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INTERSTICES 20

# The politics of social architecture in Medellín: A reading of the Parque Biblioteca España

## Introduction

Colombia's contemporary urban identity is often described as a tale of its two largest cities: Bogotá and Medellín (Castro & Echeverri, 2011; Webb, 2011). Spanning over two decades (1996-2020), this tale outlines the country's two distinct approaches to urban renewal. Discussed in parallel, both approaches are centred around progressive leadership and large-scale social projects that respond to issues of governance and spatial violence.<sup>1</sup> In Bogotá, the capital, incentive-based social experiments restructured everyday civic and cultural behaviours and generated a mutual respect among citizens, thus altering the local experience of the public realm (1995-2000).<sup>2</sup> In Medellín, changes to educational and cultural programmes embedded in new architectural projects transformed the urban image of precarious areas in the city (2004-2012). Differentiation between these two urban approaches lies in architecture, particularly in Medellín, where buildings have rapidly changed perceptions of the city's urban reality.

From 2004, architecture has been used as a strategic visual and material tool in the implementation of Medellín's dramatic urban renaissance. This architectural narrative, which has spread through global media, attributes the change to a collaboration between politicians and architects, who were dedicated to rehabilitating the urban environment through social projects. The collaboration arose from public criticisms regarding the local government's failed efforts to curb urban violence and oversee social investment. In response, both of Medellín's first independent mayors, Sergio Fajardo, a mathematics professor (2004-08), and Alonso Salazar, a journalist (2008-12), worked with architects on violence prevention and political participation strategies to establish equity in city-wide distributions of public space, local development networks, and public goods and services. At the same time, Medellín saw a decline in spatial violence after paramilitary and narcotics groups were demobilised in 2006. Thus, Medellín became an urban paradigm for progressive upgrading strategies. A "globally recognised effort", the *Medellín model* integrates marginalised areas in its city-wide strategy to increase liveability standards for its citizens (Abello Colack & Pearce, 2015: 199). The model emphasises architecture's ability to incite social change and focuses on a selection of key political actors and architectural works to significantly

shift dialogues on the city toward more positive descriptions. These descriptions of Medellín are underpinned by a narrative of historic violence comprised of the narcotics wars, and urban transformation linked to innovative development. This binary image of the city—violence and transformation creates a tension by separating Medellín’s traumatic past from its progressive future.

By examining architecture’s role in the changing perceptions of Medellín’s urban condition, this paper reviews how architecture has been co-opted into the city’s narrative of violence and its image of transformation. The Parque Biblioteca España Santo Domingo (the Spanish Library) is used to explore this image. It underscores the structural changes brought on by architecture’s tectonics and its mediation in mass media. The examination of the library attempts to demonstrate how the spatial and symbolic characteristics of architecture have a distinct connection to Medellín’s political anxieties and its present-day socio-cultural ambitions. By exploring the tensions that occur when capital flow, governance, and mass media intersect, the library unfolds Medellín’s landscape of power. Likewise it helps dismantle Medellín’s urban binary by offering a pluralistic understanding of the city’s transformation.

### Narratives of transformation

Medellín, once the “murder capital of the world”, is known as the birthplace of the narco-bourgeoisie and the professionalisation of gangs. But in 2012, it was named the world’s most innovative city: a city that instrumentalised state-of-the-art architecture and urban projects to overcome social exclusion. Forming a binary realisation of the city, urban violence and transformation, architectural publications such as the *Architectural Review*’s “Special Issue on Colombia”, *Architectural Design*’s “Latin America at the Crossroads”, and the *Harvard Design Magazine*’s “Architectures of Latin America”, associate Medellín’s striking recovery with architectural intervention, as seen with the MetroCable (Fig. 1) and the library parks. For example, Iñaki Ábalos recounts Medellín’s “triumphal creation of public space”, where architecture creates a visible economic, social, and political optimism (2011: 23). Likewise, Justin McGuirk’s *Radical Cities* (2014) reflects on the collaborative efforts of architects combatting violence to reunite the city’s citizens, who were disengaged due to discontinuous short-term leadership

Fig. 1 Christina Deluchi (2020).  
The Medellín MetroCable Line  
[Photograph]



(1970-92) and controlled by increasing urban militias through new and established tactics of intimidation (1992-2002).

Three reoccurring themes appear across the readings of Medellín's binary image. Firstly, the political instability and territorial conflicts of Colombia's contemporary wars (from the 1960s onwards) are used to frame Medellín's urban crisis through descriptions of localised, citywide, and regional corruption, drug-related terror, and socioeconomic disparity. Here, a compilation of socioeconomic, institutional, and political violence is described through distributions of power and its spatial effects such as neighbourhood feuds linked to youth gangs, street crime, robbery, kidnapping, social cleansing by police or vigilante groups, assassinations, and guerrilla or paramilitary warfare (Moser, 2004: 2). This framing establishes a discourse about "areas of disorder", making violence an important precedent for the success of Medellín's urban renewal (Capille, 2018: 129). Secondly, transformation is positioned in relation to the progressive politics of Mayor Sergio Fajardo (2004-08) and his social urbanism project—a strategy committed to rebuilding civic pride and reducing crime through architectural interventions with a social purpose (McGuirk 2014: 236). By planning for structural change to "change the skin" of the city through educational, cultural, and entrepreneurial programming, Fajardo's leadership effectively marks the beginnings of Medellín's urban transformation (Castro & Echeverri, 2011: 100). Lastly, descriptions of Medellín's transformation are underscored by countless international awards for design excellence and innovation in praise of social architecture. These honours include the Curry Stone Design Prize in 2009 for social impact design; *Citi*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and the Urban Land Institute gave Medellín the honour of 2012's Innovative City of the Year; the Harvard Veronica Rudge Green Prize in Urban Design; and Medellín hosted the seventh UN World Habitat Forum in 2014. These awards strategically place Medellín amid the global cities (such as Valparaíso, Mexico City, Beirut, Tel Aviv, Durban, and Cape Town) that shape the trajectory of urban growth and the contemporary economy through a display of innovative practices and efforts to address social issues.

