## From social urbanism to strategies of collective action in Medellin

Penny Travlou in conversation with Catalina Ortiz and Harry Smith

Penny Travlou (PT): In recent years, Colombia's economic growth has placed the country among the world's 'emerging economies', while Medellin has been branded as 'a city of urban innovation'. However, over 30 per cent of Medellin's population still live in poor housing conditions and/or inadequate homes. Could you please give us an overview of the housing situation in Medellin in the last twenty years?

Catalina Ortiz (CO): This is a very broad question, but let me point out to two scales. Housing policy in Colombia has largely focused on the construction of new housing or the resettlement of informal dwellers in new housing. [In Colombia], much of the effort and public budget are just following, in a way, the general model that the Chilean government championed in the region, the policy of subsidies to the demand of housing. Under neoliberal regimes, this is the strategy that has become predominant all across Latin America: subsidies for building in the outskirts of the city, in areas that do not necessarily have the best conditions to be urbanized – with all the problems associated with this. These problems are very well known to urban scholars. So, I think that there is a mismatch of priorities at the national *versus* the local level.

At city level, one singularity stands out – the generation and investment of public revenue is very high in comparison to the whole region. Nonetheless, there are persistent inequalities, and the qualitative deficit in housing is still large. When we approach the case of Medellin, we always have to ask, how come one of the most 'innovative' cities remains so unequal despite all the public investment? The city still has a lot of work to do towards more redistributive measures: redistribution not only in terms of access and public facilities but also in terms of income and real opportunities for social mobility, and with that, of course, political

recognition. In a research we did several years ago, in which we tried to map the trajectory of urban change [in Medellin], we discovered that most of Medellin's urban footprint (almost 40 per cent) has informal origins. The 1950s, the time of the great rural–urban migration, was the time when many of Medellin's popular neighbourhoods had begun to be built. That type of construction and self-building processes that happened during the 1950s and all the way to the 1970s produced a large part of the housing that we see now. Another very important peak in migration and new inhabitants arriving to the city occurred mainly in the 1990s, and was aligned with the exacerbation of armed conflict and the resulting forced displacement.

The configuration of a substantial number of self-built neighbourhoods are a by-product of the massive migration from rural areas or other cities. A different pattern of neighbourhoods was built in the city according to the time and trajectory of the inhabitants and the urbanization process. While in the 1970s there was construction of what is called *barrios piratas* [*'pirate neighbourhoods'*], this was still in the lowlands, or in the areas where the slope was not so steep, here the urban layout had provisions for mobility infrastructure and some public facilities making easier the provision of public utilities. In contrast, the neighbourhoods that were built during the 1990s are in areas that are more fragile from an ecological perspective. The population that came to the city during the 1990s are, to a great extent, victims of the conflict and built several neighbourhoods called *invasions* [invasions]. Therefore, the conditions [in these areas] have been very poor in terms of urban standards. These are the more challenging areas for intervention. So, even now, in this very year [2020], an updated *Strategic Plan for Housing and Habitat* was approved, which recognizes the ongoing precarity of the housing conditions in some neighbourhoods. Since the 1990s, of course, there has been a lot of further migration and, also, internal population growth. This has been ongoing.

With the rise of social urbanism since 2004, there has been a new focus on areas of informal settlement, and the strategy of connecting these areas to the general transport system in order to achieve a symbolic inclusion of the more problematic and precarious areas into the fabric of the city. This strategy of social urbanism has been very popular, mostly because it focuses on the generation of public spaces, public facilities of education and culture, and the innovative use of cable cars as part of our massive integrated transport system. These have been the main strategies for improving the conditions of life in these informal settlements. So, in the last fifteen years, there have been three approaches to housing: business as usual real estate speculation; generating new housing, such as vertical social housing; and a focus on reducing the qualitative deficit through this strategy of social urbanism targeting informal settlements. The whole upfront speculation focuses on how the high-income areas have experienced a complete transformation of the landscape with the verticalization of the city, the [expansion of] the very high-end property market, and, also, the consolidation of new frontiers of urban expansion under what we would call 'informality from the top'. Unlike informality from the bottom, this is not criminalized. This very interesting phenomenon is, of course, present in any places, but it is especially blunt in the case of Medellin.

