

# New Public Open Spaces and Old Prejudices: Public Space Uses in the Centre of Medellín

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## 1 ABSTRACT

Since the beginning of the 2000s, Medellín/Colombia has undergone a well-publicised urban transformation, both in the city centre and in the peripheral informal settlements, turning the city from one of the most dangerous hotspots of a drug-related armed conflict into a showcase for inclusive urban upgrading. This change has not only benefitted the city's inhabitants but also improved Medellín position as tourist attraction and target for international investment. Successive mayors and their administrations have invested in the iconic design and upgrading of public spaces, mobility infrastructure as well as educational facilities. Combining participatory practices, trans-institutional collaboration and transparency with high-quality design has been an emphasis in the upgrading strategy. The "recuperation" and "reinterpretation" of public space as a "safe space for all" have been another focal point in the transformation process. Educational performances, celebrations and events in the newly established public spaces are used to promote and anchor these goals, to establish use in formerly neglected areas and to define "appropriate" behaviour in public space.

The Feria de las Flores, Medellín's most important traditional festival dating back to the 1950s, has started to play a central role in the municipal government's strategy to transform public space not only through material interventions but also through a process of re-signification.

Comparing the everyday use of the spaces where the Feria de las Flores takes place with the official promotion of the festival and the uses in these spaces during the events, this paper describes how the Feria de las Flores is used to define and publicise desired practices of public space use, and how it – despite a portrayal to the contrary – adds to an exclusionary experience for the most vulnerable inhabitants of the city, who depend on public spaces and the informal economy for their livelihoods.

## 2 MEDELLÍN'S PUBLIC SPACE IN THE CONTEXT OF SOCIAL INEQUALITY

Medellin, the capital of the department of Antioquia is located at about 1500 m in the central Andes, and is Colombia's second largest city after Bogotá, the capital of the country. It covers a surface of 380,64 km<sup>2</sup>. The average population density is at about 6000 persons/km<sup>2</sup>, with only 60 p/km<sup>2</sup> in the rich southern districts (comunas) and more than 20.000 p/km<sup>2</sup> in the poor northern neighbourhoods.

Urbanization for a long time followed the Spanish rectangular pattern (and legislation) and progressed without any bigger changes or adaptations until the 1930 – 1940, when processes of rapid industrialization and population growth changed the city's face (Schnitter 2006, Romero 3rd edition 2007).

In the year 1938 168.000 people lived in the city, in 2011 there are almost 2.4 million (Alcaldía de Medellín 2011: 19). This population growth has been driven not only by industrialization and the impoverishment of the rural population, but also by the armed conflict between guerrillas, paramilitary, military and drug traffickers in the country<sup>1</sup> which has lasted for over 60 years and has caused massive forced displacement. In 2010, for example 30,099 desplazados<sup>2</sup> came to Medellín (Personería de Medellín 2010: 21) to start a new life.

Neither the modernist urban development plans of 1948, 1970 and 1985, which contributed to the social segregation of the city and to the impoverishment of public space (Avendaño Vasquez 1998: 89pp) nor social housing initiatives were able to cope with this increase in population and so from the 1950s on (Betancur 2007), but increasingly since the the 1970s (Schnitter 2005) self-build settlements formed on the slopes surrounding the city centre. For the city, a degree of informality of 22 % has been diagnosed (Werthmann 2011), meaning that 22 % of all residential buildings have been erected informally by self-build

<sup>1</sup> This conflict is one of the longest running armed conflicts in the world. The beginning of the conflict between guerrillas and military is usually specified with the mid-1940s. From the late 1970s on, criminal gangs contribute heavily to the increase in urban violence in the poor neighbourhoods of the city (Cano, Gallo, Zuluaga (ed.) (2008): *Dinámicas de guerra y construcción de paz*. 17 et seq.).

<sup>2</sup> This is the highest number of newly arriving refugees for 10 years, most of them settled in Comuna 13 in the northwest of the city.

initiatives. Furthermore, for the job sector, the informality rate is at about 50%.<sup>3</sup> 50% of the city's population is living<sup>4</sup> in housing considered informal – a clear physical sign for the pronounced inequality of society, which influences all aspects of human well-being, like education, income, health and security issues.

For long, violence has characterized Medellín's image (Torrejon 2009) and life and since the end-1980s the government has invested massively in a fight against crime. Due to major military interventions and a policy of disarmament and re-integration of former gang members, Medellín's death toll has taken a significant and much applauded dip until 2006. More recently, the vacuum that was left after the destruction of the major drug cartels in the early 1990s has resulted in increased fights for territory and power in the drug business, especially in the poor peripheral comunas and the death toll has encountered a new peak. While robberies and kidnappings can happen all over the city, the numbers of deaths and injuries as a result of armed conflicts in the peripheral districts are exceptionally high (Medellín, cómo vamos 2010: 31 pp).

