



Revista Bitācora Urbano Territorial  
ISSN: 0124-7913  
ISSN: 2027-145X  
bitacora\_farbog@unal.edu.co  
Universidad Nacional de Colombia  
Colombia

## Political theatres in the urban periphery: Medellín and the Library-Parks Project1

---

**Capillé, Cauê**

Political theatres in the urban periphery: Medellín and the Library-Parks Project1

Revista Bitācora Urbano Territorial, vol. 28, no. 2, 2018

Universidad Nacional de Colombia, Colombia

**Available in:** <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=74855211015>

**DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.15446/bitacora.v28n2.69893>

## Political theatres in the urban periphery: Medellín and the Library-Parks Project<sup>1</sup>

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 cauecapille@gmail.com  
Fau UFRJ, Brasil

Revista Bitácora Urbano Territorial, vol.  
28, no. 2, 2018

Universidad Nacional de Colombia,  
Colombia

Received: 19 January 2018  
Accepted: 20 March 2018

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.15446/bitacora.v28n2.69893>

Redalyc: <https://www.redalyc.org/articulo.oa?id=74855211015>

**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, contruidos 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, contruidos 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 idéias 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 and 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 in '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 the gap between intentions and results –that is, between political agendas (and propaganda) and real urban and social transformations– cannot be bridged without a thorough understanding of how architecture embed political functions within urban projects.

This paper intends to address this gap by analysing how one of the most important effects that is expected from these 'urban upgrading' developments in Medellín –namely, the political strengthening of local communities (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2004; Dávila, 2013; Montoya, 2014)– is embedded within the architectural object to which it is often associated (Brand and Dávila, 2011; 2013; Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano, 2014; Peña Gallego, 2011): namely, the Library-Parks Project. In other words, it addresses how this project materialises and produces ideologies of politics and culture in contexts of cultural, economic and political periphery.

## The Library-Park Project

The Library-Parks are public facilities that were built –and are still being built– to foster educational, cultural and social practices of their surrounding neighbourhoods (Peña Gallego, 2011; Rodríguez, Valencia and Arias, 2013), as well as act as local centres of 'community encounter'. In fact, the organisers of the Library-Parks Project claim that 'informal co-inhabitation' is the *raison d'être* of these buildings (Fajardo Valderrama, 2007; Montoya, 2014).

Indeed, political and cultural agendas determine the programmes of contemporary public libraries, implying complex and often conflicting requirements in terms of their functioning (Capillé, 2017b; Mickiewicz, 2016). On the one hand, they need to provide open and equal access to knowledge. On the other, they have functional needs for safety and control of books, equipment and people that might restrict or condition the distribution of occupation, movement and various activities. At the same time, social and technological changes cause these typologies to

change from within so as to include the idea of socialisation as a form of learning (Capillé and Psarra, 2014).

Considering that the Library-Parks are situated in neighbourhoods that are historically and culturally developed through incremental growth and self-management (Ortiz Arciniegas, 2014b), a first question that arises is how these two conditions are manifested in the Library-Parks, particularly in relation to the organisation of their spaces. The idea of knowledge is embedded in libraries (Forgan, 1986; Koch, 2004; Markus, 1993) through the organisation of architectural space and access to informational content. Similarly, political and collective values are part of the structuring of spatial and social relations in public library buildings (Capillé, 2017b). In the case of the Library-Parks, how does the programme of the libraries respond to the requirements for offering public space? What are the spatial dimensions of these two roles (library use and public use)? Finally, how does the use of these buildings relate to Medellín's political agendas of urban and social change?

Instead of addressing these questions directly, this paper intends to contribute by contextualising the political and urban agendas within the Library-Parks Project. In other words, the paper aims to understand how the 'Medellín Model' is materialised in the Project of Library-Parks.

