

Moving the Elephant: City action and strategy to transform Avenida Séptima into Bogotá's first Green Corridor.

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¹ PARIS IAS

TO CITE

Caicedo, J. P. (2024). *Moving the Elephant: City action and strategy to transform Avenida Séptima into Bogotá's first Green Corridor*. . 1. <https://paris.pias.science/article/moving-the-elephant-city-action-and-strategy-to-transform-avenida-septima-into-bogotas-first-green-corridor>

PUBLICATION DATE

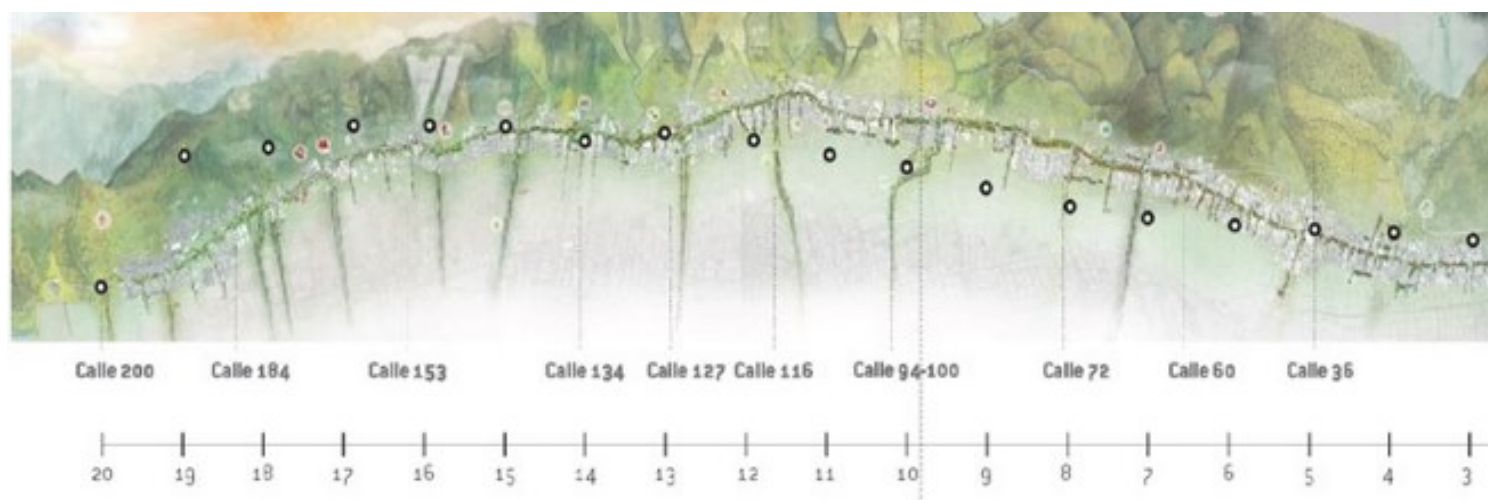
08/09/2023

ABSTRACT

This paper explores the multifaceted challenges faced by Bogotá in its efforts to transform Avenida Séptima. Situated at an essential corridor has long struggled with congestion, but transand opposition from various stakeholders. Previous administrative projects for the corridor faced relentless resistance. In response, Claudia López's administration introduced an innovative approach, the community, prioritize sustainability, and foster consensus. The paper delves into class-based tensions, participation in urban planning, highlighting the deliberate, comprehensive approach adopted by Bogotá. It underscores the importance of stakeholder engagement, effective communication, and negotiations as tools to mitigate opposition, offering valuable insights into the complexities of urban development and the delicate balance between public interest and stakeholder demands. The Bogotá case serves as a testament to the collaborative and productive approach to urban development amid increasing scrutiny and opposition.

Introduction

In the heart of Bogotá, where economic activity thrives in the shadow of the city's mountainous backdrop, one of the city's most vital arteries is at risk of being collapsed. Avenidas Caracas and Séptima represent the epicenter of commuting activity in eastern Bogotá; while the former is the backbone of the city's infrastructure, hosting the first heavy rail metro line for the city, the latter struggles in providing better infrastructure, as it is a political and economic insurmountable.



The urgent need for solutions to accommodate the current and future demand in this vital area of the city became its rich historical heritage, narrow sidewalks, and limited lanes, transforming Carrera Séptima into an efficient urban formidable challenge. Over the past two decades, the city has seen multiple administrations propose ambitious projects to face relentless opposition from politicians, high-income residents, heritage preservationists, and environmentalists. These opposition efforts have successfully stalled numerous projects, obstructing much-needed urban renewal.

