CITOPIA: Bogotá Change
For the launch of our movie night series at Studio/K, CITIES is screening the film Bogotá Change. Our initial theme is CITOPIA, and Bogotá Change reinforces the idea that great cities are about people, not structures. Great cities work because of small-scale interventions and human, people-friendly solutions.

Bogotá Change tells the story of the transformation of Bogotá, the capital of Colombia, and the role of two charismatic mayors who used unorthodox methods to turn a city of violence, drugs and crime into a livable metropolis populated by caring and engaged citizens.

The protagonists of this documentary do not care about leaving their mark in the form of prestigious architecture. Their concern is the public betterment of the city. To achieve this, a range of programmes and projects were initiated to target improvements in education and access to information via public library systems, as well as better housing, transportation and quality public space.

This booklet provides some background on the current situation in Bogotá. The two articles are written by Caroline McDermott, a CITIES contributor working as a researcher in Bogotá.

Opposite
FROM CAR BOMBS TO SOCCER MOMS

BOGOTÁ IS CHANGING RAPIDLY. THE WORLD SHOULD PAY ATTENTION.
The busta bounces along the pot-holed streets, past gritty colonial churches, nightmare graffiti, sex shops, and grimy office buildings. Suddenly, an oasis of peace and public order interrupts the urban chaos. The view opens into a wide plaza with palm trees, purple flowers, and a series of reflecting pools leading to a sleek, modern-looking station for Bogotá’s new bus rapid transit system, TransMilenio.

The city certainly had a long way to come. Twenty years ago, it was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Colombia was ravaged by civil war and drug trafficking, and bombs went off in the capital city almost daily. In 1994, it recorded one of the highest homicide rates in Latin America—82 deaths per 100,000 inhabitants—and in the same year registered 1,089 traffic-related deaths. Moreover, rapid industrialization and half a century of civil war drove nearly 3 million Colombians from their homes in the countryside to Bogotá between 1985 and 2003. Most of these internal migrants settled in Bogotá’s massive slums, without utilities, paved roads, sanitation, or public schools. These internal migrants and poor transportation led to a vicious circle of poverty, crime, environmental destruction, and poor transportation. One of them was Antanus Mockus, a quirky mathematician and professor born to Lithuanian immigrants. As mayor, he gained fame for promoting a world-famous bus rapid transit system, TransMilenio.

Changes in the urban landscape are evident everywhere. The busta, now free from the chaotic city center, roars past a new office park, Colombia’s largest skyscraper, and dozens of construction sites. From the window one can see the massive TransMilenio route to Bogotá’s international airport.

Mockus’ accomplishments included the expansion of education and improvements in tax collection and the tax code, nearly doubling public revenues. Bogotá’s next mayor, Enrique Peñalosa, continued these tax reforms and took full advantage of the new public funds they created. His administration focused its efforts on integrating the city through public space and public transportation. These reforms generated over 270 kilometers of bike paths—the largest bike path network in Latin America—the renovation of 1,034 public parks and the planting of over 70,000 trees, Bogotá’s world-famous bus rapid transit system, and a new, internationally-recognized public library system, called BiblioRed

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Bogotá began its rapid transformation in the mid-1990s, with a new office park, Colombia’s largest skyscraper, and dozens of construction sites. From the window one can see the massive TransMilenio route to Bogotá’s international airport. While by no means an urban paradise, the city is determinedly improving, creating, moving, and constructing. Given its crippling social problems and its quirky ideas to combat them, Bogotá has much to teach the world about urban development.

Text by Caroline McDermott

There is no more authentic way to get a sense of Bogotá, Colombia, than by riding a busta through the heart of the city at the busiest hour of the day: lunchtime. The city center roars with construction machinery, taxis and buses honking, and street vendors calling out to suit-clad professionals for shoe-shines, empanadas, cell phone calls, jewelry, fresh-cut mangos, or just a few extra coins to buy a bag of milk.

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For the past 20 years, Luis, nicknamed ‘Paisa’, has sold snacks on the same street corner in Tunjuelito, a poor community in southern Bogotá. Tunjuelito sits near some of Bogotá’s poorest slums, where more than 80 percent of residents are impoverished and most lack access to public education.

For anyone who asks how Tunjuelito has changed in the past two decades, Paisa eagerly recounts the rapid transformation of his few blocks of market share. An empty lot became a renowned hospital, a junkyard became Bogotá’s second-largest public park and, where Paisa now parks his cart, sits a massive, internationally recognized public library. “The library has changed everything,” he comments. Paisa uses the library to access the internet, to watch movies, and to attend an occasional cultural event. In a community in which violence, crime, low levels of education, and poverty are the norm, the El Tunal Public Library is challenging the notion that access to information, culture, and community life is a luxury that only rich societies can provide.

Public libraries have become an essential feature in the urban transformation of Bogotá. In the 1980s, Bogotá was what one resident called a ‘failed city’. It was considered one of the most dangerous cities in the world, largely due to Colombia’s civil war and rampant drug trafficking. Bombs went off in the capital city almost daily. Rapid industrialization and violence displaced nearly 3 million Colombians to Bogotá between 1985 and 2003. Most of these internal migrants settled into massive slums, without basic utilities or infrastructure, and with scant access to education, jobs, public transportation, public space, and cultural activities.

Bogotá’s public library system, Biblored, emerged as a response to Bogotá’s crisis of social exclusion and poor access to education. It was designed in 1998 through an initiative sponsored by the administration of then-mayor Enrique Peñalosa. The libraries would be ‘urban temples’ of knowledge, culture, social integration, and community
España Library Park

Author’s own

Public libraries have also fostered grassroots community leadership in Bogotá and Medellín, providing programs that support community initiatives and meeting space for civil society groups. Bogotá’s public library system hosts ‘Chats of Community Interest’, and chooses discussion topics by user requests. Medellín’s public libraries provide a space for meetings of the ‘Participatory Budget’, which solicits community input about local public expenditures. Santiago Londoño, City Councilman of Medellín, comments that the public library “puts small communities on the map” politically, making their needs more visible to local governments and increasing a community’s sense of self-recognition.

Perhaps most importantly, these libraries have provided citizens with invaluable access to information, empowering them with the knowledge to improve their own quality of life in the way they see most fit. Juan Carlos, a 14-year-old who frequents the La Peña library in a Bogotá slum, likes to rent Harry Potter movies and practice his English. An elderly woman named Carmenzúa uses the computers at La Peña to access health information online and make doctor’s appointments. Luz Miriam, a young single mother, reads parenting magazines while she waits for a resume workshop to begin. Instead of government programs that dispense benefits to targeted populations, these public libraries have the ability to arm citizens with the power to change their own lives.

Paisa, looking past his snack cart at the El Tunal Public Library, puts it well: ‘It gives more life to the people who live here.’

Author’s own

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