



CITY FOCUS

Medellín

A Sustained Commitment to Transformation





Formerly a dangerous confrontation area for gangs, this water storage tank has now become a vibrant public space.

For its sustained efforts in tackling its socio-economic challenges, the city of Medellín was named the 2016 Lee Kuan Yew World City Prize Laureate. *Urban Solutions* looks at some key infrastructural interventions that have helped the city to make radical improvements to its people's lives.

“In two decades, Medellín was transformed into a model city lauded for radical social innovation...”

In 1991, Medellín earned the dubious honour of being murder capital of the world; the second largest city of Colombia had reached the peak of its homicide rate at a record 395 murders per 100,000 people. The city was in economic and social collapse: unemployment, gang violence, drug trafficking, corruption, poverty and inequality were rife.

That year, however, became a turning point. Colombia introduced a new constitution that decentralised power, giving cities greater authority to combat local problems. The government urged cities to involve local communities and in 1996, introduced a municipal planning system that obliged cities to use participatory planning. This was how the first long-term plan for Medellín emerged. Since then, a succession of committed mayors has tackled the city's biggest issues of violence and inequality through long-term planning and social innovation.

Guided by master plans, Medellín relied heavily on cutting-edge urban design and architecture to respond to its challenges; it poured investments into the poorest, often most violent parts of the city. This approach, known as “social urbanism” rejuvenated the city with visually striking infrastructure, but more importantly changed the way people lived, worked and interacted.

In two decades, Medellín was transformed into a model city lauded for radical social innovation; homicide rates were slashed by 92.1% and unemployment dropped from 23% in 1990 to 10.2% in 2014. Extreme poverty, which stood at 19.4% of the population in 1991, fell to 2.8% in 2015. The city aims to eliminate extreme poverty in the next four years.

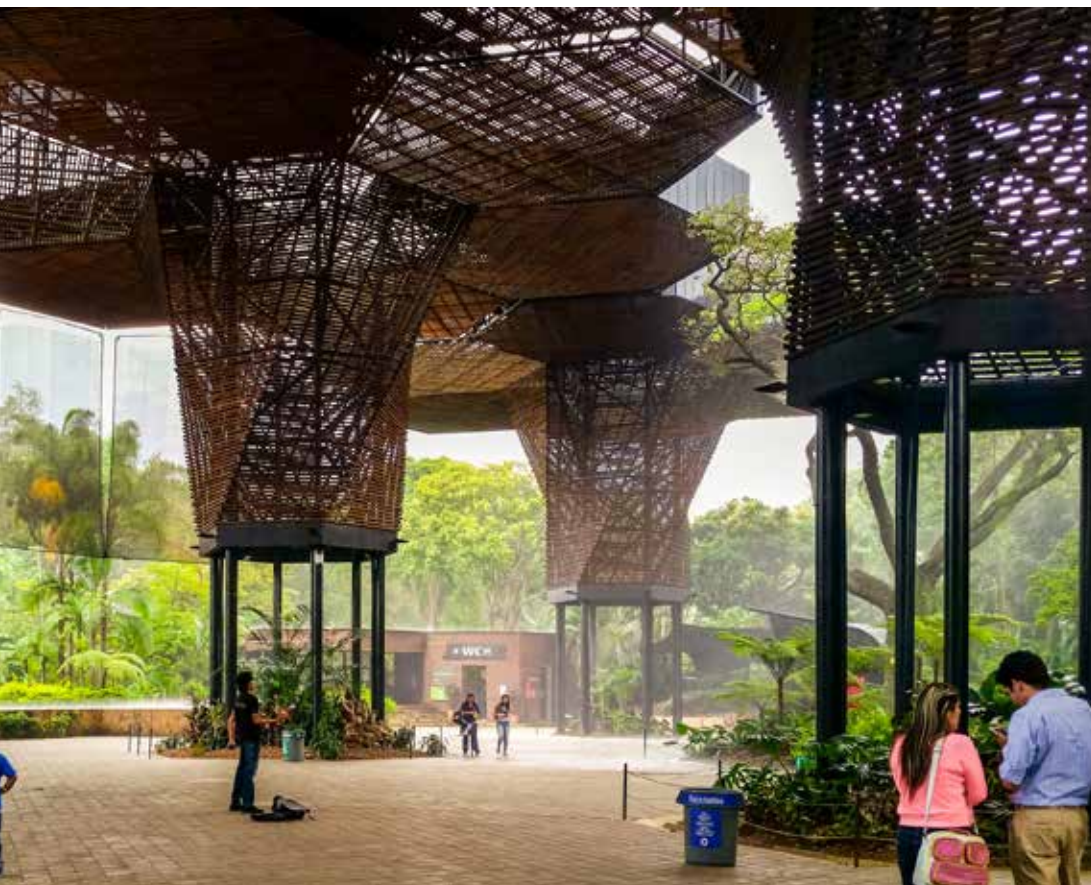
Investing in Mobility

Located in the Aburra Valley, Medellín is surrounded by mountains and is known as “the city of eternal spring” for its pleasing climate.





