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Abstract

In the construction of an argument in favor of the architectural discipline as an extended field, this article aims at analyzing the architectural design of the Library Parks and their urban insertions. The program was a part of a broad territorial restructuring implemented by the Integral Urban Projects from 2004 and 2008 in the city of Medellin, Colombia.

The interventions, paradigmatic as a confrontation of the typical precariousness of Latin American cities, are approached through three analytical categories: its urban character, its systemic character, and its political dimension. Even though they have a local urban dimension, the architectural designs proposed for the Library Parks are part of a system of public spaces affecting the entire city, representative of the action and presence of the State given the political and territorial fragmentation, and the urban violence that historically marks the city of Medellin. Through an architecture that seeks to dialog with the various preexistences – either material or not – the interventions are deposited on a complex overlapping of webs woven by different agents over time. They laden with a strong imagery, symbolic and political character, which are central to the construction of a narrative that intends to make profound transformations in the imaginary of the city as well.

Keywords: Library Parks, Integral Urban Project, Medellin, Precarious Settlements, Contemporary Architecture

Likewise in the first half of the 20th century, the field of architecture received the freshness of modernist contribution of the peripheral countries. We have witnessed in recent years a relevant and renewed contribution by architecture – public, that is to say – of Medellin for the discipline regarding the production of the city. The radical transformation process involving that Colombian city incorporates as a sine-qua-non condition the proposition of an architecture that returns to the city by creating several public spaces of coexistence, a fact that becomes evident when one analyzes the Library Park projects.

Unlike the way most contemporary production is approached, especially iconic buildings, these projects should not be understood as isolated objects: they are a part of a network of public equipment and spaces on the scale of the city – the most recent layer of continuous historical webs woven over the territory. From this scope, the article analyzes the Library Parks, especially those implemented between 2004 and 2008, in light of their own Integral Urban Projects and consolidation of the precarious settlements of Medellin. The narrative established herein starts from the object of study in the present toward the past to identify its historical agents and processes, which webs overlap and affect the projects; which hands weave them, which moment gives rise to the phenomenon of which it is a part. The aim is finally to construct a critical perspective of the interventions under three analytical categories: their systemic character, their urban character, and their political sense.

Under this method/script, we leave the building.

Webs in time: agents and processes

The Library Parks are educational, cultural and social equipment designed as public spaces and elements of the landscape for qualification of a particular urban zone. The two names that identify some of the projects refer to some aspects of the intervention: the architectural program represented by the figures of prominent writers and intellectuals, or their viability political-financial institutions; and the neighborhood in which they are inserted. Thus, the network consists of the libraries España (reference to the collaboration of the Spanish Crown in the building's construction) - Santo Domingo; León de Grieff - La Ladera; Tomás Carrasquilla - La Quintana; Presbítero Jorge Luis Arroyave - San Javier; Fernando Botero - San Cristóbal; José Horacio Betancur - San Antonio de Prado; Manuel Mejía Vallejo - Guayabal; Gabriel García Marquez - Doce de Octubre; and the Belén library (donated by the Japanese government, through the University of Tokyo).

Except for the Belén library, the Santo Domingo and La Ladera projects, both authored by Giancarlo Mazzanti, La Quintana by Ricardo La Rotta, and San Javier by Javier Vera Londoño, concluded under the municipal management of Sergio Fajardo (2003-2007), are the first to be implemented due to the high degree of precariousness of the areas where they are inserted. Such fact gives the interventions a certain inaugural and experimental character. They are also the object of national public tender for architecture, won by a new generation of architects who seek to establish their agenda of contemporary design (Gonçalves, 2013).

Said projects are presented mainly as icons of a set of actions by the government in facing the precariousness and urban violence. The projects are locally associated with a series of other equipment and public spaces for territorial transformation intended for neighborhoods with significant lack of educational buildings, living areas, recreation and leisure, and which also carry the highest rates of urban violence (Zuquim et al., 2013).

