

Three-Dimensional Public Space in Bogotá, Colombia: A Case Study of Institutional, Material and Deliberative Publicness

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Over the past 20 years, Bogotá, Colombia has gone from an exemplary case of innovative urban planning and policy – even described as an ‘urban miracle’ – to a city that exemplifies how democratic politics can disrupt visions of, or for, social and physical cohesion in the city. A series of decentralizing and democratizing national policies in the 1990s made the municipality the principal unit of governance in Colombia, which, combined with a new strategic planning system (“Territorial Ordinance”), allowed for the re-centralization of power in City Hall, and have empowered the mayor to pursue dramatic alterations to the city. However, the very same legal structures and institutions responsible for Bogotá’s ‘miracle’ years have produced a more recent period regarded by many (in Bogotá and beyond) as one of ‘decline’, or ‘stagnation’. More recently, democratically elected mayors have been associated with politicization (new political parties creating new and intensified forms of competition); discontinuity (four-year mayors, who cannot be immediately reelected, pursue Municipal Development Plans with no real obligation to continue with works of their predecessors); and inevitably an uncertainty and climate of mistrust.

Currently, Bogotá finds itself in the midst of a particularly notable administrative transition that exemplifies the challenges that this system poses to creating a stable vision of/for the city. Following twelve years of leftist *Polo Democrático* (PD) mayors, and the relatively continuous “social” approach they have (reportedly) taken to managing the city, former mayor and internationally-renowned transport planning consultant Enrique Peñalosa (referred to by some as the “Robert Moses of Bogotá”) has taken the reigns, promising massive infrastructure developments such as 80,000+ new housing units, a new elevated metro system, a new highway, and new Transmilenio BRT routes. However, the shift in vision of the city is not as simple as social vs. infrastructure. Peñalosa’s immediate predecessor, Gustavo Petro, pursued an ambitious development plan that likewise focused on large-scale regeneration and public housing development in an “expanded” and “revitalized” city center, a new *underground* metro, and the development of an Integrated Transportation System that included a massive takeover by the city (albeit through public-private partnerships) of conventional bus routes. Petro also made attempts to significantly rewrite the city’s Territorial Ordinance Plan (it’s long-term land use regulations), focusing in particular on expanding requirements for social housing and encouraging regenerative development. Thus much of what Peñalosa is pursuing in his new development plan is less a shift from social to infrastructural development, and more an example of how new mayors seek to pursue their own specific forms of both social and infrastructural development, often without regards for, or in direct opposition to, plans that have come before. Peñalosa has scrapped the underground metro and introduced a half elevated, half subterranean system, and has turned his attention from city-center regeneration and “re-densification” to massive residential developments in peripheral parts of the city serviced by a new highway that was directly opposed by Petro.

Here, within the continuities and differences that exist between these two mayors’ development plans (Petro’s *Bogotá Humana* and Peñalosa’s *Bogotá Mejor Para Todos*), and in the claims made by civil society/publics vis-à-vis the programs entailed in these, the complex dynamics of urban publicness become more readily visible. It is these dynamics that this paper explores using the heuristic concepts of ‘the public city’ and ‘city publics’. What ensues is a multi-dimensional analysis of urban public space that extends the subject to incorporate three interdependent categories: physical public space(s), the institutional space(s) of municipal governance, and the deliberative, participatory space(s) of ‘public spheres’. Using research data from an ongoing, long-term ethnography of urban planning practices in Bogotá, Colombia, it explores how ‘publics’ are formed and maintained through, or around, different public space development projects, and their relationship to mechanisms (or lack thereof) of participation and negotiation entailed within these. It will explore cases of formal/compulsory participation (such as the “citizen encounters” legally mandated for the making of local and municipal development plans), and informal/civil society based cases (such as *veedurías*, or citizen oversight groups), as well as cases of the semi-formal, semi-informal *Juntas de Acción Comunal* (Community Action Committees). Analyzing data derived from interviews and observations, empirical research will be weaved together with two groups of theories: Habermasian theories of the public sphere that seek to understand, or normatively evaluate, mechanisms for scaling up democracy from the public level; and theories of socially constructed, or relational space (à la Henri Lefebvre, ANT, non-representational theories of geography, etc.).

In the analysis, some common (i.e. real estate developers) and uncommon (universities) characters are vilified, while “the state” proves an unwieldy (and divided) mass of institutionalizing power. The result is a series of “centers” and “peripheries” (physical, social, political, economic) that create both barriers and opportunities for leveraging and/or altering the multiple dimensions of “publicness.”

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