

# The renovation project in the historic city center of Bogotá\*

*EL PROYECTO DE RENOVACIÓN DEL CENTRO HISTÓRICO DE BOGOTÁ*

*O PROJETO DE RENOVAÇÃO NO CENTRO DA CIDADE HISTÓRICA DE BOGOTÁ*

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### **Abstract**

Ministry's project, an urban renovation project that looks for a complete shift in the historic center of Bogotá. This study approaches the two stories behind the urban regeneration process proposed by the named project, trying to understand which urban agencies are involved, how they are handling the situation with the community and what their agendas are. This is done from the review of the proposals made by the stakeholders —the National Government represented by the Company for Urban Renovation EVB and the community represented by the committee 'En Defensa del Centro'. The analysis allows understanding the way in which the expertise-authorized discourse of heritage stores political positions. In this case, heritage is being used as a tool to impose and to resist urban (re) development.

**Keywords:** Urban regeneration; heritage; community; historic city center; Bogotá

### **Resumen**

El Proyecto Ministerios, un proyecto de renovación urbana en el centro de Bogotá, pretende cambiar por completo la cara de un importante sector de la ciudad. El presente estudio hace una aproximación a las dos caras detrás del proceso de 'regeneración urbana' que propone dicho proyecto, a partir de la revisión de las propuestas de los actores involucrados directamente —el Gobierno Nacional representado en la Empresa de Renovación Urbana EVB, y la comunidad mediante el comité 'En Defensa del Centro'. Dicho análisis permite entender la forma como el patrimonio, visto desde su discurso 'experto', almacena posturas políticas. En este caso, el patrimonio es usado como un instrumento que a la vez pretende imponer y resistir el desarrollo urbano.

**Palabras clave:** Bogotá; Centro Histórico; renovación urbana; patrimonio; comunidad

### **Resumo**

O Projeto Ministerios, é um projeto de renovação urbana no centro de Bogotá que procura mudar totalmente a fachada de um importante sector da cidade. O presente estudo faz uma abordagem a duas caras detrás do processo de 'regeneração urbana' que propõe este projeto, a partir da revisão das propostas dos atores envolvidos diretamente —o Governo Nacional representado na Empresa da Renovação Urbana EVB e a comunidade desde comité 'Em Defesa do Centro'. Nesta análise permite-se entender o jeito como património, assistido desde seu discurso 'esperto'. Neste caso, o património é usado como instrumento que impõe e a sua vez resiste o desenvolvimento urbano.

**Palavras chaves:** Bogotá; Centro Histórico; renovação urbana; património; comunidade



Figure 1: Streetscape of the neighbourhood Centro Administrativo. Taken from the Facebook profile of 'El Centro no se vende'. <https://www.facebook.com/459418457470061/photos/ms.c.eJwIx8ENACAIBMG0zMEhi--;03ZozzGzqJ7KPCp2fxbkyUtvVfkkcEuualCYc---.bps.a.762712487140655.1073741864.459418457470061/762714003807170/?type=1&theater>

## INTRO

Cities, both through their administration and citizens, are in a run for responding to global trends and, sooner or later, to the contemporary needs of its inhabitants. The importance of keeping up to date means constantly refreshing cities in order to understand the resources they have to work with and the needs they have to supply. These changes are not innocent or spontaneous; on the contrary, they respond to and reflect the wishes of actors and agencies (Madgin, 2010, p. 29). Thus, political, economic and cultural interests of the different urban agencies always bias initiatives for urban space regeneration, understood as the process for urban transformation in which social, political, economic and physical aspects are connected into a policy looking to improve the life quality of an urban area and its inhabitants (Cowan, 2005).

Different from European cities, Latin American cities are currently going through urban regeneration processes with the challenge of fitting the historic environment into priorities set by different urban agencies.<sup>1</sup> Those processes are particular to historic centers of capital cities, where public policies attempt to reinvent the legacy of colonial and republican past by reusing important historic buildings incorporate them into modern structures. Albeit the state of constant flux of cities, some of them are still going through a process of identity definition and decision making on how they want to look. Sometimes, urban planners consider necessary to change the function of an area to regenerate for different reasons. This is the case of Bogotá, where a so called regeneration process has tried to get on since the beginning of 2000's, and has apparently found by this decade the necessary impulse to come true (*El Tiempo*, 24 de marzo de 2015). The present document analyses the specific situation of urban regeneration in the center of Bogotá. The Ministries' Project is attempting to reconceptualize the historic

center, turning it from a traditional and commercial one into a functional center, meaning the physical centralization of the majority of public institutions and outsourcing hired services, in order to provide a 'better package' (EVB, 2013a, p. 12) for citizen's assistance.