This would be, roughly speaking, a general perspective on the housing conditions [in Medellin]. Of course, there are several further elements to discuss: the number of housing units in downtown tenements (this is estimated to be more than 25,000 units, or more than 8,000 households), and the risks and challenges, such as the spiking homelessness and the new wave of migrants, mainly from Venezuela, who are adding further pressures on the informal settlements and changing the landscape [of the areas] where new housing is intended to be generated.

Harry Smith (HS): My engagement with housing in Medellin was initially through the *Medellin Urban Innovation*[1] (MUI) project, from 2015 to 2017. Together with Professor Françoise Coupé (from the Colombian side), I was responsible for the housing team within that project. There was an exchange of knowledge and experience in housing research among academics [in Medellin] and the team from Edinburgh, and I learnt a lot. Comparing the situation in Medellin with my experience from elsewhere, [Medellin was representative of] what you could see throughout the Global South, and South America in particular. There has been a long experience of state intervention and housing provision [in Medellin], going back to the 1950s and 1960s. This provision focuses very much on owner occupation rather than renting. This remains the trend in Colombia in general, and Medellin in particular. The other thing to bear in mind is that, in the 1980s, internationally there was a shift from the state providing housing to the state enabling housing, in line with the United Nations' discourse on this. So, how has this played out in Medellin? From what I could see, Medellin still enables developers to provide what we call 'minimum-standard dwellings'. Medellin has some examples [of this], such as *Nuevo Occidente*, which was actually built to temporarily house athletes participating in the games hosted there before being allocated to low-income households, and which, in a way, replicates the model from the 1950s and 1960s. Some of these housing projects, which are very much based on a modernist approach, do reach people of very low income to some extent, because they have to. As we were starting to work on the Medellin Urban Innovation

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[1] Medellín: A model for future cities? Harnessing innovation in city development for social equity and well-being #MUI was a research collaboration between academic and non-academic institutions in the UK and Colombia. It was a two-year project (2015 – 17) that received a Newton Institutional Links Grant from the British Council. MUI was about researching to what extent urban innovation in Medellín (Colombia) has helped increase social equity and well-being in the city. This project was led by Dr Soledad Garcia Ferrari (University of Edinburgh) in collaboration with Dr Harry Smith (Heriot-Watt University). http://www.medellin-urban-innovation.eca.ed.ac.uk/ This led to two projects on landslide risk management in Medellin (2016-19) working with communities in *Comuna 8*. https://www.globalurbancollaborative.org/completed-projects

Project, there was a programme just starting, of about 100,000 housing units specifically addressing lower-income residents. Historically, these modernist projects actually reached middle-income and, at a stretch, low-middle-income residents, rather than lower-income ones, although there have been attempts to reach the latter as well. At the other end, you see the so-called informal settlements continuing to spread very rapidly up the hillsides. This is housing that people provide for themselves, because there is still a large influx of internally displaced people. In the follow-up projects that I worked on, we worked in three neighbourhoods, looking at risk and how we can manage it. In two of [these neighbourhoods], the percentage of internally displaced people was about 80 per cent. This shows you how many people were actually still coming to the city. [These people] tend to provide themselves with housing on the perimeter [of the city], in increasingly high-risk areas further and further away from the city centre. That was the other extreme. So, there is both official and unofficial housing provision. You asked about the last two decades. Something that has happened in the last two decades is Medellin coming on the world map as 'the most innovative city in the world', as it was acclaimed in 2013, and promoting its social urbanism model internationally.

Going back to the question about housing, essentially, we do not see [the situation in Medellin] as dissimilar to what occurs in many other rapidly growing cities of the Global South. Now, what struck me in my repeated visits to Medellin was the surprising speed at which some of these so-called informal settlements were appearing and growing. I remember being on a visit in Santo Domingo with some Colombian collaborators who looked across the valley to the western side and said, 'that settlement over there wasn't there the last time I was up here'. Even the local officials were surprised by the speed at which some of these things were happening, so I think that this is generally the case. Another thing to highlight is the increasing polarization and segregation in socio-economic terms. As far as I can see, this is continuing.

