



## **Collective urbanism. A common Future through coordinated actions.**

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A few days ago, Kristine Guzmán and Eneas Bernal from MUSAC extended me the generous invitation to take part in the Post-Pandemic Cities series that they have been leading for quite some time now. I, as a member of the public, a person who has lived his whole life in such a contradictory and complex city as Medellín, accepted straight away because I have a real relish for sharing experiences, learnings from this lifetime in Medellín. A city that encapsulates a good part of the conflicts, difficulties, questions, and complexities of contemporary cities. Yet, it is also a city that is a land of love, life, creation, and very special people in very many ways. A city that produces and in which is produced a great deal of human, cultural, social, and political dynamics. And well, I think it is important in these worrying pandemic times that we talk about a city that is witness to difficulties and problems, but also to hopes and some remarkable abilities to react to problems.

Medellín, at the end of the eighties, was the roughly conventional result of a good part of the urbanisation that Latin America experienced over several decades. In Colombia, in particular, the move into our largest areas was very extreme, quick, and big. And Medellín, like Bogotá, Cali, and other cities, grew not only very quickly but also very chaotically. And it created a tremendously unequitable, tremendously segregated environment full of land, social, and economic conflicts over the sixties, seventies, and even eighties. And towards the end of the eighties, we were a city that had a precarious, practically non-existent system of democracy, a city with, as I said, extensive urbanisation that was also incomplete and riven by precariousness, injustice, difficulties, as is common, unfortunately, in most cities around the world. But it also had other factors such as the structural economic crisis arising from the decline in industry and another series of problems, which made Medellín through illegal activity, smuggling, and latterly drug trafficking and organised crime into probably one of the clearest examples of an unviable urban society. It was precarious in physical terms, precarious in social terms, precarious in political terms.

Luckily, this crisis also came in the late eighties and early nineties at the same time as the rise of local democracy in Colombia and also a new political Constitution which outlined more democratic, more participative scenarios with greater respect for people's rights, as well as a very strong focus on the future of cities.

And I, as an architect who grew up in Medellín and have spent my whole life in that area, have to say that I have lived all of my adult life since then and, of course, all of my time as an architect in this city, which has made this city a sort of a lab for an architect and member of the public and that's what I want to talk to you about.

So, when considering giving my thoughts on post-pandemic cities from the perspective of Medellín, the first thing I thought was that a possibly very relevant message today is that we need collective urbanism, a common future through coordinated actions.

The city is a collective project aided by the capacity of Medellín to face the crisis, a crisis that forced us to come together, to think together, to assess, to value, and to understand what we had built over the previous decades. It led to us, all through the nineties and the early twentieth century, building a sort of collective commitment through social dialogue to what we called: the



city. And that brought about the very powerful inclusion of diverse actors which enabled us to gradually build democratic scenarios, new institutions, planning process developments that had a high level of connection to all sectors of society, the commitment of the ruling classes in both society and culture and politics and business, as well as the universities and academia.

And gradually through the work of cultural actors, academic actors, business and political leaders we started to agree on, map out, and find pathways. In such a way, that I think the first message that is worth thinking about is: there is almost no city suffering a collective crisis that cannot move beyond it if it builds a future based on collective leadership and hard work shared between diverse actors.

That is what Medellín achieved in the past in that crisis and I think it is lesson that thinking about post-pandemic cities offers us today.

But there is also a very important point to consider, which is that today when we talk so assuredly about the pandemic, about that setting of widespread crisis, maybe it was the first time in a long time for humanity that we had had such a consensus that we were in a crisis, because nowadays we are in several pandemics. Maybe COVID is the most obvious, but there are others which have lived alongside, have coexisted with us for a long time. And they are the pandemics of inequality, of precarious urbanisation leading to severe poverty for many, and a pandemic that is a fact: the climate emergency.

So, stemming from all these questions and all these pandemics, I think that it is timely that we talk about collective urbanism as a way of seeking to create cities, coming together as a social collective to build a common future.

The cities at the epicentre of the greatest human capabilities for creation, thought, discussion, imagination... I think that through more and better urban planning, more and better engagement of all the actors in that thing we call urban planning, which many consider a problem for architects, engineers, sociologists, and some other professions, it becomes a common endeavour.

