INNOVATIONS FOR SUCCESSFUL SOCIETIES

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Interviewee: Alejandro Echeverri

Interviewer: Matthew Devlin

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DEVLIN: Today is October 26th, 2009. We're in Medellín, Colombia, with Alejandro
                 Echeverri, who was director general of the Urban Development Company in
                 2004-2005 and then director of urban projects for the mayor's office of Medellín
                 in 2005-2007.

ECHEVERRI: *Thank you. It's a pleasure to be here with you.*

DEVLIN: I thought we might start by asking you to rather simply explain the nature of those
                 two positions you held under Sergio Fajardo.

ECHEVERRI: *Yes, even before Sergio Fajardo and the rest of us came to government, we
                 worked with him for two years, helping him develop his government plan. My
                 responsibility was to direct the urban policies and the strategic urban and
                 architectural projects. Before that administration and afterwards, once we were at
                 the mayor's office working on this, I came in as the manager for the urban
                 development company, which was a decentralized public entity.*

                 *From that point, we decided that would be the center of different strategic
                 projects and working groups, especially the projects of physical and architectural
                 transformation.*

DEVLIN: And in terms of this idea of social urbanism, what did that mean during the
                 administration of Fajardo. What was the idea there?

ECHEVERRI: *To begin with, it's a political decision, to have the greatest public investments in
                 the poorest parts of the city. But for us the implementation of his policies also had
                 to come with a transformation of urban and physical space, especially changing
                 the skin of the city to make the politics visible, and for us too. The goal was to do
                 it with the best quality and the best designs, with comprehensive physical
                 intervention policies, but also such that the physical projects would just be the
                 means for starting an integral process of education, culture. It was all parallel
                 with the physical process.*

DEVLIN: And one example, one very concrete example of where this all came together
                 was these PUIs. These—I'm not sure what the Spanish acronym is, but…

ECHEVERRI: *Integral Urban Projects [without translator].*

DEVLIN: Exactly. What is the thought behind those integrated projects?

ECHEVERRI: *There are many ideas that can help explain this. First of all, it is to be selective in
                 public interventions [and prioritize the human and technical effort] in some of the
                 more critical areas of the city. Critical in two ways: that they have great problems
                 of inequality and poverty and structural problems, as well in terms of security.
                 Simply, poor and violent areas are chosen; some of them are chosen that are
                 representative to create the intervention model of urban projects.*

DEVLIN: And this—

ECHEVERRI: *A central aspect is that [we define the concept of social management] with
                 interdisciplinary teams of architects, engineers, communicators, and social
                 workers, who would be there 24 hours a day, working specifically in these
                 territories and being the face of the projects in front of the community, in order to*

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work with the community as a team and for them to have a clear and immediate response.

Another central aspect is that the definition of policies of [urban] intervention were done [alongside the community] by going corner by corner in the different neighborhoods, defining in some way how this intervention would work.

And the last aspect, just to sum up the idea, is that these projects don't just have the goal of increasing the quality of life for people, but also to increase the pride and self-esteem of the people, and that they feel integrated in the development of the city. For that reason, we are also in search of beauty and aesthetics, with works of the best quality for these places.

DEVLIN: So, on the point of selecting where these projects were going to happen, who ultimately made those decisions, and by what point were they made?

ECHEVERRI: *[Translator:] At what point?*

DEVLIN: At what point were they made? Was it during the administration, or had they already identified this in a pre-planning process?

ECHEVERRI: *It's a combination of all of the aspects. The first project, [which we called the] integral [urban] project of the northeast, [without translator:] where the first Metrocable [elevated cable car] is. [Translator:] We were studying it before coming to office, because some of the issues that were executed during the Fajardo administration had already been worked on by academics, NGOs, different groups.*

We also sought to take advantage of the opportunities that large investment was producing in the city. So we tried to put together big infrastructure construction like the [Metrocable], which in some cases, like this one, came on its own without the integral plan, and we saw it as a great opportunity to create an integral change where the stations were going to be, which happened to be in one of the most critical places of the city.

