to life-long*

*learning is part of the transformation of an educated and active citizenry. It's about transforming and empowering people.*

Yet, Medellín remains a city with roughly 200,000 internally displaced residents (Muggah *et al.* 2016). Acknowledging and addressing the traumatic legacy of narco-trafficking, civil conflict, and guerilla and paramilitary violence has been another approach to support education and cultural identity. A program called 'Peace and Reconciliation: Return to Legality' (*Paz y Reconciliación: Regreso a la Legalidad*), is run by the municipal government to support the reintegration of members of armed groups into the city. The Museo Casa de la Memoria, or House of Memory Museum, was opened in 2012 as a place for 'remembering and not repeating' the armed conflict, forced displacement, violation of human rights and other tragedies Medellín's citizens experienced. Importantly, the museum acts as a site for collective sharing and healing. Public art spaces, such as Plaza Botero, also act as a way of re-unifying a traumatized city (Maclean 2015).

### Key component 7: an ethics of aesthetics

A final key concept in Medellín's transformation has been the 'ethics of aesthetics' or a governmental and civil society commitment to projects and programs that reflect functional beauty, human dignity and serve the urgent needs of the poor. In other words, a key feature of the transformation of the city was 'urban acupuncture,' or to invest first and with the highest quality in the worst-off neighborhoods, and then stimulate well-being across the city (Guerrero 2011). The first Metrocables and transit improvements, library parks, UVAs, education, health care and museum investments, among other projects, were in the most violent and poorest neighborhoods, such as Comunas 1 and 13, in the northeast and west central areas of the city respectively. As Professor Diane Davis of Harvard University noted:

*What makes it possible to reduce violence in a city when we think of the city as a set of spaces as opposed to a city as a place where social policy is introduced?.. If you want to push back against violence you need to understand the physicality of the city much better, and that's obvious in the work that's been happening in Medellín because they are thinking physically about the city and where to intervene in an acupuncture way.*

The *Jardín Circunvalar de Medellín* is another example of investing first, beautifully and efficiently, in the poorest and most vulnerable neighborhoods in the periphery of the city (Patiño and Miralles García 2015). This project is a green belt that has multiple ecologic and social justice aims. First, it acts as

a growth boundary limiting the further expansion of the city up the steep mountainsides that surround the Valle de Aburrá. It also links the peripheral and poorest parts of the municipality with the rest of the urban fabric through improved pathways, parks, sports facilities and urban gardens. Launched in neighborhoods such as La Sierra, the urban park project also employs hundreds of residents and is helping to reduce poverty and increase neighborhood stability. The greenbelt is also redirecting high-density development to the center of the city while upgrading housing and public services for the poor living along the hillsides. A signature aspect of the greenbelt is *El Camino de la Vida*, a 12-kilometer walking trail connecting formerly disconnected neighborhoods along the mountainside. The now safe path used to be known as the *Camino de la Muerte* – the ‘path of death’ – because it was where gangs would hang the bodies of their enemies (Patiño and Miralles Garcia 2015).

A map locating of many of the key interventions in Medellín – from transport to UVAs to library parks – that have contributed to its physical and social transformation appear in Figure 9.

## Medellín: city renewal for life and social justice

We have suggested that the crisis of violence brought diverse stakeholders together to re-plan and re-invest in community, government, culture, and places that helped transform Medellín. The seven themes offered here help highlight how a transformation of local democracy, including public dialogues, participatory budgeting and workshops, contributed to new projects, programs and policies that first improved life for the poorest, most deprived and previous violent places. This ‘urban acupuncture’ or targeted investments for the least well off, has also raised the level of safety, inclusion and security for all.

Our seven, inter-related concepts may only work together, in that any one approach may be limited in its ability to achieve the successes of Medellín. While still an incomplete transformation, the key insight from Medellín for other cities and places is that transformation is more likely when multiple themes are pursued and integrated over time. Placing life and equity at the center of the strategy, as was done with the *City for Life* concept, seems to