There is an ongoing debate whether architecture's creative actions might indeed effect change, or whether architecture might only be an operation within a social structure (as stated in Awan et al., 2011: 31). This tension is founded on the socio-political understanding of agency as the dialectic pairing between agency (individual) and structure (social). The built projects attributed to Fajardo appear to operate outside of the city's traditional civic structure, strengthening ideas of architectural agency and concealing underlying political forces. Here, the dialectic of agency and structure reinforces the city's binary through powerful built expressions of transformation. Consequently, Medellín's governing body could shift dialogues about the city by using photogenic accounts of socio-cultural projects—such as the MetroCable (Fig. 1), the library park projects (Fig. 2) and the Juan Bobo I+II and La Herrera rehabilitation—to reorient ideas of Medellín's urban reality through images of good culture, inclusivity, and participatory design as a triumph over violence. These images are observed in the participatory actions implemented through planning schemes such as Proyecto Urbano Integrales (PUIs) carrying out local design consultations and civil budgeting priorities to establish a good culture around educational capital, mobility, and infrastructure in marginalised areas.

## Social urbanism

Henri Lefebvre, in *The Production of Space*, positions spatial production in a more expansive social context by stating “(social) space is a (social) product” (1991: 26). Jeremy Till, in *Architecture Depends*, explores this notion as a twofold message. Firstly, that the introduction of the social in understandings of space eliminates it being treated, or observed, as an abstract form devoid of social content; and secondly, it erases any assumption that space is, or might be, produced by a single person (Till, 2009: 126). Redefining space in this way reveals a shared authorship in spatial production that moves beyond the disciplinary edges of professionals such as architects and planners. Thus, social space is formed by broader and more dynamic methods of spatial production that take influence from overlapping societal agencies with conflicting interests. This exposes space to political consequences, creating a politics of space, and its production. Awan, Schneider, and Till’s *Spatial Agency* extends this notion. For them, social space is “inherently political”, a lived space continuously effected by the politics of everyday life and “charged with the dynamics of power/empowerment, interaction/isolation, control/freedom” and so forth (Awan et al., 2011: 30). Similarly, Doreen Massey (2005: 59) conceptualises space as an open, multiple, relational, and unfinished set of histories and their fundamental conditions. For Massey, simultaneity is space’s social dimension. Continuous cycles of spatial production reconfigure heterogeneity, and in turn, provide the endless opportunity for politics to unfold across multiple fields of engagement.

Unravelling the ebbs and flows of social urbanism in Medellín looks to Till, Awan, Schneider, and Massey’s interpretations of the social in spatial production to move beyond the singularity of Fajardo’s ambitions as imposed by its binary image to unpack a more pluralistic understanding of urban transformation. This broadened interpretation of the social in space also engages David Harvey’s idea of collective right to the city. Harvey, in *Rebel Cities*, argues that the right to the city claims shaping power over the making and remaking of cities through urbanisation processes (2012: 5). But, the control over these processes, in Harvey’s Marxist perspective, is tied to the production of surplus value. The development of both urbanisation and surplus value are perpetually contingent and/or codependent on each other (Harvey, 2012: 5). As a result, the idea of the right to the city arises from the streets, from neighbourhoods, as a call for help from oppressed peoples (2012: xiii). For Lefebvre, revolutionary social change is constituted out of the urban rather than from the working class (Harvey, 2012: xiii). Here, change is a political task, one that can reconstitute the city, but cannot occur without first transforming daily life through anti-capitalist movements (Harvey, 2012: xvi). We see similar ideas in Fajardo’s social urbanism. It addresses the notion of the urban as a network of agents and as a political task by embedding grassroots operations, participatory actions, and educational reform in architecture to incite transformation. But it also borrows from decades of broadminded urban practices in early modern city planning—the concept of a social urbanism is not new in Colombia.

Since the 1920s, issues of governance, industrialisation, social mobility, and urban sprawl have called for the implementation of urban plans across Latin America. Emerging from collaborations between municipal and national governments, professional associations and research centres, these urban plans

placed great confidence in foreign experts from Europe and the United States (Almandoz, 2010: 88). In 1933, the Austrian academic and urban planner Karl Brunner was hired by the municipality of Bogota, Colombia's capital, as the principal advisor of its new Department of Urbanism. Brunner took influence from Camillo Sitte's complex morphological and typological organisation of masses in city planning and his interest in progressive social movements that bridged various themes "from sanitation, improved housing and workers' rights, to economic and political theory" (Bohl & Lejeune, 2009: xvi). He also drew from Viennese planning models such as Otto Wagner's *Grossstadt*, the Garden City (in an Austrian context), and the *Siedlung* social housing movement. Echoing these interests, Brunner published two volumes of his *Manual de Urbanismo* (1939-40) whilst in Bogota. The manual observed the "science of town planning" in relation to socio-graphic matters by bringing together "historical and epistemological considerations" to generate an "urban sociography" (Almandoz, 2016: v). Rather than redesigning cities from scratch, Brunner responded to their political, sociological, technical, and artistic conditions. It was an attempt to integrate its fragmented urban structure by introducing an axis that linked peripheral neighbourhoods to the city centre and broke the traditional Spanish grid system using public space as an anatomic element.

Brunner's urban plan for Medellín integrated the city's formal centre to the periphery. However, displaced rural populations caused a dramatic expansion of informal housing settlements on Medellín's fringe after Colombia's civil war, *La Violencia* (1946-57). The city encountered new challenges such as illegal subdivisions, a lack of infrastructure and public services, and the intensification of politicised crime, urban warfare, and conflict economies linked to narcotics trafficking and armed groups—Medellín did not develop as planned. Years later, in an attempt to address these key urban issues and remodel itself as a metropolis, the city established one of Colombia's first Plans de Desarrollo (Metropolitan Development Plans) in 1985. This plan arose after popular protests that spurred the construction of new national-civil organisations, such as Coordinadora Nacional de Movimientos Cívicos, which mobilised diverse social and political sectors to campaign for improvements to public services. In response, Medellín's plan was founded on eight "positive trends" including: "a recovered sense of credibility in public institutions and the city as a whole, renewed solidarity, new forms of employment, institutionalised public participation, fiscal recovery, lower mortality rates, more and better public transport, and improvement in the state of the environment" (Brand & Thomas, 2005: 185).<sup>3</sup> Since 1985, Medellín's municipal leaders and non-governmental organisations have studied and implemented development plans with each new political term. Each involves "the allocation of public resources [and] improving the state and the coverage of infrastructure" such as roads, public space, and transportation, to incorporate marginalised communities into the city's formal urban fabric (Echeverri Restrepo & Orsini, 2012: 138). The most commonly recognised of these plans is Sergio Fajardo's social urbanism.

