Governing inequality in the South through the Barcelona model: 'social urbanism' in Medellín, Colombia[1]

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Abstract: Not all urban crises relate directly to the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. Although global in reach, effects have been highly heterogeneous in different regions of the world, often accentuating or giving a new turn to existing crises. In the cities of the South, these commonly relate to acute problems of poverty, inequality, crime and insecurity; in short, governability. This paper examines critically the case of Medellin, Colombia's second city, until recently infamous for its association with drugs cartels but now widely regarded as a laboratory of successful urban planning, design and management. This has been undertaken through the adaptation of the Barcelona model to local conditions, with high impact innovations in terms of public transport, architecture and urban design: a strategy of 'urban acupuncture' sustained by a narrative of a radical transformation and a break with the past. However, given increasing social inequality and a still fragile public order, this narrative has to be continually renewed and reinforced. Recent evidence suggests that the narrative is becoming strained and its 'truth effects' weakened, in part because the success of the city's 'social urbanism' is converting an internal socio-spatial project into an external marketing strategy. The international interest and comparative study potential lies in the adaptation of a European model to the cities of the South, as well as the fact that the 'Medellin model' has influenced many cities in Latin America and elsewhere.

1. Introduction

The current urban crisis is defined, in Western terms, by the 2008 financial crisis and its aftermath. Although the financial crisis has had global effects, these are highly heterogeneous in different regions of the world. Cities in Asia, Africa and Latin America are facing new economic challenges as the global economy slowed, but mostly they are not having to deal with 'austerity politics'. Rather, the financial crisis has thrown to the surface underlying, more local crisis of governability. This paper examines the case of a Latin American city, illustrative of this type of phenomenon and, it is hoped, a useful reference for comparative studies.

Medellin, Colombia's second city bursting the hillsides of a steep Andean valley, is still indelibly linked in the popular imagination to the infamous drug baron Pablo Escobar. Drugs organisations certainly played an important part in the crisis affecting the city in the final two decades of the last millennium, though far from account for all the difficulties underwent by the city. Trade liberalisation and structural adjustment policies had wrought havoc on the city's economy, unemployment was high and the future was uncertain (Brand, 2005; Hylton, 2007; Fukuyama and Colby, 2011).However, the drugs issue did make a major contribution to Medellin becoming the most violent city in the world, reaching a peak of 381 murders per 100.000 in 1991 and remaining above150/100.000 throughout the rest of the decade, both a symptom and cause of a more widespread urban crisis.

Urban discourse constructed a radical change in the city's fortunes in new millennium. It was the beginning of what The Urban Land Institute termed 'one of the most remarkable urban turnarounds in modern history', and what city administration likes to call the 'miracle' of Medellin. A national level (and highly criticised) demobilisation agreement with narco-paramilitary organisations in 2002 resulted in a drastic reduction in killings ('half a miracle' according to Fukuyama and Colby, 2011). An independent political movement took control of the city administration in 2004 and began what was claimed to be the 'transformation' of Medellin through an invigorated social agenda, modern governance practices and a set of urban interventions known as 'social urbanism'. The city also continued to actively develop a comprehensive competitiveness agenda, but it is the urban interventions, strongly influenced by the Barcelona model of the 1990s, which have had the greater impact and achievements have certainly been impressive (Davila, 2013). The Inter-American Development Bank began supporting the 'Medellin model' in 2008 and since then it has received a number of international awards. The recent decision to name Medellin as host city to the 2014 World Urban Forum is further recognition of the city's achievements.

Recognition has not just been external. The general feeling within the city is one of considerable, though not uncontested achievement. In March of this year Medellin received the World's Most Innovative City prize, beating New York and Tel Aviv in the final round. Here two significant things stand out. Firstly, the prize was awarded by the American Urban Land Institute and sponsored by the Wall Street Journal and Citigroup, major forces behind global capitalism. Secondly, the play-off decision was made by popular vote, and the citizens of Medellin accounted for 70% of the total number of votes received (Citigroup, 2013). In other words, not only capitalist interests loved the urban transformations, but local citizens as well, despite the fact that Medellin is one of the most socially unequal cities in the world.

