



# Only the best is good enough

## Urban integration of an informal area, Medellín, Colombia

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For many years, the Colombian city of Medellín was subjected to much violence and criminal activity. A page has turned, and a stunning transformation stands in its place. Even in the informal settlement of Comuna 13, living conditions have substantially improved. But how did it happen? Behind the scenes are numerous stakeholders – government authorities, expert planners and designers, NGOs, businesses, and the community itself – all working together on projects which are moving the city and its people to a brighter future.



Fifteen years ago the annual murder rate in the second largest city of Colombia stood at 380 per 100,000 inhabitants. In 2007 the rate was down at 26 per 100,000 inhabitants. Today people walk the streets of Medellín in safety.

In the past, Medellín's mild climate led to it being called "the city of perpetual spring". Now, that title also applies to the quality of life enjoyed by its residents. The key to this impressive transformation was to look beyond the symptoms of urban degeneration – and to treat the disease. The ground was prepared for working together with all groups, including the poorest areas, and funds were made available for investment in urban redevelopment projects.

### Repairing the social fabric

One of the creative leaders responsible for Medellín's Integral Urban Project (IUP) is





“Often, the football field is more important than anything else when you want to talk about change!” **Gustavo Restrepo**

46-year-old architect Gustavo Restrepo, manager of urban projects for Enterprise of Urban Development in Medellín (EDU), a state industrial and commercial enterprise. “At the moment we have 180 projects under way.”

Gustavo Restrepo is a font of enthusiasm for his work. “At the beginning, everyone thought our mayor was crazy and had no chance. But the concept he developed was strategic. And people began to come on board.”

The concept was focused on the principle of creating the most valued public buildings – whether libraries, schools, concert halls, or museums – in the poorest quarters. The

intent – to create public spaces in the slums and repair the social fabric of the community. “For the poorest, only the best is good enough,” the architect says. “For example, schools with the high quality of private institutions.”



Local community: from information to participation.

Not unexpectedly there was mistrust.

From the outset, Gustavo Restrepo and his team focused on community involvement, bringing the residents themselves into the planning loop, ensuring them that the projects were designed to meet their needs.

“We conducted an intensive character study – our research stretched over a year and a half before we could analyze first results.”

#### **Building trust in the community**

As part of the urban master plan, Comuna 1 was first to be transformed. “Residents were skeptical,” Gustavo Restrepo explains, and their opinion was: ‘you promise us things but it won’t happen.’ Progress was slow, but involved bringing both formal and informal community leaders on board first. “Football players, for instance,” he says. “Often, the football field is more important than anything else when you want to talk about change!”



Leaflets and flyers invited the community to information sessions. At first only a couple of people showed up, a week later it was ten, then 100 and after that 400. The process engendered trust, community participation was assured. The long list of improvements needed in the quarter reflected its formidable level of degradation, built up over decades of neglect and improvised living.

### **Involving children**

Community involvement initiatives include participation in the construction works as well as specific activities for children. They were encouraged, for example, to express their visions for the future on paper. “They painted parks, public spaces, and schools – even escalators!”

Many small projects have arisen from the children’s ideas. “Escalators would be revolutionary but not unattainable,” the architect

Some 40 building projects are currently under way in Medellín: impressions of the new independent college.



believes. “We are trialing pilot projects – if expectations are met, the idea can be multiplied.”

### **Informal dwellings, lack of public space**

Since the 1950s squatters had been arriving in Medellín, driven away from rural areas. “They arrive with nothing – no money, no home, no papers. They have lost everything, including hope,” Gustavo Restrepo explains. For three months they receive government support, and then they are responsible for their own survival.

Some find work on building sites, others in the informal economy. Many families exist on less than the minimum wage and unemployment hovers around 50%. Building an informal dwelling on a free patch of land is their only choice. The informal settlements climb the hills surrounding the main city in the valley.



In these unplanned and fast-growing settlements there is no transport system. Only footpaths and staircases lead into these hillside quarters. In a life-threatening emergency, ambulance or fire services would have no chance of reaching the uppermost households. Beyond the lack of roads, however, is the critical problem of no public space – no football fields or meeting places where community members can socialize.

**New accommodation for every fourth inhabitant of the city**

Medellín itself lies in a fertile basin of forests and fields, but within the informal settlements there is not a single tree. Too few schools and daycare centers are available for children. Yet where could such public facilities be sited when each dwelling is built directly against its neighbor's wall?

The government committed to radical intervention, structural urban redesign

was urgently needed. Many small houses are inefficient in terms of land use – through the densification of residential precincts; the balance of land use can be adjusted to public buildings, infrastructure, and recreation. Over the coming years Medellín will be home to 15,000 new apartment buildings. Each will house 10 to 16 apartments for an average family of five.