We had some clear ideas, but we developed them and refined them throughout that administration, which allowed us to define with greater precision the future [urban] integral projects.

DEVLIN: And in terms of—once the area was identified, in terms of the actual projects that would go into the area, what forms of community involvement were there in that?

ECHEVERRI: *This is one of the hardest issues, but I think one of the most important ones—first of all, because to come to work in these neighborhoods where there was great skepticism was very hard at first. But we created a space by making small commitments and meeting them. We tried to activate all the possible spaces of community participation. The community action councils. We tried to give greater visibility to the positive leaders in the communities. We invented forums such as imaginary workshops, with children, with adults, senior citizens, all the projects that in some way were defined and discussed so they could express—in this participation process, we included all the actors in the neighborhood; we even included the ones who had a recent history of violence. They would all sit there with mothers, with community leaders, with the former militiamen, to work together on these projects. That's one idea. It's not easy, but it's the way we tried to do it.*

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DEVLIN: So you mentioned that one of the strategies for this was to make small commitments and meet them. To look at some of these areas now, the commitments seem rather grandiose. There are cable cars, there are library parks, there are big schools, so it seems like a sequence. In the beginning you promised small things. Are there examples of that that come to mind? Some of these early days, the things you did then?

ECHEVERRI: *You are absolutely right in what you are saying. Our purpose was to create interventions and projects of different scales, always trying to work on the depth—urban depth [espesor: thickness] with many different projects of different scale. [Without translator:] Small. Small ones. [Translator:] Combined with some big urban projects such as the library parks, [the Metrocable], all of those. When I speak of small commitments, I'm just mentioning [a part of these commitments]. We defined the work plan with the community in which we could verify and validate every three months, every six months, every year, and those commitments we made with the community, we fulfilled them.*

               A small commitment may just be to take a pre-design or pre-project [design or project proposal] to discuss it with the community, and to fulfill this by going two months later with this project. And six months later going with the mayor to validate the project. And [one year later] have a transformed public space, but three or four years later we will have a library park. It is a combination of goals of different scale but with the commitment of fulfilling every stage in order to gain confidence.

DEVLIN: So you had an idea of what you wanted to achieve, but then you also had this process of community consultation. Were there projects that the community was pushing for that you hadn't considered? Or, alternatively, were there projects that they wanted that you had to say, "No, that's not feasible," for whatever reason?

ECHEVERRI: *Work with the community is not linear work. A strategic transformation vision, it would be very difficult to achieve this with community participation because—let me give you an example. In a space where there had never been public transportation like the [Metrocable] or a library park, it's impossible to imagine that the community would ask for this. The work was a combination of strategic definitions, done by people who had been working and studying these issues for a while before coming to the mayor's office, and to open spaces for these projects to enrich themselves, so that the use would be modified or some things would be transformed. But there's also a space that is opened in case there's new things that come up that generally would not be a great infrastructure but small uses, small parks, they can be defined within the community.*

               In the end, what's important is that the people have a sense of ownership over it, which guarantees the usage, the sustainability, and the success of the projects.

DEVLIN: And when we think about the structure of this effort, as your position at the urban development company—would it be accurate to say you served as a convening power, you were a coordinating body?

ECHEVERRI: *I don't know if it would be the right thing to say.*

DEVLIN: All right. What would be the right thing to say?

