

Connecting Classes in Medellín: The Gondola and the Escalator

The Americas

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Abstract: The city of Medellín, Colombia is infamously known for the reign of Pablo Escobar. While he is globally known as a drug lord, in the Medellín neighborhoods of Santo Domingo and Comuna Trece, he was revered for the ways he benefited their often under-served communities. After his death, the neighborhoods very quickly fell into shambles, taken over by differing gangs with little interference from the city government. In 1995, with the ideas of new mayor Sergio Fajardo, the city began to establish programs focused on the redevelopment of the mountainous outskirts of Medellín. With that came the development of the escalators and the gondolas in these two neighborhoods. This paper analyzes the ways in which these new systems of transportation have benefited the

communities where they are located, and how they have established a sense of pride in the citizens.

Medellín, Colombia's second-largest city after its capital, has had an extremely notorious history. Known for Pablo Escobar and the illicit drug trade, Medellín has now become an example of urban prowess for its country and for Latin America. Its urban renewal has been considered a miracle for many scholars considering its history. Medellín is known to be a predominantly informal city, with its low-income neighborhoods consisting of informal housing, or "self-constructed urban fabrics" (Gouverneur 2016). These can include homes made with aimlessly placed pieces of wood, tin roofs, and other materials not normally considered safe for housing. The two most infamous neighborhoods in Medellín go by the names Comuna Trece (Commune Thirteen) and Santo Domingo (Holy Sunday), and they are both considered informal neighborhoods, set deep into the steep mountains where Pablo Escobar once reigned. Now, under government

supervision, these neighborhoods have undergone a substantial urban renewal as the city connects them to the center. Over time, the city of Medellín, Colombia has created new methods of transportation that connect its different neighborhoods, allowing it to be known as a success story of urban renewal. With this came the development of the electric escalators in Comuna Trece and the gondolas leading to Santo Domingo.

As aforementioned, the neighborhoods in the mountains surrounding Medellín were infamous after the reign of Pablo Escobar. He was seen as a Robin Hood figure for the citizens, but also brought the notorious drug trade and Medellín Cartel to the area. At this time, the government had given up on an influx of illegal settlers escaping from violence, withdrawing from the impenetrable steep hillsides. Due to the absence of a representative presence, urban guerrillas found their perfect hiding places (Reimerink

2018). Escobar's focus was mainly to gain political power in the smaller, underrepresented neighborhoods of Santo Domingo and Comuna 13 by bringing money to them; this included implementing portions of his drug trade into the city. Led by Escobar and two of his colleagues, the Medellín cartel was formed in response to the kidnapping of drug lord Jorge Luis Ochoa Vásquez by rival guerrilla group M-19 to assert power and dominate the drug industry. As the cartel grew, so did Pablo Escobar's power, expanding into politics and development. The cartel bosses were "pro-Colombian nationalists in that they portray themselves as defenders of national values, civic leaders, and fighters for progress. They argue that [the cartel] is good for Colombia since it brings in such large amounts of money, aids development and progress, and helps keep down unemployment" (Filippone 1994). Escobar began programs focused on renewing the

neighborhoods where he housed his business, proposing "Medellín without Slums" (a program meant to build 2,000 new homes, although it only constructed 500) and paying for anything that needed to be fixed, whether it was streetlights or sewage systems. He became part of the family for low-income citizens, and many of them still carry that view of him. However, with the death of Escobar, "the liberalization of the 1990s played a crucial role in the distribution of power...and the changes in the understanding of local governance, including the role of the state" (Franz 2016) leading to confusion in the neighborhoods, left impoverished and forgotten, their names tarnished because of their past reputations.

The inauguration of Medellín's metro in 1995 left planners wondering if they could do something to make Santo Domingo and Comuna 13 more accessible for their citizens. The transportation systems

of Medellín became essential to its overall urban transformation, which included four *Proyectos Urbanos Integrales* (Integral Urban Projects). The mayor of Medellín, Sergio Fajardo, had a strategy that “consisted of a combination of physical, social and institutional measures which he labelled ‘social urbanism’” (Reimerink 2018). His goal was to connect social classes and reduce violence; he built architectural landmarks in poor neighborhoods surrounded by eye-catching scenery, including the famous *Biblioteca de España*, and placed a large focus on his motto, “Medellín la más educada” (Medellín, the most educated). His main goal was to gain back control over neighborhoods that had long been controlled by violence; in the mind of the government, “non-state violence such as extortion, forced recruitment and direct threats to life and health authored by criminal actors, are deviant forms of authority” (Müller 2019). Fajardo chose to

stop these backwards realms of authority by re-developing the areas, thereby showing government presence and respect.

