

# From *narcoterrorismo* to social urbanism: Medellín

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In 1826, when the provincial government of Antioquia moved from Santa Fe to Medellín, the latest became the capital of Antioquia department. The city, which was founded in 1675, is located in a small intermontane valley at an altitude of 1,520 m. Until the development of transportation in the 19th century, it was practically isolated<sup>1</sup>, but now it is home to around 2.5 million inhabitant and is the second-largest city of Colombia.

If the city of Medellín has much to offer, it is unfortunately best known for its dark time at the end of the past century that earned her the title of « most dangerous city on earth » by The Time magazine in March 1988. However, during the past decades, the city has been experiencing a rebirth and has been named « most innovative city in the world » by the Urban Land Institute, beating same year's top contestant cities Tel Aviv and New York City. From the time of drug lords to today, how has the city been able to rebound in such a short period of time, and what are the plans laying ahead for Medellín?

## **Pablo Escobar, from benefactor to public enemy.**

The eighties and nineties have been the theater of the rise and fall of one of the biggest drug cartel in history, the Medellín Cartel, run by Pablo Escobar, son of a farmer who became the head of an international illegal market organization. The cartel at its peak was making \$60 million a day and generated over \$4 billion in cash revenues over a single year.<sup>2</sup>

As portrayed in the 10-part duo-language Netflix series *Narcos* that aired on the streaming platform August, 25<sup>th</sup> 2015, the cartel supplied for more than 80% of North America's cocaine demand and was in the early 90s the first worldwide producer of cocaine<sup>3</sup>. Pablo Escobar had a really unique business model and took advantage of his country's situation to thrive. On one hand he performed a vertical integration at massive scale to assume control on both production and supply of, respectively, coca plants and cocaine. The tactic was then to « flood the market with supply and let the price for cocaine fall where the market decided » and thus gaining control over supply on quantities offered.

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<sup>1</sup> Columbia Electronic Encyclopedia. 6th Edition; 2019, p1-1.

<sup>2</sup> Berredá, B., (2016). "Colombia: The Economics of Pablo Escobar". BBN Times.

<sup>3</sup> the cartel concentrated 43% of the worldwide coca cultivation.



On the other hand, his business model was also based on the weakness of the corrupted Colombian state torn between the guerillas with the FARC's, the far-left military wing of the Colombian Communist Party, since 1964 and global corruption from the different Colombian drug cartels. Moreover, Colombia has « the perfect climate and soil condition to grow cannabis »<sup>4</sup> and the natural high-UV light conditions in Medellin, due to its high altitude, actually help increase THC production in the plants. The climate also allows for year-round harvests, up to three times given the temperature and lighting conditions of the area. Combined with innovative tactics to increase yields, Escobar was able to grow large amounts of coca plants and additionally set up a huge profit margin. While a single leaf costed \$800 to grow, 1kg of cocaine in the US generated around \$100,000<sup>5</sup>, and therefore the market was merely impacted by raids and destruction of a few fields by the police every now and then.

If Pablo Escobar was a very extravagant man regarding how he liked to spend his money in real estate, helicopters, boats and other things, he always kept a very casual look. At first, Escobar was perceived as a benefactor by the people living in the *comunas* of Medellin, those isolated neighborhoods on the hillside surrounding the city's center<sup>6</sup>. He would come up with his money to build houses and soccer fields and recruit young people who felt disconnected from the wider city and didn't have a lot of job opportunities in their comunas. He was perceived as a contemporary « Robin Hood » by the poor communities living there. The feeling started to change when the government started to openly try to tackle the cartel issue through the use of military and armed police patrols that would go into the comunas to hunt cartel members but would in the process often kill a few innocent residents.

As a result of the lack of efficiency of the Colombian government, former US President Ronald Reagan decided to declare « war on drugs » and encourage joint efforts between his administration and local police. It only encouraged Escobar in escalating the retaliations, bombarding the capital and a plane and killing many people. At this time the cartel and especially its leader, Escobar, lost the support of the communities they were financially supporting. Finally, on December 2, 1993 Escobar was shot on a rooftop during a joint US-Colombian operation, leaving the city of Medellin in terrible shape, struck in a vicious cycle of violence that didn't seem to be able to be resolved. Indeed, in 1991, the murder rate was of 375 deaths per 100,000 people<sup>7</sup>, a number three to four times higher than today's most violent cities in the world.

