

The struggle to belong
Dealing with diversity in 21st century urban settings

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The praxis of socio-spatial justice:
Contemporary policymaking and planning in Bogotá, Colombia

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Abstract:

In my paper I explore the processes through which “social justice” and “rights to the city” discourses have been incorporated into recent urban policy and planning frameworks in Bogotá, Colombia. In contrast to scholarship on urban social movements, I focus on the ways in which planners and policymakers’ themselves engage transnational ideas of socio-spatial justice. Based on interviews and ethnographic research in policy circles and related communities of practice I call attention to planners’ new orientations towards *social reality* and *institutional logics*. I argue that planners’ *self-critical positions* –their efforts to produce new forms of knowledge and to reorganize state action– are aimed at bridging the gap between the rhetoric and practice of social justice. In looking at such attempts to implement “innovative” and “socially progressive” policy instruments, I thus consider contemporary shifts in urban expertise and political action in the global south.

Insurgent planning, critical policymaking

In his book *Spaces of Hope* (2000), David Harvey introduces the figure of the “insurgent architect” (233), calling attention to the fact that the architect/planner is “like everyone else, an embodied person...He or she is also a bundle of emotions, desires, concerns, and fears all of which play out through social activities and actions” (234). For Harvey this observation points to the crucial connection between the “personal” and the “political.” It raises questions about the everyday practice of policy actors and their potential roles in processes of socio-spatial transformation.

Building on this insight, today I want to talk about policy makers and planners’ shifting orientations towards *social reality* and *institutional logics*. I will highlight what I would describe as planners’ *self-critical positions*: their attempts to readjust their knowledge practices and their approaches to policy design and intervention. I look at these processes within Bogotá’s recent history of political, social, and spatial transformations. Since the 1990s the city has become somewhat of a model of urban reconstruction in the region (Martin & Ceballos 2005). More recently, the country and particularly Bogotá have been recognized for the use of master

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planning and land policy as crucial instruments to manage urban growth and inequality (Fernandes & Maldonado 2009). Importantly, these juridical and planning tools have opened spaces for forms of governmental action and knowledge aimed at producing a more just urban environment. Not surprisingly, planners, policymakers, and other urban experts have been at the center of these debates as key actors in charge of setting policy objectives, defining modes of intervention, and constructing alliances within Bogotá's innovative planning frameworks. Planners, from this perspective, do not appear primarily as technocrats or bureaucrats, but also as political actors in their own right.

Struggles over rights and space in Latin American cities have been usually studied from the perspective of urban social movements –what James Holston (2008) calls “insurgent citizenship.” What I propose, instead, is to examine the ways in which policy makers and planners themselves engage the “Right to the City” (Lefebvre 1996; D. Mitchell 2003; Harvey 2008) discourses that have infused legal and political rhetoric in urban Colombia. Discussing the possibilities for a practice of “insurgent planning” (Sandercock 1998; Miraftab 2009) requires more attention to the everyday practice policymaking: that “personal” dimension in which political stakes and social visions are forged and tested. It means re-conceiving cultures of expertise and professional trajectories not as detached and technocratic affairs, but as deeply politicized and experiential processes (Boyer 2008). In the case of Bogotá, I have found some of these avenues for social critique and political action in policy makers’ current struggles to produce new forms of knowledge and to rearrange governmental action. Such pragmatic and self-critical approaches are an integral part of policy actors’ ongoing attempts to *ground* the city’s new planning instruments and make them in some way *operative*.

The rise of policy and planning

Before going into policymakers' own views, let me give you a sense of Bogotá's shifts in urban governance during the past 15 years and of the ways in which ideals of social justice have been incorporated into the city's institutional and socio-spatial makeup. Since at least 1993, the city became the locus of a series of policy experiments that led to one of Latin America's most unique stories of urban revitalization. Over the span of a decade the city quickly went from being considered a "capital of mayhem" to international acclaim as a "city reborn." In 2006, Bogotá received the Gold Lion Award at the Venice Biennale of Architecture with an exhibition entitled "Bogotá: The Proud Revival of a City" (Martin 2007). Earlier yet, in 2002, the United Nations Development Program presented Bogotá as a success story and a model of urban governance in the region (Riveros et al. 2002). Local and international media echoed these accolades calling Bogotá's changes anything from a "miracle" to a true "renaissance".

