The oasis: a story of displacement and resistance

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Abstract
This text describes the result of a participatory project I carried out in July 2015, in Moravia, a neighborhood located in Medellin, Colombia. The contemporary art center 'Fundación Casa 3 Patios' and the Colombian Ministry of Culture aided the initiative; the former is an organization that researches pedagogy with social impact, alternative art, participatory town planning, architecture and curatorship.
The project's main purpose was to experiment with creative activities that could bring forth consequences of accountability in the community; consequently, the practice-based research started with a collective exploration of the neighborhood from the perspective of emotional cartographies and ephemeral urban interventions, which entailed understanding Moravia's territory as the display of a web of human interactions that was interpreted from a psychogeographical perspective, that is to say, as the manifestation of desires, fears, impulses, conflicts, etc.
This project is part of a long-term practice-led research that investigates how artistic, design and humanistic appropriations of public space can inspire collective agency and positive transformations in neglected scenarios. In these situations the ephemeral interventions represent a pretext for activating a given social dynamic, rather than being the main goal of the research.

Keywords: Colombia, Social Cartographies, Mapping, Civic Agency, Participatory Art..

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Introduction

Johan has been living in the same place for 23 years, his whole life as he points out. Moravia, a neighborhood that grew on top of an open dump during the 80's, is two kilometers away from the center of Medellin, Colombia's second largest city. Johan remembers being sent home early from school as a child due to violent clashes—territorial disputes, mostly—between several armed groups in the area. He also remembers also how *La Calle Central/Central Street,* today a busy avenue full of commerce, was a place that resembled a little village with unpaved roads and lined by narrow alleys. Nowadays Moravia is one of the most populated settlements in the country (Arango, 2006), and is comparable, density-wise, with the Brazilian favelas and some Chinese urban slums (Baracaldo, 2014). According to the last census, in 2004, the neighborhood had 42,000 inhabitants in its area of 42 hectares. Put another way, that is a density of 1000 inhabitants per hectare and an average of 5 families per house. The whole locality has been intervened several times on an official basis, giving it its current distinctive look of narrow streets and pathways that result in a labyrinth-like citadel, packed with houses of slim vertical facades of 2-4 floors, a proportion that gives them the impression of being taller.
Back in the 50's this whole region was still a large and beautiful meadow crossed by the Medellin River; a popular place where *Paisas* (the name given to originals from Antioquia, the department where Medellin is located) used to have their Sunday strolls and picnics.

In 1956 the first scattered houses were built, signaling the beginning of Moravia (Baracaldo, 2014). Most of these grounds were property of wealthy families who abandoned them when the first waves of forced migration, a result of the country's violence, hit the city. Affluent families moved further south, to the present-day *El Poblado* neighborhood, a place that has defined upper class Medellin to this day.

The city started growing to the south and in the late 70's the town hall zoned Moravia as one of the city's main dumpsters. In1977 the sector began to cluster together the waste of Medellin and its surrounding 10 villages in the Aburrá Valley (Montoya et al., 2011). Garbage disposal was so massive that it ended up creating a huge hill and by 1984 the open dump was already saturated, forcing Medellin's administration to replace it for another area in the city outskirts.

What was left of the open dump was gradually occupied by thousands of victims of the country's political violence. The refugees were looking for any solid area on the fetid hill, across the compacted trash, to build temporary hovels on the banks of the Medellin River. Instead of a huge pile of rotting rubbish they saw the opportunity for a better life, a life improved by easy access to their city neighbors' leftovers: food, clothes, debris, scrap and so forth.

In less than a decade the hill grew to have 4.265 families who survived mostly as recyclers or as toilers in the neighborhood's informal economy (Baracaldo, 2014). During the 80's the urban guerrilla M-19 and the surge of drug trafficking ended up having a significant effect on poor areas in Medellin. Moravia, given its strategic position, was not an exception. Right in the middle of the neighborhood is located a synthetic-grass football field, perhaps the only open area of such dimensions in the vicinity. In the mid 80's, the drug lord Pablo Escobar Gaviria started rallying a political campaign for Colombian congress. As part of his strategy, Escobar transformed Moravia's stark football turf into what is allegedly the first artificial-grass field in the country, alongside fencing and professional lighting equipment. Escobar also facilitated the construction of Moravia's sewer system and developed a housing plan as part of his electioneering program *Medellín sin Tugurios/Medellin without Slums.*