By the same political-social precept that surrounds Library Parks, ten middle schools managed jointly by the government, universities and the business sector, called Quality Colleges, are distributed in the peripheral districts of the city, as well as public spaces of coexistence through the "Open School" program. They promote cultural, social, sports and leisure activities for the population (Naranjo, 2015). Political education as an axis of social integration is complemented by its economic component through implementation of the Centros de Desarrollo Empresarial Zonal [Zonal Business Development Centers] (CEDEZO). Their goal is the economic and social dynamization through identification and development of local entrepreneurial vocations in several neighborhoods of the city, through training, consultancy, and assistance for the creation of small enterprises (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2016).

Interventions in precarious settlements in Medellín, mainly the latest ones, use to focus efforts on the infrastructure, services, equipment and public spaces. However, we can also highlight the housing consolidations of La Herrera and Juan Bobo I and II as the provision of safe housing in function of the removals required due to the high-risk conditions of the previous settlements. They bring with them the construction of containments, plateaus, public squares for relaxation and leisure, public walks, bridges and recovery and maintenance of existing streams and green areas, actions whose effects have an impact beyond the housing unit. (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010).

Each set of interventions and equipment that are part of the Library Parks are understood as strategic actions defined by the Integral Urban Projects (PUI). These are conceived as instruments of planning and physical intervention with the aim of creating or reconfiguring new centralities in six zones of the city where the State accumulates a high social debt (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010). They are also catalysts of modernizing actions necessary to open new areas of the capital, to which the precariousness of infrastructure and services are configured as a border of expansion (Mautner, 1999).

Due to the dramatic urban precariousness presented by the Northeastern zone, the PUI-NOR is the first to be implemented due to the emergency of the intervention. Based on the so-called social urbanism and adaptation of the methodology of the Barcelona Urbanism Lab (LUB), the project is taken as a practical experimentation for the other subsequent PUIs - northeastern, midwestern, mid-eastern and Southwestern (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010).

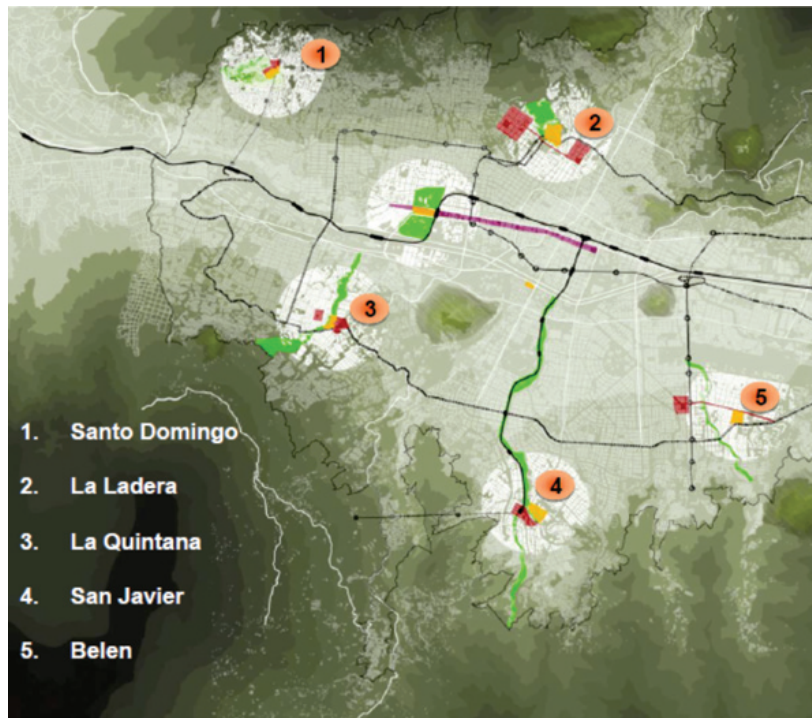


Fig. 1: Location of the five first Library Parks in the city of Medellín. Source: Echeverri, 2008.