ECHEVERRI: *To have a transformation of this type, political leadership is absolutely key. The figure of the mayor is central here. This is not a minor issue; it is a central issue, but the urban development company was in a way the key structure and the space, in some way, where the management and the strategic working groups of the strategic projects were located. And it was through the urban development company that worked together with all the other secretariats, and all the other structures of the mayor's office. But during the Fajardo administration, I must say that one of the qualities was that there was integral work with a structure, with the different secretariats.*

DEVLIN: And so you stress the teams you had on-site in these areas. Very important. What type of skills, talents, did you need on those teams? There is the somewhat obvious groups of architects and engineers for any infrastructural project, but you also mentioned people like social workers, communications…

ECHEVERRI: *Yes, one of the bottlenecks, one of the great problems of public administration is how to execute good ideas, and in any administration there are great ideas. The issue is always how to execute them. That's one of the problems. For that reason, we tried to take away some of the day-to-day responsibilities of public servants. These tasks of the strategic projects—the people who were working these urban integral projects and others that we defined as strategic, only worked on these projects. They did not have to do any other types of activities. They didn't have to be involved in the day-to-day of administration. Perhaps one of the most important characteristics was the passion that these people put into this. The people who worked on this and the people who still do, we were convinced that we could make this transformation, and people could feel that.*

               The issue is that they have the capacity and experience in the subject, and of course, the total honesty and transparency to do this work. And we also worked with very young people who had recently graduated from university, many of them, and all of us had been learning in the process.

DEVLIN: And so the first of these integrated projects was in the northeast?

ECHEVERRI: *Yes.*

DEVLIN: When you—how did you conceive of sequencing your actions? Because from start to finish, it's a different world you were creating, in some sense. How did you break that down?

ECHEVERRI: *The sequence of the interventions in the same projects? Or the sequencing of all the different projects?*

DEVLIN: Sorry?

ECHEVERRI: *The sequencing within each project? Or the sequencing of first which project, and then which other project?*

DEVLIN: The sequencing project by project.

ECHEVERRI: *The issues are not very complex to identify. A city like ours is over-diagnosed. There is a lot of study, lots of things, and there are indicators that are adequate enough to show us which neighborhoods had marginal origin. They conserve these characteristics, and they have big problems of violence and of social problems in general. These sorts of neighborhoods come in different sizes and in*

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different parts of the city, but they all have the same basic problems, so that two or three intervention areas were looked at: the ones that were historically [obvious to us] and that the city knew of, but also the ones that had a real possibility of combining large infrastructure of transportation—for example, with a number of important urban and social projects. And the northeast sector, without a doubt, if you ask anyone in Medellín, was one of the most critical areas. I'm sure among the two or three, he would tell you those.

These areas would have 10 or 12 and would need three or four [governments/administrations] of continuous projects to work on them.

DEVLIN: And so within a particular project, say within the northeast, there are libraries, parks…

ECHEVERRI: Housing.

DEVLIN: Housing. How do you prioritize those needs?

ECHEVERRI: We give a central value to everything that we call "public space" and public services and buildings. [Without translator:] I don't know how to say. [Translator:] Because these are some of the structural deficiencies in the neighborhoods: how to include social development; especially the focus of this was children and young people. [Because in some way it's like generating] for their development and their inclusion. [So they were] new places for encounters for children, places that would make the neighborhood accessible. Like public transport, education is a central issue. Schools, libraries, these are common issues for many parts—many cities in the world. And perhaps we were able to work on all of these as a group.

DEVLIN: And one thing we had mentioned was the community involvement in identifying problems and the needs and the type of projects they would like to see. But once work was underway, was there a role for them in project management, oversight? Were contracts awarded within the neighborhood?

ECHEVERRI: Yes, the mayor's office promoted oversight, and consolidating the oversight to do follow-up. The community is included in many areas of the work. Even some simple things, such as the name that's going to be given to the public space, and that more than 90% of the workers are from the community.

Some public works are also used for technical training. For example, [...] with the SENA [National Learning Service] for technology relating to the use of public space, with bricks in urban furnishings.

Perhaps the most important part here is what we call the third phase, which is the issue of urban animation and the appropriation of these spaces. So we try to work with the communities on the different forms of occupying public spaces through cultural and artistic events—for example, the markets of entrepreneurship in the public spaces, in order to try to make communities more autonomous in how they use their space.