One of the fundamental aspects in this is a culture of dialogue and conversation, which enables people to prioritise problems and reach agreements that mean we can say:

We can't get these things wrong anymore.

It doesn't matter which ideology or political group governs a society, there are some issues which are fundamental for life as a community, which are the fundamental rights to human dignity and which always call on cities to take action. People have the right to a healthy habitat; they have the right to have access to drinking water, to food, to energy, to education.... Cities need to be accessible, inclusive, to take everyone into consideration. I think those discussions have given us an understanding of issues that used to be less prominent and obvious, such as the fact that at present there is a large number of vulnerable people, that there is a large number of people who need assistance, that we have to transform what we term: living together. And accept this coexistence implies a growing number of elderly people who are going to need increasingly accessible and safer cities, as well as the rights of all minorities, all social groups as a fundamental issue.

So, in this idea about talking about post-pandemic cities in this podcast, I think that the experiences I've had as a member of the public and as an architect, as an urban planner in a city such as Medellín which has been such a complex lab, pose various pathways.



When a city, even one with such strong economic limitations as the society of Medellín understands that we have to prioritise problems appropriately, then we really can get to grips with the problems

In Medellín in the early nineties we understood that the segregation, precariousness, poverty, and exclusion we were going through was breeding a society that was destroying itself through violence and we made it a priority that we had to work towards equality, inclusion, to bridge divides, to include communities that previously had barely had any idea they were part of society. So, I think when a city, a society is able to have dialogue and agree that those things can be solved, then that is when leadership emerges, the resources emerge, the budgets emerge, the public policies emerge. And I think that is the interesting thing about Medellín. It's not just a matter of financial planning, planning for spaces, equipment, town planning, infrastructure works, it is also an overarching concept, social policies, public policies in general which allow, with appropriate planning and appropriate social dialogue, and the corresponding management, between all levels of society, great advances to be made.

The participatory processes in the communities of Medellín, the engagement of the public in the process of the city has many stories, and I would go so far as to say that it is certainly one of the key aspects that have allowed us to evolve from that extreme crisis to the quite better times we are in now. I actually can talk about other places. I have been lucky enough to work in other places, but there is one case that I think is really beautiful, which is the handling and agreement of the Medellín Land Use Plan (POT by its acronym in Spanish) in 2013 and 2014, because a series of exemplary factors all happened at the same time. One is that we picked up on the history of civic participation that had been happening since the nineties. And we rolled out a lasting system for dialogue with the organised communities, which allowed us to grasp, to understand what the main concerns and main proposals from the grassroots communities were. In fact, it has to be said that some of the new structural elements in the new plan were planned around initiatives from the community level. Those debates were... sometimes difficult, sometimes very demanding. In some case, they were almost conflictive, but as the real desire was to agree on and build ideas for the future, we managed to take a big step forward.

Colombian law, the Constitution, stipulates that a planning process like the POT must be widely participatory and so over those two years we held more than 140 public gatherings which were organised with a methodology, and produced reports, attendance lists, and, above all, included a very important issue that we were committed to, which was to report back on what happened once community ideas were received by the technical teams and whether or not they were included, how, and in what form in the Plan.

But there was also the approval debate in the municipal senate, which we call the Municipal Council, which by law lasts ninety days in which the whole of the Plan must be debated and approved article by article. There was an intense, open, very strong debate. It was highly demanding. Ninety days, with extended sessions, and even though there wasn't a strong political coalition backing the municipal government, they managed to secure 80% of the councillors' votes in favour. This is quite unusual because several large Colombian cities have been unable to pass their Land Use Plan over the last, maybe, 15 years.

And thanks to that process, which we have to admit happened at the same time, we were the hosts of the 7th World Urban Forum. And so you could say that participation in Medellín at that time was also an act of global sharing because we had the biggest meeting of experts and authorities on urban planning issues from all over the planet discussing the future of the cities



in Medellín. And that enriched, amplified, and fed the debate, and, of course, created a lot of public awareness on what we were doing. At that world urban forum we staged a pavilion, called Pabellón Medellín, which was a citizen hall that explained visually using large-scale prints, models, plans, historic and new videos the current position of the city and its future with a very strong emphasis on the land around the river, on the hillside, and the higher mountainsides. This gave the many people who visited the pavilion an insight, a better understanding of what the proposal was for the future of their city.

