Political theatres in the urban periphery:
MEDELLÍN AND THE LIBRARY-PARKS PROJECT

Teatros políticos en la periferia urbana:
Medellín y el Proyecto de Parques-Biblioteca

Teatros políticos na periferia urbana:
Medellín e o Projeto de Parques-Biblioteca

Cauê Capillé
PhD in Built Environment
Fau UFRJ
cauecapille@gmail.com

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Abstract

The Library-Parks of Medellín are pivotal in this city’s project of ‘urban and social upgrading’. They consist of a combination of cultural programmes and generous surrounding and indoor spaces for public use, built with the intention to produce a new sense of community and citizenship by means of architecture and its appropriation. This fact opens a series of questions regarding the instrumental use of architecture within the frame of wider projects of urban transformations. In particular, these urban projects intended to transform areas that were hitherto peripheral in this city’s economy, culture and politics. This paper intends to address how the Library-Parks Project materialises and produces ideologies of politics and culture in contexts of cultural, economic and political periphery.

Keywords: space and politics, public architecture, periphery, Medellín, library-parks.

Resumen

Los parques-biblioteca de Medellín son cruciales en el proyecto de ‘mejoramiento urbano y social’ de esta ciudad. Ellos consisten en una combinación de programas culturales y generosos espacios exteriores e interiores para uso público, construidos con la intención de producir un sentido nuevo de comunidad y ciudadanía mediante la arquitectura y su apropiación. Este hecho abre una serie de preguntas sobre el uso instrumental de la arquitectura en proyectos más amplios de transformaciones urbanas. En particular, dichos proyectos urbanos intentaron transformar áreas que, hasta ahora, eran periféricas en la economía, la cultura y la política de la ciudad. Este artículo intenta abordar cómo el proyecto de parques-biblioteca materializa y produce ideologías de política y cultura en contextos de periferia cultural, económica y política.

Palabras clave: espacio y política, arquitectura pública, periferia, Medellín, parques-biblioteca.

Resumo

Os parques-biblioteca de Medellín são fundamentais no projeto desta cidade de ‘modernização urbana e social’. Estes edifícios consistem em uma combinação de programas culturais e espaços generosos para uso público, construídos com a intenção de produzir um novo senso de comunidade e cidadania por meio da arquitetura e sua apropriação. Este fato abre uma série de perguntas sobre o uso instrumental da arquitetura dentro de projetos mais amplos de transformação urbana. Em particular, esses projetos urbanos visavam transformar áreas que até então eram periféricas na economia, cultura e política desta cidade. Este artigo pretende abordar como o projeto Parques-Biblioteca materializa e produz ideias de política e cultura em contextos de periferia cultural, econômica e política.

Palavras-chave: espaço e política, arquitetura pública, periferia, medellín, parques-biblioteca.
Introduction

Medellín, the second largest city of Colombia, is undergoing important social and urban changes since the beginning of the 1990s. Major transport and educational infrastructures are being built, affecting especially the areas of the city with the most underprivileged populations. These areas were hitherto peripheral in this city's economy, culture, politics, and even stigmatised as places of violent drug trafficking. These conditions and negative image have been gradually replaced by that of a planning practice that focuses on 'upgrading' the spatial condition of informal settlements, as well as integrating these settlements with the 'formal' city.

Due to this process of urban upgrading, Medellín became a model for the re-making of the urban peripheries in Latin America and in the so-called 'Global South' (Ortiz Arciniegas, 2012; 2014b). However, recent experiences that followed Medellín as a model, e.g. in Rio de Janeiro, have shown that there is a gap between intentions and results, between political agendas (and propaganda) and real urban and social transformationscannot be bridged without a thorough understanding of how architecture embeds political functions within urban projects.

This paper intends to address this gap by analysing one of the most important projects that is expected from these 'urban upgrading' developments in Medellín –namely, the political uses and the social strategy in the Cultural Libraries.