The case study here chosen is the renovation project proposed in 2013 for the neighborhood 'Centro Administrativo', which is a traditional area next to the institutional zone, the heart of the city center. It is the home for several small businesses working there since the mid-twentieth century and for hundreds of families who live there. The neighbors have organized themselves into a community called 'Comité en defensa del Centro' (Committee in defense of the city center), with the purpose of negotiate the aims and effects of the 'Proyecto Ministerios' or Ministries' project, which is looking to transform the traditional area into one of institutional centralization with new buildings for four ministries and other public entities.

During this renovation process, heritage has come to the surface not only as the legacy of the past used to build a Nation discourse, but also as part of present social dynamics if values such as communal are taken into account. The importance of heritage in current use goes beyond the dualism between more generic historic and aesthetic values related to a city or even a country, and can be understood within the effects of familiar and cherished scenes, seen as elements of the aesthetic and historic significance of a specific and delimited place where heritage works as a contributor to an everyday identity and as an argument to maintain historic fabric (Grenville, 2007, p. 455). But, at the same time, heritage, seen in a wider perspective, may sustain the 'cultural preoccupations and power relations of a small elite' and its conservation may be exercised as a way to achieve benefits for the city (Pendlebury, 2009, p. 197). It is then when memory and history come to play an important but complex role in the definition of a project like this. History may be used as a tool to justify and legitimate the preservation of an object by linking it to a community and its self-awareness (Lowenthal, 1985, p. 213) as well as to reject it.

Thinking in the manipulation of a historic environment demands a better understanding of heritage policies in Colombian cities. The built environment may find protection under national policies designed by the Ministry of Culture or more development-related policies proposed by the Mayor's office. With the General Law of Culture in 1997 (Senado de la República, 1997), a milestone in Colombian heritage management was approved, creating the listing system of BIC (Bienes de Interés Cultural - Assets of Cultural Interest), which scales assets according to their importance, going from national as the higher, to municipal or district level. Several topics in the General Law have been updated in the past years. Intangible heritage was also recognized and included into the BIC listing, establishing a commitment of the government, through the Ministry, to protect all BICs and to provide the resources for doing so. In this same year, architecture heritage was included in the Law for Territorial Development, which was an important achievement for the historic environment, because none of the previous cultural policies was able to get historic buildings protected in case of urban renovation. From the district's background, there are two main policies: Territorial Ordering Plan (POT), it is the legislation issued from the Planning office that determines how to use the land in the city, trying to make a rational use of it especially close, giving access to common services to all of the citizens, and giving priority to housing, production activities and cultural spaces (Secretaría Distrital de Planeación); and Center Zone Plan (CZP) approved in 2007, it has been quite discussed, especially because its priority is to motivate a re-occupation of the city centre by permanent habitants.

Examining the resources for managing and protecting heritage is necessary in order to understand who are the actors playing a role in the negotiation process of what to 'let go', what to keep and how to achieve them both during an urban intervention. Historic areas of a city are part of the past legacy but the message they are transmitting depends on the way they are handled. The fact that only a part of the message gets to be transmitted also means that agencies have chosen not to include in the discourse information about something or somebody. Not everybody will always be happy with the results. Especially if the renovation project in question is attempting, as this one is, to consolidate the functionality of the city center by building 'tomorrow's heritage' (EVB, 2013a, p. 151) and not necessarily including the current. In other words, renovation projects are looking for a conscious manipulation and reconfiguration of the physical space by taking an existing definition of the place, for example a traditional neighborhood still marked by some physical properties given since the Spanish conquest that are now recognize as heritage, such as colonial architecture, plots and urban plan, land determiners that are still influencing the social dynamics of the area. This will become an architectural ensemble of modern structures in respond to the authorities' perception on what the urban environment should look like and the message that this image should communicate, by the creation of new landmarks. The issue with these transformations is that they are not always guided by historic and social priorities, but this soon-to-be-heritage will be built on constant shifting economic pressures.

