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One River, Three Stories

A visit to three moments of the Medellín’s River

The Medellín River, also called the Aburrá River (due to the name of the pre-existing indigenous community), runs 104 km through the Department of Antioquia and across the metropolitan area of Medellín and is made up of ten municipalities with about 3.930.000 inhabitants as of 2018. Its route in the city of Medellín takes place over 23 km and receives more than 250 tributaries, a situation that configures the predominant orography of the valley.

Medellín looks like a crumpled piece of paper, and in its folds one can find its virtues, where urban and social opportunities are concentrated, but these folds are also where many of the city’s logistical problems have arisen over the centuries. Thus the development of the city is at the forefront of more exploitation and demographic speculation, ahead of community life, civic interaction, leisure, and landscape potentials. Medellín is a city ruled by the course of its river and ravines, yet this factor has been the most ignored issue in the urban decisions of the city in its recent history.

Is it possible to think of three key moments associated with urban development on the Medellín River? Such boldness might seem pretentious, but this writing examines three key episodes to understand the role of the Medellín River in the city’s configuration of the past, present, and future: the Meandering River, the Linear River, and the Park River.

The Meandering River (1848 – 1942)

The sinuous path of the river was present until the first half of the twentieth century. Prior to this, the Medellín River was renowned for its landscape potential and for being a place of leisure, a locale for social encounters, and the site of the laundry-doers and raft-rowers. Its predominance as a natural and cultural landscape was contrasted by the great floods that were foreseeable, a

situation that since the city’s foundation in 1616 determined the development of the new town on the eastern bank of the river. The waves and meanders of the river made the water meek, allowing people to have contact with the river as a part of their daily life, as portrayed by numerous photographs and maps in the city’s archives.

At the beginning of the twentieth century, the Medellín River was a landscape concerned with the rest and leisure of its inhabitants. In this way, the exploitation of its currents for self-consumption and the sanitary needs of the adjacent citizens were remarkable. In 1907, Hermes García, while visiting the city, described it as follows:

The Aburrá or Medellín River bathes the population to the west, and yet it is notable by the amount of its waters, for the beauty of its shores, by the meekness of its waves, and by the lovely landscapes that it offers to be seen. Both this river and the stream (the St. Helena ravine), in addition to ornaments for the site, are of vital importance for the comfort and health of the neighbors...¹

Since 1913, with the *Plano de Medellín Futuro* led by entrepreneurs and urban planners such as Ricardo Olano (1874-1947) and Karl Brunner (1887-1960), there was a need to establish guidelines for the development, zoning, mobility, and “widening” of the city. While such a plan was only developed on the eastern side of the river, it succumbed to the “conservative mindset of the liberal elite,”² which did not allow the realization of the plan. This had a negative impact on an overflowing informal growth in a city without a regulatory plan and caused new messy set-

Image Next Page: POMCA 2007. Aerial image south of Medellín.



tlements on the slopes; in the lower parts, numerous industries took advantage of diverse economic and state credit benefits and perched on the banks of the river, unchecked. Beginning in the 1940s, after this uncontrolled occupation of the Medellín River and the eagerness to channel it in order to support the new “urbanization” and provide utility to industry, there were incentivized proposals to turn the riverbed into a large park, thus returning it to a center of ecological connectivity, in addition to enhancing cultural services and community life on its course. This is how Pedro Nel Gómez (1899-1984), an artist, architect, and engineer, developed a visionary proposal called the National Park (*Parque Nacional*), perhaps promoted by certain ominous images of the river converted into a large highway used only for the development of factories and transport infrastructure.

