

## Redesigning the Rio Arzobispo - P4 reflection

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### Urban analysis through Narrative Inhabitation

On our first explorations of Bogotá certain objects immediately caught my attention, urban objects that were being used in a different way to their apparent primary use. For instance a military memorial was a local meeting place, politically contested as the statue itself was used as a canvas for territorialisation by opposing groups through political graffiti. These objects had undergone what the Guy Debord would term *detournement*, a hijacking of their use for something else.

More hijacked objects became apparent over the following days. Hand in hand with the *detournement* came a particular social condition. An intensification of the regular social relationships occurred. I saw these objects during my day's explorations, and during the evening, whilst reading *Ludic City* by Quentin Stevens, I came across the concept of the 'moment', defined by Henri Lefebvre as exactly the kind of behaviour I had been witnessing during the day. An experience where "the oppositions and contradictions of social life are intensified, thereby raised to consciousness, and engaged" (Stevens, 2007). These moments became the focus of my investigation.

To investigate the moments I invented a mode of analysis I called Narrative Inhabitation where I would personify the city, giving it a voice describing the life happening within it. I developed this method by building upon past studies of literary investigations and urban form.

My method of inhabitation involved writing about the behaviour of the residents of Bogotá, in the form of a series of monologues told by architectural elements of the city itself. Writing the city from the point of view of a bridge, wall, statue, park and the wider district helped me to deal with the complexity of what I was describing in a single coherent form. It gave me a way to describe behaviour I had witnessed or been told about, things that could happen or had ceased to occur. The elements were the locations that had grabbed my attention upon my arrival in the city, the places of the moments. To sort the elements I had used Kevin Lynch's classifications of the path, edge, district, node and landmark. I reversed his analysis developed in *The Image of the City*, from studying people's perception of the city, to the city's perception of its people. I combined this with Jane Rendell's site writing, a mode of investigation that combines objective and subjective critique and a simultaneous investigation of the intimate and the distant. I described the elements in a series of monologues, writing their experience of the city. The architecture speaking, talking about the actions of the residents around it.

### Redesigning the Rio Arzobispo

Understanding how these moments developed, and their usefulness in urban life, I began to look at our study area of La Soledad, looking for places where the elements were having a negative effect on local behaviour, dead spaces. After cataloguing and describing the broken elements across the district I settled on the site of the Rio Arzobispo, and urban stream denoting the northern edge of the district. This urban edge acted as a barrier, and was tragically underused by members of the local community. The Rio had the potential to be a great asset to the community, but in its current situation was having the opposite effect.

I decided my goal was to turn the Rio into a space of encounter, a place where moments could happen. I would do this by changing its nature as an element, defining it more strongly as a path, a green route for pedestrians crossing the city between the main north/south arteries. I would also try to lessen its negative edge effect, making it a place where the communities it bounded could interact, rather than a left behind space used by none. I wanted to encourage moments in this space, but to design a space for *détournement* is a paradox. The closest I can come to designing for *détournement* is to create a place where as much life happens as possible, an artificial reef that could be used as the structure for much more spontaneous actions connected with the formation of moments.

I have redesigned the path of the Rio, turning it from a simple channel into a series of water plazas. Water plazas are usable public spaces that are designed to flood, where the afternoon deluges can be stored, to either soak away or to be slowly released downstream. They fill with surface runoff from surrounding streets, reducing the load on sewers and treatment plants that would otherwise have to process this mostly clean water. The water plazas help prevent flooding in the lower parts of the city, helping Bogotá become more resilient to climate change by building useful pleasant spaces, rather than large storm drains. These temporary floods also serve to closer connect residents with the natural environment, engaging them by intensifying the contradictions between city and its location, at the foot of the Andes mountains, all helpful conditions in the creation of moments.

To design the plazas I have used my method of Narrative Inhabitation, to help imagine how the plazas will be occupied and how changes to the design can affect inhabitation. I have also used elements, loosely related to Lynch's own, giving my a design language that can be applied across the site, creating a cohesive design across this long, varied site. The design closely relates to the theme of the studio, 'Creating the Commons'; the water plazas being shared 'common' space in the city. They link the communities that border them together, but simultaneously link these communities to those downstream through the prevention of flooding, strengthening bonds across Bogotá.

## Conclusions

Reflecting on my process, my research has proved to be a useful tool in understanding Bogotá. Narrative Inhabitation has been key to my analysis of Bogotá. It helped me overcome the constraints of limited time and local unfamiliarity to give a deep analysis of the elements, encompassing their history, their changing relevance and their daily rhythms. Inhabiting the elements with site writing helped produce a breadth of analysis as I inhabited the city, forcing me to thinking empathetically and go beyond my own subjective experience. It also stopped me from presenting a universal experience of Bogotá, recognising the multitude of views that belong to different people. By writing the city I have been able to investigate the emotions and personal motivations that Bogotá's elements provoke, the semi-fiction of the monologues giving me space to imagine and suppose whilst still creating a sense of place, accurate and useful for understanding the city's operation.

Using narrative has helped me to avoid a narrow, shallow, view of the city and put me in a position of being ready to make specific and useful architectural propositions as part of my continuing graduation project.

I have successfully taken the concepts of the moment and *détournement*, identified its real world examples and understood the spatial and behavioural requirements that encourage the phenomena. My design uses these concepts, creating spaces of contradiction,

encounter and activity, all ingredients required to make a moment, as shown by my narrative inhabitations. It connects communities, drawing uses out of the surrounding buildings, but it is not programme specific, making it resilient to changing uses in the neighbourhood. It aides the city's resilience against increasingly intense weather. I have designed a series of pleasant, useful spaces that would be local assists, with the potential to make small, positive impacts on life in the city.

Antanas Mockus, during his first term as Mayor of Bogotá (1995-97), enacted a series of policies that appeared trivial to onlookers. For instance the city's traffic police were replaced with mimes, who would not give tickets, but theatrical public chastisements. These policies shifted people from their normal way of doing things, making them conscious of their behaviour. Mockus's policies appear to me as a government production of moments, by intensifying social experiences, new awareness is formed and behaviour is changed. During the term of Mockus murders in Bogotá fell by 70%, traffic fatalities fell by 50%, water usage fell by 40%, giving vindication to his ideas. Working on a local, district scale, rather than a city wide scale, the redesign of the Rio Arzobispo would create similar social experiences. It has the ability to bring people into contact with one another and helping to create a social, self aware population.