Today, there are other 12 renovation plans developing in the city and four of them are within the historic center. In 2012, the National Government made public a concern for the future of the historic center of the capital city. This is the reason why the National Company for Renovation and Urban Development Virgilio Barco Vargas was created, taking charge of the Ministries' Project, for planning the new headquarters of four ministries next to the Presidential Palace, City Hall, Court and Congress. This is a private company, the product of a public and private alliance, in charge of the development of regeneration projects with public money in order to attract private investment (EVB, 2013b). The project will materialize through the transformation of six blocks to the west side of the Presidential Palace. Currently, the project is in a characterization phase of the area, as well as trying to develop a census of the inhabitants (permanent and floating). In the previous studies the area is seen as a testimony of important historic events, therefore its declaration as cultural urban heritage. In the same document is precisely this legacy from colonial and republican condition what defines the current problematic of the area: public space, traffic, public services, and most of all, the image of 'deterioration and *tugurización*'.<sup>2</sup> The winning proposal architect, Juan Pablo Ortiz, explains that the main idea was 'to unify the multiple urban fragments of the territory' (EVB, 2013a, p. 151), this will be achieve by using contemporary architecture as a mechanism to preserve the past alive by creating a series of platforms, allowing physical links between new structures and the historic buildings that will remain. According to the proposal, approximately 70% of existing buildings will be demolished to build a succession of patios, illuminating the platforms and recuperating a several amount of public space. Patios will be at the same time a leading commercial lane between eight stories office towers (Fullmetaldv, 2014).

## THE NEIGHBORHOOD

The neighborhood is conformed basically by colonial houses that measuring from a quarter of block and due to densification they have been divided into many more properties. These buildings were designed under the pressure of the necessities and functions of a past time, in order to respond to more contemporary users, they have suffered several changes inside of them (Lulle, T. & De Urbina, A., 2011, p. 118). Today, some of these houses have changed from residential to commercial and mixed uses, shifting the type of population as well. Nevertheless, citizens and the inhabitants understand and attribute in different ways heritage values to the area. For example, some people may associate the buildings and streets with the national history and identity, dignifying the presence or even ownership of important personalities during the independence period with some houses; others may highlight those stories of the everyday, thinking of all the families' memories —both good and bad— that happened within those walls and how, by living there, they are making part of that oral history too. For other people, heritage value relies on the familiar environment, very similar to living in a small town and a feeling that can be missed in the chaos of a big city (Lulle, T. & De Urbina, A., 2011, pp. 118-119).

Centro Administrativo is a declared conservation area due to its condition of 'cultural interest and antique sector'. Also, according to committee, businesses there established are profitable, working as contractors for widely known companies around the country and have earned goodwill within the sector. These businesses have dedicated for nearly forty years mainly to the production and commercialization of military merchandising and graphic arts; they operate as production lines in which different smaller businesses tailor specific different products that are gathered together in the shops. These shops are at the same time the only part of the businesses opened to the public, which is why this area is not considered as very economically dynamic one. Also, the location of these shops is very convenient taking into account that the Presidential Brigade stands two blocks up to the east. The same happens for the graphic arts, workshops that in appearance just make a couple of printing orders per week, but in reality can manage huge orders for big companies. The footwear is kind of a milestone in the history of the area, one of the main streets, Tenth Street, houses the first commercial area of the city specialized in shoes and there are still few shops with more than 75 years producing and selling shoes and other leather articles to Bogota's families.

## THE COMMUNITY

The Centro Administrativo is a neighborhood full of meanings for the people who daily experience it, defining it as the setting for the construction of memory of the community: people outside of their shops waiting for a new customer to come, chatting and helping each other while they are not busy, they know each other, they also know the lady who sells them a cup of coffee in the street or the men with plastic glasses full of colorful fruits. It is not a redundant space; it is a mixture of commercial and residential spaces. The first approach of the project to the neighbors in March of 2013 with the arrival of letters as an announcement of the project, people did not paid attention to these letters until a couple of months later when the company started to take a census of the area according to the legal requirements for this kind of projects. It was in this moment when a process of intimidation began, according to



some neighbors. Workers of the EVB told them that if they do not helped with the census, they would not have the right to reclaim anything and also they would be evicted from their houses and shops. Some people refused to help and instead of being afraid, businessmen got together and conformed this group. Leidy Garzón, who started an educational campaign with the neighbors, along with other members of the committee, explaining the further consequences and the reality of the project -the one that the company and the government are not telling- and how it will change their life in a negative way unless people get together, took the leadership of this resistance. The chosen slogan –The city center is not on sale- generated some reticence along the business people because, according to Tache (2015), almost an 80% of them are tenants. They thought that the situation would not affect them because they were not owners. The group made the community realize their business would be devastated if they accepted the project as it was presented.



