

Portrait

Gil Peñalosa, 8-80 Cities



Photo: Ashley Bostrom



Democracy by design

Cities should be about people, says Gil Peñalosa. Marty McLennan profiles the planner who is exporting Colombia's incredible successes in inter-modal transport connectivity and public spaces to the rest of the world

It is a Wednesday evening and the fluorescent lights flicker a greenish hue across the packed hall. It looks like an innocuous US west coast university gathering – a crowd of jeans, plaid and loafers – and the audience has long been hypnotised, lulled into submission by the presenter's warm Spanish accent and rhetoric. Pacing back and forth, clicking slide after slide, he has the audience staring slack-jawed at the graphs splashed by a projector onto the wall: obesity peaking; roads replacing public spaces, and total number of motor vehicles along with rocketing concentrations of atmospheric carbon dioxide.

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“It’s the perfect storm,” he says, his voice quivering with excitement. This is the climax of the night; the part where the guest speaker goes from “has been done”, to ‘what we can do’- indeed, “what we must do”.

You could be forgiven if you had walked in late and confused the gathering for one with a religious tone. For a talk by Gil Peñalosa, executive director of 8-80 Cities and senior consultant with Copenhagen’s renowned Gehl Architects, has the effect of converting the masses, spurring the fence-sitters into instant missionaries, and channelling feel-good, go-and-get-’em euphoria into hard actions. This is the point when it is clearest that when Bogotá’s former commissioner of parks and recreation delivers one of his many public speeches, he blurs the line between urban master planner and secular evangelist.

The similarities are striking. Both preacher and Peñalosa talk to their flock in community centres, university aula magnas and church basements. Both employ persuasive props – holy books and sermons with the former replaced with stats and Powerpoint presentations with the latter. And they both demand change, now, for both the greater good and personal salvation.

But where the two differ is in the promise of redemption: this isn’t about the afterlife. Peñalosa is focused on improving our lot here on earth, now.

Peñalosa cites architect Frederick Law Olmsted and Ann C. Fenton, a relatively unknown teacher of physical education, as two of his influences.

It was a tense cityscape when Olmsted, the socially conscious, so-called father of American landscape architecture, started on the Central Park blueprints in 1850. While the ideal of democracy figured importantly during the period, the reality was that New Yorkers hated each other: the rich and the poor, the whites and blacks, the immigrants and the locals. They didn’t live in the same neighbourhoods or buildings, didn’t go to the same schools. Since they rarely interacted, mutual suspicion only grew.

Olmsted went against the grain. He saw his park as a physical extension of the egalitarian ideal, an opportunity to create a space both free and equally accessible for all.

Like no other green space in the US at the time, social equality was designed into Central Park: beyond the peaceful labyrinthine pathways at its very core, he carved out The Mall, a 40ft (12m) promenade extending from 66th to 72nd street, lined with shade-giving trees, providing the masses with “the gregarious class of social receptive recreation”.

It was, he wrote, “a place where all classes largely represented, with a common purpose, not at all intellectual, competitive with none, disposing to jealousy and spiritual or intellectual pride toward none, each individual adding by his mere presence to the pleasure of all others, all helping to the greater happiness of each.”

In other words, Central Park – inspired by the public park in Birkenhead, near Liverpool, England – was an extraordinary place to mingle.

Fenton, on the other hand, caught Peñalosa’s eye for quite another reason. A teacher in Orangeville, near his newly adopted home in Ontario, Canada, she was rattled by the fact that fewer and fewer students walked to school.

Sick of the cars, the exhaust fumes, the morning rush and the obesity in the school yard, one morning she singlehandedly shut down her school car park. “She thought some of the parents were going to hit her,” Peñalosa recalls. “They were very upset.”

Yet, the crafty educator greeted everybody with a smile and informed them about five drop-off zones located 500m or more from the school. Yes, the students would have to walk, but she made them understand that decentralisation would be safer and indeed quicker, not to mention healthier for all – parents included.

