Lessons for Detroit from Medellín, Colombia
Optimism and Innovation in the World’s Former Murder Capital

By Steve Davidson
Entering my final year as a graduate student at the University of Michigan’s Erb Institute for Global Sustainable Enterprise, I resolved to embark on my first solo trip of consequence. A month’s deliberation led me to Medellín, at 2.5 million people Colombia’s second-largest city. Everyone — even Medellín natives! — asked me why I chose the home of Pablo Escobar, the notorious drug lord whose rise to prominence during the 1980s spurred citywide gang warfare that in 1991 produced 6,349 homicides, representing 433 murders per 100,000 inhabitants.¹²

In fact, I’ve been drawn to case studies in urban revitalization for the past 10 years. Having organized and led rebuilding efforts in post-Katrina New Orleans as an undergraduate, and more recently having evaluated Detroit-based social impact ventures as a member of the University of Michigan’s student-run Social Venture Fund, I’ve learned how frustratingly challenging it can be for cities to refocus and rebuild amidst chaos, even despite the sincerest of intentions. (Many of my classmates can attest to my skepticism about the prospects for Detroit’s timely turnaround).

According to a friend’s firsthand testaments, Medellín has dramatically transformed itself from the world’s murder capital to its most innovative city, designated “Innovative City of the Year” in 2012 by Citibank, the Wall Street Journal and the Urban Land Institute.³ Also in 2012, Medellín shared the Sustainable Transport Award with San Francisco and decreased its homicide rate to just 12 percent of its 1991 figure.⁴⁵ The story is nothing short of remarkable.

About the Author

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All photos in this publication were taken by the author.
Exploring Medellín’s Path to Recovery

I learned the secret to Medellín’s rapid revival soon after arriving: the city’s famously friendly inhabitants possess an indomitable spirit forged in the depths of terror during Escobar’s reign. Having escaped a nightmarish upbringing, the paisas — Colombians native to the region containing Medellín — are a warm people who appreciate each day as if it might be their last. The perpetual, sun-filled 75-degree days don’t hurt, either.

Regional governmental officials have demonstrated this fortitude on a grand scale while orchestrating the turnaround. A Sustainable Cities Collective article highlights how Sergio Fajardo, who was elected mayor in 2003, provided a sense of dignity to the city’s poorest citizens by “literally [building] bridges (and trams) that connected poor neighborhoods to areas of economic vitality.” In fact, the city’s creation of integrated public transportation infrastructure served as its keystone project, supporting future efforts to restore dignity and hope for all citizens, regardless of background and income level. Holger Dalkmann, board member of the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy, called sustainable transport one of Medellín’s “key levers to drive change.”

After eagerly taking to the streets to experience the two main transportation public works, additional research uncovered their enormous scale and impact:

Metro – the city’s public transit arteries

Medellín took a major step forward with its introduction of 25 metro stations in 1995. The two main lines, which run north to south and west to east, now contain 27 stations that serve more than half a million riders per day. In my experience, they’re generally safe (guarded by police) and often elevated (above ground), providing spectacular views of the city and the surrounding mountains.

The benefits are astounding. The Metro enables people to more quickly, cheaply and reliably travel to and from work or school without inhaling the plumes of thick, black smoke that spew constantly from the ubiquitous city buses. A Climate Progress article quantified Medellín’s annual CO2 reduction of 175,000 tons and annual respiratory health cost savings of $1.5 billion. Meanwhile, the Metro has strengthened economic activity within the downtown core and introduced commerce within historically disconnected poor neighborhoods.
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Metro – the city’s public transit arteries continued

Medellín expresses its immense pride for the Metro through its meticulous upkeep of the trains and stations — as I observed, they’re kept in immaculate condition by employees who roam the stations in search of areas to clean. In fact, when my friend briefly rested his foot on a stone seat at one of the stations, he was quickly reprimanded by two police officers who valued its upkeep over his comfort.

