Touring the ‘comuna’: memory and transformation in Medellin, Colombia

NAEF, Patrick James

Abstract
The objective is to explore the touristification of some peripheral neighbourhoods of Medellin. The focus is on urban areas built by war-displaced populations commonly referred to as ‘comunas’ and often associated with crime and narco-traffic. Some tours generally labelled as ‘comuna tours’ have been emerging during the last three years and are largely included in the promotion of the ‘new Medellin’, focusing on its transformation from ‘the most violent to the most innovative city in the world’. Examining the role of the different stakeholders, including local community leaders, private entrepreneurs or state representatives, it will show that this practice is above all multiform and has to be analysed along with the general process of city branding ongoing in Medellin. Between the acknowledgement of past violent events and the will to look forward, competing narratives are at stake in this touristic and memorial arena.

Reference

DOI : 10.1080/14766825.2016.1246555
Touring the ‘comuna’: memory and transformation in Medellin.

Patrick Naef, University of Geneva, Department of Geography and Environment

ABSTRACT
The objective is to explore the touristification of some peripheral neighbourhoods of Medellin. The focus is on urban areas built by war-displaced populations commonly referred to as ‘comunas’ and often associated with crime and narco-traffice. Some tours generally labelled as ‘comuna tours’ have been emerging the last three years and are largely included in the promotion of the ‘new Medellin’, focusing on its transformation from ‘the most violent to the most innovative city in the world’. Examining the role of the different stakeholders, including local community leaders, private entrepreneurs or state representatives, it will show that this practice is above all multiform and has to be analysed along with the general process of city branding on-going in Medellin. Between the acknowledgment of past violent events and the will to look forward, competing narratives are at stake in this touristic and memorial arena.

KEYWORDS: transformation; memory; tourism; war; violence; Colombia

Introduction

The lighted buildings give it a cosmopolitan look, an air of grandeur that makes us think that we’ve already conquered underdevelopment. The metro crosses through the middle, and when we first saw it snake through the city, we thought that we’d finally emerged from poverty.

(Jorge Franco)

After decades of violence, Medellin, the second largest city of Colombia, is now receiving an increasing number of visitors. A significant drop in homicides and an active promotion campaign targeting international tourists as well as foreign investors are contributing to what is described as the transformation of the most violent city to the most innovative city in the world. Tourism has an active role in this process, serving as a shop window for this transformation. Moreover, some peripheral areas – still often associated with criminality and narco-traffice – are also identified as illustrations of this transformation.

These informal urban developments, commonly described as ‘comunas’, many of them settled on the hills surrounding the city, are still seen as threatening places by
inhabitants. Some scholars like Polit-Dueñas also stress that if ‘endemic forms of violence experienced in Medellin in the 1980s have diminished, the comunas still are very violent places.’ (2013, p. 176) Yet nowadays some significant investments, usually presented as ‘social urbanism’ (Hernández, 2016; Salazar, 2011), are taking place in some of these deprived areas and participating in the branding of the new Medellin. Architects, urban developers and international delegations were the first to visit the comunas, quickly followed by journalists, bloggers and tourists. Thereafter, private entrepreneurs started proposing what is now often referred to as ‘comuna tours’ for the emergent tourism market, still predominantly composed of independent travellers such as ‘backpackers’.

This kind of offer first started in the ‘comuna 13’ and is now also developing in the ‘comuna 4’, specifically in the vibrant neighbourhood of Moravia. Both communes experienced a high level of violence and still carry an aura of danger, especially the comuna 13, notorious for its past guerrilla activity, repressed by military and paramilitary armed operations in the 2000’s. Nowadays, if most of the population agrees on the socio-economic improvement of these communes, their access to basic resources is still very low and crime is far from gone. Nevertheless, both places are actively promoted in narratives related to the transformation of Medellin, through the presentation of high visibility architectural and territorial activity. In this context, the booming tourism sector represents a valuable vehicle.

This contribution aims to present some of the entrepreneurs involved in this practice and explore the conflicts and the compromises when insiders and outsiders share a market, and are part of a discourse on the city. Furthermore, while ‘transformation’ is a major concept in the field of anthropology of tourism, it is usually considered from the standpoint of tourism conceptualized as an agent of transformation. In this study, transformation and innovation will be analysed as resources, creating business opportunities, but also as ways of participating in the construction of the image of Colombia’s second city.

The first question is thus to determine if elements illustrating innovation and the transformation of Medellin can constitute a niche market in its developing tourism sector. Secondly, a deconstruction of the discourse on this transformation will allow us to examine the different, and sometimes competing narratives at stake. Keeping in mind that a city is perpetually in ‘transformation’, we should look at the real impact of this process, between concrete social change and broad city marketing. This has to be considered in the context of the tourism sector, without overlooking the point of view of the inhabitants of these comunas.

This analysis is the result of four months of fieldwork conducted in Medellin in 2015. It is based mainly on more than 20 semi-directive interviews with tourist guides, community leaders, inhabitants of the comunas, city employees and magistrates. The interviews were carried out in parallel with the semi-participative observation of approximately ten comuna tours. An extended content analysis of media and administrative material was also undertaken, in particular to define the setting of the case studies.