Multiple factors converged to make these transformations possible, many more than I could address here. I would like to highlight, however, three main aspects of the city's recent reconfigurations and then connect them to current planning frameworks. First, since the late 1980s the country has been going through a process of administrative and political decentralization: starting with the introduction of the popular election of governors and mayors in 1986 and later on with the 1991 Constitutional reform which consolidated the "municipality" as a key scale of governance (Castro 2001). But decentralization has not been a predictable process; it has been, in fact, a highly contested process (cf. Beard et al. 2008) as is clear by the extremely uneven outcomes across the country's cities. In this regard Bogotá has followed a unique trajectory.

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This leads me to my second point: the city's juridical and institutional reconfigurations in its renewed status as Capital District under the 1991 Constitution. Such reforms brought Bogotá more political representation in congress, complete administrative autonomy, and a firmer control over its budget (Gilbert & Dávila 2002: 32). The creation of the city's Organic Statute in 1993 further expanded mayoral powers by eroding clientelistic networks managed from the City Council and leading the city out of a long fiscal crisis with nearly double its revenue. These institutional rearrangements ultimately translated into what Faranak Mirafab (2008: 31), writing about Cape Town, describes as a "strong governing body to oversee the at-large interests" of the city and "to counter the splintering affects of decentralization."

The consolidation of mayoral control and autonomy, although with its own risks in terms of accountability and democratic safeguards (Gilbert 2008), became nonetheless a crucial condition for Bogotá's policy and planning revival of the mid-1990s. The third crucial factor, in this regard, was the election of two independent mayors –Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa– who governed the city from 1995 to 2003. Much has been written about Mockus and Peñalosa's innovative strategies during these years and their legacy has been significant in other Colombian cities and beyond. For the purposes of my discussion I would like to stress the fact that these administrations signaled the rise of urban policy and planning in Bogotá. During these years, different elements of city life were constituted as objects of knowledge and policy intervention. Most notably, "citizen culture" and "urban space" were positioned as fields of expert knowledge within the administration and in local universities and NGOs. In this manner, Mockus and Peñalosa's governments became largely devoted to ideals of urban modernity and order and to socio-cultural and spatial reform. At the same time, they both grounded their programs on strong ideals of social justice, equality, and redistribution, which were made

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apparent in what became the administration's most significant investments in public goods and social services in recent years (Perez 2010). The conjunction of such notions of 'order' and 'equality', which often resulted in tensions and contradictions, was nevertheless particularly important and fairly unprecedented in that it constituted an overarching narrative, a vision of the city's future.

Decentralization efforts, the strengthening of local governance, and the election of independent and innovative mayors were thus an integral part of what is commonly described as 'Bogotá's Transformation'. Parallel to these developments, in 1997 Colombia's Congress passed a national law known as the Urban Reform Law (388). This law introduced a series of progressive planning tools and land management instruments directly aimed at producing of greater equality in Colombian cities. Crucially, it required municipalities to create a Master Plan, a *Territorial Ordering Plan*, with comprehensive and long term goals of urban development. In Bogotá, the first version of the Plan was established towards the end of the Peñalosa administration in 2000. In this manner it incorporated many of the city's key projects during the time (for example laying out the future stages of the BRT system), in addition to establishing specific guidelines as to how the future development of the city should proceed (Salazar 2007). It was a first attempt to 'institutionalize' the visions of modernity and equality of previous years, although initially from a decidedly 'spatial' perspective (Pinilla 2010). Later on, during the second Mockus administration (2001-2003) and in more recent years, efforts have been made to implement some of the more progressive instruments provided by the law such as benefits and charges schemes, added value taxation, and partial plans, among others. Alongside its earlier infrastructural and systemic features, the Plan has thus become increasingly relevant in terms of the possibilities for state regulation of real estate development with potentially wide-ranging