One of the most contentious proposals was brought forth by former Mayor Enrique Peñalosa in 2019, which aimed to create a Rapid Transit (BRT) network, known as TransMilenio, in a manner that faced severe resistance from a coalition of politicians, community-based organizations, and environmentalists. Their efforts, often fueled by legal action, resulted in the project being completely blocked.

As a response to these new ways of interacting with high-scale urban projects, the Claudia López administration (2020) took a different approach to the Séptima Corridor project, the Green Corridor (CV7), which was conceived to engage the community in dialogue, prioritize environmental sustainability, and (try to) foster consensus.

This paper delves into the intricacies of this urban governance and transportation challenge, exploring the conflicts that have arisen in the Séptima Corridor. It delves into the literature that studied and dissected some of these conflicts, recognizing the tension, the result of a lack of openness in participation, and low governmental capacity to respond to legal challenges. It examines the strategies employed by the City of Bogotá -aware of these conflicts- to mitigate the risk of urban development of the Green Corridor.

While the outcome of the Green Corridor project remains uncertain at the time of this paper's publication, the case serves as a testament to the deliberate and comprehensive approach employed by the City of Bogotá. It underlines the importance of effective communication, and direct negotiations as key tools to mitigate opposition and foster consensus in highly contested urban spaces.

also states that this open approach allows new technical and narrative solutions to emerge in project development. The combination of these elements as a way to gain leverage and better positioning to overcome the limitations of the previous approach.

In an era where urban development projects face increasing scrutiny and opposition, the Bogotá case study provides a window into the complexities of governance, community engagement, and the delicate balance between public interest and stakeholder demands. The winner-takes-all dynamic that often characterizes these projects is challenging, but the city's commitment to build a more inclusive vision for urban development reflects a promising step toward a more collaborative and equitable urban future.

Global structure

This paper is organized as follows: The first part contains a brief context and discussion around the Séptima Corridor and the actions to be analyzed in the context of urban governance, transportation, and socio-legal studies. Then, it will briefly describe the attempt of pursuing a project in the Corridor (TransMilenio Séptima or TM7) and the network of opposition created around it. The new approach suggested by City Government (the Green Corridor or CV7) this paper will claim how there was a change in engagement strategy intentionally conceived to mitigate opposition and innovate in urban design and transportation. In the argument the core section of this paper will outline three different challenges identified by the literature in the Séptima Corridor and will reference how the Green Corridor approach was intentionally different. These challenges are class-based segregation, lack of openness in participation, and governmental capacity to articulate and process a different design and judicial activism. In the elements the document will provide references and particular solutions achieved or suggested by the administrative and judicial elements. Finally, it will reflect on how these approaches can mitigate some judicial activism (not all) and shape new ways of envisioning urban development in Bogotá and the region.

Context

Bogotá (Colombia) concentrates most of its economic activity in the eastern border of the city, adjacent to its mountains. In this area, the 100 block wide area between the mountains and Avenida Caracas (colloquially referred as the “expanded corridor”) is a popular commuting destination in the city carrying half of its total daily trips: 6.5 million (DNP 2017). Nonetheless, the service close to this area is the Avenida Caracas TransMilenio, the first BRT corridor of the city inaugurated in 2000. It now- is completely out of capacity as it was projected to operate at a maximum load of 35,000 passengers per hour. The new Green Corridor is carrying 53,000 and up (DNP, 2017).