Place identity and competing representations

Analysing narratives on the ‘transformation’ of a city implies first undertaking a brief
reflexion on the notion of ‘place identity’ (Ashworth, Graham & Tunbridge, 2007; Watson, 2013) and the process of ‘place making’ or ‘place branding’ (Anholt, 2013; Kavaratzis & Ashworth, 2005; Peel & Lloyd, 2008; Young, 2012). There is now a general consensus that place branding does not limit itself to the delivery of a logo and a communicative campaign. (Pell & Lloyd, 2008) Anholt (2013) points out that that the image formation of countries (and by extension of cities and regions) is far more complex and rich than that of any consumption products and therefore a place brand should not be reduced to a catchy, simple and one-dimensional formula.

Watson (2013, p. 80) defines ‘place identity’ as a ‘set of meanings associated with any particular cultural landscape that any particular person or group of people draws on the construction of their own personal or social identities.’ Following this conceptualisation, Ashworth et al. (2007, p. 54) consider the transformation of space into place ‘through traditions, memories, myths and narratives and its uniqueness confirmed and legitimated in terms of their relationship to particular representations of the past.’ They add that a place always carries an ideological intent and therefore cannot be considered as neutral. This increases the potential for contestation between the various actors involved, confronting official and unofficial representations and narratives, and thus enhancing the degree of dissonance among different stakeholders.

This raises the question of images and narratives selection, ‘and the extent to which a collective city image can then be defined, shared and disseminated.’ (Peel & Lloyd, 2008, p. 508) The construction of a place identity or city image is thus guided by power dynamics underlined by the diverse interpretations and representations associated with the city. As Ashworth et al. (2007, p.61) state: ‘In urban cultures, powerful groups will attempt to determine the limits of meaning for everyone else by universalising their own cultural truths.’ Considering the fact that there are many imagined cities in one city and that dominant meanings tend to crowd out those providing identity to weaker groups, Healey (2002) raises the question of whether a city can generate an imaginative, shared collective resource, richer and more inclusive. Here the main question is: ‘Who does the city belong to and who has the power to shape its trajectory?’ (Healey, 2002, p. 1779) For Healey, the city cannot be limited to a particular image, but has to represent ‘a terrain of debate, a resource for identity formation and for building a sense of a shared context.’ (Healey, 2002, p. 1789).

In this competing arena of meanings and representations, tourism can play a central role, acting as a vector for dominant narratives as well as offering means of resistance for marginalised groups. Place identity is thus considered here as a resource for tourism and city marketing, associated with diverse and sometimes disputed discourses on the city.

**Urban conflicts in Medellin**

Before briefly looking back at the recent historical context of the case studies and analysing more precisely the ‘transformation’ of Medellin, a few words on the term ‘comuna’ are important. Medellin is composed of 16 communes; however, if one talks about a ‘comuna’, one usually refers to a peripheral neighbourhood, often regarded as a slum, and associated with poverty and crime. Yet these informal areas, often built by war-displaced populations from the countryside, are also seen, sometimes with affection
and nostalgia, as resurgences of *el campo* (the countryside) in the city. Therefore, even if a mechanism of stigmatization is certainly targeting the populations of the *comunas*, the referent has also been reclaimed by local communities, who use it as an important element of their identity. The ‘*comuna*’ is thus seen as a cradle for music (with a significant predominance of hip-hop) and other artistic productions. It can also create a strong sense of belonging and solidarity, shown for example by a collective of musicians called ‘*Unión entre comunas*’ or the many graffiti in the area referring to the *comuna* such as ‘*Soy comuna 13*’ (I am *comuna 13*).

Furthermore, similar to what Larkins (2015) describes in the favelas of Rio de Janeiro, the mass media, especially movies and TV-shows, create specific representations of these places. The Netflix production *Narcos* certainly contributed to this dynamic in the case of potential international visitors from the United States and elsewhere, by depicting the rise and fall of the former drug lord Pablo Escobar and presenting the *comunas* as his turf for narco-business. Nevertheless, if these representations are fiction and tinged with a kind of dark romanticism, they also without any doubt present a violent reality. For many inhabitants of Medellín, the *comunas* are still primarily linked to violence and symbolize another Medellin, another city characterized by crime and drugs. As the narrator in the famous novel of Jorge Franco - *Rosario Tijeras* – states, referring to the many lights sparkling among the *comunas* set on the surrounding hills: ‘Rosario took me to that other city, the one of the little lights.’ (Franco, 2005)

The use of the designation of ‘*comuna*’ in tourism narratives, as demonstrated by the appearance of ‘*comuna tours*’, confirms the strong symbolic dimension that this referent carries.