This paper examines how this has been achieved. Evidently the point of reference for the urban crisis in Medellin was the 'drugs war' and the social violence/disruption this caused. However the paper attempts to contextualize this phenomenon within the wider picture of the effects of economic globalisation, and highlight the implications (strains and contradictions) brought about by the 2008 financial crisis.

2. The Barcelona model and its adaptation

The term 'Barcelona model' is used here in the sense of intermediate scale architectural and urban space interventions deployed with the intention of reconstructing the urban fabric and rearticulating a sense of place, local identity and spatial equality. There has been some debate as to the extent to which the Barcelona experience represents a model as such (Marshall, 2000), but the city has undoubtedly had an important influence on urban planning practice. It was, amongst other things, one of the first cities to break with the rational-comprehensive planning model, giving priority to the urban project. Many other cities soon followed this pattern, but in function of economic restructuring and the interests of private capital; Barcelona developed a wider spatial spread and a more socially inclusive approach.

We refer, then, to the phase of the Barcelona model (often divided into four periods) which occurred in the post-Franco era and peaked following the successful Olympic Games bid of 1986 and continued through into the 1990s: a model based on the urban project rather the urban plan, with its emphasis on the importance of public space (for articulating the physical fabric of the city and as essentially democratic) and the even distribution of public facilities to promote quality of life and a sense of inclusion across the socio-spatial spectrum (Montaner, nd).

The chief architect and leader of urban projects in Medellin had undertaken doctoral studies in Barcelona in the late 1990s, some of that city's leading urbanists acted as consultants, and the discourse of social urbanism is loaded with the Barcelona lexicon of 'urban acupuncture', 'new centralities', the democratic value of public space', and so on. Social urbanism in Medellin also shared the Barcelona intention of a break with the past (there with strong national overtones, in Medellin in a more local sense), as well as more substantive issues such as scant regard for social housing and neighbourhood economies (Montaner, op. cit.). However the Medellin experience did include some notable absences in the Barcelona model such as environmental concerns, as was perhaps inevitable given the geophysical conditions of Medellin, and an albeit modest economic (small-business) component.

The above indicates an important process of adaptation of the Barcelona model and local inventiveness. Adaptation was made with reference to the city's acute problems of poverty, inequality, segregation and violence; inventiveness through borrowing on Medellin's prior experiences and projects developed throughout the 1990s, and the experiences of other Latin American cities, especially Bogota in the 1990s where important experiments had been carried out in relation to urban political culture ('citizen culture'), governance practices, education, public space and transport. The key aspect, however, was urban change through physical interventions. Structural factors concerning the employment and housing crises were effectively ignored, in the context of a political crisis concerning governability and state control over large marginal areas of the city.

3. Characteristics of social urbanism in Medellin

Social urbanism is the name given to the physical interventions in the poorer sectors of the city over the period 2002-2010 (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010; The Architectural Review, 2011). They are the material manifestations of what was termed the 'Medellin model' by the Organisation of American States which, during in XXXVIII General Assembly held in there in 2008, set up an observatory in the city to monitor and promote the experience. The model itself consisted of a conventional but generally well executed repertoire of 'good governance' (planning, fiscal discipline, transparency, participation and communication), with a substantive emphasis on education, culture, entrepreneurship, inclusion and 'peaceful coexistence', as well as social urbanism.

Social urbanism is by far the most striking. Supported by the discourse of paying off the city's historical debt to the long-abandoned poor sectors, it involved shifting substantial public investment to those sectors in the form of infrastructure, public buildings and services, and urban space and environmental improvements. This was partly functional (improving the provision of and access to services, and improving quality of life indices) but above all aesthetic: high quality architecture and finishing aimed to materialise the idea of inclusion. This applied to the whole range of projects ranging from the aerial cable-cars to new schools and public spaces.

