Medellín, the second economic centre of Colombia. The capital of the Antioquia province is situated at 1,538 meters, amidst high hills. In 1980, the Metropolitan Region Medellín and Aburrá Valley was constituted, it integrates ten municipalities together with Medellín, and today has a population of about 3.4 millions. The urban region has an extension of 1,157 km² and a population density of 2,877 inhabitants/km².

Medellín once enjoyed the reputation of being one of Latin America’s most progressive industrial centres with a long tradition of civic minded public service and urban planning. Medellín’s reorientation and modernisation during the first half of the 20th century were not initiated by external investors, but by local capital and local elites, unlike other Latin American industrial regions. Textile industry was the engine of economic growth. The historical particularity of Medellín’s economic history contradicted current Third-World-development theories. Medellín’s elite promoted the image of a city where high rates of capitalist productivity were possible thanks to the elite’s social responsibility. In the mid-1970s, Medellín was still Colombia’s first economic centre.

World-wide deindustrialisation, however, sharpened the contradictions of the local economic model which entered in a deep crisis. The crisis was confronted by the concentration of regional capital and the constitution of an economic group, Grupo Empresarial Antioqueño, in 1979. The group headed the metropolitan region’s economic restructuring; today it is Colombia’s first economic group. Deep industrial crises, economic restructuring, growing informality (50.2% of all urban jobs in 1984, and 55.7% in 2000), as well as the expansion of the global drug economy, helped transform Medellín into the first drug capital of the world. The expansion of the drug economy opened new economic perspectives in Medellín. During the late 1990s, in the wake of a huge influx of money, a globalized consumer and shopping-centre culture spread across the city, the housing market was booming: luxurious apartment towers, fenced in and tightly monitored by private security forces, appeared everywhere in Medellín. At the same time, a wave of extreme violence eroded Medellín’s social fabric. From 1989 to 1993, the year when the icon of the global narcotics trade, the Colombian drug lord Pablo Escobar, was killed in Medellín, 28,700 people were assassinated in the city. Most were young men between fourteen and twenty-six years old of the urban ‘underclass’. Between 1994 and 2004, other 34,600 people were killed, only after 2004 this numbers diminished. The more the urban crisis increased the more the city’s industrial past became glorified in community memory. During the 1990s, public debates at Round Tables and Open Forums between grassroots organizations, local NGOs, trade unions, universities, the municipality and the city’s business sector, as well as strategic planning, aimed at managing the urban crisis, and at developing a postindustrial model of a City of the Future. The debates pushed Medellín’s transition from an industrial to a service metropole.

The background of Medellín’s makeover and its recent boom is paradoxical: on the one hand, the debates, and on the other hand, the formation of paramilitary-led corporate mercenaries which pacified the city.

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The new headquarter of BANCOLIUMBA was inaugurated in 2005. It is the strongest symbol of Medellín’s transition from a declining industrial region to an emerging financial centre. The building was constructed in the city’s most important former industrial area, near the historic centre. The regeneration of the city’s declined industrial areas is the key strategic goal of Medellín’s strategic plan Medellín 2015. It aims at re-establishing Medellín’s image as a booming metropolis in Latin America. BANCOLIUMBA is Colombia’s first bank, it belongs to the country’s first economic group Grupo Empresarial Antioqueño, which is rooted in Medellín. Bancolombia’s headquarter is the hugest building a bank ever built in Latin America. The building has direct access to Medellín’s metro system and to the city’s main express highways. It is the flagship project of a number of important regeneration projects realised in the same area during the last 5 years. The sculpture of superman posing like Rodin’s “Thinker” in front of the building reinforces the building’s symbolic meaning.

The mega-project Metro de Medellín was the impetus of Medellín’s urban renewal and restructuring. The Metro started operation in 1995. It crosses the city on a fifteen meter high concrete viaduct from North to South (line A) and from downtown to the West (line B). The Metro radically transformed the city’s transport system. The metro company (Empresa de Transportes Masivo del Valle de Aburrá) was created in 1979 in association with the municipality of Medellín and the provincial government. In 1982 the metro project was approved by the national government, and in 1994 the company contracted a German-Spanish consortium to realise the construction works. The works were executed during the city’s deepest economic crisis. They were stopped, between 1989 and 1992, due to corruption, and finished in 1995. The Metro Style (Estética Metro) today is a kind of brand of the city’s upgraded and renewed public space. In 2004 and 2007, Metro Cable, two aerial passenger tramways have connected part of the lowest income districts on Medellín’s hillsides to the Metro system. Aerial passenger tramways are not often used as mass transportation system. The project had been brought to the city’s public Round Tables in 1996. At that time, however, it was planned as a tourist attraction that linked together the city’s pan-American sites. The project raised a heated public debate. The public debate may have pushed Medellín’s first independent mayor, Sergio Fajardo, to transform a tourist project into a project for mass transportation.

The project is the result of participatory planning in the context of Medellín’s 1999 Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial-POT. The project was designed to relocate families from the city’s geological “high risk zones”. It was articulated to the new mass transport system Metro Cable, which connects it to the centre of the city. During the South American Championship in Medellín, in March 2010, some of the buildings had hosted international sport delegations. The social housing project has approx. 40,000 residents. The impact of the project is ambivalent: Housing conditions improved considerably, while unemployment could only partially be faced by the construction of a market. Relocated residents lost direct access to their former informal working place downtown.

The city’s first participative upgrading program was implemented in Moravia, a neighbourhood close to the city’s historical centre. The neighbourhood was part of Medellín’s former dump. Between 1977 and 1983 around 15,000 people settled on the dump, which was 30 meter high and had an area of 76,000 m². In 1980, the municipality closed the dump. Residents resisted to relocation and started negotiating participative upgrading with the municipality: decontamination, legalization of land tenure, public services, improvement of housing and public space. In 1990, the municipality declared Moravia a special area of urban upgrading. During the 1990s, Moravia turned into a dynamic centre of informal economy. Recreapar, a cooperative specialized in waste management emerged in the neighbourhood and expanded to more than 1,000 workers. 73% of the waste gathered by the cooperative is recovered by its associates through the Circular Economy Programme which serves industries, businesses and public and private institutions. But at that time, Moravia also turned into an epicentre of Medellín’s urban conflict. The neighbourhood became a laboratory of conflict management when the municipality started negotiations with the armed gangs. In 2004 the municipality declared Moravia’s participatory upgrading strategy a successful urban project. Today, Moravia is focalized close to strategic infrastructures: the city’s central bus station, universities, hospitals, new leisure parks; its ground rent potential is high and inhabitants constantly feel the pressure of being relocated. The residents’ organization, mobilization and combativeness provoked a wave of solidarity in the city which forced the municipality to declare Moravia “a zone of re-development where residents must be protected from being expelled by future mega-projects”. During participative planning in Morabina the municipality declared the figure of “residents’ protection” with the municipality. This figure has served as a laboratory of conflict management in order to conserve the existing social tissue and economic networks. The negotiations’ outcome was Moravia’s Global Upgrading Plan. This plan is an exemplar result of successful social resistance to profit oriented urban regeneration.