

Life Among Urban Planners

THE CITY IN THE TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY

Eugenie L. Birch and Susan M. Wachter, Series Editors

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LIFE AMONG URBAN PLANNERS

Practice, Professionalism, and Expertise
in the Making of the City

Edited by

Jennifer Mack

and

Michael Herzfeld

PENN

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CHAPTER 5

An Anatomy of Failure

Planning After the Fact in Contemporary Bogotá, Colombia

Federico Pérez

A contentious planning process unfolded intermittently between 2008 and 2011 in Bogotá, Colombia: the revision of the city's Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial or POT (Territorial Ordering Plan). Established by Colombia's 1997 Urban Reform Law, the POT's goal was "to guide and manage the physical development of territory and use of land" in cities across the country (Law 388, art. 9). Although many considered this law a victory of urban regulation and redistribution, its implementation has been lethargic and deeply conflicted. Bogotá's city administration created the city's first POT in 2000, a different cohort of planners substantially modified it in 2003, and yet another group of experts revised it again in the version that appeared as the 2008–11 project.¹

Given the many modifications made within a short time and the significant structural instabilities that these constant changes engendered, urban planners increasingly began to question the value of their practice. A veteran bureaucrat once confessed to me in a moment of "professional intimacy" (Herzfeld this volume), "Sometimes it seems that what we do here in the planning department is useless." Looking down at worn-out plans from the 1970s, he added, "We have always been going in one direction, while the city goes in another!" Many other planners similarly suggested that the idea of a collective and long-term urban vision had succumbed to fractured socialities and transient political interests (see Herzfeld 2009, 88; Mack this volume).

In 2010, the directors of Bogotá's departments of finance and planning characterized the latest POT revision as an attempt to make the plan more pragmatic (cf. Healey 2009). The key, the two Ivy League-educated economists explained, was recognizing that the "devil is in the details." They both emphasized that, despite the progressive current juridical and planning rhetoric, nothing would be accomplished if the everyday uses of planning instruments did not accord with the spirit of the law. For them, moving from legal discourse to urban reality required a deeper understanding of on-the-ground planning practice.

In this light, the latest revision of Bogotá's POT opens a space for the analysis of two crucial themes. First, it calls attention to the limits of progressive juridical reform. As Teresa Caldeira and James Holston note in their analysis of "democratic planning" in São Paulo, "instruments of planning and governmental regulation do not necessarily produce the results their formulators intended" (2005, 411; see also Fernandes and Maldonado 2009). Political context and material realities shape the ways in which planning tools are interpreted, mobilized, and implemented. Second, and even more important, the POT revision sheds light on planners' new efforts to understand, anticipate, and manage such political realities as they accept their own impotence in the context of more traditional forms of professional practice.

Planners working on the POT revision deployed multiple strategies to "close" spaces of "discretionary interpretation" and to create conditions for more predictable outcomes. In some cases, planners attempted to resolve power struggles and procedural uncertainties by rewriting the plan. The revision thus addressed urban politics through legal maneuvers (the master plan itself was a decree) and new technical instruments. This resonates with what Jean Comaroff and John Comaroff have called the "judicialization of politics" (2006): the ways in which political life is becoming increasingly "saturated with a culture of legality" and "migrating to the courts" (2006, 26) and, as the POT case shows, to boardrooms and experts' desks. The revision of the Plan recast political questions as technical issues (see Ferguson 1994; Mitchell 2002; Li 2007).

In other instances, planning experts relied directly on political work such as alliance building within policy circles and collaborations with academia, media, and citizen organizations. These engagements revealed planners' critical and reflexive awareness of the limits and contradictions of juridico-technical intervention. For most of them, malfunctions and unintended consequences were unavoidable, and they spent significant time

devising strategies to anticipate and manage such effects. Rather than focusing entirely on technical prescriptions, planners were involved in the art of approximation: striving to bring their plans closer to reality, even if only tentatively and gradually.²

In the end, it was precisely the tension between the technical and the political that brought the revision to a halt during the 2011 mayoral race. This failure, as well as those the revision was supposed to amend, reflected neither bureaucratic dysfunction nor depoliticizing modes of expertise alone (Herzfeld 1992, 70). Breakdown was not external to planning but integral to its technopolitical configurations and practices. An ethnographic examination of the POT's demise reveals planners' pragmatic and self-critical orientations as they engage with planning failures through recalibrations and adjustments. At the same time, and despite these reflexive attunements, it calls attention to planners' recalcitrant modernist sensibilities and their enduring faith in the promise of technical fixes.