You get very high-income areas such as *El Poblado*, contrasting with very low-income areas, for example the Northeast, and, also, the Northwest periphery of the city. You can see this very clearly. If you overlap a map of socio-economic stratification in Medellin on the map of the city's topography, you can see that the higher-income people tend to be in the valley and also in the Southeast (there are some exceptions to this, because of high-income areas expanding up the hillsides in some places), but, in the rest of the city, the lower-income residents are concentrated on the periphery and the hillsides. Finally, another thing to highlight is that Medellin very clearly exemplifies two forms of the so-called 'informal housing' provision. One [form] is the 'land invasions' that we typically recognize from other Latin American cities: largely self-built housing without regular layouts, without services. . . . Well, [some] services, such as water and electricity, are present to some extent, but other services are not. [Besides these], there are other settlements, which are not legal or formally approved historically. These [settlements], called *urbanizaciones piratas* ['pirate settlements'], are quite regular. You also find [them] in Bogota, so this phenomenon is not unique to Medellin, but it is very striking there. *Urbanizaciones piratas* have produced a lot of the urban tissue in Medellin, and much of them predates the last two decades. This type of settlement has been present since the 1960s. What I think has happened in the last two decades is that these places may have been consolidating. But, there has been more land invasion and unorganized, informal settlement in the last two decades, rather than *barrios piratas*.

PT: How really inclusive is the '*Medellin miracle*' project in reference to housing? Can we speak of a successful policy when we refer, for example, to social urbanism? Could you please elaborate on this with describing, firstly, what social urbanism is, and, secondly, how social urbanism has shaped housing conditions in the city?

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CO: We have the official discourse about social urbanism *versus* the more critical approach. A lot of my work has been following a more critical approach on what [social urbanism] is. I have defined social urbanism as [a set] of spatial strategies for monumentalizing the peripheries by intertwining partial slum upgrading with a pacification process. I think that this is very important, because we cannot overlook the role that the militarization of space plays in the 'success' of social urbanism. Also, when I say that slum upgrading is partial, I refer to the fact that the emphasis of the social urbanist project has been mainly on the construction of public infrastructure (public systems), whereas tricky issues such as housing, tenure, risk mitigation, climate adaptation and income generation are less at the centre of this strategy. So, I think that [social urbanism] has been very successful in boosting people's civic pride; also, in terms of mobility and public facilities, it has certainly made a very important achievement. Nonetheless, when you ask who can pay, who can afford to even access the transport system, some assessments have shown that, even if you build the infrastructure, this does not mean that everyone is able to afford the fare and access the system, right? There could be a mismatch in affordability. This is why older transit systems for getting to the downtown are in some cases still active. So, there is a partial 'success'.

I also think that the very idea of 'success' is very problematic. We need to answer the question: Success for whom? [Social urbanism] has been extremely successful for the marketing of the city. In this regard, [it has been] part of removing the stigmatization [of Medellin] in the international arena. This is a very good achievement. On the other hand, this very 'boosterism' and the marketing of the city have also been used against any contestation and dissent within different social movements in Medellin. Slogans such as *'the most innovative city'* and the legitimacy that international actors give to this success, have also resulted in many setbacks in terms of what a culture of community planning can do. There is

still a technocratic approach to planning, and this is interesting and important, but not if it happens at the expense of different voices, different ways of practising planning and of providing spaces (also) for dissent.

HS: I think that, sometimes, there is some confusion about what the 'Medellin miracle' is. There are two stages in this ['miracle']. There is what is known externally as the 'Medellin miracle': social urbanism, which came along with Fajardo [the former mayor of Medellin], from 2004 onwards. People external to Medellin contrast this with what was previously known as 'the murder capital of the world' and tend to conflate these two things. However, there was a prior stage, in the early 1990s: because the situation in Medellin was so bad, a presidential commission was set up to address it, and they started turning around violence back then. One of the elements of that earlier programme was what we call 'slum upgrading' in English, which, I think, is a very often inappropriate term for what, in Spanish, is called 'neighbourhood improvement'. This integrated neighbourhood improvement programme back then [in the 1990s] transformed housing conditions in some parts of Medellin. I think it was the same period when one of the concepts used the National University in Medellin was coined 'habitat', rather than 'housing'. 'Habitat' is a more holistic concept, so it brought about improvements in habitat [when it] came along. So, this is when the 'miracle' started, if you want to put it this way.