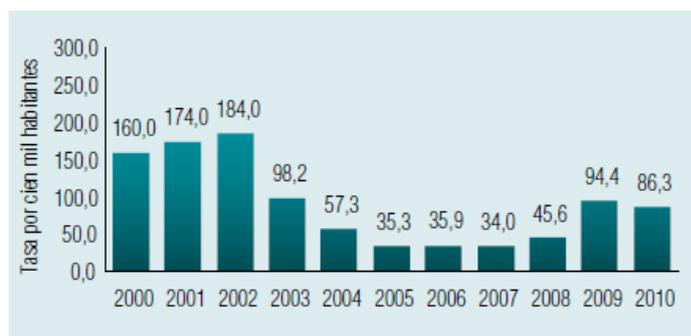


Fig. 1: Annual rate of homicides, per 100.000 inhabitants. Source: Medellín Cómo vamos (2011): 30

This situation of constant threat had and still has a massive impact on the lives of people in the city: public space has been perceived as a threat and was therefore rejected;<sup>5</sup> the city was experienced segmented by invisible borders. Since the mid-1990s, politicians and administration alike recognized that improving Medellín's security situation was the basis for improving the quality of life of all residents and for a successful redefinition of the city, which they based to a large extent on a reinterpretation of public space and an increased focus on social equality.

This was in accordance with the new Colombian Constitution from 1991, which the Colombian government drafted to overcome its crisis of legitimacy of the late 1980s. The 1991 Constitution emphasises citizens' participation and grants their co-governance in legislative, judicial, electoral and fiscal initiatives while at the same time making place for strict neo-liberal policies and decentralisation (Hunt 2009: 333). Public space became central in this context as the "privileged space of citizen communication" and "the necessity of offering spaces of coexistence and the democratic exercise of citizenship" was recognized (PMEP 2005: 2; POT 2000: 13 cited in Hunt 2009: 333).

This combination of neo-liberal politics and governance through spatial interventions is occurring in various countries around the world (Anjaria 2013, Schwab/Garcia 2012) and the practice has entailed criticism: Some take issue with urban policy and state that "(...) because cities are under increasing pressure to be competitive in the global economy, they have turned away from democratic governance, which is seen to be inefficient and uncompetitive" (Purcell 2003: 12), while others try to raise awareness of the potentially exclusionary power of urban space production (Zukin: 1996).

On a different note, many publications stress the importance of public space in projects of urban transformation in countries with high levels of inequality. Enrique Peñalosa, former Mayor of Bogotá, sees in public space an important equalizing factor towards a more inclusive society and stresses its role for the

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.inura.org/NMM\\_Posters\\_PDF/INURA11\\_Medellin.pdf](http://www.inura.org/NMM_Posters_PDF/INURA11_Medellin.pdf)

<sup>4</sup> The residential areas of the city are divided into 6 estratos; the classification is based on a survey of the quality of infrastructure and provision of municipal services, the building and the public spaces. Depending on the assignment, the tax burden of an apartment or a house is calculated. 50% of residents are living in the 2 lower estratos in informal settlements, which are mainly concentrated in the northeast and northwest of the city on the slopes. Another 30% live in estrato 3 (bajo medio) in districts that often arose from consolidated informal settlements (Departamento Administrativo de Planeación 2010).

<sup>5</sup> The city's poor public space ratio per inhabitant at 4 m<sup>2</sup> is a physical indicator for that process.

development of civil society (Peñalosa: 2007), and Gouverneur and Grauer argue that “public spaces working as urban connectors can play a key role in achieving integration, minimizing inequality, and fighting violence and resentment” (Gouverneur/Grauer 2008: 30). The unquestioned celebration of the all-transformative power of (good) design (Roy 2004: 308) may have given way to the more realistic evaluation that public spaces are important actors in the shift towards a more equal society, but that they are of little help if socioeconomic progress for marginalized groups is absent (Gouverneur/Grauer 2008: 29).

### 3 METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This article presents work from my PhD Thesis on the role of public space and socio-spatial justice in the upgrading of self-build settlements in Latin America and comprises research undertaken in Medellín between July 2011 and January 2012. The work is set within the tradition of Qualitative Research. For this paper, primary data extracted from user analysis through participant observation as well as from document analysis through qualitative analysis of content is presented in a case study of the Feria de las Flores festival and one of its venues, the Parque de los Pies Descalzos. A Literature Review provides the context for the findings obtained during fieldwork. As will become apparent in this article, the city government avoids putting its urban transformation process into the context of critical deliberation. It is my intent to offer a reflective context by discussing my findings in the light of the two major points of criticism and screening them for structural similarities.

Participant Observation was carried out to analyse the use of six selected spaces, three in the centre of town, three in the poor comunas on the periphery. The sites were observed on 7 occasions throughout the week and at different times during the day (weekday mid-morning, midday, afternoon and evening; weekend mid-morning, afternoon and evening), lasting for 30 minutes each. These 7 observational moments were distributed throughout a timespan of about a month. Through colour and sign codes, activity and users were categorized into three categories of activity (pedestrian traffic, activity, observation) and eight user groups (male/female kids from 1 – 12 years of age, male/female teenagers from 13 – 20 years, male/female adults from 21 – 65 years of age as well as male/female elders above 65). In a later step, the results of these observations were transferred into digital maps and also collated in tables.