Grupo POT: Between Thinking and Doing

The Grupo POT primarily comprised consultants hired in 2008 specifically for the revision of the plan and a few public servants temporarily assigned to back their efforts. The split between the itinerant consultants and permanent employees was a source of contention, both in the production of planning and in its future implementation. Public officials at the planning department often seemed alienated and to some extent belittled by the presence of external consultants. Meanwhile, outside contract workers had become a vital resource for the planning department, given the overwhelming number of procedures and tasks employees had to confront on a daily basis.

These organizational issues reveal fundamental tensions between planning and implementing (*planear y tramitar*) in at least two respects: on one hand, the excess of bureaucratic procedures in Colombia's "hyper-legalistic" environment (Gutierrez 2001) can entail the abolition of institutional spaces for strategic planning and research; on the other, the discontinuous outsourcing of planning endeavors can generate a widening gap between governmental thinking and doing. In both cases, the disconnect between theory and practice inevitably limits the political and ethical consequences of city planning (Fainstein 2010). Navigating and bridging these spaces was one of the main challenges of the Grupo POT.

Diego, an architect in his late thirties who had been working in the Grupo POT for a couple of years, described the team's unique position as "neither totally inside the institution nor really outside of it." As I worked alongside the Grupo POT for several months, I found this "bureaucratic liminality" to be a particularly useful entry point to the inner workings of Bogotá's planning department and came to rely on planners' critical observations of daily practices—on their "para-ethnographic insights" (Holmes and Marcus 2005, 237). According to Victor Turner, "if liminality is regarded as a time and place of withdrawal from normal modes of social action, it can be seen as potentially a period of scrutinization of the central values and axioms of the culture in which it occurs" (1969, 167). The Grupo POT was exemplary of a form of institutional liminality in which consultants uncovered some of the fundamental dynamics operating at the core of the city's planning bureaucracy. "[*La Secretaría de Planeación*," Diego explained, "can be easily eaten up by the 'day-to-day': the *trámite*, the response to the official letter, the response to the comptroller, the response to the functionary. . . . You see people working up there [on the upper floors of the governmental building] and they're full of files in many cases."

Diego was not exaggerating. In my several visits to the planning department, I saw how bureaucrats were usually immersed in a tumultuous flow of people, meetings, phone calls, petitions, and documents. Mid- and low-level functionaries spent most of their time in their cubicles carrying out tedious procedures and answering official letters (*haciendo oficios*). Visitors wandered through the department's hallways looking over the low panel divisions for sympathetic bureaucrats or receptionists behind computer screens and stacks of folios and folders. Opposite the cubicles were the offices of directors and undersecretaries. With floor-to-ceiling walls and doors and window blinds (usually drawn), these high-level officials could more easily avoid the peering eyes of disoriented citizens. When not in their offices, functionaries would ceremoniously file into meeting rooms to engage in extended discussions about bureaucratic conflicts and strategies to overcome procedural gridlocks. As a young planner with a background in private consultancy joked, this reflected the bureaucratic disease of "meetingitis" (*reunionitis*): "There are meetings for everything, and 80 percent or 90 percent of them never lead to anything." A morass of redundant procedures and activities ruled everyday life in the planning department, leaving few spaces for critical reflection, comprehensive views, or, ultimately, for planning itself.

At a relative distance from the planning department and its spaces of *tramitología* ("procedurology") was the Grupo POT. The group had been



Figure 5.1. The Secretaría de Planeación and the citizen service center building where the Grupo POT's office was located. Photograph by Federico Pérez.

temporarily assigned a vacant office on the mezzanine of a lower building in the governmental complex. The semideserted cubicles and windowless workstations were located above a busy atrium dedicated to citizen services, which was in turn connected by a glass and concrete tunnel to the higher office building of the planning department. Diego and his colleagues would often joke about their improvised and isolated office space, where Internet and phone connections broke down easily and rolls of maps flooded desks and cabinets. “The good thing about not having a direct phone line,” one of them once quipped, “is that we can avoid unnecessary meetings.” Parts of the mezzanine were also treated as forgotten corners, such that an office band rehearsed Christmas carols in December near the Grupo POT's cubicles, *val-lenato* songs were occasionally audible in impromptu birthday celebrations, and temporary health clinics for employees were sometimes installed in unused offices.