Then social urbanism came along, and this is what has been marketed externally. The discourse around social urbanism was about the city owing a historic debt to the poorer areas which were also part of it, and which have to be given more resources, and better access to the kind of resources the rest of the city has. When I say 'access', this did translate into, for example, transport infrastructure, such as the *Metrocable*, and public infrastructure, such as the park libraries. Social urbanism was about both. It tried to combine access to information

and culture, and also to open spaces, green areas. It thus produced these park libraries, which are very iconic and produce a new image of the city. These [park libraries] had an impact on both the local consciousness and also the external image of the city. For social urbanism, housing was a much lower priority than it was for the previous interventions of the early 1990s. [In social urbanism, housing interventions were undertaken as] a kind of model project. The advantage in the Juan Bobo project, for example, was that it provided better housing conditions for people who were living in informal settlements around a ravine. In some cases, [these people] were provided with upgraded houses; in other cases, people who were living right down in the ravine at high risk were rehoused in modernist buildings. There was no removal elsewhere [in Medellin] as far as I know. That project won international awards, but it was very costly; so it was not replicated. It was in line with other interventions, such as the major transport infrastructure, *Metrocable*, which is highly visible and, again, a symbol. There was a publication, produced by DPU,[2] which talks about the symbolic importance of social urbanism. To a large extent, a lot of what was done was symbolic rather than actual, substantial change. Even the capacity of the *Metrocable* is not that great: it is not a mass transportation system, since the number of people it can transport [is small], but it does work, it does integrate, and, for many people who use it, it has transformed their connection with the city. But there is a lot of symbolism there. So, in terms of housing, what was done tended to be rather symbolic as well, instead of achieving widespread improvement of housing throughout the city. [The latter] is not something that social urbanism achieved.

PT: Following from my previous question, social urbanism has been considered as a means to build an image of the city that is more distinguishable from that of other cities in Colombia.

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[2] The Bartlett – Development Planning Unit

From your own research, what can we draw as best practice when we discuss social urbanism? Obviously, you refer to infrastructures. I was looking back at research on social urbanism, and most studies focus on the public libraries, public space, the transport system connecting the different neighbourhoods, etc. But, then, what about housing within the social urbanism agenda?

HS: To build on what I said previously, the impact of social urbanism on housing was much, much less. Housing was not, as far as I know, a key focus of social urbanism; [social urbanism] was much more focused on infrastructures. [There are also] other things that have not been talked about very widely, but [which] you hear when you talk to the communities, when you dig a little bit more. In some cases, it appears that housing was actually removed to make way for some of [the social urbanist] projects, and that created quite a bit of disparity and distress in some communities. We encountered this when we started our project on landslide risk management in 2016. When we talked to people in the communities where the housing conditions are much poorer, one of the things we found was that there were two discourses. On the periphery of Medellin, one of their key demands is for *vivienda digna* [decent housing]. Even the way they organize themselves reflects this. One of the key players we worked with was the *Mesa de Vivienda*, that is, the Housing Board, which is district-wide. I am talking about *Comuna 8*: There, in particular, housing is such a key issue for them that they are well organized to lobby about this. This is because [housing] has not been addressed properly by the local government from the community's perspective. Judging from recent interventions, when the local government does intervene, it does so in relation, for example, to what they call *macro proyectos* (macro-projects) [that aim] to develop the city by areas, and, also, to address risk. What the community sees when this happens is local government mapping the risk areas and then saying, 'we are going to have to rehouse you'. This sends mixed messages

to the community because, on the one hand, some households think, 'well, if we get proper housing out of this it might be good', but many say, 'no, we want to stay here, this is our home'. You get into this conflicting situation where local communities are saying, 'wait a minute, you are talking about us being in high-risk areas, but what this really is about is high cost'; 'how come people in El Poblado [a high-income area] are living in high-rise flats, on exactly the same kind of steep hillsides as us, and they are not being told that they need to move out, while we are?' So, housing actually becomes a bit of a catalyst, or a lens through which you can see the socio-economic segregation. In that sense, it has not really been addressed by social urbanism – at least not successfully.

PT: From your past and most recent research in Medellin, what do you think are the ignored (alternative) voices, memories and learning spaces that have disrupted upgrading urban practices such as the ones discussed earlier?