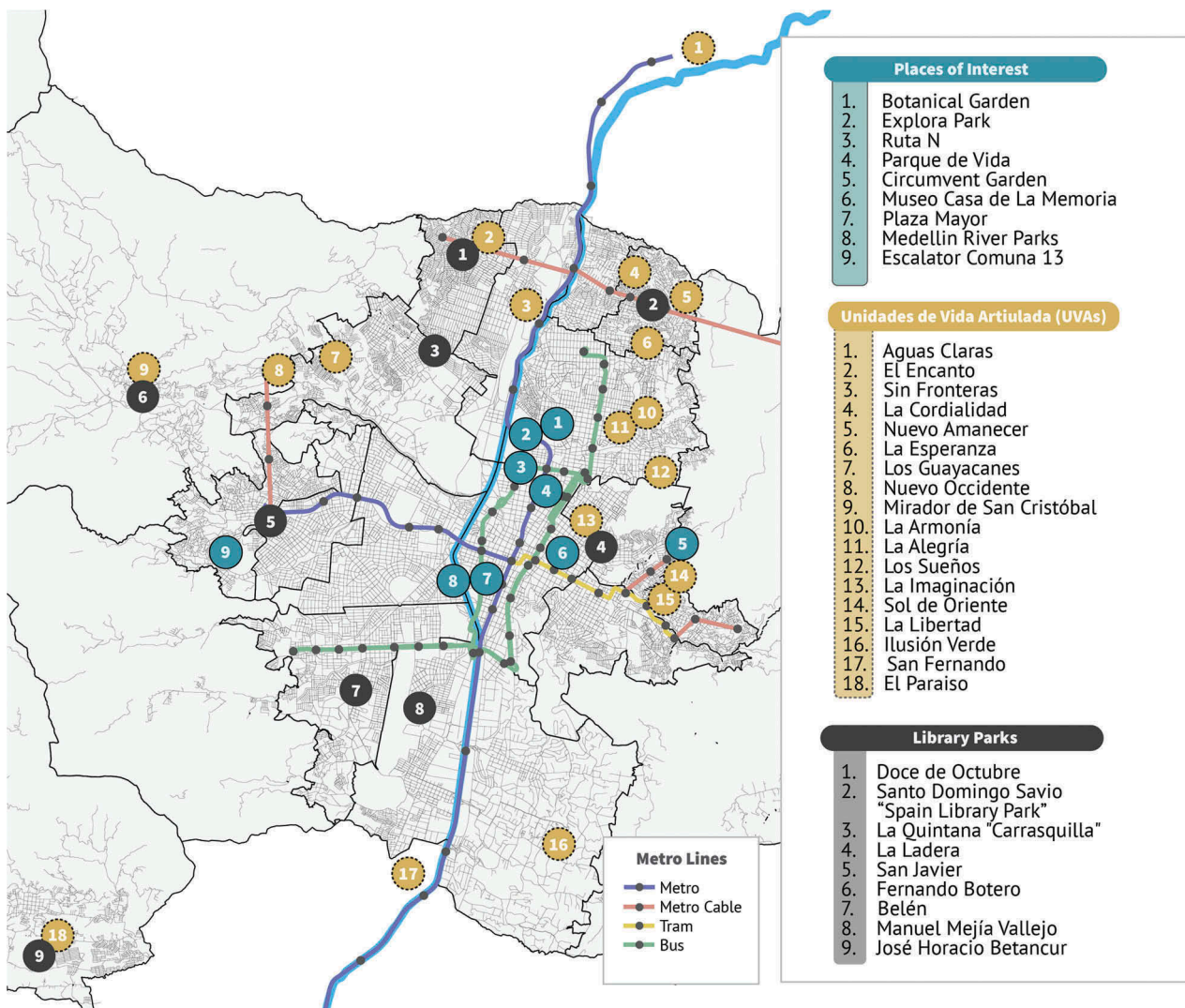


Figure 9. Map of Medellín key projects and places.

be critical for ensuring all places and populations benefit. On-going and transparent democracy, at the local, municipal and regional scale, are also critical factors. Medellín can be seen as a living case study for equitable development. Significant gains have been made in violence reduction, education and physical infrastructure, yet the city still grapples with poverty, spatial segregation, migration and growth pressures.

Much has been written about the successes of Medellín in reducing the homicide rate and building new transit, but this paper has offered insights about the multiple, related interventions and the City's commitment to participatory democracy, spatial transformation and governance. Clearly, Medellín should be understood as a 'work in progress,' as perhaps all cities striving for health equity should understand their tasks. Former Mayor Gavira, reflecting on a decade or more of engagement, notes:

*When many people talk about Medellín, they say 'Medellín transformed.' No, Medellín is in the process of transforming. Our great challenge is to not believe that we have finished our work in the city. The great truth is that we continue to transform, and we have a long way to go to become the city that we can and should be.*

The processes that have contributed to the on-going transformation of Medellín offer insights for urban health equity everywhere.

## Note

1. Mayors included: Luis Pérez Gutiérrez, 2000–2003 from Partido Liberal; Sergio Fajardo, 2004–2007 and Alonso Salazar, 2008–2011 from Movimiento Ciudadano and Aníbal Gaviria, 2012–2015 from Partido Liberal and a broad coalition with other parties, including citizen movements.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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## Appendix: Interviewees

- Aníbal Gavira Correa – Former Mayor of Medellín (2012–2015), former Governor of Antioquia (2004–2008).
- Carlos Cadena Gaitan, PhD – Academic Coordinator, Centre for Urban and Environmental Studies, Urbam, EAFIT University.
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