Alejandro Echeverri (2004-08), Sergio Fajardo's chief advisor on urban renewal and head of the Commercial and Industrial Enterprise of the Municipal Order (EDU), describes social urbanism in Medellín as "a tool to mitigate serious problems of inequality and segregation, and to connect, integrate and coordinate the city through an instrument of physical and social inclusion" (Castro & Echeverri,

2011: 100).<sup>4</sup> Similar to Brunner, Fajardo concentrated on reducing the “profound social debts” linked to systemic issues of urban violence and exclusion that are implicit in Medellín’s social structures (Echeverri Restrepo & Orsini, 2012: 138). Accumulated social debt appears as infrastructure and public space deficits, the absence of public amenities such as healthcare and education, and discontinuous or non-existent mobility services—all of which left illicit economies to operate undisturbed, escalating the level of segregation experienced in peripheral communities. In pursuit of reducing social debt, Fajardo harnessed the power of architecture. For example, Fajardo deployed teams of interdisciplinary professionals to execute the “best-quality designs” to improve the relationship between social programmes, buildings, and their context (Castro & Echeverri, 2011: 100). These include a series of five library parks and ten schools on the city’s periphery as well as an array of projects in Medellín’s centre. These projects materialised the policies of Medellín’s governing body—political participation and educational reform—and its social urbanism strategy through pilot planning projects like PUIs. The city’s cultural practices and civic behaviours transformed because of the changes to physical space. Social urbanism underscored the importance of architectural intervention in Medellín’s marginalised territories: architecture represented a more dedicated and unified local government capable of implementing structural transformation.



Fig. 2 Iwan Baan (2013). The Parque Biblioteca España Santo Domingo and forecourt [Photograph]

### The Parque Biblioteca España Santo Domingo

The Biblioteca España—or the Spanish Library—consistently appears in readings of social urbanism and architectural innovation in Medellín (Abalos, 2011; Castro & Echeverri 2011; Webb, 2011; McGuirk, 2014; Dolan, 2018).<sup>5</sup> Opened in 2007, and comprising three black geometries that stand over Medellín’s Aburra Valley, the Biblioteca España is “folded and clipped” like the contours of its mountain site (Figs. 2 and 6) (El Equipo Mazzanti, 2020). Designed by the Colombian architecture practice El Equipo Mazzanti, it “is a project of urban, cultural and social transformation in one of the poorest and most violent sectors

of Medellín” (Mazzanti & Schenk, 2014: 14). Clad in black stone, the library’s three architectural volumes house a series of public amenities, including a library, classrooms, exhibition hall, auditorium, and office space. Its volumes are joined by an expansive public balcony that overlooks the city and are surrounded by an open forecourt intended for participatory community events (Figs. 2 and 5). The Biblioteca España’s spatial, symbolic, and programmatic characteristics underscore architecture’s direct impact on shifting perspectives of Medellín’s urban reality and its role in shaping the city’s contemporary ambitions centred on culture, liveability, education, and progress.

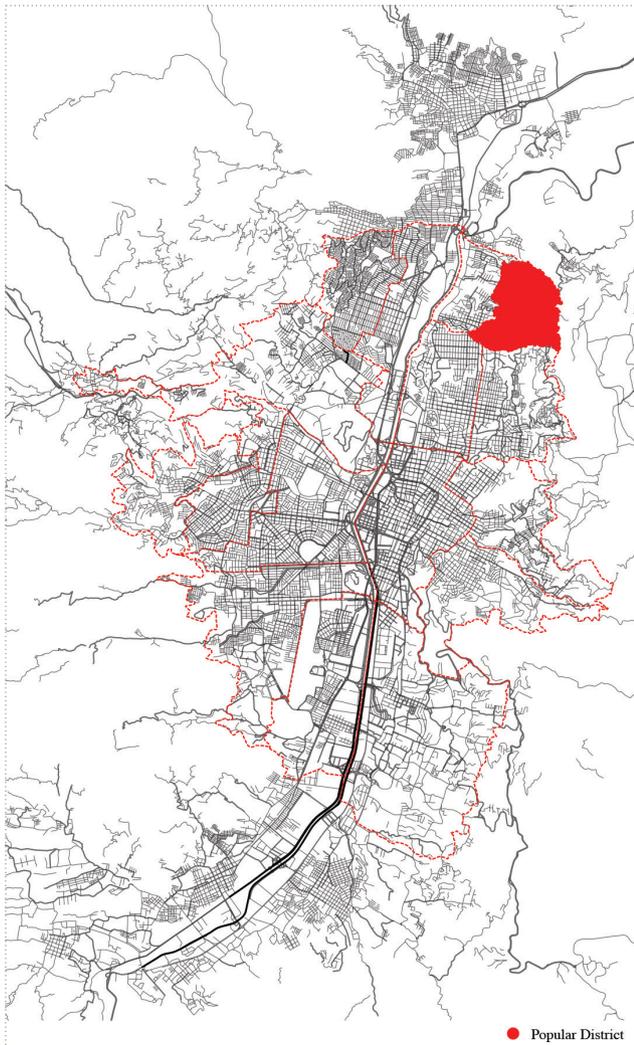


Fig. 3 Christina Deluchi (2020). Map of Medellín indicating the Popular District [Drawing]