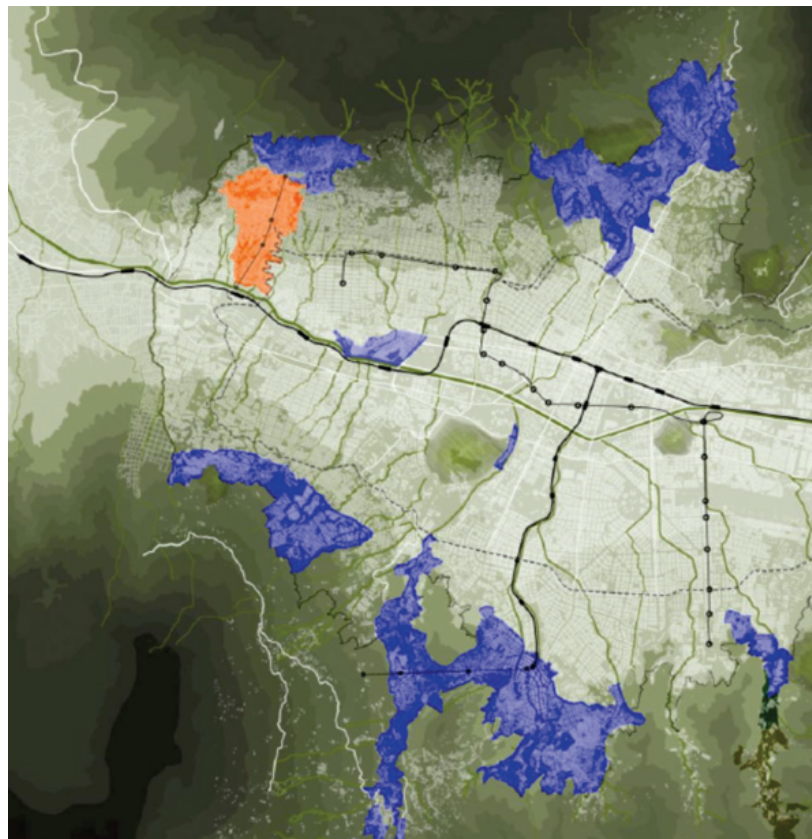


Fig. 2: Location of the PUIs in Medellín. PUI-NOR is highlighted in orange. Source: Medellín, 2010, p. 140.

One of the characteristics of the Integral Urban Project was the participative methodology, developed between government institutions, international cooperation, NGOs, community organizations, social movements and universities throughout its implementation program.

Thus, through impulse teams, technical advisory, community assemblies and deliberative forums, the intervention was structured as axis (social and institutional), components (construction of public and coexistence spaces, mobility systems, housing programs, environmental corridors and public safety) and development stages (diagnosis, formulation, execution and post-occupancy). In each of these implementation stages, the community's active participation is regarded as a fundamental entity of qualification adequacy of the proposals, where the physical and social character of the intervention are considered to be inseparable (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010).

In the diagnosis and formulation stages, the traditional method of analysis of the modern urbanism discipline – road structure maps, full and empty, typologies and topographic layout – overlaps the indication, by the community, of program vocations and

recognition of the main spaces of economic activity and of daily meeting in the neighborhood, suggesting specific centralities in each intervention zone. Taking PUI-NOR as example, interdisciplinary teams are being formed to act according to guidelines of the Plan de Desarrollo [Development Plan] – 2004-2007, with architects, engineers, sociologists, social workers, natural and institutional community leaders (the churches, as religious organizations), organized social groups (social movements, youth, and senior groups), and above all ordinary citizens. Once this community-institutional substrate is established, the design stage begins by seizing the place by walking with the community leaders (Cardenas, 2006).