The initiative will bring almost a quarter of the city's 2.3 million residents into new



Comuna 13 grows tall. Buildings for up to ten families house many and frees space on the ground for public uses.

accommodation. Families displaced by the building works are guaranteed a place in the redeveloped quarter. In the meantime they are housed in temporary accommodation at state cost.

“Our plan ensures that the social structure of the quarters is respected, and not disturbed,” Gustavo Restrepo says. “We must maintain the identity of the place under intervention as well as the collective memory of its inhabitants.”

**Turning urban degradation around**

After first results from the Comuna 1 intervention demonstrated the benefit of the IUP approach, the EDU team turned their sights on Comuna 13 in the city's north-east. Around 700 hectares in size, and with some 145,000 inhabitants, this huge informal settlement had only a few years before been an urban crisis zone.

“Our experiences in Comuna 1 showed us



“We are trialing pilot projects – if expectations are met, the idea can be multiplied.” **Gustavo Restrepo**

Part of the infrastructure development includes daycare centers – mothers bring their children and help in looking after the different groups.

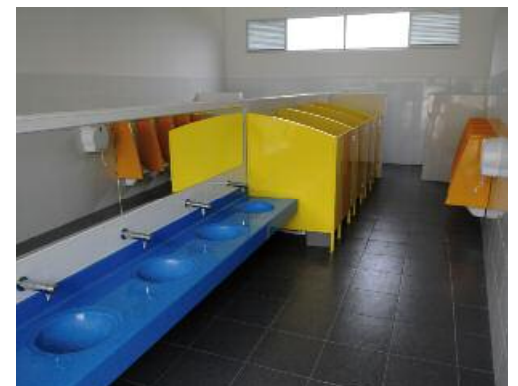
the way,” Gustavo Restrepo says. A planning office was established in the middle of the quarter. As well as the direct involvement of residents, many stakeholder groups engaged in the process of developing the comprehensive renewal strategy, including NGOs, other

government agencies, local community organizations and businesses.

#### **Riding the new Metrocable**

The project which generates the most excitement is the innovative public transport

system Metrocable, which connects the settlements on the hills with the subway and the formal city in the valley below. Comuna 13’s Metrocable line was opened in January 2008. Gondolas for up to eight occupants transport around 40,000 people a day.





Access has had a major impact on revaluing housing in the quarters.

Gustavo Restrepo is delighted: “When I hear from a resident that ‘thanks to Metrocable there are no borders or walls between us anymore,’ you can’t help but feel enthused about the real change taking place here.”

It is a comfortable mode of transport; its stations are new and spotless. In only a few minutes, the gondola is high over the quarter, bringing with it an overview of some 40 building projects currently under way. “That’s a new school, and here is a hospital,” Gustavo Restrepo says, pointing out landmarks. “Over there is a daycare center for children.”

The various projects have already created such an impact that some residents are on to the next stage of development – exten-

A gondola achieves what a road cannot – access to Comuna 13 and beyond. A ride on the Metrocable shows how Comuna 13 has changed – everywhere there are new landmarks, playgrounds and infrastructure.