DEVLIN: And on that point of contracting work, were contracts awarded to local residents in terms of construction? Was any preference given? Or was that not a major concern?

ECHEVERRI: _Public contracting in Colombia has worked by certain requirements. When it is of higher cost, when you do have a public bidding process, and here all the businesses in the city can participate. When they are of lower value, you can do contracting by selection, and many of the works from participatory budgeting—that's also in the city—can be done through direct contracting of people. It is not an easy issue and it doesn't always work out well, but we did require the companies that won the bidding process to commit to hiring local people with follow-up by the manager of the urban integral plan._

But it is a matter of will.

DEVLIN: If we step back and think about this as a political decision, what type of opposition did you come up against on that front? I can only imagine that the suggestion that you're going to pour all this money into some of the most unstable neighborhoods in the city must have met with some criticism.

ECHEVERRI: _Yes, I lost an idea. [Laughter.] It was not easy at the beginning for people to understand what the mayor's office wanted to do with the integral urban projects, but a very complete process of public communication was done, which was aided by images and references, and what was very important for us was what we called the model projects—works that could be done in a short amount of time but would show people what could happen._

I'll mention something I told you at first, which is that in this Mayor Fajardo was very important. He is a person with a great capacity for public communication and great clarity, and with total transparency explained to the city, and the issue started to be learned and understood. I usually tell an anecdote [which expresses how the society] incorporated the value of education. A foreign colleague, who came in the third year of government, told me that when the taxi driver received him at the airport he didn't speak about the soccer team, [...] about Boca Juniors or any of the other issues, but he would speak about the library parks. And it's an anecdote that is repeated many times throughout the years. The city, I think, was able to incorporate and create a consensus about these central things.

The reality today is that there is tourism that did not exist [in Medellín]. There is an interest in foreign investment that did not exist [in Medellín]. So beyond improving the quality of life for people who were living in critical situations, a benefit has been seen in other spheres, and people have understood it this way.

DEVLIN: You mention the importance of the public communication campaign behind this. Were there any efforts on that front that you remember as being especially effective?

ECHEVERRI: _In what projects?_

DEVLIN: In terms of explaining why all this money needed to go into Comunas One and Two?

ECHEVERRI: _Not all the funds went there. Most of the funds went there. But I would say that one of the characteristics of the work, one of the characteristics of what we accomplished, is that the sensation is that there were urban transformations throughout the city. Because the places that were chosen were strategically defined. We are now sitting in [...] the El Poblado sector, which is perhaps one of the richest areas of the city, of the highest class; these cities are deeply segregated. We are living in a different world here. But down here on [El_

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Poblado] Avenue, which is one of the most emblematic avenues, there was a transformation to transform public space so that people would give more value to public space, to walk the streets, and it had a great impact as well.

It is clear that most investments were not in the part of the cities with the most resources, but we tried to get the Medellín population as a whole involved in this. In fact, one of the central aspects is that we tried to build spaces where all social classes could meet and use [them effectively]. It is perhaps a utopian idea, but today in public spaces, such as the Botanical Garden, Explora Park, people of different classes are there, using them.

DEVLIN: Now one thing you had mentioned that I'm very interested in is these model projects. The idea that you have quick wins. That you show results [...] I'd be really keen to hear some specific examples of projects that fulfilled that goal.

ECHEVERRI: *The decision has to do with pragmatism, with choosing opportunities. You must understand that these projects have to be a conceptual and integral part of [the] idea [you are trying to communicate]. It's as simple as creating a small park for kids in a neighborhood where they have never had it before. [Or] to take advantage of an opportunity of something that the city might already have been working on, but to reorient it so that it has the components that we think it should have. In terms of politics, in politics, one has to build trust with real actions. But it is important that these not be [arbitrary and scattered] projects. But that they all start from a general idea, and I think that's central. When we spoke of Medellín, the most educated—we wanted to, in terms of public spaces, in terms of buildings and services, cultural facilities; everything that had to do with citizen encounters and the creation of education and culture as models of the city. And of these there are different scales and some small things.*

For example, if we were trying to transform a new public school, there is probably one that is already existing, that with a rapid improvement will transmit our idea, and that we can show as an example of what we expect to build on a bigger scale.

