

15 Apr 2014



In most cities, I spend time looking for the actions to match the words. In Medellin it was the opposite. After five days gasping at the audacity of its actions, I finally found words that helped me begin to really understand this remarkable transition process.

Article first appeared

<http://www.blog.urbact.eu/2014/04/making-sense-of-medellin/>

“Inequality Is The Root Of Urban Violence”

In the city’s Gallery of Modern Art, a huge panel occupies the centre of the main exhibition space. This sets out the Medellin Diagram, which provides a strategic narrative to the city’s recent and ongoing journey. Subtitled, “A story of civic freedom: How a public emerged from conflict, restored urban dignity, activated collective agency and reclaimed the future of its own city”, it underlines that this was first and foremost a political process. Its opening statement proclaims that “Inequality is the root of urban violence”.

I was in Medellin, Colombia, participating in the UN Habitat World Urban Forum. The theme was urban equity in development, at this huge event attracting 23,000 participants from the four corners of the globe.

It is no coincidence that the WUF7 was held in Medellin, as there is probably no other city in the world that better demonstrates the potential for urban change.

In 2013 The Wall Street Journal declared Medellin the most innovative city in the world. This

was only the latest of a string of international awards which have included the Harvard University prize for urban design and the 2013 Sustainable Urban Transport Award (shared with San Francisco). Yet, as recently as 1991 the city also had a global reputation, but for the wrong reasons. Then, it had the highest homicide rate on the planet (381 murders per 100,000 residents), at the height of its narco-related gang violence.



Investments In Public Transport

Perhaps the most emblematic symbol of Medellin's striking transformation is the Metrocable. Towering over the city skyline, this cable car system transports 30,000 people a day from mountainside barrios to the city centre. For those in work, this has reduced their daily commute from three hours to forty minutes at a stroke. Perhaps, more significantly, it has opened up communities which for decades were isolated, socially excluded and infested with crime and violence. Medellin now has the best-integrated public transport system in South America, with the Metrocable and gas-powered buses connected to a fast, clean and efficient metro network.

In the south of the city a different kind of transport intervention has driven a wedge into Comuna 13, historically one of Medellin's most dangerous neighbourhoods. There, a series of electric escalators has opened up this barrio which perches on the side of a steep hillside, breaching the isolation which contributed to it being a no-go area for outsiders in the past.

Iconic Buildings Uptown

Both of these visibly striking mobility initiatives sit alongside other iconic structures. At the top of the Metrocable, sits the Biblioteca di España, three black monolithic blocks, whilst the Biblioteca di San Javier squats at the base of the electric staircase. These are the two most recognizable of the city's 23 new public libraries. Designed by renowned architects, they sit within traditional working class neighbourhoods, representing a huge statement of intent.

Most cities locate their iconic buildings downtown, where international visitors can appreciate them without the inconvenience of leaving the city centre. Medellin has them dotted across its poorest districts far from the glass and steel commercial towers of the city centre. As a former Medellin Mayor put it, "Our most beautiful buildings must be in our poorest areas. " Also, by

operating as hubs of learning and culture, this library network reflects the importance of learning to Medellin's transformation.

City Sponsored Innovation Culture

The alignment of learning, enterprise and innovation, is also at the heart of Ruta N, the city's innovation and enterprise agency. Funded through a private/public partnership model, it focuses on driving the city's knowledge economy, clustered around specific industry sectors (Health, Energy and ICT). Its strategy includes plans for a 115-hectare innovation district to be established and thriving by 2023.

Towards that end, there is already an extensive network of research and commercial agreements. This includes a distinctive strategy to complement home grown innovation talent with established corporate innovators from overseas, specifically those bringing regional decision-making functions to Medellin. For a non-capital city, this is identified as key to future success. The North American ICT giant, Hewlett Packard, which has taken a 15-year lease from Ruta N for its South American HQ, is the most prominent company attracted by this model to date.

Alongside this corporate collaboration, Ruta N has an active development programme, designed to nurture a culture of innovation across the city. It includes collaborative activity with education providers as well as extensive placement opportunities for young people. Working closely with the Mayor's team, Ruta N sees the drive to increase high value added science and technology jobs as part of the city's bigger ambition to tackle social problems like health and poverty. Economic growth and reduction of inequalities are identified as two sides of the same coin.

Innovation And Mistakes

As a country, Colombia still confronts significant challenges. The World Bank defines it as the seventh most unequal country on the planet, and peace negotiations continue with FARC guerillas to end a 50 year conflict that has claimed the lives of over 100,000 people. But I was struck by the energy and optimism of everyone I spoke with in Medellin, as well as by the visible results of its urbanism social model.

On our last night in the city I ate with some European colleagues. As we discussed the scale of the Medellin's achievements, I detected an underlying cynicism amongst some colleagues. One

remarked that these libraries might turn out to be white elephants – like many of Spain's regional airports funded during the boom years. Another predicted that Medellin is bound to make mistakes – perhaps some big ones – along the way.

In response you have to say – well, that's innovation for you! Thirty years from now if Medellin's city leaders look back and see no mistakes, then they may conclude that they were not being innovative enough. The city's story raises important questions about tolerance levels to risk amongst public policy makers. As their journey continues, we will watch with interest.

In the meantime, their bold adventure is an inspiration for many. It is also an example of sustainable integrated urban development in action, and therefore a lesson for us all.

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