## **The 'Medellín Model'**

Cities in Latin America grew exponentially in the first half of the 20th century, due to intense industrialization and rural migration (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010). This growth resulted in many urban issues, particularly a widespread informal growth (Brakarz, Greene, and Rojas, 2002; Fiori, Riley and Ramírez, 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 mean to eradicate urban informality (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010). However, the last quarter of the 20th century 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, 2010; Fiori, Riley and Ramírez, 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 synthesised as the explicit associations between environments that 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' (Henley, 2013; Vulliamy, 2013; Wall Street Journal, 2012). Brand and Dávila (2013) see that 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 Desarrollo 2004-2007" (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2004, hereafter referred as "Development Plan 2004-2007"), published by the Municipality of Medellín, and which has a great importance in the implementation process of the Library-Parks. The Development Plans are documents that work as administrative instruments to validate planning and management projects in Colombian territory.

The "Development Plan 2004-2007" is organised in two main parts. The first part presents a strategic set of programmes, projects and goals that would improve the quality of life in urban and rural settlements. The second part proposes short and medium term interventions that are in tune with these programmes and goals (Gobernación de Antioquia, 2011). The "Development Plan 2004-2007" starts by listing the main problems that Medellín faced at that moment: a crisis in (municipal) governance in violent neighbourhoods; the high levels of poverty and inequalities; the obsolete economic structures; and the poor integration between the commercial, cultural and scientific sectors. The "Development Plan 2004-2007" argues that the many interventions it proposes are directly addressing these problems. This is particularly evident in the summarising diagram in page 96, titled "Medellín, a Space for the Citizen Encounter". In this diagram, one sees (from left to right) social problems, objectives, strategies and programmes, all linked in a single and clear flow chart. This diagram exposes the explicit, and perhaps naïve, attempt to connect complex aspects of urban life with complex aspects of urban management. Curiously, this attempt is regarded as one of the main factors for the international success of the 'Medellín Model'. This explicit link between problems and solutions is what has often been appraised by media, international urban experts and multilateral agencies, making Medellín a model for the re-making of urban areas in Latin America and in the so-called 'Global South' (Ortiz Arciniegas, 2012; 2014b).

Rio 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 preparation for major international events in the past few years (González Vélez and Carrizosa Isaza, 2011; Silva, 2013). In 2011, the first aerial cable-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 urban upgrading project in poor neighbourhoods of Rio de Janeiro. However, recent research is indicating that the social and economic impacts of such projects are unclear and even negative (Reiss, 2017; Silva, 2013); and 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) highlight that the shift of planning strategy –from

coercive actions that aimed to reallocate inhabitants of poor areas, to the improvement or ‘upgrading’ of these areas– is one of the reasons 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 formal city. Echeverri and Orsini (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 how to approach urban informality was originally proposed by Turner (1972; 1976). His numerous contributions as to how governments, social agencies, public and architects provided the ground to the formulation of the ‘urban upgrading’ project, which should focus therefore on the (participative) 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 ‘Metrocables’ (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’<sup>2</sup> were built (namely the Library-Parks Project), which offered a wide range of services to the surrounding communities. Fourthly, the programme of urban upgrade included the renovation of schools and other public facilities. A fifth and last strategy refers to the urban public space renovation, connecting all projects so as to expose the 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 locations (Peña Gallego, 2011).





**Figure 1**  
View of Medellín and the Metrocables from España Library-Park  
propia

The interventions were linked administratively by the “Proyectos Urbanos Integrales” (‘Integral Urban Projects’) and coordinated by the ‘Company of Urban Development’ (‘Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano’, EDU), which is a state-led institution. Nevertheless, although it was a state-led company that coordinated the construction of the 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 (2013) clarify that mechanisms for participatory planning and budgeting are part of Colombia’s constitution since 1994, 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, which existed previously to the urban renovation). The authors argue that this link was important to guarantee political representation for these communities in the participatory process. However, as Fiori, Riley and Ramírez (2000) argue, although participation can be considered the ‘cornerstone’ of poverty alleviation policies, assessing how it is integrated in a democratic process remains a complex challenge.