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redistributive effects. As a broader and durable framework aimed coalescing, institutionalizing, and expanding urban policy practices of social and spatial transformation, the Plan has become a key site of epistemic, political, and ethical struggles over the city's future. It is in this context that planners are currently facing –and attempting to resolve– the tensions between the discourse and practice of urban justice.

Six Degrees

But I should better refer directly to how policy makers themselves articulate these ideas. Last summer while in Bogotá I met with a senior official in the city's Secretary of Finances, Osvaldo Jiménez¹: an economist, graduate of an elite North American university, and former advisor to the Inter-American Development Bank. Jiménez works closely with the city's planning team and their offices are housed in the same government building near downtown Bogotá. This is a 14-story structure exemplary of Colombian modernist architecture, mostly concrete and with a grid-like façade. Significantly, the building currently stands next to the material trail of one of the city's worst public contracting scandals in recent years: an unfinished Bus Rapid Transit line, whose stalled works have left one of the city's main avenues in utter disrepair. The sight –the *modernist grid* juxtaposed to the *landscape of corruption*– became an eloquent prologue to Jiménez's critiques of urban planning as I arrived to his office.

Jiménez said he could explain the situation with a simple example: He had had lunch earlier with a political leader from a neighborhood in Bogotá called El Restrepo. He said: "When you go to El Restrepo this is a place full of houses with all kinds of activities: commerce, industry, there's prostitution, contraband, there's everything you can imagine." He stressed that the neighborhood had its own dynamic, separate from the myriad regulations and codes enacted

¹ All names have been changed except when referring to public figures such as elected officials, candidates, etc.

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by the administration. He emphasized: “People [who live and work there] come, look, and coordinate. AND THAT IS HOW IT IS!” Now came his strong critique: “And then you have some guys, like us, who studied in the United States, who say that people should have a workplace, a certain number of individuals per square meter, disability access requirements, fire safety requirements, a number things, and that stuff has nothing to do with these people’s lives.” He then concluded: “Because of my social background, my education, I don’t have any ‘six degrees of separation’...in other words, I can reach Kevin Bacon [the actor] much quicker than anyone in El Barrio Restrepo.”

The main problem, in Jiménez’s words, was the divorce between “norms, narrative, and reality.” The fact that policy makers do not have processes, he said, “to construct an understanding of reality.” Here he was not critiquing planning in the abstract; he was referring to Colombia and Bogotá’s new juridical frameworks. The rhetoric of socio-spatial justice contained in the Urban Reform Laws, explained Jimenez, was very much part of this belief that a *concept* could generate *realities*. This, he said, was in line with Colombia’s elites’ fascination with an “aesthetics of rhetoric”. “The practice of planning in Bogotá,” he concluded, “was still very *literal, literal modernism.*”

The Devil is in the Details

Although Jiménez’s critique at times bordered on nihilism, his pessimism might have been partly exacerbated by the fact that we were having an essentially ‘academic’ conversation, outside the exigencies of daily practice. His critiques, however, did actually have concrete policy implications. Together with Carolina García, a senior official in the City Planning Department, they had been working for over two years on the revision of Bogotá’s the *Territorial Ordering Plan*. As I mentioned earlier, this is the main planning tool created by national legislation in

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1997 to promote “equity, sustainability, and productivity” in Colombian cities. Bogotá’s original 2000 Plan had had minor revisions in 2004. The latest project to revise the Plan (which is still pending approval) has attempted to address the procedural difficulties and lack of information that have mired the use of many of the city’s new planning instruments. Although not a substantial modification in terms of the goals of the Plan, it does represent an important shift towards a more *pragmatic* understanding of policy implementation (cf. Healey 2009).