Document Analysis was conducted on diverse print and video documents, such as the Municipality’s Urban Development Plans (2004 – 2007 and 2008 – 2011), official communication by the mayor’s office on issues surrounding the urban transformation process, municipal reports on quality of life aspects in Medellín (Medellín, cómo vamos), plans and planning documents as provided by the Planning Department and the architects. Special importance was put on assessing the document’s author, the context and purpose of the document’s creation, the intended audience and the document’s significance in the context of the on-going transformation process. It was my aim to capture hidden meaning and ambiguity and to discern the ways in which realities were socially constructed with a political agenda.

### 4 FINDINGS: MEDELLÍN’S RECENT URBAN TRANSFORMATION

#### 4.1 First Steps towards a redefinition of the city

In 1993 first projects for the upgrading of peripheral informal settlements started under the PRIMED programme<sup>6</sup> (Programa Integral de Mejoramiento de Barrios Informales – Integral program for the upgrading of informal settlements), which followed a new logic and methodology: instead of erasing whole neighbourhoods with bulldozers and relocating the inhabitants in social housing, the project invested in the physical and social improvement of the barrios with the aim to keep social structures intact<sup>7</sup> (Betancur 2007). Around the same time, after nearly 15-years of planning and construction, the first metro-line was inaugurated in 1995. It provided efficient public transport from the city’s poor north to the rich south and made getting to work for many inhabitants of the northern comunas considerably easier and cheaper.

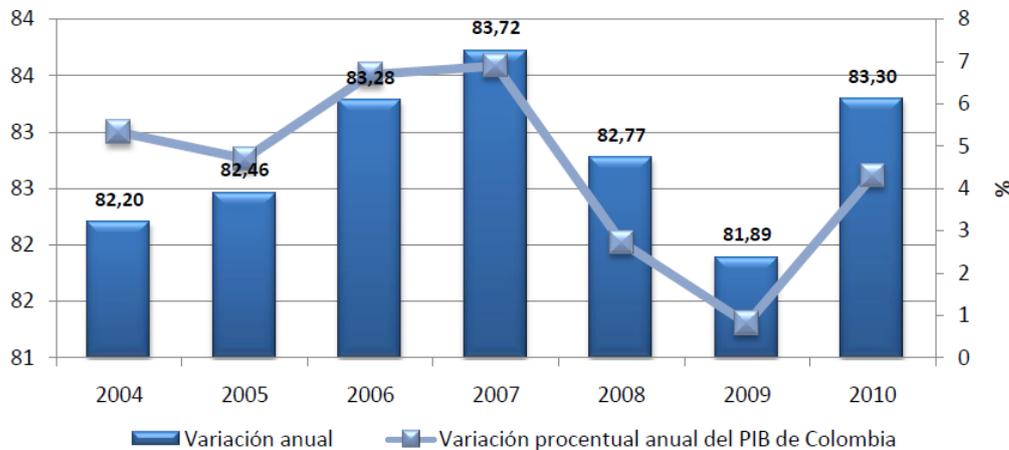
<sup>6</sup> Funded by the German government through the German Federal Ministry for Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ) and the bank KfW (Reconstruction Loan Corporation).

<sup>7</sup> PRIMED objectives: establishment of appropriate planning and implementation mechanisms, expansion of civic participation, physical improvement of neighbourhoods, physical improvement of houses (resettlement, *faute de mieux*); awarding tenure; mitigation of geological risks in the areas of Pan de Azúcar, Picacho and Nuevos Conquistadores.

Long before the Metro began operations, an educational campaign called “Cultura Metro” was launched. Lectures, artistic interventions, street festivals and social work were used to instil understanding and pride for the new means of transport. Cleanliness, social control, non-violence and tolerance were key themes of the campaign. For many, the metro was the beginning of a discourse about public space. The Cultura Metro campaign can also be understood as the beginning of a new kind of political and administrative communication which combines educational and regulatory measures with fun and entertainment to define and enforce desired behaviour.

#### 4.2 Medellín presents itself as exemplary laboratory for urban transformation

In accordance with the Urban Development Plan 2004 – 2007 which was geared towards new governance, social inclusion and the creation of new jobs as well as positioning Medellín globally,<sup>8</sup> in 2004 the Urbanismo Social programme was established by the then-mayor Sergio Fajardo with the aim to reduce the long-lasting social inequality.<sup>9</sup> Good design, public participation and communication, as well as inter-institutional cooperation and transparency were defined as main means to reach this goal. Through this programme, the “historic debt” against the poor should be paid and a city with “public spaces for all” should be created. Other much-used, albeit ambiguous terms in the discourse are the “recovery of public space for the encounter of citizens” and “the establishment of an adequate use of public space” (Alcaldía de Medellín 2011). The programme focused on a comprehensive approach to upgrade the whole city and invested in the upgrading of peripheral settlements through infrastructure improvement and the construction of stunning educational facilities and the upgrading of the rundown and depleted city centre through emblematic (public space) projects. In these projects, iconic architecture is used to create attractions of city-wide significance (ibid.: 137 et seqq.) to help reinterpret public space positively and to demonstrate Fajardo’s slogan “The most beautiful for the most humble”<sup>10</sup>. The Parque de los Deseos and Parque Explora, the Parque de los Pies Descalzos, the Parque de las Luces are some of the public spaces, which are presented as successful urban interventions of high quality design and as central space for all user groups (Martignoni 2008).