Indeed, some authors are critical to the ways in which this ‘participation’ took place in Medellín (González Vélez and Carrizosa Isaza, 2011; Ortiz Arciniegas, 2014b), arguing that the model of city that was constructed is tuned more with political and economic interests of the local elite, than to the most recurrent or urgent needs of the majority of the city’s population. This is due to two main factors.

The first one is related to the identification that the problematic areas of the city were the ones where the poor population lived. In other words, the construction of a discourse of “areas of ‘disorder’” in the city was a fundamental precedent for the success of the ‘Model’ (González Vélez and Carrizosa Isaza, 2011). Poverty, violence and drug trafficking coincided in these “areas of disorder”. With the view to ‘upgrade’ these areas into ‘areas of order’, a series of projects started to reshape its urban space since 2001. 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, Herman Montoya (2014) explains that participatory processes had to be extensively improved for what he called the ‘second generation’ of Library-Parks, after 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 economy that a few elite groups took control – all under the motto of a ‘greater good’ (González Vélez and Carrizosa Isaza, 2011; Ortiz Arciniegas, 2014a; 2014b).

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<sup>3</sup> 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 sense of community through the public use of their spaces and programmes. These buildings are placed in poor neighbourhoods that suffered from a historical lack of physical and political integration with the city and from negligence of the state to resolve their most urgent needs (such as basic infrastructure, education, health, etc.). While some projects of the urban upgrading strategy improved these neighbourhoods physical condition (e.g. through urban mobility, basic infrastructure and new public spaces), others focused on integrating and empowering these communities through cultural, educational, political and economic projects (schools, cultural centres and public libraries). The Library-Parks combine both kinds of improvement. The buildings offer new public spaces for the surrounding neighbourhoods. They have areas controlled by the library administration (mainly the libraries’ interiors) and others that are openly accessed to the public (their outside spaces), even beyond the official opening times.<sup>4</sup> In addition, the libraries’ cultural programmes (e.g. literary festivals, language courses, informatics courses, dance and theatre classes, etc.) help improve education for these communities. These programmes expose the Municipal intention to use knowledge and information as fundamental means to achieve the inclusion of underprivileged communities of



Medellín in a “21st century democratic process” (as the literature often describes). Education is not only about knowing what (knowledge contents), but also about knowing how to communicate and share these contents. In this sense, the public use of the buildings and the kinds of co-presence that they produce are part of the educational process.

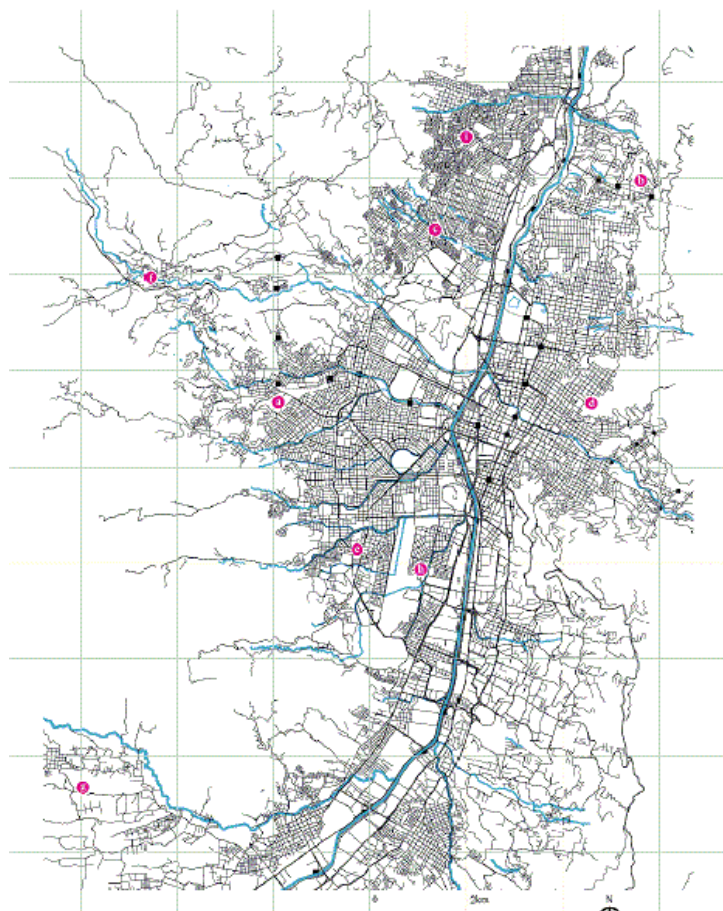
In other words, the libraries acquire a significant political role through their educational agendas that stimulate appropriation and participation, and through their spaces that allow for such phenomenon to take place as spatial cultures. Studies (Cardona Ortiz, 2012) indicate that the Library-Parks have a positive effect in the education of people of the surrounding neighbourhoods, 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 urban public space (Franco Calderón and Zabala Corredor, 2012; Giraldo Giraldo, Román Betancur and Quiroz Posada, 2009; Jaramillo, 2012). In other words, the libraries’ spaces are liberated for other types of programmes and uses (other than those of a ‘traditional’ public library). However, it is precisely the spatial rather than economic and literary impact of the Library-Parks that has received very little attention in the literature.