The development—also described as ‘invasions’—of these informal neighbourhoods started in the 1970’s with the displacement of many inhabitants of rural areas, including a large number from the North of Antioquia, the department encompassing Medellin. Displacements were not just a rural exile to the city, but also took place within Medellin, where some families were obliged to change location several times due to the threats of armed groups in the city. In the 80’s and the 90’s, guerrillas such as the FARC (Fuerzas armadas revolucionarias de Colombia) and ELN (Ejército de Liberación Nacional), started to occupy these areas, taking advantage of the poverty-stricken social tissue to recruit the local youth and develop illicit trades of drugs and weapons. (National Centre for Historical Memory, 2011)

In the end of the 90’s, a process of social cleansing began, largely supported by paramilitary groups backed by the state, especially during the two terms of president Álvaro Uribe from 2002 to 2010. The main objective was to expel guerrillas from the city, but the ‘*limpieza social*’ (social cleaning) also targeted other individuals, such as prostitutes, union leaders, petty criminals, etc. The *comuna 13* became a particularly infamous symbol of this process, after several military and paramilitary operations took place there. The operations *Mariscal* and *Orion* in 2002 are certainly the best-known and were the most traumatic for the local population. After guerrilla groups abandoned the *comuna 13*, paramilitary structures (mainly the Bloque Cacique Nutibara) took control of the area until the beginning of the demobilization process in 2003. Nowadays, under other labels like ‘*combos*’, ‘*bandas*’, ‘*desmovilizados*’ or ‘*BACRIM*’, violence and the threat of forced displacement are still means of political and social control. (National Centre for Historical Memory, 2011)
If the neighbourhood of Moravia, in the comuna 4, also has a history of sicaria (professional hit-men), displacement and social conflict, it is, unlike the previous case, situated in the centre of Medellin. Moravia is famous for its ‘morro’, a former dump representing a hill of solid trash more than 30 meters high. Since the 1980’s it attracted many displaced groups dedicated to recycling the material available and contributing to the environmental degradation of the area. In 2005, the municipality initiated a plan of urban and environmental reclaiming of the morro, involving the relocation of the families settled on the hill of trash and the creation of community gardens instead. According to the 2004 census, 2,224 families were living on the 10 hectares of a dump 35 meters high, representing 1.5 million tons of waste. (Restrepo, Gómez, Quintanilla et al., 2011)

The relocation was a source of tension and several police operations were necessary to carry it out. An important resistance movement grew among the inhabitants and as these lines are being written a dozen families are still refusing to leave. Nevertheless, most of the dwellings disappeared after a few years and in 2010 the community gardens were equipped with buffer strips to reduce the infiltration of water and retain pollutants. Local involvement was promoted and community leaders were encouraged to participate in the decision process. Now a group of local women takes care of the gardens, through a non-profit organisation called Cojardicom Corporación, with material support from the municipality.

The ‘transformation’ of Medellín

Following an intense period of violence these comunas are now the site of an ambitious programme, labelled ‘social investment’, ‘social urbanism’ or ‘urban acupuncture’. The latest efforts encompass public space recuperation and community projects that include infrastructure, education, mobility, access to resources and cultural promotion. The city also hosted the 7th World Urban Forum in 2014 and has been presented as a world capital for innovation by the media and organizations such as the Urban Land Institute. This process is illustrated by various emblematic projects, including modern multimedia centres (‘parques biblioteca’) and urban metro-cables, which the journalist Ariela Navarro (2014) calls the ‘cable car for the poor’.

In the neighbourhood of Independencia 1 located at the heart of the comuna 13, a brand new system of outdoor electric stairways was inaugurated in 2012, adding to the existing cable car, and representing an investment of close to three million Euros (figure 1). Other initiatives like the reconstruction of roofs and the painting of walls in surrounding houses have also contributed to the revitalization of this specific area. These projects are usually initiated by the city and associated with private funding, like the capital invested by Pilsen, the brand of one the most popular beers in Colombia. If these emblematic projects aim to connect peripheral areas and marginal communities with the centre, they are also unavoidable symbols of the transformation of the city. These initiatives are the focus of the promotional discourses associated with this process, often presented as a ‘miracle’, allowing Medellín to shift from ‘the most dangerous to the most innovative city in the world’. (Naef, 2016) The electric stairways and the area around them have been attracting tourists since 2014, when the professional and international delegations were invited to visit the site during and after the World Urban Forum. So-called ‘comuna tours’ are starting to develop; they began within the community when
local artists organised the ‘Graffitour’ – a tour focusing on urban murals - and were followed by other similar tours offered by entrepreneurs all around the city.

In the comuna 4, the neighbourhood of Moravia is also a major symbol of the transformation of the city. Despite a context of extreme violence still vivid in the memory of its inhabitants, Moravia is depicted as a place bursting with culture, due to its central situation and the multiple origins of its population, for the most part war-displaced people. The hill of Moravia – el morro – is now covered with community gardens visible from the metro. The local newspaper El Colombiano talks about magic when it describes the transformation of the neighbourhood: ‘Moravia seems to have been touched by magic. Where there was pollution and death, there is now life, friendship and solidarity’. (Zapata, 2015) The journalist even describes the area today as a small paradise.