The Imagery Workshops, in which the population participated directly in the projects design, proved to be a valuable tool for identifying significant places as a historical and symbolic burden – through thematic keys ("memory", "dreams", "knowledge", "existence") informing and documenting the specific demands of each neighborhood, while seeking local legitimization of the State's actions (Zuquim et al., 2013).

Participation continued in the following stages: in the architectural design, development of the physical and electronic models and production of images were adopted as representation of the proposals, and the reviews resulted from the dialog between the technical staff and the community; in the works execution stage, the use of local labor advised by the technical staff was supported by representatives of the initial committee, especially by the social workers; Finally, the maintenance and appropriation stage was established between State and community in the post works through community cultural events coordinated between local cultural organizations and CEDEZO (Cardenas, 2006).

It is also important to stress the fundamental role of the urban mobility infrastructure in this set of transformations. Districts and communes that were previously segregated, either by topographic condition or by the territorialization of rival delinquent bands, are connected by bridges, walkways, and escalators. If these minor interventions retrace the internal routes to PUI, Metrocable is the infrastructure whose incidence exceeds the physical limits of each zone.

Started in the period immediately before the design of the Library Parks, the Metrocable is a medium-capacity public transportation system by cable car harnessed and strategically enhanced by the Integral Urban Projects since it has an impact on the local scale and scale of the city. The cable transport system focuses on the neighborhoods by configuring centralities through their stations, places of convergence of flows through public sidewalks and squares, closely related to the Library Parks, while requiring a relatively minimal and occasional number of removals.

At the same time, Metrocable lines are configured as extensions connected to the subway – the latter being arranged linearly from north-south in the Medellin river channel – consolidating a trunk-transportation system, and a set of other modals, such as BRT and VLT [LRV], being the element that gives unit to the PUI, and connects historically segregated zones to the formal city, materialized in the lowest reaches of the Aburrá Valley.

This significant number of relevant interventions is concentrated in a short period, between 2004 and 2007, under the municipal administration of Sergio Fajardo, whose public policies continue, however to a lesser extent, between 2008 and 2011 with his successor, Alonso Salazar. Connected to the universities, a determining factor concerning the experimental and interdisciplinary nature of the various actions, Fajardo has shown himself to be a progressive alternative among liberals and conservatives, who until then were the leading figures of political disputes. In addition, several precedents are determinant in the outline of their political policies, like the urban experiences of Bogota, previous interventions in precarious settlements of Medellin (Primed, Moravía, and La Iguaná, for example), consolidation of the Territorial Spatial Development Plan (POT) in 1997, and fundamentally the institution of a representative and participative democracy with the 1991 Constitution (Mazo, 2016).

Construction of the institutionality that makes the State the hand that weaves a new web in the urban space of Medellin is the direct result of the problematic political-social situation that precedes it, the result of the subsequence waves of urban violence that historically mark the city of Medellin. In addition to the drug trafficking, political fragmentation due to the presence of several other "States", such as the leftist guerillas, the Medellin cartel, the right-wing paramilitaries, the government itself, the international cooperation and its alleged neoliberal counterpart, in addition to the civil war between liberals and conservatives in the 1950s and 1960s, made the city a territory under constant armed political dispute for almost half a century. On the other hand, there is the strengthening of the community and cooperative religious and educational work – especially in areas where the State accumulates high social debt – such as organized popular movements that, even in a fragmented way, also claim their space. At this moment, several agents are present, making clear in its most dramatic sense the idea of city construction as webs woven by several hands in processes that intersect and compete in the production of urban space.

The territory where these various forces converge and incur is marked by socio-spatial segregation, resulting from an excluding urbanization process typical of Latin American cities. Medellin's topographic conditions, embedded in the Aburrá Valley, clearly reveal the physical splitting of the urban fabric into two opposing cities. One, formal and infrastructural, to the South and in the lower reaches of the valley, occupied by the middle and upper classes; and another one self-built to the North and in the higher reaches of the eastern and western slopes, with urbanization and habitat below critical levels (Echeverri and Orsini, 2010).