Since the late 80's there have been several partial official attempts to relocate the families living in *El Morro*, the local name for the garbage hill, but it wasn't until 2005 that the city government managed to relocate families who were situated in high-risk areas, thanks to housing subsidies and the necessary logistic and legal support that allowed them to move to apartment buildings. Families were moved, mainly to Medellin's periphery. As recently as 2014 there were still 140 families remaining in *El Morro* (Baracaldo, 2014). The initiative to move families from Moravia was entitled *Programa de Intervención Integral/Integral Intervention Program,* and was carried out from 2004 to 2008, comprising not just Moravia but the surrounding areas. One of its biggest successes was the creation of the neighborhood's cultural and artistic center, designed by one of the most prominent Colombian architect: Rogelio Salmona. The center was opened in 2008 and it meaningfully changed the area's cultural panorama.

Johan remembers the drastic changes the barrio underwent due to the cultural and architectonic intervention. Johan explains, "everything calmed down when I was a teenager and it has remained like that ever since, […] because I was so young I didn't think about it; I was simply happy of being able of walk around without worrying".

The former dumpster had become an example of urban renewal and the *Centro de Desarrollo Cultural de Moravia/ Cultural Development Center Moravia (CDCM)* was a significant catalyst of the change. The center hosts for free a diverse array of educational programs related to dance, music, visual arts, cinema, etc., and serves also as a gallery and stage for the community's creative ventures.

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Johan has strong ties to the cultural center; he spends a lot of time there rehearsing guitar and many of his friends are involved in different creative projects as well. Isaac, one of his best friends, was relocated during the intervention when he was a teenager; he and his family were transferred to Robledo, a district located in the northwest of the city. Isaac's connections to Moravia are so strong that he doesn't hesitate to assert that he "lives in Moravia but sleeps in Robledo." During the last few years he has been working at the CDCM as a teacher in a project about environmental culture for schools in Moravia and the surrounding neighborhoods, the rest of his time he is "writing lyrics or thinking about music".

Bulla Lab: an ephemeral intervention
After decades of drug-related violence and civil strife, Medellin has been experiencing recently a visible upturn and, in the last few years, the city has been boasting a special commitment to education and innovation, alongside a relative economical stability and a subsequent wave of construction in several neighborhoods, particularly in the south end of town. A significant part of this transformation is due to the emergence of official sites devoted to culture, such as the CDCM and a cluster of museums in the historic quarter, but also because of newer newer independent places like *Fundación Casa 3 Patios (C3P)*: a contemporary art center that researches about pedagogy with social impact, alternative art, participatory town planning, architecture and curatorship, as well as several other subjects. The Foundation has residence programs offered to creative practitioners who want to develop projects related to the organization's interests.

As part of C3P's residence program and aided by the Colombian Ministry of Culture, I was selected in July 2015 by the Foundation to carry out an artistic research My project consisted of exploring the city from the perspective of emotional cartographies and ephemeral urban interventions. The concept entailed understanding a given urban territory as a manifestation of a web of human interactions, which can be interpreted from a psychogeographical perspective, that is to say, as the manifestation of desires, fears, impulses, conflicts, etc.

The practice-based part of the research was carried out in Moravia's cultural center and it started with an open call for residents to participate in a three weeks 'Urban Acupuncture Lab', dedicated to mapping and visualizing the neighborhood from a perspective of fear and hostility in public space, in order to identify those spots that could be intervened with a notch of participatory acupuncture. The lab had an average attendance of 20 participants, the most of them residents of Moravia, with Isaac and Johan as some of its most active members.