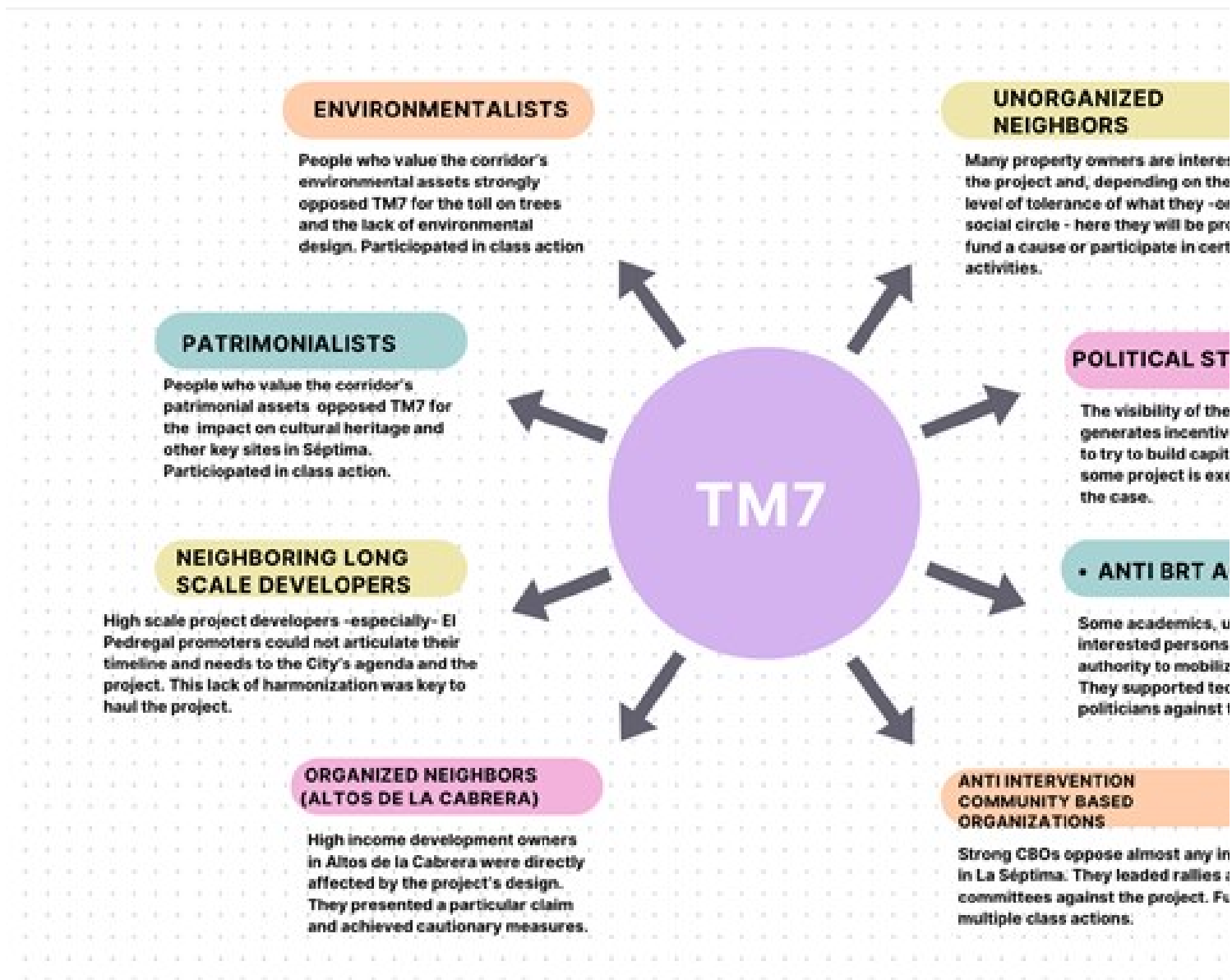
With Caracas incapable of supporting all of the trips fed by the BRT network of the city, the eastern border claims capable of absorbing current and future demand. Because of the presence of most governmental institutions, the financial clusters, and elite shopping districts, it is plausible that this portion of the city will continue to be the major. Throughout the entire “expanded downtown” Carrera Séptima is a few blocks from Avenida Caracas. Although it is a challenge for the City’s mobility necessities, it is a challenge for every Mayor in office over the last 20 years to propose income neighbors, public heritage assets, historic parks, and buildings integrate this Avenue in the heart of the city sidewalks and limited lanes imply that finding the best practical solution to urban transit is very complex.

In recent times, the last five governments of Bogotá have invested millions of dollars in proposals that could not transform many different reasons. Every single proposal to do projects with this road has generated controversy, community neighborhood resistance. The proposal of former Mayor Enrique Peñalosa in 2019 was the one that went the furthest, being awarded a construction contract—and the one that had the most citizens organizing against it. His administrative expansion of the BRT network that he has historically defended for the city (TransMilenio)².

As referenced by Sotomayor et al. (2023) this was a highly contentious project that generated many different sources of citizens, councilmen, national politicians, community-based organizations and many others. Because of different budget deficit, the project led to judicial actions, mainly the following:

Community organized against the city of Bogotá claiming collective rights, especially environmental and participatory rights. High-Income development Altos de la Cabrera, claiming affectations to their private property⁴. Senator Rodrigo Lara Restrepo against the City of Bogotá for lack of harmonization between planning instruments, environmentalists and Patrimonialists against the project claiming irreparable damages to the city’s patrimonial trees and buildings.

