

Interview with Diego Ceresuela-Wiesmann and Hubert Klumpner*

***Conducted and/or edited by the Volume Editors.**

Volume Editors: Can you describe your engagement as architects and urban designers, coming from a Swiss Institution like the ETH in Zurich, in contexts like those in countries like Colombia?

Hubert Klumpner: The ETH has, for a long time, generated professionals for Switzerland—that was always its primary purpose. Today, however, this is being re-evaluated in different registers. Colombia is actually a place in the world—among others—where Switzerland has taken a particular responsibility by teaming up bilateral institutions. In Colombia, Switzerland supports the Inter-American Development Bank, as one of its founding members, and is also engaged there through its State Secretariat for Economic Affairs (SECO). As an honest broker, the Swiss actually have an opportunity to play a transformative role. With all of this in mind, Colombia has been on our radar for almost ten years, on environmental, social, and governance registers. And we are approaching it from different angles. An important element is having set up an office in Medellin with Diego, but we're also engaging by setting up a Doctoral Programme at the Institute of Science, Technology and Policy at ETH in Zurich as a way to share knowledge between the two countries. For the students in our semester studios, we continue to develop of what is becoming a 'Never-Ending Studio'. We've looked at Barranquilla, Bogota, Cartagena and Medellin already with students from the ETH, in the contexts of studios, summer and winter schools, and also city action labs. Of course, it's a risk-taking operation to go into a place very shortly after a conflict—and one can easily say that there is still a conflict going on—but we need to try to engage in such places.

Diego Ceresuela-Wiesmann: After 50 years of conflict in Colombia, our presence there is important. The peace agreement is a signature from 2016, but the process will continue for a long time. With that guiding our strategic approach, we can describe our engagement in three different ways. It's not just the built projects that we're doing, but also research, and the implementation of a task-force unit to implement that research into the resulting projects. Together with new stakeholders that we're putting together, a new typology and paradigm of how to approach

architectural interventions is emerging. It's also important to note that our point of departure as an institution—the ETH—involves being aware that our context is the exception and not the rule, if we think about the planet in Bucky Fuller's terms, 'Spaceship Earth'. In that sense, when we go to the field, we have to go beyond doing pure research, and rather immerse ourselves in a new reality, and it is following from this process that we are able to implement projects. It's a transgression of the usual task of the university. That also means the stakeholders we bring together go beyond the academic context. In Colombia, we work with the Universidad del Norte and the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana, but also with public institutions and the material and construction industries. The partnerships that come out of this are interesting also for the other side, in that our findings and research are also relevant to those industries, which in turn makes innovation possible with partners elsewhere in their own networks. Our work with municipalities is similarly interesting, in that it sometimes requires the connection of departments that have themselves never worked together before. As outsiders coming from the Swiss context, we're therefore able to apply our expertise into the local context, but in the inevitable transformation that such a process entails, new knowledge and ways of working are created, which then feed back into that same local context. The legacy we want to leave is not an opportunistic one—what we want to establish is a long-term engagement that will actually span beyond our own presence. That's also part of the vision of achieving the sustainable development of a city—navigating the political transformations it goes through. The transformation of a city cannot be done in the four years of a typical political mandate. Actually, in this project, we've already survived six different mandates. The challenge is therefore also to figure out how we can develop long-distance visions while at the same time achieve short-term implementation goals.

HK: There's also the profound social stratification that we observe in Colombian cities. In a coastal city like Cartagena, for example, people in informal settlements are drowning due to rising sea levels, while elsewhere in the city, skyscrapers and modernist developments are booming, together with tourism that's bringing in unprecedented amounts of money for the area. The situation is so stark that it reminds us of the Magical Realism of Garcia Marquez—in this case, rather, 'Magical Urbanism'.

VEs: You seem to be engaging in an interesting intersection of crises in Colombia, from political to ecological. In terms of your practice and output, in what ways is your engagement manifested?

DCW: With the idea of 'learned lessons onsite' coming from the research communities we're developing, we're able to inform our idea of a prototype. We're not trying to design unique elements, but something that is possible to roll out [on a] large scale. In Colombia, with the idea of memory, but also in terms of protecting the peace process while reducing inequality by giving access universal access to key public buildings, we decided to focus on education and culture as guiding topics of potential projects. We learned that Colombia as a whole lacks about 3000 schools, as well as access to sports and leisure facilities. We are also reflecting on the dynamics of the 21st century, where the role of citizens is moving slowly from purely consumers, to also producers. We therefore asked ourselves, 'how can we, and the community we're working with—the bottom-up situation—be engaged with new typologies?'. All of this thinking lead to our project, BAQ: Fábrica de Cultura, in Barranquilla. In a city with the second-largest Carnival in the world—one that has been recently recognized by UNESCO as part of their World Heritage Programme—the municipality and different stakeholders were thinking about developing a museum for the Carnival, which would have meant an encapsulation of this event. In working through this idea, though, adding to it our belief in dynamic buildings—buildings that can engage not only the neighborhood, but also the whole city, while at the same time continuing to develop their character after construction—we arrived at the concept of an arts school to support the activities of the Carnival. By also producing art, rather than just showing it, we may also be able to create waves in the job market. We consulted with Colombian artist Oscar Murillo, who recently won the Turner Prize, and began building on the idea that a facility dedicated to the production of arts can also help to produce new lifestyles.