The two neighbourhoods presented above are key places in the promotion of the miracle of Medellin. In the airport, cable cars (figure 2) hang from the roof as illustrations of the process and Moravia’s morro is pictured on big boards together with the description: ‘Moravia, a live example of auto-planning and integrative intervention from the city. Thanks to multiple strategies implemented by the community a space for life has been built.’ However, if this ‘miracle’ is featured repeatedly in national and international media, the optimism is far from being shared by the local population; some see only a strategy of city-marketing and question the real social impact of these projects. Inhabitants criticize this depiction of Moravia as a ‘small paradise’ pointing out that a ‘vacuna’ (an extortion tax) is required to start a business or even park a car on the street. (personal communication, May 8, 2015) Although the level of violence is certainly not comparable to that at the end of the last century, numerous social problems remain. In the context of the transformation of Medellin, the memory of acts of violence (assassination, rapes, forced disappearance and displacements) is still there.

Between transformation and memory, future and past, different representations and discourses on the city emerge and sometimes clash. The shock of two different cities, with on one side the ‘new Medellin’ promoted by the political and economic sector, where innovation prevailed over violence, and on the other side the city of the periphery, home to a population without access to basic resources and living in areas still largely controlled by illegal armed groups. A community leader from the Committee of memorial impulsion of the comuna 13 clearly presents this multi-faced Medellin, stressing that the innovative city tends to obscure its numerous problems:

This city is not ours. Our city is the one of the periphery, with community process, human rights groups… But also with people without water, without public service, jobless people threatened by armed groups. This innovative city is a city without memory. It denies the past to build the future. (personal communication, October 24, 2015)

This last quotation is a good illustration of the challenge put forward by Healey (2002) of elaborating an image of the city as a collective resource, as well as the notion of ‘parallel cities’ developed by Kavaratzis (2004). For the latter, individuals mediate and assimilate various external and internal representations that cohabit in an uneven field: ‘Two parallel cities exist simultaneously, overlap and interact.’ (Kavaratzis, 2004, p.61) As previously noted, this cohabitation is underlined by power dynamics that impose particular meanings on a city and its inhabitants.
Tourism thus represents an appropriate frame to explore the tensions arising from competing representations of Medellín’s transformation. Tourism can serve as vehicle for local groups to express a memory eclipsed by discourses on innovation, but it is also an ideal promotional tool to present the transformation of the city and thus screen out a past seen as problematic. In 2015, Medellín hosted the General Assembly of the World Tourism Organization under the theme: ‘Tourism: Fostering inclusive development and social transformation’. Taleb Rifà, the Secretary-General, praised the social benefits of tourism and encouraged the mutation of Medellín as one of ‘America’s fastest growing tourism destinations’: ‘Only those that understand the connection between tourism and peace can appreciate the real value of travel and tourism’. Yet, beyond the political speeches celebrating tourism’s potential for peace, we need to analyse the practices of actors on the ground in order to identify the tensions and compromises in Medellín’s touristscape, and more broadly in its whole memorialscape.

Touring the comuna

When it comes to presenting the violent history of Medellín to visitors, different narratives compete. First, the touristification of the former drug lord and terrorist Pablo Escobar appeared at the end of the 2000’s first decade. After his pop culturization, in particular in narco-soap-operas like El Patron del Mal, the history of this infamous character is presented by local guides during so-called ‘Pablo tours’ (Naef, 2015; Giraldo, Van Broeck, & Posada, 2014) As Giraldo et al. demonstrate, the local authorities are more than reluctant to even consider this practice, usually seen as a dark representation of the city, and aim instead to showcase the positive impacts of its transformation. Secondly, other entrepreneurs try to introduce a more general discourse related to the history of Medellín and attempt to distance themselves from the overexposure of Pablo Escobar. Do not say that name tour, the designation of a historical tour offered by Colombia Travel Operator illustrates the complexity involved in the presentation of one of the darkest figures of the country. Finally, the museum Casa de la Memoria opened its doors in 2014 and reviews all the conflicts in the department of Antioquia, with a modern and well-documented multimedia scenography.

Nevertheless, if ‘narcoheritage’ (Naef, 2015) and the violent past associated with Pablo Escobar is not on the city tourist map, the comunas, and especially their history and transformation, are emerging as new tourism products. Since 2014, the comuna 4 and the lively neighbourhood of Moravia have been actively promoted as new tourism potentialities by local authorities. In a similar vein, the comuna 13 and the area of Independencia 1, where the outdoor electric stairways are located, are also present in the city touristscape as illustrations of innovation. Laura Escovar is working for the Office of the First Lady, a department of the city involved in various projects like the reconstruction of roofs close by the electric stairways. When she refers to this urban project, she mentions its impact on the community: ‘They are proud of their stairs and they gain visibility from the tourists.’ (personal communication, May 6, 2015) She also insists on the symbolic dimension of the electric stairs:

‘It was more for the innovation. This innovation that turned touristic. If you are not close to the electric stairs, they are not of any use for you. [...] It is more like a symbolic
message. During the former administration of Sergio Fajardo [Mayor of Medellin from 2003-2007], they used to say: “The best for the poorest.” (personal communication, May 6, 2015)

The ‘insiders’ perspective

In this context of urban and social transformation, in which these previously dreaded comunas are now considered as tourist products, some private entrepreneurs are cashing in on their appeal for tourists and developing a new niche. The first initiative appeared in the comuna 13 and was community-based. A hip-hop collective, named ‘Casa Kolacho’ in tribute to one of their assassinated comrades, is involved primarily in music and urban arts, but also proposes free classes and workshops for the local youth. In 2010 Casa Kolacho started what they called the ‘Graffitour’, a tour focusing on the numerous graffiti of the neighbourhood, constituting also a pretext for presenting the history of the area and its recent transformation. As Jeihhco, the founder of Casa Kolacho puts it, the main objective of the tour was to produce knowledge:

We do not need much money. We do this with social and political consent… Telling the story of the place. When we started the Graffitour we did not want to create a business, but we wanted to explain the history of the place. (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

The tour is about three hours long and at the time of writing is offered only in Spanish. However, according to the members of Casa Kolacho, there is a plan to offer it in English and to train more guides in order to respond to an increasing demand. In 2015, Kbala was the main guide conducting the tour and his discourse on past violence is very critical. The process of limpieza social described above is fiercely denounced and former president Álvaro Uribe, although still respected by many Colombians, is described as an ‘assassin’ and as the ‘most harmful figure for the community’. Yet Kbala’s words aim to be above all vectors of peace. Precising that Casa Kolacho is not associated with any armed group – legal or illegal -, he states that the demobilization of the paramilitary forces is nothing more than a political manoeuvre and that Colombia is a country with a double-morality:

They repudiate the death of soldiers, but celebrate the death of guerillas. One does not talk about the soldiers that massacre and rape indigenous communities. One does not talk about the corruption in institutions like the national police. (personal communication, May 7, 2015)

Kbala also insists that it is important for foreigners to visit and to understand the comuna 13 which he presents as a ‘territory of violence and a territory of artists’. Tourists are invited to add their own graffiti on the walls of the comuna and thus reinforce their bond with the place. Although the guide acknowledges the improvement of the area, he nevertheless questions the transformation process in Medellin. At the end of the tour, highlighting the electric outdoor stairways, he points out their lack of impact on a community that in his opinion was not sufficiently consulted:
We are going to go down by another way in order for you to discover another part from the one with the electric stairs. A part that is not so good. These projects have a lot of positive elements as I was saying earlier but there are also a lot of things that the community rejects. [...] There are a lot of complaints from the community about these projects. They said they chose this area because it was supposedly the neighbourhood with the most disabled people, but that is not true. There is another area four or five streets further on where you have the largest disabled population. (personal communication, May 5, 2015)

For Kbala and Jeihhco, the only reason the authorities built electric stairways in this area is the visibility of the site close to the metro; they consider the social dynamic associated with mobility to be mainly rhetorical. Kbala adds that most of the people in the neighbourhood would rather have seen the approximately three million Euros necessary for the construction of the electric stairways invested in other areas such as education, health or housing.

Since the development of the Graffitour, several other entrepreneurs have started to propose tours. Some of them, like Casa Kolacho, considered here as ‘insiders’, were born in the comuna 13, but most of them are ‘outsiders’. Moreover, the most successful companies in this context have their offices in El Poblado, the wealthy and touristy area of the city. Jeihhco notes the threat that this can constitute in terms of appropriation of their practice and discourse:

A lot of tourism companies come here and guide tourists themselves, bringing them mainly to the electric stairs. We should do this ourselves because we know the people here. [...] It is not going to be the same experience as the real Graffitour… But if you come from outside and somebody shows you two or three graffiti and the electric stairs… you will think that you did the Graffitour of the comuna 13 without knowing that there is something better.’ (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

Casa Kolacho thus decided to offer their services to some of these new tourism companies who now include the Graffitour in their own comuna tour.

The ‘outsiders’ perspective

Colombia Travel Operator is one of the companies collaborating with Casa Kolacho. Julio and Matilda work together in guiding and in the management of the business, whose offices are situated in the El Poblado neighbourhood. Under the slogan ‘Medellin has changed and is generating change’, they propose a visit of the comuna 13 in their Socialinnovation Tour. As stated on their website, the objective is ‘to show innovation as a social function, generate economic alternatives and believe in social initiatives’. The comuna 13 is described as a transformed neighbourhood:

A district famous for being one of the most dangerous places not only in Colombia but probably on the whole continent. [...] Nowadays this part of the city has changed direction and has become an example of the new social transformation.

Governmental initiatives like the outdoor electric stairways are celebrated as original
projects and ‘starting signals for an amazing transformation’:

The construction of an original public transportation system with cable cars and
escalators called *Metro Cable*, and meeting centres with libraries, called *Parques
Bibliotecas*, were the starting signal for the amazing transformation. […] We will take the
cable car up the mountain to view the district from the air. From there we can get a
glimpse of the initiative of the government titled ‘Tecos Una Historia’ [roofs a History]:
roofs and houses painted with huge graffiti. […] Nowadays, after having suffered the
horrors of the war, the residents of the area are proud of their district and can talk without
fear about the difficult time they went through and how different their life is now.35

As these excerpts show, the narrative of these entrepreneurs is far more positive about
Medellin’s transformation. In contrast to the *Graffitour* statements, governmental
initiatives are approved as innovative projects welcomed by the local population. It is
also interesting to note that the project mentioned above – *Tecos una historia* – was run
by the *Office of the First Lady* in collaboration with artists from *Casa Kolacho*. This
partnership does not seem to represent an obstacle for critical statements about such a
project, as the words of Kbala show:

> Around the stairs they painted and renovated a certain amount of houses… the facades!
Two streets further away, the electric stairs do not benefit anybody. Why? The economy
here has not changed. Foreigners - coming from Italy, France or Germany - do not come
two streets away, they come here. They did not renovate the roof of *Dona Maria’s* house,
because she does not live close to the electric stairs.’ (personal communication, May 7,
2015)

Unlike *Colombia Travel Operator*, a company run by Colombians, *Palenque Tour
Colombia* was created by a German expatriate and includes a mixed staff of Colombians
and foreigners. *Palenque Tour* also occasionally collaborates with *Casa Kolacho* while
bringing visitors to the *comuna 13*. On their website, the *Graffitour* is clearly linked to
Medellin’s transformation:

>The City of Medellin offers a great variety of urban arts due to the city’s transformation
over the last 20 years. Nowadays, the city is so full of countless street art expressions,
that the local authorities declared urban art a cultural landmark of Medellin. Graffiti is
not only about strong artistic and cultural elements, it is a way of political expression. See
the graffiti of the Comuna 13 guided by some of the local artists themselves. Medellin
Graffiti Tour gives you an insight on history and daily life in this area and the importance
of street art for social communication and identity.36

While urban arts are presented as illustrations of the city’s transformation, they are also
perceived as strong vehicles for identity affirmation and political expression. Indeed,
many graffiti in the area are related to social conflicts and past (or even present) violence
(figure 3). Tourism companies like *Colombia Travel Operator* and *Palenque Tour* can
thus be considered as important relays in the diffusion of political discourses, sometimes
very critical, on the transformation of the city. As Luise, a German collaborator working
in the sale department of *Palenque Tour* states, if the objective is to deliver a neutral and
objective picture, their political inclination is nonetheless assumed: ‘We do not hide that
we are a little bit more left-wing.’ (personal communication, May 14, 2015) She adds that Palenque Tours was among the first to organize tours in the comuna 13, a practice that was regarded in the beginning as ‘crazy’: ‘People were saying: “You are kind of crazy, why would you go there? This is like nuts.” And now everybody is doing it!’ (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

Palenque Tours also proposes a tour called History of Transformation, focusing on the transformation of the city after the death of Pablo Escobar and offering a visit to the electric stairways of the comuna 13, but without the inclusion of Casa Kolacho. According to the website, this tour aims to bring insight on the ‘innovative transport-system in the poorer neighbourhoods and to listen to Medellin’s dwellers share their opinions on the history of the city’:

Following the footsteps of Medellin’s history back in time about 20 years, we’ll find ourselves in one of the most dangerous cities in the world. […] In 2002, however, the city began to undergo a deep transformation. Local politicians gave it a try and started to invest in infrastructure and public education. The city is still reaping the rich rewards today. Medellín has turned into one of the most innovative metropolises worldwide.xviii

Luise explains that the History of Transformation is the most popular tour in their offer:

‘Because we are explaining how Medellín, after being the most dangerous city in the world, became the most innovative. […] There are so many things you can say about the transformation that you can easily do a whole day tour.’ (personal communication, May 14, 2015)

Palenque Tours is strongly supported by the Medellin Convention and Visitors Bureau, a private-public body in charge of tourism promotion in the city, which awarded them a prize for their innovation. On a website managed by the Medellin Convention and Visitors Bureau and the Municipality of Medellín, the Graffitour is also presented as an ‘incessant message of peace’ and the outdoor electric stairways are depicted as one of the most important processes of transformation of the city: ‘Walking along the district 13, you can realize that about 2,000 people benefit from the outdoor escalator.’xix Furthermore, the viewpoint at the top of the stairways is similarly claimed to be an exceptional achievement:

People living in the district 13 define it as ‘the best balcony of the city’. When you are on the escalator’s lookout, you can see a lot of bright-coloured houses that climb the mountain, the red bricks of other houses and, in the forefront, the roofs decorated with birds and flowers of different species, which were painted by more than 18 graffiti artists of Casa Kolacho, as part of the programme Techo. Then, you will understand the district from the inside.x

Several other tourism entrepreneurs now include the comuna 13 in their offer. Juan-Manuel, the guide of Comuna 13 walking tours, also presents a very positive image of the outdoor electric stairways. His discourse systematically praises the transformation and describes the electric stairs as an outstanding achievement in terms of mobility and social development. The website presenting this tour clearly corroborates this narrative:
The district of Comuna 13 clings to a steep hillside. For many years the 12,000 residents of this community had to make the precarious climb up hundreds of concrete steps, comparable to climbing a 28 story building, but now the giant electric escalators reduces their daily commute from thirty-five minutes to six minutes. \textsuperscript{xi}

On another hand, \textit{Medellin City Tour} proposes what is labelled as a ‘slum tour’, highlighting the fact that it will allow tourists to discover places away from the traditional tourist areas: ‘Discover the reality and true atmosphere of this so-called rough area’. If the label of ‘slum tour’ and the qualification of the area as ‘rough’ denote a less idealistic portrait of the \textit{comuna 13}, most of the other outsider guide narratives give a very positive picture of the area that sometimes contrasts with some of the critical discourses included in the \textit{Graffitour}.

