Planning by the People

The Colombian Urban Experience
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Colombia’s social urbanism and inclusive transportation projects have left a lasting impression on urban planning in the global south. The author explains how urban planning got democratised in Colombia and why India is still far behind.

This article emerges from a two-week long workshop in Colombia held in July 2014. The workshop was aimed at preparing guidelines for a territorial plan for the inter-municipal association of G11 in Colombia.[i] The event was hosted by Les Ateliers, with active support from the 11 municipalities in the south of the Valle del Cauca, and led by the mayor of Cali city (Santiago de Cali). The workshop was expected to come up with a regional plan (guidelines) for an area of 11,000 sq km to improve the economic, social and environmental aspects of the relatively backward south Colombian region of G11. Such a voluntary coalition of 11 municipalities and an attempt at regional planning for holistic development was the first of its kind in Colombia’s planning history.

Introduction

Latin America (especially Brazil and Colombia) with a very high urban population ratio has always been a hot bed of urban interventions. These initiatives have mostly been people-centric and innovative – participatory budgeting and Bus Rapid Transportation Systems (BRTS) being the most popular. It might be relevant to discuss some of the planning interventions undertaken in Colombia as its concerns are quite similar to those of the global south. This is especially important in the present schema of proposed investments in the Indian urban-scape - 100 smart cities, housing for all by 2022 and the revamped/renamed Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission (JNNURM) for 500 cities, under the newly elected government. Also interestingly, it will be an appropriate occasion to compare and contrast the case of Mumbai that hosted its first ever public consultations in August 2014 in the history of urban planning in India.[ii] We can perhaps learn from and reflect on Latin American examples to address our own concerns here.

Colombia - The Context to Urban Innovations
Colombia, in the wake of its tumultuous violent past, urgently required intervention and investment in its urban areas so as to create a stable and successful model of a nation state. Colombian cities undertook an interesting approach to address the urban concerns. These cities have been forced to innovate with meagre resources and acute problems at hand. Now their urban solutions have become worthy of emulation and experimentation by other countries. These successes have become symbols of national pride and are representative of the newfound Colombian-ness.
In this article, the first section will focus on the most prominent aspects of urban innovations in the transportation and housing sectors in Colombia. While innovations in the former have been extremely successful, changes in the latter have remained a major concern for urban planners in Colombian cities. Innovations in both sectors will be explained through case studies from different cities in Colombia. The next section will focus on the enabling institutional and regulatory mechanisms that have aided urban innovations and the means by which these successes have been made a part of the urban planning discourse. The last section will draw comparisons with the process of revising the Mumbai Development Plan (2014-34) and compare the scenarios in India and Colombia – both from the global south.

Public Transportation in Colombia: The Case of Medellín

Colombian cities were crowded with obsolete buses that operated haphazardly with disregard for public safety and traffic rules. It was only in 1998 that Bogotá decided to tackle its public transportation woes with the introduction of a scaled-up version of a successful, smaller model of Bus Rapid Transport system (BRTS) in Curitiba, Brazil. Immensely successful in Bogotá, at least in the earlier years of implementation, it laid the foundation of the National Urban Transportation Policy (NUTP) and served as a model for the roll-out of BRTS throughout Colombia’s largest cities.\[iv\] Bogotá developed 84 km of exclusive bus lanes, and similar BRTS programmes have been implemented in other cities of Colombia, including Medellín. \[v\]

Over the last decade, Medellín has overtaken Bogotá in terms of the innovative modes of transport it has devised to address its specific issues and is now an inspiration for others to emulate. In 2014, Medellín hosted the prestigious World Urban Forum convened by United Nations-Habitat. It was the recipient of the most innovative city award, even beating cities like New York and London in the race, primarily for its efforts in reorienting and diversifying the transportation network in Medellín (Image 2).\[vi\]
Image 2: The transportation network of Medellin. The scaled-down map shows the central spine of the Metro, the Metrocable lines K and J, the BRTS lines and the bicycle sharing options available at different stations.


Medellin is the second largest city in Colombia with a population of 3 million (2011 census) and is nestled in a valley with a linear spread along river Medellin. The commercial districts and the relatively affluent housing localities have sprung up along this spine. The poor, however, mostly live in the hills around the city in informal settlements that emerged in the 1970s and 80s, as thousands of internally displaced people from the violence-torn countryside flocked to Colombian cities. And to complicate matters even further, the city was engulfed in drug-related violence that thrived on poverty, informality and marginality in poorer urban neighbourhoods.

It is in this context that the metro, constructed in 1995, proved to be the “game changer” and became a source of regional pride. Though derided by some as wasteful expenditure, it was the first major state intervention for public transportation in the country. In the early 2000s, inspired by Bogotá’s success, the transport network was further strengthened by the introduction of the BRTS. But what these conventional modes of transport could not address, were the transportation needs of majority of people living in informal settlements perched on the hills where the density of dwellings was sometimes as high as 400 houses per hectare.