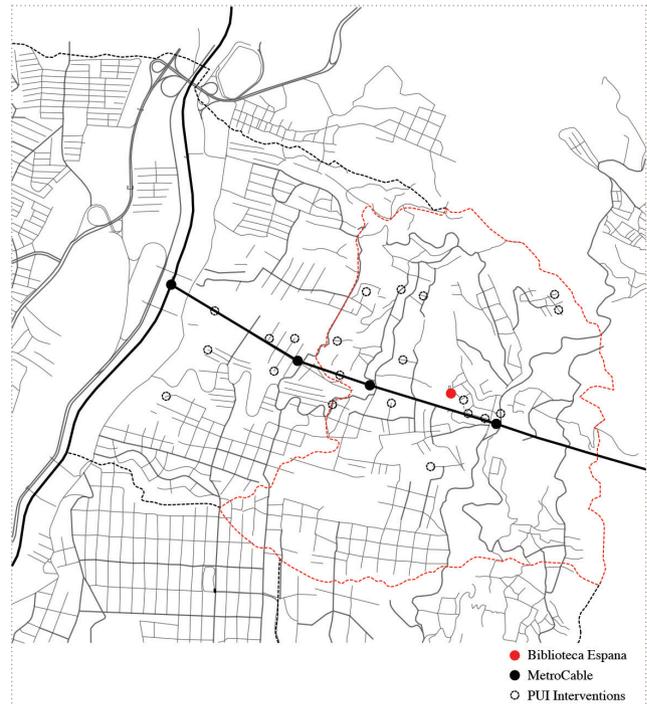


Fig. 4 Christina Deluchi (2020). Location of the Biblioteca España and Northeastern PUI [Drawing]

The Biblioteca España is located on Medellín’s north-eastern hillside in Santo Domingo (Figs. 3 and 4). A notoriously dangerous informal neighbourhood, Santo Domingo is known for narcotics trafficking and gang activity. Historically the government has been absent in this territory. Consequently, the Parque Biblioteca España is frequently used by political actors and in media to describe architecture’s physical and programmatic effects in marginalised communities. It is one of the first of seven library parks to be completed by Sergio Fajardo’s administration as part of its social urbanism strategy. Library parks continue to be fundamental to the development and implementation of social urbanism across Medellín: each consists of various public facilities built in precarious

neighbourhoods, which aspire to foster educational, cultural, and social practices in their surroundings (Capille, 2018: 126). This is achieved through programmes and events designed to increase human capital in marginalised areas, such as political leadership workshops for women and information points (CEDEZOs) offering training services and advice for small/micro entrepreneurs. The Biblioteca España is also understood through its alignment to Alejandro Echeverri's pilot project as head of the EDU, named Proyecto Urbano Integral (PUI). A PUI is "an instrument of planning and physical intervention in zones which are characterised by high indices of marginality, segregation, poverty and crime" including homicide rates, poor quality of life, access to public services, mobility, overpopulation, informality, high density, and sanitation (Echeverri Restrepo & Orsini, 2012: 143). Addressing the physical and social aspects of a defined territory through targeted urban upgrading strategies, PUIs are designed to foster civic development through new public facilities and infrastructural networks of both large- and small-scale actions in areas of heightened exclusion. Proyecto Urbano Integrals and library parks are part of the key strategies administered by Medellín's Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial—a long-term development plan of three mayoral cycles—that has sustained Fajardo's social urbanism project by ensuring the continuity of its vision.

Fig. 5 Iwan Baan (2013). The Parque Biblioteca España Santo Domingo balcony. [Photograph]



Medellín's first PUI, the Northeastern Urban Integration Project, was initiated in 2004, and Santo Domingo makes up part of this PUI's intervention zone. Addressing issues of poverty, informality, unemployment, social conflict, and forced displacement alongside the lack of public space, environment deterioration, and public transport, this PUI includes various public works, in addition to the library park, such as the MetroCable extension, upgrade of 106 Street—from footpaths to lighting, CEDEZO Santo Domingo, a medical centre, and children's play equipment (Figs. 1 and 6).<sup>6</sup> The design and construction of the PUI's library park was opened to public competition in an effort to deepen political transparency. As described in the *Architectural Review*, the public tender aimed to inspire "symbolic value [in] architecture as a physical expression of new public polices for

education and culture”, in pursuit of creating “spaces of encounter that serve as urban landmarks and gathering spaces for the community” (Castro & Echeverri, 2011: 100). This ambition highlights changes to the structure of Santo Domingo’s social landscape as the development and realisation of such significant social projects display political commitment to the community, as well as participatory practices. For example, various political, financial, and community stakeholders worked collaboratively to cultivate local involvement in the library park’s design and programming before, during, and after its construction.<sup>7</sup> The participatory action and social integration that occurred during the conception and execution of the library’s design clearly demonstrates Fajardo’s embedded political project. Partnerships with local NGOs, businesses, and community actors like the Alto Comisionado de las Naciones Unidas para los Refugiados (ACNUR), Juntas Administradoras Locales and the Junta de Acción Comunal, coincided with the implementation of Medellín’s Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial, the 2004–07 Plan de Desarrollo (development plan), and its Administración Transparente y Control Social (Transparency and Social Management Administration). These plans institutionalised a participatory budget, allowing for local investment priorities. They introduced a two-step system; every four years a communal planning committee is formed to create a Plan de Desarrollo Local (PDL); and every year a four-phase Presupuesto Participativo (PP) is executed.<sup>8</sup> The PDL and PP provide voting resources to citizens, giving them direct impact on budget distribution to physically develop their community. The finances equate to approximately 5 per cent of the municipality’s free investment budget (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2020). Localised partnerships and planning generated a mechanism for political transparency. Coupling architecture and planning with new participatory practices, Fajardo mobilised the physical and symbolic value of architecture in local politics by opening a space for it to become an important instrument for social change. But, this ideological expression of the relationship between architecture and politics serves only as a representation of change. Further, the lack of visibility of all involved local NGOs, businesses, and community actors in participatory processes is ambiguous and suggests the possible concealment of involved parties. After all, the rhetoric of participation fails to address the reality of the community’s influence over design practices, the distribution of funds, and the realisation of its social impacts.