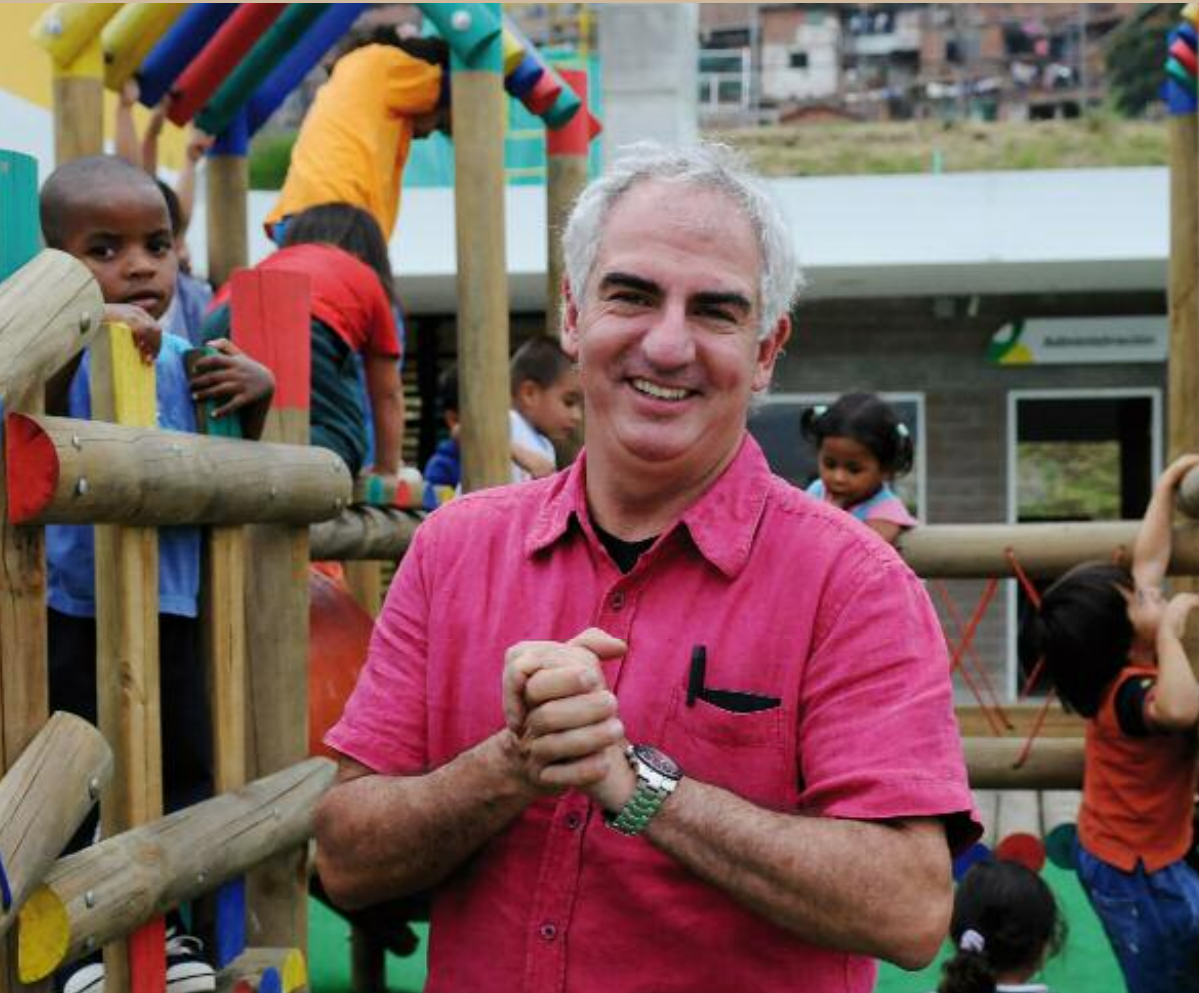
ding their homes to sub-let rooms. Such is the demand for housing in Comuna 13.

### **Financing the revitalization**

The number of projects under construction and the commitment to quality inevitably leads to the question: who pays? The answer is simple, according to Gustavo Restrepo. “Medellín has always been a rich city – it is the center of the Latin American textile industry,” he explains. “Revitalization of the city brings success and people have the means to pay taxes again. So we apply that money to our projects.”

### **Making up for lost time**

Gustavo Restrepo is fully engaged in the high-speed and high-pressure process. “For many years, progress was at a dawdling pace but now we are making up for lost time.” The 180 projects involved in this comprehensive process of urban trans-



## City lab

Behind the renewal strategy for Comuna 13 was background research covering all key elements of the quarter's current state and future needs – this included such aspects as public space components, mobility, equipment, environment and dwellings. The analysis took months and the results were published in a 100-page thick document. Each tree was counted, all building materials, plans and inventories were recorded. Comuna 13 in its entirety was committed to paper. "There were no records," Gustavo Restrepo (pictured left) says. "The analysis was critical to the process. The quarter itself was our laboratory."

From their investigations, the priority focus was on the creation of community meeting points to encourage public gathering and social cohesion. A target of a 40% increase in public space was set. This included revitalizing the series of streams that flow down from the hills into the city's river network. "We have reclaimed them as green corridors," Gustavo Restrepo explains. Remediation efforts include adapting informal dwellings on their banks, revegetation and the integration of new public spaces.

“Thanks to Metrocable there are no borders or walls between us anymore.”

Gustavo Restrepo (pictured above)

formation and integration employs 26 people full-time, and draws on the resources of some 400 external specialists. “We are confronted by challenges every day, but it is exciting and rewarding work.” The positive energy generated in the

community by the renewal process cannot be underestimated. Everywhere in Medellín one meets committed, engaged people who are ambassadors for change – change that demonstrates a strong contribution to the fulfillment of the Millennium Development

Goals. In this context, a professional daycare center is not simply a daycare center, nor are primary or secondary schools simply houses of learning. They are windows onto a real-life happy ending for this stunning transformation in Medellín.