\textbf{Recycling and Resistance in Moravia}

Since 2010 and the birth of the \textit{Graffitour}, the \textit{comuna 13} has become a definite part of Medellin’s touristscape. However, a new tourist resource is now being actively promoted by the city. On 8 May 2015, the municipality invited all the main tourist actors of Medellin to discover the neighbourhood of \textit{Moravia}. The aim, as it was presented at the time by the organizers, was to build a new ‘tourism product’. The cultural dimension of \textit{Moravia} was continuously promoted, as well as its history of recycling and resistance to forced relocation. \textit{Colombia Connexion} is the first company actively promoting the area as a tourism product in its three-day tour: \textit{Medellin City of the future}. Here again the place is presented as a key illustration of the transformation of the city, especially the \textit{morro}, conceived as part of a ‘process of social and environmental transformation’ \textsuperscript{xii}.

Outsider guides conduct the tour, but as in the \textit{comuna 13}, insiders, such as community leaders and social workers, present some specific elements. The brand new cultural centre is depicted as triggering the transformation of \textit{Moravia}. In it, a room serves as a museum on its history, looking at the past evolution of the neighbourhood and focusing on the community’s resistance to forced relocation. Again, a sign spells out the link between \textit{Moravia} and transformation: ‘Moravia land of transformation... Situated in the heart of Medellin, it’s a territory born from the waste of the rest of the city.’ \textsuperscript{xiii} A member of the police force, met during a first visit to the cultural centre, recalls some of the community strategies to resist the relocation process: ‘because taking down a Colombian flag is illegal, some individuals would put a flag on their roof to prevent the authorities from destroying the house (and taking down the flag).’ (personal communication, May 8, 2015) This anecdote is also introduced during the tour, when a community leader working in the cultural centre presents a framed picture of father Vincente Mejía who was the instigator of the flag initiative. It is part of a discourse on what this leader called ‘indigenous ingenuity’, which also includes the fact that women would carry stones under their shirt to look as if they were pregnant.

On the \textit{morro}, a memory trail leads to a greenhouse. Big signs relate the history of this former dump and artistic work using recycled material is exposed. In the middle of this outdoor museum, some shacks are still standing, inhabited by families who refuse to leave (figure 4). The musealisation of the \textit{morro} has already begun, even though the social conflict is still going on. A woman collaborating with the non-profit \textit{Cojardicom}
Corporación, states: ‘They witnessed the experiences of people who accepted relocation, so they do not want to leave.’ (personal communication, October 10, 2015) She remembers her own relocation in 2008 as one of the saddest days of her life and, like many others, she severely criticizes the process:

Now I have leaks through the telephone wires! Before I had a roof filled with chewing gum to plug the holes, but I had no leaks. I miss everything about before… Even the fires. [Very common before the revitalization of the dump]. (personal communication, October 10, 2015)

The unsuitable new housing conditions, the disintegration of the social tissue and the increase of domestic violence caused by displacement, often from a house to a large building, are fiercely attacked during her account.

Tourism and competitive narratives on transformation

As the two case studies analysed above demonstrate, transformation and innovation have been clearly integrated as tourism resources by different actors, including public authorities, private entrepreneurs and members of the local community. Clemencia Botero, director of the cultural and natural tourism department of the Medellin Convention and Visitors Bureau, confirms this when she lists the priority tourist products for Medellin: ‘business tourism, nature, fairs, Fernando Boteroxi, gastronomy and urban transformation, which also represents an important product.’ (personal communication, May 27, 2015) However, the tourist discourse on the transformation of Medellin is far from being homogenous. In the memorial arenas of Moravia and the comuna 13, different narratives compete and the transformation of the city can be celebrated or questioned. In this context, ‘comuna tourism’ constitutes an important communication vehicle for stakeholders, whether public authorities implicated in the branding of the new Medellin or community leaders trying to make their voices heard. Different levels of discourse on the presentation and promotion of places where violent social conflicts still exist are inevitable sources of tensions.

In 2015, David Garzon started a tour in the comuna 13 in order to raise funds for low-income people in the area. Communicating mainly through Facebook, the feedbacks he got were sometimes very critical: ‘How is taking backpackers on a "tour" to look at poor people like they're some kind of freak show zoo animals a "positive" thing?’ (Collected on Facebook, April 2015) The same criticism was also put forward by some habitants of the comuna 13, who complained that tourists would take pictures of their houses during tours organized by Palanque Tour. (personal communication, May 14, 2015) Others, like this collaborator for the Medellin tourism department of Sena, The National Apprenticeship, notes the opposition between people from the top and the bottom of the comuna 13: ‘Guides only talk about people of the top. But at the bottom we are the founders of the neighbourhood.’ (personal communication, October 10, 2015) As these examples show, somehabitants see tourism as a breach of their privacy and as a form of voyeurism, while others would rather take advantage of this visibility, in the same way that Casa Kolacho publicizes their ideas and projects.