In short, the set of interventions is added to the various historical layers that overlap the Medellin territory, defining a particular complexity, since these juxtaposed webs, woven by different agents, are not regular. On the contrary, they are tense, suffer distortions, expressed

'in the contradiction of interests that guide the city's construction with several, unequal, fragmented hands, with powers that are hardly equalized; dispossessed hands, that struggle for a place to live; philanthropic hands, that support, guide and sustain the fight; violent hands, that eliminate, threaten and hinder processes, imposing orders according to specific conveniences; excluding hands, that disregard the difference, denying or hiding it; popular

hands, that claim the right to the city subsisting, resisting and transcending limitations imposed and wagering on the possibilities of daily life' (Mazo, 2014).

Systemic dimension, political dimension and urban dimension

The complexity brought by Medellín as an object of intervention, due to the multiplicity of processes and agents acting on various interests and territories, demands from the institutionality the design of an integrated public policy. It shall be based on co-participation, that intends to organize the various actions and agents around a consensus: deconstruction of the state of violence (result of the political fragmentation) and urban precariousness (result of the socio-spatial fragmentation), productivity and competitiveness, and integration with the region and the world (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2004).

In fact, the Library Parks forcefully materialize this approach. As discussed above, the historical determination of the object (temporal analysis) is superimposed on a territorial reading (spatial analysis). Removal of the object in time to identify its historical processes and agents occurs, in parallel, in space through a series of zoom outs, through gradual increase of the scale of analysis, in function of the intrinsic systemic dimension of the Library Parks, allowing us to understand them as part of a complex whole. They are centralities of a network of public spaces and interconnected equipment, inserted in subsystems – the Integral Urban Projects – connected by a transport network and united by a public policy of transformation that affects the entire urban space of Medellín.

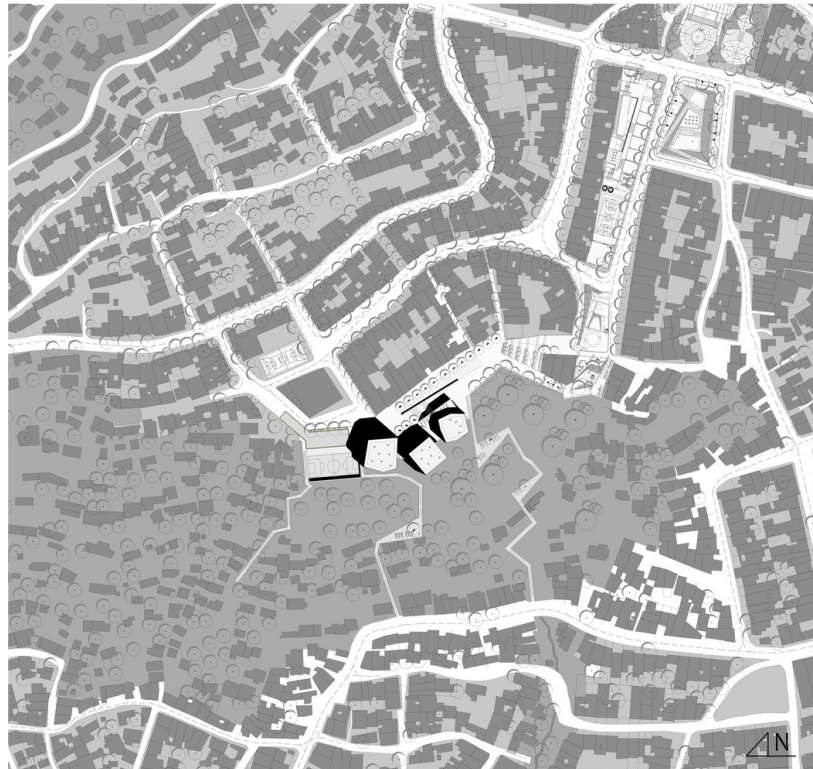


Fig. 3: Deployment of the Santo Domingo Library Park and creation of axis of squares and equipment between the building and Metrocable station. Source: www.plataformaarquitectura.cl/c/02-6075/biblioteca-parque-espana-giancarlo-mazzanti [Accessed 30 June 2016].

