

# Medellin: «El Hueco» as a public space

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## RESUMEN

El deterioro significativo en el espacio público de las ciudades latinoamericanas contemporáneas cuestiona las razones por las cuales se genera polarización social y segregación en dichas ciudades. Aparte del deseo constante, a nivel municipal, de mejorar y expandir las zonas de dominio público con estándares de planeación apropiados, muchos de estos lugares todavía no funcionan como verdaderos espacios para el encuentro de diferentes actores sociales. Al mismo tiempo, como producto de los cambios en la estructura económica, nuevos espacios públicos aparecen de manera espontánea en localidades poco usuales, lo que los lleva a no ser reconocidos como esferas de accesibilidad colectiva.

Este artículo explora «El Hueco», un bazar localizado en el centro de la ciudad de Medellín, como un verdadero espacio público donde las actividades comerciales que se desarrollan allí, representan un escenario interesante para generar un intercambio vibrante entre todos los habitantes de la ciudad. La metodología propuesta por Milton Santos es usada en este caso, para analizar el espacio urbano de «El Hueco» como un proceso complejo. Esta metodología es complementada con la propuesta de un grupo de intervenciones físicas llamadas soluciones «software» que tienen como fin preservar la autenticidad espacial de dicho bazar. Adicionalmente, este artículo finaliza cuestionando la necesidad de generar procesos de moderación entre las autoridades de la ciudad, las empresas locales, el sector informal y los clientes, para estimular desarrollos locales innovativos e infraestructuras de bajo costo.

**PALABRAS CLAVE:** Espacio público, Sector informal, Espacio fragmentado

## ABSTRACT

Significant deterioration of public space in contemporary Latin American cities raises a question about reasons of massive social polarization and segregation. Apart from constant desire from the Municipal level to improve and enlarge public domain, quality of regulative- planned spaces did not manage to assemble all social actors. At the same time, as a product of structural changes in economy, self- generated and spontaneous public spaces appear at unusual locations, being not recognized as a collectively accessible sphere.

This paper tries to see «El Hueco», bazaar- like space in the centre of Medellín, Colombia, as an interesting public arena and naturally formed public space where commercial activities represent a background for vibrant exchange interface for all urban inhabitants. By using the methodology of Milton Santos, urban space of «El Hueco» is analyzed as a complex process. Then, a set of interventions is proposed, the so-called «software» solutions, in order to preserve «El Hueco» as an authentic generic space. In addition, this paper concludes by asking for moderation processes between City Authorities, local entrepreneurs, informal sector and customers, so that innovation- based development and cost- reduction infrastructure are stimulated.

**KEY WORDS:** Socio- spatial analysis through time. Tourism. Periodization. Spatial configuration.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Globalization, a new way of structuring time and space, and market economy as its consequence, have great influence on post-industrial cities in Latin America, especially in the appropriation of public space. Fast urbanization with extreme ecological consequences, energy consumption and waste production; also influence directly the perception of the public space.

As a logic result, different forms of fragmentation appear where every single part of society tries to «privatize» the space as much as possible, by neglecting «common» public space. Since the Authorities are not capable to cope with the situation on the ground, public sphere rapidly decrease. That vacuum in management of the cities become a place where informality finds itself, so abounded public or green space is turned into a source of income, working space or place of social cohesion.

### 1.1. Mobility and accessibility

Decrease in public spaces in Medellín is severely influenced by social inequalities. For most of middle and upper classes, public space means private areas with high security measures, high levels of consumption and uniformity in social status. For experiencing truly public spaces, high-income classes are willing to pay big amounts of money to travel to USA or Europe to enjoy the advantages of public facilities and broad spatial accessibility (green spaces, water banks, biking, free cultural activities, etc.). In the last couple of years the Municipality of Medellín has done a big effort to cope with the deficiency of public spaces by building parks, libraries and museums but still minimum standards are not fulfilled especially in low- income areas.

Why people in Medellín do care too little about public space? Why middle and upper classes who are the most educated population in the city are satisfied with the public spaces offered by the private market? Does the lack of national and international mobility of the majority of people have something to contribute to this situation?

Medellín, as any other city in Colombia, has been affected by the lack of accessibility and mobility, which has deprived the majority of its inhabitants of cultural exchange, education and recreation, keeping them isolated. It has created a claustrophobic atmosphere where communal interests are not considered important and privatization takes more strength in the political agenda.

The mobility of Colombians is limited by several factors. First of all, traveling with a Colombian passport means that visa is required for most of the countries in the world. This task is not easy to fulfill due to the great number of bureaucratic procedures. Secondly, the prices of flight tickets are expensive for the average income (figure 1) and the number of airlines flying from Colombia to another destinations is decreasing, creating a monopoly of the existing ones.