Yet the promotion of Casa Kolacho is not without tensions. The national channel
Caracol Televisión produced a small documentary in 2014 on the Graffitour. The journalistic emphasis on violence and narco-trafficking – the practice was considered under the label of ‘narcotourism’ – strongly irritated the hip-hop collective, trying to disseminate a message of peace. Indeed the tour organized by the collective has nothing to do with narco-tourism, observed in some ‘favela tours’ in Rio de Janeiro, where cocaine production and consumption can be the main focus. (Larkins, 2015) Nevertheless, if Casa Kolacho tends to distance itself from representations of violence and narco-traffic, its discourse remains the most critical of all the entrepreneurs involved in this practice. The Graffitour guides are also the only ones to mention the infamous ‘escombrera’, a dumpster hiding dozen of bodies that disappeared after military and paramilitary operations in the area. Even though this informal cemetery is situated only a few hundred meters from the electric stairs, this site is never mentioned in other guides’ presentations. The paradox here is that it is the critical narrative of Casa Kolacho that led some actors like Caracol Televisión to present them as narco-tourism promoters. Indeed, unlike many outsiders, such as the guides of Comuna 13 walking tours, Palenque Tours and Colombia Travel Operator, the Graffitour often refers to paramilitary violence and statecrimes and criticizes the transformation of the city.

As shown already, in addition to the diversity of memorial and tourist entrepreneurs involved –outsiders and insiders – there are different and sometimes conflicting levels of discourse on the comuna and its transformation. Yet, the collaboration of insiders like the Graffitour guides with outsiders such as Palenque Tours or Colombia Travel Operator also demonstrates a kind of pragmatism that facilitates the diffusion of discourses from the community to a wider audience. Moreover, this dynamic limits the appropriation of the discourse on the comuna by outsiders since entrepreneurs disconnected from the comuna leave ‘the floor’ to insider guides like the ones of Casa Kolacho. The Graffitour thus provides an alternative to some of the distorted views on Medellin peripheral neighbourhoods and the transformation of the city based essentially on the presentation of architectural highlights. As Lynnell L. Thomas notes while examining the tourism sector after hurricane Katrina in New Orleans, the presentation of Afro-American identity was entrenched in predominant tourism narratives: ‘African American inclusion was often confined to the politics of visibility at the expense of political, economic and social equity.’ (2014, p.12) In the context of Medellin, some outsider tourism narratives on the transformation also tend to limit their scope to high-visibility elements such as the outdoor electric stairs and fail to examine the real social impact of such projects.

Like Thomas, Healey (2002, p. 1786) insists on the importance of keeping the multiple readings of the city alive - the ‘many cities in one city’ – in order to avoid trapping it in a mono-vocal language. Moreover, if the discourse is essentially externally imposed, it risks being even more exclusionary for some groups that do not fit into the image being promoted. It can also encourage the production of stereotypes, especially in tourism narratives, where representations of violence are simplified and broadly associated with inhabitants of the comuna. In line with this idea, Ashworth et al. (2007, p. 65) criticize absurd situations ‘in which outsiders define the sense of place of insiders, who are informed what their recognisably distinct local identity might be.’ Considering tourism development, Young (2012) goes even further, adding that when projects aim primarily to attract new consumers and overseas tourists, they rarely seek to improve the
quality of life of permanent residents. The outdoor electric stairs, essentially promoted by outsiders, can be analysed in this light, and their social impact on the local community questioned. If urban projects do not win the support of the community, civil engagement and local identity are nothing more than empty phrases.

Conclusion

This contribution explored the ways tourism and memorial entrepreneurs produced various discourses on a multifaceted city like Medellin. The main objective was to demonstrate that the tourism sector could contribute to the formation of a myth based on the transformation of the most violent city into the most innovative city in the world. On another hand it also showed that tourism could serve as vehicle to deconstruct this simplistic and limited discourse by allowing the diffusion of diverse voices rooted in the community, as has been demonstrated with Casa Kolacho and their Graffitour.

Furthermore, this analysis highlighted the tensions and accommodations inherent within the competing representations associated with the Medellin memorial arena, ranging from city branding to those linked to victims and their struggle to prevent past atrocities from being washed away by the transformation of their city. Medellin is now facing an important challenge if it wants to look to the future without denying its dark past.

Finally, this study determined that transformation could definitely be considered as a tourism product, as its inclusion in tourism narratives and tours apppellations demonstrates, and, significantly, the incorporation of this resource into the city’s strategic plans.

References


---

2 *The boss of evil* in English, is a famous television series produced in 2012 by *Caracol TV*, a Colombian private national television network
3 Colombia Travel Operator: http://colombiatraveloperator.com/tours/do-not-say-that-name-tour/ (April, 2016)
4 Colombia Travel Operator: http://colombiatraveloperator.com/tours/socialinnovation-tour/ (April, 2016)
5 Idem
6 Idem
7 Palenque Tours Colombia: http://www.palenque-tours-colombia.com (April 2016)
8 Idem
10 Idem
11 Comuna 13 Walking Tours: http://www.comuna13tours.com/
12 Excerpt from the leaflet of the tour: *Medellin City of the future.*
13 Excerpt from a sign in *Moravia* Cultural center
14 A famous Colombian painter and sculptor