Social urbanism is the discursive formalisation of a set of ideas and experiences, some original, others borrowed and adapted. The jewel in the crown is undoubtedly the aerial cable-cars, known as Metrocables, the first ever application of tourist infrastructure technology to public transport for the urban poor, integrated in this case to the existing metro system. The idea took form in the 1990s and the first line came into operation in 2004. Further lines have been built since then (a second line was built in 2008, a third in 2010 and two more are planned for 2014), and the idea has been replicated in other cities such as Caracas (2009) and Río de Janeiro (2011).

Aerial cable-car systems

The Metrocables were also used as an axis for wider urban upgrading or 'integral urban projects'. These projects involved systematic improvement in terms of urban space, recreational and service facilities, environmental improvements and to a lesser extent housing. An exceptional case of the latter was the Juan Bobo in situ re-housing project, given a best practice award at Dubai 2008. On a steep and unstable hillside along a stream, very poor quality housing was upgraded or rebuilt in four or five- story blocks, along with public space provision, environmental improvements and risk mitigation works. However, perhaps the most outstanding aspect was project management. It was undertaken with the intimate participation of residents, no family was forcibly re-housed, 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. It was a highly-recognised but relatively small-scale project (some 220 dwellings), intensive in both financial and institutional resources, especially technical personal and on-the-ground staff. Like many of these projects, its international impact was greater than its urban effect, and only one comparable project of this kind was subsequently implemented.

Another important component of social urbanism was the library-parks, the amplification of an idea earlier implemented in Bogotá. Conceived as affirmations of state presence in the poor sectors, they provide a variety of services including computer and information technology, training courses, cultural activities, spaces for sport and recreation, social programmes, business set-up advice and so on. As with the new schools, architecture was a key feature of state presence. These buildings, implanted in monotone brick neighbourhoods, stand out in their scale, form, materials and colour, and announce state presence worthy of the wealthier sectors of the city. Architectural design was by international competition, although most winners were Colombian architects; the Moravia Cultural Centre was the last work of Colombia´s most exquisite, Rogelio Salmona.

Complementary urban projects

All this was undertaken with an extraordinary project management capability. A special urban development unit was set up 2002, which brought together seasoned technical staff, young professionals and new recruits from academia; a fortunate combination of committed staff capable of delivering new ideas over short periods of time (project completion of aerial cable-cars and library-parks was typically 12-18 months). The role of young mayors from political movements independent of traditional parties and practices was also important. A second key aspect was the municipality's financial capacity. Although projects were not exorbitant (an aerial cable-car cost around US$25 million, a library-park around US$6 million), they were largely funded through the city's capital expenditure budget without the need for loans. The publicly owned Metro Company partly financed the cable-cars, and financing of other projects was significantly helped by the publicly owned utilities company (Empresas Públicas de Medellín) which annually transfers 30-45% of operating profits to the municipality for social investment; in 2011 this amounted to over U$$300 million. Finally, mention should be made of functional articulation and spatial coherence of the projects, which helps establish a genuinely urban character and reach of these sets of interventions.

Behind these commendable and successful initiatives there was a deeper and more serious purpose: the reconstitution of the social fabric which had been shattered by decades of violence severely affected the city's population (Hylton, 2007). All urbanism has an explicit social content, but 'social urbanism' in Medellín went beyond the conventional. The municipal administration spoke not only of 'building better architecture, which the people can be proud of and builds the community's self-esteem and sense of belonging', but also of 'leverage projects' leading to 'a profound social transformation'. The aspiration was to build, literally, a new 'social contract' through the provision of spaces of citizenship, places for democracy and environments of conviviality (Medellin Mayor's Office, 2008).

There were, however, many obstacles to achieving these high ends: a city which is increasingly socially unequal and spatially segregated, with high levels of poverty, a growing social housing crisis, structural unemployment, alarming levels of informality and underemployment, and restricted opportunities for young people. Add the presence of youth gangs and criminal organisations resulting from the incomplete reinsertion of illegal paramilitary groups in Colombia, the trafficking and consumption of drugs and turf wars for territorial control, then the challenges remain considerable (Brand, 2010).