Direct flights from Bogotá	Cost (Euros)
<b>Europe</b>	
Madrid	900- 1500
Paris	1000- 1600
London	No direct flights
Berlin	No direct flight s
<b>South America</b>	
Lima	360
Buenos Aires	600
São Paulo	800- 1300

**Figure 1. Cost of flight tickets from Bogotá to different international destinations**  
 Source: Websites of Air France, Iberia, LAN and Varig, December 2007

## 1.2. Economic Mobility

The lack of mobility and geographical isolation, which seems to influence the perception and use of public space, does not appear as a limitation for one part of the population dedicated to business activities. In contrary, it is seen as a challenge. People from Medellín known as «Paisas» have based their own business on national and international relations. It means that traveling became a very common activity taking place not only in Colombia, but also in foreign countries. It has given «Paisas» the reputation of being adventurous and business people; characteristics that are until now are part of «Paísa» mentality.

In order to supply their shops and provide their families mainly with electrical appliances, cloths and toys, trade started in the North of Colombia in the city of Maicao (Guajira) and San Andres Island due to tax exception. Then the attention turned into Panama where goods were offered at more favorable prices. By discovering that the majority of products sent to Medellín where produced in China, «Paisas» started to do business directly with Chinese in order to control production, distribution and commercialization (figure 2).



Figure 2: Economic mobility of Paisas  
Source: López- Kuc. 2008

## 1.3. Medellín, social construction of the space

In the last decades, Medellín has been an oasis for different social actors, due to its regional importance and the civil war, which frames Colombian reality. They find in the city an opportunity to improve their living conditions and develop economic activities. These actors have played an important role in shaping and defining the use of the city by controlling the public space and by being involved in formal and informal activities such as begging, privatization, business and money laundry (figure 3). As a result, the city is experiencing a unique transformation rich in social, cultural and economical complexities, which strongly influence the use, interaction and mobility within the city.



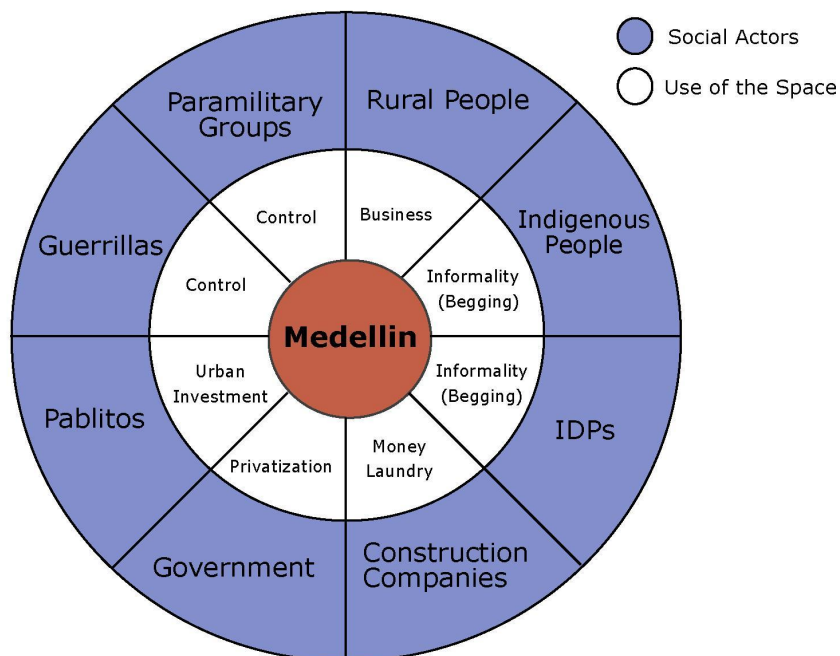


Figure 3. Social construction of the space  
Source: López- Kuc. 2008



Figure 4. Municipality of Medellín  
Source: Plan de Desarrollo para Medellín 2004- 2007

### 1.4. Urban and rural relation

Medellin's metropolitan area consists of 30% urban and 70% rural. The majority of its inhabitants are located in the urban part while the inhabitants of the rural areas are located in the corregimientos of San Antonio de Prado, Santa Elena, San Cristobal, San Sebastian de Palmitas and Altavista (figure 4). The expansion of the urban fabric has produced a big pressure on the agricultural land, generating a decrease in the number of rural population. Another phenomenon, which contributes to the decline of population in rural areas, is the fast migration into the city due to the crises faced by the agricultural sector and the civil war. This rapid migration has left the city unprepared to provide some of these new inhabitants with proper infrastructure and basic services. As a consequence, the city develops in an unplanned way, which is visible through the increase in the number of shantytowns and severe environmental degradation. On the other hand, this migratory phenomenon not only has affected the urban fabric but also rural-urban relations by bringing rural behavior and habits into the city, producing clashes with urban residents.

### 1.5. Medellin, fragmented collage

There are several factors that influence the perception and use of space within the city and which produce polarization and division. One of the main factors that contribute to this phenomenon is the rapid increase of gated communities, country clubs, shopping centres and highways. The presence of these massive and dominant infrastructures has created an atmosphere of social marginality and segregation, excluding people from low-income areas who represent the majority of population. Another source of urban fragmentation is produced by the presence of «pablitos»<sup>1</sup> in the urban landscape. Lavish discos, restaurants and motels produce an environment dominated by fear, danger and insecurity (figure 5).