Recognizing the systemic dimension of the Library Parks means placing these architectural proposals in the process that Josep Maria Montaner calls "crisis of the object", in which architectural theory and production shift the focus from buildings as individual and isolated elements to the relations they establish with other items, as a set of buildings, public spaces, neighboring units, urban fabrics, the environmental preexistences, etc.. This change in approach is evident in two works by the Catalan critic, "As formas do século XX" [The forms of the 20th century] (2002) and "Sistemas Arquitetônicos Contemporâneos" [Contemporary Architectural Systems] (2008). The first one identifies and compares different formal aspects in the production of architecture, design, art, and cinema of the 20th century, to insert them, in the second work, in their respective contexts and interpret them from the relations with their surroundings on an enlarged scale.

'[...] un sistema es un conjunto de elementos heterogéneos (materiales o no), de distintas escalas, que están relacionadas entre si, con una organización interna que intenta estratégicamente adaptarse a la complejidad del contexto y que constituye un todo que no es explicable por la mera suma de sus partes. Cada parte del sistema está en función de otra; no existen elementos aislados. Dentro de los diversos sistemas que se pueden establecer, la arquitectura y el urbanismo son sistemas de tipo funcional, espacial, constructivo, formal y simbólico' (Montaner, 2009, p.11).

As mentioned earlier, the PUIs are transversal instruments that institutionally articulate public, private agents, the academic circle and the population, in order to guarantee, at the same time, a political action of the State, an increase in the meeting of social and economic demands, the support as a democratic process, and territorial specificity. Therefore it assumes the complexity of the urban context on which it intends to act. In the case of Medellín, because of the political fragmentation, the history of urban violence and the high social debt accumulated by the State in the areas of the PUI operation, architecture, as one of the disciplines that takes on a particular leading role in the transformation process, acquires, due to its systemic dimension, a strong political character as a method and tool of control by the State.

Far from being an unprecedented movement, the contemporary architectural discipline recovers its political and social role as of the year 2000, through a new generation of architects see an urbanity in crisis as a means of acting. As presupposed by Muxí and Montaner (2014), the figures of the "starchitects" and those of the post-modernist ones do not provide a solution to the challenges of cities today. In fact, a large part of this production that recovers the political-social dimension of architecture responds to the profound aggravation of the urban crisis of the end of the 20th century, especially in developing countries, with neoliberalism and the consequent reduction of the State's role in addressing these issues.

The political action by architecture allows the attribution of a symbolic dimension to the action of the government in informal spaces. We found some alignment in the intentions of the municipal administration and in the architectural party adopted for the Santo Domingo Library Park project, for example, where the common objective is an intervention with notable characteristics, as can be seen in the testimonies of Fajardo and Mazzanti, respectively:

'We will build a new public space. Let's break away from the idea that beautiful things are for the rich, but rather that the most beautiful is for the most humble. And so we state how we will get to them. [...] And we begin to build this entire space simultaneously so that any person would say: something happened here. Because citizens from the world over often reach us on account of these transformations.

[...]

What we wanted to do was a building that would be visible, and that would in some way represent the entire transformation of what Medellín meant. [...] This project attacks the visual, this project is an image. Its interior works as it should and relates lifestyles, but the visual is the key, which causes the community to take ownership of it. This building is part of saying how we propitiate a different life, and how we can propitiate it in purely visual terms. (Maravillas ..., 2013, our translation).



Fig. 4: Santo Domingo Library Park and the Metrocable Line. Source: www.latam.discovery.com/shows/maravillas-de-colombia/imagenes/biblioteca-espana-medellin [Accessed 30 June 2016].