<sup>8</sup> In the 2004 – 2007 Development Plan “Medellín, compromiso de toda la ciudadanía” (Medellín, a commitment of all citizens), five main problems were diagnosed: a systematic crisis in governability, high levels of poverty, a growing inequality, obsolete economic and social structures and an insufficient integration with the country and the world (Consejo de Medellín 2004: 6et seqq.). Five lines of action were defined: Governable and participative Medellín; social and inclusive Medellín; Medellín, a place for the meeting of its citizens; Productive, competitive and solidary Medellín; Medellín is connected to the region and the world. Despite the obvious social focuses, the Development Plan’s title is a clear indication of a new understanding of governance that involves the inhabitants, but also of its neo-liberal essence by holding “all citizens” accountable for the city’s successes and failures. This “entrepreneurial city” has been made possible by and in turn fosters the emergence of the mayor as the city’s “CEO” (Dávila 2011). The 2008 – 2011 Development Plan “Medellin es solidaria y competitiva” (Medellín is solidary and competitive) continued the above mentioned efforts, since it diagnosed continuing poverty and inequality as the main obstacles to an integral human and urban development (Alcaldía de Medellín 2008: 14)

<sup>9</sup> The subsequent mayors Alonso Salazar and Anibal Gaviria followed suit, but have given the programme their personal spin and objectives. For instance, Gaviria renamed the initiative “Urbanismo Cívico-Pedagógico” <http://www.edu.gov.co/>

<sup>10</sup> “Para los más humildes, lo mejor: los espacios más dignos, los mejores materiales y las nuevas tecnologías.” <http://habitat.aq.upm.es/dubai/10/bp2500.html>

Fig. 2: Annual quality of live index for Medellín, 2004 – 2010 and variations of the GDP. Source: Departamento Administrativo de Planeación (2011): without page reference

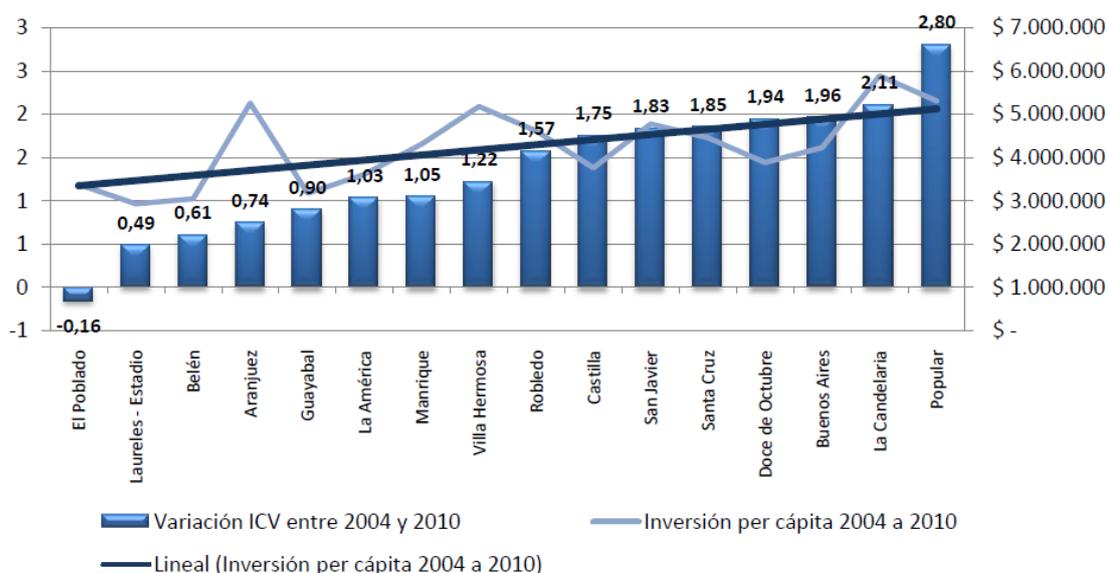


Fig. 3: Development of the quality of live index 2004 – 2010 per barrio and municipal inversion per capita. Source: Departamento Administrativo de Planeación (2011): without page reference

