

A model of informal settlement integration in Medellin, Colombia.



Escalators wind up the hillside of an informal settlement helping to integrate the neighbourhood through increased accessibility.

A great urban transformation has occurred in Medellin, Colombia over the past decade. In the 1990's it was widely considered the world's most dangerous city. The City has since seen its murder rate plummet from 381 per 100,000 a year at its peak to 20 per 100,000 in 2015. This period also saw rapid economic growth and improved perceptions of the city by citizens and visitors alike. Urban planning initiatives, started in earnest in the early 2000's, have received a large amount of credit for what is termed the 'Medellin Miracle'

In addition to high crime in the 90's, Medellin was one of the world's most unequal cities. In the mountain valley city of Medellin, this inequality was distinctly spatial. Formally planned and wealthy, the central city lay at the bottom of the valley while poorer informal settlements rose up the mountainsides. Much like many cities in the Global South, Medellin

had historically all but denied investment and recognition to their informal settlements. The planning initiatives saw this inequality as a fundamental cause of the social ills in Medellin. The initiatives aimed to aggressively address social exclusion by integrating the informal settlements with the rest of the city. In April of this year, I went to Medellin in search of how these initiatives managed to effect social exclusion in the informal settlements and produce positive change.

Medellin's strategy was implemented primarily through "integrated urban plans" (IUP) that targeted investment in the City's poorest and most crime ridden neighbourhoods. The projects addressed social exclusion through a balanced and comprehensive approach. Three main themes can be seen in their method. First, the neighbourhoods were physically integrated with the rest of the city. Second, there was a focus on empowering residents through social programming. Third, was an effort to address stigma of the neighbourhoods by creating an image of radical transformation.

The physical integration of the informal neighbourhoods comprised of upgrading infrastructure to levels more comparable to the rest of Medellin, and by increasing accessibility between the neighbourhoods and the rest of the city. New buildings, public spaces, and transportation infrastructure were created but notably without the demolition of existing buildings. This was a departure from standard practice in dealing with informal settlements in the Global South. Upgrades to informal settlements were often deemed problematic and significant demolition of existing structures or slum clearance was normal.

One reason why improvements were deemed problematic is the geographical constraints that many of these neighbourhoods share. Informal settlements are often located in rugged terrain at the periphery of cities. Extending infrastructure to these areas is costly and inefficient. This particularly true of traditional

forms of transportation such as trains and buses. To increase accessibility, Medellin turned to novel options. Ideal for the mountainside, gondolas were used for the first time for urban public transit. Other transportation solutions included escalators, stairs, pathways, and pedestrian bridges built to span deep ravines that had been problematic to cross. Average travel times between the neighbourhoods and the formal city and within the neighbourhoods themselves were drastically reduced.



A beautiful new pedestrian bridge over a ravine connects two neighbourhoods.

While the physical components of the projects receive much of the attention, it was the effort to socially integrate and empower residents that formed their core. 3/4 of project spending went towards social services aiming to build capacity within the community. Much of the new physical infrastructure improvements were directed towards health and education. Beautiful new library-parks acted as community nodes. Public participation for the projects included residents in city processes as they never had been before. Social programs built upon the physical integration by enabling residents to better take advantage of the new infrastructure and connectivity.

Particularly interesting was the IUPs effect on reducing neighbourhood stigma, which had built up from years of poverty and crime. The IUPs deliberately tried to generate an image of radical transformation to alleviate the stigma. To achieve this image, the projects focused on high quality architecture and urban design. Thus a striking visual change was achieved. The narrow spatial focus of the projects accentuated this perception of change by concentrating the physical transformation. What city officials had not intended however, was how the IUPs helped to make the neighbourhoods attractions and brought people to them. The perception of radical change coupled with novel solutions brought international tourists, academics, officials and people from the rest of the city. Gondola's are often filled with as many sightseers as locals. The gondolas provide a beautiful view and a safe introduction to the neighbourhoods.



Gondolas do much more than boost accessibility by acting as dramatic symbols of transformation and as tourism attractions.

The image of transformation was key in creating momentum and public support for the projects. It magnified and quickened the process of integration brought on by the physical changes.

It was easy to see why the neighbourhoods had become attractions. It was incredibly fun for this student to wander through this unique informal settlement experience. Much as in other informal settlements the roads were narrow and wound maze-like between buildings. But here, signs of improved public infrastructure were everywhere. Sidewalks were being installed and stairs created. There was a sense of discovery to the place. Turning a bend, a narrow street would suddenly open up to a beautiful new public space, looking out over the city from its perch in the mountains. It is a striking mixture of informal, organic built form and an incremental placement of comprehensive planning with novel solutions. The experience was made all the more enjoyable by the residents' palpable sense of optimism and pride.

The gondolas and escalators of Medellin provided exciting new solutions to addressing social exclusion in informal settlements. However, it is the IUPs comprehensive and balanced approach that provides a more complete story of Medellin's success in producing positive change. The three themes of physical integration, social empowerment and reducing stigma enhanced and sustained the effects of the others. Medellin's example also provides persuasive evidence that investing in the integration of informal settlements can initiate profound positive change across a city. Other cities battling social inequality and informal settlements would do well to take heed of this example.