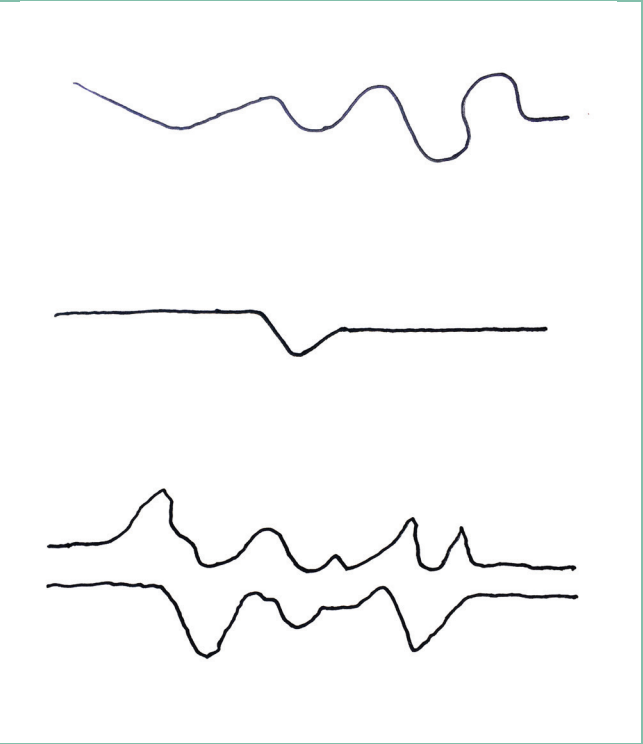
The plan was signed and dated by the artist in 1942; on its lower right side were two inscriptions that could serve as the manifesto for the future of Medellín: “Scheme for the great gardens of the city,” and below, “New City.” The idea of a large park parallel to the river with green spaces, homes, cultural and educational facilities could not be solidified. In the words of Fernando Botero Herrera:

... the National Park that this city needed was sacrificed by the interests of industry and landowners valued for construction and subsidized by the nation. Moreover, the regulation of urban space regarding the prohibition proposed by Brunner of establishing factories in a strip of two hundred meters along the *Avenida de los Libertadores*, in order to allocate this beautiful space for housing, public gardens, schools, and other non-industrial purposes, was postponed...³

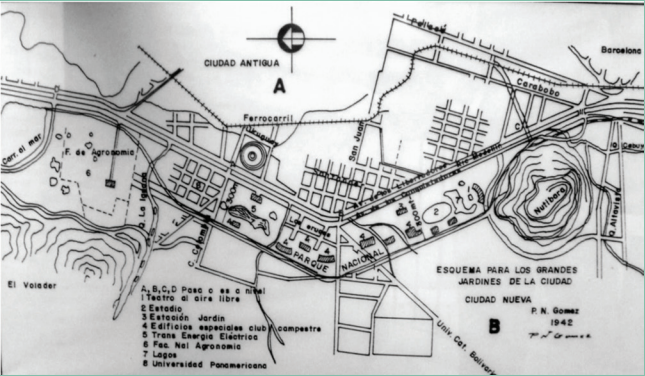
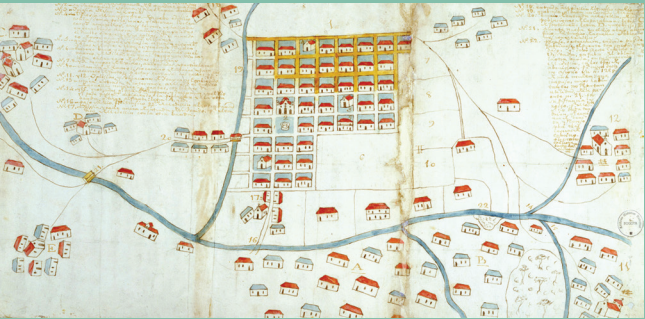
Paradoxically, the large and thriving companies that boosted the economic growth of the city since the early twentieth century, placing it as a leading industrial city and lifeline for Colombian society, were naively tasked with avoiding the proper urban development of the city and its river. It took more than seventy years to understand the importance of projects such as the National Park, as will be seen later.

The Linear River (1942-1995)

During the 1940s, the rectification and channeling of the river became a reality, and the priority of a regulatory



The Meandering River, Linear River, Park River. 2019.



Top: José María Giraldo. Plan of the Villa of Medellín, 1791.

Bottom: Pedro Nel Gomez. National Park Project. 1942.

plan was urgent. Guided by Brunner’s first sketches and driven by great local architects such as Nel Rodríguez Hausler (1905-1996), the pilot plan for Medellín was contracted to Town Planning Associates of New York, directed by Paul Lester Wiener and Josep Luís Sert. The firm, founded in the United States in the postwar era, also developed the pilot plans for Bogotá, Tumaco, and Chimbote in Peru, among others. There was hope that the firm’s ideas would be based on the proposals of the International Congresses of Modern Architecture (CIAM), a visualization of a city segregated by functions: living, working, circulation, and cultivation of body and spirit. While identical cities with mixed uses might seem out-

dated today, in 1950 these ideals dictated many of the decisions for urban planning.

