

The Latin American city post Medellín

Interview with Alejandro Echeverri

Sofía Saavedra

Abstract

Alejandro Echeverri analyzes the transformation of several Latin American cities, mainly Medellín, and the interdependence between territorial planning and political processes. At the same time, he explains the social bases that prompted the spectacular transformation of Medellín in the past decade, he gives details of the procedure that made it possible and makes a critical balance of its repercussion on other cities of the region.

Echeverri describes the phenomenon of second cities and emphasizes the case of Rosario (Argentina). He analyzes the challenge faced by Brazilian cities in order to respond to the growth of the middle class. He presents the fundamentals of "social town planning", discarding the fact that the ultimate end might be the physical transformations and clarifying that the objective of this town planning is to offer programs that integrate the population to the development of the city.

Finally, Echeverri explains how Medellín knew how to take advantage of its geographical conditions.

For Alejandro Echeverri, town planner responsible for the spectacular transformation of Medellín, the final objective of "social town planning" is to offer programs, services, activities and employment to the communities. This town planner looks for the best buildings with the best design, but thinks that constructions are nothing more than the physical expression of a series of programs. The ultimate goal of social town planning is the transformation of people: the use that people are going to give to these spaces in order to integrate them to the economic development of the city. For Echeverri, architecture is merely the visual expression, the change of skin.

How do you see urban development in Latin America? Does the fact that Latin America has left-wing politics influence it?

Urban processes are living a very intense moment in Latin America. Many very interesting things are happening. But, unlike what is happening in Europe and the developed countries, these processes are fragile and discontinuous because they depend very much on the political situation and, in a certain way, on the political support these transformation projects have.

Since the experiences of Bogotá and Medellín, several Colombian cities have shown interest in channelling public investment through the public space and new facilities, such as schools and other types of buildings. On the other hand, countries like Brazil, specifically Río de Janeiro, have large budgets to build big projects or do urban transformation because of the events that will take

place in the coming years, such as the Olympic Games⁽¹⁾ and the World Football Championship⁽²⁾. Actually, in the last months, several competitions on a very important scale for Río de Janeiro⁽³⁾ have taken place. Brazil is a very powerful country that goes very fast. But many town planners and architect colleagues have a very critical view of the processes that are taking place in Brazil, as the investments are supported by groups that promote real-estate businesses, many times in contradiction with the interests of the city.

For a long time Latin American capitals were characterized by migration, but this year, for the first time, the number of inhabitants of a capital city as important as São Paulo stopped growing.

No rational town planning can adequately respond to the explosion that characterized São Paulo, a city which had an explosive growth: in one hundred years it increased from one hundred thousand inhabitants to twenty million.

Brazil's challenge in the medium term, from the urban point of view, is to respond to the growth of the middle class. An important percentage of people who live in poverty or with important deficiencies, mainly in the "favelas", will improve their material conditions. This implies a big challenge from the point of view of mobility, accessibility, consumption, quality of housing, etc. Then, as it has also been studied in Colombia, in the next years there will be a reduction of the migration to cities because in some way, there is a more stable economic

situation. The challenge of the cities will be to build on top of what is already built, to improve the conditions of the inhabitants and generate new housing alternatives. Actually, it is necessary to rethink all the existing network from the formal as well as from the informal and industrial point of view, and so on.

What is the dynamics of second cities in Latin America? How has the decentralization policy of some countries contributed to a greater autonomy or capacity of management of these cities?

In countries like Colombia, or Argentina, the phenomenon of medium size cities and second cities is very interesting. Beyond Buenos Aires, a network of Argentine cities weaves a network of knowledge and interchange. Because of its size, Buenos Aires is extremely autonomous; its relationships are out of its surrounding national networks. Cities like Rosario⁽⁴⁾ or Córdoba⁽⁵⁾ do not consider it a peer. On the other hand, these other cities have the capacity to create a very interesting interchange, including Uruguay.

In recent years, Rosario has undoubtedly been the model of urban transformation in Argentina. Starting from a strategic plan⁽⁶⁾ with political management leadership, with very involved architects and very good architecture, they have had a very interesting process of change and recovery of the city.

I belong to a second city, Medellín, and I find the situation of these cities very interesting. Very valuable things are happening in Latin America, the world has given room to the cities so

that they themselves have a presence, so that they can construct much bigger interchange, academic and intellectual networks than in the past. In the past, big events, conferences, forums, academic, intellectual and finance networks had to be channelled by the nation, it was practically a condition. Therefore, the capital cities were the fundamental channel of communication to access these spaces. Nowadays, second cities, as well as third ones, have a big opportunity if they understand how to play in this framework of interchange, if they are willing to have an important aggressive diplomacy.