As the comment about superfluous meetings suggests, this spatial arrangement also had its advantages. This is a point Diego elaborated on in one of our last conversations in early 2012: “I think one of the good things to come out of the workspace is that we were removed from the day-to-day



Figure 5.2. Planner at work in the mezzanine cubicles. Photograph by Federico Pérez.

[routines] that take place upstairs. We didn't have a window, but we had *time*. We had time to discuss, to debate. The organization of the seats allowed us to unroll a plan on the floor, draw, all that." Diego emphasized that they were at a "relative distance," partly because their challenge was to understand the difficulties and contradictions of the department's daily procedures while establishing channels for feedback on, and appropriation of the Plan among, public officials. This was immediately visible in the group's regular routines, which involved research and debate in the de facto "think tank" of their mezzanine office and afternoon meetings in the upper floors of the main tower past the glass and concrete tunnel. Most importantly, the group had managed to recruit experienced planners from the department at different times in the revision. "Some of them had time," Diego explained, "so we were able to pull them towards us." He then went on to explain the importance of these experienced planners' knowledge: "[Their perspectives are] useful because when you have that kind of help you learn about what's going on in the institution, what the daily problem of the institution is, and that you're making decisions about an issue that will affect the institution. . . . [Being in] the middle ground has a very important advantage, because you're not totally disconnected but

you're also not totally immersed in the daily processing [*el tramitar diario*] of files and signatures and reference numbers and all that."

In spite of the Grupo POT's attention to the relationship between *plañear* and *tramitar*, to the interaction between planning and implementing, thinking and doing, most of the planners involved in the process ultimately worried about the transience of their work. In final reflections, Diego made an apprehensive comment about the lack of institutionalization of the modification project: "What does worry [me] is that, after all of this, the institution won't have a permanent office to monitor [the Plan's revision and implementation]. So [it ends up being that] some consultants come in and formulate a POT, they debate, come up with a product, and bye-bye. . . . I think there should be an office that is thinking the city, that is sketching it [*le esté echando lápiz*], discussing, and receiving inputs from someone to debate them."

These concerns were heightened by the impending collapse of the project during the 2011 electoral campaign and its indefinite suspension under the new city administration in January 2012. With most of the group members' contracts expiring and new planning directors taking office, the fate of the POT project was uncertain: there was nothing that would prevent it from being "forgotten in a drawer" (*engavetado*), as occurred frequently with other consultancy projects.

The eventful trajectory of the POT's modification project and its uncertain direction under the new city administration evinced the socio-political complexities of planning practice. Beyond the creation of a POT office that would be permanently dedicated to "thinking the city," as Diego suggested, the enactment of Bogotá's urban plans required far greater attention to actors, processes, and interactions, as he and other planners' also readily admitted. Rather than formulating "better" plans—understood here as fixed blueprints of desired realities—the revision and implementation of the POT depended on the elusive alignment of a multiplicity of people, ideas, practices, and artifacts. The main issue then was neither flawed institutions nor incompetent bureaucrats, but rather the creation an operational assemblage of actors and technical instruments within a changing and unwieldy political environment.³ Experts like Diego recognized the broader challenges of translating plans into durable networks and consistent practices, but, in the face of such difficulties, he and other planners continued to fall back on narrow bureaucratic and technical logics. They imagined idealized institutions and technical instruments that would allow them eventually to overcome such practical obstacles.