## Politics through architecture

In an interview conducted in 2014, Herman Montoya, leader of the Project of Library-Parks at the Municipality of Medellín (Alcaldía de Medellín), explained that the very name of the Project in Spanish –‘Parques Biblioteca’– emphasises the idea that these buildings are public spaces in the first place. He also highlighted that the Project’s main objective is “to use public architecture as means to achieve a reinvention of social practices” (Montoya, 2014). Montoya explains that this ‘social role’ is aimed to be constructed through two main strategies in the case of the Library-Parks: firstly, to use architecture as means to represent an ‘upgraded’ society; and secondly, to ‘produce’ social change through the arrangement of spaces that can generate a new sense of community and citizenship through informal co-inhabitation and interaction.

In regards to the first role –to ‘represent an upgraded society’– Brand and Dávila (2013) posit that the architectural contrast between the Library-Parks and their surroundings brought 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 these projects, formulating that their aim was “to activate the power of aesthetics as a motor for social change” (Salazar apud Brand and Dávila, 2013). Brand and Dávila suggest that this contrast opens up the debate about the quality of public architecture for Latin-American cities. In addition, this contrast also introduces the topic of participatory planning and how the state is made ‘present’ in popular neighbourhoods. Aside this ‘architectural contrast’ of the library buildings with their surroundings, the buildings also aim to construct

‘historical contrasts’ (Montoya, 2014). These ‘historical contrasts’ are expressed by the sites chosen for these buildings, as they are often in places that have a recent history of strong violence (executions camps, drug trafficking bases, prisons) that reminds of the ‘Medellín of the Cartels’ (Melguizo and Cronshaw, 2001; Montoya, 2014) (Figure 2). The intention in the programme is to use the sites and the ‘contrasting’ and ‘monumental’ architecture of the library buildings as symbols of successful social upgrading. This idea is broadcasted internationally, influencing other cities (e.g. Rio de Janeiro, Brazil) that started similar strategies in their own contexts.



**Figure 2**

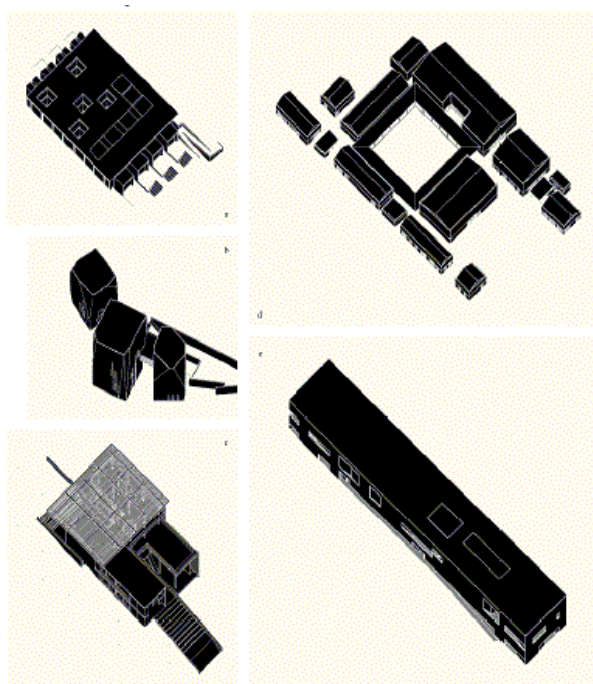
Map of location of the Library-Parks in Medellín