This challenging panorama faced by the city implied a massive opposition from many different sources, stakeholders they represented different segments of society -including political views- they all came together around the objective



Pressure Group	Level of Opposition	Action to Achieve Level of Opposition
Environmentalists	High	People who value the corridor's environment strongly opposed TM7 for the toll on trees and environmental design. Participated in class action.
Patrimonialists	High	People who value the corridor's patrimonial heritage opposed TM7 for the impact on cultural heritage and Séptima. Participated in class action.
Neighboring Developers (Aldea Proyectos)	High	High scale project developers -especially- promoters could not articulate their timeline with the City's agenda and the project. This lack of coordination was key to haul the project.
Organized Neighbors (Altos de la Cabrera)	High	High income development owners in Altos de la Cabrera were directly affected by the project's design. They presented a particular claim and achieved certain measures.
Unorganized Neighbors	Medium	Many property owners are interested in the project depending on their level of tolerance of what is in their social circle - here they will be prone to fund or participate in certain activities.
Political Stakeholders	High	The visibility of the project is very high and there are incentives for political stakeholders to try to avoid it around attacking it. Until some project is established, this is expected to continue to be the case.
Anti BRT Activists	High	Some academics, urbanists, and other intellectuals used their voice and authority to mobilize against the project. They technically supported CBOs and political groups in a project involving a bus-based solution.
Anti Intervention Community Based Organizations	High	Strong CBOs oppose almost any intervention in the corridor. They led rallies and committees against the project. multiple class actions

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Sotomayor et al. (2022) document this mobilization of urban and legal expertise against governmental projects as factors. Most interesting to this study are the following: i.) As a way to prompt class-based visions of how the alternative to more open and engaging participatory processes; iii.) As an expedite way -because of City government- to paralyze projects until a new electoral cycle comes along.

The Green Corridor (CV7)

On January 1, 2020 Claudia López started her 4-year term as Mayor of Bogotá. As a part of the campaign she is rethinking this project and analyzing different alternatives to make it better than a classic BRT. With Transmilenio and judicial courts, her administration proposed a different approach: not only basing decision-making on classic democracy but also including social dialogue and the fight against climate change as structuring elements of public engagement.

After a broad public consultation process on November 23, 2020 she presented the city's new approach to la Séptima not only as a zero emissions public transit solution but a design interaction between green mobility, public space, and an instrument for social dialogue, prioritization and the search for consensus. The project is a dialogue opportunity space and to reflect upon the value of quality public space, naturalization and the use of non-polluting alternative mobility city requires.



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Most of the diagnostics and conclusions outlined by Sotomayor et al. (2023), were (at least intuitively) acknowledged in the structuring of a new plan to deliver a project in Carrera Séptima. Nonetheless, after a multivariate alternative de Movilidad in 2021², best public transport solution for the Corridor was still bus based. Because of this, the C discussions regarding TM7 could come back and some stakeholders will re-engage in discussion.

This paper will present some of the key actions designed by the City of Bogotá in its purpose to anticipate -and could allow an intervention in this corridor. For three of the main factors analyzed by Sotomayor et al., this doc where they come from and how they were interpreted by city officials (the author being the Project Manager) anticipate a new judicial discussion with better outcome chances for the city.

Problem 1. Class-based vision of urban narratives

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Sotomayor, et al. (2022) studied how judicialization of different conflicts in Colombia -particularly after the 1991 (C) dramatically and achieved new controls to the administrative power. They also document, however, how this benefited segments of society with more resources to access better law practitioners, influential politicians, major sources of power. This tendency, denominated by the authors as “middle and upper class citizens”, have organized projects through different actions successfully (political action, communication, legal actions, etc) and sometimes interest.

Janette Sadik-Khan (2019) reflects on how this approach is a challenge for city governments to overcome effectively “Jacobs’s model of grassroots resistance has been co-opted into a perverse politics of rejecting new ideas -and project as a victory, even if that victory is status quo (...) Speaking at public hearings, local residents and business language as a smokescreen to fight Jacobs-like projects. They oppose plans for walkable neighborhoods and bike might congest traffic, make streets less safe and pollute the environment or erode property values” (Sadik-Khan, Street

Acknowledging the necessity of bringing public transit with certain characteristics (interoperable, high commercial etc) city government realized that the most viable solution that could achieve the operative parameters of the corridor of the stakeholders representing the middle and upper class segment that have historically opposed an intervention in about avoiding an expansion of the BRT network, and/or were particularly interested in maintaining the status quo.

