

Architectural Agonism: The Urban Imaginary Project

Medellin's Renaissance, a Post-War Imaginary

Columbia University GSAPP

Master of Science in Advanced Architectural Design

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Imaginaries are historical constructions defined by the interactions of subjects in society...and the set of values, institutions, laws and symbols that are common to a particular social group.

Jean-Paul Sartre¹ in *Psychologie Phénoménologique de l'Imagination*

The Construction of Urban Imaginaries

This studio explores the potential of *Agonism* to opening unexpected paths for the identification, confrontation and discussion of current polemics in architecture. Specifically, it investigates the *Construction of Urban Imaginaries* through the vindication of the role of the architect as a *Public Intellectual*, that is, a designer that participates in public debates about the conformation of cities, risking his or her own position by questioning institutions, received ideas and the general status quo. Different versions of the concept of *The Imaginary* have been studied by authors like Jean-Paul Sartre, Michel Foucault, Cornelius Castoriadis or Charles Taylor—who defines Modern Social Imaginaries as “the ways people imagine their social existence, how they fit together with each other, how things go on between them and their fellows, the expectations that are normally met, and the deeper normative notions and images that underline these expectations”². Yet if we talk about *Urban Imaginaries* we could say that they are the construction of the desired idea of cities that their inhabitants consciously produce; a system conformed by social relations, architectural operations, urban policies and the ideology behind them.

Medellin's Renaissance, a Post-War Imaginary

Medellin is maybe still popularly associated with the idea of narco-trafficking, the drug lord Pablo Escobar, and with the extremely high murder rate it suffered from the 70's to the 90'. However, in 2013, Medellin has been awarded, among other international distinctions, by The World Street Journal with the title of *The Most Innovative City of the Year* beating contenders as New York or Tel Aviv. The answer to the question of how has this change been possible in such limited time, is basically through international operations that ended the *Cartel de Medellin* (or drug war) and local ambitious projects of public architecture. In other words, in the construction of an *Urban Imaginary* that is not validated by its commercial means but by its potential to create a new form of urbanity through architecture, culture and social programs based in equality. The renaissance of Medellin was possible thanks to a group of politicians (some architects among them) that through the application of an operation based in architectural acupuncture (the construction of open and free libraries, botanic gardens, sport facilities etc.) and the reinvention of the city infrastructure (subway and *metro cable*, a gondola lift system that flies and connects the slum neighborhoods of the city) achieved an enormous impact in the relation of the city with

¹ Sartre, Jean-Paul, *L'Imaginaire: Psychologie Phénoménologique de l'Imagination*, Paris: Gallimard, 1940.

² Taylor, Charles, *Modern Social Imaginaries*, Duke University Press, Durham 2004.

its inhabitants. Yet today, after the success of the re-emergence of Medellin as one of the most innovative cities in the world, the city faces new challenges like the potential banalization of its ideals or the commercialization of its cultural and social interests among others issues.

Modus Operandi: Workshop in Medellin, an International Consulting Agency of Infiltrated Agents

This studio will operate as an international urban consulting agency, that is, as a group of experts able to deliver a current diagnosis and potential futures for the city of Medellin in the form of an *Urban Imaginary* based in programmatic strategies and architectural operations. We will travel to Medellin during the third week of September, in order to participate in an intensive workshop hosted by *Urbam* (EAFIT University) a prestigious research center of urban and environmental studies directed by the authors the Medellin's reinvention. Once in location we will study the past, recent history and current challenges of the city; interview the main local actors that have been involved in the creation of the current Medellin (politicians, architects, urban designers, artists, theatre companies, rappers, curators, neighbors etc.); we will tour the city in different speeds and means of transportations; study its geographical, urban and social fabric and we will work in conclusions. We will, in other words, work as infiltrated agents of independent observers that will, ultimately, design a potential future *Urban Imaginary for Medellin*, unveiling in doing so, issues that require public discussion inside and outside the architectural discipline.

Critical Pedagogy

This studio will work with a methodology based in Critical Pedagogy. In other words, the students will be trained to develop their independent critical skills that will be applied agonistically, that is, taking radical positions and learning to defend them graphically, orally and in the construction of strong arguments. Approximately once a week the class will have pedagogical sessions where lecturers will be invited, debates will be organized, acting workshops will be delivered and a wide range of time constrained games/exercises will be played in order to advance in the students' skills, analysis and proposals.

*The students that are interested in this studio should quickly investigate if they require a visa in order to travel to Colombia, and in that case, if it will be possible for them to acquire it in approximately one week and a half.