During a visit to Medellin in the early stages, the Catalan urbanist Oriol Bohigas expressed his admiration for an urban policy which he regarded as 'fantastic, [and] of an extraordinary efficacy', then adding 'one has to say the good things and also the bad things. We are talking about a city which in reality is a catastrophe, with a high percentage of the population living in shacks […] we are talking about a city which has deep problems' (El Colombiano, 2007). Neoliberal, market-orientated, competitiveness policies continue to accentuate those problems, which economic growth and local social programmes have only been able to ameliorate. In the following section we examine the question of the 'efficacy' mentioned by Bohigas.

4. Impacts and limitations

The urban crisis in Medellin was one of governability, or the ability of the local administration to exercise effective control and impose social order in the low-income sectors of the city. Under- and unemployment, dominant consequences of the 2008 financial crisis in the West, had been at high levels for a long time in Medellin. Social exclusion and weak state territorial control were the most salient characteristics of the Medellin crisis. Early disputes over the control of those territories had been led by left-wing militias, followed in the 1990s by an intensified presence of drugs organizations and, later, right-wing paramilitary groups. The low-income sectors of the city became indelibly associated with illegality, crime and violence, and the inhabitants suffered a severe stigmatization as a result.

Socio-spatial inclusion became the city's major goal and social urbanism its leading urban strategy. This section examines its material and symbolic effects. The first two aerial cable cars systems and associated integral urban projects were built precisely in those sectors of the city where poverty and violence were most acute. The first one, Line K, in the northeast sector of the city had been the most densely populated, fastest (informally) growing and poorest sector of the city, and at that time main stronghold of the local mafia. The second one, Line J, traversed what was by then, in the late 90s and early part of the new millennium, the principal site of occupation and dispute among a mixture of guerrilla groups, paramilitary organisations and drug trafficking, characterized by armed dispute for the control of local territories. Basic services are provided, but housing is dense, often precarious and public space scarce. A third of the population had only primary school education, although this figure and social security affiliation are improving; most inhabitants work in the informal sector and average family incomes are below the legal minimum wage and national poverty line.

4.1 Material impacts

- **Mobility, travel costs and spatial integration:** The initial building block of social urbanism was the introduction of the first aerial cable-car or Metrocable, and as mentioned earlier, complementary integrated urban improvement projects were organised around this. The initial assumption was that the benefits of improved mobility in fairly inaccessible sectors of the city would accrue naturally, due to a reduction in transport costs and time. In principle, the cable-car also provides a means of breaking down spatial barriers. In optimum conditions, the first cable-car, Line K, allows a cable-car/Metro journey 10 kilometres from and 350 metres above the city centre to be undertaken in 20 minutes. This radically alters the idea of spatial marginalisation and the notion of the geographic periphery. Not only were travel times to be radically improved, but so were travel costs. The Metrocable involves no extra cost for Metro users, being part of the single-price ticket to move anywhere on the system. Metrocable users could access the Metro without having to pay a bus fare to get to it.

The reality, however, was somewhat more complicated. Access to the cable-car/Metro system can involve lengthy periods of walking and queuing, zero in off-peak but over an hour in peak periods. The effective time for Metrocable users can turn out to be greater than conventional bus journeys, at least to the city centre. On the issue of cost, the Metrocable/Metro offers considerable advantages for long journeys and those involving an integrated Metrocable/Metro/bus ticket, with savings of around 30%. However, for a single non-transfer journey to the city centre the conventional bus remains marginally cheaper. Monetary cost tends to be the deciding factor for users, who are prepared to walk long distances to save a few pesos.

The principal users of the cable-car users are formal sector workers (in the construction, manufacturing, services) with long journey-to-work patterns. Students get a discount fare and with their more flexible routines, also benefit considerably. Even here, the advantages for these users are more in terms of money than time. For people in the informal sector of the economy (the great majority), children and young people, housewives, the elderly and infirm, the Metrocable/Metro system offers fewer advantages and therefore more limited use. Less than 10% of the journeys in the area of influence (as defined by local administrative boundaries) use the Metrocable/Metro, conventional buses and walking continue to be the major transport modes, and there is little evidence to suggest an increase in the number of journeys made for non-essential trips leading to greater participation in city life.