In addition to their resistance to the TransMilenio model in the city “they also oppose infrastructure that is architectural heritage and ecological structures, and appeal to active mobility, walkability, green corridors, and corridors (Sotomayor et al., 2022). Anticipating this discussion the project concealed two different things when building a new city-wide resources in rethinking the infrastructure design to be lighter, cleaner, and less invasive, and integrating aspirational values that these same constituents could resonate to, such as walkability, landscaping, biking, and other

The latter strategy was required to start atomizing opposition into their real and particular interests. Aware that diverse motivations to oppose an intervention in Séptima, trying to build coalitions around particular aspects that were than TM7 (environmental design, heavy infrastructure implantation, disaffecting relevant patrimonial buildings normative challenges) would isolate the anti-project group and reduce incentives on opposition on many others. Because some of the visions that motivated organized opposition into the project narrative to build a more just approach to urban

This approach, as suggested by Centner (2014), allows for a more inclusive narrative:

“Successful strategies to bolster the right to the city for all will need to push these visions of the right kind of city with the fact that cities are always shared, collective achievements that can only thrive when space- literally - is made those who are on the "wrong" side of distinction.”

Pressure groups heavily invested and organized against TM7 were identified and engaged directly via workshops, discussions, etc. depending on their core interest. Environmental, patrimonial and some community-based groups intent to be more comprehensive.

For example, as the project was intentionally heavy on landscaping throughout the entire engagement period, many leaders and activists were involved directly in public discussions and city-led events regarding the necessity of integrating green solutions into infrastructure development. Shortly after the conceptual design of the project was released -in which the project will be bus-based and some discomfort was initiated- the three architecture organizations publicly backed the initiative.

“We consider that the conceptual design disclosed by the current administration of Bogotá responds to the fact that, after a long time, that it is conceived as an act of love and responsibility for the city and its natural basis.

We understand that a process of creation as it is in progress responds to the desire of the individual to live, and a balanced framework that reconciles diverse visions of past and future administrations and allows it to fluidly articulate society.”(Rojas, Fajardo, Martínez, 2021)”

Gathering input, including concepts experts value into the design and highlighting their involvement, making it clear that their suggestions were included in the final design of the project, was critical through this engagement process.

Problem 2. Openness in participation

In high scale/ long-term projects it is easy for communities to understand and even calculate costs but benefits and making public engagement and communication very challenging. Although the TM7 participatory process included engagement and participation this was not perceived nor recognized by constituents. As documented by Sotomayor, communities referred to this process as a “top-down” and “socializing” process instead of a participatory opportunity for design decisions. There was a strong feeling in participants that meetings were held as a formality to validate decisions at technical instances:

According to a participant, when residents or groups raised an issue concerning a project, the professionals responded with what, to citizen groups, sounded like: “this has already been decided, this is all technically based, based on knowledge” (pers. comm., 04/29/2020). Legal activism thus became the counterpoint to Peñalosa’s brand of top-down decision-making.

Public consultation processes are challenging as some people expect to expand their incidence to the realm of co-decision-making. To take distance from top-down and “socializing” without misleading expectations to participants, the City structured different levels of engagement: from open access to information to direct incidence in some decision-making. These alter-

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design workshops structured by neighborhoods, massive newsletters and communications, in-site hauls, and a part using the Streetmix platform, among others⁸.

Output of this initial process was used for different purposes, mainly two: legitimacy and achieving a broad participation, and, more importantly, demonstrate that potentially contentious design decisions (such as a limitation on cars) were in line with the aspirations of citizens participating in the process. All of these efforts were documented on official websites and instruments and included in the narrative of the different stages of the process.

Some of the key insights of the initial phase of engagement include the following -as reported by the Instituto Comunal IDPAC:

"The participatory process involved informative, consultative, deliberative, and educational tools. Approximately 400,000 people were reached through the strategy, with 34,180 interactions on social media and mass media. According to a survey, 40% of the population has information about the green corridor, with the highest proportion (55%) in the 40 to 100 segment.

There were 36 deliberation spaces with 2,239 participants. Additionally, three educational forums via Facebook Live were held and reached an additional 115,000. Various citizen consultation actions were implemented, including Bogotá Abierta website, WhatsApp, street consultations, and StreetMix, resulting in 49,519 responses and 56,288 proposals when the survey was conducted among 1,521 households with individuals over 18 years, with a margin of error of 2.9%.