But what was most impressive and unusual was her witty approach: she had dressed up as a giant pylon to help ease the tension. The students turned out to be excited about the initiative. Within a month, two neighbouring schools engaged a similar walk-to-school programme.

“Let’s not take no for an answer,” says Peñalosa excitedly when prompted about this unsung hero. “It’s about taking leadership. It’s about getting things done.”

Take a look at the demographics lurking behind the population tipping point, and you’ll see that from Abidjan to Zurich, the inequalities and poor social integration among ethnicities and social classes has exploded: we have leapt from global village to overrun megalopolises in a heartbeat.

Despite the radicalised demographics, change has come slowly to urban planning departments. If anything has been sorely missing, it has been strategic design that keeps its eyes on the prize: interconnectivity at a human scale. Cities are for people after all; about three and a half billion or so of them worldwide.

The urban drift has resulted in harsh disparities, particularly in the developing world. Few migrants arrive as equals. Government borrowing of international funds widens the gap as infrastructural upgrades, usually reserved for the wealthy districts and economic corridors, result in less social programming. Stick with the plan and the doors to the so-called perks of modernity – the malls, the theatres, the restaurants, air and seaports – shut to the majority of the population faster than you can whistle “economic apartheid”.

But as Olmsted’s 150-year-old project shows, community works the other way around. It’s a build-it-and-they-will-come solution to the age-old fear of others. Stroll under the penumbra of century-old American elms in Central Park’s “open air hall of reception” towards Bethesda Terrace today and you will see that the simple joy of recreation continues: today, some 35m people of all ethnicities, pocketbooks, shapes and sizes come to have fun. Arguably, Central Park remains the Big Apple’s biggest fruit, an oasis of humanity in a jungle of concrete.

With virtually all population growth over the next 30 years predicted to occur in urban areas, Peñalosa’s point is well taken: we need the Ann Fentons and the Frederick Law Olmsteds.



“We need to have walkable and bikeable cities so people can connect,” Peñalosa says. As commissioner, he put his money where his mouth was - try 280km of separated bike trails in three years. Cycling mobility has increased tenfold in Bogotá, with cycling’s modal share growing from 0.4% to 4.5%

Sitting in a crisp, blue button-down shirt in the 8-80 Cities office, a not-for-profit organisation based in Toronto, Canada, with the mission of contributing to the creation of vibrant, happier and healthier cities and communities, Peñalosa seems miles away from the charged political landscape that he confronted more than a decade ago. Form is function, and his office layout mirrors his style of urban design.

“It’s an open door policy as its best,” beams Mercedes Aquino, one of his staff, about their shared, wall-less, cubicle-free workplace. “He likes to be with his team.”

Animated as always, Peñalosa’s agenda – underscored with gigs in Guayaquil in Ecuador, New York, Copenhagen and Seoul to name but a few (“It’s crazily busy,” confides Aquino) – goes a long

way to expose the fact that he may be the most globally involved person I have ever met.

But despite a frenetic schedule, or perhaps because of it, Peñalosa knows how to be in the present. And today, he does what he does best: drawing a picture of the moment through the experiences of his past.

He talks about his now-famous time as parks and recreation commissioner in Bogotá. For him, the example is both useful and necessary. It shows that with political seriousness and what he calls “guts,” you can get things done. He tells me that every time he goes to any elected official, they always say they don’t have enough funds. But the situation in Colombia’s capital, with one-tenth of Canada’s per capita income, was far worse. “Bogotá,” he says, “was almost hopeless.”

The state of affairs he faced was a classic example of the struggle of modernist planning in the exploding cities of the developing world. The social pressures of the time, including immigration from the rural areas, not to mention the predominance of cocaine cartels and a lingering guerilla war, had resulted in creating an inward-looking, segregated society in many parts of Colombia. Drugs, violence and fear were rampant. People built walls around their homes to box each other out.

Starting in 1995, the energetic planner took a novel approach to the dilemma of social integration in a fear-based society, realising

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(much like Olmsted) that segregation was inherently violent in nature. Seeing diversity as a fantastic opportunity rather than as a problem, he sought to create community in public spaces. People thought he was nuts.