CO: I think that the most incredible and rich set of experiences have been propelled and championed by grassroots organizations and long-term NGOs that are very committed to different territories. Even though I could not point out a specific project that deals directly with housing, I think that there is a lot of work around social mobilization. Many collectives – such as the *Movimiento de Laderas* – are working in what is now called *escuela popular de autonomias*, or popular school of autonomies. I think that these practices bring a very interesting new perspective into the old, traditional popular education movement that is so well established in Latin America. Initiatives such as the *escuela popular de autonomia*, or those led by the victims of the Conflict who try to [find ways] to support the livelihoods of people who have been forcibly displaced, are very inspiring. Speaking specifically about the *escuela popular de autonomias*, they started in *Comuna* 8 because this has been the hub of many very interesting and progressive initiatives. The *escuela popular de autonomias* have

also been linked with *Comunas* 3 and 1. This year, the *comunas* have been consolidating this idea of *escuela popular de autonomias*, talking about food and energy sovereignty, and also thinking in terms of harnessing issues of the right to stay put, community-based risk mitigation, or culture and education from the bottom. This is a very interesting approach that builds on popular education and critical pedagogies. They have been meeting even during the pandemic!

As I mentioned, key to this transformation is how the pacification process enables the state to build new strategies of territorial control and surveillance, which we usually fail to see or speak much about because of the very complicated and opaque nature of these processes. [What is] largely ignored is precisely how the construction of territorial peace – one of the main mantras after the signing of the peace accord with FARC – takes place in the cities. I think that this process (how you build territorial peace) has already been happening within cultural collectives: they have done a lot of incredible work on this. For instance, consider the case of *Agroarte*, a collective that links sowing and hip-hop with performances to honour resistance and memory in the context of *Comuna* 13 legacy of armed conflict and 'military operations'. The more intangible, kinaesthetic expression of reconciliation has featured as part of this transformation. The [discussion on transformation] has not been explicit enough about how [such processes] play a role in reconciliation and the building of peace. [Pacification] has been addressed mainly through the lens of militarization and not of the processes through which reconciliation and recognition for the victims are achieved.

Regarding housing, my work approaches it as an infrastructure of care. According to this approach, food and energy are the basis of survival and the protection of life. If we extend this notion of infrastructure of care, then we could think that the *escuela popular de autonomia* could be connected to housing. We understand them at a broader level: of course,

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they do their advocacy around 'slum upgrading' and the recognition of tenure, the security of tenure, and this, of course, is directly related to housing and the informal settlements.

HS: One of the things that is striking about this is how communities have a really strong voice in parts of the city. I have worked a lot with community representatives, from *Comuna* 8 in particular. My knowledge might be biased towards the people I have been engaging with, because I do get the impression that they are particularly strong. I do not know how strong community voices are in other parts of the city, but they are highly articulate, and housing is one of their key demands: *vivienda digna*. They are very well organized as well. As part of our first landslide project, we piloted community-based approaches to monitoring and mitigating landslide risk with residents in a particular small community. In the second year of the project, this developed into the community organizing a *cabildo abierto* [townhall meeting] – a type of meeting that is recognized in the Colombian constitution. If the local community requests [such a meeting], the Municipality has to respond. This does not mean that [the municipal authority] has to act, but at least it has to provide a response to what the community is demanding. Since we were doing action research, we were flexible. We went along with the flow, and I was really impressed by the strong and organized voice the community expressed through that platform. The project itself was instrumental in actually making that [meeting] happen, because you needed two things to happen: you needed those who had the authority to legally convene that [meeting], that is, the *Junta Administradora Local* [Local Administration Board] – the lowest level of local government – the ones who could involve the Municipality; you also needed a different type of *junta* [board], the *Junta de Acción Local* [Local Action Board] or *the Junta Communal* [Community Board], who had the power to actually bring people from the community. So, these bodies are the top (recognized) level of the community, and the bottom level of the local administration: one could convene the Municipality; [the

other] could convene the community. Françoise Coupé was able to work out an agreement between these two levels to bring about this *cabildo*. The result was that, in the first *cabildo*, in August 2017, up in Sol de Oriente, we had over 600 people from the community, from across the entire *Comuna* 8. The whole thirty-three neighbourhoods of *Comuna* 8 were represented, [including] the ones from the lower-income area.