The new policy not only had to address the obligatory aspects of health, such as sewage, urban aqueducts, litter, hygiene, and control of diseases such as malaria, it also had to “colonize” the western side of the city, giving the former swamp and floodplains the right to inhabit the city. New neighborhoods were planned for the working classes incorporating concepts such as neighboring units, ravine parks, models of English parkways, radial layouts in neighborhoods such as Laureles, and new densities and mixes of buildings. In the central area near the river, a civic center was proposed that would concentrate governmental and commercial activities, the railway, and a market; this was built in the 1960s/70s and is known as “La Alpujarra Administrative Center.” The space for industrial work was located in the southern part of the city in order to allow easy accessibility, proximity to new labor housing centers, and controlled smoke pollution, thanks to the north-south direction of the winds. It is also worth mentioning that many guidelines in the zoning plans could not be realized as insufficient legal tools prevented existing operations, such as land partitioning. Finally, the green areas—cultivating body and spirit—were planned for the hills, the slopes of the city next to streams of water; this was perhaps the most important, and most expensive, realization of the plan. According to the *Report of the Pilot Plan*, dated 31 January 1950.

... the park program could include a number of hillside parks looking over the city. The slopes should be reforested in many sectors and very strict legislation should protect the potential of these green areas. Typical hillside parks should be developed on Cerro Nutibara, Cerro El Volador (botanical garden), and near El Salvador, in the west



Paul Lester Weiner and Josep Luís Sert (Town Planning Associates). Medellín Pilot Plan. Industrial and commercial zone plan. 1950.

of the new civic center... The playing and sports fields are planned along the linear parks following the lines of the river and the streams [*quebradas*], thus joining them in the green areas, rather than small isolated points...⁴

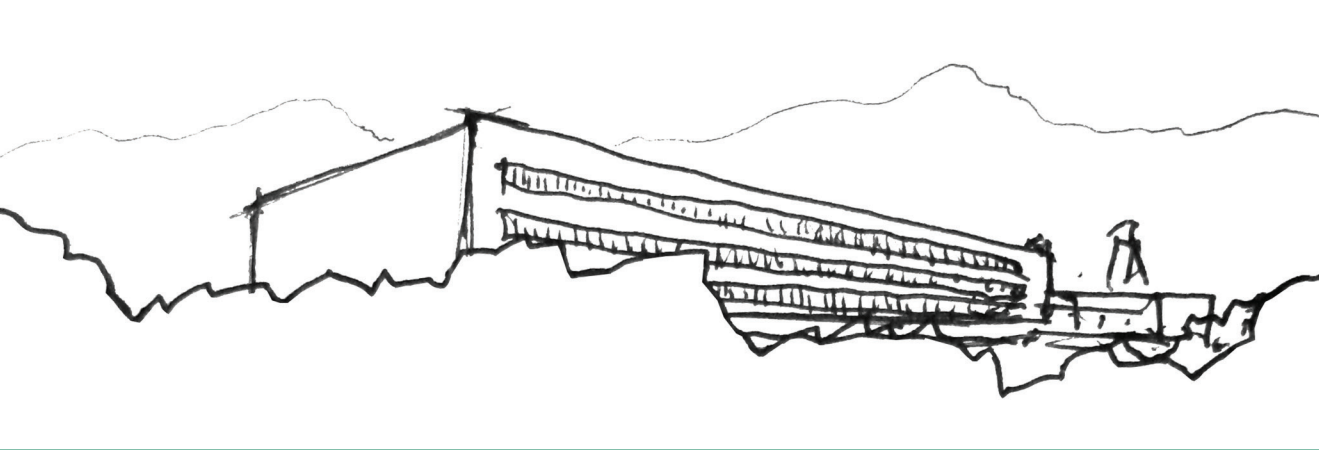
As noted, the plan for the green areas could be understood as a projected hypothesis oriented towards the connectivity of ecological, environmental, and human activities in the natural components of the city: hills, river, and ravines.