a) San Javier (2006); b) España (2007); c) La Quintana (2007); e) La Ladera (2007); f) Belén (2008); g) Fernando Botero (2009); h) José Betancur (2011); i) Guayabal (2012); j) Doce de Octubre (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?



**Figure 3**

Five libraries in the same scale: a collection of architectural forms produced for the rhetorics of social, political, cultural and urban change

a) San Javier; b) España; c) La Quintana; d) Belén; e) Fernando Botero.

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 consolidation 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 relationship 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 relationship of use and space – 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 rationalities of social control in their very architecture. This process was studied in the formation of prisons (Foucault, 1991; Steadman, 2014), 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 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 Carrizosa Isaza, 2011; Peña Gallego, 2011). These documents and studies do not make direct reference to a ‘disciplinary society’. Nevertheless, the idea that the buildings are capable of ‘organising behaviours’ and ‘upgrading social practices’ is similar in many aspects to the proposition of a ‘disciplinary society’. Yet, none of these studies and documents analyse how the Library-Parks organise behaviours through public use.

Nevertheless, community appropriation is what truly ‘endorses’ the collective value of these public libraries (Rodríguez, Valencia and Arias, 2013). At this point, one may see that the use of the spaces of the Library-Parks carries a twofold political value: on one hand, they give materiality to the civic ideologies of the Project (if the libraries were emptied of users, they could not maintain their status as representatives and producers of an ‘upgraded society’). On the other hand, this same ‘status of representation of collectivity’ (or ‘metonymic function’, as we called earlier) that is given to the Library-Parks stimulates a political awareness in its users, as it renders the community visible to itself (Jaramillo, 2012). This ‘self-visibility’ may happen through ‘programmatic’ means – such as



educational courses, festivities and meetings – and through the everyday social practices in the spaces of these buildings. The latter, as opposed to the former, becomes a collective entity only as it is happening in space (Figure 4).



**Figure 4**  
Corridor / public pathway in Belén Public Library  
propia

### Political theatres in the urban periphery

Considering all the attention and endorsement given by the media, international organisations and academic works, the role of representation of this ‘urban change’ may be considered successful. However, the ways in which these buildings are being used and the ways in which architecture gives structure to these forms of use as a collective whole remains to be fully understood. Co-inhabitation that is expected to happen in the libraries is fundamentally different from the one that happens naturally in public spaces of those informal contexts, since the former is housed by architectural space instead of urban space. This fact opens a series of questions regarding how the spaces of a building may serve as a platform for public use. In other words, how a building may be as public as a ‘park’. Furthermore, it is important to consider that the term ‘Library’ of the Project title refers to a set of different programmes that aim at educating local users so that they can be integrated in a “21st century democratic process” and the rationale of the information society (Peña Gallego, 2011). As we have seen, for this reason the libraries offer courses of informatics, small business administration, literacy, language, arts and etc. Implicit in these programmes is the idea that the library should help organising this ‘new society’ into a productive one. In addition to these educational programmes, the Municipality of Medellín established a set of rules that may be used to identify legitimate from illegitimate forms of public use<sup>5</sup>.



The question stated above – ‘how does the programme of the library interact with the emphasis in offering public space?’ – becomes 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 collectivity that resembles what Zook and Bafna (2012) suggested as ‘social staging’, in other words these buildings make visitors see themselves as a collective (Figure 5). 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: 383). He proposes that “spatial practice is neither determined by an existing system, (...) nor adapted to a system” (Lefebvre, 1991: 391). 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 formal education of local culture (the educational programmes) and informal practice of local urban 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 from the architectural 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 transformations, rather than copying 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.