So what is wrong with Bogotá’s ‘socially progressive’ urban policy frameworks? Why has it been so difficult to implement the multiple planning tools and taxation mechanisms that the law established (partial plans, land value increment taxes, benefits and charges schemes, and zonal plans, among others)? Jiménez and García answered these questions categorically: “Because the devil is in the details!” The ‘details’, they explained, are the practices and processes through which policies are implemented or in this case ‘devilishly’ blocked and subverted. They stressed the need, as policy makers, to know more about the main actors that participate in policy initiatives, their roles and interests, and their understandings of policy processes. Furthermore, they called attention to the lack of information about property and real estate in the city: of an inventory of public space, for example, or even a trustworthy registry of property deeds. An issue that runs deep into Colombia’s complex history of land appropriation and misappropriation.

In the end it was the oversight of these details, of social and institutional practice, which in their view had made the rhetoric of socio-spatial justice an inert construct. In Jiménez’s own words, the Urban Reform Law and the policies it had inspired followed an Aristotelian understanding of reality. The reformers behind these initiatives (which for him included certain academics and other advocates) focused exclusively on the concept, the discourse –in this case

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social justice— as if this were enough to transform reality. Instead, he said, “when you actually *do things* you become particularly concerned with understanding what others are *doing* in order to be able to *negotiate*.” Extending the Aristotelian metaphor, Jimenez and García were critiquing planning discourse for being a detached *episteme*. Instead, they were rethinking policy as a more contextualized form of practical thought. Not merely an instrumental rationality, or *techne* in Aristotle’s terms, but a techno-political mode of action, or *phronesis* following again the Aristotelian terminology (see Flyvbjerg 2001 for a discussion of *phronesis* in the social sciences).

“The devil is in the details” has become somewhat of a recurrent idiom in my preliminary research. Last summer in Bogotá I met with a scholar and consultant specializing in urban law and he used the same idea to describe the city’s convoluted legal system. He talked about his research as a form of *juridical archeology* that attempts to untangle the city’s bricolage of building codes and regulations and understand the multiple forms of legal strategizing. More recently, I heard the phrase again during a presentation about Colombia’s Urban Reform Laws at the Lincoln Institute for Land Policy in Cambridge, MA. Coincidentally, and very conveniently for me, the Institute, which is a key actor in Bogotá’s urban debates, is located less than a mile away from Harvard Square. The Lincoln Institute has been actively involved in shaping the city’s contemporary legal and academic discourses of socio-spatial justice. It is a key source of funding and training for academic researchers, those whom Jiménez called the Aristotelians, but also for scholars with more critical positions and practitioners directly involved in policy design.

In one of the Institute’s recent lectures a former Colombian congresswoman, recent graduate student of public policy at Harvard University, and current independent candidate for

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October's mayoral elections, Gina Parody², talked about the pitfalls of Colombia's urban legislation. In her presentation, which she very appropriately entitled "From Debate to Implementation," Parody detailed the bureaucratic complexities that hindered the application of the country's planning instruments. Because the "devil is in the details," she said, master plans and urban laws by themselves cannot ensure the production of more just cities. Worse yet, they can be deployed, as has frequently occurred, at cross-purposes with the goals of socio-spatial justice. Hers was a critique of the prevalent planning discourse, from within one of the institutions that had most supported it. For her, it was a matter of not confusing the means with the ends, that is, of not fixating on plans and tools without paying attention to their actual uses and possibilities for action. Similarly to Jiménez and García, she was suggesting the need for more flexible tools, firmly rooted in debates over social goals, but also attentive to cities' socio-political and institutional landscapes. More generally, she was also gesturing towards a form of policy making that incorporates policy practice into its designs.

The 'Real City'?