The social and economic unsustainability of the metro, which suffered from low ridership, forced the planners to devise the Metrocable. It was an indigenous low cost unconventional public transport system that connected the remote hill slopes to the metro. This reworked...
version of ski-trains was employed to ferry passengers to and fro from the most inaccessible slopes, something which was unthinkable with the conventional modes of transport. The first line (K) in 2003 cost a measly US$24 million, and the second line (J) around US$47 million (Image 3). [viii]

The cost per km of the Metrocable in urban areas compares favourably with BRT and rail systems. The transport network has been further strengthened by connecting the metro-BRT spine to communities living in remote and inaccessible areas by either the Metrocable or escalators going up the hill slope. And recently, in stations around the campuses, bicycle facilities have been created. Thus Medellin now, boasts of the most composite and varied transport network after 15 years of out of the box thinking.
But what distinguishes the public transportation network devised in Medellin from other cities, is the social motivation behind the project. The Metrocable was a socially-motivated project – a way of extending the benefits of the metro to the poorest and inaccessible areas of the city. It was a part of the Integrated Urban Project of Medelin city (Proyectos Urbanos integrals or PUI in Spanish) that earmarked certain poor areas, home to marginalised communities, for urban improvement. The PUI is a part of a wider policy of “social urbanism” which calls for improvement of the poor sectors of the city by public investment in better housing, parks, libraries, new schools and public spaces (Image 4&5).[ix]
However, there have been major debates on the tangible social and economic impact of such interventions, and whether more focus should be laid on devising policy programmes to tackle inequality in communities rather than on development of transport systems and social urbanism. Many studies show that the impact of Metrocable remains localised and does not translate into the development of the community, with hardly 10% of residents in the community use it.

The Integrated Urban Project has been discontinued since the mayoral change in 2007. Nevertheless, the implementation of social urbanism and innovations in transport in the last ten years leaves Medellin in a unique position to tackle its future urban concerns. The robust public transportation and a good model for integrated community development through social architecture has had a positive impact on the psyche and moral of Medellin, a city which in the 90s was labelled as the crime capital of the world.

Confused Housing Policy in Colombia: The Case of Bogotá

National level Schemes: Unlike its famed socially oriented transportation policy, the
Colombian housing policy has evolved from the somewhat unhealthy premise of homeownership. The real problem was not homeownership but rather availability of affordable housing itself. The idea of facilitating home-ownership emerged in the 1950s and 60s and resulted in the establishment of the state-owned Colombian Housing Institute (ICT) that aimed to supply housing units at a subsidised rate. The beneficiaries of such schemes were always the middle class, and the economically weaker sections were left out of the system.\[x\]

The violence in the countryside only compounded the housing crisis and the state’s housing supply fell woefully short of demand. In a city like Bogotá, with 50% of people living in rented accommodation and more than 40% living in informal settlements, the formal housing programmes fixated on “provision” and “homeownership” (supply of houses) could hardly address the real housing issues. In a span of 50 years, the ICT built or financed only 700,000 housing units.\[xi\]

In 1991, the ICT was declared bankrupt and closed down. Simultaneously the (neoliberal) government led by Cesar Graviria of the Liberal party introduced the ABC policy based on the triple element of savings (ahorro), subsidy (bono) and credit (crédito) to help the poor, on the lines of Chilean housing subsidy programme.\[xii\] It was expected that the private sector, with its perceived efficiency and cost effectiveness would be the best possible option after the state’s withdrawal from the housing sector.

The ABC policy did generate a large number of subsidies for housing, almost amounting to 4 billion pesos, but only a few managed to convert it to housing. The private sector was supposed to plan and build homes and sell them to the newly enfranchised and subsidised poor. But again, the subsidies provided to the poorest were not enough for them to own and maintain houses. Besides the subsidy misallocation, the housing complexes built by the private sector were also ill-planned, remotely located and socio-economically segregated.

Between 2006 and 2009, the National Housing Fund (FNV) assigned subsidies to 1,72,000 families, but only 63% of these resulted in the purchase of a home. Recent studies have claimed that only 14.5% of claimants managed to convert their subsidy into a house.\[xiii\] The misguided attempts to provide houses – both by the state and the private sector - and the wasted subsidies have not yet resulted in clear policy guidelines to resolve the Colombian housing crisis.

In 2012, the Colombian government announced another “radical housing policy” of providing “free homes for 100,000 families every year”.\[xiv\] Many critiques of the radical housing policy have argued that the concept of free housing stems from biased views on self-help housing – the most commonly adopted model by cities of global south. The huge amount spent on the construction of houses could be employed to assist the marginalised communities to access basic services that they have been deprived off.