Medellín's valley locale forces informal settlements to sprawl onto mountainsides, where poor accessibility breeds crime and other social ills.



The Botanical Garden of Medellín is a welcoming public space for all.



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As the city's population boomed, rural migrants began to settle haphazardly on the mountain slopes surrounding the city. They became socially and economically isolated, with poor access to public services; soon, these neighbourhoods became hotspots for crime and violence.

To tackle exclusion, the community had the novel idea of installing a series of escalators on the hillside of the poorest and most violent neighbourhood. The 384-metre journey reduced a strenuous 35-minute uphill trek to a leisurely six-minute ride—allowing everyone, including the elderly and young, to reach the city and access work, school or public services more easily.

Another feature is the cable car system that ferries 30,000 people a day between the hills and downtown Medellín cheaply. Other interventions include the bus rapid transit, a bicycle sharing programme and the new Ayacucho tram that uses pneumatic-powered wheels to climb the city's steep slopes. There are plans to build 400 kilometres of bike lanes and pedestrians pathways to complete a seamless mobility network that will benefit the poorest.



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Fight Violence with Equality

Mr Anibal Gavira, the city's former mayor, told *Urban Solutions* that attacking inequality is the best way to structurally fight against the roots of violence. To this end, Medellín has invested in a multi-modal public transport system, and is creating public spaces “because in public spaces all persons are equal no matter if you're rich or poor, woman or man, young or old”.

The result: awe-inspiring public parks, libraries, museums and schools, many of which have won global praise and awards.

The city has been creative in freeing up public spaces amid its crammed built-up landscape. Its award-winning UVAs (*Unidades de Vida Articulada*), or Articulated Life Units, were once water storage tanks installed on hillsides and fenced off from the public. As informal settlements sprung up on the slopes, the off-limit zones became the only green spaces left in the neighbourhoods.

To share the space, the city launched a master plan in 2013 to convert 20 enclosures into water reservoirs cum “social clubs”.

01 The famed Library Parks combine public libraries with parks and are strategically located in the poorest areas to form community hubs.

02 School children enjoying the Bethlehem Library Park.

03 The Spanish Library Park is built on what was once one of the most dangerous places in Latin America.

“I have found that building high quality spaces is both the fastest and most effective way of attacking inequality while fighting against violence.”



“The UVAs, which were formerly confrontation areas for gangs, have become meeting points for several neighbourhoods,” said Mr Gavira. “I have found that building high quality spaces is both the fastest and most effective way of attacking inequality while fighting against violence.”

Improving the Quality of Life Through Sustainability

The chaotic expansion of migrant homes also endangered residents and degraded the environment. Heavy rains triggered landslides, killing people while washing away their poorly built homes.

With safety and environmental sustainability in mind, the city decided to limit further growth—not with walls but with a green belt known as the Medellín Circumvent Garden.

Mr Gavira shared that affected families were at first relocated to distant places when works began. It was an unpopular move. Learning from this experience, the city now provides families with safer, better homes built in the same area. To assuage fears of eviction, the city also worked with residents to design the green belt and have employed residents to work on the development as well.



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- 01 The Medellín Circumvent Garden will prevent urban sprawl while providing amenities like gyms and footpaths, as well as farming sites.
- 02 With community inputs, each UVA has been uniquely converted into a multi-use public space with amenities ranging from amphitheatres to computer rooms and sports facilities.
- 03 The opening celebration of UVA de la Armonía, a public space converted from a water storage tank.
- 04 The Circumvent Garden also provides new sites for community farming.





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People Power

Involving residents in urban planning has had a stabilising effect on Medellín. As the law in Colombia doesn't allow mayors to stand for re-election, the city has had seven mayors and several changes of government in two decades. Despite the political changes, the city's long-term plans, developed through participatory planning, have not been disrupted.

Current mayor Federico Gutierrez said, "Medellín does not start over every four years [the electoral cycle], we maintain the projects and programmes that work well and improve whatever is needed. Our commitment to civic culture and culture of legality will be our flagship. All of us must contribute, so our motto is 'Medellín Counts on You.'"

Mr Jorge Perez Jaramillo, Director of Planning during Mr Gavira's term, shared that the mayor attended more than 240 public meetings, involving thousands of residents, in the first six months of his term, to discuss his 12-year plan. Subsequent mayors cannot change these long-term plans without proper explanation to the populace. "If a mayor wants to stop [some plans] ... the community will ask why," he said.

The city also allocates 5% of its budget for communities to define priorities in their neighbourhoods. Known as "participatory budgeting", this practice has funded small projects such as bridges, community halls, and even microloans. Over time, the city and its people have gotten used to the idea that the city does indeed belong to everyone. ●