

Urban Interiority and the Spatial Processes of Securitisation in Medellín: A Speculation on the Architectures of Reassurance

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Abstract

Medellín, Colombia, a city best known for its violent history and subsequent radical transformation, hosts multiple political forces of varying degrees of legitimacy. In this context, architecture was mobilised as a physical weapon in the city's urban regions. As an extension of this architectural condition, the city's landscape has repeatedly been appropriated and repurposed to enforce state and criminal agency. Medellín's cultural geography became increasingly unstable as both real and imagined threats lingered in the spaces of every day – apartment towers, gated communities, supermarkets, TV and radio, imbued with violent operational spatial logics.

In detecting processes of regulation, protection, and surveillance, the political instrumentality and larger urban implications of interior space in Medellín are revealed through architectural objects and spatial devices of control. As techniques of securitisation, these processes provide evidence for the construction of Medellín's interiority, an urban condition founded on political violence and withdrawal. The objects and devices of this interiority are often remarkably ordinary, yet they are the political tools that indoctrinate a military-style urbanism that interprets, registers, and shapes territorial conflict. The mobilisation of Medellín's interiority in the pursuit of power and control has manufactured an urban imaginary governed by the constant threat of violence.

Keywords: interiority, politics, urban imaginary, Medellín, Colombia

Introduction

From the 1970's, on the back of a sharp economic recession, an extensive period of political violence in Colombia caused a shift toward new economic regimes that led to a spike in criminal activity, gang violence and the birth of the Narco-bourgeoisie in Medellín. Reconfiguration of the country's hegemonic and exclusory classes initiated the move from the dominant and long-established banana, oil and coffee trades to emeralds, counterfeit goods, narcotics, and arms. This restructuring led to the privatisation of power and violence and saw the uprise of multiple non-state militia groups and illegitimate enterprises that deployed systems of securitisation as weapons to establish hybrid forms of governance and assert territorial control. The shift in economic landscapes generated real and existential societal threats as general stores, banks, housing blocks, supermarkets and the everyday domestic spaces of Medellín came to house political operations.

By detecting the architectural and spatial processes of regulation, protection, and surveillance in Medellín, this paper surveys the political instrumentality of everyday interior space and its larger urban implications. Firstly, an account of Medellín's violent history and contemporary urban transformation contextualises the city's dominant narratives before discussing the urban and architectural devices that stimulate and reinforce notions of interiority. Furthermore, these devices reveal manifestations of fear and violence as architecture is applied as a lens in understanding the territorialisation of the city and establishing its urban imaginary. By employing architectural devices and spatial processes as a mode of interpretation, this paper provides examples of how an interiority founded on political violence has been constructed. Analyses of regulation, protection and surveillance measures reveal the organisational logic of spatial politics and how this has continued to exercise power over Medellín's collective memory, and finally, its relentless overemphasis on contemporary architecture's capacity to evoke change.

Medellín: Violence and Transformation

Cities are host to a myriad of spatial conflicts where political mobilisation and acts of subversion are concentrated, influencing and assisting in the governance and transformation of the urban realm. Medellín, an urban cocktail of terror, corruption, resistance, radicalisation, dissent and formerly known as the 'Murder Capital of the World,' is famous for the professionalisation of gangs and its subsequent progressive transformation. The city's most enduring

legacy is that of Pablo Escobar and the Medellín Cartel where violence and crime became a business that penetrated all aspects of the city. After a 15-year international narcotics war between cartels, paramilitary groups, guerrillas, politicians and Police Special Forces, a citywide manhunt led to the assassination of Escobar. However, attempts at reviving the city remained futile. 190 gangs were identified in Medellín in 1990 (Salazar, 1990, p. 8). Homicide numbers reached their peak in 1991, and high numbers continued until 2002 with a total estimate of 55,000 violent deaths (Hylton, 2007, p. 153). As described by Forest Hylton (2007) while detailing the social forces responsible for the city's current process of "extreme makeover," gangsterism had, in fact, become society itself as neighbourhood gangs and guerrilla groups continued to multiply throughout the city's rapidly growing informal neighbourhoods. With the lure of economic stability and social affluence, members were primarily involved in illicit activities such as extortion and racketeering, drug trafficking, contract killing and armed robbery – all of which adopted the spatial and technical infrastructure of their corresponding neighbourhoods to amplify political power. In reaction to this extended period of violent conflict, military-style spatial devices appeared across Medellín, constructing a landscape of borders, police stands and watchtowers, security fences and boom gates laced with CCTV cameras and radio frequency channels. This era of intense militarisation exploited both high and low-tech securitisation and control practices, redefining the behaviour of space in Medellín.

