



The Parque Biblioteca España overlooks the Santo Domingo Salvio barrio of Medellín.

Medellín's

Extravagant Option

The promise of an improbable gift

Michelle Clifton-Soderstrom

My country is the world," wrote Thomas Paine. Growing up in the Midwest during the 1980s, I misinterpreted this protean phrase and reversed the order grounding its meaning. In short, I thought that the United States was the center of the world. I lived in the best place on earth. It was clean, wholesome, and beautiful. Most important, it was powerful, and I felt safe.

When I compared my home to those of my neighbors to the south, I took refuge in the idea of living safely in the center. The evening news taught me to understand places in Latin America through the lenses of "savagery,"

"communism," "kidnapping," "guerillas," "armed conflict," and "drug cartels." In particular, these images and headlines shaped my imagination of El Salvador, Guatemala, and Colombia. I remember thanking God that Latin America was so far away—relieved that nothing could threaten the sanctuary of my country for which my TV screen made me grateful.

My ability to imagine life in Latin America was not formed by the Christian story. It was shaped by network news and parochial mythology. I believed that we needed to crack

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down, set embargos, and strengthen our military presence in violent areas. I believed that the best way to bring about peace was to send in the troops. And if that didn't work, we could just ignore those foreign places—after all, my country was the world, and I could afford such luxury.

Last March, I received a call from Hauna Ondrey, one of my students, who is teaching for the Covenant seminary in Colombia (through the Pacto Evangélico de Colombia). I serve as Hauna's field education supervisor, and she asked if I would consider a site visit. Unbidden, the images of my TV screen came rushing into my head: "communism," "kidnapping," "guerrillas," "armed conflict," and "drug cartels."

I am an adventurous adult now though, and truth be told, I enjoy traveling to new places. Moreover, my eagerness to observe Hauna helped shift my reaction from fear to enthusiasm. I brought the idea to my dean and my field education colleague, who shared my enthusiasm about the trip.

They turned out to be exceptions, however. When I told others of my plan, I heard, "You're traveling to Colombia? Isn't that really dangerous? Isn't Colombia on the U.S. watch list? You know, there are a lot of kidnappings there." And, most commonly, I heard the joke, "Don't get arrested bringing back drugs!"

I found myself becoming a little uneasy again. What kept me motivated was Hauna. She, after all, had been living there alone for the better part of the year. She had lived in Bogota and travelled to Medellín, Cartagena, and Barranquilla. She was teaching church history, Bible courses, and Greek—in Spanish! I had to go, if

for no other reason than to support the courageous internship of my student.

I turned off my TV images and left for Colombia wearing my "how is God working here?" lenses. As expected,

Hauna's teaching was engaging. Students were interacting with the textbook of Cuban-American historian Justo González. Hauna heard their questions, and guided their conversations about ministry and church history. God was at work.

Where else was God working? We ventured to Medellín. I sought again, though with greater ease now, to curb the images in my head. I gladly replaced them with visions of teaching, community development, empowering women, hospitality, and Christian formation. As I observed Covenant missionaries Gary and Mary Lou Sander, Holly Meyer, and Sam and Cassie Posladek, I saw the selfless risks each had taken to answer God's call to solidarity with Christians in Colombia—Christians who were, after all, just as much our brothers and sisters as those in our North American communities. I recognized courage in each missionary, and I thought that many ought to find inspiration in their use of priestly gifts for the whole church. God was indeed at work.

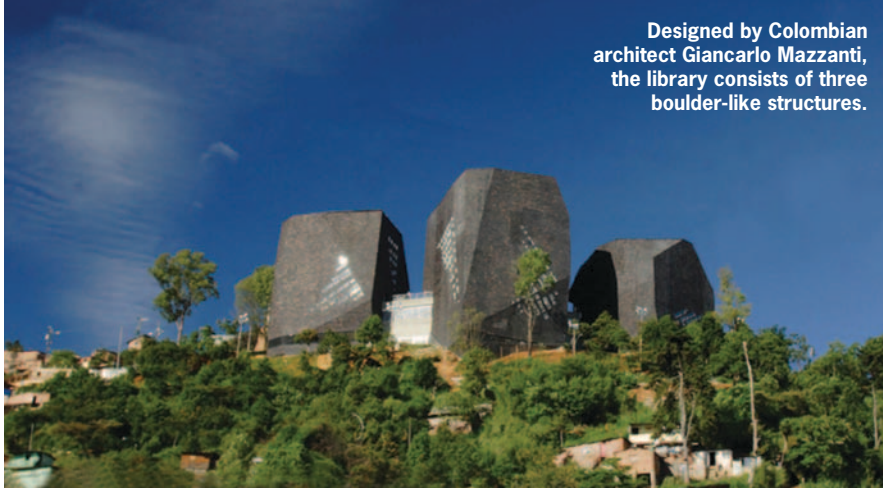
Before coming to Colombia, I had been particularly beset with warnings about Medellín. Despite popular opinion at home, however, I was hopeful. Medellín is a city with theological history—the place where Latin American Catholic bishops gathered together in 1968 to confront oppression and to craft a renewed vision for what it means to be Christ in the world. Amidst revolutionary fighting

and upheaval, they exposed violence in Latin America, and in an arresting cry for peace, they named poverty as the root cause.