Today, Medellín’s most iconic urban landmark, the Biblioteca España, is recognised both locally and internationally. Set in an informal neighbourhood, the juxtaposition between the library’s architectural form and its context reveals an explicit political agenda: the visible expression of new and positive changes on the city’s fringe. One of its fundamental aims was framed as to “use architecture as a means to represent an ‘upgraded’ society” with the intent “to ‘produce’ social change” through spatial arrangement (Capille, 2018: 129). This is seen in Santo Domingo as widely dispersed images of the library convey change, leading it to become a global representation of social urbanism’s achievements. Emphasising the library’s visual properties, architectural culture associated change with appearance; the *Architectural Review*, *Architectural Design*, and *Harvard Design Magazine* all circulated images of the library dominating the hillside alongside their descriptions of urban renewal. The aesthetic contrast between architectural object and its context reinforces Medellín’s urban binary—violence and transformation. The library stands alone, tall and oversized, its form is faceted and sharp-edged, its masses ordered, and its materiality matte and dark compared to

the compact and jagged spatial disarray of its brick-laden informal surroundings (Fig. 6). The Biblioteca España implicates the binary perception of the city, but the reality of its effect on the Santo Domingo community is disconnected from this image. Isolated from Medellín's formal centre, the impact of the narcotic wars is evident in readings of Santo Domingo's socioeconomic indicators: 48 per cent of residents are in the lowest category for social services and subsidies; it is overpopulated; has high levels of unemployment; and 61 per cent of residents attain only primary or lower level education (Holmes & Piñeres, 2013: 6). The stark aesthetic and historical contrast between informal districts and architectural intervention have remodelled the idea of state presence (physically and pictorially) to evoke transformation on Medellín's political periphery.

Fig. 6 Iwan Baan (2013). The Parque Biblioteca España Santo Domingo. [Photograph]



Strategically co-opted into images of transformation, socially driven architecture and community upgrading schemes in Santo Domingo have caused the Biblioteca España to become one of Medellín's most prolific sites for political and social action throughout the city's ongoing renewal. The building is activated through the visions and the actualities of Medellín's political struggles, manifested in public space. Harvey explores these kinds of scenarios in *Rebel Cities* when describing the form the city takes. For Harvey, the power play occurring in public space presents an opportunity for its users, giving them the ability to create a new and common space for socio-political action—or, to pursue the right to the city (2012: xvi). His thinking resonates with Lefebvre's heterotopia where social space provides the possibility of an alternative urban trajectory to take place (Harvey, 2012: xvii). This relationship between the spaces and buildings of the city and its citizens has the potential to activate an important political imaginary, one that consolidates a clear sense of belonging in the community. But, despite attempts to address issues of poverty, unemployment, and exclusion in Santo Domingo, the Biblioteca España is increasingly more interconnected to political ideologies aligned to the business interests of the city and image building. The visual impact of architecture was mobilised by Medellín's governing bodies to produce the city's binary perception of historic violence and urban transformation. The

rhetoric of social inclusion through design, participatory practices, and political transparency shapes this perception. It operates at all levels—in governing, in media, and in architecture. But the library reveals that Medellín’s narrative of change moves far beyond this binary notion. The library complicates it by actualising a parallel and equally relevant account of what contemporary Medellín looks like. This account demonstrates how the Biblioteca España is bound more closely to the city’s image of transformation than the reality of the physical and social impact of architecture itself.

### **The social, politics, and architecture**

The power of architecture’s aesthetics suppresses the Biblioteca España’s more important and volatile spatial conditions, such as political affiliations, social policy, production processes, programming and occupation, and everyday relations to society. The spaces of architecture should not, and cannot, be understood as mere aesthetic actions (re-emphasising Awan et al., 2011: 30). To extend this notion, Massey’s depiction of how the social is constructed through the “negotiation of relations within multiplicities” and their political implications implies that space can only be a product of associations (2005: 13). Architecture can therefore never be an impartial action. This idea builds a more challenging and varied landscape of the relationship between power and architecture in Medellín.

Colombia’s 1991 constitution change, formalised a more participatory and autonomous juridical framework by setting forth a restructure of municipal power and establishing the popular election of governors and mayors across the country. The constitution widened the space of representation to include previously excluded, new, and diverse political and social actors. Economically, it set up mechanisms for transferring national revenue to municipal departments to increase funding for education and public health. Ana Maria Bejarano describes the updated and more collaborative constitution as a “navigational chart” that provided a map toward a project yet to be achieved, but one that offered a more pluralistic, just, and democratic political order (2001: 55). Additionally, the Presidential Council for Medellín and its metropolitan area was established as the national government’s direct representative on issues of violence, security, and local development. This was Medellín’s first attempt at a participatory political project. An alliance between central government and local civil society was founded after realisations that the council could not operate without the support of NGO’s—like Corporación Región and Instituto Popular de Capacitación—working on the ground. This alliance allowed the council to expand into a project that sought to “tackle violence through increased control and prevention measures and institutions while deepening the political participation of the city’s marginalized population in peripheral neighbourhoods” (Moncada, 2016: 55). These measures included increased police and local judicial resources, development of conflict resolution centres and detention facilities, improved food security, better quality education, incentive-based employment, and the expansion of public space and community centres with targeted social programming—all of which appear to construct an alternate form of governing in high-risk areas. The council was a top-down initiative that intended to operate from the bottom up.