Merely 30 years later, nonetheless, these numbers have plummeted by 80% and the city has finally

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<sup>4</sup> Janikian, M., (2017) "*Inside Colombia's legal weed scene*". High Times.

<sup>5</sup> Op. cit.

<sup>6</sup> Mars, R. (2018). *Post-Narco Urbanism*. [4.50min-8.30min], 99% Invisible episode 312.

<sup>7</sup> Per, the Medical Examiner's Office.



left the top 50 most violent cities index. In 2018, the murder rate was around 25 deaths per 100,000 people, even if not perfect yet these numbers are promising and really demonstrates the efforts made by the city and its inhabitant over the past decades.

### **Reborn like a phoenix<sup>8</sup>.**

Medellin had a strong heritage of been entrepreneurial but slowed down during the 80s and 90s when violence issues really escalated and both intellectual elites and young students fled, but its rebirth started when young people who received education abroad during the dark time came back with entrepreneurial energy and a will to claim back the city and its image. One of these people is former mayor and 2014 presidential candidate Sergio Fajardo, after graduating from University of Wisconsin in 1984 he was asked to join local councils in Antioquia in 1995, the same year the metro system was inaugurated. He later held tenure as Medellin's mayor from 2004 to 2007 when he started to build the social urbanism strategy for the city.

The first major step, though, as many inhabitants would testify<sup>9</sup>, was the opening of the metro system in November 1995, later followed by the development of many more urban infrastructures especially the ones related to improving mobility within the municipality. Indeed, experts succeeded in identifying the single major source of violence and inequality: isolation. By inaugurating the metro system, which is up to today one of the best rated metro in the world, they allowed people to go out of their *barrios*, or neighborhoods, and go to other parts of the city. It encouraged both mixity and mobility, opening new leisure and work opportunities. To tackle the issue of the *comunas*, the most isolated barrios of all due to their location on the mountainous outskirts, Medellin was the first city to use cable cars as a solution to mobility and public transport. In Comuna 13, one of the poorest and most dangerous, the city decided to build mega escalators to facilitate movements to and from the city center, reducing a 30-min difficult walk to a 5-min escalator ride.

And these measures really helped bring more peace and both economic and social development, today Comuna 13 is a walkable place with shops and plazas to stroll around or grab a coffee. Even Escobar's former barrio, Santo Domingo, is now really safe thanks to the cable car line linking it to downtown and a new library and community center, El Parque Biblioteca España conceived by Bogota's architect Giancarlo Mazzanti as part of Fajardo's initiatives in the year 2000s.

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<sup>8</sup> Prada, L., (2019). "*Medellin Como un Ave Fenix*". El Adelantado.

<sup>9</sup> Brodzinsky, S., (2014). "*From murder capital to model city: is Medellín's miracle show or substance?*". The Guardian.



Ever since the start of the millennium, the goal has been to push for civic engagement in projects. The main inspiration behind Fajardo's *Plan De Desarrollo 2004-2007*<sup>10</sup> has been the work of former mayor of Curitiba (Brazil), Jaime Lerner, and his concept of « Urban Acupuncture »<sup>11</sup>. Per Lerner, urban acupuncture, is about « revitalizing interventions to make the organism work in a different way », or in other words about creating an involvement of the people in and around urban projects to better their quality of life and grow a sense of community and inclusion. Fajardo's initiated a Comprehensive Urban Plan<sup>12</sup> focused on human development and the marginalized groups within the city, while employing civic engagement as a key tool. Other comprehensive urban plans include similar library-parks like La Quintana, leisure parks like Parque de los Pies Descalzados, the continuing development of mobility solutions, and many more initiatives as part of the mayor's « architecture as a social program » credo.

Economically, after years of dependence on manufacturing and then drug trafficking, Medellin is diversifying its economy with Tourism and Technology. It aims at becoming South America's Silicon Valley, a major tech hub for national and international companies and start-ups. In 2009 the city inaugurated Ruta N, the largest tech hub in the southern part of the Americas. This new center for innovation and science, partially funded the local government is part of a wider public-private partnership investment strategy. Since 2000, the city of Medellin and EPM (Medellin public utilities company for gas/water/energy needs) partnered to reinvest 30% of its profits in a series of public works and spaces such as libraries, parks, schools and transport infrastructure. The city also offers numerous tax incentives to attract young and innovative start-ups and foreign companies. One last advantage for companies is that running costs are reportedly 38% cheaper<sup>13</sup> than in Bogota. A successful example of such politics is the growth of antioquian company ConTREEbute, a start-up specialized in sustainable solutions and resiliency that gifted the city with their *éco-arbol* project designed in collaboration with German engineers to create a structure capable of depolluting the air in a 80m wide circle around it and offers, in addition to clear air, a screening surface for outdoor movies and activities in one of Medellin's major parks.