- Family income and neighbourhood economies: Here we address the question as to the extent which enhanced mobility and the job creation programmes associated with social urbanism have reduced poverty and improved neighbourhood economies. That this might occur is based on the assumption that greater mobility can improve access to jobs, reduce the weight of transport costs on family budgets, and in conjunction with specific job-creation programmes, help stimulate economic development within the areas of influence of the cable-car systems. There are considerable difficulties in isolating the effects of specific variables, since family incomes are subject to macroeconomic cycles and a whole range of central and local government economic and social policies. Detailed and reliable information on incomes is notoriously difficult to obtain, especially in the informal sector, and the statistical data available was for large disaggregated urban areas. Nevertheless, some important indications of the effect of the Metrocables and associated urban interventions were able to be identified.

Firstly, average family incomes did improve significantly in the area of influence of the first cable-car/integrated urban project, over the period 2004-2009. This suggests that families were able to exploit the opportunities offered by the growing urban economy as a whole, in part at least due to the Metrocables. Since the inauguration of the first Metrocable, the housing market has become more dynamic, as measured in transactions and small-scale housing improvements, but new building has been substantially restricted to public buildings (such as schools, libraries and recreation facilities); private sector institutional investment, such as banks or supermarkets, has been very limited. The construction of infrastructure projects offered short-term direct and indirect employment for local residents, and increased accessibility subsequently contributed to a

marked increase in small enterprises (usually retailing and services), especially around some of the Metrocable stations. The complementary urban improvement projects and social programmes, and business start-up advisory centres, developed in the areas of influence of the Metrocables were probably contributory factors, although reservations exist concerning their intensity of use and programme effectiveness (MacNamara, 2009; Blanco and Kobayashi, 2009; Bateman and Maclean, 2011).

Whilst there have been some improvements to family incomes and urban livelihoods, these follow the general trends for the city as a whole. Furthermore, composite indices, such as the quality of life index and the human development index, indicate that improvements in the areas of influence of the Metrocables have been inferior to the average for the city and, therefore, much less than in the more wealthy areas of the city. In other words, although the Metrocables/social urbanism appear to have contributed to improving living conditions in the areas of influence, they have done nothing to contain the increasing socio-spatial inequality of the city. In fact whilst the Metrocables were being introduced Medellin became the most unequal city of Colombia as measured in terms of income distribution.

4.2 Symbolic integration

As indicated above, the material benefits of social urbanism, including the aerial cable-cars, have been meagre. Nevertheless, research undertaken in the areas of influence of the aerial cable-cars and social urbanism projects confirms the claim of the city authorities in the sense of that they have produced greater community self-esteem and an authentic sense of inclusion. Most residents feel proud of what has happened in their communities and welcome visitors and tourists; once stigmatised, residents now feel part of the city (Leibler and Musset, 2011; Davila, 2013; Quinchía, 2013).

This *sensation* of inclusion through social urbanism can be attributed in part to the simple fact of inclusion in the urban agenda. Long ignored, these neighbourhoods suddenly became the prime targets of the city administration with its institutional presence, financial investment, technological innovation, urban experimentation, all leading to positive media coverage and numerous illustrious visitors, technical commissions and local and international tourism.

These effects are potentiated by the high visibility of the aerial cable-cars and the kinaesthetic experience that they offer. A conventional road and bus system may have the capacity to move a higher volume of passengers, but they lack the visual and aesthetic appeal of the aerial cable-cars. The passenger in this highly controlled system, sealed off in a cable-car capsule offering impressive panoramic views, glides silently above the rooftops with glimpses into the private life of the poor neighbourhoods. The Metrocables allow visitors (including tourists, international experts and journalists) a peculiar proximity to a distant world, so close yet at the same time so far from the experience of the passenger him or herself. Similarly, the architecture and services of the library-parks, schools, urban spaces and so on, exhibit comforting aspirational aesthetic codes,

highlighted by enthusiastic children sitting at computers or engaging in cultural activities. It is easy to understand the extraordinary impact, indeed the sense of marvel that the cable-cars and social urbanism produce on the visitor. However, having once alighted at a station, the visitor quickly becomes aware of the tight limits of the institutionalised space in which he/she feels comfortable.