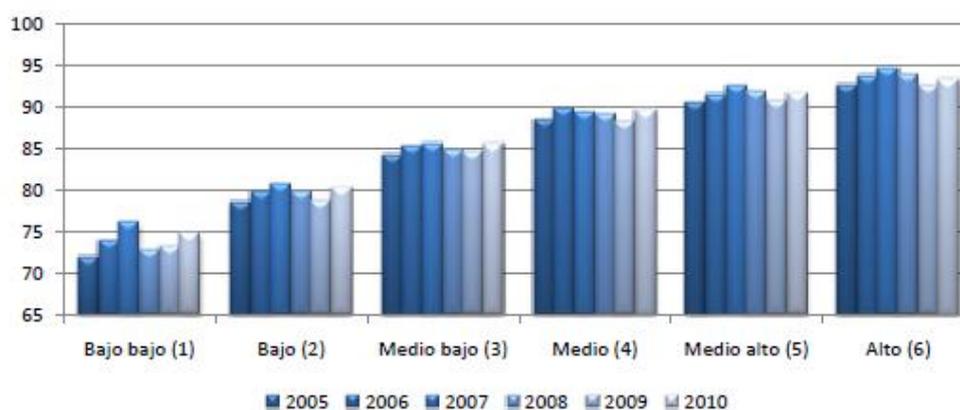


Fig. 4: Development of the quality of live index 2004 – 2010 per estrato. Source: Departamento Administrativo de Planeación (2011): without page reference

### 4.3 Points of Criticism

While the methodology of the Urbanismo Social has established a break with the municipality's decades-long neglect of the peripheral poor neighbourhoods, and the city government and the Urban Development Department have been awarded international recognition and accolade,<sup>11</sup> a growing group of academic critics is gaining attention. Two main points of criticism can be distinguished:

#### 4.3.1 Questionable Reduction of Poverty and Inequality

Recent research suggests that despite the highly visible political communication of the successes of urban transformation efforts in Medellín, it remains unclear if sustainable economic improvement for the inhabitants of the poor comunas could be fostered through the interventions. In the immediate vicinity of the new project, increased small scale economic activity (much of it informal) can be observed and housing prices and rents show some stimulation, outside these small areas however, the benefit is a lot less evident

<sup>11</sup> Both the mentioned spaces as well as the interventions in the barrios populares have won many international architecture prizes and recognitions by the UN (amongst others) (Alcaldía de Medellín 2011: 224) and serve the city as advertising for their improvement strategy (ibid.:13f). It is the government's goal to establish its methodology as best practice and to pass on the knowledge to other cities around the world and especially delegations of other Latin American governments have been known to pilgrimage to Medellín.

(Brand, Dávila 2011: 655). Furthermore, the same authors estimate that less than 10 % of the inhabitants of the poor comunas use the newly built infrastructure, public buildings and open spaces and point out that “the social impact of specific projects remains somewhat unclear”. Additionally, both the quality of life index and the human development index have increased along the same percentage as the whole city (MacNamara, 2009; Blanco and Kobayashi, 2009; Cañón, 2010; Quinchía, 2011 cited in Brand, Dávila 2011: 656 – 658). What is more, the poor estratos suffered proportionally more from the negative effects of macroeconomic developments, pointing to the fact that inequality is higher among poor estratos (Departamento Administrativo de Planeación 2011). Brand and Dávila also point to the fact that participatory practices have diminished and/or been turned into token participation and that the architecture of the projects has been criticised for “ostentation” and “lack of originality”. Other urbanists in Medellín describe the projects as imitations of Barcelona ignoring Colombian tradition and reality (Schwab 2011: 15). They conclude that “[A]gainst all prima facie visual evidence, a quick-fix approach motivated by short-term political impact and publicity-conscious gain are unlikely to be successful (Brand, Dávila 2011: 659). Along the same line, Leibler and Musset determine that the biggest impact of the transformation process has been a change of self-esteem and national and international representation, which “result from massive promotion of the ideals of social justice in the project through intensive political communication” (Leibler, Musset 2010; my own translation)

#### 4.3.2 Continuing Depreciation and Exclusion of People in the Informal Labour Market

Hunt draws attention to the fact that it is a widespread phenomenon in the recuperation and recovery of public space that the informal sector is blamed for its invasion and derelict state, and that street vendors are demonised through ascribing them a “culture of informality” and portraying them as violent, filthy, illegal tax evaders who live an easy life. Despite this common assumption, mainly illegally parked cars, private constructions and formal businesses can be made responsible for their self-serving appropriation of public space, while informal street vendors occupy less than 10 % of public space through their selling activity. Even so, as the same author demonstrates for the case of Bogotá, in political communication and public perception, street vendors are made culpable for bringing chaos to public space and should be removed in order to recuperate it for the use of all citizens, thus creating a dual logic of legitimate and illegitimate citizens or noncitizens (Hunt 2009: 334). The increase of work in the informal sector in Medellín<sup>12</sup> sheds an ambiguous light on the effects of the recent governmental and economic restructuring, because “the reality of the invasion of public space by ambulant vendors is linked to processes of economic restructuring that have generated severe unemployment, aggravated by the agrarian crisis and the internal conflict in the country with the resulting displacement of the rural population” (FVP 2005: 2 in Hunt 2009: 336f).