Today these actions, while beginning to be realized as historical debt, have very high social, political, and economic repercussions, but they still remain as an outstanding balance on the agenda for the coming years. The potential landscapes of Medellín associated with its natural components are undeniable; despite the eradication of many of these components, they are still

often visible, despite the aftermath of the industrial era that left its mark on the landscape.

However, this industrial image has also been accompanied by excellent buildings, beautiful architectural manifestos built between the 50s and 70s that must now be converted to memory with the new revitalized landscapes for the city. Factories in the southern area, such as Coltabaco, Colcafé, Gaseosas Lux, and Liquor Factory, must now be remade with new uses and public and private services, while retaining that image of ships stranded on the edges of the river.

It was undeniable that by the mid-20th century the city was debating two logics (as it continues to do today) as it conceived of the development of the river. As Nel Rodríguez stated in 1942, “... The Medellín River can be treated artistically with curves and backwater, surrounded by irregular green areas, as well as rectifying it to a single straight and surrounding it with arteries



H.M. Rodríguez e Hijos Ltda. Compañía Colombiana de Tabacos S.A. Medellín, 1948 - 1957. Drawing factory building from Avenida Regional Sur.

suitable for the various uses, in short, making on its banks two thick arteries for transit...”¹⁵

These contrasting ideas between architecture and urbanism versus engineering did not allow for agreements; the industrial zones previously located in the “outskirts” of the city, gradually became one of the most prosperous urban sectors of the city between the 70s and 90s.

River Park (1995-2019)

Since the construction of the first bridge in 1848 over the Medellín River at the top of Colombia Street, the city has always inhabited the eastern side of the river. With the opening of the *Otrabanda* between the 40s and 50s, many roads, factories, shops, housing, and equipment

occupied the channels of the Medellín River in a disorderly manner, particularly in the northern area. In fact, until 1984 the city’s landfill, a large mountain of rubbish in the Moravian sector, adjoined the waters of the river. This situation, among many others, highlighted three fundamental challenges: the decontamination of the river, the need to dictate new regulations to allow new uses and densities, and reintegration of the river and its tributaries back to the public and ecological life of the city.

The opening of the Metro system in 1995, with its parallel lines to the river and ravines (which for many was a big mistake in its planning), allowed the city to visualize the layout of the waterways and highlight the problems and challenges described above. Subsequent initiatives on the new, modern, straight river appeared,

such as the construction of nearby neighborhoods with high urban and architectural quality such as Carlos E. Restrepo, Los Libertadores and Conquistadores, the Alpujarra I and II civic centers, the Metropolitan Theater, and the Wastewater Treatment Plant in the southern zone. The situation highlighted the need for the industries to migrate to others places out of town. This migration and the purchase of some of them by large industrial guilds changed the vocation of the city; it was ceasing to be an industrial city and was becoming a city of services.

With the implementation of the Territorial Ordering Plan in 1999, the door for urban renewal of industrial sites and areas near the river was opened. There were some regulatory contradictions, however, like declaring the city should grow inward by the narrow-

ness of the valley, but at the same time not allowing densities, indexes, and uses that encouraged growth in the southern industrial zone. But with partial plans, numerous interventions were carried out on the edges of the river and good architecture, accompanied by public space designs, were incorporated as part of the citizen discourse.

All this happened at a historic moment in the city (the 80s/90s) where the war associated with drug trafficking had put all the social sectors in check, declaring it a non-viable city for the country. It could be argued

Latitud S.A.S. Sebastián Monsalve, Juan David Hoyos. Image proposed winner international contest, Botanical Park. 2012. Medellín.



that much of the city’s urban development of the last twenty-five years has been the result not only of a long urban, industrial, and constructive tradition but also of a collective citizen sense of “survival” that was directed to the victims of violence, leading to a great sense of belonging and involvement with the city’s decisions.