The other thing that you saw there as well was the important role of supportive NGOs in facilitating communication. There was an NGO there that had been working with the community for a long, long time. They facilitated the whole event, and they organized it so that every community – each one of the community representatives – had three minutes to talk, to present their petition to the Municipality. [There were many] communities, and they got three minutes each. I thought that we could learn a lot from how they organize things, because every time one community came up to present their petition, the NGO called out the next one to be ready. It was a constant stream, it was so efficient, it was amazing! And then we had the different departments of the Municipality represented there. The debate got pretty heated. At one point, the [representatives of the Municipal] Departments stood up and said '*we're leaving*', even though, at the beginning of the session (initiated by Françoise and me), I had explained the project, and Françoise had explained the terms of *concertación*, and how people need to engage under these terms: the thing you should never do is close the door, you should keep the door open to dialogue. And when they all got up to leave, I said to Françoise who was sitting next to me, '*they're closing the door!*', but they [came back and] sat down again. Then, the following year, there was another *cabildo* around the same issues – risk management and *vivienda digna* – and the tone had changed quite a lot. So, the community has a strong voice, and we have managed to find ways to engage with the Municipality, although it has been confrontational at times.

I mentioned NGOs. . . . From the first project, we had learnt that the community we worked with had strong leaders, but focused on just one leader. For a community organization, this is a weakness. But, you cannot expect that community organizations will [be able to resort to their own] resources all the time. They need some other external support sometimes and, also, other types of knowledge. These can come from NGOs, which [can] work really well with the community on the ground. So, in the second landslide project we worked on, we had quite an intense negotiation with two NGOs that were working with the two neighbourhoods we wanted to work with. We discussed all sorts of things: who owns the knowledge that is generated, what is the purpose of what we are doing, etc. They had a very strong voice as well, and very strong experience. This is one of the things that these NGOs can ensure: some continuity of experience and, also, the ability to tap into other types of knowledge that a community may not have access to, or the capacity to deal with. So, these were the strong voices that I came across. As I said, I do not think that [well-organized and vocal communities] are evenly distributed geographically across Medellin (although this [view] may be biased from my own experience), but I get the impression that there are certain parts of Medellin which have very well-organized communities that make their voice heard, with the support of strong NGOs.

PT: Within these alternative voices and urban practices, are there any good examples of grassroots/community-led housing initiatives that we can look at in relation to this book's theme, 'housing as commons'?

HS: In terms of innovative grassroots experiences around housing, again, I would say that I have not found examples of commons around housing [in the narrow sense of the term]. But if you take the concept of 'habitat' (a concept used extensively by the National University of Colombia in Medellin in their research, teaching and writing), then yes! [The concept of]

habitat is another way of seeing how you inhabit the territory, and, yes, I have seen this kind of 'coming together' within the community. This goes back to the history of how many of these informal settlements were created. In the two consecutive projects on landslide risk that followed from the MUI project, the first element was semi-structured interviews with residents in three neighbourhoods in Medellin. We asked people about their history: How had they come here? How did they provide themselves with their homes? What was their perception of risk? How much did they feel threatened by landslides and other risks? What experiences had they had before they came to the neighbourhood? Many of them had actually experienced all sorts of threats elsewhere before coming here. Through that storytelling, we found out a lot about how these neighbourhoods have come about. There was a lot of mutual help in the early stages of formation of all three neighbourhoods. The communities had experience in producing their habitat, their own environment, together – not necessarily their own house, perhaps, but the neighbourhood: for example, clearing land, setting out the pathways, etc. This is a way of coming together which they call *el convite*, which means something like an invitation to get together, work together for a day, and then have a meal at the end of that day. There is a kind of communion around eating and working together, and then sharing food. This is quite a traditional way of doing things, which persists to some extent. We found that this practice had actually waned in recent years, but we revived it as part of the two landside projects – particularly of the first one. We had some money to experiment with some low-cost mitigation work and the community suggested, 'let's do convites'. So, what we did was to identify the areas of priority.

