

The UNESCO Learning City Medellín: Library parks as community places of lifelong learning and culture

by Stefan Volkmann, former UIL research visitor



[View from a Metro Cable Car towards Parque Biblioteca España \(Spain Library Park\)](#)

During the 1990s, Medellín was globally perceived as one of the most dangerous and violent cities in the world due to intense conflict between local drug cartels and other criminal groups. Since then, the city has transformed socially, economically, and culturally, receiving awards for its innovative policies in city planning and urban design, and praise for its dedication to better the life of its inhabitants.

Medellín became a member of the UNESCO Global Network of Learning Cities (GNLC) in August 2017 following a wave of urban intervention plans. The realization of these plans improved the socio-economic climate and the overall well-being of the city. Among others, the creation of nine 'Library Parks', and the positive effect they have had on community identity and culture, have received high international acclaim. These conveniently located Library Parks provide much needed space, staff, resources, programmes, and internet access to the communities they serve.

Libraries, in their extended definition as flexible centres or hubs for lifelong learning, culture and recreation, appear as a central component in many learning city plans, including initiatives developed in Edmonton, Canada (Hillyard, 2016) and in Hume, Melbourne, Australia (Volkmann, 2016), where they form part of the city's Global Learning Centres.

Medellín's Library Parks

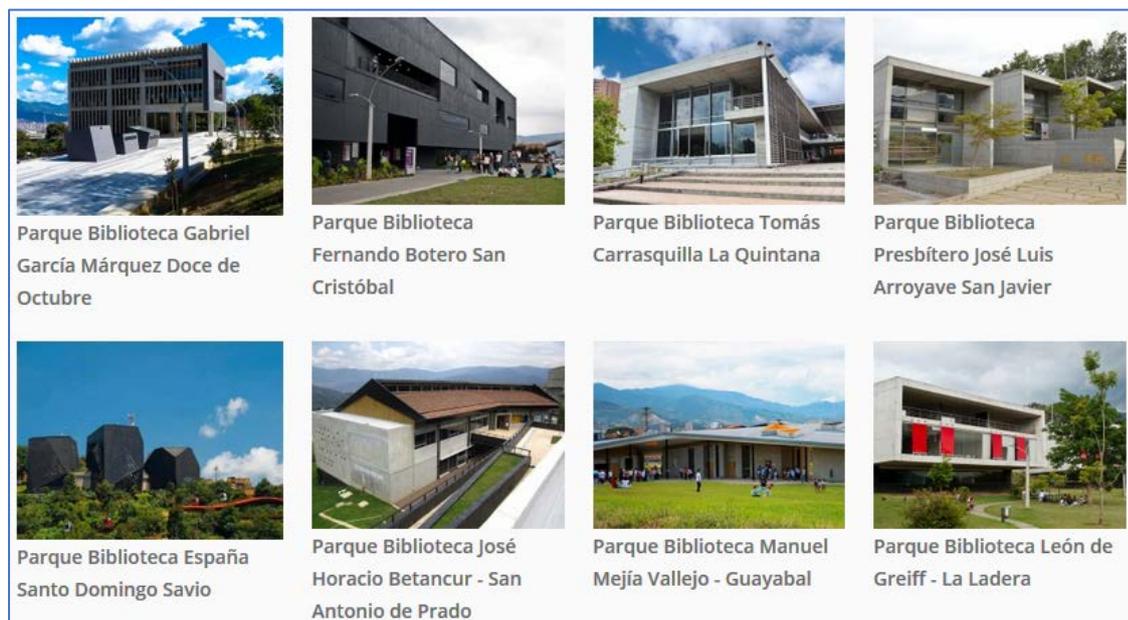
Established in December 2006 in Comuna 13, once Medellín's most violent district, San Javier Library Park was the first of its kind in the city. It followed the local government's 'Operation Orion' in 2002, which aimed to put an end to guerrilla control in the area. To improve residents' access to the centre of Medellín (and thus to jobs and learning opportunities) from their homes in Comuna 13, the city council built a cable car network. It also built new learning and training facilities, such as the Father José Luis Arroyave Restrepo Library (Parque Biblioteca Presbítero José Luis Arroyave Restrepo), located in San Javier Library Park.

Library Parks aim to address Medellín’s inequality. Fundamentally, the facilities are designed to get people, particularly youth, off the streets. They succeed in attracting young people by showing films, staging exhibitions and theatre productions, and giving local talent the chance to perform. These opportunities, in turn, raise self-esteem, participation and creativity.