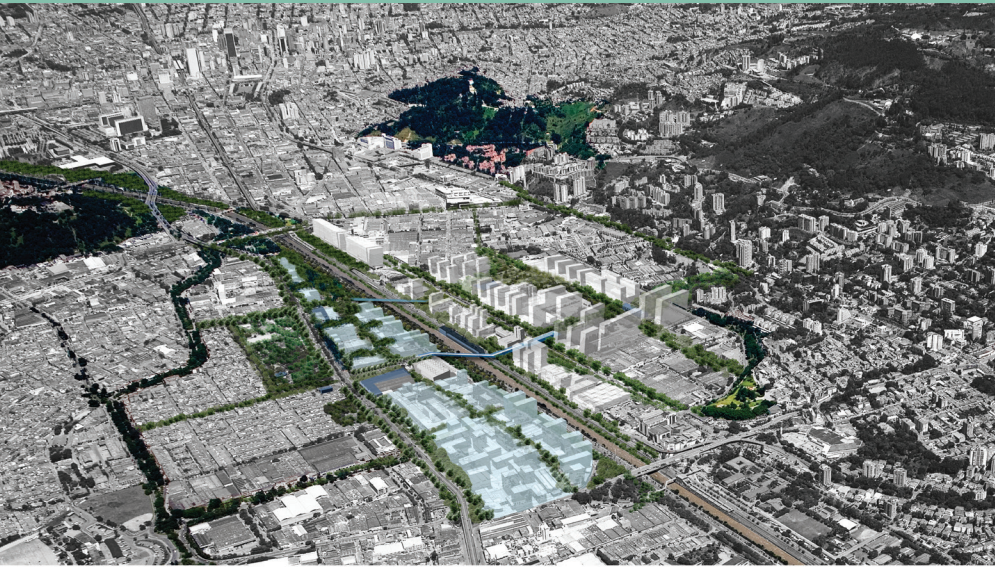
Notable for this time was the Building of Public Enterprises of Medellín E.P.M. (1997), the Parque de los Pies Descalzos powered by E.P.M., the School of Architecture at the Universidad Pontificia Bolivariana/U.P.B. (2000), Plaza Mayor (2005), the partial plan of the former steel company SIMESA/Ciudad del Río (2006), the construction of the Bancolombia building (2005), the public competitions of the South and North Centrality of the Aburrá Valley (2007), and other numerous plans and projects built between 2000 and 2014.⁶

The growing interest in urban renewal of the areas surrounding the river is summarized with the Master Plan for Medellín and the Aburrá Valley BIO 2030⁷ that aims to identify strategic intervention scenarios for the next twenty years. The plan identifies the river and hillsides as key places for future urban development as a result of messy urban expansion and low occupancy of the central areas close to the river.

The study in question was the preamble to the new update of the Territorial Ordering Plan (2014) and the formulation of the River Macroprojects, understood as large-scale operations to transform, redensify, and revitalize underutilized urban areas located around the Medellín River.⁸ The proof of these proposals was established with the international design competition for the Medellín River Park in 2012 where the proposal



Latitud S.A.S. Sebastián Monsalve, Juan David Hoyos. *River Parks*, 2018, Medellín.
Right: Mayor of Medellín, Proantioquia, urbam/EAFIT. *Between Banks. Urban Park and Renovation*, 2015, Medellín.



RIVER, NAHR, RÍO

called Parque Botánico developed by the architecture firm Latitud S.A.S.⁹ received the first place.

The twenty-kilometer project, today called Parques del Río, is a project that seeks to use urban design, architecture, landscaping, mobility, and urban renewal to improve and requalify public space and ecological connectivity in the city of Medellín.

References for this project can be seen in the interventions of public space and parks on the Manzanares River in Madrid, the Mapocho River in Santiago de Chile, and the conversion from highway to park in the Cheong Gye Cheon River in Seoul, as well as some urban waterfront renewals such as those developed in Puerto Madero in Buenos Aires, Battery Park in New York, and the coastal edge of Guayaquil in Ecuador, among many others.

Of the seven planned stages, the one near the civic center of the city was prioritized for execution; this is paradoxically where Pedro Nel Gómez himself had predicted it over seventy years ago (1942). While the decision to develop the demonstrative stage of this project was suggested by many in the northern area (the place of greater social, physical, and environmental complexity), it is possible that such complexity would have made it impossible to preview its intentions in a relatively short time.