Today, following a barrage of international prizes, Medellín is known as 2013's 'Innovative City of the Year', an award bestowed by Citi Bank Group, the Wall Street Journal and the Urban Land Institute. Soon after, Medellín was to host the 2014 UN World Habitat Forum. These accolades strengthen the city's new architectural legacy, "Social Urbanism" (McGuirk, 2014, p. 243). In Medellín, architectural objects have appeared in an archipelago of intervention sites scattered across the city. An uncompromising architectural demand and the overemphasis of architecture as compensation for social insecurity has triggered global media hype, establishing the city's rank in the global urban hierarchy. Symbols of reassurance, its architecture has generated a new urban narrative – one that describes a fantastical civic rejuvenation and triumphs over the city's violent history.

However, the optimistic contemporary narrative of Medellín's all-encompassing urban reinvention is consistently paired with the violence of Narco-fuelled conflict. As Leopold Lambert (2016) describes, dominant urban narratives always function to enforce political agenda, in the case of Medellín, these narratives form a

deliberate cultural rhetoric to inform a precise and highly influential urban imaginary. Narratives perform in a way that uses popular and urban culture to seduce a multitude of generations, communities, individuals, and tourists to believe the dichotomies of good versus evil. The plague of the “Narcos” plays an essential role in the curation of the city’s new identity as the constant reminder of a violent past. What the dominant narratives fail to articulate, or purposely exclude, are that they are the consequence of a long-established military-style urban vision that has governed the way social, political and cultural circuits have developed and transformed. Stephen Graham (2010) calls this condition ‘the new military urbanism’ where a shift in the communal and private spaces of the city, and their infrastructures, renders them as a source of targets and threats (p. xiv). This condition is stable and constant, feeding on the conflict surrounding crime, terror, corruption, narcotics and general societal insecurities – infecting not only the urban infrastructures and landscapes of the city but also the everyday domestic realm.

Architecture, Interiority and Political Warfare

Everyday space became a system that sustained political action, affecting the organisation and behaviour of citizens in Medellín. Gangs have existed in Medellín since the 1960’s. However, their reign of intimidation and violence was not activated until the city was overrun by cartels during the narcotics war. This condition set a precursor for the recruitment of the underprivileged as extortionists, enforcers, undercover intelligence, contract killers, auto thieves, drug traffickers, armed robbers and money launders that continued well into the 1990’s (Hylton, 2007, p. 161). Crimes success as a business caused services to soon include methods of protection and defence – private security, armed escort services, construction, real estate, transportation and cable TV. All this assembles, as Jean-Louis Cohen (2011) infers in *Architecture in Uniform*, a city of mass spectacles that are interspersed among various episodes of conflict (p. 45). The urban as a critical space for dissent caused the interior to become passive and withdrawn, yet deeply colonised by political forces assembled as geographies of defence propaganda. This composition incited a powerful collective memory and fortified the doctrines of perpetual fear.

The architectures of political groups reinforced the territorialisation of Medellín’s neighbourhoods. They were mobilised as physical weapons directly operative on bodies. Architecture controlled the flow of goods and people as a machine of regulation and defence. Its characteristics are dependent on the needs of political actors. Space was strategically indispensable as architectural devices

determined the outcomes of political conflict. Eyal Weizman (2007) consistently questions the role of architecture in this position as built objects and space are systematically oppressed, manipulated or destroyed as symbolic devastations of governance, culture, and community. Architecture, in this case, is an instrument that detects, and responds to, the multiple scales of political violence in the city. Its total mobilisation in the pursuit of power and control is the motivation behind Medellín's transformation as the contemporary architectural narrative continues to govern the production of the city's identity.

Interiority is defined by, and firmly rooted in, the emotional responses of the city's inhabitants to contextualised violence that is central to understanding individual existence. Similarly, interiority in Medellín is perceived as a symptomatic response to the urban conflicts occurring in the public spaces of everyday life – the city's inhabitants withdrawing into defended and gated enclaves where life becomes reduced to the interior. As interior space fell victim to 'bandas,' local gang members, a surplus in clientele authenticated "protective services" and imposed illicit tactics of safety rent to support the coordination of further territorial control (Moncada, 2016, p. 231/2). Fear had manifested itself in the city's interiors, and, it is here where citizens became susceptible to individual or communal vulnerabilities. Returning to Graham's (2010) notion of 'the new military urbanism,' the design of collective fears is a direct and militarised means of managing the wider public realm of the city (p. 107). Interior space was exposed to political power-play as criminal actors were forcibly employed as protection from "enemies" on the street. Consequently, interiority in Medellín is marked by externality as it responds to the actions and events of contextual violence.