The Library-Park Project

The Library-Parks are public facilities that were built—and are still being built—to foster education, cultural and social practices of their surrounding neighbours (Peña Gallego, 2011; 2013; García and Rojas, 2002; Echeverri and Orsini, 2000). In general, these informal areas lack basic infrastructure and correspond to the most violent places in the cities (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010). The Latin-American governments' first attempt to resolve these problems was to reallocate the urban poor to the edges of the cities, using coercive force as their main tool to eradicare urban informality (Echeverri and Orsini, 2004). However, the last two decades saw the emergence of a new strategy: that of the improvement (or ‘upgrading’) of the existing poor urban settlements (Brakarz, Greene and Rojas, 2002; Echeverri and Orsini, 2000; Riley and Ramirez, 2000, Turner, 1972, 1976). Medellín is considered by many urban agencies, media experts and academics as a successful case of the ‘urban upgrading’ strategy.

In fact, the ‘Medellín Model’ is the term which the current literature often uses to refer to the collection of recent urban changes in this city (Brand, 2013; Colak and Pearce, 2015; Ortiz Arciniegas, 2014b; Simpson, 2013). In a nutshell, the ‘Medellín Model’ may be summarised as a model for change—the social and political associations which were historically used to be poor and violent, and those that—due to a series of urban transformations of governance and infrastructure—became ‘smart’, ‘innovative’ and ‘upgraded’ (Hendry, 2015; Vulliamy, 2013; Wall Street Journal, 2012). Brand and Dávila (2013) see the social objectives of the projects of the ‘Medellín Model’ were “beyond conventional level of explicitness”, highlighting a direct link between very complex urban problems and the interventions that resolve them. This can be clearly illustrated by the “Plan de De- sarrollo Urbano 2004-2007” and the “Medellín Model for the re-making of urban areas in Latin America and in the so-called ‘Global South’” (Ortiz Arciniegas, 2012; 2014b).

Río de Janeiro illustrates the use of Medellín as a model of urban renewal. The Brazilian city was following (and adapting) many of Medellín’s strategies in the context of new national and international events in the past few years (González Vélez and Carrizosa Iñesta, 2013; Silva, 2013). In 2011, the first cable aerial-car line for non-touristic purposes was opened, followed by the renovation of several stations of train lines. In 2010, two library-parks were opened, and a third one was opened in 2014. These libraries are also part of a greater plan that addresses the improvement of the social and economic conditions of the so-called ‘urban upgrading’ strategy in the city of Río de Janeiro. However, recent research is indicating that the social and economic impacts of such projects are unclear and even negative (Leis, 2013). After a few years of use, many of these public facilities and infrastructures are now closed.

In Medellín, besides the explicitness of intentions, Echeverri and Orsini (2010) highlighted that the shift of planning strategy—from coercive actions that aimed to realise inhabitants of poor areas, to the development of Medellín’s model that uses an ‘upgrading’ strategy—is one of the main factors for the success of the Medellín Model. The authors explain that the coercive strategies were inefficient because they did not address the origin of the problem. Governments spent time and public resources in repressive actions that were incapable of providing housing and infrastructure for the population or including these communities within the urban fabric. Orsini and Ortiz (2010) posit that the ‘urban upgrading’ strategy is opposed to the ‘coercive’ ones as it sees the urban informality as a solution, rather than a problem. This fundamental shift in the way to perceive urban informality was originally proposed by Turner (1972; 1976).
Numerous contributions to how governments, social agencies, public and architects provided the ground to the formulation of urban upgrading projects, with differences on the participatory provision of infrastructures, buildings and programmes that could improve, rather than eradicate, urban informality. Among the main strategies utilised in the project of urban and social upgrading in Medellín, one may include: firstly, a transport strategy, with the implementation of the Metrobus (aerial cable cars), which enabled access to the main metro line to populations of underprivileged areas of the city (Figure 1). Secondly, the construction of social housing projects in the same neighbourhoods. Thirdly, public libraries of ‘great architectural impact’ were built (namely the Library-Parks Project), which offered a wide range of services to the surrounding communities. Fourthly, the programmatic ‘Company of Urban Development’ (‘Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano’, EUD), which is a state-led institution. Nevertheless, although it was a state-led company that coordinated the construction of new buildings and urban spaces, an interesting aspect to be highlighted is the participation of the local communities in the planning decision and funding of the projects. Coupé, Brand and Dávila (2012) clarify that mechanisms for participatory planning and budgeting are part of Colombia’s constitution since 1991, functioning as a fundamental factor for the promotion and strengthening of local communities. Echeverri and Orsini (2010) highlight that local communities were invited to participate in all planning phases, from diagnostics to construction. The authors explain that local neighbourhood groups were organised to deal with the participatory process. These groups were linked to the ‘Boards of Community Action’ (‘Juntas de Acción Comunal’, JAACs) and participated in physical and political integration of investments. Moreover, the projects in Medellín are referred to follow a strategy of urban renewal called ‘urban acupuncture’, which promotes the idea that an urban area can be entirely affected by small, but precise, operations in very specific areas (‘acupuncture’, which promotes the idea that an urban area can be entirely affected by small, but precise, operations in very specific areas). The second factor concerns the mechanisms for public participation, which allowed little to be actually changed in the projects by the inhabitants of these areas. In the case of the Library-Parks, for example, Heredia Montoya (2014) explains that participatory processes had to be extensively improved in which he called the second generation of Library-Parks the first five were built (namely the Library-Parks San Javier, España, La Ladera, La Quintana and Belén). Moreover, these projects made possible to include these areas into an urban environment that a few years before had become the context of a ‘better good’ (González Vélez and Carhrasza Isaza. 2011; Ortiz Arciniegas, 2012, 2013).