The term "preferential option for the poor" was coined by those Latin American bishops. Although it has a rocky history, it is arguably the most influential theme that has challenged Christian ethics in the last fifty years. In short, preferential option for the poor is a shift from understanding charity as simply giving alms, to the idea that charity means advocating for the full participation of all persons. One of the first initiatives was the formation of ecclesial "base communities" for laypeople to come together in small groups to read Scripture. Beyond that, the bishops promoted the political voice of marginalized persons, the empowerment of disadvantaged groups, and the prevention of poverty. Using the lens of the Christian narrative, the Latin American bishops saw the poor as especially blessed by God, and they called the church to be in solidarity with them.

In Medellín I unexpectedly found public witness to this concept. It happened on the train. As we boarded the cleanest public transportation system I had ever ridden, I learned that the Medellín Metro was built specifically to safely transport the working classes. The train transected the city, serving Medellín's marginalized neighborhoods. Noticeably, the Metro had the additional function of revealing the whole city to its passengers.

As Hauna and I transferred from the train to the gondola that would take us up to a national park, I looked up the hill. Abject poverty filled my vision. The barrios, as they are called, are the poorest areas of the city. Run-down homes stacked on top of each other littered the hill. Many had plastic roofs (if any), laundry was



Designed by Colombian architect Giancarlo Mazzanti, the library consists of three boulder-like structures.

strung out everywhere, and streets were irregularly paved. Basics such as electricity, refrigeration, and potable running water appeared to be luxuries. It seemed a ripe place for “armed conflict,” and “drug cartels.”

We continued to ascend, and then, without warning, an architectural icon emerged on the hillside. It was magnificent—a work of modern art. The structure was the Parque Biblioteca España, a massive library designed by Giancarlo Mazzanti and completed in 2007 as part of an urban project aimed at cultural and social transformation. The library was donated by Spain, who stipulated that it be constructed in a poor neighborhood in Medellín. The intent was to address violence by providing an option for children in this poor sector of the barrios.

I was astonished. Spain had donated a multimillion dollar work of art? To a Colombian city deeply affected by violence and drugs? For children? On a hill that looked as if everything were about to slide into the river?

What an extravagant option! I felt it when I entered the library. The impressive exterior led to an even more expansive interior, where children filled the rooms. In addition

to the library, the structure houses an auditorium, an art gallery, a day-care center, and computer rooms. One section includes an exhibit on organic gardening, showing the nuts and bolts of how to start a garden on a concrete rooftop or a 4 x 5 deck.

It’s only a library, but as we wandered around, I thought, *So many rooms, so many educational possibilities, so much promise.*

Libraries open doors, they are portals into new places, and this library has literally transformed what was once a slum where not even Colombian law enforcement dared to enter, into a place where children can move freely in body, mind, and spirit. Violence has been reduced, children can walk to school, and the once insurmountable route between the city and the national park is no longer an impasse.

Ingenious urban planning? I prefer to think that God is at work in impractical, even outlandish ways.

Myme to think creatively about the options we envision in response to poverty, violence, and injustice—whether in our own country or abroad. In the United States, we incarcerate more people than any

other country in the world, our police forces carry guns, and our military is the strongest. We have habituated ourselves toward forceful means of confronting evil and wrongdoing. I expected Colombia to be no different. But in a barrio in Medellín I saw a different way, an example of a peaceable option. The Parque Biblioteca España is counterintuitive, an extravagant gift in the middle of a desperate place. It’s a gift that is transforming the community. Colombia, of all places, shifted my center.

It is easy to think that our country is the world, and that God blesses us especially. We in the U.S. have relative safety, order, and beauty. We don’t live in the same world that my adolescent TV screen envisaged for me. We are first world. We are protected. We have options.

But God is working everywhere, and in Medellín, a fifty-cent metro ride refuted my conventional wisdom about how God presents his people options. Force is practical—it gets results, and as a young Midwesterner, I thought that the only way to address a corrupt system was with a strong arm. But now I’m not so sure. While I recognize that Colombia continues to wrestle with systemic violence and injustice, in the run-down streets of Medellín I saw what happens when peaceful options are created to confront those evils.

If there is anything protean in this story, it’s probably not so much Paine’s quote, though its meaning is one I am still working to grasp. Instead, the versatility lies in the irony that despite TV images and well-intentioned warnings, God revealed “humanity,” “community,” “generosity,” “priests,” “peaceful solutions,” and “options for the poor.” In Colombia. ■