Originally, the money was for intervening in three volunteer houses to see what could be done, at low cost, to mitigate landslide risk. After debate, both the academic team and the community we were working with came to the conclusion that following the original plan

could lead to all sorts of perceptions of unfairness: some people would benefit and others would not. This is one of the tricky things about housing: when you see housing in a narrow sense as only your own home. We decided that the money should be used for areas that were perceived as part of the wider habitat that [everybody] shared, so we made a four-tier classification of the types of space linked to social networks. Generally, we did not intervene in individual homes except when, for example, installing a gutter in one home would stop water spilling over onto a home further down the hillside. (We felt that such an effect between the two homes was a shared issue.) The second level – the next level up – was shared spaces, which were not streets or lanes but a kind of mutual space for two or three households. We put a lot of work into that, and also into the narrow lanes where the Municipality does not really intervene. The *convites* focused on these, and people really engaged with [the project]. There was always an element of self-interest, so people were always asking, 'oh, is this work going to be done outside my home as well?' People would engage if they felt that their own home was going to benefit, so there is a kind of balance there between community and your own household's interest. But that worked really well!

You see this kind of community coming together in different types of experiences, even in those that the Municipality has tried to foster: for example, allotments, as part of the upgrading of some settlements on the periphery. Some will say that the motivations for that were slightly questionable and, maybe, that the allotment project was not fully successful. For example, some of the allotments [in] some of the communities on the edge were promoted by the Municipality as a way of preventing any further land invasions. The community [had a sense of] ownership of some [of these] lands, and they would stop any others trying to build there, so there was a funny mixture of motivations and reactions.

This is the extent to which I have seen communities coming together to intervene as a community in their habitat. This is the experience I have, and this is the kind of thing that we are trying to promote further. At the moment, we are working with the Municipality's Department for Disaster Risk Management. They approached us, but this was because they are in constant communication with *Comuna 8*. So, this voice continues to be heard. They want to develop and integrate a disaster risk management plan for the Northeast of Medellin, so we have been in conversation with them for the last few months about how to do that. Obviously, the community, being a driving force there, is one of the key elements of that. But, as I say, it does not focus on individual houses as such, on housing in the narrow sense, but on improving the habitat.

PT: Catalina, your project, 'COiNVITE',[3] stems from the notions of gathering and working together. As stated on the project's website, *COiNVITE* is 'a celebration of collective actions that result from solidarity and empathy networks among urban dwellers'. Could you tell us a bit more about your project and elaborate on participatory practices for slam improvement?

CO: We recognize that, in many places, collective work for indigenous communities is called *minga*. The idea of *convite* is a similar kind of collective work in the context of the *barrios populares* in Medellin. *Convite* is a practice [whereby a] social organization self-builds neighbourhoods. It is self-management: a strategy of collective action in the informal settlements. So, in a way, this *convite* operates on many fronts: it is used to transform the material conditions of a place – to pave a road, work on risk mitigation, put a ceiling over a

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[3] COiNVITE: 'Activating Urban Learning for Slum Upgrading' funded by the Bartlett ECR-GCRF and led by Dr Catalina Ortiz and Gynna Millan (PDRA) at the Bartlett Development Planning Unit (DPU), is a research collaboration between the Bartlett DPU staff, UN-Habitat, United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG), Habitat International Coalition (HIC), Cities Alliance, the Municipality of Medellin and six grassroots organizations part of 'Movimiento de Pobladores' and Sandelion – a local transmedia production organization – to codesign a digital platform that helps to learn about slum upgrading strategies. https://medium.com/@storytelling4urbanlearning

collective facility. In a *convite*, you do these; you also come together to celebrate and support these networks of solidarity through public cooking. So, in a *convite,* you also have the pot – a big pot – to feed everyone who is participating in this knowledge exchange while also contributing to the improvement of the living conditions of a particular community. The *convite* also helps to organize and mobilize people, so it is also an act of resistance. It could host acts of resistance. It has a cultural connotation as well. You do a *convite*, a gathering with food, to also bring different cultural representations, such as public theatre or a bazaar. These also produce some funding for doing something else for the community. I think that this collective gathering to transform something, either materially, or symbolically, or organizationally, is a very powerful strategy for organizing. This has been at the core of the founding of informal settlements, particularly in Medellin.