We noticed, however, that the achievements of this group of architects do not necessarily represent a breaking away from contemporary architecture, still less the continuity of the 20th century's Latin American modernism. We can state, based on authors like Montaner, Nesbitt, and Gonçalves, that this generation's stance is a dialectic synthesis between different modernities that can be taken up and reinterpreted. It is possible to identify in the designs of the Library Parks to be analyzed part of the reflection proposed by these authors, especially in questions referring to the notion of place in detriment of the idea of space.

'[...] we could point out in a schematic and synthetic way that, in a few decades, the conception of architecture goes from the primordial idea of space to the notion of place. That is, the essence of architecture is no longer that of physical, mathematical, plastic, rational and functional space (taking as reference the ideas of Moholy-Nagy and Zevi), to become something more concrete, material, real, qualitative and human, laden with culture, history, symbols, and qualified defined by the light by the texture of the materials. It would move from a physical conception of plan-based architecture, plastic and visual perception and on a tendency toward abstraction, to a cultural understanding of architecture, based on the material, on the tactile perception and the trend toward contextualization and expression of semiological values' (Montaner, 1993, p.41, our translation).

The concept of place and the aesthetic questions it carries, while defining a stance common to the designs, also presupposes that the proposals have their own specificities according to each insertion, i.e., their urban dimension, essential to understanding the proposals as the occasional introduction of a system of interventions at the city scale. Thus, operations in common to the projects, such as the creation of collective spaces, gazebos, squares and shaded areas from articulation of the buildings, interpretation of the topography and connections with the urban network and with other equipment, are characterized differently in each proposal in relation to the form, typology, tectonics, use and their various appropriations. The participative process as an intention to establish ties with the social fabric completes the political discourse in construction: an including action of the State that dialogs with the place and the society.

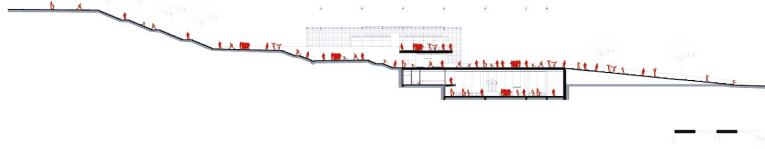


Fig. 5: Longitudinal section of La Quintana Library Park. Note the pedestrian crossing the building in the continuity of the existing road, connecting different levels. Source: La Rotta Arquitectos. Available at <<http://la-rotta.com/proyecto.php?code=41>> [Accessed 30 June 2016].

Contradictions

Three aspects are thus outlined concerning the projects of the Library Parks selected as objects of analysis, presented in juxtaposition: the systemic dimension, the political dimension, and the urban dimension. As amalgams-like, the great challenge of these architectures

'[...] is how to develop projects that can generate social inclusion. And this is not just a matter of locating buildings in degraded areas. It also implies in the capacity to create new forms of behavior, belonging and pride in the community' (Mazzanti, 2011 cited in Gonçalves, 2013 p.207).

This elaborate and ambitious narrative holds major contradictions revealed from the understanding of the city as a composition of webs that are woven and deposited on the territory over time, showing contacts often conflicting between one layer and another. Thus, establishing such analytical categories does not mean the simplification of the studied object, but rather the opportunity to reveal these ambiguities.

Part of these tensions derives mostly from the relationship between global and local, between the urban plan and architectural design, which in this argument refer to the systemic and urban dimensions, respectively. The participative methodology of the PUIs, as one of the bases of approach between government and community, questions the modern idea of the urban plan. Marked by the abstraction of those who formulate a set of interventions far from the territory – an overfly that produces maps and mass plans – this notion is problematic due to the apprehension of the place by walking through the site, and by the opening of the process to population participation. In this permeability of the process, we find an important legacy of the Integral Urban Projects: a contraposition possible between the ideas of plan and web.