Medellín's interiority can also be described through the concept of 'battlespace.' Graham (2010) describes 'battlespace' as all-consuming, nothing lies outside of its temporal or geographic zones – it has "no front or back, no start nor end" (p. 31). It permeates all and includes both friendly and enemy forces in its infrastructures, environments, and terrains. Interiority in Medellín is absorbed into the city's 'battlespace,' it is constantly manipulated to assist military-style fantasies of regulation, protection, and surveillance. Therefore, interior space is not a passive backdrop in the dissemination of violence, instead, security, as its psychological effect, turned this space into a perpetual target. This has constituted an interiority founded on apprehension and permeates all aspects of social life as its operational logics work to anticipate and/or deflect violence.

Evidence: Regulation, Protection, and Surveillance

The performance of violence, as a condition of Medellín's interiority, is established through systems of "banal terrorisms" that normalise security practices. These systems are deliberate, and unassuming and act in brute force. Systems hinge on their visibility – or invisibility – as every day symbols of the real and perceived threat of contextual terror. Cindy Katz (2007) identifies systems of 'banal terrorisms' as permanently fixed in the performance of "secure" everyday environments. These systems work across all scales as they authorise and reinforce one another to become naturalised and accepted as spatial norms (p. 351). They connect the geography of the interior and exterior by framing spatial denominations of power. As "measures of security," systems obscure the true purpose that drives the realisation and consumption of securitisation. Cohen (2011) characterises these systems as landscapes of "surveillance and video equipment, security checkpoints, material tests and restrictions, prevention protocols and heavily armed security guards [that] now adorn streets, building lobbies, airports, train and bus stations – even our homes" (p. 7). Even inanimate objects, statues, weapons and household commodities can be appropriated to assert authority over space.

Spatial devices communicate countless socio-political actions, revealing both visible and "invisible" means of control. The evidence collected here categorises spatial devices that constitute the processes of regulation, protection and surveillance practices and their effects in Medellín since the 1970's. Evidence comes not only from historical accounts and architectural documents but a diverse range of cultural products – investigative journalism, documentaries, popular television serials and glossy magazines. The assortment of evidence is vast and often bias. It effectively reconstructs information that fetishises the city's dominant narratives, yet also provides information that deciphers the city's anatomy. Spatial processes assist in the portrayal of 'vast complexes of individualities, subjectivities [and] communities, each with layers upon layers of [difference], complexity and ambiguity within their own [built] fabric, that exist and operate within all the strata of the "world"' (Graham, 2010, p. 37). These devices reveal the structure of interiority in Medellín. It does not simply frame political action, but, incessantly transforms the city's field of conflicts through ordinary, and spectacular, events that traverse multiple territories. Interiority is sustained by the psychological presence of security, exploiting the built rhetoric of "good" versus "evil" to establish an urban imaginary that constructs ideas of public space plagued by perpetual violence.

Regulation

In Medellín, the demarcation of territory is essential in demonstrating the power of both legally recognised state actors and non-state criminal actors. As community insecurities rose during the 1980's, non-state actors linked to gangs and drug-trafficking networks preyed on vulnerable societal groups to gain legitimacy. In the context of social inequality and exclusion, providing public services to marginalised communities in frontier zones allowed criminal actors to exercise alternative forms of authority – enforcing new territorial regulations in 'barrios' positioned throughout strategic urban corridors. As the operation of illicit networks grew more sophisticated, drug-traffickers and 'bandas' expanded their business portfolios to consume everything from contraband, prostitution, and extortion to profitable protective services enterprises – confusing the legality and formality of their actions and arrangements.