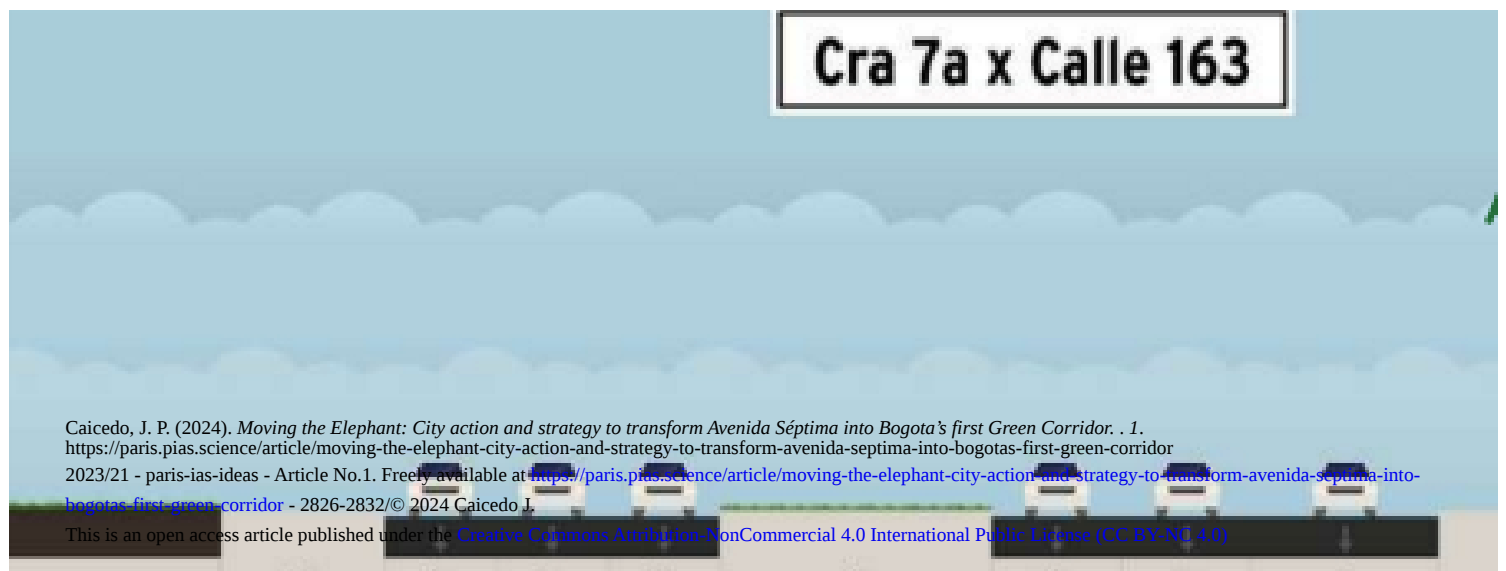
Despite the ongoing public debate on mass transit, the public did not prioritize it. Instead, there was more interest in skateboarding, with occasional interest in electric buses or trams when discussing mass transit."⁹

A particular example of effectiveness was the use of an open source software "Streetmix" as a part of the participatory process, a partnership between the city and the New Urban Mobility Alliance "NUMO". As recalled by Carlos Pardo

"participants could easily create and submit their own proposals to indicate their vision for 15 key locations along the corridor, measured to scale and recreated online. (...) Over those two weeks in October, nearly 7,000 proposals from 6,000 people were received, which met all requirements. Streetmix saves each proposal in code, which allowed NUMO to create a precise breakdown of what was wanted to see on the redesigned Séptima – from public transit to cycling and walking. This analysis provided the basis for the final design from those who actually use Séptima (2021).

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Pardo documented some of the findings of the usage of this open source platform as an innovative participatory strategy. “Results showed that participants favored active and shared modes, creating streets that in aggregate allocated 56% more space to skateboards and 74% more space to public transit than the status quo, while reducing space for private automobiles. The proposals reduced emissions by an average of 6% for the avenue and up to 26% in one segment. Participants prioritized public transit through prioritizing active modes and public transit. Finally, 248 proposals integrated autonomous vehicles, indicating a change and innovation on this front.” (Pardo, 2021).

In a broader sense, the objective was to highlight other elements of the discussion around infrastructure development and to democratize and celebrate other elements of these projects that city government could actually deliver (such as public space, green areas, safe infrastructure for bikers and pedestrians, etc).

With a strong documented case of quantitative and qualitative participation, intense communication strategies, and social spaces the administration wanted to effectively build a narrative that could resonate in an intent towards building as per request of the citizens involved.

Problem 3: City’s Administrative and Legal capacity of response actions

Coming back to the actors discussed beforehand, there is an inclination in the Colombian legal and social context “of the classes” to use legal actions to legitimize their view of the city (Sotomayor et al, 2022). Many of these actors for (acciones populares or tutelas) -summed up with rallying, Public Relations strategies, and opportunistic politician achieve short-term blockage of these projects.

Most of these actions were successful when they found a legal detail that was not clearly resolved by the particular right to be safeguarded:

Finally, for many of the citizens and politicians we interviewed, resorting to the judicial process implied the infrastructure project vulnerable from a legal point of view. That led to the fact that many times the process became to interrupt a project rather than a deep deliberation on its merits or limitations (Sotomayor 2023).

The overall approach to this challenge -in which particular governance issues, a sensible lack of articulation between lack of capacity to plan a better defense put at risk the final delivery of the project- was to resolve independently each the project and included into the comprehensive engagement strategy.