El principal logro del PUI es desarrollar una metodología que sirve como modelo eficaz de intervención urbana con un alto componente social. La conformación de los comités, es el eje desde donde las obras de infraestructura se convierten en una herramienta de desarrollo social, porque son un mecanismo de participación incluyente que no sólo ayuda a que los proyectos se validen por la gente para los que fueron pensados, sino que fortalece a los individuos que deciden pertenecer a ellos, capacitándolos para la organización social, la gestión, la ejecución y en la mayoría de los casos, descubriendo nuevos líderes capaces de jalonar procesos sociales que en definitiva terminan reestableciendo el tejido social, tan necesario para el avance de las comunidades (Cárdenas, 2006).

It is worthy to note, however, that State's decisions superimpose the program of needs established by the community since the programmatic profile of the equipment is defined a priori by the 2004-2007 Plan de Desarrollo [Development Plan], which is the case of the Santo Domingo library. The distance from the institutional discourse made above and the testimony of the community leader, Rosalba Cardona, allows us to ponder and question the weight of the participative process in the decision-making that funds the intervention.

'Actually, the administration had never asked the community if this library that is located here today could be what the community needed. Not without taking into account that the library is a sculpture, that the library is a great help in the formation of people. But sirs, this is not the need these people have' (Biblioteca ..., 2014, our translation).

In fact, the construction of Medellín's image, based primarily on the Santo Domingo Library, is derived from, besides its pre-established socio-cultural program, some architectural aspects of the building. By contrasting relations, it is linked to and transforms the landscape figuratively through its materiality and monumentality, such that it can be seen and contemplated from several points of the city by a tense background-and-figure relation with the set of self-built houses that surround it.



Fig. 6: Santo Domingo Library Park. Source: <plataformaarquitectura.cl/cl/02-6075/biblioteca-parque-espana-giancarlo-mazzanti> [Accessed 8 May 2017].



Fig. 7: La Quintana Library Park. Source: author.

Analyzed under the same tectonic aspects of the materiality and monumentality, La Quintana Library presents an intervention in the opposite direction: it is diluted in the green areas and the existing built structure, creating a new topography through a sequence of levels, under which programs are arranged. The visual result is a series of slabs-gazebos coated lined with ceramic tiles – materially linked to the surrounding house – whose landscape is framed by a light cover.

These two projects present two different images of the city, being that only one of them was linked to a deep process of transformation and confrontation of urban precariousness. If the tectonics, through materiality and monumentality, was able to construct the image of a paradigm for a global architectural culture, it is also possible to see, when we dwell on the current problems of the Santo Domingo Park, the ambiguities, and contradictions of what was taken as a model.



Fig. 8: Santo Domingo Library Park in 2017. Source: www.minuto30.com/el-deterioro-amenaza-la-biblioteca-espana-un-simbolo-de-la-ciudad/341002. [Accessed 8 May 2017].

Conclusions

The broad approach of the processes and agents that constitute the cities, and therefore the locus of the intervention of architecture allow us to understand which processes we respond to and are part of. The intention was thus to build an argument regarding a current need for affirmation of the architectural discipline as an extended field, which includes dialog with the complexity and multiplicity inherent to the urban space.

Reaffirming the idea of the city as a superposition of historical layers, as webs woven by different agents in processes that intersect and compete in the production of the city is essential to understanding the relevance of the Library Park projects as central elements in the transformation process of Medellín. They synthesize broad, however very specific processes of city construction, where we only understand their systemic character by determining the complexity of the environment, marked by the political and territorial fragmentation, violence and urban precariousness.

In the studied interventions, other issues related to contemporary architecture are derived from its systemic dimension. Inclusion and control of the various agents of urban construction allow us to reaffirm architectural production as a political act, as a determination. The urban nature of the interventions and the relations established by the architecture with the social fabric, topography, and environmental preexistences denote points of contact between a system conceived in the macro-scale and the local specificities, between the global and the local, which also reveal shocks, contradictions, and ambiguities.

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