## Acknowledgements

I would like to thank Herman Montoya (leader of the Library-Park Project at the Municipality of Medellín) for conceding an extensive interview and to the staff members of the Library-Parks for their assistance during fieldwork. I would also like to thank both reviewers for their insightful comments, which helped improve the paper. This research was conducted during my PhD (2016) at The Bartlett, UCL, and I would like to thank my supervisors, Sophia Psarra and Alan Penn, as our exchange of ideas are expressed in this work. This research was sponsored by Capes Foundation (Fundação Coordenação de Aperfeiçoamento de Pessoal de Nível Superior – CAPES).

## References

- ALCALDÍA DE MEDELLÍN. (2004). Plan de Desarrollo 2004-2007: Medellín, compromiso de toda la ciudadanía. Medellín: Alcaldía de Medellín. Retrieved from: [https://www.medellin.gov.co/irj/go/km/docs/pccdesign/SubportaldelCiudadano\\_2/PlandeDesarrollo\\_0\\_0\\_0/Shared%20Content/pdf%20codigo%20buen%20comienzo/Texto%20Completo%20Acuerdo%20Plan.pdf](https://www.medellin.gov.co/irj/go/km/docs/pccdesign/SubportaldelCiudadano_2/PlandeDesarrollo_0_0_0/Shared%20Content/pdf%20codigo%20buen%20comienzo/Texto%20Completo%20Acuerdo%20Plan.pdf)
- BENNETT, T. (1995). *The birth of the museum: history, theory, politics*. New York: Routledge.
- BRAKARZ, J., GREENE, M. and ROJAS, E. (2002). *Cities for all: recent experiences with neighbourhood upgrading programs*. Washington DC: Inter-American Development Bank.
- BRAND, P. (2013). "Governing inequality in the South through the Barcelona model: "social urbanism" in Medellín, Colombia". In: *Interrogating urban crisis: governance, contestation, critique*. Leicester: De Montfort University, pp.1-17
- BRAND, P. and DÁVILA, J. (2011). "Mobility innovation at the urban margins". *City*, 15 (6): 647-661.
- BRAND, P. and DÁVILA, J. (2013). "Metrocables and "social urbanism": two complementary strategies". In: J. Dávila (ed.), *Urban mobility and poverty: lessons from Medellín and Soacha, Colombia*. London: UCL, UNC, pp. 46-54.
- CAPILLÉ, C. (2016). *Spatial cultures of public libraries: architecture, collective use and political agendas in Medellín's Library-Parks*. London: UCL.
- CAPILLÉ, C. (2017a). "Arquitetura como dispositivo político: Introdução ao Projeto de Parques-Biblioteca em Medellín". *Revista Prumo*, 1 (3).
- CAPILLÉ, C. (2017b, forthcoming). "Political interiors: the case of public libraries". *Space and Culture*.
- CAPILLÉ, C. and PSARRA, S. (2014). "Space and planned informality: strong and weak programme categorisation in public learning environments". *A|Z ITU Journal of Architecture*, 11 (2): 9-29.
- CAPILLÉ, C. and PSARRA, S. (2016). "Disciplined informality: assembling unprogrammed spatial practices in three public libraries in Medellín". *Journal of Space Syntax*, 6 (2): 247-270.
- CARDONA ORTIZ, L. (2012). *El Parque Biblioteca España como agente generador de capital cultural en el Barrio Santo Domingo de la Comuna 1. Medellín*, Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, Tesis de Maestría.
- COLAK, A. A. and PEARCE, J. (2015). "Securing the global city?: an analysis of the "Medellín Model" through participatory research". *Conflict, Security & Development*, 15 (3): 197-228.
- COUPÉ, F., BRAND, P. and DÁVILA, J. (2013). "Medellín: institutional context and urban paradigm change". In J. D. Dávila (ed.), *Urban mobility and poverty: lessons from Medellín and Soacha, Colombia*. London: UCL, UNC, pp. 55-67.
- DÁVILA, J. (2013). "Introduction". In: J. Dávila (ed.), *Urban mobility and poverty: lessons from Medellín and Soacha, Colombia*. London: UCL, UNC, pp. 9-15.