*1. After the death of Pablo Escobar, the drug industry was not concentrated in one leader. Instead, lots of Pablitos started to appear mainly within the young population. They are part of a complex structure that allows them to work with a large mobility and flexibility. They are characterized for the economic investments in the urban fabric, which has an especial «Mafioso taste» (lavish and big in proportions).*



Figure 5. Fragmented collage  
Source: López-Kúc 2008

One of the main consequences of this fragmented collage is the lack of public space offered by the city, and the rise of clusters with specific social classes. According with statistics provided by the Plan de Desarrollo para Medellín 2004- 2007, urban areas count on 4.01 m<sup>2</sup> of public space per inhabitant while in the rural parts of the city each inhabitant enjoy just 1.02 m<sup>2</sup> (figure 6). This situation becomes even more critic at the moment of comparing Medellín with other cities in the World such as Buenos Aires, London or New York. The huge deficit of public space proves that urgent attention from the government is required and creative solutions are needed to cope with this deficiency (figure 7).

Medellin Metropolitan Area		Public Space (m <sup>2</sup> /inhabitant)
1	Medellin urban	4.01
2	Medellin rural	1.02
2.1	San Cristobal	0.5
2.2	San Antonio de Prado	1.9
2.3	San Sebastian de Palmitas	0
2.4	Santa Elena	1.7
2.5	Altavista	1

**Figure 6. Public space per inhabitant in Medellín (2004)**

Source: Plan de Desarrollo para Medellín 2004- 2007

City	Public space (m <sup>2</sup> /inhabitant)
Buenos Aires	22
New York	22
London	20
Singapore	19
Bogotá	6
Medellin	4.01

**Figure 7. Public space per inhabitant in different cities in the world**

Source: Silva Salamanca, 2005



## 2. «El Hueco»: a public space

Despite of the shortage of public space within the city, some of its inhabitants have found the way to cope with this deficiency by means of transforming the space in different ways. One example is the transformation of an area located in the centre of the city into a market called «El Hueco», which represents a genuine public space where all social classes of the city meet and informal activities play an important role in the economy of the area.

Before 1970, Guayaquil (today's «El Hueco») was known for its economic activity. It hosted the biggest informal market of the city called «El Pedrero». Shops were located in this area as well as restaurants and bars. A fire occurred in 1969 marked an important period for this area: the informal market was destroyed, turning it into a place for drug dealing, alcohol, poverty and prostitution.



The 70s and 80s were characterized by big migration of people from rural areas to Medellín, due to the violence in the East of Antioquia<sup>2</sup>. These new inhabitants discovered in the informal economy a profitable way to generate economic income. They settled down in Guayaquil, which latter on was transformed in bazaars that took the name «El Hueco». Nowadays, «El Hueco» is a huge market, which creates lots of employment and great amount of money. It became a symbol of the city and is undertaken significant transformations.

## 2.1. Form and structure of El Hueco

«El Hueco» is located in the heart of Medellín and surrounded by Municipal and Administration buildings, banks and services. According to Asoguayaquil<sup>3</sup>, the bazaar is formed by 23 blocks, which contain more than 6.600 shops whose sizes are small compare to those located in the main shopping centres of the city. This characteristic is attributed to the valued of the square meter, which is considered one of the most expensive in the whole city. Owning a shop of 10 m<sup>2</sup> in this bazaar cost around 50.000 Euros, and its rent approximately 800 Euros per month.

High prices in the property are reflected in the poor facilities offered such as shortage of toilets, small and uncomfortable fitting rooms, narrow corridors, poor ventilation systems and lack of emergency exits, parking facilities and information centres. Every square meter has to generate big amounts of money and the commodity of the customer is not considered as a priority. Big efforts are being done to improve the physical infrastructure, but visitors are still facing the inconveniences of doing their shopping in this confusing and chaotic labyrinth.

The bazaar is connected by endless small corridors of approximately 3 meters wide which support a massive circulation of visitors especially during the weekends or just before public celebrations such as Christmas and Mother's day. Shops are fully packed with of all kind of colorful merchandise (pictures 1 and 2) keeping the attention of different audiences, which come from different part of the country and belong to different social classes. Prices are not fixed, giving the possibility to the customer who is prepared to stand unpleasant conditions to bargain the price and to prove its ability and skills to negotiate.



2. Antioquia is one of the 32 Departments of Colombia.  
3. Trade association of Guayaquil

Picture 1. typical goods at El Hueco  
Source: [carlosmunera.blogspot.com](http://carlosmunera.blogspot.com)

Picture 2. typical goods at El Hueco  
Source: [carlosmunera.blogspot.com](http://carlosmunera.blogspot.com)

Municipality of Medellín recognizes the importance of this bazaar in the economy of the city. Nowadays, it represents a significant source of employment in the city: 17.000 jobs are provided as well as 900 street vendors are connected to the bazaar (Pictures 3 and 4). The national goods offered in the bazaar count for 85%, while 15% comes from abroad. It means that many small and medium local enterprises count on «El Hueco» as the main channel of commercialization of their products, due to the flexibility and trust- based relations. One of the biggest problems that the Municipality is facing is the informal or illegal occupation of public space. It is clearly visible that businesses are based on interconnectivity of informal and formal sectors, and any attempt to eliminate informal activities can have serious consequences on the economic performance of the place.