Figure 2: Render of the winning proposal by architect Juan Pablo Ortiz. Taken from: <http://www.empresavirgilioibarco.gov.co/proyectos/Paginas/ministerios.aspx>

## THE REALITY OF THE PROJECT

Historic centers present a huge complexity linked to deterioration, neglect, incompatible uses (from residential to commercial and industrial), traffic and obsolete infrastructure. Today, the renovation of these areas is priority to urban agencies. In Bogotá, the national government through the renovation company is proposing to keep the centre as nucleus for economic and political services and permanent as well as itinerant residents in order to vitalize them and avoid marginalization and obsolescence instead of building new administrative centres outside this area. Today, the area is perceived as a cultural, political and economic centre where long-term inhabitants coexist with students, artists and tourists. The image of the centre that the national government is attempting to establish is one based on development in function of economy, disintegrating the area as a unit so as to reuse the land, speculate it and redevelop it. This process have been called ‘new urban colonialism’, in which the collective right to the city is not recognize and the working class is the first one to suffer these consequences of conquering the old urban space in order to build the new (Harvey, 2008, p. 33). A claim like this finds support in three key points regarding the project:

### *The nature of the company*

Regarding to the characterization document, the company identifies the area in terms of territory, history and problematic, but there is a considerable lack in the study of the significance of the neighborhood in which the 'expertise' explain with theoretical background the reasons to intervene and take out the current inhabitants, a justification different from the fact that the neighborhood is next to other public institutions. The document is very emphatic in the importance of managing the heritage as a means to get benefits for the community, but how is this going to happen if apparently the idea is to buy entire blocks for new buildings and take away its residential condition. Evidently the State needs this space in order to make a statement of stability, order and credibility and attract capital investment. Beyond this, the condition of having a mixed company with a public heart and private head and pocket may seem strange. In 2012 public-private alliances were made legal in Colombia as an aid to accelerate traditionally slow public projects (*Semana*, 6 de octubre de 2012). These alliances might be a door to, first, investment of capital in unviable projects part of Politian's agendas; second, to corruption, especially in urban renovations, in which public projects use private capital to buy cheap properties to people, demolishing old houses to build flat or offices' towers with high profits for building companies and then selling these to the government with puffed prices due to land speculation. The fear of this project being one of those situations sustained in the image of the design for the new building complex, where space for more than four ministries employees is available but not for the popular economy that had been there for the last fifty years.

### *Trajectory with the community*

After the refusal of the community to cooperate with the census, the company issued two resolutions, no 11 and 17, to make public the reasons for the project and how the land will be paid to owners and how tenants will be compensated. The City Hall (Catastro Distrital, 2013)<sup>3</sup> determined the prices for land taking into account an analysis of the real estate market; squared meter was valued approximately between £80 and £400 plus the possibility of a compensation of maximum £3700 and advice for relocation. These are low prices for land in the historic center of a capital city. Making a comparison of the previous prices with prices in other neighborhoods right next to this one, the land is between £900 for modern houses and £4.000 for commercial use. It would not be that easy to find a workspace of those conditions of size (because they need to be together), location and price. Add to this, if they choose to leave, the company promised them an economic compensation of £4.000.<sup>4</sup> Reinaldo Gaira, a lithographer, says how this aid is not helping (Vargas, 2014). On one hand, this amount is not enough, when a calculation of the money they really need for moving out, they should be paid at least £10.000, between the loss of future earnings, payments to their employees, the tradition of the business in that location and the time of inactivity during the moving out. In reality, the people who chose to leave three years ago have not been paid (Tache, 2015), and some lithographers are saying that the company is offering a maximum of £800. The architect says businesses have nothing to worry about, they would be relocated in a period of six years when the construction is ready, but they do not want to take the risk after what happened with the risible compensations the government is offering. Since the presentation of these prices,



the compulsory purchase process have turned very difficult for the company thanks to the effective pedagogic role of the committee. Thus, the company have yielded to sit down and negotiated with the committee, who asked to stop the census process until a more inclusive policy is designed. The census is a legal requirement for a renovation project. In words of Tache (2015), they know this just a small delay and that tearing down the project would be almost impossible, but at least demanding a fair way out of the area is worth the try.