- ECHEVERRI, A. and ORSINI, F. (2010). "Informalidad y urbanismo social en Medellín". In: M. H. Arbaux, A. E. Restrepo and J. G. Ramírez (eds.), Medellín: medio ambiente, urbanismo y sociedad. Medellín: Universidad EAFIT, pp. 130-152.
- EMPRESA DE DESAROLLO URBANO. (2014). Proyectos Parques Biblioteca. Retrieved from: <http://www.edu.gov.co/index.php/proyectos/parques-biblioteca>
- FAJARDO VALDERRAMA, S. (2007). Pacto ciudadano de cuidado y apropiación de los Parques Biblioteca. Medellín: Alcaldía de Medellín.
- FIORI, J., RILEY, L. and RAMÍREZ, R. (2000). Urban poverty alleviation through environmental upgrading in Rio de Janeiro. London: UCL.
- FORGAN, S. (1986). "Context, image and function: a preliminary enquiry into the architecture of scientific societies". The British Journal for the History of Science, 19 (1): 89-113.
- FOUCAULT, M. (1991). Discipline and punish: the birth of the prison. London: Penguin.
- FRANCO CALDERÓN, Á. M. and ZABALA CORREDOR, S. K. (2012). "Los equipamientos urbanos como instrumentos para la construcción de ciudad y ciudadanía". Dearq, 11: 10-21.
- GIRALDO GIRALDO, Y. N., ROMÁN BETANCUR, E. G. and QUIROZ POSADA, R. E. (2009). "La biblioteca pública como ambiente educativo para el encuentro ciudadano: un estudio en la Comuna 1 de Medellín". Revista Interamericana de Bibliotecología, 32 (1): 47-84.
- GOBERNACIÓN DE ANTIOQUIA. (2011). Glosario de Terminos. Retrieved from: <http://isolucion.antioquia.gov.co/isolucion/ModuloVocabulario.asp>
- GONZÁLEZ VÉLEZ, M. E. and CARRIZOSA ISAZA, C. (2011). "Entre la planeación urbana, la apropiación del espacio y la participación ciudadana. Los pactos ciudadanos y el Parque Biblioteca España de Santo Domingo Savio". Estudios Políticos, 39: 117-140.
- HENLEY, J. (2013, July 31). "Medellín: the fast track from the slums". The Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jul/31/medellin-colombia-fast-track-slums-escalators>
- JARAMILLO, O. (2012). "La formación ciudadana, dinamizadora de procesos de transformación social desde la biblioteca pública". Revista Interamericana de Bibliotecología, 35 (1): 73-82.
- KOCH, D. (2004). Spatial systems as producers of meaning - the idea of knowledge in three public libraries. Stockholm, KTH School of Architecture, Licentiate Thesis.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1967). "Le droit à la ville". L'homme et la société, 6 (1): 29-35.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1974). "La production de l'espace". L'homme et la société, 31-32: 15-32.
- LEFEBVRE, H. (1991). The production of space. Oxford: Blackwell.
- MARKUS, T. A. (1993). Buildings and power - freedom and control in the origin of modern building types. London: Routledge.
- MELGUIZO, R. C. and CRONSHAW, F. (2001). "The evolution of armed conflict in Medellín: an analysis of the major actors". Latin American Perspectives, 28 (1): 110-131.