Planning after the Fact

In their everyday work, planners frequently referred to “lot by lot” (*predio a predio*) development as one of the key problems of Bogotá’s contemporary urbanism. Andrés, an urban geographer, would often tell me in a matter-of-fact tone, “The problem is that Colombians have a very low capacity to associate.” Such concerns resonated with scholarly descriptions of Bogotá as a “fragmented city” (Pergolis 1998). Urban fragmentation entailed not only the abandonment and destruction of public space (cf. Caldeira 2000; Pérez 2010), but also the effects of a deregulated real estate market where economic rationalities ruled over broader sociospatial criteria (Saldarriaga 2000).⁴

Colombia’s Urban Reform Law (Law 388/1997) was a decisive response to the increased deregulation of urban development, most clearly embodied in the city’s previous plan, the market-oriented Acuerdo 6 of 1990. The Urban Reform Law represented a paradigm shift towards land policy and financial instruments aimed at producing greater urban equality, sustainability, and productivity (Pinilla 2010). The POT—and its attempt to devise a planning assemblage more in tune with the city’s institutional, sociopolitical, and material realities—was to become the main vehicle for these changes. It represented a move from planning futures *ex nihilo* to planning *post festum*.⁵

The first version of Bogotá’s POT (2000), however, emphasized the “physical dimension of territorial planning” (2000, 345) without mobilizing the more progressive land policy and financial instruments created by the law. The POT’s first revision (2003) made a more explicit attempt to connect planning and land management instruments (*instrumentos de planeación y de gestión del suelo*). Two related and important tools that the administration has attempted to utilize during the past years are: (1) state capture of land value increments (*participación en plusvalías*)⁶ to finance affordable housing and public infrastructure, and (2) comprehensive urban development and renovation through partial plans (*plan parcial de desarrollo/renovación urbana*).

In practice, the participation of the city administration in *plusvalías* (land value increments) has been exceptionally low. Between 2003 and 2008, the administration anticipated collecting over US\$100 million; in the end, it collected less than US\$25 million (Grupo POT 2009). As Susana, a high-level department planner, put it: “It’s a small and uncertain collection, and in general what happens is that it doesn’t provide much. Here we have a lot of land value capture processing and it’s an administrative burn out [*desgaste administrativo*].”

Under current legislation, *plusvalías* occur when land values rise because of changes in land use and the increase of building allowances. In theory, the mechanism should successfully regulate land prices and facilitate the redistribution of rents generated by urbanization. In practice, however, the instrument has run into complex technical and political obstacles.

The calculation and collection of *plusvalías* present “countless technical and juridical alternatives” that make its “daily operation” very uncertain (Piniña 2010, 351). The lack of unified criteria and institutionalized forms of knowledge not only weaken its technical operation but also create spaces of administrative uncertainty and “discretionality” (*discrecionalidad*) that make the instrument vulnerable to economic and political pressures. Susana offered this insight about the everyday difficulties of *plusvalías*: “It is interesting and true that the state has to obtain part of the land value increments generated by public urban actions. But when we have such a strange regulation, which nobody understands and for which you almost need . . . I don’t know . . . someone initiated in the subject [*un iniciado*] to decipher what can be done in each piece of land [*en cada predio*], that kind of issue becomes very subjective.”

The *plusvalía* mechanism aspires to calculate the incalculable. When an urban project arrives for implementation in the planning department, the planner in charge must study the existing regulations for a particular lot and ensure that the project follows them. In Susana’s words, “[The architect] reviews the previous regulation, the Acuerdo 6, which is an entirely different thing, and then she has to do this project with that regulation. . . . It’s so crazy . . . but it’s the only way to compare regulation to regulation.” Once the “generating fact” (*hecho generador*) to justify the change—either a larger construction area or a more profitable use—is established, the project is analyzed by the Direction of Urban Economy and finally by expert appraisers hired by the Administrative Unit of Cadastre.

If calculating the value of future construction under incompatible regulations is problematic, the evaluation of profitability or economic potentials in relation to different land uses is even more speculative. Once again, the more circuitous the procedure, the more spaces are available to exert pressure through under-the-table negotiations, legal maneuvers, and political agreements. Finally, because value increments are calculated through a comparison of urban laws, and the previous regulation in Bogotá was the market-oriented *Acuerdo 6*, current building allowances are frequently more restrictive. This produces a *minusvalía* or loss of value, as it were, even in the case of empty lots, because older zoning would have allowed the construction

of larger areas. This makes it impossible to capture value generated by the majority of the city's own current construction activity.