By the 1990's, the 15th Brigade of Medellín counted at least 120 bands of contract killers in the Aburra Valley; these were located mostly in the northeast with over 3000 youths involved, the average age being 16 (Salazar, 1990, p. 112). As the gap between income and consumer desires grew, the demand for fast money resulted in the increased involvement of youths in black market economies. The combination of job insecurity, a hike in the cost of living and barrios laden with gangs led to the establishment of illegal credit systems run by criminal actors where street gangs shared in a percentage of the profits. This system set up the framework for lucrative methods of extortion from residents, small businesses and transport companies in the neighbourhood (Abello-Colak & Guarneros-Meza, 2014, p. 3278). Combined with a severe lack of community leisure space, communal insecurities reduced social space to the interior. With approximately 450 residents per hectare, domestic space became an extension of the barrios (Salazar, 1990, p. 112). This absorption of the domestic, the elimination of the street and community interiors, constructed a permanent and singular interior in the peripheral neighbourhoods of Medellín. Criminal actors imprisoned residents in their everyday spaces by enforcing systems of economic regulation, order, and control. Density and the lack of public space contributed to an interiority founded on insecurity where politics was executed through informal economic tactics and constraints.

Protection

As Medellín's socio-spatial pattern continued to fragment due to violent confrontations between non-state and state groups over disputed territory, inequalities deepened, and struggles over the

right to public space continued. A constant and changing pattern of hazardous urban zones was controlled by criminal agents and transgressing between them became precarious. The State was distant and often hostile, and police were the materialisation of ineffective defences against criminal parties. The geography of fear expanded causing architectures of protection, prevention, concealment and increased exclusion – “such architectures operate ‘in the false hope of creating rigidity and secure difference’ within the volatilities and polarisations of contemporary city life” (Graham, 2010, p. 107). These architectures aestheticise criminal agency as new expressions of spatial appropriation led to the proliferation of gated communities and apartment towers, security doors, boom gates and CCTV cameras.

As large, new apartment complexes geared at the middle and upper-class appeared, everyday existence became consistently more interiorised – fences, surveillance cameras and the constant presence of private security, fortified residents against members, and victims, of controlled gang territories and low-income districts. As domestic spaces became increasingly more lavish, embellished with protective and preventative spatial allegories, they activated a sense of homogeneity, certainty, and withdrawal. The continued demonisation of criminal underclasses secured and justified the need to retreat to fortified enclaves of luxury lifestyles. Even Pablo Escobar supposedly hid a share of his fortune in the walls of various residences (Mollison, 2007, p. 309) and found “refuge” from the State in his own self-built “prison,” La Catedral (Mollison, 2007, p. 184).

The introduction of military-style doctrines of domestic space caused “the upper and middle classes [to withdraw] from open public spaces, enclosing themselves or privatising the spaces they wished to access, [whilst] the dangerous classes invaded public spaces, appropriating the streets, the public squares and the inner city” (Stienen, 2009, p. 112). The conditions of interiority became disengaged from urban life, an imagined world founded on its separation from civic and social life, wholly dependent on the affordance of elite luxury and resort-style living. Keller Easterling (2005) describes these objects and scenarios as ‘spatial products.’ They are “[glyphs] and [monuments] in overt political contexts; they are nuanced expressions of heavy information, an unexpected subtext of action or practice” (p. 6). In Medellín, these ‘spatial products’ secure and radicalise conditions of interiority imbued with myth and symbolic protection for the wealthy. These fortified archipelagos of high-end domestic urban enclaves are the architectural language of – and the recipe for – the political constitution of elitist control operations. Typically presumed as

protective and preventative responses to urban conflict, this interiority, its territorial demarcation, and systems of banal security devices are apparatuses of intimidation and aggression.

Surveillance

Symptoms of Medellín's increasingly violent episodes, the reduction of social existence to everyday interiors, gated communities and apartment towers adorned with CCTV cameras and private security – and their informal counterparts in peripheral barrios – produced a territory of police security and surveillance services. The “positive” and “safe” aspects of space were reliant on the existence of armed police. Consequently, in 1989, to assert political power, cartel leaders declared “death to the police in the city,” offering prize rewards for the death of a policeman beginning at US\$2500 and increasing by rank (Mollison, 2007, p. 150). Attacks continued until 1993 and claimed the lives of as many as 1000 police officers (Mollison, 2007, p. 150). The response of police personnel was just as merciless as their criminal enemy with police-death-squads retaliating and enacting revenge, causing many innocent civilians to be caught in the crossfire. This conflict resulted in surveillance architectures, such as Centro de Atención Inmediata (CAI) police stands, to be reconfigured in the process of invisibilisation. They were replaced by dense systems of CCTV surveillance devices, telecommunications, radio, TV and plainclothes civilian police as primary regulatory operations of political control – changes in urban policy even made it illegal to ride a motorcycle with a passenger in an attempt to curb the killings (Mollison, 2007, p. 150).