### *Incoherence in using the heritage discourse*

Within this project is possible to find different uses of the heritage discourse. On one side is the use given by the company and on the other, by the community. The company is making an approach influenced by current international policy regarding the management of city centers. One example is the book published by the Inter-American Development Bank (BID) (Rojas, 2004) in which cases like Barcelona or Paris are used as successful centrality's reconceptualization projects but a less-theoretical and more community focused version is not approached. The State uses heritage discourse, helped by this kind of documents, to legitimate the intervention in the area praising an aesthetic and historic value, ignoring other type of less-monumental values. For example, the communal value, in which is included not only the way the community sees its territory, but also their reality and necessities, instead of values more related to the expertise point of view. Adding to this is the fact that the company is lacking of a concrete method of approaching the listed buildings and incorporating them into a heritage-friendly environment with a suitable new use. According to the project's document, current social and economic activities are going to be included in the final result, but in an interview with the architect, it is not clear how –theoretically and physically- this could be possible. In words of Madgin (2009, p. 2), it can be said that, apparently, the government is not interested in the physical and more important, the mental mark they are leaving in this landscape.



Figure 3: One of the footwear businessmen in his shop, showing support to the community group. Taken from the Facebook profile of 'El Centro no se vende': <https://www.facebook.com/459418457470061/photos/pb.459418457470061-2207520000.1427408146./677588898986348/?type=3&theater>.

## CONCLUSION

This case illustrates how our urban environment is influenced by political agendas beyond the 'transparent' to benefit more personal agendas. The understanding of the power exercised by the National Government is achieved thanks to an interest in approaching its resistance. It is also an example of the use of some benignant and apparently innocent concepts such as regeneration or Urban Historic Environment but when looked at carefully, they are nothing more than labels used to legitimate agendas and convince the public opinion that those are agencies playing the role of securing urban change in the most beneficial possible way. The project is taking into account neither the historic heritage significance nor the local economy of the area. It is not necessary to wait for this project to materialize, to realize it is just another case of development trying to wear the regeneration disguise. It would not be very strange to think of this project in relation with other projects in the historic center, especially those focused on housing, as steps within a bigger plan for what Harvey calls 'new urbanism' (Harvey, 2008, p. 31), a trend offering quality lifestyles, making easier for the employees of the multinationals that will rent full stories in the Ministries sector and rent a flat in the gentrified area of the upper historic city center, very close to the hill and workplace. The 'construction of heritage' at this stage becomes more than a rhetorical technique of the project, is a wild card for legitimating the lack of study and investment in the present heritage, because in financial terms it is usually cheaper and less demanding to demolish and start all over than to preserve it. The proposition of creating a milestone for the urban landscape and more public space but for other people different from present community, with a different social status, economic dynamics and urban dreams. From the discourse it is using, the project will improve the appearance of the urban space, besides increasing the goodwill on the country and boosting the economy of the industrial sector. The facts are showing the community that only few 'elite' people will benefit from it. In this sense, the construction of heritage is also legitimation tool of social segregation, the reinvention of the city as a brand as an excuse for putting economic interests of a few above the social groups that won't ever again feel that place as theirs. The company can build a building but it should not be able to tell the citizens how to approach it, specially in the case of a community that has built itself and its sense of self-awareness around its own heritage. Nevertheless, the question still remains on the community side: for how long are they going to stand against this project? Would the community still reject the situation in the presence of bigger compensations for the Company to pay them for what their land should be priced? Sometimes heritage discourses are also an excuse for making better deals. A problematic emerges here: how to measure social value in planning debates? Both heritage and urban development are fundamental for the sustained growth of a city, and should not be necessarily inversely proportional. In the meantime, it will be necessary a complete significance study to argument not only if this heritage is worthy of being kept but also the ways in which the company and government will manage the impact of intervention for the community and the whole area. Moreover, the sense that a project of such dimensions is the product of the necessities of a small group and not the product of a sensible, technical and theoretical study in which heritage and development are supported by the real needs of people. Even if the area cannot be preserved, as it is known today, it is unacceptable even to formulate a project without a coherent inclusion and, if necessary, relocation plans for the community and a clear connection with other projects being taken within the historic city center.

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## NOTES

- 1 Such as Quito, Ecuador or Lima, Perú (Cruz, 2014).
- 2 'The process of turning into slums, looking like a slum'. (EVB, 2013a, p. 61).
- 3 District's Planning Office. Informe Técnico – Valores de referencia ampliación centro cívico (2013).
- 4 Money values are represented in the approximated Exchange rate for the deadline of this paper (£1 GBP is equivalent to \$4.000 COP).

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