Furthermore, and quite contrary to the idea of the street vendors’ easy life, statistics “reveal vendors’ severe poverty, as well as the gruelling hours they must endure to eke out a living. Some 81 % of street vendors work every day of the week, and 60 % work more than 40 hours per week, with the average workday consisting of 10 hours. Despite labouring more hours per day and more days per week than any other working group, the state reports that the vast majority of street vendors (76.2 %) earn at most the minimum wage, while 40.1 % earn less than half the minimum wage. Of these workers 95 % don’t have pensions to care for them in old age” (Hunt 2009: 336f). Given the widespread interventions against street vendors in the new policies to reinterpret public space, it results especially interesting to know that “Constitutional Court decision T-772 of 2003 established that anyone whose basic needs are not met by the state has the right to utilize public space for income-generating activities” (Hunt 2009: 338). This not only questions the social and moral aspects of the interventions against street vendors, it also puts them into a negative light juridically.

#### 4.4 The role of Animación Urbana in the reinterpretation of the city

As was already the case with the „Cultura Metro“ campaign, the government’s official communication and education strategy play an essential role in the transformation process. „Animación Urbana” alludes to all those activities by the mayor’s office, the planning departments or municipal social services in public spaces which are meant to provide entertainment for the population and simultaneously perform an educational task by encouraging a new vision and use of public space. The official goal of Animación Urbana activities is to

<sup>12</sup> [http://www.inura.org/NMM\\_Posters\\_PDF/INURA11\\_Medellin.pdf](http://www.inura.org/NMM_Posters_PDF/INURA11_Medellin.pdf)

contribute to the reinterpretation of public space in order to promote a new urban identity, which is based on a new understanding of communal life and social justice.<sup>13</sup> Animación Urbana activities often take place in the above mentioned new central open spaces and try to use established formats like festivals and celebrations to transport their message.

The “Feria de las Flores” is one of Medellín’s most traditional festivals. It was created in 1957 to uphold the traditional customs of flower growing and arranging and to serve as a folkloristic tourist attraction. In the five decades of its existence, the Feria de las Flores has become a major cultural reference point for Medellín and Antioquia, and today offers a complete spectacle with about 150 different events over a 10 day period. During this time, the tourism sector boasts a hotel occupancy rate of over 80 % (Radio Caracol 2011: 15). Throughout the Feria the city vibrates with life, more people than usually are walking in the streets after dark, and also the presence of the police and the military is more obvious than throughout normal times. In addition to the parks and squares of the city, especially the shopping malls act as venues for the various events. It allows a deeper understanding of the idea of public space in Medellín, which is influenced by concerns for security, order and social distinction, to know that half of the events take place in shopping malls and to read the mayor’s introduction to the Feria, where he describes the importance of the festival for public space, as during the Feria “the citizens, united as a family, flock to the streets” (ibid.: 5).

Nowadays, the Feria is not only a tourist attraction but plays an important role in terms of the above mentioned Animación Urbana and the construction of identity: as a collective celebration as well as staging of the (apparently) peaceful coexistence it receives huge media coverage already weeks before the starting date. The theme song and the accompanying video play an essential role in this. In 2011, two different groups were selected to interpret the song: the rappers *laberinto* etc, who describe life in the poor neighbourhoods of the city with critical songs and the boy’s band *Piso 21*, well known for smooth faces and catchy pop rhythms perform “Feria en mi casa” and conjure up the idea of everybody being part of the Feria. The accompanying video<sup>14</sup> shows the boys singing in the streets of the *barrios populares* on the periphery of the city, in the newly created public open space, at the market and on the construction site. This official presentation of the city shows the major projects of the urban transformation process and presents Medellín as a place of happy, proud, working class people who willingly accept informality, who make the best of their situation by celebrating and singing together. Seen from the perspective of the city’s development plans, one can state that the video accomplishes two tasks: it helps to improve Medellín’s image and to position the city globally as the exemplary laboratory of urban change, but more than that it takes effect as internal representation and mobilization in the sense of Animación Urbana, and as a marketing tool for the transformation processes in the city,<sup>15</sup> and thus serves a political purpose. Also during the various events of the Feria, self-representation and Animación Urbana take a prominent position in the event.

#### 4.5 The role of the new public spaces in the reinterpretation of the city

The newly created public spaces not only serve the community through new equipment and new spatial offers, they are also used for the representation of the city’ positive change. They serve as stage for local TV shows, backdrop for business commercials and as venues for open air concerts. I will focus on one space here, the Parque de los Pies Descalzos, which is exemplary for the new public space developments in the centre of Medellín.

##### 4.5.1 Parque de los Pies Descalzos

Parque de los Pies Descalzos (Barefoot Park) is situated in the administrative centre of the city, with the town hall and the district government of Antioquia, the convention centre and the Teatro Metropolitano just a short walk away and is surrounded by administrative and representative buildings of Empresas Públicas de Medellín (EPM).<sup>16</sup> The park lies on a little urban island formed by the busy multi-lane main roads of the city,

<sup>13</sup> <http://urbanismosocialmedellin.universia.net.co/galerias/familia1c2.jsp>

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CCic0YTgBb4>

<sup>15</sup> Some of the comments on youtube indicate how striking it is that almost all of the video was shot in poor districts.