Although the costs for the project are enormous (largely due to the excessive advantage that the city took for the disorderly development of this sector of the city and extreme engineering logic), today the plan is being incorporated gradually into the ecological, cultural, and community structure of the city, and is even being enjoyed by initial detractors. It is worth mentioning that the execution of the project has not eradicated the constant discussion of experts, academics, and politicians for the future occupation of the areas surrounding the Medellín

River. There are current debates on the continuity of the Parques del Río to other areas or converting the corridor of the river into a large elevated highway with several roads in a north-south direction.

Adhering to the Parques del Río project in the industrial zone, new proposals have appeared for the intervention of the areas surrounding the river. This is how the Entre Orillas project (2013-2015) developed.¹⁰ It started from the hypothesis that a linear problem like the river is solved in a transversal way and looks to connecting the river banks:

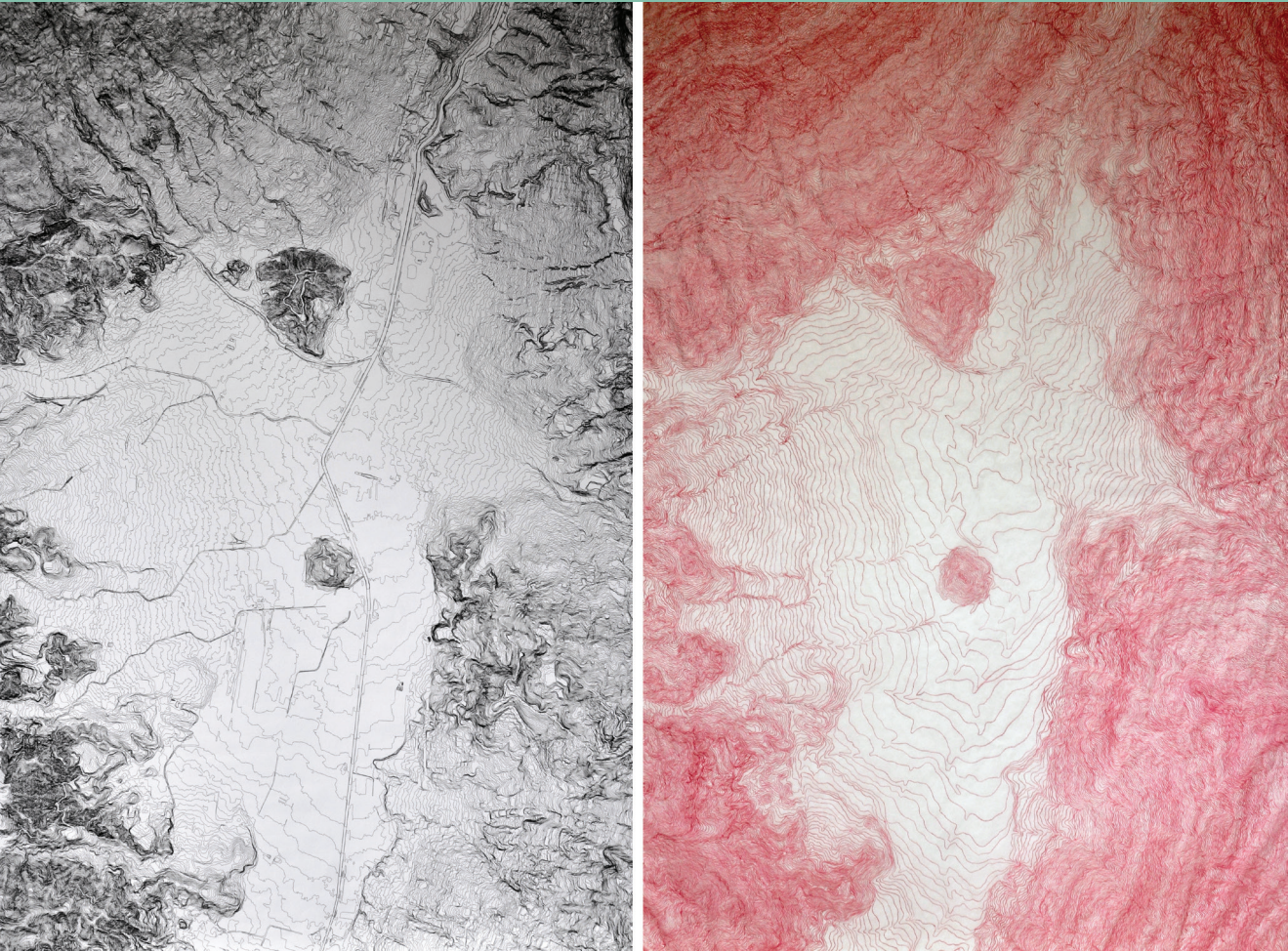
It will be an urban catalyst that will transform the sector and allow social articulation between the neighborhoods, healthy coexistence between companies and other uses, with public space systems, equipment and clean mobility. In addition, it has been developed with a participatory methodology between the public and private sectors, with the support of the academy.¹¹