Similar issues concern the *planes parciales*, possibly the most representative planning instruments in Colombia's urban reform laws. Aimed at overcoming the fragmentation of the city's earlier lot-by-lot urbanism, the *plan parcial* develops an association of landowners, developers, and the state by creating—contrary to what the name suggests—comprehensive development and redevelopment plans. In contrast to the diffused approach to planning used previously, *planes parciales* would address the lack of affordable housing, adequate public space, and infrastructure. They would enable “the urbanistic development of a specific area that includes the corresponding road infrastructure, green areas, facilities, and public services” (Pinilla 2010, 353). Moreover, by establishing a scheme for public-private cooperation, such plans were intended to allow a more just distribution of urban costs and returns. Rather than state financing for public infrastructure, which ultimately adds value to private properties, the *plan parcial* assigns a series of charges to the developer to distribute the benefits and increased land rents generated by urban development in a more equitable way.

A common complaint about *planes parciales* is their long processing time, with cases taking up to eight years. Since 2000, forty-five plans have been approved for vacant land destined for urban expansion and six for urban redevelopment; none has yet been implemented. Planners and developers have emphasized the lack of clear requirements and inconsistent procedural rules. Here again, bureaucratic opacity leaves ample room for arbitrariness and individual negotiations.⁷

Given the absence of a specific regulatory framework, the case of redevelopment plans (*planes parciales de renovación urbana*) is even more dramatic. The relevant procedures, created under very different conditions (i.e., vacant land, few property owners, no infrastructure), have been transposed onto these cases, generating even more contradictions and difficulties.

These were Susana's first impressions of *planes parciales* when she started working in the planning department after dealing with similar issues in the national Ministry of Housing and Urban Development: “I was very surprised when I got here and I realized that not even the expert team was clear on the procedure or scope or on what the distribution of charges and benefits was [*reparto de cargas y beneficios*].” She then went on to explain the fractures in the production and transmission of the technical knowledge: “Initially, the [planning department] hired an expert team from the Universidad Nacional

to process the *planes parciales*. So no knowledge was accrued here among our experts. Later on, the agreement was dissolved and . . . [a new director of *planes parciales*] came in and she alone was leading *planes parciales* with two or three people. The rest of the team didn't participate and no 'learned knowledge' [*conocimiento aprendido*] remained among the permanent staff."

As Susana detailed how *planes parciales* traversed the planning department, she emphasized the related technical and administrative problems: "It is often the technocrats who don't allow an agreement to take place [about how things should be done]." Here she meant the increased "politicization" (*politicización*) of the institution during the past years and the absence of a clear administrative structure with consistent procedures.

Not only are planning directors and consultants often at odds with the institution's official staff, but planners—many appointed through political favors—frequently lack technical competence and are immersed in power struggles. These conflicts are compounded by the private sector's resistance to development charges and taxation, or what Colombian law calls the "social demands on property" (*función social de la propiedad*), as well as by developers' attempts to deploy planning instruments to different ends and, more generally, by the obstacles to collective action. In urban redevelopment projects, for instance, the *plan parcial* has been used to change land uses, buy out property owners, or simply enhance building potentials, rather than to renovate urban areas designated for comprehensive change.

Ultimately, the impact of *planes parciales* in the city has been extremely limited. With only a few plans implemented in Bogotá's shrinking expansion areas and one approved redevelopment plan in the "built city" (*ciudad construida*), most of the city's urban growth still proceeds on a lot-by-lot basis. By all counts the redevelopment and redensification of the inner city (*centro expandido*) has intensified during the past years, exerting even more pressure on already scarce infrastructures, amenities, and public spaces.

Edificabilidad: Recontextualizing Planning Practice

On the basis of critical assessments of the POT's *plusvalías* and *planes parciales*, the Grupo POT set out to design new and more effective tools. Establishing development charges based on floor area ratios was one important strategy to overcome current technical and sociopolitical limitations. Rather than discarding the principles behind the *plusvalías* or *planes parciales*, they

sought to create a new framework. Planners ultimately conceived of *edificabilidad* as a pragmatic means of contextualizing planning practice that would incorporate existing institutional and urban conditions more explicitly.

The planners started by acknowledging how the city was growing and the extent to which planning instruments could regulate and distribute the associated costs and benefits. In this sense, the central issue for the Grupo POT was that the city was basically “growing on itself” (*creciendo sobre sí misma*). “Bogotá is building its second floor,” was the way in which Javier, an expert in urban regulations and codes, put it.