The experimentation was intended to start with collective drifts to gather data in the neighborhood, using a digital application to point out places that were marked by fear and discomfort through GPS entries added by the lab's participants. The idea was to create a collective visualization in the cultural center, made from the data collected on individual and group drifts in Moravia's streets. The CDCM has a studio equipped with three computers and good Internet access; therefore the strategy adopted involved using instead an analogical 'Drift Collector Data Kit' which consisted of a few graphic pieces and simple tools: an infographic manual with easy instructions to follow (*Figure 1*), two copies of the neighborhood's map (one for discomfort and another for fear), a small notepad and a dice to randomize the drifts according to a system of rules (*Figure 2*), proposed to prevent everyone from going directly to the neighborhood hot spots. I decided to use this analogical tool for gathering data since just 3 of the 20 participants had smart phones and none of them had a data plan that allowed the use of the digital application I have used in other circumstances.
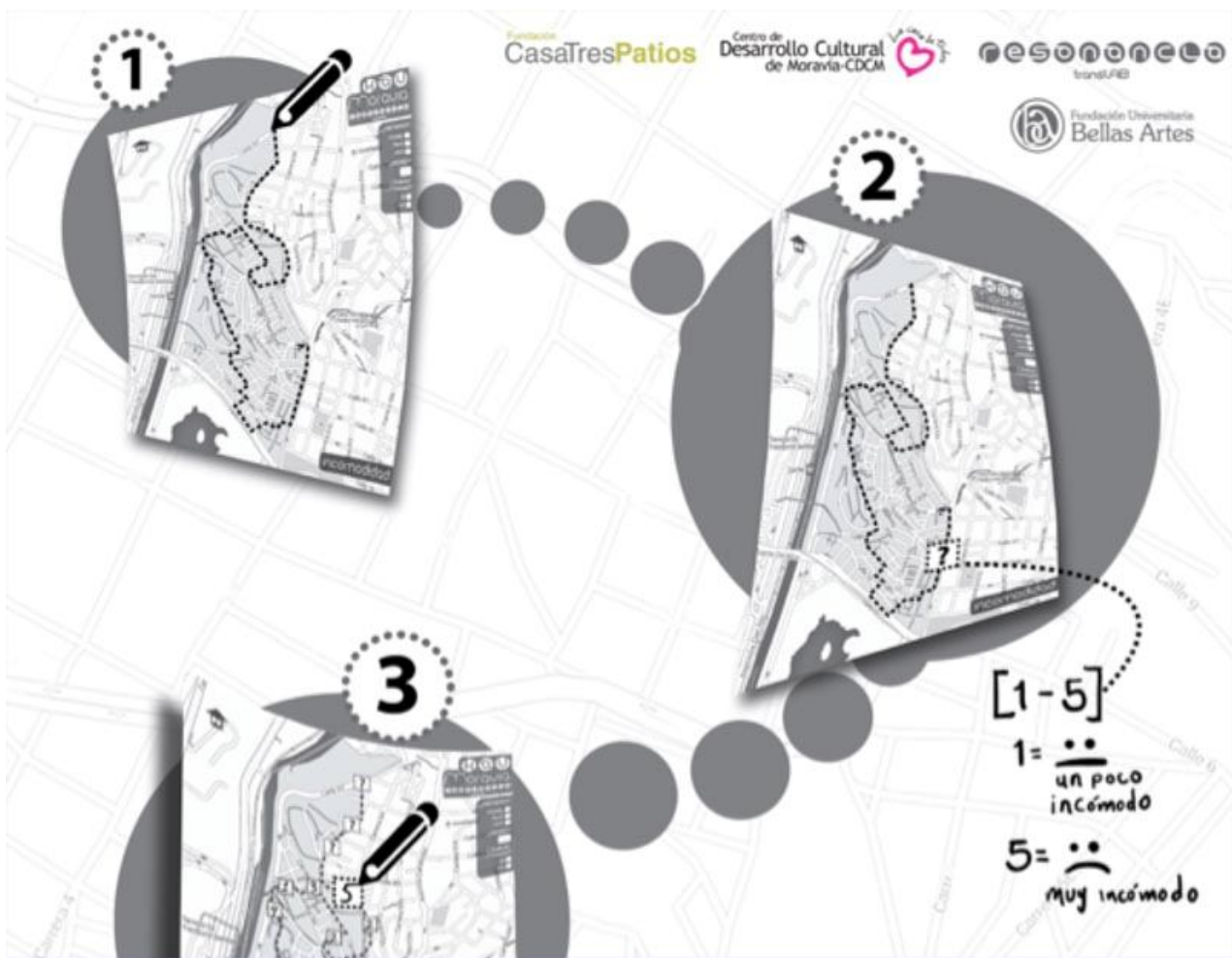
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Figure 1. Infographic piece with general instructions, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

Figure 2. Infographic piece: instructions for using the dice, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

Figure 3. Moravia's map: format for mapping discomfort, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

The information to be gathered required walking alone and in groups of 4 participants for a period of two hours in each session. The whole group ended up carrying out 6 walks using the cartograms, writing down in our formats those places in the neighborhood where each participant felt uncomfortable or unsafe, for any reason, using a scale of 1 to 5 to indicate the intensity of the discomfort, where 1 implied being slightly uncomfortable and 5 extremely uncomfortable. Each shared journey ended with an assembly where all the participants discussed their interpretations and uploaded the information to a database using the computers at the cultural center. To accomplish this I gave a series of short lessons to show how to set the entries collected in each format to an online database.

