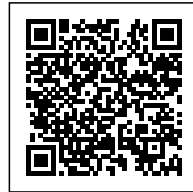




## JUAN BOBO CREEK: BRINGING COMMUNITY YOUTH TOGETHER

*Posted on November 24, 2022 by xavigonzalez*



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The Juan Bobo creek is part of Comuna 2, a densely populated urban district on the northeastern slopes of Medellin. As space for new homes ran out and demand for housing continued to increase, people built precarious structures directly over the creek, exposing themselves to the risk of floods and landslides. The City of Medellin relocated these families into new multifamily buildings nearby and transformed the banks of the creek into space for recreation and leisure. The intervention also incorporated bridges over the creek, bringing community youth together that had previously maintained antagonistic relationships.

## **Public Space**

In an effort to protect people living along the creek from imminent disaster and ensure newcomers did not continue building homes on inadequate land, high risk areas along the Juan Bobo Creek were evacuated and converted into public space. The freed areas correspond to the space affected by changes in the creek's volume of water. When the water level is low, this space is used for leisure and recreation. The site's transformation also increased inhabitants' sense of personal safety in their community.

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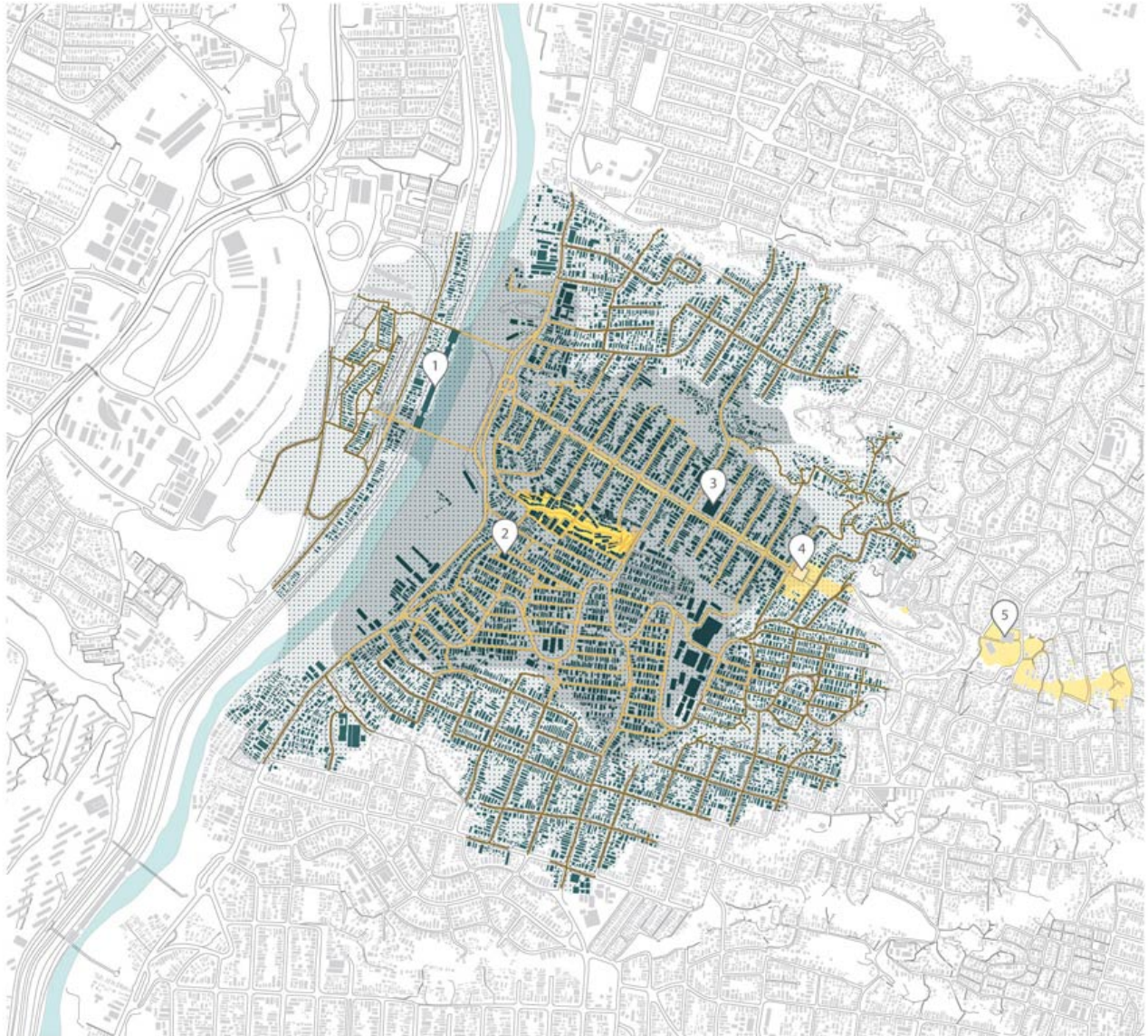
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— Distance traveled between 0m to 500m  
 — Distance traveled between 500m to 800m  
 — Public space  
 7,172 Structures  
 131.35 ha Area of influence 800m