The planning instruments established in the POT, however, had been targeting and regulating the least representative form of urbanization in Bogotá: construction projects on the city’s shrinking stock of vacant land. While the city’s legal expansion onto such properties required associated payments (in the form of paid taxes or land transfers), the rapid reconstruction of existing central districts did not. In fact, the demolition of small structures and houses in the inner city for the construction of taller buildings was the primary way in which Bogotá was growing: upward and on repurposed properties. Critically, such construction also generated increased needs for public infrastructure.

“The only [mechanisms] that are contributing [resources or land],” Diego explained, “are development and urban renovation [*planes parciales de renovación urbana*]. [But this is] the minority [of land being developed]; the majority is in the built city [*ciudad consolidada*].” A figure that team members often showed in PowerPoint presentations illustrated the point: of the 3.75 million square meters that had been licensed and constructed in Bogotá between 2007 and 2009, 67 percent did not make any kind of monetary or land-based contribution to the city (Grupo POT 2009). For the Grupo POT, a more equitable and sustainable process of urbanization hinged on the possibility of regulating the growth of the *ciudad consolidada*.

Plusvalías were clearly not effective. They produced mostly procedural difficulties, and, more significantly, often conflicted with legal frameworks. Development charges were intended to emerge from the comparison between old regulations and the new supposedly more generous zoning regulations. But in practice the former often allowed higher densities making it impossible for the administration to obtain part of the increased gains of new developments. The *planes parciales de renovación urbana*—the other instrument that applied to the *ciudad consolidada*—had remained effectively blocked over the past twelve years. This model did not consider the financial, social, and material conditions under which redevelopment could become

feasible. In the 2000 POT, Diego noted, the logic of renovation had been the following: “[As a planner], I mark an area because it is deteriorated, but because I don’t have resources I wait for the private [sector] to come, but they don’t because they’re not interested.”

Using up-to-date information on public infrastructure and services as well as on building trends and urban densities, the Grupo POT planners devised a system for existing and permitted floor area ratios (*edificabilidades*) in different areas of the city. They then proposed to charge developers contributions of money or land in exchange for the right to build in ways that exceeded the very coefficients that the team itself considered desirable (in terms of infrastructure and services) in each area. Andrés, the urban geographer in charge of economic analysis and statistics in the Grupo POT, explained the proposal to a group of citizens on one occasion: “What we found is that the medians for building coefficients, which are registered in cadastre’s database and are up-to-date . . . , were good indicators for allowing lots in different areas to reach that coefficient without paying. We have many lots in the city, a bit idle, that could be developed to that point without paying. . . . So our first bet with *edificabilidad* is that we’re going to let people reach the median of their block.”

When the median was exceeded, what Andrés called the “real planning exercise” began. By this he meant establishing the permitted or projected *edificabilidades* in different urban zones; the approach would ultimately represent either incentives for or constraints on building and introduce certain obligations for developers. Instead of doing convoluted calculations based on incommensurable building codes or the projected economic profitability of changes to land use, planners would create value by means of a much simpler operation: for every 5.6 square meters built beyond the median coefficient (up to the projected coefficient), the developer would contribute the cost of one square meter. The money thus collected would fund urban projects—infrastructure, amenities, and public space—in each zone.

The exact proportion—one for every 5.6—was the result of protracted negotiations between the planning department and the Colombian Chamber of Construction (CAMACOL). These two often antagonistic organizations established this figure to balance the profitability of real estate development with the city’s public needs. Some planners disagreed with the proportion and the scope of the requirements the city imposed on its private real estate sector. “Are we placing too many burdens on developers?” they asked. Others pushed for stronger obligations, viewing the construction sector as traditionally “greedy.”

The key issue beyond these debates, Andrés explained, was how comprehensively the proposal reenvisioned the administration's procedures and criteria for establishing the benefits of urbanization and distributing costs: "This new financial resource isn't really new. When you look at the participation in land value increments [*plusvalías*] you'll see that participation also occurs in terms of increased floor area ratios [*edificabilidad*]. This is an adjustment of the capture method of that greater value [making it less reliant on zoning regulations]. For what purpose? So it can leverage the financing of public projects in the area."

