

City on a Hill

Russell Crandall & Caroline McDermott

Back in May 2009, Mexican President Felipe Calderón paid a working visit to the provincial Colombian city of Medellín. Calderón's itinerary included an unusual stop: Comuna 13, a sprawling urban zone (or comuna) that is home to 150,000 residents living mainly in ramshackle houses that crawl up a verdant mountainside, in other words, the Colombian version of a Brazilian favela. Accompanied by Medellín's irrepressible Mayor Alonso Salazar, Calderón's tour started at one of the neighborhood stations for the Metrocable, an innovative gondola lift service that allows formerly isolated Comuna 13 residents to gain inexpensive, reliable access to the city's burgeoning public services and its metro and bus lines.

Calderón came to Comuna 13 to witness first-hand the turnaround in this once violent neighborhood that epitomizes Medellín's broader transformation. What was once a notoriously violent, cocaine-ridden metropolis, home to drug kingpin Pablo Escobar two decades ago, is today an urban trendsetter that

attracts legions of curious politicians and urban planners from across the globe who are eager to emulate its innovations. Indeed, what proud city leaders dubbed the "Medellín Miracle" appeared to track nicely with Colombia's newfound stability, coming after teetering on the brink of collapse due to drug-fueled Marxist and rightist violence only a decade ago. Thus it was not surprising that the leader of Mexico, a country riddled with narcotics violence that is frighteningly reminiscent of Colombia's dark days in the 1980s and 1990s, wanted to see what his country might learn from Medellín's well-publicized makeover.

Alas, the course of true love is not the only thing that doesn't run smooth. Had President Calderón visited Comuna 13 in August 2010, he would have witnessed 2,000 police and military units trying to quell escalating turf wars among dozens of gangs operating in the zone. Bullets piercing the gondola cars shut the Metrocable down for two weeks, and the luster of Medellín, and Comuna 13 in particular, seemed to be rubbing off. Yet order was in due course restored. Despite recent setbacks, Medellín remains a remarkable story of urban investment and renewal amid seemingly intractable circumstances.

The proper points of comparison to see Medellín's improvement are not 2009 and 2010, but 2003 and 2011. Only eight years ago, the scene inside Comuna 13 was truly grim, a reality that mirrored problems throughout Medellín's poverty-ridden hillside comunas. Urban

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Medellín at night

guerrillas from the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (or FARC) and National Liberation Army (ELN), the Marxist insurgencies active in Colombia since the early 1960s, had boldly taken control of Comuna 13 in order to recruit guerrillas and dominate the narcotics market. Not to be outdone, rightist, drug-financed paramilitaries entered the fray, attempting to push their mortal enemies out of this lucrative urban stronghold.

Despite the growing violence, the Colombian state was reluctant to take action, fearful that its intervention would aggravate matters and end in failure. That changed when a new President, Álvaro Uribe, approved the Colombian military's plan to clean up Comuna 13 once and for all in October 2002, shortly after he took office. Led by the hard-charging 4th Brigade commander, General Mario Montoya, and backed by helicopters and tanks, over a thousand Colombian troops fought house-to-house battles over two days to pacify the neighborhood. Comuna 13's desperate residents welcomed the military's push for law and order, known as Operation Orion. Despite the security gains, Montoya's achievements were sullied by accusations that the Colombian troops committed human rights violations, including disappearances of civilians. Others claimed that

Montoya had coordinated his anti-guerrilla initiative with illegal paramilitary groups.

While military efforts such as the controversial Operation Orion unquestionably helped pacify Medellín's comunas, the municipality-led efforts that followed the urban combat exemplify the city's impressive strides in recent years. Essentially, urban operations such as the one in Comuna 13 resemble counterinsurgency campaigns in which one first "clears" territory but must then "hold" and "build" to achieve real success. Prescient politicians in Medellín wanted to show the country that they could not just clear but also hold and build with imagination and ingenuity, thus overcoming Colombia's tragic penchant for cycles of violence and destruction.

This new approach took shape most prominently under the leadership of the eminently modern then-Mayor Sergio Fajardo. City officials implemented their vision of "social urbanism", the novel notion that public and private sector architects, psychologists and other professionals could work with local communities to design and implement social programs and public space. Fajardo inaugurated a slew of projects between 2004 and 2007 that reflected the city government's commitment to focus on the city's roughest areas, including Comuna 13. Over

time, Medellín's shockingly high murder rate (its rate in 1991 was 381 per 100,000 residents, one of the highest ever recorded) began to ebb dramatically, and Farjado became a political hero.

The most visible sign of social urbanism is undoubtedly the Metrocable. The democratic elements of the strategy are inherent in the gondola's increased and expedited connections to transportation and social centers. The Metrocable links formerly disenfranchised citizens to business districts, public libraries, community centers, schools, health clinics and a new ecological reserve called Parque Arvi.