Indeed, what these studies highlight is that, among all the projects of urban upgrading, the Library-Parks stand in a critical position, as they become the architectural manifestation of both top-down ideological propaganda and the possibility of everyday community engagement. Understanding the functioning of the Library-Parks seems, therefore, to entail the study of mechanisms of control/resistance between state-led administration and self-led societies, exposing the effects of the ‘Medellín Model’ in everyday life. This issue is highly relevant for the case of the Library-Parks. This is because one of the most important roles that is expected from these buildings is to strengthen the link between community and the use of their spaces and programmes. These buildings are mainly due to their cultural programmes and the open access to internet and computer facilities. Aside these programmes, these buildings are also ‘for collective life’, as they work as extensions of educational and cultural programmes (e.g. literary festivals, language courses, informatics courses, dance and theatre performances). This phenomenon to take place as spatial cultures. Studies (Cardona Jaramillo, 2012; Giraldo Giraldo, Román Betancur and Quiroz Posada, 2009; Jaramillo, 2012) indicate that the Library-Parks have a positive effect in the education of people of the surrounding neighbourhoods, mainly through the public use of their spaces and programmes. These buildings are also “for collective life”, as they work as ‘a motor for social change’. Additionally, it is precisely the spatial rationality and economic benefit that can provide a new urban culture through informal co-inhabitation and interaction.

In regards to the first role –to ‘represent an upgraded society’–, Brand and Dávila (2011) posit that the architectural contrast between the Library-Parks and their surroundings by the buildings’ scale, materials, and form emphasise the state’s presence in those areas. Indeed, one of the mayors of Medellín highlighted the importance of architectural quality in those projects, formulating that their aim was “to activate the power aesthetic of the ‘urban acupuncture’ which has a semi-covered stage which is fully opened to the public at all times (even when the library is closed). This space was used for group meetings and performance rehearsals. As it shall be discussed at length in the section that follows, particularly in regards to the symbolic (architectural) presence of the state in the popular areas of the city. In other words, the libraries acquire a significant political role through their educational agendas that stimulate appropriation and participation, and through their spaces that allow for such phenomenon to take place as spatial cultures. These studies reveal the importance of the Library-Parks project and their role as a motor for social change” (Salazar apud Brand and Dávila, 2013).
The second strategy used by the Library-Parks Project refers to the idea that these buildings are supposed not only to represent urban change through their broadcasted monumentality, but most importantly to produce it through the arrangement of spaces that can generate a new sense of community and citizenship through informal co-inhabitation and interaction (Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano, 2014; Franco Calderón and Zabala Corredor, 2012; Montoya, 2014). As it was mentioned above, the term ‘Park’ in the project title “comes first precisely due to the fact that these facilities are public spaces in the first place” (Montoya, 2014). In other words, great importance is given to the ways in which the libraries are used, and to the potential social interactions that these forms of use might produce. Consequently, one may suggest that these forms of use and social interaction acquire a ‘metonymic function’, as they offer a glimpse of the transformed society of Medellín.