Picture 3. Informal street vendor  
Source:  
carlosmunera.blogspot.com



Picture 4. Informal street vendor  
Source:  
carlosmunera.blogspot.com

Nowadays, El Hueco is undergoing significant transformations. New buildings are appearing, the number of shops is increasing, and more floors are added to the existing buildings. Vivid and over scaled billboards with the names of remote places such as Shanghai, Singapore, Bombay and Japan compete to each other to attract the attention of the customers and stimulate the shopping. The euphoria of buying cheap goods has kept the attention not only of low income actors but also of high and middle classes who are motivated by the possibility of bargaining and establishing interactive dialogs with the sellers. Due to its particular character, El Hueco is turning into a tourist attraction by receiving a huge amount of visitors per day who create a vibrant hub and a unique public arena.



## 2.2. El Hueco as a Hybrid Space

The methodology of Milton Santos is used in this paper to analyze different forces and their influence on the space (El Hueco). According to Santos, to understand the space is necessary not only to identify geographical, natural or artificial objects but also to apprehend its relationship with society. The following diagram (figure 8) represents those forces, which contribute to the production and organization of El Hueco. Within this diagram, a new term called "invisible forces" is added to the methodology. This term identifies those aspects, which are not recognized by the society but have a great influence in the formation of the space. These forces should be understood as a particular consequence of Medellín's turbulent past and their presence in the public domain strongly influences informal- formal relations. Different interventions are proposed in the following chapter based on informal- formal relations. The term "invisible forces" helps to understand patterns of behavior and mobility of certain groups within the space.



By using Milton Santos methodology, El Hueco is analyzed by taking into account different forces:

- Science and technology: El Hueco has been shaped by the different mega projects developed within the city. One example is the construction of big transport infrastructures such as Metro and Metro Plus (bus supply which is still under construction). It has facilitated the accessibility to the area.
- Social: El Hueco operates as an authentic public space where all social classes of Medellin meet and represents a landmark of the city attracting also the attention of tourists.
- Cultural: It is a place with a strong identity and has become a reference point. For many social actors it has turned into the perfect place to spread ideological ideas or to establish cultural activities.
- Political: Legalization and restructuring of the space is a main issue in the political agenda.
- Economy: El Hueco is a place where different kinds of economy get together. The informal economy uses temporary structures, which are located in the streets and pedestrian zones. The formal economy can be found in small shops located in the big bazaars. The public service economy also plays an important role by providing water, electricity, telephone access and solid waste collection.
- Environment: The place is characterized by bad air quality and high levels of noise due to the great number of cars and buses that circulate this area.



A new force complements the above methodology by giving a deep inside into the informal-formal relations:

- Invisible forces: Paramilitaries provide security services and control the use of public space by charging taxes and intimidating undesirable social actors such as sexual workers, Internally Displaced People (IDPs) and homeless.

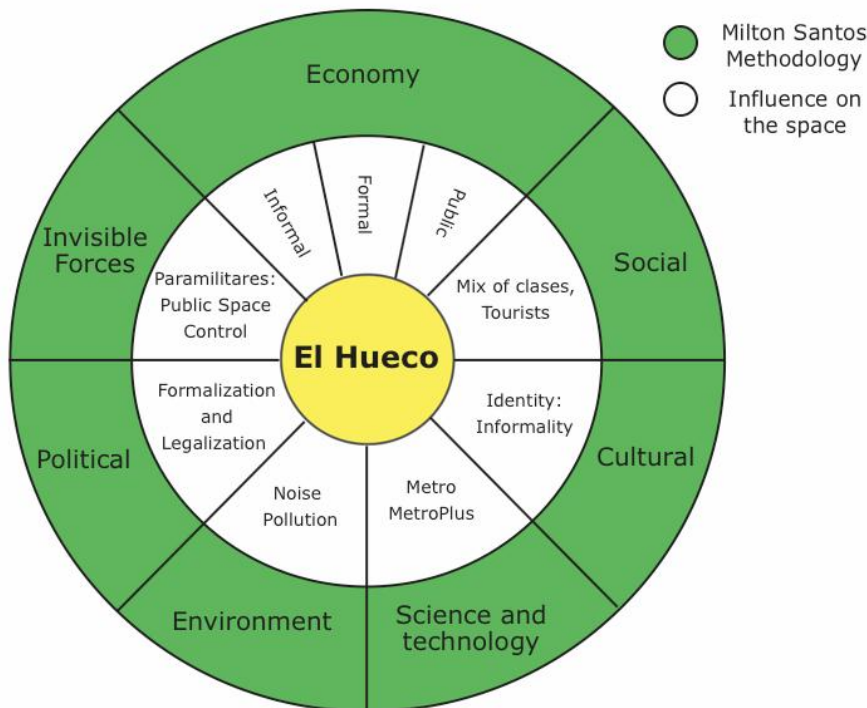


Figure 8. Milton Santos Methodology modified by adding Invisible Forces category  
Source: López-Kuc, 2009

