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■ AQ FEATURE

A Tale of Two Cities: Bogotá

BY [Sibylla Brodzinsky](#)

Has corruption undermined one of the region's leaders in sustainability and the benefits the policies have brought to the city's poor?

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From his modest home in Ciudad Bolívar, high in the hills of Bogotá's poor southwestern edge, Alexdy Torres, 41, can see the city of 7.5 million people spread out before him. Far to the north, he can make out the wealthy districts of Bogotá and a small cluster of skyscrapers that mark the city center.

It's a world away from his own neighborhood—a maze of winding roads and precariously built houses clinging to the hillsides. Except for a few neglected parks, public space is limited to trash-strewn, windswept lots. Only a few sclerotic trees manage to survive in one of the most densely populated areas of Colombia's capital.

But the magnificent view also contains some features in Bogotá's urban landscape that have changed how Torres thinks about his city—and his family's future.

A wide boulevard nearby leads to *Parque Metropolitano El Tunal* (El Tunal Metropolitan Park), once one of the city's most derelict and crime-infested areas and now a broad green patch of soccer fields and tennis courts circled by bicycle lanes. The park is flanked on one side by a well-stocked public library and on the other by the terminal for the city's iconic TransMilenio bus rapid transit system (BRT).

The transit system, parks, bike routes, and libraries are the most visible symbols of the sustainable urban development program that has won Bogotá international awards and accolades—including a Golden Lion for Best City at the 2006 Venice Biennial—for its innovative approach to mobility, social inclusion and the use of public space.

Driven by a duo of innovative mayors—Antanas Mockus and Enrique Peñalosa—in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the city's development model focused on some of the most underprivileged areas. But after making huge strides in city planning and renovation, the Colombian capital in the past decade slipped back into emergency mode, lurching from corruption crises to political clashes that have seen the last two mayors deposed from office.



Reclamation projects: A view of La Vaca marsh, one of 13 recovered wetlands in Bogota. Photo: Juan Arredondo



Torres laments the backsliding. The BRT, along with the park and its facilities, had helped raise the Torres family's quality of life and, he says, offered a new vision of the future—a “perception that we can get ahead.”

The library in El Tunal has provided opportunities for his children to study for careers that would once have been unimaginable. His oldest son, Daniel, 21, is just three semesters away from becoming a physicist, while his daughter Madelene, 16, is hoping to study history. “They have access to the city and world that I never felt I had,” he says.

As a carpenter with clients all over the city, Torres often crisscrosses Bogotá several times a week, traveling south from Ciudad Bolívar to the swank homes in Usaquén in the north, or from his workshop in the Kennedy district to the high-rise luxury apartments near the Country Club de Bogotá. Thanks to the TransMilenio, a journey to visit clients in the north of the city takes only an hour, compared to the two-and-a-half hours he once had to spend traveling on the fume-spewing, privately operated *buseta* buses.

“The TransMilenio, more than anything else, has changed the face of the city,” says Adriana Parias, of the *Instituto de Estudios Urbanos* (Institute of Urban Studies) at the *Universidad Nacional de Colombia* (National University of Colombia), noting that the BRT is more than a form of transportation. “A mass transit system in a city that has such high levels of social polarization like Bogotá does—with the poor in the south and the rich in the north—can play a strong role in social integration,” says Parias.

View a slideshow of Bogotá below.



El Paraíso Mirador in Bogotá's 19th district, Ciudad Bolívar. While most of Ciudad Bolívar is rural, its urban portion includes one of the world's largest mega-slums and is known for violence due to gangs, organized crime, and the FARC.



Getting Crowded, Getting Slow

The TransMilenio—so named because it was inaugurated at the turn of the millennium, in 2000—has been praised as a model for BRT services worldwide. In Bogotá, the system has 11 core routes that run on 84 kilometers (52 miles) of dedicated lanes, and moves an average of 1.6 million people a day.

But it's still a work in progress. Even after more than a decade of “integration by transport,” seven of every 10 *bogotanos* believe inequality in the city is high or very high, according to a 2012 quality of life survey by the research group *Bogotá Cómo Vamos* (Bogotá, How Are We Doing). In fact, nearly 52 percent of those surveyed said they felt inequality had grown in the past five years, despite a decline in poverty between 2002 and 2012. This perception is backed up by a not-yet-released UN Habitat study, which includes Bogotá among Latin America's most unequal cities.

In some ways, the system has become a victim of its own success on the one hand, and of crooked leaders on the other.

Throughout the day, the most frequently used lines of the system are so packed that *bogotanos* have taken to calling the TransMilenio the “Trans-mi-leno” (in Spanish, “lento” means “full”).