The cable-cars and social urbanism can also be seen as fitting within the logic of the urbanism of spectacle (Debord, 1994) as a dominant trend in the restructuring of cities, based on the political economy of commercialised cultural consumption through festivals, concerts, shows and similar events. The logic of local spectacles can also sow seeds of dissent and constitute a terrain for reflexive action which 'provoke radical critiques of inequality' (Fox Gotham, 2005), some early signs of which are emerging in the case of Medellin.

In any case, the creation, via the cable-cars and associated urban improvements, of a sense of inclusion is an important political benefit, in both an internal and external sense. City administrations gain in legitimacy and governability vis-a-vis the urban population, whilst the aesthetic impact of cable-cars and high-quality architecture in poor urban areas fascinates the architectural and planning profession and can be used to promote an economically competitive *and* socially progressive image. The attraction of cable-car systems for city mayors is easy to understand.

4.3 Social regulation and territorial control

Mobility is not a one-directional affair. The Metrocables, as well as providing improved access for local residents to the rest of the city, also permit access by the rest of the city to what were once no-go areas. They provide highly-controlled and safe routes for public officials, international experts and the curious tourist (and academic researchers). As such, they serve as a vehicle for the re-establishment of state control. Firstly, this can function at a symbolic level, as most clearly illustrated by the visit by King Juan Carlos of Spain to inaugurate the library-park nearby the terminal station of the first Line K route. As consecutive mayors have often announced, the most important thing was not the (modest) financial aid given by the Spanish government for equipping the library, but the mere fact of his being there; his *presence* symbolised the retaking of the once notorious sector.

The cable-car systems can also be understood as dispositives for the normalisation and control of informal sectors of the city. The Metrocables, especially, carry with them rigid conditions of access, strict rules of behaviour, heavy surveillance and policing, administrative procedures and information registers, and so on. The poorly-dressed or badly-spoken or anyone under the influence of alcohol is not allowed on the Metrocables/Metro, the consumption of food and drink is prohibited, as is the carrying of bulky packages. 'Correct' behaviour is permanently reinforced by the 'Metro Culture' programme (Metro de Medellín, 2007; Agudelo, 2008), with its messages concerning the 'good citizen' and the values, attitudes, and everyday habits which it expects of users. The Metro system offers classical music and book-lending facilities of local authors. The culture it promotes is bourgeois and traditional; a strategy of 'social improvement'. Most residents

accept this as something necessary, sometimes positive, although it does provoke a degree of discomfort, inconformity, and resistance among some users. Users express annoyance over heavy-handed or rude vigilance, and express sympathy for those unable to access the system for whatever reason, and its coldness in the face of individual adversity.

The Metrocables and social urbanism projects also provide an entrance for public institutions and state authority, which gradually impose themselves in informal sectors substantially out of their control before then. The construction of the system, carefully negotiated with local residents groups, would later lead to the formalisation of things such as electricity and water connections, the legalisation of property holdings and imposition of property taxes, permissions and controls over social events, the inclusion in official business registers, and so on. The Metrocables began to bring about the 'normalisation' of local urban life in a variety of subtle ways.

All this can be seen as the exercise of power 'from below', through the creation of citizen subjectivities, based on the conditions under which the poor sectors of the population may gain access to the city (Foucault, 1991). Its scope, however, is limited to the 'informal city', but fails to reach the illegal groups and organisations that previously controlled (and still exert a big influence over) these sectors. For this, the city has developed a complementary strategy of repression, including the emplacement of police and military establishments in these areas. Normalisation and 'pacification' work hand- in-hand, the former being infinitely preferable despite its own limitations (Brand, 2010).

5. Underlying problems

The evidence presented above suggests that, so far at least, social urbanism has had an extremely limited impact on the material conditions of life in the low-income areas of influence. This puts into perspective the scope of physical interventions in the city and draws attention to context. Contemporary urbanism, including the Medellin case, has become increasingly inclined towards the spectacular and its marketing potential, caught up in a dizzy spiral of competition and the short-term logic of capital. Fetichisation of the architectural object and urban design project is an inevitable outcome. This section examines social urbanism in the changing context and social relations in and through which it is produced.