**City Level Schemes:** While the housing policy at the national level has received little
success, many interventions at the city level have addressed the needs of people living in informal settlements. Land titles were awarded to the informal communities and upgradation programmes were launched to ensure provision of not just housing needs, but also basic services. Commenced in 1998 in Bogotá, the demarginalisation programme allotted 1.2 billion pesos over four years for the improvement of living conditions in numerous informal settlements with the aim of raising the living standards of people. The said programme had a massive impact and benefitted around 620,000 people from the poorest 12 neighbourhoods. [xv] The main interventions of the programmes were synchronised construction of public services and amenities.

In 2001, after four years of implementation of the demarginalisation programme, the “Integral Improvement of Neighbourhoods” programme was initiated with a key component being community participation, and all the interventions were outlined for the first time in the Territorial Ordering Plan (POT) (Image 6, 7&8). Also in 1998, rather than provision of subsidies, the Bogotá administration legislated the creation of a land bank with the aim of facilitating housing in Bogotá. [xvi] This remains a unique effort to facilitate construction of houses for the poor.


Source: Author
Image 7: Integrated Neighbourhood Development Programme in El Rosario and El Parasio, Bogotá. The interventions transformed a sewer canal running through the neighbourhoods into a public space together with a walkway that has become the community spine. The intervention had multiple impacts on health, flood reduction and also indirectly supported the informal livelihoods in the community.

Source: Author
Reforms undertaken: Municipalities empowered

Until the 1980s, Colombia was a country without an effective local government. Everything was handled by central agencies, including the appointment of the city mayor. It was only with the promulgation of the new constitution in 1991 that decentralisation was introduced and many powers devolved to cities, giving them new tools to take control of urban planning.

The most important of them all, the Territorial Development Law, was approved in 1997 and it empowered Colombia’s 1,102 municipalities with planning and management tools to develop their environmental, geographical and urban space with very positive results. City mayors were vested with more political, administrative and budgetary powers and new rules for accountability, transparency and people’s participation were institutionalised. These laws became the foundation on which the urban reforms and social urbanism of Bogotá and Medellín rested.

The state’s intervention in planning, housing or handling urban issues until the 1990s was
always derided upon and considered to be below par compared to the private developers. The economic inequality (which still persists) added to the sense of urban woes of the common populace, especially the marginalised sections of the society. But the territorial laws, the empowerment of local bodies and mayors with appropriate tools of zoning and land use planning (1989), territorial planning guidelines (1997), laws stipulating and encouraging participation in planning (2000) and so on, resulted in a chain reaction, where mayors with newfound policy instruments employed urban planning and governance as a major tool to (re)imagine the urbans.[xvii]

It empowered mayors like Jaime Castro (992-94), Antonas Mockus (1995-1997, 2001-2003) and Enrique Peñalosa (1998-2000) in Bogotá, and Serjio Fajardo (2003-2007) in Medellin, who collectively, and in many ways complimentarily, changed the planning discourse in Colombia for the greater public benefit.[xviii] For the first time, the call for city’s holistic development garnered public support; mayoral candidates and their electoral successes depended heavily on planning for people in the city under the regulatory guidelines, giving shape to what came to be known as social urbanism (Image 1).[xix]

The targeting of social (not economic) inequalities was believed to be the first step to address the needs of the marginalised sections of society. Various projects emerged in Bogotá that aimed to close the gap of service provision and access to information for the urban poor. The major interventions of creating a library network, public transportation network and neighbourhood improvement programmes did not remain as minor projects, but were dovetailed into the POT (development/master plans), so as to ensure an integrated approach in the provision of amenities to the poorest neighbourhoods in the city (Map 1,2,3 &4). The participatory practices, the budgetary allocations, the inclusion in formal planning processes has also ensured the increasing awareness and engagement of communities, which consequently ensures that the projects are as per people’s aspirations and are owned by the community.[xx]
Map 1: Spread of Poverty in Bogotá in 2002

Map 2: Bibliored Network - Library Network Plan in Bogotá


Map 3: Bogotá is divided in 117 UPZs and 27 of them are recognized to need a special treatment for slum upgrading in POTs.
The Case of Mumbai Development 2014-34 (Master) Plan Revision Process

It was in August 2014 that the Municipal Corporation of Greater Mumbai (MCGM), entrusted with making the development (master) plan, organised ward level consultations with the aim of taking suggestions from the elected representatives and the citizenry in general. This initiative was a first of its kind in the history of urban planning in India. Unlike Colombia, with its inclusive POT and territorial planning laws, there are no laws or regulations that prescribe people’s participation in the city planning processes. The outdated town planning acts are still non-inclusive and promote top-down bureaucratic planning. [xxi]

In the last three years, many people’s campaigns have emerged to increase awareness among citizens about the importance of engagement with the state in urban planning, and more specifically to (re)imagine planning as a tool for building social equity in a vastly and very visibly unequal Mumbai. The many interventions - critical contribution of people’s
campaign in the form of helping assess the preliminary Existing Land Use surveys (October 2012- February 2013); formulation of demands and constructive participation at the city wide level consultations (November 2013 – January 2014 ) - being the prominent engagements recognized by MCGM.