In what ways can these critiques change the practice of urban planning? What do these moments of professional reflexivity tell us about the making of policy? Or about the making of urban space? I caught some glimpses of what this all might entail in terms of the production of urban policies and spaces during a policy meeting I attended in Bogotá in late August. It was one of a series of daylong meetings in which a group of city planners and urban experts discussed the revision of Bogotá's *Territorial Ordering Plan*. The opening presentation was telling. Nohra Montaña, a statistician and cartographer, set the tone for the discussion. She said: "Today our starting point is the *real city*." She then unrolled two large maps on the floor, in the middle of the

² Actual name.

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boardroom, as the other city officials and consultants stretched over their tables trying to make sense of the imperfect grids and colored polygons. In the discussion that followed the participants addressed residential patterns, job markets, and spatial segregation. The maps and the lively exchange that ensued evinced what has been perhaps the Planning Department's main emphasis during the past two years: producing an enormous body of geo-referenced and updated information about the city. This is currently known in the administration as the *Urban File*, a legally required system of urban information, which I believe Bogotá is the first Colombian city to produce. Most importantly, however, was how this urban knowledge became the grounds for a series of interpretative and political struggles. The map was in the end just an *entry point* and the File only a set of *preliminary calculations* that had to be assembled in a politically meaningful and consequential way. In this process, García, who was chairing the discussion, stressed once again the importance of "understanding the *logic of the city*" before making any policy decision. This recognition of the importance of local dynamics along with the admission of the government's partial ignorance hinted at a particular way of conceiving policy and urban intervention. It was not the encompassing scheme of an all-seeing state, but a more tentative, piecemeal approach towards *knowing the real city* and *acting politically* within it. Additionally, for each policy proposal, García stressed the need to acquire a firm sense of the bureaucratic and institutional interactions and practices that were in place, or that had to be put in place. This was an equally important impulse to produce knowledge about planning institutions and processes, and about the practices and interests of related actors, all of which usually fall out the policy designer's purview.

The *real city* appears here as a never fully knowable or determinable phenomenon; rather, it is seen more as a *process* (Amin & Thrift 2002) which policy makers are constantly in the

struggle of knowing and influencing. Far from a script for reality, or a plan to produce space, urban policy is thus understood as one element within a more complex constellation of actors, institutions, practices, and places.

Conclusion

These planners' attention to the 'real city', and to 'real policy' for that matter, is at odds with commonly held assumptions about city planning as a decontextualized and technocratic mode of intervention (Holston 1989; Hall 2002). Instead, policymakers such as Jiménez and García seem particularly concerned with the socio-political context in which governmental action is embedded. They take account of and attempt to manage the *unintended effects* of their plans; they strive to establish *connections* and *negotiations* with multiple actors; and they struggle over the *political* orientation and *meaning* of their projects. Importantly, their critical positions unsettle the boundaries between policy design and implementation (Mosse 2005), knowledge and practice, suggesting a networked and processual understanding of governance (Wedel et al. 2005).

Rather than *assuming* an already formed system of governmental knowledge, these comments call for the study of the *contingencies* and *politics* through which 'policies' and 'plans' are constituted and enacted. Policy appears in this way as a tentative *assemblage* of people, ideas, practices, institutions, and technologies (Latour 1996, 2005; Greenhalgh 2008). But in looking at these policy circuits of knowledge and practice it is crucial to take into consideration actors' diverse roles, interests, capacities for action, and political convictions. In the case of planners, this means understanding their efforts to build, sustain, and spatialize policy networks. Importantly, such assemblages of urban policies and spaces are techno-political processes (cf. Mitchell 2002) informed not only by policymakers' professional trajectories, but

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also by their political stakes, urban experiences, and social backgrounds. Planners, policy makers, and urban experts appear in this manner as “practical intellectuals” who mediate broader currents of social practice and imagination. This last point has significant implications for social science research on urban policy and planning: exploring planners’ pragmatic intellectualism as well as their own ethnographic impulses, evinces the possibilities for overlap, mutual critique, and discovery afforded by the social sciences’ and planning’s juxtaposed epistemological fields.

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