Across the city from Comuna 13, the Metrocable carries poor residents and intrepid tourists to the architecturally stunning Parque España Public Library, situated in the hilltop slum of Santo Domingo, in Comuna 1. A hub of community participation and commercial development now thrives around the Metrocable station, including the public library, one of several city-sponsored Centers for Entrepreneurial Development (called CEDEZOs) and a newly updated primary school. Where rival gangs once fought their turf wars now sits a public basketball court lined with community art touting phrases like "*Cambio minas por esperanza*" or, "I change land mines for hope." In just six years, the number of small businesses in the three-block corridor between the Metrocable station and the public library grew from forty to 250.

This barrage of urban innovations changed the tenor of the Santo Domingo community from a violent failure to a literal and figurative city upon a hill. Medellín City Councilman Santiago Londoño described the change:

Before, neighborhoods like this one only existed when there was violence—when there was something negative. Now they exist because they have something positive—a cultural or educational offering and a new type of social fabric. . . . They carry with them a discourse of participation and self-appropriation.

Indeed, part of what has made the Miracle of Medellín so compelling to visiting dignitaries from chronically embattled cities like Rio or Ciudad Juarez is that its gains are so tangible. The current Mayor Salazar, a crime journalist whose chilling account of Medellín in the

1980s was translated into several languages, beams with pride as he leads the incessant visiting delegations to the new and undeniably impressive schools, libraries and social centers that now dot the city.¹ A new "coordination center" in Comuna 13, which itself receives two to three note-taking delegations a week, is part of the "integrated action" effort to have a police, judicial, human rights, social welfare and employment entities all under one roof.

The city is also attempting to address the "psychosocial" aspects of urban crime and violence, especially on the city's youth. One program took hundreds of youth from tough neighborhoods and sent them to a nearby ranch, where they spent six months undergoing "resocialization" therapy. The youth then returned to their homes to form a sort of civic corps, painting houses, maintaining gardens and participating in other activities intended to keep them away from local violence.

The gains from these urban reforms are still subject to Medellín's intransigent security challenges. A public library administrator from Medellín found that some libraries have made convenient venues for local gang meetings. Many citizens prefer not to venture out to a community center and risk the street violence that left 179 dead in Comuna 1 in 2009.

Local officials complain that justice remains the weakest link of the integrated action strategy. Police officers struggle with the judicial bureaucracy to obtain arrest warrants, and suspects are often back on the streets in less than 24 hours. Moreover, following the demobilization of upwards of 30,000 paramilitary fighters over the past several years, legions of "underemployed" fighters are now scouring Medellín for work. Given their employment background, they are often willing and more than able to join the myriad local drug gangs. Comuna 13 has also suffered from a proliferation of sophisticated weapons, the kinds associated more with seasoned guerrilla and paramilitary forces than with run-of-the-mill drug thugs.

¹Alonso Salazar J., *No nacimos pa' Semilla* (CINEP, 1990). The English version is: Salazar, *Born to Die in Medellín* (Monthly Review Press, 1990).



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A line on Medellín's Metrocable

That is not the only kind of critique one hears. Aside from the weakness of the justice system, some allege that Mayor Salazar's anti-crime and delinquency programs are based on "non-aggression pacts" with the city's criminal gangs. This perception is undoubtedly encouraged by the fact that most of the city's violence is gang-on-gang. The city is forced to choose between focusing its resources on the difficult task of stopping these gangland murders or continuing to build opportunities and citizen confidence through new schools, social assistance and targeted infrastructure. Generally it chooses the latter. The hope, it seems, is that while the gangs attrit each other, the non-criminal sections of town will prosper, grow and eventually absorb the survivors of the gang wars—or their children.

But gang-dominated enclaves do not always collapse into wars of attrition. Sometimes the drug trade can coexist with a considerable level of local social order. While it is tempting to attribute Medellín's drastic reduction in violence over the past decades to innovative social programs, pacification was due in no small part to the ability of a prominent drug boss to enforce a crude truce among the city's rival gangs.

Diego Fernando Murillo, known as "Don Berna", started his illicit career as a member of the Popular Liberation Army, a tiny Marxist guerrilla group that years ago split off from the FARC and barely exists today. After his brief dalliance with world revolution, Don Berna operated as a formidable Medellín drug trafficker who collaborated with Pablo Escobar before turning against him and joining a rival gang that helped lead authorities to him. After Colombian police officers gunned down Escobar on a Medellín rooftop in 1993, Medellín's drug bosses met to discuss business, apparently

in an underground parking garage in the neighborhood of Envigado, the same barrio where Escobar got his start. From this meeting emerged the so-called Envigado Office, with Don Berna managing its drug trafficking, assassination-for-hire and extortion operations.