It is hoped that these “insurgent planning” citizen initiatives that are informal in nature lead to institutional changes and get formalised with alterations in planning acts and guidelines.[xxii]

Image 9: Ward consultations for Mumbai DP 2014-34

Source - Author

Other than the fact that this participatory process generated some civic awareness about the planning process in the city, it necessarily did not invite the best kind of suggestions. This partly had to do with (a few) badly conducted meetings and inappropriate response mechanisms such as “feedback forms”, which were confusing and useless for any practical suggestions.

The consultations were also dominated by the vocal and powerful middle classes, whose demands and aspirations were in principle opposed to a more inclusive framework. [xxiii]
Their demands usually ranged from the need to remove slums and hawkers from their neighbourhood to provision of “maintained” open spaces and more parking spaces.

The other major challenge was the lack of engagement on the part of local elected representatives, who were oblivious of the transformative potential of master plans and planning in general. The local councillors predominantly demanded provision of small amenities like toilet blocks or street lights in the communities not realising that such basic amenities are not within the purview of master plans. The major components of the masterplan such as public housing, public transport, health care and education were completely sidelined.

**Conclusions**

The newly elected Narendra Modi government in 2014, made a grand announcement – housing for all by 2022 and a new scheme for developing 100 smart cities. In October 2014, before the Maharashtra Assembly elections, a massive outlay of approximately 5 lakh crore (about 800 billion US$) was announced, more than half of which is to be invested in urban India for “housing provision for all” and making select 100 cities “smart”. The yet to be titled programmeme is in keeping with prime minister Modi’s direction of *Har Parivar ko Ghar* (a house for every family).

Urban India, with a shortage of more than 20 million houses, will require a public-private-participation (PPP) model to deliver an astounding 8,000 housing units daily. Such a policy measure that recognises cities as “engines of growth” needs to learn from Colombian programmes where subsidised housing failed. However, what worked on the ground were “smart” practical upgradation programmes and including informal settlements into the planning fold at the local level. It was recognised that provision of housing for all was not possible and loans/ subsidies (that generally favour the bankable segment of the society) do not usually convert into housing.

The case of Mumbai in 2014 highlights all that is problematic with urban planning in India. In spite of taking a path-breaking step of including people’s demand in planning, development plans per say do not have a major say on policy decisions regarding the city. Important planning decisions concerning the city are still being taken at the state level. For example, the Slum Rehabilitation Authority (SRA) policy that has led to further deterioration of housing conditions for the majority (poor) in the city or the numerous Special Planning Areas (SPAs) that are located in the city and are critical sites for development. And yet the planning for all these areas is outside the mandate of the urban local body. The latest victim of this top-down planning could be the proposal to rejuvenate of the Mumbai Port Trust lands.

At this juncture, urban policies need to be reformed urgently to ensure that the central/state government enable and strengthen local governments with appropriate tools so they are involved in the local planning exercise with significant budgetary powers. Like the post...
1990s era Colombian cities, the municipal level planning exercises will ensure better informed participation from citizenry and cultivate accountability of the local elected representatives (councillors) who do not exercise the true potential of their mandate. This hopefully will alter the course of dominant planning discourse towards more people-centric themes of (self-help) housing, public transportation, participatory budgeting, public amenities and inclusion of informality and thereby make planning a development tool for equity building.

Notes

[i] Please refer the website for more details - http://www.ateliers.org/entre-economie-globale-quartiers?lang=en


[vi] Toderian, Brent (2014): “3 Reasons We Should Pay Attention to Medellín”, Planetizen,

[viii] Ibid.


[xiv] Ibid.

[xvii] Ibid.


[xxi] In case of cities in Maharashtra state, it is the Maharashtra Regional Town Planning (MRTP) Act 1966 that gives the regulatory framework for the preparation of Development plans or Master Plan for the urban local bodies.


[xxiii] The People’s Vision Document that Hamara Shehar Vikas Niyojan (Our City Development Plan) Campaign advocates for a more inclusive and just Mumbai and lays down the demands from the Mumbai DP revision process. The document was prepared after wide participatory consultations in 2013. For more details please refer - http://www.yuvaurbanindia.org/data/People's%20Vision%20Document_Final.pdf
