

# BUILDING SERENITY

how architecture can reduce violence

By Gary Turton



"Library park" Biblioteca León de Greiff, Medellín. Designed by Giancarlo Mazzanti.

While the proliferation of murder and violence continues to affect Trinidad and Tobago and the unfortunate battle ensues in Jamaica, I am intrigued by an example where architecture, through politics, has contributed to the reduction of crime in one of the world's most violent cities - Medellín, Colombia - by approximately 90%.

Throughout the 1990s, Colombia's second-largest metropolis was posting yearly murder rates in the thousands. Infamous drug cartels such as the feared Medellín Cartel led by the infamous Pablo Escobar, terrorized neighbourhoods, and nationalist paramilitaries engaged in urban battle with revolutionary guerrillas. Although the Cartels were dismantled largely through the efforts of the Colombian National Police trained and assisted by the US Delta Force and the CIA and fear of extradition to the US for drug trafficking, violence remained in the city of Medellín.

Over the past 10 years or so, Medellín has managed to shed its notorious reputation, partly through the strategies of the then Mayor Sergio Fajardo, who strangely enough was not a career politician, but a Mathematician. It was frustration with corruption and the

lack of any meaningful change, which drove Fajardo to enter politics and become Mayor of Medellín between 2003 and 2007. In Medellín, the real problem was social inequity and deep-rooted violence. The goal was to diminish violence every day and simultaneously deliver social opportunities.

Fajardo's approach was that any reduction in violence was immediately supplemented with a "concrete community improvement." As the murder rate dropped, the city's poorest neighbourhoods became home to brilliant new schools, housing, community spaces and "library parks". It has become one of the best examples in the world of urban transformation, basing their policies on the slogan "Medellín: from fear to hope."



Fajardo stated in an interview with architect Giancarlo Mazzanti, "From the time I was a child, it was clear to me what aesthetics meant as a tool for social transformation, as a message of inclusion. That is something that is often misunderstood here. Underneath it all is the most important word in all of those urban interventions in which architecture plays an important role: dignity."

Their mantra was 'to the poorest people, the most beautiful buildings.' Some of the city's most impoverished and brutalized neighborhoods became homes to top-notch new schools, libraries and housing.



Biblioteca España, Medellín. Designed by Giancarlo Mazzanti.

Fajardo stated "Many people in our society have a solid wall in front of them: at one end is a door to enter into the world of illegality. Drug trafficking has taken on some extraordinary dimensions, more so in Medellín than anywhere else. Another door leads to informality and homelessness. Our challenge has been to open doors in that sealed wall, doors so that people can pass through and go on participating in the construction of hope. What is hope? When someone in the community sees a path they can follow. If they are living with only a wall in front of them and can't see any options other than illegality and informality, they have no real alternatives."

In a Newsweek article he took issue with the interviewer's statement that some of his critics accuse him of wasting money on fancy new buildings that do more for his image than for poor communities or poor students.

On the contrary argued Fajardo, "People who say that a beautiful building doesn't improve education don't understand something critical. We have to build Medellín's most beautiful buildings in the places where there has never been a real state. The first step toward quality education is the dignity of the space. When the poorest kid in Medellín arrives in the best classroom in the city, there is a powerful message of social inclusion. That kid has a newfound self-esteem, and he learns

math more easily. If you give the most humble neighborhoods beautiful libraries, you make those communities proud of the libraries. That is powerful. We are saying that that library or school, with its spectacular architecture, is the most important building in the neighborhood. And it is sending the rest of society a very clear message of social transformation, but of social transformation without rage. This is our revolution. The most powerful people see us focusing on the most humble, and they are supporting us—that is an important achievement."

I have found great inspiration in the work of former Mayor Fajardo, who was a Vice-Presidential candidate in Colombia's 2010 election. I too believe that societies are changed through politics and education. I draw parallels to the Caribbean where countries like Jamaica and Trinidad and Tobago are now deeply affected by violence as a result of the illegal drug trafficking. As the ubiquitous TED talks website slogan states, 'ideas (are) worth sharing', so I share these ideas as one approach that has transformed a violent city in the hopes that we may find a solution to our own social inequity and growing violence - through a multisectoral approach - in Trinidad and Tobago before its too late.