On a spatial register, the Grupo POT had identified two "areas of opportunity" or *bolsas* (pockets), where urban redensification would be explicitly promoted. In other areas, given the conditions of infrastructure, services, and public space, urban development would be restricted. In all cases, new funds would be readily available to cover the costs of the ongoing process of redensification. In more general terms, the "sociospatial strategy," as the Grupo POT called it, intended to reshape the city's "unbalanced" structure and financial obligations. The scheme aimed to attract investment to the well-served and low-density *bolsas*, while attempting to contain the extraordinarily high densities of the city's underserved peripheries. Planners thereby sought both to recognize actual urban dynamics—existing floor area ratios and development patterns—and to create more pragmatic mechanisms to manage and obtain some of the economic value generated by real estate development.

Conclusion

In his "autopsy" of the failed project to build a rapid personal transit system in Paris during the 1970s and 1980s, Bruno Latour (1996, 78) argues that "failure and success have to be treated symmetrically." Rather than invoking first causes, this entails following projects as they are debated, transformed, and, at times, translated into a "stabilized state of things" (79). The faltering trajectory of the POT revision shows the extent to which planning projects in Bogotá are far from reaching stability, as well as the backstage innovations and conflicts that would otherwise remain out of sight: from stubborn regulatory frameworks and transient planning knowledges to self-critical and pragmatic modes of expertise. As an exercise in "prototyping" (Corsín-Jiménez 2014), the revision process reveals the ways in which planners incorporated an awareness of failure and uncertainty into their technocratic practice.⁸ As

the POT project collapsed in December 2012 and newly elected leftist mayor Gustavo Petro took office, the gap between the worlds of planning and politics resurfaced with intensity. For the new network of experts that came into the administration, many of whom were drawn from academia, planning failures were mainly the result of a lack of ideological and political commitment.

Paradoxically, for all the Grupo POT's attention to the micropolitics surrounding everyday planning routines, the broader sociopolitical implications of their work were never fully developed. This is something that Andrés noted after the project was suspended. "Nobody wants to be planned," he told me, "and least of all politicians." Rather than antagonizing or ignoring them, Andrés continued, "[We need a POT] that allows them to play their part. We need to understand [politicians] from [the perspective of] planning as actors, grabbing them through technical [knowledge]."

Other team members recognized additional political weaknesses. Fernando, one of the public officials in the group, once told me that for him the project had been too "developmentalist" (*desarrollista*). He was referring to the administration's promotion of market-driven real estate development. As he put it: "[The administration was] letting the private sector act and not demanding enough as a public sector." Diego made a similar point when he noted the almost complete absence of a "social housing policy."

During several work meetings Andrés had suggested related problems regarding the *edificabilidad* proposal. He had pointed out that contributions and investments would be localized and tied to real estate dynamics, leaving little room for redistribution to zones with less construction activity. Although other consultants and planners usually agreed on this point, the difficulty of arriving at alternative strategies and the priority given to development incentives caused the issue to recede into the background. More generally, the proposal's emphasis on the "redensification" of the inner city, understood primarily as an issue of efficiently promoting and taxing real estate development, betrayed technocratic neutrality. The incoming administration attempted to repoliticize planning with the concept of "revitalization" and its more explicit concern with inclusion and affordability.

A stronger critique of the POT revision, however, was that it did not live up to its own pragmatic ambitions. As Javier, the group's expert in urban law, put it, "The modification recognized problems and had important goals, but when it came to materializing them, it backed down." The revision had failed to simplify the convoluted patchwork of norms and regulations of previous POTs. Furthermore, the central idea of stimulating construction activity as

much as possible to capture greater rents had been compromised during the revision process. Planners had ultimately capped potential growth and circumscribed it only to a few urban areas.

For Javier, the modification was still “modernist urbanism . . . [which assumes] that you can anticipate controllable futures.” For him, the true innovation—a self-regulatory mechanism based on urbanization patterns and financial contributions—had been lost during the process. In the end, in his view, planning had succumbed to its modernist roots. Rather than recognizing the “unplannable” nature of urban realities, the POT had reinscribed experts’ faith in the transformative power of technical instruments. Most problematically, the Grupo had failed to engage the larger social and political networks in which planning practice was embedded. This ultimately led to the project’s demise.