When a \$5bn (€3.5bn) grant for creating a set of elevated motorways came in from the Japanese International Cooperation Agency, he realised that if the highways ever materialised, just about everybody in Bogotá was going to be poor in terms of both public space and air quality. With the clock ticking, he tackled the problem at its root.

“We didn’t even have sidewalks. Build cities around car mobility and you will get more cars,” he says. “But,” he goes on, his voice accelerating, “when you build a city around people, you get a happier, healthier population”.

First in the firing line were the city’s below-par parking practices – drivers were simply leaving their vehicles on the sidewalks, making it difficult if not dangerous to brave these raised barriers on foot. After the enforcement of the law came the fallout: irate shopkeepers and indignant motorists (some 300,000 strong) joined forces, demanding impeachment.

When the dust settled, the pedestrians had won; the cars scuttled back onto the road. In this difficult political moment, Peñalosa reconfirmed at least two important lessons: in today’s cities, we all are car-oppressed, mobility-deprived, public space-poor; and, as he likes to say in his talks, change might not be easy, but “everything is do-able”.

With these two tenets he oversaw the renovation of Bogotá’s urban landscape, creating an astounding five metropolitan parks, 50 zone parks and 800 neighbourhood parks within 36 months.

The largest of these was a centrally-located, 360-hectare green space near the city centre. Aptly named after Latin America’s most enduring revolutionaries, the Simón Bolívar remains the crown in Bogotá’s master plan. Prior to Peñalosa, its claim to fame was a

million-strong mass in 1986 by Pope John Paul II. A decade later, it went from a massive, unkempt field with a small chapel, to a green haven complete with a lake, playgrounds, velodrome, municipal library, aquatic complex and a 140,000-capacity open-air concert venue. If anybody is counting, the Simón Bolívar is 20 hectares (50 acres) bigger than Central Park.

There is no doubt that Peñalosa is passionate about parks, in particular his beloved Simón Bolívar (his three children tease that he gave it so much attention they consider it their fourth sibling), but it is the linear challenges that really get Peñalosa going. Show him a map and his eyes will search for the connections, his finger tracing those rectilinear movements across the page. This is where his planning mind fires into overdrive, conceiving routes, considering the possibilities of linking the dots; the people here with the locations there; the high income with the low income, the children; the parks; the consumers; the merchants; the community.

Under this shifted rubric, it’s the roads that edge forward to embody the public’s greatest asset. The resulting question every urban planner has to answer is: do we use them to warehouse cars or build a community?

With interconnectivity as his philosophy and a don’t-take-no-for-an-answer managerial style, Peñalosa made bold steps to link Bogotá through a network of separated rapid transit ways, launching the Transmilenio bus line. The system now serves 1.4m passengers a day.

No matter how great the programme, however, the truth is mass public transport will never take you door to door. That is where cycling gets its cue.

“We need to have walkable and bikeable cities so people can connect,” Peñalosa says. As commissioner, he put his money where his mouth was. His team vaulted cycling into a new sphere with

special bike parking throughout the Transmilenio route. They added 280km of separated bike-specific trails within three years. Each was scrutinised and designed with the “8-80 Rule”: they must be safe for everybody from eight to 80 years old. Not surprisingly, cycling mobility has increased tenfold in Bogotá, with cycling’s modal share growing from 0.4% to 4.5% of total transport.

As part of this newly embraced mass mobility came the renaissance of the Ciclovía, the car-free bikeway. During his tenure he lured it away from a reticent department of transport (“they were only interested in cars,” he recalls) that had administered it until then. Under his watch, the innovation grew from 10km to more than 100km of interconnected streets set aside for non-motorised recreation throughout the Colombian capital every Sunday and holiday of the year. It’s like a giant paved park, and it comes with the bonus that there are no additional capital investments. “All that is required,” he says, “is operational costs and political will.”