The web interface used to upload the info was based on the Google Maps JavaScript API (https://developers.google.com/maps/documentation/javascript/) accessed through a web browser. The custom-built web app was restricted to the limits of Moravia, and allowed locating the points in a map with its corresponding levels and additional info, using the API's *place data* feature. The API tags each entry automatically with its GPS coordinate in order to export the information to KML format (Keyhole Markup Language), a notation system for expressing geographic information in two-dimensional maps.

A spontaneous result of the process of working at the Cultural Center's studio was the formation of a parallel sound experimentation lab that initially was regarded as a 'Jam Lab', but since the group agreed that the word *jam* was somehow exclusionary and 'fancy' to those who didn't have music

foundations, the collective decided to rename the initiative as 'Bulla Lab'. In Colombia the word *'bulla'* refers to a happy riot or a festive fuss; in accordance with that simple idea the 'Bulla Lab' was a space used to experiment with sound in a series of participatory sessions where participants could play with electroacoustic possibilities to improvise and compose music while waiting for her/his turn to upload the info to the database.

The cartographic visualization representing discomfort (*Figure 4*) in the neighborhood marked in red a single area, which meant that this spot was rated with a discomfort level of 5 by the most of the participants who walked around that part of Moravia. As I hadn't visited that area myself we organized a group excursion to this spot. The area was known as 'El Oasis': a piece of sloping land of about 3 hectares, right next to the Medellin River. 'El Oasis' has quite a significant inclination and it suffered a fire in March of 2007 that burnt down 200 houses ("Incendio destruyó 200 viviendas," 2007). The area had remained vacant for years until it was occupied only a few weeks before the project began by a group of people who sought a dignified solution to their housing conditions. Among the settlers there are a large number of victims who had been forcibly displaced by diverse armed groups and who had had several confrontations with the police shortly after they secured their settlement in the hillside. It was easy to understand why this part of Moravia was marked by discomfort, and furthermore that this was the particular place that deserved a notch of urban acupuncture, namely, an ephemeral participatory intervention with its residents.

Figure 4. Collective visualization of discomfort, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015.

Moravia, the outstanding example that has served to show off Medellin's urban renewal and social transformation through culture, perfectly illustrated the wheel of history and the social tragedy in Colombia, with this occupation that resembled the sheer origins of Moravia itself.

Figure 5. El Oasis, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015
Figure 6. El Oasis, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

After a few visits to El Oasis the Bulla Lab members began working with its residents. Wilder, one of the community leaders in the hillside had been painting by hand a large number of posters and signs using sheets and pieces of cardboard. The signs attempted to point out how he and his occupation allies had been displaced repeatedly by different actors in Colombia's multi-sided war and how now, after their endless departure, they were going to be once again displaced. This time, though, they would be moved by the state, represented by the riot police team, always present during daylight hours.

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Figure 7. El Oasis, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

The Bulla Lab group organized a two-week workshop for the kids in El Oasis, a fluctuating group of children between 4 and 12 years approximately, who waited eagerly for the Lab members to show up everyday at 4 pm. That so many members of the hillside community were musically driven impressed me. It was due to this apparent musical drive that our exploration ended up consisting of producing simple instruments from recycled objects provided by the 'El Oasis' community, in order to discover collectively their possibilities. Afterwards the assemblage was able to interpret some Caribbean folklore songs the children knew from memory. Simultaneously the Lab started facilitating the logistics for the adults to paint some more posters. This small experience was entitled 'Bulla in Oasis.'

Figure 8. El Oasis, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

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Everyday, around 6 pm, the Bulla Lab got back from El Oasis to the CDCM where a simple recording studio was set up to rehearse some of the songs that started to take shape in of the common rehearsals where the residents played. Since the studio performances where intermingled with discussions about previous situations, some of the tracks contain neighborhood anecdotes and stories about the Bulla Lab itself.