<sup>16</sup> EPM is a public utility service company, providing water, sanitation, energy, gas and telecommunications. It was founded in 1955 and initially served only the city of Medellín and its inhabitants. Nowadays, it is one of the biggest companies of Colombia, providing 1/5 of Colombia’s inhabitants with energy and one of the biggest energy providers in whole Latin America. The Municipality of Medellín is its 100 % owner. Since the year 2000, EPM (90 % sponsor)

San Juan (calle 44), carrera 57 and 63 and the motorway called La Regional. These roads on the one hand create important barriers towards the park and make approach difficult for those who walk. On the other hand, the mentioned roads are frequented by almost every public transport bus that connects to the town centre and therefore makes the park readily accessible for those using public transport. Apart from the buses, Metro stops Alpujarra and Cisneros are within a 15 minutes walking distance and supervised car parking is available just next to the park.

Parque de los Pies Descalzos was opened for the public on the 7th December 1999. When EPM approached LAUR (Laboratorio de Arquitectura y Urbanismo de la Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana) for an integrated design of their parking spaces, LAUR came up with the idea to counter the negative influences of the modernist urban plans from the earlier years on the administrative centre of town by upgrading public space. A central quality of the area was to be a public park that would represent EPM but equally bring them to show “social commitment” and “give back to the community” (personal interview with the architects), while all their initial requirements for parking and accessibility would be met. The park was to offer a central public space that would express EPM’s role as provider of hydroelectric energy and offer a ludic yet educational space for the inhabitants of Medellín to create awareness for natural resources. The park was constructed on a plot of land that belongs to EPM, and paid for by EPM. It was then turned over to the municipality after its completion. Obras Públicas<sup>17</sup> is now responsible for general maintenance issues in the park, but EPM provide maintenance to all the water and sand surfaces and they employ park “rangers” who are responsible of the educational programmes and contact with the users. They also contract the private security firm that surveys the park 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. This fact has entailed critique from within Medellín’s academe and some practicing urbanists, as it endangers the space’s publicness (personal interviews).

The park’s name has symbolic and evocative qualities alike: It makes reference to the many children of the city living in poverty who have to walk barefoot and who are invited to enjoy the park’s attractions. On the other hand, it invites visitors to take off their shoes and use the water and sand areas to contemplate and stimulate their senses. Some of the zones are only accessible without shoes.

Before the construction of the park and the surrounding EPM facilities, the area was taken up by former industrial storage space and waste land. The centric part of the city suffered from neglect and showed all the known problems of depleted inner cities. The park was the first big public space development after years of neglect of the topic, so it marks a turning point in peoples’ consciousness and the city’s public space politics (personal interview with the architects).

#### 4.5.2 Analysis of use in Parque de los Pies Descalzos

On working days, it is a diverse space mainly for people who are connected to EPM in one way or the other, as customers or employees. People are crossing the square to and from EPM. During lunch break, the employees divide into two groups and occupy different spaces. While the executives go and have lunch in one of the nearby restaurants, the common employees like the cleaning ladies and secretaries sit in the park and eat their packed lunch. Sometimes, kids and their parents are using the water attractions. Through the observation, it has become obvious that the park has been awarded the status of an important tourist attraction as various groups of Colombian and foreign tourists take guided tours through the park. During the week, slightly more men use the park than women, especially at times when there is a lot of pedestrian traffic by EPM executives. On workdays, the number of users varies between 101 and 132.

In difference to results from participant observation in other central spaces in Medellín, street vendors are significantly underrepresented and consumption is reserved to the cafés and restaurants in the adjacent building. This is striking, especially during lunch time;<sup>18</sup> only 2 or 3 vendors are to be found on the streets

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and recognised educational institutions in Medellín formed the Fundación EPM, which performs educational activities in the public spaces of the city and offers an important number of student grants to disadvantaged young people.

[http://www.fundacionepm.org.co/site/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=107&Itemid=75](http://www.fundacionepm.org.co/site/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=107&Itemid=75) (last accessed 22.01.2013)

<sup>17</sup> Secretaría de Obras Públicas is a municipal entity responsible for the design, construction and maintenance of public infrastructure, as well as the city’s buildings and installations.

<sup>18</sup> If there is such a thing as culture of informality, it is that of buying from street vendors.

surrounding the park. It can be assumed that this is in consequence of the security guards controlling the space.

