

Becoming Bogotá:

Urban Analysis through Narrative Inhabitation

Matthew Cook

I have several names: La Soledad, Teusaquillo, Home. Depending on whom you ask, my boundaries shift and vary, but I know who I am. A lot goes on inside my limits. I am large; I, as they say, contain multitudes. At my heart is Parkway, it runs through me, gives me a structure and a centre. It's an important place. It's where all the life of the area pumps through. Eating, drinking, buying, sitting, watching, playing, walking, this is where it is all happening.

(excerpt from the monologue 'District')

This urban analysis, carried out within the framework of a master graduation studio at Delft University of Technology, focuses on an urban neighbourhood of Bogotá, Colombia. The city is a place of rapid urbanization,

inequality and development, a frontier between the global south and the global north that once colonized it. These tensions make it a prime location to investigate the wider interest of the studio, 'Constructing the Commons', the understanding of the city as a precious resource in itself, which can be used and shared in the population's evolution.

Arriving on site in the barrio of La Soledad, a well-functioning, pleasant residential neighbourhood, I noticed locations of intense social activity, places that had been appropriated and transformed. In an attempt to analyse the relationship between these spaces and the social practices of everyday life taking place within them, I decided to employ site writing as a mode of investigation. I began to 'inhabit' urban elements, writing monologues from their personified point of view of their experience of the city.

I developed *Narrative Inhabitation* as a practice of personifying the city, giving it a voice that describes the life happening within it. My method of inhabitation involved writing about the everyday life of Bogotá, in the form of a series of monologues told by architectural elements of the city itself. To sort the elements, I had used Kevin Lynch's classifications of the path, edge, district, node and landmark.¹ I reversed his analysis, developed in *The Image of the City*, from studying people's perception of the city, to the city's perception of its people. I combined this with Jane Rendell's site writing, a mode of investigation that combines objective and subjective critique and a simultaneous investigation of the intimate and the distant.²

Writing the city from the point of view of a bridge, wall, statue, park and the wider district helped me to deal with the complexity of what I was describing in a single coherent form. It gave me a way to investigate daily practices I had witnessed or been told about, things that could potentially happen or had ceased to occur. The elements were a series of locations that had grabbed my attention upon my arrival in the city, places of heightened social encounter where the elements' uses had been transformed and their space appropriated.

What follows are abridged extracts from two of the monologues, featuring the elements of the path and landmark. Through these texts Narrative

Inhabitation communicates a sense of Bogotá, demonstrating its everyday spatial practices.

The Bridge

It's a strange group that I live with. The six of us, all here, in the same place, but all leading very different existences. We all have different routines, and have different motivations, but basically, we are all the same, getting the job done. We all carry people from one place to another; it's as simple as that. You won't find a more interesting group of people than the ones I carry though. They must be the smartest collection of people in the country. They know everything apart from one crucial thing, though: what they will do with their lives, what they will turn into. I don't get many celebrities, politicians or famous people crossing. But mark my words, if you follow the people crossing right now, for the next 20 years, you are going to get to some pretty cool places. I'm certain of it.

I'm not saying the others don't have interesting people travelling along them. Look who I'm crossing over, the road down there. Almost every person in the entire city has to go through it. It knows everyone, as long as they can afford a car. From the bin men to the taxi drivers, to probably the mayor himself. They all know it.

That route next to the road, the parallel partner, it knows everyone too, but in more of a working-class hero kind of way. The route knows the street traders, the 9-5ers, the ones with two jobs, three kids and a leaking roof. They come from miles away, roaring through, crammed in, getting to know each other in silence, riding the bumps and holding tight for the corners. They don't call those two the spine of the city for nothing; everyone needs those two.

I feel a bit sorry for the bridge next to me, crossing that lot below. It's like the road, knows loads of people too, all the drivers, in their cars, vans and taxis. They don't care about the bridge, though; they just use it to get to the roads below. Just a stepping stone to something else.

My favourite two are that pair down there, although maybe don't mention that to the others. That duo take the cyclists and the pedestrians. They are quieter

