Bogotá’s inner city is a microcosm of spatial contestation, today exhibiting contradictory conditions that exist side by side in a delicate balance. From here, the history of this contemporary Latin American metropolis began with the founding of the colonial city. Today the tensions between the ideal principles of the city’s foundation and the realities of its development remain in stark contrast.

These conditions are loosely strung together by Eje Ambiental - a route that runs along the old path of the San Francisco river from the foot of Monserrate to the start of Avenida Caracas. Now a vital multimodal public boulevard, this urban figure runs along the North edge of Bogotá’s historic centre connecting several distinct urban conditions that make up Bogotá’s downtown and together form the city’s earliest layers.
Fragmented Conditions

Tracing the route of Eje Ambiental uncovers a constellation of distinct conditions, revealing competing notions of the ideal and the chaotic, the static and the transient, the powerful and the excluded.

Together these developments tell a story of a space founded on formal principles that are in stark contrast to the unpredictability of the modern city.

1 Universidad Los Andes
2 Carrera Septima
3 La Candelaria
4 San Victorino
5 Parque Tercer Milenio
6 Voto Nacional
Parque Tercer Milenio

The Parque Terceiro Milenio is a clear example of the state implementing its ambitions and ideals spatially as a concrete project, attempting to absorb a problematic instance of otherness into its own vision for the city. In its dominating spatial implementation the park takes on a symbolic role, projecting a new set of values onto a landscape that did not previously adhere to these.

This means of translating socio-political ambitions into a concrete spatial intervention is relatable to those methods used nearly five hundred years previously in the initial formation of the city. Peñalosa envisioned the park as a public space that would transcend the colonial-era plaza in scale, signalling a new future for Bogotá, but in the physical execution the creation of Plaza Bolivar and the new park follow a rather similar logic of interiorising otherness.
In contrast to the stable and idealised principles of the initial settlement, the major commercial hubs at San Victorino and Plaza España have continuously operated as spaces of encounter and exchange, where lodging, food and sex were commodified and supplied to a population that was in a constant state of flux. Today the deprivation of these neighbourhoods opposes moves to revitalise the historic centre of an increasingly cosmopolitan city.

What remains evident is the sharp divide between the deprivation of the Voto Nacional neighbourhood in comparison to the national political base only six blocks East. Finding ways of bridging this divide is perhaps one of the most pressing spatial challenges in downtown Bogota.
This commercial centre on Carrera Septima reflected the excitement of the street life outside, occupied by shops that provided entertainment and fun to customers. Here we found shops selling toys, games and DVDs, candy shops and small kiosks selling soft drinks, as well as barbers and beauticians offering cheap haircuts and manicures.

Towards the back, a barber shop spilled out into the centre, where men had set up plastic chairs to sit and chat. The atrium was again used as a cafe space, where we sat for a while having coffee and making drawings.

The chimney from the cafe’s kitchen shot through the floor above, where it was masked by a number of additional fake chimneys. These had been bent into curves to form a round bench. This, and most of the other fittings, were finished in chrome and brass, giving everything the feel of a run-down casino or amusement arcade.
This cafe, seemingly tiny at first glance, was visited at the very start of the fieldwork. Situated on an old winding street in La Candelaria, the building was characterised by its thick walls, heavy wooden door and the mountain of clay tiles that formed the projecting roof.

The entrance leads into a bar space where drinks can be ordered. Moving beyond this, through a small door at the back, the cafe opens into a beautiful and unexpected double-height atrium. Visitors move along a gallery and then step down into this semi-outdoor space filled with small tables. The atrium steps down further to a small garden beyond.

Squeezed behind the bar, another small room connecting to the street is used as a kiosk and store, selling snacks and cigarettes to passers-by.
The Veracruz commercial centre blurred the distinction between established business and informal appropriation more than the other interiors we visited, situated in a building that appeared to be an old auto repair garage.

It had recently been fitted out as a shopping centre, apparent from the pieces of steel frame that were lying on the floor ready to be assembled into small cubicles for new shops. Some merchants had already occupied those closest to the entrance. Further back, others were trading openly on the floor. One man sat repairing guitars in a dimly light corner. Power cables and lighting fixtures hung loosely from the ceiling, above ladders and tool boxes.

What was special was the surprisingly large, busy food court situated furthest back from the street on the first level, beneath the vast steel roof trusses. To one side, two small kitchens provided food to clients. To the other side, two kiosks sold additional snacks, cold drinks and coffee.
The Fortaleza passage was the first we visited in San Victorino. The order and cleanliness of the interior contrasted strongly to the chaotic and unpredictable streets outside.

After returning from New Jersey, the owner had hired an architect to design his passage. He had seen similar commercial spaces in the US and asked for a vaulted, translucent roof that would improve daylight. The highly rationalised steel frame structure formed modules that could be combined or separated to form shops of different sizes, with an attic above for storage accessed by ladder.

All of the stores sold supplies for making cosmetics, including empty, unlabelled bottles, chemicals and scents, as well as a vast catalogue of lab equipment.

At the centre, the owner ran a small cafe selling freshly ground coffee. In the attic space above he had created a comfortable seating area completely withdrawn from the street.
An office building on the corner of an intersection near Carrera Septima created an active edge condition where diverse but inter-related activities could take place.

The ground floor was set back, widening the street to form a sheltered gallery. Internal spaces provided services such as a cafe, a barbershop and a tailor. The external space of the gallery had been occupied by kiosks and tables selling lottery tickets, flowers, children’s toys and magazines.

The selection of goods on sale targeted the bankers working inside; lottery tickets for those pursuing financial success and with spare money to burn, flowers and toys as gifts for families, and tailors and barbers to maintain a professional appearance. The busy corner appeared as a self-contained eco-system - a typical office building that supported numerous activities and bought together different types of people.
The fieldwork conducted around Eje Ambiental provides a direct experience of the city, understanding the city from the part rather than the whole. It begins purely from observation, using the material reality of the city as a means of revealing commonalities in building types, everyday objects and associated social practices.

This methodology provides the basis for the fieldwork in Bogotá, offering an expanded understanding of Wajiro Kon’s Modernology and the work that continues to follow on from it. The fieldwork is treated as an exploration of this approach, applying Kon’s gaze to a new urban context.

It has been carried out by sketching the city as it was encountered, seeking common conditions that are easily appropriated by people. The drawings focus on those everyday spaces, buildings and objects that would typically be dismissed as banal or uninteresting by designers.