With Fajardo’s ideas and support, the city began to transform itself. The famous gondolas were opened by him in 2004 in Santo Domingo, a low income neighborhood located in the north of Medellín. Santo Domingo has long suffered drug and gang violence, to a point where “so-called ‘invisible borders’ [were produced] between the municipalities that were controlled by different gangs. Residents from one part could not cross these borders without the danger of becoming a victim of the conflict” (Heinrichs 2014). The cable cars were built as a public sector project, meant to connect downtown Medellín with the diverse mountain neighborhoods. It would increase safety for residents who needed to walk long distances from the subway and bring in more people from the city, thereby ridding some of the segregation Medellín was

known for. It was funded partially by the Metro de Medellín company and partially by the city government. While it was also used as a reason to bring more passengers directly to an underused Metro system, Metro authorities insisted it was a socially-motivated project, and had a “‘symbolic’ objective to pay back the historical debt of neglect” (Heinrichs 2014). It was implemented as a way to showcase a presence from the government in the neighborhood, to show an attempt to increase investments in physically deteriorating portions of the city.

In 2012, the very well-known electric escalators of Comuna 13 were inaugurated. Comuna 13 itself is set in the central western part of Medellín, and is very densely populated, housing over 140,000 people. Its history of illegal settlers dating back to the 1970s for protection against guerrillas only grew over time, and once the government stopped intervening, the

neighborhood only physically deteriorated. The electric escalators took some time to plan, design, and build; the process took a total of 5 years. There are six different escalators zig zagging one of the most remote and steep parts of Comuna 13; they are in total 94 meters long and bridge an altitude of 38 meters. At first, many of the citizens of Comuna 13 didn’t see the escalators as necessary; many of them already climbed 300-500 stairs a day and were used to it. They actually requested that a wider path be built for them in cases when they needed to carry sick relatives to the doctor. The planners “envisioned that an escalator would serve up to 12,000 people...[and respond] to the assumed needs of many elderly and disabled people” (Reimerink 2018).

According to author Heinrichs, “Transport professionals generally focus on the quality of the transport that connects place of residence and destination, and the

question how to improve usability” (Heinrichs 2014). The focus of both the escalator and the gondola was to improve accessibility throughout the neighborhoods and to also improve the quality of life among citizens. Using focuses such as cost, speed, and overall safety, urban sociologists can determine whether a new system of transit is worth utilization by citizens. The gondolas are an excellent example of how new transportation can completely reinvent an area. Because they only allow ten people per car, the feeling of security has been renewed, particularly for women, who no longer have to worry about being groped in an overcrowded subway car or left defenseless against a taxi driver. Along with that, the “invisible borders” that used to exist between different areas of the Comuna are no longer there; “The changes in the infrastructure of the Comuna and the presence of security personnel have minimised these ‘invisible borders’ that in

other parts of the city are still a big problem for the residents in terms of accessibility” (Heinrichs 2014). The cost to ride the gondola is low because there is a system of free interchange between it and the Metro station of Acevedo, with a cost of 1,800 COP (USD \$0.53). If the passenger uses a prepaid Metro card, the cost is reduced by 200 COP. Speed is also an important factor, and one that the gondolas are known for. Even with long queues during rush hours, they are constantly moving in passengers’ eyelines, so they feel like they are moving faster. With the direct, explicit route, it is faster to move up the hills than it is on an informal bus. Buses will just stop anywhere that people tell them to, to a point that they stop on nearly every corner. For most cable car passengers, the journey to Santo Domingo station takes about fifteen minutes, as opposed to more than an hour by bus.

The escalators are a little less effective in their mission for accessibility.

Although they are helpful to elderly and disabled citizens, initially teenagers were using them more than any other age group, mainly because they saw it as a new toy. However, with the development of the escalators, a swarm of new projects in Comuna 13 followed. The Instituto Social de Vivienda y Hábitat de Medellín “handed out subsidies for housing renovations... In [a] painting project, a total of 1,380 façades, 40 rooftops and seventeen murals were painted [by local artists]. All of these were located in the area immediately surrounding the escalator” (Reimerink 2018). Now, the escalators are a popular tourist site, where people from all different classes gather to socialize, view the murals, and ride up the mountainside. Although it is now utilized in different ways than urban planners originally imagined, it has still created a sense of pride and belonging in the people of Comuna 13.

The urban renewal of Medellín has provided an excellent example to other cities in Latin America, displaying what two new modes of transit can do to benefit a historically underserved area. The once ‘invisible borders’ of Santo Domingo that created an insecure and dangerous environment for anyone willing to cross them have been alleviated because of the gondola system, while the escalators in Comuna 13 bring in more people from outside areas, closing the gap between social classes. The gondolas and escalators have created a new feeling of pride in low income citizens in Medellín and fostered a new wave of community acceptance from outsiders. With the new systems of transportation supporting their mission, Santo Domingo and Comuna 13 are turning their reputations around.

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