In this sense, Medellín and its people do not try to compete in the same scenarios as Bogotá. But there is a large quantity of economic, academic and cultural spaces for second and third cities. Besides, these have a great virtue: the attitude of their actors is much more horizontal and open to work with others, particularly in the provinces. I have had plenty of relationships with Monterrey and Guadalajara, which are cities on a very different scale from the Federal District (DF), with very interesting processes and challenges. Such as Rosario, in Argentina. Since they are not capital cities, and they are not absolutely associated to the national programs, and are not thinking all the time from the point of view of the government plans, these cities build new alternatives in a very creative way.

A few years ago, Supersudaca presented the following idea: political decentralization in some Latin American countries could lead to the concept of a network of smaller cities (productive) that could stop the flow from the country to the big cities.

Recently, some town planners of the European avant-garde have stepped aside from the concept of compact city and have opted for the network of smaller cities, like Bernardo Secchi⁽⁷⁾ with the Veneto Region, of Geyer⁽⁸⁾ with the Flamingo diamond⁽⁹⁾ or the Dutch concept of Randstad.⁽¹⁰⁾ Is it possible to aspire to a future with city networks? To what extent is political decentralization a key for that? Is a big distance between cities a problem?

Although distances are very big in Latin America, there is a very strong interchange through new technologies, especially internet. But the construction of friendship links and the interchange of projects originated in the network demands a more intense interchange from the point of view of personal attendance, which is how projects and ideas take shape. In recent years there has been a much more presential interchange.

What is the relationship between violence and urban management in Latin America?

Unfortunately, we cannot separate violence from the conditions of cities which have lacked development. But town planning and architecture are not the ultimate response to violence. When rulers, politicians and technicians come to Medellín and believe that a library-park in a peripheral neighborhood is going to solve the safety problem of their cities, they are wrong. It is undoubtedly a big help though. Dignified development and services improve many conditions, but it is important to understand that violence has other types of expression which must be dealt with or fought.

That is why we insist on social town planning, on integral urban projects, where physical transformation, which is fundamental, is not the final objective. The final objective is to offer programs, services, activities and employment to the communities. This is achieved by means of new spaces and symbolic references. But we are never going to eradicate poverty nor violence if we do not have an integral and concurrent vision, if we do not make a series of simultaneous interventions to really integrate the poor population into the economic development of the city.

Following the example of Bogota, the governor of Curazao⁽¹¹⁾ has decided to close one of the main traffic roads on Sundays. On the other hand, Río and Caracas also chose to introduce a Metrocable.⁽¹²⁾ Although in Holland the integral approach of the neighborhoods has been a failure, Curacao has decided to try it again, but from the “bottom up”, like Medellín. Did Medellín create a catharsis in other Latin American countries?

Some cities have successful urban and architectural transformation processes. We, the architects, like to visit places and find referents, examples and models. There are many cities such as Barcelona, Bogotá or Rosario that have created interesting processes which are published, sometimes too much. In recent years, Medellín became a referent. Resonance is given in multiple ways. Many young architects as well as many academics and politicians, have come to Medellín from several Latin American cities and from other parts of the world. All of them take models and build their own in order to take them to their cities.

Unfortunately, in most cases, the intention is to implement the superficial, the visual point of view is the most evident, but that is not where the reasons for success are. And then, some Latin American cities have been having problems with the Metrocables since the first days of operation, like Río de Janeiro. What has interested us more in Medellín is that a whole system of town planning and services is constructed starting from the transport network. Social town planning looks for the best buildings with the best design, but it is a means and not an end. Buildings are the physical expression of a series of service programs that the city locates in certain neighbourhoods. The programs and the transformation done by the people are the ultimate end: the use that people will give to these spaces. Architecture is the visual expression, the change of skin.

Is it possible to export and reproduce the integral approach that characterizes social town planning?

Once the management of Mayor Fajardo⁽¹³⁾ was finished, I had the opportunity to collaborate with other cities in Colombia and Latin America. This has allowed me to confirm that, from the point of view of public management, there are two problems for the development of integral programs in the neighbourhoods. The first one is that a very strong political leadership is needed, with an obsession from the leader to give priority help to certain strategic territories. Since interventions are very complex, the support of the governor is needed in order to coordinate and lead actions in a sustained way for four years. Unfortunately, it is exceptional for a ruler to sustain the strategic vision of the projects.

The second problem, also very difficult to solve, is that public structures and management are made to function separately, each one as an independent island. Public works on one side, sport centers on another, education on another. The key for social town planning is to coordinate various actions strategically in specific territories, with the participation of the community. That requires a transversal coordination of municipal or public structures.

How were you able to change the model of corrupt public management that characterizes Latin American cities? Could that method be exported?