The picture presented above changes drastically during the weekends, when families use the park with their children and the site turns into a major recreational facility in the city centre. Around 250 people can be observed during a Sunday afternoon. As during the week, the better-off frequent the restaurants, while the others enjoy their picnic on one of the wooden platforms or the benches. Working class people from the *barrios populares* are clearly overrepresented. The kids mingle at the water features and the park rangers are busy explaining the different attractions. During the evening, the space is frequented by young couples, both homo- and heterosexual. The few homosexual couples tend to sit in more secluded spaces, while the others freely show their affection to the world. There are a few more ambulant vendors to be observed, they are trying to maintain a low profile while offering snacks and fruit or services like photo taking. In comparison to other spaces, their number is still relatively minor. But it shows a common logic, namely that ambulant vendors are to be found when there is a crowd and that they hope to find better working conditions with more people around. All in all, the park offers various subspaces that are used by a diverse clientele, so that the Parque de los Pies Descalzos can be described as a space that represents the diversity and multiplicity of urban life in Medellín. On the other hand, it is a more regulated space than other comparable spaces through the influence of private security guards and the park rangers, which are to upkeep EPM's clean image.

During the festival, the site was the venue for a series of events called Parque Cultural Nocturno (Nightly Cultural Park), which presented concerts in different musical styles from Acid Jazz to Vallenato. Between 2000 and 10,000 people attended the free performances by popular artists. Before the concert, between performances and after the show, the time was used by two presenters to create a positive vibe for the ongoing urban transformation. New projects were explained, the use of tax revenues was demonstrated, and interviews with sponsors were conducted. Special emphasis was put on presenting the good conviviality of all citizens through references to the events of the day, which portrayed success stories of inclusion and improved lives. Those present were commended on the one hand for their "adequate" behaviour, on the other hand urged to continue to show their "buena cultura" (= good education, sophistication), eg to not get drunk and to leave the venue in an ordered manner, to have "healthy" fun and to support the security guards in their important work of keeping order. Private security guards and the festival supervision ensured compliance with the standards of behaviour. In accordance with the types of music presented, the size and the composition of the crowd varied. Working class people were less represented than usually, and most people arrived in cars to the concerts.<sup>19</sup> It is interesting to note in this context that street vendors who were present during the normal times and who were so ubiquitous at the other festival venues, were prevented to enter the park in order to sell their goods and only stands by the festival's official sponsors were allowed to offer drinks and food (at a much higher price than the informal vendors who made it past the controls).

## 5 CONCLUSION

Structural similarities with the two main points of criticism can be detected in the results from the investigation of this case. The Feria de las Flores on the one hand can be seen as a traditionally important celebration of public space and diverse cultural practices that fulfils an essential function in a city like Medellín, where public space has been historically equated with danger. The use of the long-established Feria as a tool for the re-interpretation of public space shows the administration's intention to see urban transformation not only as a task of architects and planners, but to understand it as well as a process of production of space by the citizens. The objectives of the new policy are not only to physically improve but to reach a shift of meaning of public space and an increased self-confidence of the residents in the participation in and the use of public space. To achieve this, Animación Urbana increasingly uses mass media, places of consumption and spectacles to reach the population and transport its message.

On the other hand, the exclusion of informal vendors is not only contrary to the experience of daily life in the city where street vendors offer and sell merchandise from vegetables to snacks to single cigarettes, it is also contrary to the celebration of informality which is conveyed through the video. This ambiguity and contradiction raises awareness to the danger that informality is made into an image of "favela chic" devoid of

<sup>19</sup> Only 15 % of Medellín's inhabitants own cars or mopeds, so this is a clear indicator for the social composition of the group of visitors (Medellín, *Cómo vamos* 2010: 66).

the everyday problems people have to face and that the city capitalizes (culturally, socially and economically) from marketing a particular life situation while at the same time aggravating it. The use of the festival for political communication fits the prototypical description of spectacularization of neoliberal urban governance which is to develop both external and internal effects.

It is to be regarded as highly critical that the city administration postulates "adequate" behaviour in public space at an event which is stylized as "open for all" and through the video appears especially geared towards lower income groups, since the required "adequate" behaviour reproduces hegemonic perspectives on space and society, and denies them their use rights and thus their earning potential.

The use of the word "cultura" in this context makes it easy to overlook the structural imbalance in the demand for adequate behaviour, because it turns diverse ways of behaving into people's personal responsibility and choice and neglects inequalities. Despite the obvious good-humoured nature of these animación urbana activities, Hunt (2009: 332) emphasizes that "civic education [is] a noncoercive technology of governance that both empowers and subjugates". In the case of the street vendors, the latter is obvious. It is equally obvious that the urban transformation processes and the recuperation of public space in Medellín has led to a reallocation of resources, an intensification of the marginalization of certain populations and thus to "the exacerbation of inequality" (Hunt 2009: 345) for the poorest inhabitants.

Without wanting to downplay the far-reaching changes in the lives of the inhabitants that programmes like Urbanismo Social have accomplished, which have contributed to both structural improvements and a new sense of the public, one must not forget everyday life in Medellín which is affected by an continued social inequality in all its manifestations, such as unemployment, lack of education, and violence. The obvious danger is that in this attempt to turn Medellín into a formal city and a destination for international tourism and investment structural inequalities persist or are even intensified. Thus the fact that during the events of the Feria social hierarchies and exclusionary settings were reproduced casts severe doubt about "the city for all".

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