### 3. INTERVENTIONS

«As paradoxical it may sound, the informal system is also central. The centrality of informality becomes manifest when the societal system is studied from the angle of informality» (Laguerre, 1994: 22)

What makes this Bazaar- like space fascinating is the mix of informal and formal activities, which occur as a consequence of social relations blended with processes of globalization. Generic forms and new patterns of urban behavior are the most visible manifestations of those interactions. Spatial «informalization» in this case came as a result of using the formal space for informal purposes. More particularly, informality takes place in spatial niches of the formal structure. Street vendors sell their products in front of the legal shops, creating pulsating atmosphere based on flexible working- hours, high- mobility, self- promotion and direct eye- contact with possible customers.

A scenario planning gives a set of interventions, which in most of the cases uses actual urban fabric (hardware) and tries to restructure the space by shifts in circulation, orientation and social relations (software). Special attention is given to the mix of social classes, which is a kind of «heritage» in contrast to the extremely polarized society in the city of Medellín. Multifaceted relations between informal and formal are foundation for proposals of El Hueco's development by preserving its exceptional character.

Suggestions are given in a problem-solution relation with the aim to discover causalities which can reshape El Hueco (figure 9).

Problems	Solutions
Group 1 - shops supply - fire and earthquake vulnerability - sanitary shortage - claustrophobic spaces - infrastructure	Solution 1 - “respiratory treatment” a. ambient b. physical
Group 2 - time consuming - visual chaos	Solution 2 - thematic corridors
Group 3 - orientation - circulation	Solution 3 - signs system
Group 4 - lack of open public space - identity problem	Solution 4 - public event

**Figure 9. Problem-Solution relation**  
 Source: López- Kuc, 2008

#### 3.1. Problems 1 – Solutions 1 (physical intervention)

The first set of problems is related to physical structure of «El Hueco». Narrow corridors, self- made constructions, and lack of basic infrastructure create a place of uncertainty, highly vulnerable to earthquakes and fire. Density, which is the product of fast development and absence of any regulations, creates danger for both employees and visitors. Due to the constant need for shops supply (lack of storage space), already limited circulation is slow- down.

In this case, interventions have an attempt to offer a sort of «openings» in the existing fabric, by putting toilets and storages underground and providing more space for social cohesion in the ground floor (figure 10). Thus, the first floor could be used for organizational purposes, and together with the down floor it would form a unit that aims at providing more light, hygiene and social interaction. Network of those units would signify an aesthetic improvement of El Hueco's fabric, preserving already established patterns of behavior and social capital.

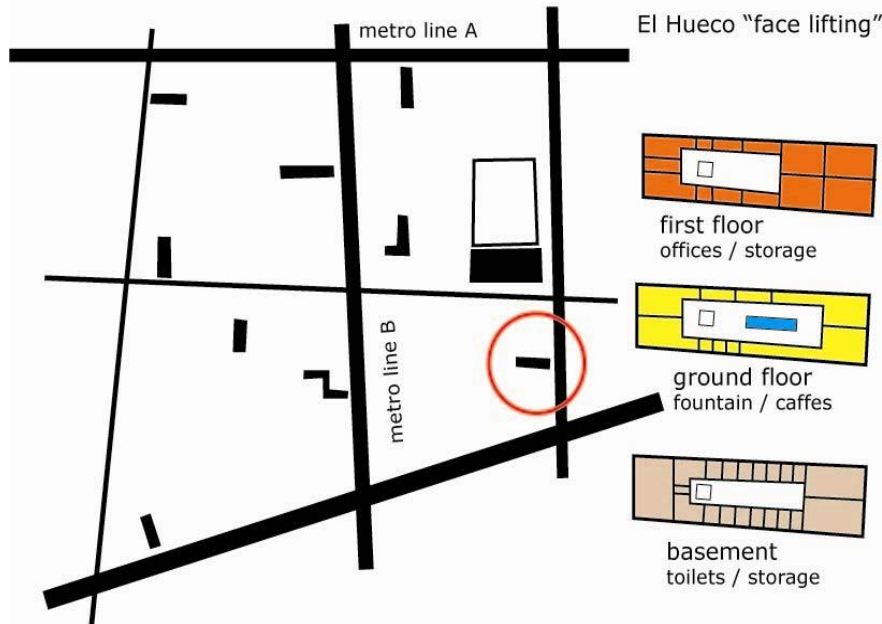


Figure 10. Physical interventions in «El Hueco»  
Source: López- Kuc, 2008

### 3.2. Problems 2 – Solutions 2 (thematic corridors)

*«Because the formal system is unable to meet the expectations of every member of the city community, individuals feel it necessarily to transform formal space into informal space to conduct their informal activities» (Laguerre, 1994: 29)*

The second group of problems deals with unplanned enlargement of «El Hueco», where visual chaos and self- branding strategies produce a set of labyrinths and confusing spaces. Once one is in, it is very hard to step out from the flow of visitors and use his own routing. That «organized chaos» seems to be attractive at the first glance, but very soon usual commercial activity at «El Hueco» become time- demanding and tiring.