However, how can social change depend on the public use of a building? Intuitively we may suggest that ‘public use’ implies, to a certain level, that forms of occupation, movement and interaction are un-predicted and unprogrammed. In that sense, if one considers all the investment in assuring that the Library-Parks work as extensions of public space, that is, to be open to all comers and to allow a certain level of freedom of use, they cannot be regarded as mere educational or cultural facilities (Figure 3). As mentioned above, studies (Cardona Ortiz, 2012) indicate that the Library-Parks have a positive effect in levels of education in the surrounding neighbourhoods, mainly due to their cultural programmes and due to the open access to internet and computer facilities. However, the literature is only starting to analyse how these facilities work beyond their educational aims (Capillé, 2016; 2017a; Capillé and Psarra, 2016). In particular, how does the public use of space associate with the social intentions of the Project?

The hypothesis that there is a ‘metonymic relationship’ between use of space and the social aims of the Project is also present in a study carried out by Franco Calderón and Zabala Corredor (2012). They investigate on the impact of the urban interventions of the Medellín Model on the sense of citizenship and participation of...
local communities. They suggest that the two main functions of the architectural interventions are to represent and to reproduce social change. They argue that the buildings are first "objects," a condition that "contributes to the consolation of the sentiment of belonging and citizen identity" through their function as reference points. Secondly, they are for "collective use," working as "centres of encounters" for the community. In this way, the buildings would work as "instruments for the construction of citizenship." The authors, however, do not elaborate how the buildings may work as "instruments." Nevertheless, what is evident in their study is that the political agenda of the "Medellín Model" turns the relationship space/programme/use in the Library-Parks as more than just a mere library use. It underpins the formulation that the relationships of space and programme in these buildings is instrumental in 'upgrading' social behaviours. At the same time, the background political agenda of the 'Medellín Model' turns the patterns of use of space - that is, the related use of space and use - as representatives of this 'upgraded society'.

In this sense, the Library-Parks could be considered to be manifestations of a similar process observed in the formation of building types of the 19th century in Europe. This concerns the use of architectural arrangement to organise behaviours towards a disciplinary society. In a nutshell, public buildings embed political consciousness of social control in their very architecture. This process was studied in the formation of prisons (Foucault, 1991; Steadman, 1993), museums (Bennett, 1995), department stores (Bennett, 1995; Markus, 1993), hospitals (Steadman, 2014), and libraries (Capillé, 2016; Markus, 1993). In the case of the Library-Parks, the hypothesis is that these buildings are capable of producing social change through the use of their interior spaces and programmes is evident in many official documents (Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano, 2014; Fajardo Valderrama, 2007) and studies (Franco Calderón and Zabala Corredor, 2012; González Vélez and Carrastro Isaza, 2011; Peña Gallego, 2011). These documents and studies do not make direct reference to a 'disciplinary society'. Nevertheless, the idea that these buildings are capable of organising behaviours and 'upgrading social practices' is similar in many aspects to the representation of collective whole remains to be fully understood. Co-inhabitation even more relevant when considering the social and cultural context of Medellín as we have briefly revised. As we discussed, these buildings are not supposed to function only as a library, but to promote social change through education and community empowerment. The Library-Parks produce a sense of collective that resembles what Zook and Bafna (2013) suggest when performing arts, in other words, these buildings make visitors see themselves as a collective (Figure 3). In this sense, these libraries materialise Lefebvre’s (1967; 1974) propositions that collective spatial practice produces ‘pressure from below’ (which […] confront the state in its role as organiser of space’ (Lefebvre, 1991: 393). On the contrary, it diverts homogeneous space producing a theatricalised or dramatized space (Lefebvre, 1991). Similar to performing arts such as acting and dance, the practice of negotiation from living together does not leave behind a product but coincides with the performance itself. Moreover, this emergent power is only possible because architecture gives structure to otherwise un-connected individual actions, such as for the education of local culture (obtained through educational programmes) and informal practice of local culture (the unprogrammed practice negotiation).

In other words, these collective actions of real urban and political transformation do not emerge from the propaganda of social change, but rather from the arrangement of urban culture. In this sense, if cities of the Global South intend to achieve the same ‘success’ that Medellín seemingly achieved with its urban transformation, another way to do so is to copy the mediatic image of the ‘Medellín Model’, more attention must be given to the architecture of the Colombian urban project. Rather than a politics for producing architecture, the opposite: an architecture for producing politics.

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