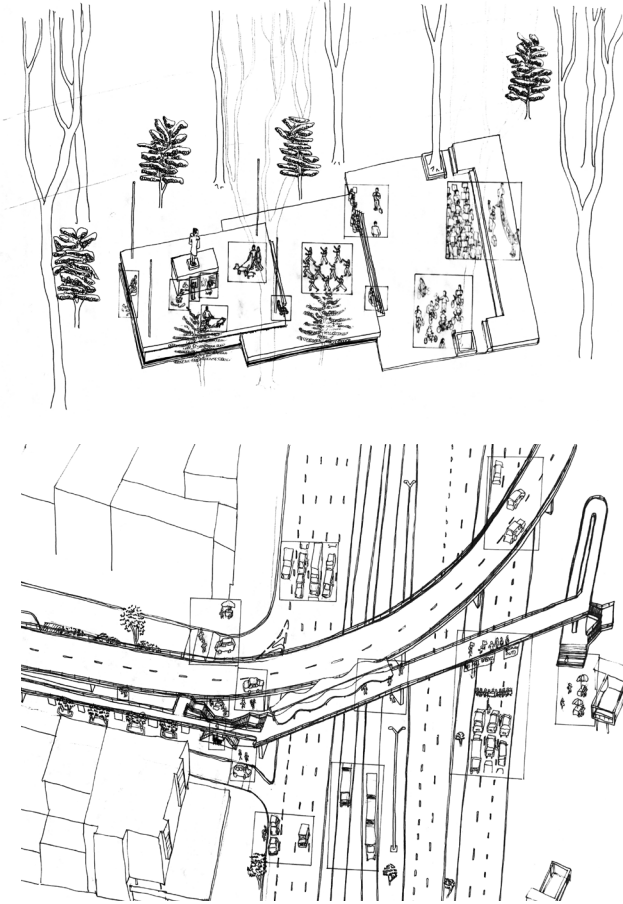


Fig. 1+2. Drawings by the author, Matthew Cook

about it and don't know as many people as the others, but that's where all the interesting stuff happens. People come from all over the city just to place themselves next to those two. Close to the people walking and cycling by, with the chance to interact, to distract them for a moment, to swap their money for food, drinks, goods, services. It's the place to be if you want to see or be seen. I'm kind of part of it too actually, slightly on the periphery, but crucial; at least I like to think so. They use me as a sheltered spot, a place to build a permanent shop, a bit of shade, a location to meet at, to sit and eat a meal.

The Landmark

I am Admiral Jose Prudencio Padilla Lopez, leader of the Colombian fleet, liberator of Santa Marta and Cartagena, scourge of the Spanish admiralty. I am the protector of Teusaquillo in this city of Bogotá.

I stand guard here, made from brick and brass, watching over the citizenry. I stand here tall above the parkland, the rolling waves of wind passing through the trees about me. The light shimmers through the foliage as though on the water's surface. I feel the rain on my face and am reminded of the spray from the Caribbean Sea.

Much life occurs in this park, for it belongs to all men, not just the wealthy aristocrats and merchants. As the sun climbs the local inhabitants will walk with their great hounds. They approach me, climbing my stairs, they walk around my feet, and then return. Occasionally a foul beast will take relief against me. I am enraged by this impertinence. If this was one of my men I would have the hound shot and the owner keelhauled for this indignity. When the sun reaches its zenith I am accompanied by a host of different characters. I believe they are local merchants. They sit by my feet to consume their midday meal. As my watch draws on and the sun sets, groups will appear beneath me. Sometimes they speak of topics important to the nation, standing with signs and making a great clamour. Sometimes they whisper revolutionary thoughts and I glower at their treacherous speeches.

As my night watch proceeds the miscreants emerge from their hovels. They

drink noxious juices on my steps, and allow themselves into a state of drunkenness and disorder that would see them locked up on a ship of mine.

Not so many moons ago a figure approached me in the darkness. It was a girl whom I had seen sitting at my feet at noon. I was shocked that such a girl would dare come out at this dark hour, especially without a chaperone. To my horror she began to smear posters onto my plinth. I could not read these posters but I know them to be sedition. I stood there, in humiliation, for days, until a young man tore the paper from me. I had previously thought the boy a scoundrel having seen him making crude remarks to the ladies on their afternoon promenades. I now suspect these women to be part of a radical female infiltration by the Spanish and the boy to be a good patriot.

There is only so much one man, one statue, can do to keep a city safe. It is up to the living men of this area to keep it secure from infiltration and to ensure the great nation of Colombia lives long as the jewel of the Americas. As God is my witness I will do all I can, and together, bricks and mortar, flesh and blood, we shall succeed in maintaining the security of the city and of this nation.

Conclusions

Narrative Inhabitation has been key to my analysis of Bogotá. It helped me overcome the constraints of limited time and local unfamiliarity to give a deep analysis of the elements, encompassing their history, their changing relevance and their daily rhythms.

Inhabiting the elements with site writing helped produce a breadth of analysis as I inhabited the city, forcing me to think empathetically and go beyond my own subjective experience. It also stopped me from presenting a universal experience of Bogotá, recognizing the multitude of views that belong to different people. By writing the city I have been able to investigate the emotions and personal motivations that Bogotá's elements provoke, the semi-fiction of the monologues giving me space to imagine and suppose whilst still creating a sense of place, accurate and useful for understanding the city's operation.

- 1 Kevin Lynch, *The Image of the City* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1960), 204.
- 2 Jane Rendell, 'Site-Writing', in Jane Rendell et al. (eds.), *Critical Architecture* (Oxford: Routledge, 2007), 150-162