The new political and economic stability cleared the way for strategic social objectives—violence control and prevention measures—to coexist with participatory

practices in Medellín. However, from 1990 the rise of new professional political forces and international competitors weakened Medellín's government-business links, which had traditionally facilitated a shared coordination of local governance, appointed seats in council offices, and public-private commissions—the scope of which helped to broaden the city's economic interests (Moncada, 2016: 61).<sup>9</sup> This weakened partnership hindered attempts at political participation in Medellín. Furthermore, to achieve greater discretion over socioeconomic development funding allocations, Luis Alfredo Ramos (1992–95) amended the national government council's funding structure. Unfortunately, this meant the Presidential Council for Medellín's funding bypassed grassroots initiatives and bottom-up operations with civil organisations ceased as the municipality came to direct the council's spending. This new funding structure reignited the politics the council had been built to end. By 1993, Medellín's participatory project had dissolved and Ramos founded the EDU to initiate a large-scale urban planning strategy—the Parque San Antonio Project—in the city centre. Once again, the polarisation of the local population heightened the condition of urban exclusion in Medellín. Looking back to Lefebvre's concept of heterotopia—where social space has the potential to bring about other types of spatial production—the return to a fragmented urbanism in Medellín questions whether the pursuit for “something different”, or the creation of a “differential space” through open and participatory socio-political models, is truly possible (Harvey, 2012: xvii; Lefebvre, 1991: 52). Moreover, in the decade that followed, the relationship between Medellín's business elites and local government remained unstable, but architecture's role in politics intensified as it came to represent affiliations linked to political campaigns. This is seen in the public works strategy of Mayor Luis Pérez Gutiérrez (2001–04). Instead of focusing local investment on Medellín's philosophical pillars—security and coexistence—Pérez rewarded his financial backers, mostly large local construction companies, with public-works contracts that included infrastructure, sport, and education projects. Of the 162 public works contracts authorised by Pérez, the most notable are Medellín's MetroCable Line K (Fig. 1) linking Acevedo, Andalucía, Popular, and Santo Domingo to the centre, and a series of new libraries—projects commonly ascribed with the Medellín miracle and Sergio Fajardo's social urbanism. Thus, since the failure of Medellín's first participatory project, the notion of governing had become increasingly more interlaced with appeasing business elites and sustaining individual interests.

A decade of associations and already established projects had residue effects. Sergio Fajardo (2004–08) took advantage of these associations to transform the spaces of the city. In the year before his term, Fajardo executed his most strategic political move by rebuilding alliances with Medellín's traditional network of business elites, the Grupo Empresarial Antioqueño (GEA) and its research department Proantioquia, and civil society partners Corporación Región and Instituto Popular de Capacitación.<sup>10</sup> Fajardo's alignment to the GEA initiated the restructure of Medellín's economic model, through promises of financial transparency, as his civil partners launched a large grassroots movement backing his political campaign. Restoring the influence of business elites in local governance allowed Fajardo to increase local business tax to facilitate new urban projects and foster emerging markets at the expense of political autonomy. Under these circumstances, the GEA regained its power to shape the city's economy, and in turn, secure the private sector's vision for an emergent global city. At the same time, peace negotiations between the local government and urban militias saw

a striking decrease in homicides—from 161 deaths per 100,000 in 1999 to 35 in 2007—as the paramilitary group Bloque Cacique Nutibara (BCN) demobilised (Holmes & Piñeres, 2013: 3). Founded by Medellín’s most influential criminal “office”, La Oficina de Envigado, the BCN’s demobilisation reduced competition, and therefore violence, among rival armed groups. Remarkably, the BCN’s leader and head of La Oficina, Don Berna, emerged as the local government’s key mediator with ex-paramilitaries to assist in maintaining political order. Altogether, new alliances, increased finances, existing public works contracts, and drops in violence provided Fajardo with the conditions to launch Medellín’s second political participatory project: social urbanism. Yet, it is evident that the phenomenon of social urbanism is dependent upon, and constrained by, processes of globalisation and privatisation.

The political decisions made during the Biblioteca España’s build reveal contradictions in social urbanism’s application. The disparity between the library’s image and the reality of its physical and social impact demonstrates this. For instance, 150 Santo Domingo residents were relocated to provide the space for the library’s construction (McGuirk, 2014: 246). But land clearing for architectural intervention and expropriation for public benefit presents itself as a new kind of violence. Furthermore, economic design compromises were rejected. Expensive stone cladding, which needed to be transported from a distant quarry up steep and narrow roads to the building site, was used for the library’s façade (Webb, 2011: 35). These acts threatened the protocol for increased local participation and civic trust as decisions were influenced by financial investors and political affiliates with common goals. Thus, these actions underscore how important the Biblioteca España is as a site for political agency rather than as a site for social amenity in Medellín. Costly materials might represent greater investment in marginalised territories, but the value of positioning the library in this site, and its aesthetic presence, sustains the GEA and private sector’s drive to build a new global image. This economic interest, combined with Fajardo’s wish to build a symbol for the public, conveys a message of a city reunited through social inclusion. But the reality of top-down decision-making in architecture is in tension with social urbanism’s goals. This tension reaffirms that projects like the Biblioteca España are not entirely aligned to the interests of the local community.

Fig. 7 Iwan Baan (2013). The Biblioteca España learning space [Photograph]