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The most notorious cases were Altos de la Cabrera and Plan Parcial El Pedregal. The first was a legal action filed by owners alleging that the construction could cause irreparable harm to their private property and other collective environment. Although once the City demonstrated the particular design will not be executed and the action was filed without their validation of the final design, they will pursue a new legal action. Throughout the detailed design process, owners were invited to workshops and the Instituto de Desarrollo Urbano (IDU) would explain design improvements and address particular concerns.

For El Pedregal -a large scale development or Plan Parcial-, a judge determined that TM7 was not correctly handled and would be illegal to execute the project. A contentious discussion with the developer -which included a \$142,990,400 bankruptcy for lack of coordination with city government¹⁰- was deactivated during López administration through interagency work. Finally on July 18, 2023 the Secretary of Planning and the Mayor's Office announced a new completion of Plan Parcial Pedregal including a design solution that was explicitly harmonized with the Green Corridor.

Focusing institutional capacity -and articulate critical components such as utility design, transit, infrastructure, public space- to articulate a shared solution that mitigates risk of future litigation was the main objective.

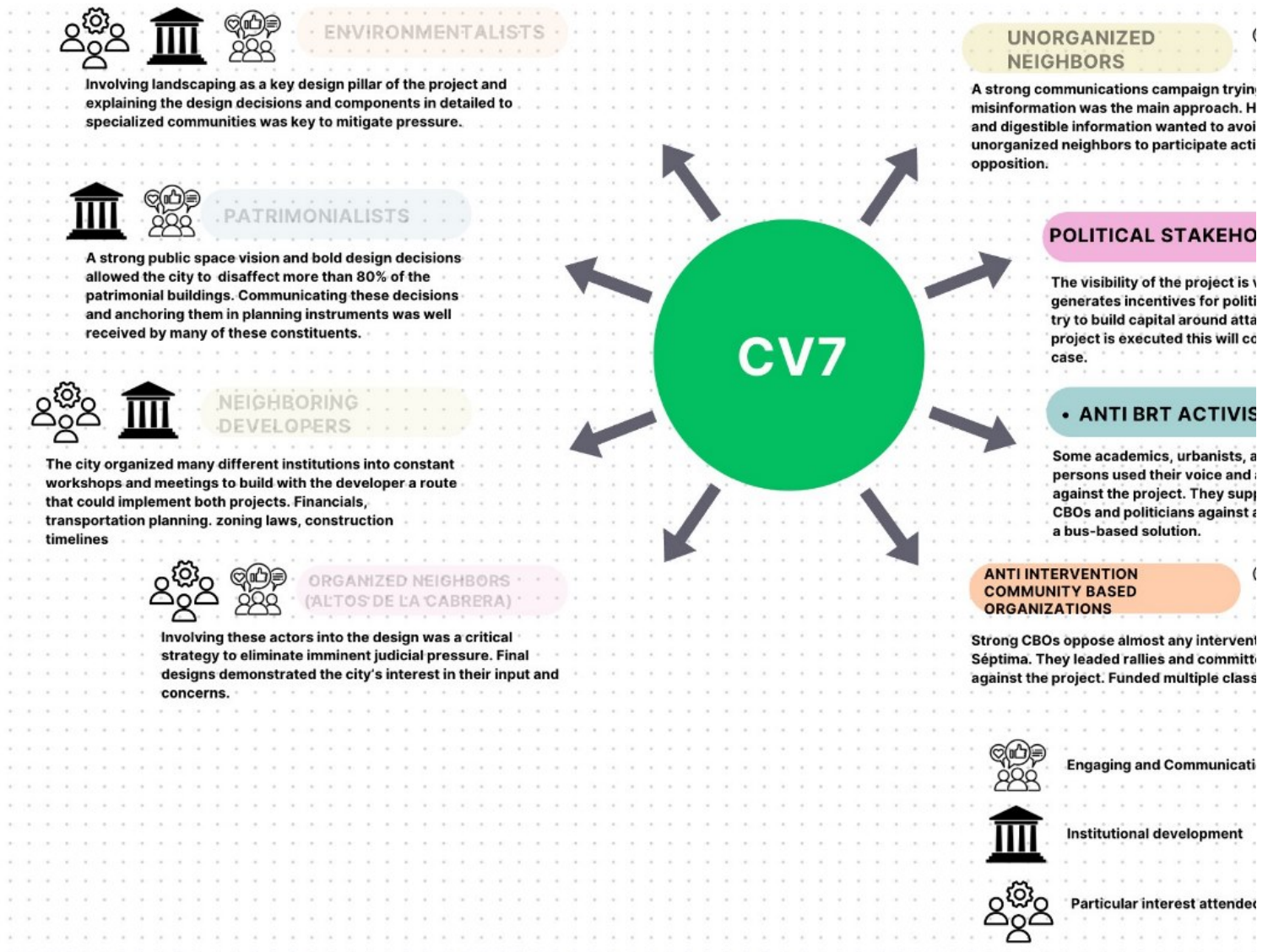
Discussion

Although at the time of publication of this paper it is uncertain if this project will be finally built, it is safe to say the government was intentional in articulating a new design process capable of mitigating judiciary risk where possible. Although which has an important background and documentation, the final design of the Green Corridor was a result of a stakeholder segmentation, and direct negotiation. All of these techniques allowed the city to be more flexible on previously untouched (road design parameters, station design, landscaping, public space design, transit-oriented development, and many others) and produce a functional solution highly different from Bogotá's traditional infrastructure.

With special attention to attend particular stakeholders, interests and through a more comprehensive governance structure, groups that were strongly vocal and organized in the TM7 process lacked incentives to continue: environmentalists, patrimonialist groups, and plaintiffs with very specific interests were treated from a more open and inclusive approach which was effective in continuing engagement in judicial action. Political stakeholders, anti BRT Activists and anti-intervention CBOs continued to oppose the project in very similar ways as they did against TM7¹¹, which demonstrates still mobilizing legal expertise to pressure the government's agendas (and particularly the blockage of city projects to achieve certain vision of the city) will continue to be present in future projects.

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Pressure Group	Level of Opposition	Action to Achieve Level of Opposition
Environmentalists	None	Involving landscaping as a key design pillar and explaining the design decisions and details to specialized communities was key pressure.
Patrimonialists	None	A strong public space vision and bold design allowed the city to disaffect more than 80% of buildings. Communicating these decisions in them in planning instruments was well received by these constituents.