In 2012, contracts expired, and the Grupo POT’s consultants left the planning department for positions in other government agencies. The old cubicles of the semiabandoned mezzanine were soon occupied by a new group of experts. Some of the functionaries who had worked in the original revision process, such as Javier, joined the newcomers, helping them navigate the thousands of pages and files that the Grupo POT had produced.

The modification process under the new Petro administration promised to produce a plan more firmly based on ideals of urban inclusion and sustainability. This much was clear during a public presentation at Bogotá’s Chamber of Commerce in which Javier explained the main goal of the new revision: the promotion of intense processes of densification in the inner city (not only in what the Grupo POT had identified as “areas of opportunity”), linked to expansive requirements and contributions of subsidized housing and public space.

As Javier clicked through his PowerPoint presentation, traces of the Grupo POT’s earlier work were apparent. The proposal, however, was a much more radical rendition of *edificabilidad* and of the notion of exacting monetary contributions from the real estate development. As he concluded the presentation, people in the auditorium were noticeably unsettled. Questions about implementation, the risks of “disorderly” densification, and, most significantly, the potentially negative effects of progressive financial mechanisms on land values filled the room.

The contentious debate about the plan only grew as months went by. The City Council finally voted against the proposal in 2013, but Mayor Petro defiantly approved it by decree. This set off an even larger conflict with developers, citizen organizations, political forces, and the national government.

Lawsuits were brought against the POT, and it was ultimately suspended by court order in 2014. Despite the administration's vigorous political discourse, planners ultimately resorted to the force of legality to materialize their urban vision. The new iteration of the POT became an attempt to produce urban inclusion by command. And once again, the logic of planning crashed against urban, social, and political realities.

If the previous modification project had sidestepped substantial political discussions in favor of a pragmatic recontextualization of planning practices, the latest POT revision seemed to have forgone concerns about implementation "details" by focusing on political rhetoric. In both cases, planners had recognized but not fully engaged the range of actors, practices, and processes involved in planning processes. They had first created technical instruments more attuned to the dynamics of urbanization and later charged them with political force, only to find that such assemblages were incompatible with the broader technopolitical terrain in which they were located. The idea of retooling planning to bring it closer to institutional and urban realities—of planning after the fact—ultimately succumbed to the decontextualized machinations of planning as usual.

Notes

1. The 2012–16 city administration launched a third revision process, which was ultimately unsuccessful; a fourth modification is currently underway. On the transience and mutability of master plans see also Crawford and Herzfeld (both this volume).

2. I am in conversation here with literature that moves beyond critical portrayals of modernist, top-down technocratic knowledge and instead explores the reflexive, contradictory, and recursive dimensions of expert practice. Recent examples include scholarship on journalism (Boyer 2013), engineering (Harvey and Knox 2015), design (Murphy 2015), and planning (Mack 2019).

3. In contrast to the ongoing turn to new materialisms and nonhuman agency in anthropology and urban studies (see, e.g., Latour 2007; McFarlane 2011), I am more interested here in the dialectical relationship between humans and nonhumans, experts and artifacts. I thus build on recent work that attends to the entanglements between materiality and imagination, things and ideology (Navaro-Yashin 2012; Appadurai 2015; Murphy 2015; Pérez 2016).

4. Such criteria include the just provision of public infrastructure, services, amenities, and affordable housing, among others.

5. I thank Michael Herzfeld for suggesting this term to me (see Bourdieu 1977, 36).

6. According to Martim Smolka of the Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, "Value capture refers to the recovery by the public of the land value increments (unearned income or *plusvalías*) generated by actions other than the landowner's direct investments" (2013, 8).

7. As with many other procedures, the trajectory of *planes parciales* in the planning department evinces the dialectical relationship between diffused individual actions and accountability through bureaucratic networks and the opening of spaces for individual bureaucratic agency. In this regard, a range of actors exploited the institution's structural opacity. On bureaucratic structure and individual agency, see Herzfeld 1992 and, more recently, Hull 2012 and Gupta 2013.

8. For recent anthropological work on urban uncertainty see e.g., Zeiderman et al. 2015 and Melly 2017.

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