The first and obvious question is the relationship of Medellin's social urbanism to neoliberal urbanisation. In the diverse context of Latin American countries, Colombia is considered as being fairly orthodox in terms of neoliberal economic policy. Throughout the 1990s it opened up its economy, adopted monetary and fiscal discipline, and undertook gradual and selective privatisation and labour market flexibilisation. These trends continued into the new millennium, but some important developments occurred following the 2008 financial crisis: further deregulation of direct foreign investment, tax breaks for foreign and national corporations, and the pursuit of bilateral free trade agreements (with Canada, US, Chile-Peru-Mexico, South Korea, European Union), which lock weak partners like Colombia into the corporate globalisation agenda,

inducing deindustrialisation and increasing economic dependence on primary products and the formal and informal service sector (Brand and Watson, 2013).

However, it is well known that Latin America as a whole largely escaped the direct effects of the 2008 financial crisis. Growth stalled in 2009 but since then has returned to an average annual rate of around 3% for the region as a whole, poverty has been reduced and public social spending increased (Cepal, 2012a; 2012b). The Gini coefficient measuring income distribution inequality has fallen marginally in the world's most unequal region (The Economist, 2012), in part due to improved wages but also through social subsidies such as conditional cash transfers (direct cash payments) to the extreme poor (Jiménez and López (2012). Even given continuing high levels of poverty, the precariousness of work and weak welfare and social service provision, Medellin's social urbanism is clearly not Western-style austerity urbanism.

The 2008 financial crisis firmly located Medellin's social urbanism in the context of intensified policy initiatives to reposition the city within global urban competition. A systematic drive was carried out to promote the city as a place for international events. Notable successes in this sense were the hosting of the General Assembly of the Organisation on American States in 2008 and the South American Games in 2010; the city reached the final three in the 2013 bid to host the 2018 Summer Youth Olympic Games and was recently awarded the site of the 2015 World Tourist Organisation General Assembly. Medellin ranked first among Colombian cities in the 2012 Global Competitiveness Index (measuring economic strength, international appeal, and human capital), moved up from 120th to 85th in the ICCA 2011 World Ranking which measures the number of regular international events hosted (the capital Bogota was joint 45th), and ranked 11th in Latin America.

Paradoxically, winning the Innovative City of the Year award in 2013 threw into focus the contradictions involved. Voting had been strongly encouraged by the city administration and local media, and authentically supported by a large section of the population, but the award itself produced a backlash highlighting the city's problems. On the day of the announcement and with official jubilation in full swing, the mayor was forced to concede that all was not well with the 'miracle city'. The local newspaper *El Colombiano* reported a UN Human Rights High Commission denouncement of widespread human rights abuses and police collusion with armed gangs, and the Archbishop of Medellin circulated a press release denouncing the serious social problems affecting the city:

> "Recently there has been a lot of publicity about Medellin being the most educated and inclusive city, about it being a model of urban innovation. All this must be true, it has been repeated so often. We are pleased with the good things that the city has achieved. But equally, we know and are witness everyday to our region being the most violent in the country, the years go by and we have not learned how to live together peacefully, we are killing each other in the 'barrios' [...] Our problems are complex and deeply entrenched in

our social structure; simplistic, partial solutions are not sufficient." (El Colombiano, 2013) (author's translation)

The Archbishop went on to enumerate a series of questions concerning crime impunity, corruption and lack of confidence in the judicial system, a culture of drug trafficking, the appalling state of prisons, the recruitment (in the armed conflict) and sexual abuse of minors, poor educational levels, and continuing high levels of poverty.