Neighboring Developers (Aldea Proyectos)	None	The city organized many different institutional workshops and meetings to build with the city that could implement both projects. Financial planning, zoning laws, construction timelines.
Organized Neighbors (Altos de la Cabrera)	None	Involving these actors into the design was key to eliminate imminent judicial pressure. Financial demonstrated the city's interest in their input.
Unorganized Neighbors	Low	A strong communications campaign trying to reduce misinformation was the main approach. Hard to digestible information wanted to avoid making neighbors to participate actively in opposition.
Political Stakeholders	Medium	The visibility of the project is very high and incentives for political stakeholders to try to go around attacking it. Until some project is executed continue to be the case.
Anti BRT Activists	High	Some academics, urbanists, and other intellectuals used their voice and authority to mobilize against the project. They technically supported CBOs and political project involving a bus-based solution.
Anti Intervention	High	Strong CBOs oppose almost any intervention

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The takeaway on Bogotá's approach to contain judicial activism against this project can be summarized as follows: i.) Projects should build -and sustain through their entire life- a relatable narrative around high-impact projects; and ii.) Projects should build -and document- a stronger case around more typical collective action (environment, public participation, planning principles, etc).

Current urban governance challenges require city governments to be more audacious, and inclusive in their project restrictions and broader visions are fundamental for high-scale interventions, political sensibility and diagnostics can and further effectiveness. Achieving a good mixture between the technical constraints and stronger narratives can converge with relevant stakeholders minimizing implementation risks.

Conclusion

This Bogotá case illustrates the expansion of checks and balances to executive action from citizens and judicial authority in Colombia, and more specifically in Bogotá, are challenging and diminish any administration capacity to pursue high scale urban projects. Because of this it is expected to experience conflict and contention in every structuring process.

The winner-takes-all structuring of these projects (either the city builds what it considers best for public interest or to stop it and maintain status quo) is costly and very high-risk. Stakeholder management, public engagement, and direct negotiations can mitigate some pressure (and sometimes it can be enough to produce a better outcome) but challenge yet to be explored and understood.

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Footnotes

1 : As mentioned by Mojica in HKSCase1942.0: A key difference between TransMilenio and other fixed busway systems was the presence of a second lane at stations that permitted buses to overtake one another and made express services possible. This second lane was thought to boost the system’s capacity from 15,000 to more than 40,000 passengers per direction per hour. Avenida Séptima had a 5 km stretch where the right-of-way was too narrow to accommodate the intended provision, in each direction, of one bus lane plus an additional lane for overtaking in the stations, two mixed traffic lanes and a sidewalk. Harvard Kennedy School of Government. (2011) The Battle Over Avenida Séptima, HKS case 1942.0 [↩](#)

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