■ Houses 500m  
 ■ Houses 800m  
 ▨ Polygon 500m  
 ▨ Polygon 800m

① Metro Estación Acevedo  
 ② Parque Primavera Nuestra Señora del Camino  
 ③ Parque Recreativo

④ Metro Estación Andalucía  
 ⑤ Estación La Popular

Scale:  
 0 50 100 200 400



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## History

Medellin received a heavy flow of migration from the countryside in the mid 20th century, as people fled the violence of armed militia. The city was not prepared to accommodate such numbers nor did it have a sufficiently large economy to employ them. As a result, spontaneous settlements make up 25% of the urban territory in Medellin. They emerged early on over the northeastern hills of the city, between the Oriental Tramway and the Andaluçia River. In the 1960s, public housing initiatives urbanized land to satisfy the housing deficit, and extra-legal constructions amplified the urban footprint in areas considered inadequate for development, such as the Juan Bobo creek. At first, the government's intention was to raze all informally built urban areas, but as demand continued to increase, they came to realize that spontaneous communities were needed to meet the need for housing. The municipality began accommodating services in the northeastern settlements, which progressively became denser. Popular, Santa Cruz, Manríquez and Aranjuez are the 4 comunas that structure this territory, which are themselves subdivided in 54 neighborhoods or barrios that reflect the different housing initiatives built over time.

In the 1990s, popular sectors in Medellin became the stage of gang violence associated with drug cartels. In many respects, the urban transformation projects designed for the northeastern hills, including the Integral Urban Project (PUI Plan Urbano Integral) and the Juan Bobo creek housing interventions, were conceived as social processes to empower neighbors. Transforming neighborhoods through the incorporation of public space, schools, cultural institutions and other facilities was meant to mitigate the structural causes of violence.

## Social and Political Context

Urban Development Plans and the Territorial Zoning Plans (POT Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial) developed by the Municipality of Medellin in the late 1990s came with changes in the Colombian constitution which decentralized many government functions. Municipalities gained jurisdiction over urban planning and the administration of local finances. Mayors were no longer assigned but elected. New legal planning instruments were adopted to guide the development of cities over an extended time, beyond the tenure period of local government.

Implementation strategies for projects, such as the Juan Bobo Creek, relied on a team of specialized social workers to interact with the communities and document their economic and social situation. They also facilitated citizen participation in the definition of projects and were able to strengthen the



community's trust in local government institutions, which had been eroded during the years of violent confrontations in the 1990s. These initiatives also created community organization structures that have endured over time.

## **Environmental Situation**

The presence of informal housing built directly over a creek and the unstable ground along its edges was deemed highly problematic by environmental and social assessments prepared for the northeastern hills of Medellín. The direct disposal of sewage water into the creek also made it a dangerous health hazard. The municipality surveyed the location of houses releasing sewage waste into the creek and those affected by running water infiltrations in the ground, which made them more prone to potential landslides.

The housing project for Juan Bobo Creek relocated families living in high risk homes to new multifamily structures built in the vicinity. Other homes in less precarious conditions were improved through access to services and better physical communication with surrounding areas.

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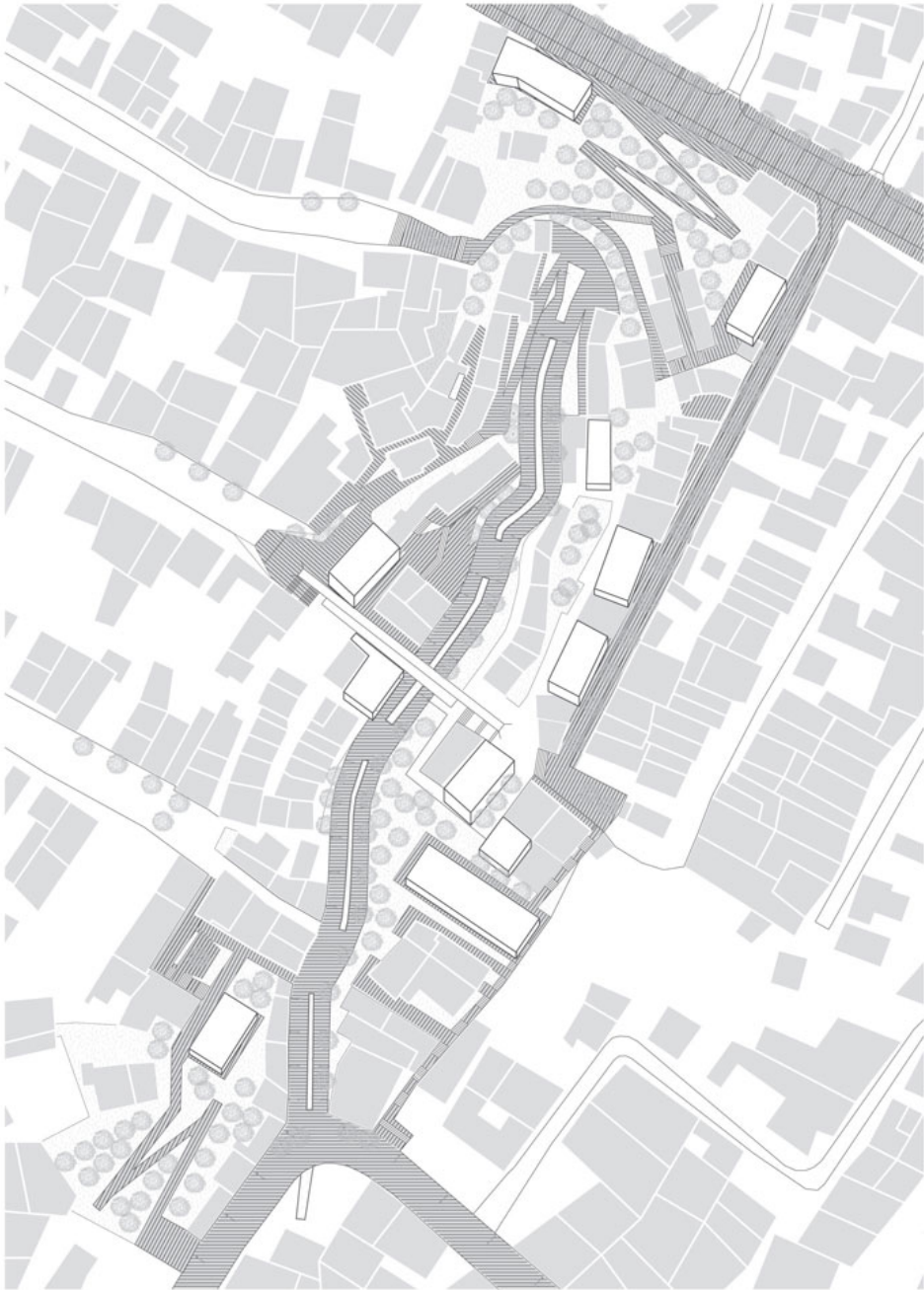
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## Urban Situation