All this was, in the end -taking everything into account and the fact there is no such thing as the perfect process, there is no process that can't be improved- a great learning experience and, above all, a very civic, very well worked out, and relatively amicable process between all the sectors of society.

There is a very clear reflection and that is the power of architecture, of urban planning, of planning, and also infrastructure as tools to deliver in people's environment the desires, dreams, and big ideas that societies make through dialogue, political thinking, and democratic efforts. Making cities more inclusive, more complete, and accessible for everyone is what will enable us to develop healthier environments, environments that do provide that aspect which public health experts call the prevention function. And as we make cities more suitable for people, in terms of care, in terms of climate change, in terms of living together in the same space, in terms of conflicts, we will surely leave behind many horrible chapters that we have gone through and are still going through in some places.

I think the fact of the matter is that in this pandemic we have grasped, better than ever before, the role of public space. In this society which, luckily, has rising life expectancy, public spaces become much more overarchingly important as well as much more of a priority.

On the other hand, we must understand that transport systems, such as the undergrounds, the trains, the buses, the cable car system, and the other systems are more than transport infrastructure; they are instruments for human integration, for social integration.

So, I think that this is a phase in which understanding the city as public property, as a stage for life becomes essential, vital. It is very important.

The other thing that comes to mind in this reflective process when considering Medellín is that it is possible to reach broad social pacts to fight against many problems. Deficits, gaps are easy to diagnose, but are, above all, surmountable if there are social agreements, if there are broad agreements, if there are serious conversations, and if there is the will for the right political leadership.

Recognising that we are interdependent in our urban areas with the regions, that multiscale idea between the urban, the metropolitan, and the regional actually starts in neighbourhoods with urban proximity, with what some people such as Carlos Moreno have called the "15-minute city". It suggests that we have to create liveable environments where it is easy or at least viable for people to meet our needs in an agile or straightforward way.

It is an issue which, in the pandemic, in this period of COVID, has become extremely important.

A wonderful experience of civic participation is the Parques del Río (River Parks) project, which is a master plan covering in its scope the whole course of the river through the city. And it



represents a significant structural change in the historic idea of the city given that from the fifties onwards, the river became a functional corridor of motorways, trainlines, and, particularly since it was channelled, an open sewer. The river became a periphery in the middle of the city, a no man's land, a non-place. And we urban planners, the students, the teachers, the architects, urban planners in general, for a long time, had the dream that river could be changed. Proposals for it were worked on in the schools of architecture for a long time and some planners, such as Carlos Julio Calle and others, put the idea forward. However, in 2013 we were fortunate enough to be able to implement that transformation alongside the mayor Anibal Gaviria. We held an international tender which 57 teams from 4 continents participated in. A winning project was selected and organised. And that involved multiple civic conversations, gatherings, exhibitions, forums, and the public debate was intense. That civic participation enabled us to mould many aspects and specify many aspects of the project and the first phase was built between 2015-2017. The lesson we learned is that all the effort that went into dialogue with the communities was fundamental. Because when some politicians and leaders with sectorial interests tried to provoke a great crisis of confidence in the public about the project, most of society backed it. However, that minority whose fears caused them to doubt the project now laud the park in place now and argue in favour of the concept of the city that Parques del Río represents, which is a city where the priority is space for people's lives, and additionally the functional infrastructure that people also needed has been addressed.

The other thing which is worth pointing out and even if it might not seem like it, has become an extremely important is the issue of democracy and politics and this is also linked to the significance of the figure of the mayor. The concept of the city that enables us as citizens to agree on and resolve a good part of our problems calls for public management, it calls for the right leadership so many things can happen. It is clear that the role of nation states is no longer what it once was, that local governments and what we shall call the *municipalist* movement have a new role, a vital role in that it is the political and governance system that is closest to citizens and people. And therefore, it is essential we make a firm commitment to that in these times of post-pandemic cities. But that requires a rethink of the role of the mayor. A rethink of their powers, their political role, and the need for them to be highly qualified leaders to govern the problems of our society in an urban world.

In such a way as to understand that the pandemic, climate change, and the huge convergence of problems in cities require collective agreements, broad dialogue. Greater use of planning, urban planning, and technical skills in building future projects is a pressing demand.

I hope my thoughts in Post-pandemic Cities with MUSAC can inspire other opportunities for reflection in many other cities around our planet.