This proposal again uses the existing fabric and intervenes in the so- called «software» of «El Hueco». By organizing thematic corridors, which consist of shops for selling similar goods, customers could orientate much easier and look for specific products (figure 11). Of course, a palette of corridors depends on the diversity of products and its shape should reflect market needs. Most common goods such as shoes, underwear and house equipment, should be organized in the longest corridors. In the places of intersection, information offices should appear to provide maps, schedules and current info.

This kind of spatial organization also could give a chance to the informal sector, especially to the street vendors, to cooperate with existing shops by being external elements of the network.



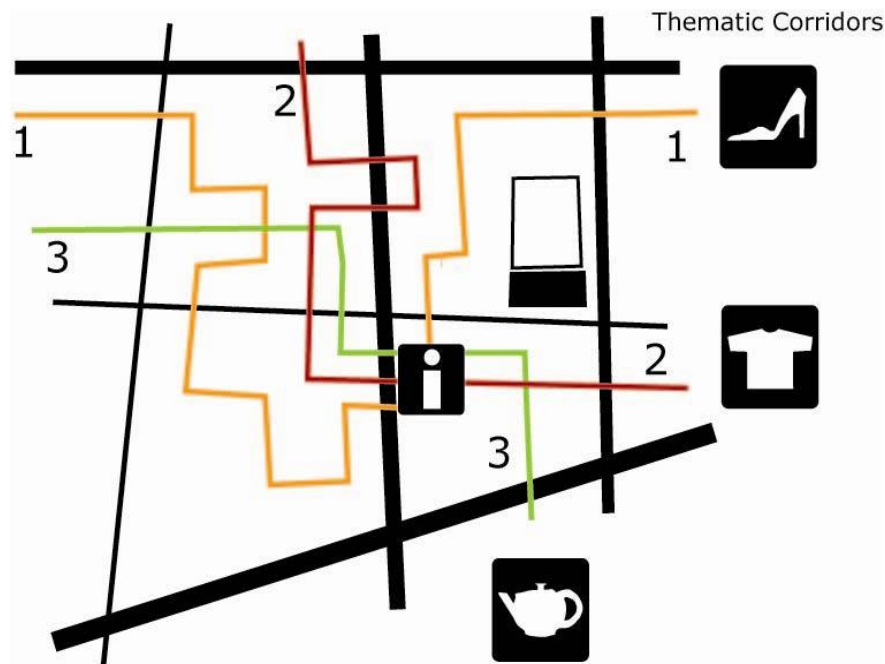


Figure 11. Thematic corridors of «El Hueco»  
Source: López- Kuc, 2008

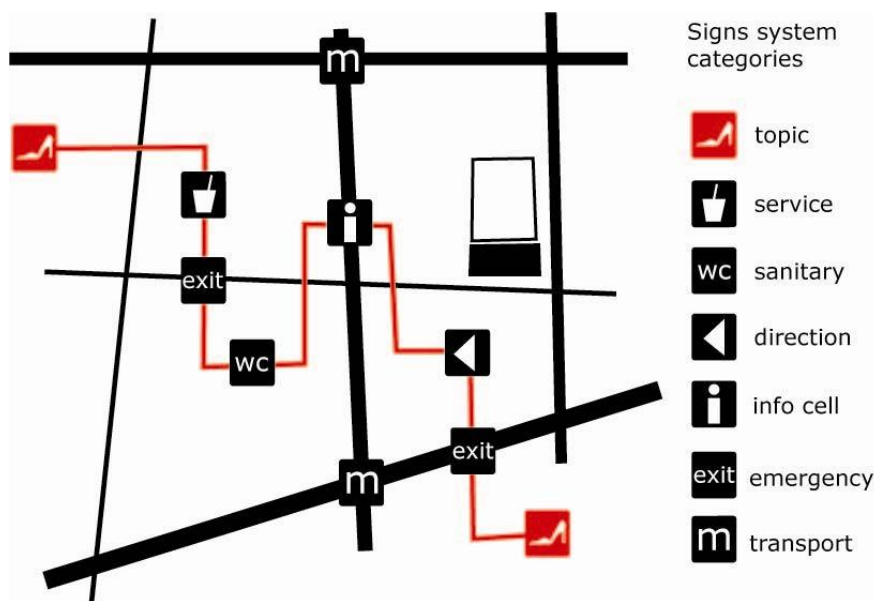
### 3.3. Problems 3 – Solutions 3 (signs system)

Being in the flow of thematic corridor is not enough for complete orientation in a place such as «El Hueco». There is a constant need for going out of the route, to stop for a while, or just to use one part of the corridor.