His call received considerable echo in the city, with crime and violence being two of the most prominent public concerns. The murder rate remains high (above 50/100,000 inhabitants) and there was widespread citizen concern over street crime, intra-family violence and crimes against women, widespread extortion, children killed by stray bullets, intra-urban forced displacement of families, and attacks against NGOs and union leaders and human rights defenders. Much of all this had to do with the mutation of the narco-paramilitary groups and their connections with neighbourhood youth gangs. According to different sources, between 250-350 gangs operate in the poor neighbourhoods across the city, closely articulated to the large criminal organisations. They fiercely contest the control of neighbourhoods for the purposes of drug distribution, the extortion of bus companies and small businesses, prostitution and arms dealing. Intimidation and violence is such that invisible frontiers have been erected, affecting child access to schools and desertion rates (Personería de Medellin, 2012; Corpades, 2013; Codhes, 2013).

This complex underlying tension in the ´barrios' of Medellin forms the context in which social urbanism operates. The casual visitor perceives it clearly enough if he or she strays from the tight institutionalised environment established by social urbanism. A decline in the murder rate between 2009 and 2012 is officially attributed to heavier and more effective policing, but social organisations insist on the influence of temporary pacts between warring criminal factions as the principal cause. For whatever reason, people living around the social urbanism projects perceive that criminal groups have become more 'civilised' in their modus operandi (Quinchía, 2013), and although crime rates have fallen generally, research suggests that there is no clear indication that crime levels and spatial distribution can be correlated with social urbanism (Siguencia et al., 2013).

A major discursive device of social urbanism was its claim to a break with the past and the paying off of an historical debt to the poor sectors. However, the earlier analysis of objective material conditions and the persistence of social problems tend to undermine such claims. This was evidenced in an analysis of residents' subjective understanding of the more substantive discursive enunciations of social urbanism around social inclusion, the elimination of spatial barriers, improvement of the quality of life, new cultural referents, greater state presence and participation in the city's economic development (Quinchía, 2013). Exploring the 'social representations' of residents through discussion groups and social cartography, Quinchía found that whilst people expressed appreciation of the physical interventions, the general perception was that living conditions had not changed very much. The striking architecture of the library-parks, schools and health facilities was not matched by better access to and the quality of services, and fit

uncomfortably into local everyday routines, making appropriation difficult; income generating activities had failed to materialise; and with the exception of the immediate area of new 'centralities', socio-spatial frontiers had been redrawn rather than been eliminated; recent spatial policy shifts and administrative practices have weakened the presence of public officials in these sectors and undermined local confidence. In short, if the discourse of social urbanism claimed a new beginning, hard reality for residents has been more one of continuity.

6. Conclusions

Medellin's social urbanism was an imaginative, well-intentioned and expertly executed attempt to address the serious problems affecting the poor sectors of the city. It borrowed extensively from the Barcelona model yet introduced new features and processes appropriate the city's particular conditions and challenges. However, like the Barcelona model it was based on, social urbanism was subject to changes over time, which tended to undermine its political content as well as revealing the inherent limitations of spatial, urban design-type interventions.

In any case, the socio-spatial scope of social urbanism has been restricted to a few urban sectors. Vast areas remain untouched and a huge concerted and continuous effort would be required for social urbanism to extend effectively over the whole city. This only accentuates the symbolic importance of social urbanism, whose aesthetics are much stronger than its material impacts. Not only projects but also their political significance needs constant reinforcement and renewal. However the discourse of social urbanism has disappeared under the current administration, to be reformulated in the more paternalistic terms of an ill-defined urban pedagogy, accompanied by the re-directioning of urban physical interventions.

As in the case of Barcelona, Medellin's social urbanism is becoming absorbed and distorted by the logic of capitalist competition. As Montaner (2012) observes, the idea of Barcelona as an equal, open and democratic city is in danger of being sacrificed to speculative development, new urban barriers and gentrification. In the case of Medellin, social urbanism has been an important component in the restructuring of the city's image as a progressive, enlightened and innovative city and its repositioning in the global city market. This external success is in danger of perverting the political underpinnings of social urbanism. As the goals of social urbanism become increasingly external, its commodification and marketing weakens ties with the poor sectors of the city and erodes trust and confidence. The slogan of the current city administration is "A home for life" but the city is increasingly looking like a show house.

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