- MICKIEWICZ, P. (2016). "Access and its limits: the contemporary library as a public space". *Space and Culture*, 19 (3): 237-250.
- MONTOYA, H. (2014). Interview by author. Medellín: unpublished.
- ORTIZ ARCINIEGAS, C. (2012). *Bargaining space: deal-making strategies for large-scale renewal projects in Colombian cities*. Chicago, University of Illinois at Chicago, PhD Thesis.
- ORTIZ ARCINIEGAS, C. (2014a). "Anclajes territoriales de los circuitos del capital financiero transnacional: Políticas, planes y proyectos urbanos hegemónicos en disputa". *Bitacora Urbano Territorio*, 24 (1): 79-83.
- ORTIZ ARCINIEGAS, C. (2014b). "Designing from the cracks: exploring the potentials of the Medellín Model drawbacks". In: C. Boano and G. Talocci (eds.), *DPU Summer Lab 2014: leveraging the city as a laboratory for developing socially responsive design strategies*. London: UCL, pp. 8-11.
- PEÑA GALLEGU, L. E. (2011). "Las bibliotecas públicas de Medellín como motor de cambio social y urbano de la ciudad". *Textos Universitarios de Biblioteconomía I Documentació*, 27: 11.
- REISS, C. (2017). "Acessibilidade e efetividade social das infraestruturas de transporte nos bairros informais do Rio de Janeiro: estudo de caso o teleférico do Complexo do Alemão". *Chão Urbano*, 17 (1): 3-21.
- RODRÍGUEZ, J. C., VALENCIA, J. and ARIAS, A. V. (2013). "Las bibliotecas públicas como escenarios de participación ciudadana e inclusión social". *Rastros Rostros*, 15 (29): 73-81.
- SILVA, V. R. A. da. (2013). "Context and potential impact of the aerial cable-car on the population of Complexo do Alemão, Rio de Janeiro". In: J. D. Dávila (ed.): *Urban mobility and poverty: lessons from Medellín and Soacha, Colombia*. London: UCL, UNC, pp. 191-207.
- SIMPSON, M. D. (2013). "Urbanising favelas, overlooking people: regressive housing policies in Rio de Janeiro's progressive slum upgrading initiatives". The Bartlett Development Planning Unit, 155. Retrieved from: [https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/sites/bartlett/files/migrated-files/WP155\\_0.pdf](https://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/development/sites/bartlett/files/migrated-files/WP155_0.pdf)
- STEADMAN, P. (2014). *Building types and built forms*. London: Matador.
- TURNER, J. F. C. (1972). "Housing as a verb". In: J. F. C. Turner and R. Fichter (eds.), *Freedom to build, dweller control of the housing process*. New York: Collier Macmillan, pp. 148-175.
- TURNER, J. F. C. (1976). *Housing by people: towards autonomy in building environments*. New York: Pantheon Books.
- VULLIAMY, E. (2013, June 9). "Medellín, Colombia: reinventing the world's most dangerous city". *The Guardian*. Retrieved from: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2013/jun/09/medellin-colombia-worlds-most-dangerous-city>
- Wall Street Journal. (2012). Medellín: awarded "Innovative city of the year." *The Wall Street Journal* pp. 1-4. Retrieved from: <http://online.wsj.com/ad/cityoftheyear>
- ZOOK, J. B. and BAFNA, S. (2012). "Imaginative content and building form in the Seattle Public Library". Santiago de Chile, Proceedings of the 8th International Space Syntax Symposium, PUC, pp. 1-24.

## Notes

- 1 This paper presents part of my PhD Research conducted at The Bartlett, UCL, from 2012-2016, to which I received a scholarship from CAPES Foundation.
- 2 One of the mayors of Medellín emphasized the importance of architectural quality in these projects, formulating that their aim was “to activate the power aesthetics as a motor for social change” (Salazar apud Brand and Dávila, 2013).
- 3 As it will 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.
- 4 This phenomenon was particularly observed in Parque-Biblioteca La Quintana, 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.
- 5 E.g.: the “Pacto Ciudadano de cuidado y apropiación de los Parques Biblioteca” (Fajardo Valderrama, 2007). The ‘Pactos’ (‘Deals’) are documents that endorse social contracts between the state and the population (González Vélez and Carrizosa Isaza, 2011). Capillé (2017a) shows that the Deal that concerns the Library-Parks encourages identification of legitimate/illegitimate kinds of use, even previously to the actual use of the buildings.