Opposition was strong. His detractors questioned that while there are so many in need of education and health, why was he investing so much in public spaces? His reply: “the status quo isn’t an option.” For healthy cities to exist, there must be vigorous alternatives. “When the poor people feel most miserable is during their leisure time,” he says. In pre-Peñalosa Bogotá, they simply had nowhere to go. The Ciclovías and parks changed everything.

The experiment has revolutionised civil culture in the Colombian capital. Every Sunday and holiday of the year, the Ciclovías burst with people looking for common enjoyment. At night, when most used to lock themselves into their fortified homes, they now ride their bikes on the city’s lively and well-lit Ciclorutas, where they can socialise with others.

Sure, the wealthy motorists complained, especially when confronted with the addition of an add-insult-to-injury initiative: a once-a-year car-free Thursday in early February, not just in the Ciclovías, but throughout the entire city.

“More than anything it’s an educational process,” Peñalosa says of trying to convert a city of nearly 1.5m motor vehicles to one without cars.

“You get into people’s homes, into people’s offices...and everyone starts talking about the role of the car.” The car-free idea led to the ultimate showdown: a city referendum. And drama be damned, when the votes had been counted it wasn’t even close: the car-free bill passed with an overwhelming majority.

The legacy lives on and the statistics support it. On last year’s car-free day, the Colombian newspaper *El Tiempo* reported a 45% reduction in carbon monoxide. “A civilised city isn’t one that’s full of auto routes, but rather a place where a child can ride his or her tricycle safely,” says Peñalosa.

Even the motorists have changed their minds: every Ciclovía Sunday, more than 1.3m capitalinos of all types come out and enjoy Bogotá’s streets on foot, on their bikes. And yes, that’s more than turned up to see the Pope.

With a gleam in his eye, Peñalosa shows me *El Porvenir* (Spanish for “the future”). This is Bogotá’s newest development, a 34km-long space set aside for development. Much of it has yet to see any buildings. That is intentional. Before the homes, the commercial buildings and the schools went in, bike lanes and sidewalks came first. The streets in many places remain unmade. “You have to be coherent with what you think, what you say, and what you do,” he says with a wink.

In the Colombian capital, street culture has caught on: cycling and walking have combined with dancing, in-line skating, yoga and other health activities. The power of change has been so great that Bogotá recently set a world record when 37,000 people joined an open-air aerobics class.

But resonating long past the numbers and fanfare is a reality, greater than the sum of the demographics and a good deal more impressive than 25 of the city’s aerobics instructors on stage in skintight gym wear. The city now has the distinction of having the largest and longest-running Ciclovía in the world and is the most cycleable capital in Latin America. Its homicide rate has plummeted to a quarter of what it was at its peak and GDP is rising.

The people have taken note. The locals wanted more. They voted Peñalosa’s brother Enrique as mayor in 1997, and he’s up for reelection this November. On a global level, many outsiders look to Bogotá as an example.

The World Health Organisation jumped on the Ciclovía bandwagon, making car-free zones the theme for their last year’s 1,000 Cities, 1,000 Lives World Health Day; they broke all expectations when more than 1,500 urban areas participated.

The list of the converted goes on. Just take a look at Peñalosa’s Rolodex of clients, a who’s who of the planet’s most decisive city planners. Why do Seoul, Vancouver and New York need this man? Scratch the surface of what he’s saying and it all comes down to the all-important concept of quality of life.

Peñalosa explains the philosophic trump card behind improved city streets: “Quality of life is by far the most important factor of economic competitiveness.”

Cities around the world are competing against each other on how to keep their residents. “A good community needs more than engineering,” he says. “It’s more about people.”

There is a new generation of urban planners busy at work across the world’s cities, refocused on bettering their local quality of life. The race is on: here you will see the improvements hidden among the streets and designed into the urban landscape.

Examine the separated bike lanes, expanding sidewalks, improved transport systems and public spaces, the growing plazas, snowballing bike-share programmes, car-free initiatives and dedicated bike routes throughout the world: democracy in design is becoming clearly apparent.

Look a little closer at these increasingly people-friendly environments. You will see Gil Peñalosa’s fingerprints everywhere. ■