Not content to simply be one more narco kingpin in a city full of them, Don Berna began turning his enmity toward his former brothers-in-arms of leftist guerrilla groups like the FARC. Seeing the FARC as rivals in the drug business and godless communists, Don Berna joined an alliance of right-wing militias that hit them back hard. These attacks came as a shock because the guerillas were used to facing what at that time was a far less formidable, "garrison-like" Colombian military. Soon, Don Berna commanded more than 3,000 of

these militias, or paramilitaries, as they came to be known.

In 2005, Don Berna turned himself in and went into house arrest and then prison as part of the Uribe Administration's Justice and Peace Law, which gave participating illegal soldiers reduced sentences in return for their confessions. But Don Berna maintained his status as Medellín's chief drug boss despite being behind bars. Ironically, violence in the city receded as Don Berna gained control of the disparate gangs. Then, in May 2008, Don Berna was extradited to the United States on drug trafficking charges along with 13 other paramilitary leaders. Today, the remnants of the Envigado Office are fighting among themselves to fill the vacuum left by Don Berna's extradition. The city now witnesses around six murders per day, up from just two in 2007.

In 2009, Don Berna was sentenced in an U.S. Federal Court to 31 years in prison for conspiring to smuggle cocaine into the United States. Don Berna testified that he helped finance President Uribe's first presidential campaign. He also claimed that his fighters entered Comuna 13 "in alliance" with troops under General Montoya's command during Operation Orion. Interestingly, Montoya resigned as the Colombian Army's Commander-in-Chief in November 2008 in the aftermath of a separate scandal over extrajudicial killings by

soldiers. (Uribe subsequently appointed him Ambassador to the Dominican Republic.) Don Berna is still in prison.

The peculiar interplay between Don Berna's powerful legacy and creative public policies in Medellín highlights a broader dialogue in Colombia between security concerns and social policies. Colombia's 2010 presidential campaign pitted the intellectual and socially innovative approach of Antanus Mockus against the more security-oriented priorities of the eventual victor, Juan Manuel Santos. While young intellectuals in downtown Bogotá carried Mockus's emblematic sunflowers and preached the virtues of a "citizen culture", a woman collecting cardboard boxes in the gritty slums of Bogotá commented, "We don't need any damn flowers. We need to get rid of the gunshots."

Medellín reflects Colombia's larger legacy of being a country at once chronically mired in civil conflict and justifiably proud of possessing one of Latin America's most entrepreneurial business classes. This paradox is most visibly represented by the sculptures of the world-renowned and Medellín-born Fernando Botero. After a 1995 bomb killed 22, injured a hundred and disfigured his massive sculpture "El pájaro" (the bird) at Medellín's Plaza de San Antonio, Botero displayed the damaged

A community that allows a large number of young men to grow up in broken families, dominated by women, never acquiring any stable relationship to male authority, never acquiring any set of rational expectations about the future—that community asks for and gets chaos. Crime, violence, unrest, disorder—most particularly the furious, unrestrained lashing out at the whole social structure—that is not only to be expected; it is very near to inevitable. And it is richly deserved.

—Daniel Patrick Moynihan

Family and Nation (1965)



A replica of Fernando Botero's sculpture "El pájaro" (foreground) stands beside the bomb-damaged original in Medellín's Plaza de San Antonio.

artwork to acknowledge the city's dark past, and in 2000 he created an identical sculpture to sit a few feet away.

Medellín and Comuna 13 also represent the grim underbelly of globalization. The insatiable American and West European demand for cocaine funds this Colombian city's most notorious actors. Indeed, the twenty-something Manhattan stockbroker who nonchalantly snorts coke is the engine that fuels much of the urban warfare of the Envigado Office and other drug gangs. Yet despite the persistent barriers to change, Medellín's perseverance is inspiring other cities and countries with similar maladies.

In an echo of Medellín's 2002 Orion Operation, in late November of last year Brazilian federal, state and military police units raided the notorious Complexo do Alemão *favela* that encompasses about a dozen smaller *favelas* and 65,000 residents of Rio de Janeiro. Caught almost completely off guard due to the virtual impunity from the security forces they typically enjoyed, the drug gangs in Alemão offered only token resistance. Brazilian leaders

emerged cautiously optimistic that the police and military operation will, as in Medellín, create the requisite security that will allow aggressive social investments to take hold. Interestingly, Alemão's first step in this effort is the construction of a gondola network that, when fully operational, will carry 30,000 people per day. Each station is slated to have a "social center" with a bank, library and other services.

Medellín's shining example of a sprawling metropolis' ability to deepen its democratic legitimacy despite the scourge of violence is a stern reminder that some of the best ideas about urban renewal and community participation come from the "developing" world. If Alexis de Tocqueville were alive today, he might see many more elements of citizen connectivity, and thus democracy, in Medellín's efforts than he would in the far more affluent yet socially deficient cities of America's Sun Belt—not to speak of places like Detroit and Newark, New Jersey. Even Americans can learn something from their street-smart southern neighbors. Call it Plan Colombia, Redux. 🇨🇴