In addition to typical library services, most Library Parks comprise auditoriums, workshops, playrooms, sports facilities and computer rooms. Youth and adult literacy programmes are also offered to boost the community’s literacy and numeracy skills, including digital literacy. Furthermore, many Library Parks feature integrated citizen centres, where the local community can complete administrative tasks. These citizen centres also offer conflict mediation or application assistance for government programmes and subsidies. Moreover, these services are taken directly to the neighbourhoods by social workers, thereby reducing the bureaucratic distance between local administration and the community.

Architecturally, the Library Parks are impressive: the award-winning Spain Library Park (Parque Biblioteca España), for example, resembles three dark grey rocks at the top of the Santo Domingo hill in Comuna 1. The three multi-storey towers house the library, training rooms and an auditorium. León de Greiff Library Park (Parque Biblioteca León de Greiff), which features a swimming pool and sports fields, offers expansive views across the city. Bethlehem Library Park (Parque Biblioteca Belén), located in Comuna 16, was designed by the Japanese architect Hiroshi Naito in collaboration with the University of Tokyo. Here, a dozen differently sized buildings make up a housing block, surrounded by green spaces, paved areas, a plaza, and a water feature. The park comprises an auditorium, exhibition hall, two cafés and a music school in addition to the library itself.

As with the cable car system in Comuna 13, the Medellín Metro Cable Cars serve many of the Library Parks, thereby enabling people of all ages and abilities to access them.



Eight of the nine Library Parks in Medellín (Source: La Red de Bibliotecas, 2018)

In addition to the nine Library Parks, the public library system of Medellín consists of 12 regular public libraries, five special branch libraries, a 'children's reading house', and another six 'documentation centres', specializing in topics such as sports, early childhood development, Education, environmental information and administrative planning (Red de Bibliotecas, 2018). One of the documentation centres also houses a historical archive of Medellín, and another the 'Resource Center for the Activation of Memory'. Both fulfil a supplementary function in conserving the culture and history of the city.

At the heart of Medellín's network of libraries is the Pilot Public Library (Biblioteca Pública Piloto), opened in 1952, which was the first UNESCO public international library to be opened in Latin America, following an agreement between UNESCO and the Government of Colombia. Its original aim was to serve as a guide for public library development in Latin America by sparking a dialogue between different cultures and making education through literacy accessible to all. Notably, the Pilot Public Library was a symbol of the city's efforts to become more open to the world (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2015).

The development, perception and impact of the Library Parks

A short look into the chronology of Medellín's transformation illustrates how complex the planning and shaping of the city's urban interventions have been. Medellín's Library Parks were developed through the visionary leadership of Medellín's then mayors, Sergio Fajardo and Alonso Salazar, combined with integrative and participative planning from private and public actors.

The strong publicity around Medellín and its Library Parks has made it one of the most talked-about learning cities. Upon their opening, the Library Parks were greeted with enthusiasm, and public surveys have shown that those communities with a Library Park reported having a higher quality of life compared to those without. However, there were also criticisms, with some citizens reporting that these interventions were simply not targeting the community's most pressing issues, such as lack of sanitation and water. Furthermore, some structures, notably the Spain Library Park (Parque Biblioteca España), have recently fallen into decay, due to limited budgets for renovation and restoration.

Overall, however, there is evidence of the positive impact of the Library Parks, notably with regard to employment rates in Medellín, which rose by nearly 7 per cent between the years 2002 and 2017. Within the same period, communities with Library Parks experienced a 17 per cent higher employment growth rate than those without. Simultaneously, while the underemployment rate grew by 1.7 per cent in the city, it fell by 1.4 per cent in Library Park neighbourhoods (Alcaldía de Medellín, 2018). Additionally, from 2002–2017, general literacy levels increased among young people.

Transformation

Since the early 2000s, Medellín has managed to effectively control and significantly reduce its levels of organized crime. Although the city's most peripheral neighbourhoods continue to face challenges in security, equity and meeting basic needs, communities with Library Parks have seen improvements in employment and equity, as well as a higher quality of life, according to its own citizens.

The Library Parks have managed to give the most deprived communities a sense of identity, pride and progress. Furthermore, they have attracted a wave of foreign tourists, business, international awards and investment. The role that libraries have played in the transformation of Medellín is far more than a simple symbol of change or a cultural experiment: they have both revitalized neighbourhoods and improved the community's quality of life.

As a conclusion, Medellín's nine Library Parks and other library services have successfully given everyone in the community the ability to 'achieve their own potential' through providing the city's citizens with invaluable access to a truly powerful and life-changing lifelong learning institution.

(NB: This article is based on a research paper written by Stefan Volkmann during his stay at the UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning [UIL] as a research visitor in September 2018.)

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