I think that this recognition has been largely absent when the 'Medellin miracle' is talked about. The story of the 'Medellin miracle' is only told from the perspective of the state, while not recognizing how, for several decades, transformation has been [achieved through] the ingenuity of the inhabitants themselves. I think that this was the reason why a project that begun with a focus on translocal learning ended up shifting its focus to the idea of *convite*, to understand and use *convite* as a learning space for critical pedagogies. In a way, *convite* provides methodological tools inspired by this practice, ideas for more horizontal knowledge exchange and co-creation. The CoiNVITE project has three aspects: Firstly, it aims to bring [together], or foster, a network of urban storytellers. We place at the centre this idea of storytelling as a strategy to build empathy and exchange knowledge. Secondly, it generates a digital platform as a repository that [enables us] to see and understand the transformation of the city, particularly around 'slum-upgrading', and to bring up perspectives that are often silenced. Thirdly, without this being part of the initial idea, CoiNVITE also provides a toolkit for

using storytelling as an instrument for urban learning. These are the key elements of this project (Figure 14.1).

Now, going back to housing and how we can relate it to *convite,* in my opinion, we need to understand housing as a verb. As an urbanist, I cannot detach housing from the general interrelatedness and complexity of urban systems. Further, and propelled by this pandemic, I think that we need to understand this crisis (the pandemic) as a crisis of infrastructure of care. Central to *convite* are the ideas of empathy, solidarity and creating, bonding, the affect and reading housing (also) through the lens of affection. These are central components of care, if you will. So, part of what we have developed in our methodological toolkit is a set of bonding strategies. When addressing *convite*, you are bringing up a participatory practice, with its participants are located in very asymmetrical positions in the constellation of power. For instance, we brought together to work with us in a horizontal manner the regional director of UN-Habitat and community leaders from different neighbourhoods of Medellin. [We did this] because we think that we need to be more innovative: not working in the comfort zone of community-led-only, or elite-only [practices], but trying to bring together antagonistic perspectives in order to change [the way problems are viewed] and reframe strategies for addressing these problems. Bonding and the affective element, as constituents of care, were part of what we did in our project. The centrepiece of the project was trying to understand how to learn about the 'slum upgrading' strategies in Medellin and, also, how we can [come] together to envision ways of making [this strategy] more inclusive, and to bring in the perspectives of the inhabitants as well. For us, housing is the core axis of slum upgrading. Even though housing itself, and the conditions of habitability, are just two of the ten dimensions of slum upgrading, housing, as a verb and as an infrastructure of care, is fully embedded in the strategies of slum upgrading.

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PT: Could *convite* be relevant to '*buen vivir*'[4] (common well-being) and, more generally, to the commons in relation to housing, that is, the theme of this book?

CO: I think that, in terms of building strategies for effecting collective action, what we are [putting together] now is a decalogue on slum upgrading. This is an evolution of the 'CoiNVITE' project: an expanded network, a coalition of very different organizations, trying to articulate, as commoners, the public [realm] that could be consider as a common. These key principles – a sort of manifesto of slum upgrading – need to become the key avenue for recovery from the pandemic and for placing informal settlements at the centre of public investment in the following [post-pandemic] phase. I could see urban learning and coalition building as ways to create and cultivate the commons. This is where the CoiNVITE crowd has been moving [towards]. Therefore, you cannot talk about housing without [talking about] urbanism. We think of housing as urbanism; [as such], it needs to be addressed holistically, in all its dimensions. You cannot decouple housing from collective memory, climate justice, political recognition, solidarity economy, social diversity. I think that these intersections are absolutely essential. I [am finding it increasingly difficult] to just talk about housing per se; instead, by thinking of the city as a complex whole, I see [housing as part of] this mesh.

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[4] The Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir*, which translates to English as 'good living', well-being refers to a world view of harmonious cohabitation between humans, more-than-humans and nature. *Buen Vivir* is directly derived from what Quechua people of Ecuador call *Sumak Kawsay*: 'knowing how to live well'. *Sumak Kawsay* is a set of principles on how to live a good life, informed by the notions of measure and harmony with nature's cycles. *Buen Vivir* is thus a contemporary interpretation of the ancestral cosmovision of *Sumak Kawsay*. In recent years, *Buen Vivir* has been linked to the commons referring to common goods and/or common well-being. What seems to quite well aligned with *Buen Vivir*, nevertheless, is 'commoning': the notion of making/becoming a common. (See Boff 2009; Acosta 2012; Santiesteban and Helfrich 2014; de Sousa Santos 2014; Gerlach 2019; Escobar 2020.)

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Figure 14.2 CoiNVITE project. (Illustration by Alejandra Congote for the project COiNVITE –
Activating Learning for Slum Upgrading through Transmedia Storytelling led by Catalina
Ortiz.)