Aside from attracting companies, the center wants to draw an educated youth workforce. And one way of doing that is to educate youth to combat unemployment through free programs like Vivero Del Software, offering free programming lessons to teenagers at Ruta N. Part of that education goal has also been the opening of two new Universities over the past couple of years. When asked about

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<sup>10</sup> *Plan de Desarrollo 2004-2007: Medellín, Compromiso de Toda la Ciudadanía*. (2004). Alcaldía de Medellín.

<sup>11</sup> Lerner, J., (2005). *Urban Acupuncture*. IAAC.

<sup>12</sup> Shallowe, A., (2016). "*Medellin: from narco terrorism to a hub of innovation & social urbanism*". RSA.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander, A., (2014). "*Inside Medellin: How Pablo Escobar's hometown hopes to become South America's 'Silicon Valley'*". The Telegraph.



the tech hub project, former mayor Anibal Gaviria said to The Telegraph “Unfortunately, I am not alone in having lost someone [...] There is still violence, still inequality here – no one can deny that, but now there is light at the end of the tunnel. We do it for them. We’re using technology to attract business and create jobs, and thus to improve the lives of the people who live here. We’re trying to end the vicious circle.”, and that's probably why Medellin is investing more in IT than any other Colombian city, and more globally most major South American cities.

### **Creating a virtuous cycle.**

The positive results of the new policies were globally recognized in 2013 when the ULI awarded Medellin the title of « Most Innovative City in the World ». The Urban Land Institute created a competition judging contestant cities worldwide on 8 criteria: Environment & Land Use, Culture & Livability, Economic/Investment Climate, Progress & Potential, Places of Power, Education & Human Capital, Technology & Research, Mobility & Infrastructure.

Medellin is now looking at the future and is redefining its goals to meet new challenges. Since 2017 the city is part of the « 100 Resilient Cities » initiative supported by the Rockefeller Foundation. The emergence of pressing issues like gender equality, climate change, education and the undoubting success of the city's rehabilitation strategies made the global city strategy evolve as well, taking a turn to become a resilient strategy.

Urban Resilience has many definitions most of which take into account the ability to manage the wide range of shocks and stresses which may occur in a city. Per The World Bank, resilience is the ability of a system, entity, community, or person to adapt to a variety of changing conditions and to withstand shocks while still maintaining its essential functions. Investing in resilience contributes to long-term sustainability by ensuring current development gains are safeguarded for future generations<sup>14</sup>. The municipality strategy's approach is constructed around four goals that together will achieve the vision the city has for a « Resilient Medellin »<sup>15</sup> :

- ❖ Equitable Medellin; recognizing diversity and inclusion while promoting and facilitating access to education opportunities and new jobs.
- ❖ Safe and Peaceful Medellin; implementing strategies towards a better access to justice, remembrance and crime prevention.
- ❖ Sustainable and Risk-Prepared Medellin; through revising land management regulations and promoting community led disaster risk management strategies.

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<sup>14</sup> *Investing in Urban Resilience* (2015), World Bank report.

<sup>15</sup> *Resilient Medellin, A Strategy for our future* (2017), Alcaldía de Medellín and The Rockefeller Foundation.



- ❖ Well-informed and Engaged Medellin; linking data with decision-making practices to implement holistic responses to priority issues.

In conclusion, the city of Medellin in Colombia has been successful in putting behind its dark moments at the end of the last century on a local scale, but still has work to do in terms of violence rate and security. Moreover, the lasting image of Escobar's narcoterror is still very present internationally when thinking about Medellin and it will probably take a long time to get rid of it and for the city to thrive as a global tech hub for innovation. But the work is ongoing and full of promises as the involvement of its inhabitant is really strong and Medellin has been able to grasp the stakes of the 21<sup>st</sup> century quicker than most cities in the world and is currently on its way to become a successful model of a resilient city that many more people around the globe should follow sooner than later.



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