DEVLIN: And these things are that quick. You can do them relatively fast and deliver results. Sometimes in efforts like the one you undertook they also turn out to be extremely cheap. I mean, it can be as simple as changing a name sometimes. Do instances of that come to mind?

ECHEVERRI: *Yes, for example, [Carabobo Street], which was the foundational axis of the city, is a project of great complexity because it is in the historic center, which had been invaded by public transport, anarchical and chaotic, with a very critical use of public space by informal vendors—and what we did was that one day a week, without any type of physical transformation, we would use [Carabobo]; we invited the city to make this a place of encounter in terms of culture and music. And the people of the city started to rediscover the street without a definitive transformation act. And that allowed us, once we had planned this project, to speak in clearer terms.*

DEVLIN: And, in terms of the sequence of all this: you started in the northeast; then, as I understand it, you moved to Moravia for the next project.

ECHEVERRI: *No. The idea of the strategic urban projects was located around many parts of the city. I'm speaking of the strategic urban projects that combined, for example, the library parks, public schools, some museums, transportation systems. Within*

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these urban strategic projects are the urban integral projects. We started to work in two areas, in the northeast and in Moravia. In these two we started to work simultaneously; what happens is that teams don't always work with the same speed and the same success. And so we had to [fine-tune]. The northeast project was a lot more successful in its execution and in its way of work. In Moravia, in part due to the complexity of the territory, it has been a slower process. And in both of them we continue to work.

After these two comes the second [Metrocable] with the urban integral project of Comuna Trece [13], which at this moment is starting its execution process.

DEVLIN: You mentioned that there were problems in Moravia, that it was more of a challenge. What made it more difficult?

ECHEVERRI: *Moravia has a story, which has made it extremely complex, in the process of solving problems. Moravia used to be the garbage dump of the city, and the families that lived from recycling trash settled there. And it is very centrally located in the city. During the most complex time—and there are still places that are dominated by paramilitaries and militias, etc.—Moravia had an obligation, a process of [reubicación: relocation] of a lot of the population, because they were living on grounds where there were toxic gases. The process of moving people to different houses is slow and complex, because it is only once you have the construction of a new house that you can move people and begin working on these aspects. So the central aspect in Moravia was the moving of people.*

And the central part of the northeast area was the construction of public spaces and new public buildings and services. Both have different speeds.

DEVLIN: And in terms of measuring your success: the whole idea is to change people's mindsets, their view of the government, in a way, and its responsiveness to them. You can build a lot of this infrastructure but still not be sure that's actually impacting people. So, I'm wondering, how did you assess your success on that front?

ECHEVERRI: *We haven't measured it very technically. [Laughter.] This is what we need help with, but the crux of this, as you mentioned, is really a mental change. To feel integrated with—and I believe that that can be measured by going through the neighborhood, speaking with people and asking people, "What are the changes you've had in the past few years?"*

But the reality is that we're missing more technical ways to measure this beyond the general ways.

DEVLIN: These integrated projects happened in the northeast and Moravia, and as you mentioned, they are starting up in Comuna Trece?

ECHEVERRI: *Yes.*

DEVLIN: So it's been—obviously, a lot of it is specific to each context, but they are all driven by the same strategy. So I'm wondering, looking back on your effort to implement the strategy in different areas, different contexts, are there lessons learned from that process? Things that go beyond the very specific context of each neighborhood? Things that have worked very well? Alternatively, things that next time should be avoided or approached differently?