Reconfiguring the nature of surveillance and control techniques toward vague and omnipresent notions of safety – and away from territorial occupation – reinforced the construction of Medellín's urban imaginary of fear. Again, citizens retreat to their protected interior enclaves, evading violent attacks, events, and disruptions occurring in the everyday public circuits of normal civic life. Here, interiors are heavily monitored, surveyed and controlled by technological means of intelligence – cameras, TV, radio and other forms of cultural media – they are shaped by mass media news coverage. Interior space became the site for the continuous performance of 24/7 projections of symbolic and real violence bringing foreign territorial threats from any geographic distance back to everyday living spaces. Even though most publicity went to drug-related violence, statistically this was far less important than the everyday manifestations of terror. Medellín's manufactured interior imposed a “condition of vulnerability [that necessitated] a culture of perpetual vigilance, anticipation, and preparedness, as citizens [were] mobilised as citizen-soldiers to personally surveil

their everyday landscapes, to be always on the look-out for the ever-elusive and ill-defined 'unusual'" (Graham, 2010, p. 93).

Conclusion: Urban Interiority in Medellín

Notions of interiority have consistently produced an opposition between the "inside" and "outside" world. This is largely framed by cultural constructions of inner experience. This process emerged when the interior was first recognised as a key architectural space in the development and experience of individual subjectivities. As architecture took to constructing the interior world, spatial effects produced by the organisation of the interior performed as a secure space that conveyed outward forms of individual expression. With fundamental social and cultural beliefs tied to architectural space, interiority functions as the site for self-definition. In Medellín, interiority is not limited to the individual experience of domestic space. Rather, it functions at the scale of the city, in multiple forms, and is founded on the collective experience of urban violence. As a result, the operational logic of interiority in Medellín has been laden with heavy symbolism. It is recognised in the architectures of securitisation and moves fluidly between interior and exterior space; it is an interiority dense with objects, devices, operations and processes. Easterling (2007) terms these types of architectures as "piratical" – architectures of information that are far from innocent in their endeavours (p. 12). Their spatial implications govern the framing, interrogation, and design of the vast and intimate territory of interiority in Medellín.

Interior space in Medellín enacts political violence and interiority behaves as a landscape of everyday scenarios that employ securitisation as their dominant psychological effect, generating powerful responses to contextual conflict through the sites of real, perceived and imagined threats. Weizman (2014) illustrates these spatial conditions as fields of instances where "sites must be understood to be more than mere locational designations" (p. 9). Sites are neutral, plotting events on a timeline, but also dynamic landscapes that shape and inflict violence. As the site for political performance, interiority in Medellín does not belong exclusively to the interior or exterior realm. Rather, it is an urban interior, a seamless territory militarised and victim to multiple conflicts that construct societal fears. It is consistently rearticulated by multiple agents in the city to generate an organisational logic founded on the spatial processes previously outlined in this paper. Interiority is the medium for which architectural objects and spatial devices communicate and interfere with each other as they interpret the political composition of the city.

Speculations on the Present

In Medellín, visible links between the city's structural continuity of interiority and the proliferation of contemporary architectures of transformation reinforce the significance of processes of securitisation. The city's makeover has paired iconic architectural objects and an urbanism of social intent with an excess of vast civic plazas, corporate branding strategies, formal policing and armour car escort services. Interiority, used as a lens to frame these contemporary notions of urban space, raises serious questions regarding Medellín's architectures of reassurance. As the site for political agency, interiority as an organisational mechanism, suggests that contemporary developments in the city act as compensation for its violent history. Even under the weight of today's optimistic narrative, systems of securitisation determine the organisational logic of spatial developments as architectural objects are mobilised as weapons of positivity in contemporary urban warfare. Deeply embedded with political agenda, urban "polarisation is manufactured and recycled through the discourses of the state, [and is] backed by representations suited to popular culture" (Graham, 2010, p. 380). This is largely the result of the continued imposition of the psychological effects of narco-fuelled violence in the forming of Medellín's collective urban imaginary and the construction of interiority.

As interiority moves beyond the walls of its enclosure, the collective effect of societal fears has caused processes of securitisation to manifest in the construction, fortification, reconstruction and even destruction of built space in Medellín since the 1970's. The extension of this process uses contemporary architectural projects to demarcate urban territory and continues to facilitate the demonisation of criminal underclasses by colonising neighbourhoods located in frontier zones. This is a direct political assault on the city through intervention and the relentless promise of change. Medellín celebrates these architectural objects and spatial processes, yet these new global architectures effortlessly transgress into objects of symbolic violence and control as they reorganise and subvert sites of interiority and urbanity.

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