The opportunity to think of the parks and the development associated with the river in a transversal way turns the gaze to new interventions such as integrating the transport systems (metro, buses, and bicycles), allowing private/public partnerships, and, as in this case, proposing new parks and ecological connections, even rising over the river.

Epilogue

As evidenced in the three moments in time described, there was always the need to recover the river as a natural structure associated with leisure but also as an urban and mobility infrastructure. Just as the river can be linear and sinuous, the city is also founded on contrasts. The memory condensed in those twenty

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Oscar Santana. *Intimate Cartography of the Aburrá Valley*, 2016, Bogotá.

kilometers is today both a source of reflection along with a call for urban renewal and habitability.

Comparative research, such as “River, Nahr, Río” developed by the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State, is not only necessary at this historic time but also urgently needed. It is in the comparison of good practices, successes, and errors where critical answers exist for correct development, so why not dream about the possibilities for urban rivers and their relationships with the beings that dwell beside them?

It is possible that in many years, when the city ceases to be a city, the rivers and ravines will take back their original channels, recovering the memory that they should never have lost, and merge into a new landscape, perhaps one very similar to the one that existed before the city itself existed. In the meantime, the obsession with intervening and properly inhabiting its vestiges and channels, even if it seems at times to be a lost race, must continue without pause.

ENDNOTES

1. Jason Betancur Hernández. “Intervention of the Medellín River: The Society for Public Improvements and the Municipal Administration of Medellín, 1940-1956.” *Historelo, regional and local history magazine*. Vol 4. Number 8, July-December 2012. 246. <http://www.scielo.org.co/pdf/histo/v4n8/v4n8a09.pdf>.

2. Fernando Botero Herrera. *Medellín 1890-1950 Urban history and the game of interests*. (Medellín. editorial University of Antioquia, 1996), 141.

3. Ibid., 158.

4. Paul Lester Wiener and Jose Luís Sert. Medellín Pilot Plan Report, Volume 2. (Medellín, 1950), 20.

5. Nel Rodriguez. “Plano Regulador de Medellín” in *Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism Magazine*. (U.P.B. 1947), 11.

6. Mayor of Medellín, Proantioquia, urbam/EAFIT. “*Between the banks. Urban Park and Renewal*”. (Proantioquia. 2015). 17.

7. Project developed in partnership between the Aburra Valley Metropolitan Area, the Mayor of Medellín and the Urban and Environmental Studies Center urbam of EAFIT University in 2010.

8. Mayor of Medellín, “Between the banks,” 26.

9. Architecture company led by architects Sebastián Monsalve and Juan David Hoyos in charge of leading stage 1 of running Parques del Rior (Contracting entity: Development Company Urban EDU).

IMAGE CREDITS

92: Urbam / EAFIT, 2015.

94: Óscar Mauricio Santana Vélez & Jorge Pérez Jaramillo.

95 Top: General Archive of the Nation of Bogota.

95 Bottom: Pedro Nel Gómez House Museum, Medellín.

96: Department Planning Administrative.

97: Óscar Mauricio Santana Vélez & Jorge Pérez Jaramillo.

98: Latitude S.A.S. Sebastián Monsalve, Juan David Hoyos.

100: Sebastián González & Pequeño Robot.

101: Urbam / EAFIT.

103: Óscar Mauricio Santana Vélez.