ECHEVERRI: *The first aspects in the time we've been completing it, [reaffirming it], preparing it, the concept of integration [comprehensiveness]. This is why you could say that they are complex projects. This is not an isolated work in a public space or a transportation system, but really a project that combines in a simultaneous way, as I mentioned, big public works such as library parks, transportation systems, with public places with places for children. All of that also with other programs that are not just physical, but to also incorporate education policies, entrepreneurship, in the same territory.*

And this is a very specific, limited territory. One cannot think that one can change the entire city; we concentrated our interventions in strategic territories.

Another element always has three components. One is what we call inter-institutional coordination: how to coordinate the various budgets and programs of the mayor's office in these specific territories.

The second has to do with community participation and public communication. The third one, which is the one through which we present the projects, is the issue of physical transformation. It is to use the project, a project that defines times, [interlocutors], spaces to speak directly with the community, and start this work with the community around all the policies and programs. I don't know if that's what you're looking for?

DEVLIN: And there's one point, the inter-agency coordination, that's always a massive problem—a massive challenge.

ECHEVERRI: *Yes.*

DEVLIN: What allowed you to do that? Or what made it a little easier?

ECHEVERRI: *[Without translator:] A little easier, I don't know. [Laughter.] [Translator:] Some things which I've already told you about, try to put them together here: First of all, the manager who is in charge of this. With a team of people that are not doing anything that will distract them from this matter. That's the first one.*

Second, interlocutors, this person being an interlocutor, this manager directly with the mayor and with the council of the city. The integral urban project was on the first page of public policies. And so that created the obligation that the decisions and problems of this project would be a priority over the other ones. It's an issue of prioritizing.

And another one—and this can be a very simple thing, but I'll tell you about it— the mayor, every Friday morning, would take all his time for the strategic projects. And each strategic project, every 15 days, with all the actors, the manager of the company for urban development, the manager of the project, the secretariats of finance, the director of planning; they would always sit down to solve the problems. Some paperwork on buying land that might be tangled up in someone's desk, the mayor would call to solve it. This was sort of the issue here.

DEVLIN: So what we're talking about, as we said, is bringing state government institutions into neighborhoods that never really had them. And the neighborhoods we're talking about have very complicated histories. Did you ever build a police station in any of these strategic projects?

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ECHEVERRI: *Yes. The issue of security is included in all this social transformation. But with the police understood as a civic presence. And with a new face for police [stations]. In fact, there are examples of police stations that today are public spaces that work for the community, but without a doubt we had to recover state presence— not violently, nor with threatening or aggressive language, but with an official say; they had to be recovered in areas. Security, culture, education and the issue of security are an important part of all of this.*

DEVLIN: And I guess the final question has to be sustainability. Cities all over the world have examples of rather grandiose projects that even 10 years later are falling apart or at least no longer serve the purpose they were supposed to serve. How did you approach the problem of ensuring sustainability over the long term?

ECHEVERRI: *That's a very delicate issue, and we'll have the answer in 10 years, next time we meet. But we always try in the process of conceiving and constructing these projects—one of the main tasks as a manager was to create management figures that would make this sustainable. And the obsession was not to ask for money as a gift, but rather to find partners. So, for example, for the library parks or the public schools, have the compensation banks. [Without translator:] I don't know in English. [Translator:] Sort of like banks as partners these days.*

             Public schools, for example, have…

DEVLIN: A godfather figure?

ECHEVERRI: *A godfather figure, some of the top public or private universities of the cities, and some of the biggest businesses of the city. [Without translator:] Not to give money, but to help, [translator:] to help with management and efficiency. But without a doubt, it is a new budget challenge for public administration. And this has to do with the political ideology of betting on—creating a network of public services that's free and of good quality for the community.*

DEVLIN: But at least in some situations, the idea is to partner these institutions with other institutions that were going to outlive the administration of Sergio Fajardo.

ECHEVERRI: *[Without translator:] Yes. Yes. Of course.*

DEVLIN: Well, thank you so much.

ECHEVERRI: *OK. Muchas gracias.*