HK: In our scoping study, we also looked at infrastructures of public space. Barranquilla, a city with a history of only 200 years, needs to be re-consolidated. In the rainy season, you're literally washed away in your car—streams of water are shooting through the city. As a result, in an area like Barrio Abajo, where we're building the BAQ: Fábrica de Cultura, the city decided to widen a road from a narrow two-lane road for horse-carriages, into a big avenue for public transport. The water and drainage infrastructure was also studied and improved. We looked at the markets, and found that the markets—one of the most important

spaces of interaction of interaction between diverse classes of people—are actually disappearing, being replaced by supermarkets for one or the other sector. We figured out that, through the establishment of the World Economic Forum’s ‘Center for the Fourth Industrial Revolution’ in Medellin, that there is actually a need for innovation districts. How do you create that? Our project in Barranquilla is our answer to that question. On the site of an old tobacco factory with an existing hangar—a series of roofs hanging over a parking lot—we’re transforming the space by adding a new building, and in the process also creating a square. After all, throughout Latin American cities, the square is at the center of public life. This combination—adding a new building while renewing an old complex, while developing the public space in between into a square, all within the context of the production of art—has the potential to transform an entire area of the city, (as the Plaza Botero, with its large-scale public art, coming from renowned Colombian Artist Fernando Botero, already illustrates). The thing to remember, though, is that the project doesn’t end with this building; it is rather a trigger or a stepping stone. Often, in ‘re-urbanization’ processes like this, there is a notion that what is already there needs to be destroyed. We want to turn that idea on its head. We want to develop, in this neighborhood of Barrio Abajo, another Latin American creolization process, very much based on the local, but also bringing the best science, technology and policy models that we can think of.

DCW: The idea we’re working with is that this ‘Fourth Industrial Revolution’ doesn’t have to be extremely technology-driven, as the term might otherwise suggest, but rather one that connects existing dots. It’s about connecting densification, work, and living to create a neighborhood. By bringing production, education and good infrastructure while connecting work and living, we can also reduce individual transportation, and therefore traffic and congestion. If we can do this, following the concept ‘leave no one behind’, then we can begin thinking more seriously about reducing inequality. In that sense, it’s very fitting that one of the principles of the Carnival itself is to ‘change the roles’. It transports a very important value—that in the changing of the roles, we’re not creating a purely technological platform, but a broader view of education. We can bring this into an architectural prototype. Building this frame, though, requires a holistic approach, and close and transparent partnerships across a wide range of stakeholders. This, in turn, feeds back into our research, allowing us to reflect on new and innovative ways of how projects can be realized.

VEs: What have different applications—in different locations and contexts—taught you about this process?

HK: Elsewhere in Colombia, in Cartagena, where the prospect of rising sea levels is very real, we see that the first people that are suffering from it is the poorest—in this context, one of the most pressing issues becomes developing settlements for people to live eight meters above sea level. At the same time, the topic of education remains hugely relevant at such a level of urgency, especially in terms of developing a prototype that can be rolled out in such a way that disaster relief takes a form that doesn't neglect the urban qualities we're developing elsewhere. The city of Cartagena actually wants to build a new airport, so we have to make sure that the urban development that comes from that doesn't push certain groups further and further away from the key areas and functions of the city. In one development, for example, Serena Del Mar, a hospital is being built that is reportedly for all citizens, but it is, ultimately, a project that caters to the top social classes. It will bring a lot of work and new dynamics to the city, but if we are to keep the spirit of the social turn in architecture close to us, then we have to look very closely at both the groups behind new developments, and their real users. In South Africa, where we also work, we see similar dynamics unfolding—it is another form of apartheid urbanism.

DCW: While our work in Barranquilla responds to different dynamics than what we're doing in Cartagena, where we're developing a school in a parcel of land known as Ciudad Bicentenario, both projects share an ideology and vision. In Barranquilla, for example, we want to position culture in such a way that it supports the activities of the Carnival during the seven days that it's running, but also beyond those seven days, as a place supporting the arts year-round. Similarly, in Cartagena, we look at the future densification of the area as one that can happen under the influence of education and culture, connecting the cosmos of space and people. In this sense, we asked ourselves, 'can a school function in the same way a square does in Latin American cities?' So we looked for the stakeholders that could bring these elements together, but we didn't stop there. What other stakeholders can we involve, if we want to create a school that is not just a school, but also a broader integrated social infrastructure. A school closes at around 15:00—what can happen in those spaces after that? It could be a community center, sport fields areas, the public library and the auditorium for different events. We're trying to push the boundaries of the typology. In the context of our stakeholder group, we're trying to curate a culture that looks at the broader benefits of the space, rather than just taking care of each

individual activity. Colombia's intellectual output, is, after all, on a very high level, and we want to nurture that.

HK: Together with our partners from Fundacion Pies Descalzos and Fundación Santo Domingo, we are imagining this school as fitting with the local cost frame, adapted to the right climate zone, meaning with the right construction and material language. This ultimately leads to our foundational approach in Cartagena: to re-establish settlements from the lower social classes on higher land, and from there, multiply the resulting urbanization, centered around cultural and educational functions, up to 3000 times across the country, on the basis of an experience. That's the value of this project: we go through the experience of executing this school, and in the process identify all the relevant partners, as well as the problems, and complications in doing it, which no one can tell you beforehand. Not even local people.

DCW: Ultimately, our vision comes down to finding the links between people, programme, and environment—both natural and built—in the reduction of inequality. With education and culture, we are making a statement, but are also not stopping there. A school is not simply a place you go to from ages 3–18—it can also be a place with which to have a lifelong relationship. It's a place where you can have your nightly meal, or do your apprenticeship, enjoy services. We're also keeping in mind the growing tourism industry, which could also find space within the flexibility of the typology we're developing. We believe in looking at the idea of school as 'more than a school'; we're beginning to set the groundwork for the sustainable development of the city. Ultimately, these projects give us the tools to continue looking, as we do elsewhere in the world, for alternatives to the growing ubiquity of the shopping mall and the gated community.

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