Metrocable – connections for the city’s poorest neighborhoods

The Metrocable tells an even more sensational story about Medellín’s commitment to social justice. To provide all citizens with access to the city’s amenities and opportunities, officials built three lines with elevated cable cars between 2004 and 2008: together, these lines serve more than half a million residents with nearly six miles of cable.\(^9,10\) The innovative structures transport citizens between Metro stations and remote barrios that house many of the city’s poor citizens in the mountains around the city’s perimeter.

Residents in these neighborhoods have experienced broad and substantial quality-of-life improvements. The Metrocable’s integration with other Metro lines and its single-fare pricing system make it convenient and affordable to travel between the barrios and anywhere along the Metro lines. According to a United Nations Habitat study released in 2013, the Santo Domingo line reduced the length of a one-way commute to the city center by more than 90 percent — from two-plus hours by minibus to just seven minutes by Metrocable — for the 230,000 residents it reaches.\(^11\) The integrated system also has reduced monthly household transportation costs by nearly 30 percent of the national minimum wage income.\(^12,13\) In addition, residents served by the Santo Domingo line have benefited from the surrounding area’s 400-percent increase in commercial activity, as well as its 79-percent reduction in violent crime between 2003 and 2004.\(^14\) The routes also reward riders with spectacular views, as well as a public library and art installations at the summits. I’ve personally found the service to be safe and efficient.

Leveraging the public transportation infrastructure, Medellín’s public art installations and public outdoor athletic facilities have guided sustainable paths forward for all citizens.
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Public spaces and public art – inspiring hope in a hopeless place

The city commissioned public art installations to transform outdoor plazas from crime havens into safe spaces that celebrate the region’s culture and history. These efforts have helped Medellín citizens to find inspiration in places where it was buried during the Escobar era. In particular, whereas the Plaza de Cisneros previously was filled with crime, it’s now home to an “urban forest” of 300 spires, each 78 feet tall, that illuminate at night as symbols of hope. A nearby building that formerly housed drug addiction and prostitution was converted into the city’s Department of Education headquarters, highlighting the path out of Medellín’s dark past by replacing a symbol of its destitution with a memorial to education.

Unidades Deportivas – building community through healthy living

Medellín impressively boasts 14 athletic complexes, or Unidades Deportivas (literally “sports units”), which provide free and open access to diverse, high-quality facilities. Given that the outdoor centers don’t require expensive, carbon-intensive HVAC or lighting systems, they promote sustainable, accessible well-being. They’re also nicer than any public athletic facilities that I’ve seen in the United States. In fact, the Unidad Deportiva de Belén, located directly across the street from my building, contains an Olympic swimming pool; a fully equipped gym; a gravel track; soccer fields; basketball, tennis and volleyball courts; and even an archery range and dirt bike course. As with the Metro, these facilities are kept guarded and pristine to ensure that they’re both safe and inviting.

Inspired perseverance to overcome persistent obstacles

With these efforts, local government officials very deliberately have channeled the resiliency of Medellín’s citizens to recreate the city with a commitment to their safety, hope and opportunity.

However, the clearly unsustainable buses that spew thick, black exhaust indicate that there’s still much left to be accomplished here — and experts also acknowledge the magnitude of Medellín’s unfinished work. Alejandro Echeverri, responsible for the architecture of much of the city’s physical transformation as its Director of Urban Projects, explains that “Medellín has done some successful things, but you can never say ‘It is finished.’ The forces which caused the problems in the first place were formidable, and they still are.”

Several facts support Echeverri’s claim. Despite Medellín’s significant progress during the past two decades, it
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still ranks among the world’s 25 most violent cities with 49 homicides per 100,000 residents.１６ Ana Mercedes Gómez Martínez — the former Director of El Colombiano, Medellín’s main newspaper — contends that though modern drug lords keep a lower profile than their predecessors, “they are still involved in a complicated, continuous war.”１７ Indeed, more than 300 combos (gangs) continue to terrorize the city. What’s particularly concerning is that the violence disproportionately impacts the city’s youth: more than 70 percent of Medellín’s estimated 3,800 gang members are between 11 and 17 years old.１８

Medellín’s sustainable transportation efforts have paved a path out of the city’s violent past. As a Congressional Representative reported in 2011, its changes “have helped civil society to better weather and confront” the current situation.１９ By both recognizing the remaining challenges and leveraging the above successes, Medellín and its citizens hope to lead another 20 years of progress.