Figure 9. El Oasis, Moravia, Medellín, Colombia, 2015

The outcome of the Bulla Lab was a series of 'Bulla Sessions' that features the *'Colectivo Pura Bulla'* -which started during these few weeks and is made up by: 'Incognito Isaac', Johan Gutiérrez, Jorge Londoño, Clotilde Penet, Karen Correa, Alejandro Araque and Ivan Chaparro.

Figure 10. Centro de Desarrollo Cultural de Moravia, Medellín, Colombia.

Figure 11. Centro de Desarrollo Cultural de Moravia, Medellín, Colombia.

Please take a look at the work carried out in Moravia in the following gallery:
https://www.flickr.com/photos/resoundcity/sets/72157656315395399

And listen to the songs here:
https://soundcloud.com/resoundcity/sets/colectivo-pura-bulla

After this short three-week intervention, the lab finished with a photographic exhibition in the main alley of El Oasis. The exhibition consisted of the best images captured by C3P intern Karen Correa and French journalist Clotilde Penet, who also sang in some of the bulla sessions. Finally, the Bulla Lab team organized a workshop in which the neighborhood kids created a small, open urban museum on their neighbors' walls.

Conclusions

The project's main purpose was to put into practice creative activities that could cause consequences of accountability in Moravia's community. The research, in the long run, intends to prove how diverse appropriations of public space can inspire collective agency and positive transformations of neglected scenarios by implementing design and artistic methodologies. The resulting ephemeral interventions, rather than being the main goal of the research, represent an excuse for activating a given social dynamic.

In this particular project, my role as a designer, artist and researcher was as facilitator and producer for a larger group of participants; my main task was to involve my skills and expertise to carry out a short venture in which the two main strengths resided in the ability to keep the participants motivated and the faculty of being flexible and adaptable. These two attributes were interconnected since, at first, I thought I was going to carry out a project related to urban data visualization and prototype making, but the circumstances demanded that I adjusted several times my intentions and assumptions in order to do what was pertinent to the community above all. Eventually, and without noticing, music became a central part of the project, which fortunately is one of the activities I have been carrying out since my early childhood; nevertheless, during the process I had to learn several different tools for recording live performances and music production in digital audio workstations, alongside how to make hip-hop, a genre I never found particularly interesting before. This flexibility of learning on the road what was relevant to them represented that I had a motivated crew, which supported further implementations that eventually became pertinent to their own surroundings.

A common query in this kind of projects concerns how to identify practical solutions to real time problems, which implies reconsidering constantly the boundaries between disciplines and professional identities. Within the Bulla Lab, the creative and practical response to such division of labour was approached by facilitating hybrid practices, that is, integrations of knowledge and modi operandi where several skill sets, technological appropriations and extra-disciplinary possibilities contribute to a constructive approximation to the context. Consequently, in this case, the concept of political agency refers to a diverse range of activities that can support the community's ongoing processes by aiding their communication, decision-making and visualization of particular problems, in order to provoke collective action and participatory interventions in their own vicinity; these wide set of tools, activities and disciplines can include pedagogy, activism, research, design and the arts, among many others, focusing on the connection between creativity and social change.

Sadly, a couple of months after the Bulla Lab finished, on Wednesday November 18, in the middle of the night, Medellin's riot police team stormed El Oasis to vacate several of the 117 families settled there. Among those affected by the operation and direct confrontation with the police there were children, pregnant women and elderly, who presented injuries from inhaling tear gas and beatings. 38 homes were evacuated that day ("Desalojo de 38 familias en El Oasis terminó con enfrentamientos," 2015).

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It is a fact that after these families are displaced within the same city, they suffer a sharp increase in their costs of living, get forced to change their jobs abruptly and experience a rupture of the social fabric that had been built, which generates serious psychological effects because of becoming displaced once again, this time by institutional actors. At the moment I am producing a documentary with the testimony of 8 from the 38 families evicted, to follow up their life stories and document their situation, as to find feasible initiatives to dignify somehow their living conditions.

The approximately 80 families who still remain in the Oasis, plus the 38 who were evicted that day share a similar condition: all have suffered directly the consequences of the Colombian conflict; their displacement situations are the result of a structural problem that has many actors and which has as one of its main roots the social inequality and lack of opportunities that afflicts the country.

All of them also share another attribute; they all have a similar daily struggle, whose true value lies in these seemingly small ways of organizing their everyday lives so they can survive these turbulent times without losing dignity.

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