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Medellín's Nonconformist Mayor Turns Blight to Beauty

By SIMON ROMERO
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Dressed in jeans and a T-shirt, sporting three days' growth of beard and unruly hair nearly down to his shoulders, Sergio Fajardo looks every bit the nonconformist mathematician who spent years attaining a doctorate at the University of Wisconsin.

But that was a past life for Mr. Fajardo, this city's mayor and the son of one of its most famous architects. Now he presses forward with an unconventional political philosophy that has turned swaths of Medellín into dust-choked construction sites.

"Our most beautiful buildings," said Mr. Fajardo, 51, "must be in our poorest areas."

With that simple idea, Mr. Fajardo hired renowned architects to design an assemblage of luxurious libraries and other public buildings in this city's most desperate slums. Their eccentric shapes -- one resembles an immense blackened loaf of bread sliced in half -- occupy areas where foot soldiers in Colombia's cocaine wars once died by the thousands each year. But several years ago, residents here say, a tenuous peace was imposed by paramilitary drug traffickers who outfought their rivals.

Now, Medellín is no longer stymied by being described as the world's deadliest city.

This city of about two million people had 29 homicides per 100,000 inhabitants in 2006, down from 381 per 100,000 when killings peaked in 1991.

Elected in 2003 as an independent, and riding a growing economy and this decline in violent crime, Mr. Fajardo has turned the city into a showcase for new educational and architectural projects.

He increased city spending on education, bringing it to 40 percent of Medellín's annual budget of \$900 million, while also raising spending on public transportation and microlending projects for small businesses. Five new libraries are at the center of his social policies, but Mr. Fajardo is also building a sprawling public science center and dozens of schools, and expanding public transportation by building cable cars up into the slums on the city's hills. He contends the poor will develop the skills they need to compete through these investments in education and new public spaces, reflecting a faith in architecture to help achieve this goal.

"Fajardo is making a long-term wager by carving out a foothold for the state in areas that were neglected for years," said Aldo Civico, who as director for the Center for International Conflict Resolution at Columbia University has done extensive fieldwork on Medellín's violence. "You need to start a process of transformation somewhere."

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Many parts of Medellín remain far from idyllic. Police officers toting assault rifles and wearing combat fatigues still patrol many parts of the city. Downtown, just steps away from the elegant plaza filled with voluptuous sculptures by another native son, Fernando Botero, street children sniff glue out of plastic bags and snort cocaine. Some in Medellín whisper that Diego Fernando Murillo, the paramilitary warlord known as Don Berna, still controls much of the city from his cell in nearby Itagüí prison. Others say drug traffickers launder revenues into the construction boom in high-rise apartments and malls that is accompanying the mayor's architectural reconfiguration.

And yet Mr. Fajardo's transformation of Medellín has captivated the city and, increasingly, other parts of Colombia. His approval ratings stand at more than 80 percent, making him the country's most popular mayor and leading him to be widely mentioned as a potential presidential candidate after his term ends this year.

"He is carrying out a redistribution of wealth without a discourse of rage," said Héctor Abad Faciolince, a prominent novelist and political commentator here. "If Medellín cannot take these risks, then what place can?"

President Álvaro Uribe hails from Antioquia Province, which encompasses Medellín. He and Mr. Fajardo were schooled here by Benedictine priests. But Mr. Fajardo offers a departure from the staunchly conservative policies of Mr. Uribe, the Bush administration's closest ally in South America.

Mr. Fajardo, for instance, favors a debate over legalizing drugs, a somewhat maverick position in a nation that is the world's largest cocaine exporter. And some personal decisions, like choosing to live with his companion, Lucrecia Ramírez (near the home of the archbishop here), have drawn criticism from Roman Catholic leaders.

Ms. Ramírez is a psychiatrist who prefers the title of "first woman" to "first lady" and leads efforts to bar underweight models from Medellín's fashion shows. She also challenged beauty pageants through alternative contests that reward knowledge of science, literature and business.

Not everyone in Medellín, which despite its history in the drug trade is considered one of Colombia's most culturally conservative cities, supports the projects carried out by either Ms. Ramírez or Mr. Fajardo. Old villas and trees are falling; critics say the new commercialized look resembles Miami or Caracas.

Some take jabs at his taste for expensive public works that resemble pyramids or massive abstract cubes.

"Fajardo is our pharaoh," said Jaime Alonso Carvajal, a member of the Environmental Collective, a group that led raucous protests over the mayor's decision to build pastel-colored pyramids along the median of a major avenue at a cost of nearly \$500,000. "He is cementing over Medellín to turn us into a dust bowl."

Mr. Fajardo says he welcomes such protests, viewing them as part of the creation of a city in which residents can intermingle anywhere regardless of their social or economic circumstances. "It is an advance for our society that people feel safe enough to say whatever they want about me in any part of this city," he said during an interview while strolling through central Medellín. And as for the shapes, he said: "I'm still a mathematician. I love geometric forms."

The pièce de résistance of Mr. Fajardo's strategy sits on a hill in Santo Domingo Savio, a sprawling slum that is home to 170,000 people. Visitors take the metro from downtown then connect to a new cable car system that swiftly transports them up into Santo

Domingo. From there, they walk through hard-edged streets until reaching the Parque Biblioteca España, designed by Giancarlo Mazzanti. There, rising from cinderblock hovels, is a hulking rectangular structure that looks not unlike some medieval citadel and includes a library, auditorium, Internet rooms, day care center and an art gallery.

It strikes those who live in its shadow variously. Yasmin Henao, 30, a maid who lives with her husband and three children in a wooden shack with a view of the library, said she was hesitant to go inside. "I saw guards at the doors," said Ms. Henao in an interview in her home. "I don't know if it's a place for me."

A short stroll away, Jaime Quizeno, a mechanic, offered another assessment as dusk began to envelope the hillside. "It looks like an enormous cloud when it is illuminated at night," said Mr. Quizeno, 63, smiling.

"Such a beautiful thing, right here with us," he continued. "Who could have imagined that?"

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