For this reason, the next proposal would suggest a new signs system, which should cover entirely '«El Hueco», in order to establish common visual communication with visitors (figure 12). A matrix with different signs (pictograms) would be divided in certain categories to facilitate circulation. The importance of signing, besides orientation, is also an issue of security, evacuation in case of fire/earthquake and easy access to public transportation.



Figure 12. Signs system  
Source: López- Kuc, 2008



### 3.4. Problems 4 – Solutions 4 (public event)

The last scenario takes event in public space as a generator of urban development (figure 13). Although, «El Hueco» symbolizes a unique unplanned public space, its users are not aware of it. Besides that, the only open space in the area (Park of the Lights) in front of the Public Library is completely underused. The proposal focuses on the use of the existing Library and the Park as a place for gathering after shopping in «El Hueco». Furthermore, City Administration together with local actors should empower dialog in the public sphere. Spatially, all thematic corridors would lead to the square, which is the test field of the informal- formal relations and place for awareness campaigns, sport and free education.

Once the City Administration is involved in the event management of the place, a further step would be the institutionalization of El Hueco Agency or a sort of Cultural Centre, which could be in charge of both preserving the distinctive local culture and providing a toolbox for further development. That means, involvement of all elements of social construction, and first steps towards equality in public realm.

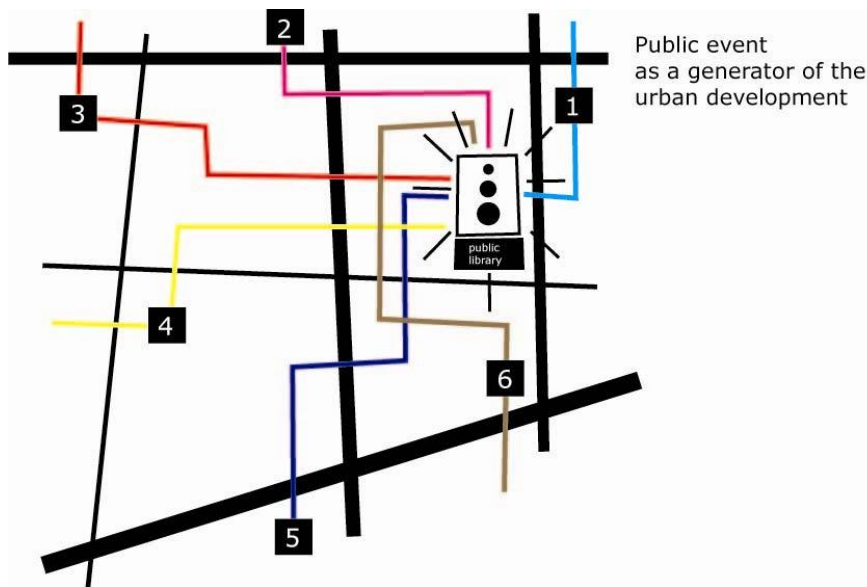


Figure 13. Public event  
Source: López- Kuc, 2008

### 3.5. Informal-Formal dialog

*«On the other hand, informality and its related insecurity give rise to the development of alternative forms of economic and social cooperation.»* (Billembourg et al, 2005: 55)

The crucial task in establishing «El Hueco» as a real city centre and place of vibrant social relations would be the creation of a future dialog between informal and formal sector. This dialog could be seen in four different ways, from most easy transition till the so- called frozen conflict (figure 14).

1. The first pair would deal with evolution of the informal vendor by changing his profession (gain knowledge), and his transition to the sphere of legal status.
2. The second pair would use collaboration in order to create the so-called «win- win» situation. This cooperative process would try to find a common ground for both actors by providing mechanisms of dual interest.
3. The third pair through process of negotiation would reshape themselves, so the outcome stays in the formal sector but with informal logic somehow.





4. And finally, the fourth pair would use current conflict as a base for moderation process, which should be run by City Administration. Even the outcome is unclear, process by itself involves other stakeholders and encourages them to have dialog among certain topics.