Whilst ideas around contesting the market and political transparency—alongside the innovative urban visions that inform bottom-up participatory approaches to social transformation—are the rhetoric of social urbanism, architecture reveals the reality of its impacts and effects. For example, the Biblioteca España’s relationship between space and programme aims to rebuild a localised sense of identity and belonging. But this aim “underpins the formulation that the relationship of space and program in [this] building is instrumental in ‘upgrading’ social behaviours” by shifting patterns of use to represent an upgraded society (Capille, 2018: 132). The library’s patterns of use were developed under three categories: political socialisation, learning environments, and social institutions. All were intended to use “knowledge and information as fundamental means to achieve the inclusion of underprivileged communities” in the development of Medellín (Capille, 2018: 129). Besides providing access to books and information/communication technologies, investment in culture and education planned to increase human capital by *upskilling* and *upgrading* the population through social integration programmes and practices. These include drug rehabilitation support, training services for specialised skills, reading and writing workshops, and entrepreneurial coaching alongside social work agencies, volunteer reading circles, and cultural events such as literary festivals and theatre productions. Such top-down initiatives promote economic growth and support government-business interests by using architecture to produce and manage new and deliberate socioeconomic habits. This approach to social inclusion concedes to globally recognised ideas of progress rather than engaging with a more contextually relevant mechanism for using architecture to establish a sense of identity and belonging in the community. Further, the contrast between the library’s regular concrete interior and its façade suggests a concealed spatial coercion (Fig. 7). The gap between the dedicated library spaces and the façade actively separates—or shields—areas for learning from the influences of the outside world, organising behaviour through embedded design rationales for social control. Spaces of learning are in tension with the context in which they are placed, despite the primary goal of social inclusion. This tension, and the coupling of political and economic interests with spatiality and design, controls the upgrading and/or upskilling of the community and the shifts to its social behaviours. The rhetoric of inclusion and equity in Santo Domingo is opposite to that of social urbanism. It is translated through physical indicators such as electricity, water, sewerage, and so forth, whereas socio-economic indicators are merely determined through city-wide surveys with limited sample sizes such as the Medellín Cómo Vamos Quality of Life reports. Thus, social urbanism—through its approach to governing and urban regeneration—has inherited its own *inclusive* language, but it is dislocated from the actuality of the project’s localised effects. Instead, the rhetoric of social urbanism is contingent on securing the private sector’s vision for a global city. This places architecture in a critical position as it signifies the top-down public expression of political and/or economic interests—the evidence of its social impact is limited to perceived community improvements rather than the reality of everyday conditions.

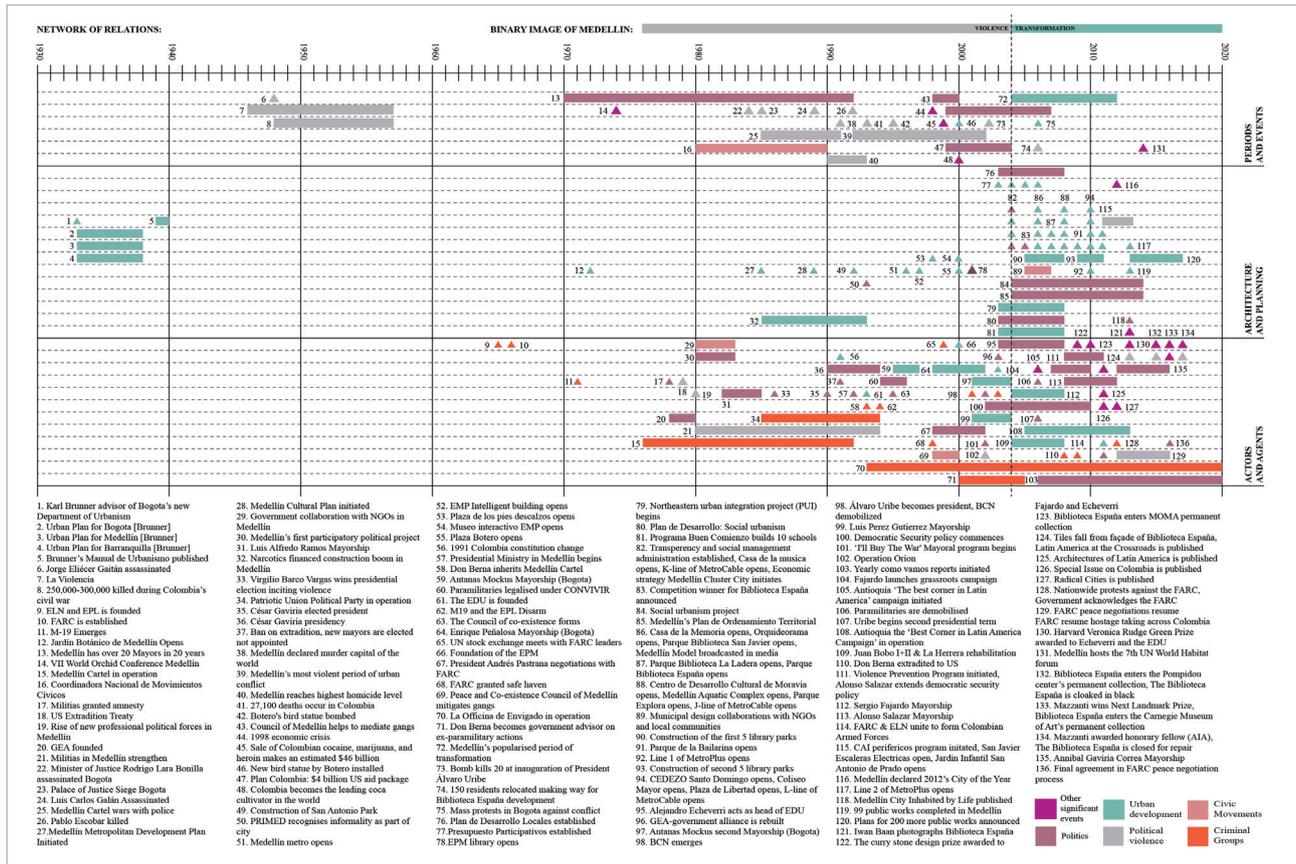


Fig. 8 Christina Deluchi (2020). Medellín's network of relations [Diagram]

### Dismantling the binary

Underpinned by socio-graphic planning schemes, decentralised politics, participatory mechanisms, educational reform, economic partnerships, and public works projects, social urbanism simply facilitated a shift toward positive spatial operations through the co-opt of architecture into political ideology. Engagement with the perception of Medellín's binary image of historic violence and novel urban transformation, allowed Fajardo to claim the right to the city. Projects like the Biblioteca España gave Medellín's dominant voices—politicians, business elites, architects, mass media outlets—the opportunity to frame the city in the new and optimistic language of social urbanism, which strengthened ideas of a united governance to produce a portrait of an emergent global city. Forrest Hylton even suggests that Medellín's updated urban ideology “better sells” the city's story of success to outsiders and its citizens (2007: 153). This perception of Medellín's socio-political condition is contingent upon the network of relations that shape it. Once we identify each agent in the network as an active force, we see their political potential. This notion is a response to Massey's claim that the overarching historical imagination of globalisation does not allow us to recognise “the simultaneous coexistence of other histories with characteristics that are distinct and futures which potentially may be so too” (2005: 11). Likewise, Medellín's urban narrative does not recognise the pluralities, parallels, overlaps, or simultaneities across its historical landscape, or how social transformation might be constructed within these territories. But Medellín is not a city composed by a binary (Fig. 8). Violence did not disappear as social urbanism was implemented, nor was social urbanism the city's first participatory project (Fig. 8). The

Biblioteca España navigates this history, its tectonics and its image unpack and reconstruct the trajectory of Medellín's urban development, its structures of violence and the social contracts within it.

