

## The Tale of Two Cities: Medellin, Colombia, in the 1990s and Today

Imagine a city of 2.5 million inhabitants with the highest murder rate on earth, where gunfights and terrorist bombings are everyday occurrences. The public areas are deserted, ruled by fear, and hundreds of thousands of refugees exiled by civil war in the countryside live in shantytowns ruled by criminal gangs. Another city the same size has a violence rate ten times lower, receives numerous international awards as a world capital of green innovation and sustainable transport, and is a continental leader in attracting new international investment and internet and tech startups. It attracts world-class architects to design some of the most striking new public buildings anywhere, and is carrying out an extraordinarily ambitious plan for climate change adaptation.

It is the same place: Medellin, Colombia, in the early 1990s and today.

Supported by leaders in business, academia, and community organizations, Medellin elected in 2003 a new mayor, Sergio Fajardo, who spearheaded a program of “social urbanism” developed at the University of Medellin in the early 1990s. It emphasized services for the poor, green public transport, and co-responsibility of local communities in managing investments affecting them.

In the last twenty years Medellin has built (through public-private partnerships) an extensive underground metro with nine aerial cable car lines connecting the hillside poor neighborhoods directly to the subway, and to a new \$145 million bus rapid transport system as well as to even newer high-speed tram lines. Now Rio de Janeiro and Caracas are also building aerial cable car systems for their hillside slums.

The metro system moves 550,000 people daily, saves 175,000 tons of CO<sub>2</sub> a year that would have been emitted

through vehicular traffic, avoids \$1.5 billion in respiratory health costs, and saves \$4 billion by reducing traffic accidents and congestion.

The cable car stations provide access to new public parks and new daycare centers for 100,000 poor children, allowing parents to find work, and connect new schools and two new universities for low-income students. One cable car line links what was once Medellin’s most violent slum, Comuna 13, to a system of covered public escalators that go farther up the hillside settlement, now flanked by lovely small gardens maintained by the inhabitants, and served by new stores and small businesses. Comuna 13 and other poor areas are assisted by neighborhood “entrepreneurial development centers,” where microcredit loans are available to open shops or services.

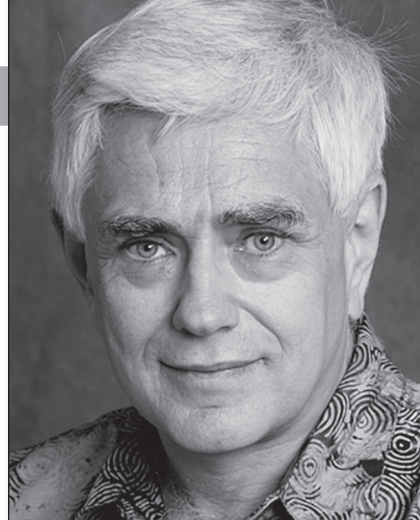
Comuna 13 is one example of Medellin’s “Integral Urban Projects”—cultural areas and green spaces connected to the transport infrastructure. Fajardo calls them “urban acupuncture,” using the term Jaime Lerner, former mayor of Curitiba,

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Brazil (where bus rapid transit was first developed), wrote about in his 2005 book of the same title. It means “poking an [urban] area to help it heal, improve, and create positive chain reactions.”

Medellin has built nine internationally renowned “Library Parks” in the poorest neighborhoods — a combination of library, public green space, and educational and cultural center — centered on distinguished buildings designed by leading architects. To heal the social fabric, Fajardo says, the municipality must “build the city’s most beautiful buildings in the poorest neighborhoods.”

Medellin is investing \$1.7 billion to build 20 kilometers of new parks along the Medellin River, which runs



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through the center of the city. The project will relocate underground a 400-yard section of the main riverside highway, which channels much of the long-distance truck and car traffic of western Colombia, and build a park on top of it, catalyzing in the city center new, greener development. The city also began work in 2011 on a \$250 million green belt that eventually will extend as far as 50 miles from the city.

Both projects are ambitious investments in climate change adaptation. Global warming is increasing the risks in the Medellin basin of more extreme and intense rainfall, landslides, and flooding that especially affect poor hillside neighborhoods where 180,000 families live.

The Medellin Miracle is a work in progress. Crime is still too high, and while Pablo Escobar is long dead, drug gangs remain active, but on a smaller, less violent scale. The miracle might not be replicable everywhere: Medellin’s budget receives \$400 to \$650 million annually from the profits of the municipal public utility, one of the best run in Latin America. The city’s strong local culture, characterized by the *Economist* as “Catholic Corporatism,” means that local elites cooperate more than elsewhere to promote the common good.

Nonetheless Medellin shows what a path to sustainable development might look like. Significantly, local officials attribute their successes to an overarching priority that is not the environment, economic efficiency, or even sustainability, but “social inclusion.”