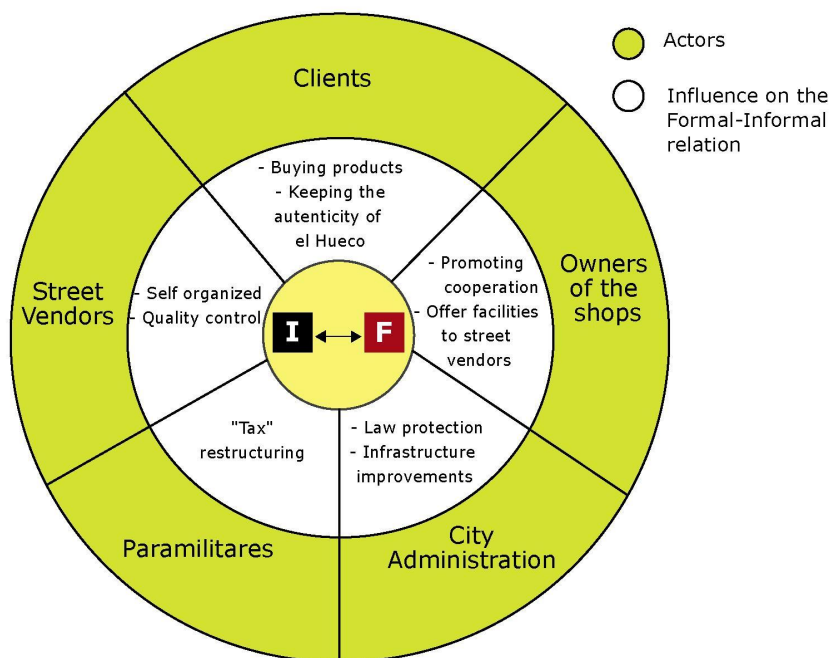


Figure 14. Informal-Formal dialog  
Source: López- Kuc, 2008

### 3.6. Participatory planning approach

«Generative planning, in contrast (to Regulative planning), is information based with local knowledge and feedback, and belongs to the domain of the informal sector» (Laguerre, 1994: 41)

To understand new relations of informal and formal sector, a model of participatory planning would be deeply explained and applied on collaboration as a way of dialog (pair 2, from Figure 14).

Taking a usual situation where an informal street vendor provides use of mobile phones (so called «Minuto Celular»), one can see a dual pressure from both owners of the shops who sell similar goods and illegal tax collectors (Paramilitares).

Our scenario predicts relations where both sides cooperate on the way that the street vendor would become a mobile infrastructure of the shop by providing external services, gadgets and sales (Picture 5). On the other hand, the informal vendor would benefit by having percentage of the sales and by using some facilities of the shop. Both of them could then improve their networking and have better opportunities towards economical stability.

This relation between two sides would also be influenced by other stakeholders such as clients or tax collectors (figure 15), so the improvement really depends on human solidarity and public awareness.

Since this paper focuses on bottom-up strategies, difficult relation between Paramilitares and the Government in terms of tax collection goes beyond our objectives, and would be a subject for further research.





Picture 5. "Minuto Celular", mobile infrastructure  
Source: carlosmunera.blogspot.com

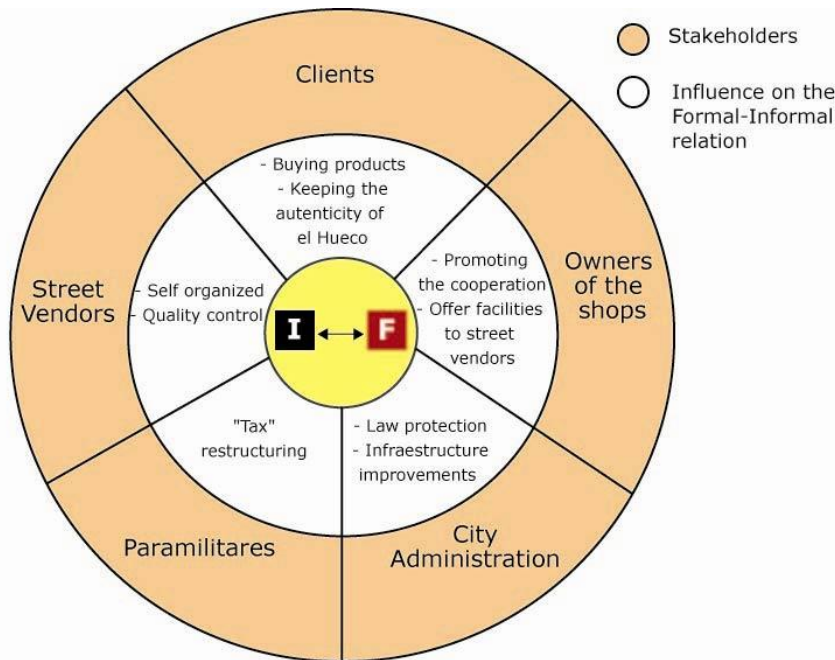


Figure 15. Informal- Formal Cooperation  
Source: López- Kuc, 2008

#### 4. CONCLUSION

Since the public space in post-industrial cities of Latin America is not simply an open space in front of Cathedral any more, new ways of space appropriation appear by reflecting the social order. Taking «El Hueco» as a case study, by understanding its construction and logic, this paper shows a set of pragmatic proposals aiming at preserving the authenticity and the role of this space.

The proposals have an attempt to intervene neither in the physical structure nor in the building process, but to harmonize informal- formal relationships and demonstrate the advantages that might provide the informal sector.

«El Hueco» is an evidence that only mix of social classes and their interaction may construct the real public sphere. What is lacking is positive environment for new forms of creative economy and knowledge-based development. To reach that point civil society must become more independent and flexible, more open towards innovation and new forms of relations between entrepreneurship and behavior in public domain. Furthermore, this unusual space needs support from Municipal level and recognition as unique and spontaneous answer to nowadays uncertainty in urban areas of Latin American Metropolis.

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