Juan Bobo creek runs for 800 meters before it reaches the Medellín River. Initially, in 1960, more regular neighborhoods had been traced on either side of the creek, prudently distanced from the water to respect the fluctuating volumes during the high rainy season. Later, these buffer areas and the creek itself became occupied with spontaneous settlements. Road access to these areas was difficult; most homes were reached through narrow walkways and stairs.

The Housing Consolidation and Environmental Sanitation project generated a relocation process that gave way to 5.000 m<sup>2</sup> of new public space. 107 new housing units in multifamily structures were built to accommodate the relocated families. These buildings take advantage of the site's topography by allowing the lower levels to be accessed from the ground, while walkways at a higher ground elevation coincide with the fourth level, providing access to the top four floors. This way an 8-story building can function without an elevator, reducing construction and maintenance costs.

## Project Funding

The Juan Bobo Creek project was formulated by the Municipality of Medellín and executed by the Urban Development Company (EDU Empresa de Desarrollo Urbano). They were responsible, jointly with the Municipality's Social Development Department, for all of the project phases including diagnostics, community engagement and participation as well as for the construction phase. Funds were pooled from resources assigned to various departments within the municipality: Public Works, the Department of Health; EPM, Planning and Administration, and the Department of Social Development. 90% of the new relocation housing was paid through subsidies from the municipal government. The remaining 10% was the responsibility of each beneficiary family. Payment was structured according to the possibilities and means of each recipient.

## Related Programs

Several other programs were designed and implemented by the municipality concurrently with the transformation of the Juan Bobo Creek. The environmental agency installed a waste recycling and management program. They also taught the community how to produce agriculture locally. Another initiative was to create risk prevention committees to teach people what to do during natural disasters, as part of the Municipality's Disaster Prevention and First Aid System. The Department of

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Citizen Culture organized community gatherings to strengthen inhabitant's sense of ownership and responsibility for the preservation of public spaces.

The Center for Zonal Entrepreneurial Development (CEDEZO Centro de Desarrollo Empresarial Zonal) is a city-wide program with venues located in many of Medellín's spontaneous settlements. It provides logistical support and educational programs for community members to better manage family businesses or build new income generating activities. Other municipal programs include the library parks and the program Buen Comienzo (Good Beginning), which supports nurseries for infants and small children.

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JUAN BOBO CREEK  
MEDELLIN, COLOMBIA



## Activities

The new public spaces along the Juan Bobo Creek are mostly walkways and paths that follow the water's course. There are also spaces large enough to program small theatre performances, concerts, exercise sessions for senior citizens, ball games and religious rituals. Sometimes urban artists paint murals in commemoration of specific community celebrations and the municipality lends support with maintenance and cleaning.

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## **Urban Integration**

The community of Juan Bobo remained isolated and disconnected from its surroundings for many years due to its complex topography, ineffective means of circulation and high density. Furthermore, negative social stigmas and violence discouraged people in the vicinity from going there. Common space was scarce. The municipality's housing and relocation project freed land along the creek and converted it into public space. The interventions also addressed accessibility by clarifying circulation through a network of walkways, bridges and public squares. Connections with the neighboring communities of Andalucía and Villa Niza were also strengthened. These urban improvements completely transformed the face of this urban area and made it visible to the rest of the city.



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