The politician that builds the works merely looking for votes is very harmful. The usual thing is to make a list of the projects by political concessions. Medellín managed to change that model and proceed with technical objectives responding to indicators, to a serious plan of investment on the zones that needed it. It was a very big change, even though it will probably not last forever.

Architects and town planners have a strategic territorial vision, they put topics together and articulate them with a methodology from the conceptual point of view. The Mayors have ideas in their government plan and need someone to articulate those ideas into concrete programs and policies. Then, the architect must understand very well that this is a shared work, the technicians do not tell him everything the Mayor needs to do. We give ideas, orientate, but we also have to listen and construct with someone else's objectives, adding what we can to generate a more powerful and articulate program. That

is one of the most interesting tasks of architects and town planners, we are mediators, practical intelligence allows us to incorporate many of the programs that at a certain moment seem loose, with a more powerful vision from the territorial point of view. It is a two way construction, one arrives with ideas, others arrive with others.

Perhaps part of the success is due to the specific transversal management; I understand that the managers of the Integral Town Plans of Medellín had very wide freedom of decision. Was there an administrative reorganization?

The Mayor defined that the institute of urban development, which in previous years had been a synonym of corruption, was suitable to define, locate and carry out some of the strategic projects. In most of the municipal structures there are possibilities for good management. If it is necessary, a new institution can be created to do it.

How was the natural system incorporated into the urban environment?

That is a challenge for the future. Medellín is immersed in the mountains and has a spectacular geographical system, with many gullies that go down to the river⁽¹⁾, a system that has all the potential to be reestablished or reconstructed. Timidly, but successfully, some steps have been taken with very precise interventions in some places where the natural system combines with the urban environment. In fact, one of the most strategic elements of social town planning is the interventions on the border spaces of the territory, where a community meets another, where

there is deterioration, where there are complex environmental systems.

Many of the projects, like some of the library-parks, owe their success to their location. In these cases, the quality of architecture has been, in some way, a reply to the tension produced by the natural geographical system when it meets the built environment and the neighbourhoods. We understand the territory from the point of view of its natural clues, and thus orientate some localization of equipment. But that is still very timid. The challenge is to give a greater dimension to the natural potential of the city.

In Medellín, the specific places of social conflict, such as the borders between neighbourhoods, coincide with the gullies...

The borders are defined by the natural system, the two things go together. The geographic condition of the city has caused many of its critical conditions. The geographic relief, the gullies and hills generate a rupture between the neighbourhoods; that is why a city reaches a point and, from there, another type starts. Identifying the natural system allows giving priority to certain interventions that create points of contact. The idea is to use, in the good sense of the word, the natural opportunities. ⁽¹⁾

NOTES

(1) Budget: 14.400 million dollars. Main transport projects: System BTR (Buses Transporte Rápido), Transcarioca, Transoeste, Transolímpica, Línea 4 (Metro). Main infrastructure projects: Olympic Park, Olympic Port, Rock City (Olympic Village) and Sambódromo.

(2) Venue cities: Belo Horizonte, Brasília, Cuiabá, Curitiba, Fortaleza, Manaus, Natal, Puerto Alegre, Recife, Rio de

Janeiro, Salvador de Bahia and São Paulo.

(3) Winner Competition Master Plan Olympic Park: AECOM (England). Winner Competition Olympic Port: João Pedro Backheuser (Brazil) + Ignasi Riera (Spain).

(4) Inhabitants: 1.028.658
Density: 5.700 inhabitants/km²
Founding: 1793 (approx.)

(5) Inhabitants: 1.309.536
Density: 2.273 inhabitants/km²
Founding: 1573

(6) Strategic Plan Rosario (1998-2008) and Strategic Plan Metropolitan Rosario (PERM + 10, in progress).

(7) Italian architect and town planner, responsible for the territorial ordinance plans of Siena, Brescia and Bergamo, among others. Author of "A new Urban Question" (Territorio n.º 53, 2010).

(8) Xaveer de Geyter (Bélgica, 1957). Worked in OMA for 10 years. He has had his own office (XDGA) since 1990. Editor of: *After-Sprawl; Research on the Contemporary City (NAI, 2002)*.

(9) One of the biggest urban areas of Europe. Its vertices are Brussels, Ambers, Gante and Lovaine.

(10) A conurbation that includes the cities of Amsterdam, Delft, Haarlem, Leiden, Rotterdam, The Hague and Utrecht, among others, besides a dozen secondary cities and towns.

(11) Autonomous country associated to the Netherlands kingdom.
Population: 140.794
Capital: Willemstad

(12) Cable railway that complements the Metro network in Medellín. It has two lines serving the less privileged areas of the city. It has been operating since 1996.

(13) Sergio Fajardo (Medellín, 1956): Mathematician and politician, Mayor of Medellín between 2004 and 2007.

(14) Río Medellín (longitud: 100 km).