Lessons for Detroit

Two struggling cities

Medellín city officials expressed their deep commitment to social justice through their development of an innovative, sustainable transportation infrastructure that bridges previously disconnected rich and poor areas. In doing so, they visibly communicated their dedication symbolically and concretely, building a foundation for future progress.

Medellín’s recognition of public transportation as a precondition for social equity prompts consideration of Detroit, where inadequate transit service accelerated the city’s decline and inhibits its progress.

Indeed, Medellín and Detroit face similar types of challenges: both are large cities with unemployment rates of more than 30 percent and the second-highest homicide rates in their respective countries.２０,２１,２２ A transportation access gap confronted Medellín’s poorest citizens before the city introduced its connected Metro system, and many of Detroit’s geographical “dead zones” — which lack easy access to public transportation — overlay low-income communities that have suffered declining populations. In fact, the city isn’t walkable and serves only 60 percent of working-age residents with public transportation, despite its relatively high percentage of households without a car.

It’s unsurprising, then, that 37 percent of the unemployed Detroiters who responded to a recent Crain’s Detroit Business survey believe that the city’s inadequate public transit contributes to its high unemployment level.２４ As of December 2013, Detroit’s unemployment rate of 14.6 percent was more than double the national rate.２５ Another consequence of Detroit’s poor transportation system is that the residents of its economically disadvantaged African-American neighborhoods lack access to supermarkets, increasing their consumption of unhealthy food and ultimately their likelihood of suffering from health-related issues.２６
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An inspired path forward

So what can Detroit learn from Medellín’s success?

If Medellín can hinge its remarkable improvements on public transportation, and if Detroit’s lack of the same contributes to its own social inequality, then clearly transportation is a critical area in which to focus the city’s future innovation and investment. If such a dramatic turnaround is possible in Medellín, given its violent history and geographic isolation, it’s undoubtedly also possible in Detroit, given its rich cultural heritage, revived auto industry, and connectedness to other major cities.

To serve citizens long neglected, Detroit must not only leverage technological and business-model innovations to enable affordable access to sustainable transportation, it also must deploy bold leadership to connect the dots, marshal the resources, and create the incentives that together will support its progress. As noted in a Sustainable Cities Collective article, “Medellín’s revival is due in no small part to avant-garde political leaders who focused on the reconstruction of social, cultural, and physical infrastructures.” Sergio Fajardo and his contemporaries in Medellín exemplified the conviction, integrity and inclusiveness needed to guide Detroit into a new era: as the Detroit News recently asserted, “Strong leadership is one of the most essential pieces to the puzzle of rebuilding Detroit.”

It’s critical that this leadership embraces a nuanced view of innovation. By their very nature, justice and opportunity exist only with respect to individuals’ unique identities, needs, and concerns. Following Medellín’s example, then, we should perceive Detroit’s challenge not solely as an exercise in enabling the city’s macro-scale economic recovery, but also with greater nuance — as an opportunity to reintroduce social justice and economic opportunity through micro-scale community revivals. Detroit must observe what the New York Times referred to as Medellín’s “wisdom of long-term, community-based policies of urban renewal”: what will work in Midtown might not work in Corktown or at Gratiot and Rosemary.

As artists approaching the canvas, we must think beyond broad brushstrokes: we must consider the details, the commonalities and distinctions across Detroit’s rich patchwork of neighborhoods as we apply our knowledge and passion to the city’s resurrection.

Some of my peers can elaborate on the specific sustainable transportation initiatives that are underway in Detroit. I can only hope that this story of Medellín’s turnaround will serve as inspiration for the continued optimism and determination needed to transform the Motor City — and since my visit to Medellín, I’m more optimistic than ever before.
Endnotes


8 Ibid.


12 Ibid.


14 Ibid.


19 Ibid.