By examining the physical features of the Biblioteca España, alongside the social policies linked to the transformation of Medellín's urban realm, this paper has dismantled the city's spectacularised binary—from violent and corrupt to socially conscious and regenerative. Moreover, the paper presents an entirely different narrative to that suggested by the *Architectural Review*, *Architectural Design*, *Harvard Design Magazine*, and Justin McGuirk's *Radical Cities*. It shows an uneven account of power and transformation in Medellín—it is not chronological, it is relational. Architecture is not seen as a representation of change, but rather a trigger for unpacking the tensions within and between Medellín's networks of power (Fig. 8). These networks—whether political, economic, civic, or criminal—expose a shared interest in reshaping the city's economy, increasing human capital, and securing the image of an emergent global city under the guise of social transformation. The analysis of the library reveals how these tensions occur at the intersection of capital flow, governance, and mass media in Medellín's post-war environment and further amplify the importance of the city's transverse landscape of power (Fig. 8). Exploring this landscape unveils the various socio-political contracts that have restructured local governance and civic behaviour on the city's fringe and subsequently reoriented perceptions of the city. But, the nuances of these contracts also reveal Medellín's contradictions—grassroots and participatory movements appear to be a mere tool in top-down operations, and despite progressive leadership, business elites still govern contemporary development. New and not so obvious types of violence, and different forms of governing, have been set in motion. They are perhaps only less visible than the political violence of the narcotic wars.

### Postscript: Contemporary ambitions

In 2013, the well-known Dutch photographer Iwan Baan documented the Biblioteca España (Figs. 2, 5, 6 and 7), perpetuating Medellín's image of transformation. These images have been disseminated across architectural and touristic media. They have also been used to consolidate additional global honours and awards for Medellín and for El Equipo Mazzanti.<sup>11</sup> But in the same year, tiles began falling from its façade. By 2015, the library's water-damaged volumes were cloaked in black fabric and, in 2017, only a decade after opening, it was closed indefinitely for repair (Fig. 9). The library's closure resulted in locals labelling it as Medellín's "white elephant" (Harindranath, 2018). The degradation of the library exposes the contradictions and inequities surrounding architecture's participatory and socially minded operations. With its essential public infrastructure dismantled and forgotten, what the library means for Medellín and the Santo Domingo community remains a critical question. And still, in the same year (2013), an exhaustive update to urban development was published in Medellín's magazine, outlining 99

Fig. 9 Christina Deluchi (2020). The Parque Biblioteca España Santo Domingo [Photograph]



completed community works and plans for 200 more (Correa & Alvarez, 2013: 49). Architecture in Medellín is in infinite surplus; buildings act as signifiers of progress and innovation. This surplus is absorbed by social urbanism's ideological superstructure, ensuring the continuity of its vision.

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 Camilo Calderon (2012) describes social urbanism using the development strategies of both cities; Peter Brand (2013) explores social urbanism's library parks in Medellín as the adaptation of Bogotá's earlier urban ideas; and Eduardo Mendieta (2011) studies how both cities shape the cartography of "global mega-urbanisation".
- 2 The Mayor of Bogotá, Antanas Mockus (1995-97), focused on citizen culture initiatives, such as traffic mimes and *Night Without Men*, to create learning opportunities in the public realm through personal interactions between strangers.
- 3 Despite attempts to address Medellín's contextual issues, in fact private interests and the political structure of the city hindered the realisation of such plans until changes were made to Colombia's constitution in 1991.
- 4 EDU is an administrative authority with independent assets and the legal capacity to sue. Since its creation in 1993, it has become known as the "development real estate agency of Medellín" (Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano de Medellín, 2008).
- 5 The building also won the XVI Bienal Panamericana de Arquitectura Prize (2008), the IV Bienal Iberoamericana de Arquitectura Prize (2008), and was a MCHAP 2014 nominee.
- 6 The MetroCable costs \$2,000 Colombian Peso (COP) one-way. Whilst this is relatively accessible, moving approximately 27,000 people a day, the wait to use the MetroCable can be extensive since it is one of Medellín's biggest tourist attractions.
- 7 Stakeholders include: the Learning National Service, the Colombian Institute of Family Welfare, the Public Projects Secretariat, the Medellín Social Housing Fund, Metrosalud, and the Medellín Metro Company.
- 8 The PDL and PP are supported by a series of public and community organisations including Juntas Administradoras Locales (JALs), the Consejo Territorial de Planeación (CTP) and the Consejo Comunales o Corregimentales de Planeación (CCCP), who manage local developments by guaranteeing the representation of civil society and promoting citizen participation.
- 9 The new professional political class rose through popular election after changes to the constitution. They wished to govern without the historical influence of Medellín's traditional economic elites. Thus, international industry competitors entered Medellín's liberalised economic arena as new business elites diversified their investment portfolios.
- 10 *The GEA was founded in the 1970s by three major companies from three different sectors—Suramericana (finance), Grupo Nacional de Chocolates (food), and Argos (infrastructure)—and quickly became one of Colombia's most powerful multinational corporations.*
- 11 Since the photographs were taken, Medellín hosted the seventh UN World Habitat Forum; El Equipo Mazzanti was included in *Fast Company Magazine's* top 10 innovative architecture practices, won the 2016 Next Landmark Prize, and the American Institute of Architects awarded Mazzanti himself Honorary Fellow (2017); and documentation of the Biblioteca España was selected for the permanent collections at the MOMA, the Centre Pompidou, and the Carnegie Museum of Art.