Torres says he tries to avoid TransMilenio at rush hour. “There are times when you don't even step onto the buses from the platforms; you get swept in by the crowd,” he says. “TransMilenio was supposed to be an answer in part to the way we used to have to travel, hanging out of open bus doors. This is an improvement, but it's still an indignation.”

The crowding is not just inside the buses and stations. The dedicated bus lanes that were meant to offer a faster alternative to the traffic-clogged streets often get backed up themselves. At peak rush hour, a bus can take as long as 45 minutes to travel just five kilometers (3.1 miles).

And while demand mounted for more extensive routes and better coverage, construction of the third phase of the BRT system became mired in a web of corruption that landed former Bogotá Mayor Samuel Moreno in jail for allegedly accepting kickbacks in exchange for granting TransMilenio road construction contracts. The scandal set expansion plans back several years. Although the third phase was finally placed in operation in 2013, the system remains in crisis.

While TransMilenio was the only large-scale transportation project approved by the United Nations to generate and sell carbon credits, the diesel-powered vehicles still chug out black fumes.

“Outside Colombia, TransMilenio is still seen as a success. There’s a dissociation with the reality on the ground,” says Parias.

The city is introducing new measures to ease pressure on the system and on the environment. These include gradually replacing of the old *busetas* with new or refurbished buses integrated with the TransMilenio system. In the next two years, two of Bogotá’s most remote, impoverished neighborhoods—one in Ciudad Bolívar and another in the San Cristóbal district—are scheduled to be connected to the rest of the city via *Metrocable*, a cable car system also part of the broader mass transit system.

And after more than 60 years of feasibility studies, geological surveys and political wrangling, Bogotá may soon lay the first line of track for an underground metro system that could be operational by 2018. The city has also announced plans to gradually switch TransMilenio to electric and hybrid buses. In September 2013, it introduced 50 experimental electric taxis. These last two plans won the city its latest prize: the 2013 C40 and Siemens City Climate Leadership Award.

Parks and Recreation

Bogotá is hardly a green city. Even including the forest reserves in Bogotá’s eastern hills, Bogotá residents enjoy just five square meters of green space per capita, compared to 52 in Curitiba and 23 in New York. In general, the poorer the neighborhood, the less green space there is.

Still, Bogotá has some green surprises in the most unlikely places. Some 540 hectares of marshland in Bogotá have been recovered, including the notorious La Vaca Marsh, once a makeshift landfill occupied by internally displaced families and now home to a family of threatened red-beaked birds known as the Bogotá rail.

But the same cannot be said of the city’s rivers. Every year, Sebastian Cruz Suescún and members of *Territorio Sur*, a group of young environmental activists, walk the length of the Tunjuelo River from its source high in the mountains through shantytown neighborhoods on the western edge of the city—where 95 percent of the poorest *bogotanos* live—to the cement companies and tanneries that operate on its banks. The group is hoping to call attention to environmental contamination produced by years of industrial and mining waste and mostly untreated sewage (Bogotá treats less than 30 percent of its wastewater). During the rainy seasons, the rivers burst their banks, spilling sludge and contaminants into adjacent neighborhoods.

“At some point, the river is channeled through pipes, and when it comes out the other end, people don’t even realize it’s the Tunjuelo River,” says Cruz. “They think it’s an open sewer—which, actually, it is.”

The activism of Cruz and his friends underlines some of the contradictions in the city's environmental transformation. Some of Bogotá's 233 miles (376 kilometers) of bike routes—another city program that has won accolades—go past the Tunjuelo River, where many cyclists wear paper face masks to try to block the stench of the river and the fumes from the thousands of polluting buses that still circulate throughout the city.

Corruption's Threat

In response to such contradictions, Gustavo Petro, who was elected mayor in 2011, modified the city's 10-year development plan to place special emphasis on assessing the environmental vulnerability of the city and on mitigating the risks of landslides and flooding. He also limited the expansion of the city in fragile forest areas and banned new mining operations within city limits, while phasing out existing mines to turn the riverfront into green parks. Petro's plan also included the revitalization of the city center by constructing more low-income housing there, rather than on the periphery.

But Petro's plans now hang in the balance. After a one-year investigation into a controversial trash collection strategy enacted in 2012, the inspector-general, an office charged with taking disciplinary action against public figures, deposed the mayor from office and banned him from participating in politics for 15 years.

The situation is “fragile,” says Mónica Villegas, director of *Bogotá Cómo Vamos*. “Bogotá was a pioneer in many urban planning ideas that were not being done elsewhere. [But since then], other cities copied Bogotá and surpassed us.”

The uncertain future of the mayor and his plans—and the unfinished nature of some of Bogotá's prize-winning urban sustainability programs of the past decade—illustrate the vulnerability of even the boldest environmental visions. While the view from above is impressive, it's still hard to transform Bogotá's aspirations into realities on the ground.

All photos courtesy of Juan Arredondo.

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