Introduction: The Medellín Miracle

Abstract: Medellín, Colombia, was once the most violent city on Earth. In recent years, however, the city has gained prominence not for its association with narco-traffic and the notorious Pablo Escobar, but for the regeneration policies, known as ‘social urbanism’, which appear to have dramatically reduced the city’s violence. Social urbanism was designed to address violence by tackling inequality and exclusion in the city, with projects including innovative public transport networks, public parks, and libraries. Although social urbanism has globally been deemed a miraculous success, within Medellín many are concerned that these developments are becoming too oriented towards city branding. In this polemic context, this volume identifies the political negotiations, coalitions, and compromises that took place behind the miracle, and the complexity and significance of the political processes involved.

Keywords: city branding; social urbanism; urban violence

Medellín, the capital of the Department of Antioquia, Colombia, was once the most murderous city on Earth. In the 1980s and 1990s, the city became known as the epicentre of the global trade in cocaine, and notorious drug lord Pablo Escobar and his Medellín Cartel were seen as largely responsible for the astonishing increase in violence at this time. At the peak of the violence in 1991, there were 375 homicides per 100,000 population in Medellín (Uran, 2010: 129). This figure was more than 35 times the World Health Organization’s definition of epidemic violence, which is 10 per 100,000 (UNDP 2013), and even compared unfavourably with the Colombian average for that year, which was 79 (Figure 1). In addition to the extreme levels of violence perpetrated and orchestrated by the cartel, violence involving paramilitaries, urban militia, and, indeed, the State was endemic in Medellín, creating a situation in which violence became ‘banal’ (Pécaut, 1999).

It would appear, however, that Medellín’s darkest days have passed, and the city is now known for the astonishing decline in violence that has occurred over the last 20 years. Although the statistics show that

![Graph showing homicide rate per 100,000 population in Medellín and Colombia, 1980–2012](image)

**Figure 1** Homicide rate per 100,000 population in Medellín and Colombia, 1980–2012


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