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Mapping Territorial Resistance – Transformative Heritage in Bogotá

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Abstract: This article explores Bogotá's urban transformation, framed within the concept of crisis as a catalyst. Drawing on the city's history from an indigenous territory to a modern megacity, it examines how different kinds of crises overlap and endure over time. The analysis uses former villages and their plazas as a starting point, showing how the (post)colonial structures, indigenous spatial practices, and rapid urbanization intersect to shape contemporary urban spaces. By integrating decolonial theory, critical cartography, and participatory action research, the study redefines crisis as a turning point that can foster resilience, adaptation, and transformation. It advocates for a shift from a problem-centered view to an urban transformation based on local communities, cultural heritage, and historical continuities as critical resources for reimagining urban futures. Through this, the article proposes new roles for architects and urbanists, proposing »transformative heritage« as an agent in the process of urban renewal.

Keywords: Bogota; Critical Cartography; Heritage; Participatory Action Research; Postcolonial Space; Urban Transformation.

Corresponding author: Alissa Diesch (Universidad del Norte, Colombia); alissa.diesch@t-online.de; https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0230-7933 Open Access. © 2025 Alissa Diesch published by transcript Verlag. This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 (BY) license.

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Introduction

Global megatrends – the effects of climate change, political, economic and societal disruptions and transformations – currently discussed in Europe and North America as poly-crisis, are hitting cities in the Global South on top of long-lasting, silenced crises outside the spotlight. Here, »crisis not only is acute but also characterized by persistence« (Appelhans 2024: 305). Taking the example of Colombia, acute crises range from unstable economic and political prospects, environmental disasters – namely droughts and floodings – to systematic killings of community leaders, forced internal and transnational migration, as well as health issues due to neglected tropical diseases. In a bigger framework, persisting post-colonial structures and effects such as immense social-ethnical disparities, the decade-long armed conflict, including narco-industries and politics, as well as the continuing economic dependence on extractivism, are of striking influence. All these crises have a strong spatially related agency. They are about spatial conflicts and have propelled on-going rapid urbanization including dynamics that defy Western urban theories. In this article, the Colombian capital – Bogotá – will be analyzed as a space where crises constitute and evolve.

Crisis here will be understood not only as a state of misery but, closer to its original Greek meaning, *krisis*, as a turning point of a malfunctioning situation. Uncovering effective, culturally evolved structures and systems supports the overdue shift of the dominant problem-centered view of cities of the Global South to a more differentiated and empowering narrative (King 2006; Robinson 2022; Roy 2009) – without denying existing challenges and the need of structural transformation (Appelhans 2024). The role of architects and urbanists in this context concerns specific spatial analytical approaches, theoretically informed (de)construction and analysis of narratives and how they are related to and nourished by urban practices and imaginaries (Silva 2006; Huffschmid/Wildner 2013), as well as advanced communication and moderation abilities (Heindl 2024). Reflections on norm and deviation of urban ideals (Chandokes 199; Kraft 2016) are embedded in broader considerations about decolonial knowledge production (Bhambra 2014; Kerner 2012; Mignolo 2011; Quijano 1992).

Due to the rapid urbanization between 1950-1990, Latin America today has an urbanized population of more than 80% and the highest rate of inhabitants of megacities (United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division 2019). Bogotá is a paradigmatic example of

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these dynamics, representing annual growth rates of up to 5-7% during that period (WPR 2023) while performing pragmatic problem-solving in urban planning and policies. The rapid conquest and colonization by the European powers during the 16th century, along with the exuberant and capital-driven urbanization of the 20th century, represent two profound ruptures for Latin America, both of which continue to shape its urban spaces. Many of these spaces are characterized by the simultaneity of different cultures and historical periods leading often to conflicts, segregation and hybridization (Huffschmid/Wildner 2013). From an architectural and urban design perspective, the characteristic square *plazas* of colonial urban foundations in the the former Spanish colonies will be analyzed as such places. These plazas continue to influence centrality and the understanding of public space to this day.

The genesis of Bogotá (fig. 1) is commonly, even in academic literature, told as the story of a city (»Santafe de Bogotá«) founded by Spanish conquerors in the 16th century, that expanded mono-centrically and explosively in the 20th century. While this describes the two most important turning points in its history, it is sidelining the agency of communities, structures and dynamics active since pre-Hispanic times. The Muisca, the Indigenous group continuously inhabiting the high plains of Bogotá for more than 1200 years, for a long time have been referred to as extinct and merged into the mestizo society (Diesch/Niviayo/Yopasá 2018). Only since 1991 have the first local communities been formally recognized as Indigenous groups, also due to their uninterrupted presence and agency in the territory. Their strong though mainly ignored influence on colonization and urbanization is lately getting more scientific attention, increasingly also authored by researchers of the Muisca communities (del Castillo 2019; Durán 2004; Fernandez 2014; Goubert 2019; Niviayo 2017).

After decades of a problem-centered urbanistic perspective on the city with a focus on quick and technology-driven solutions, in the last two decades, academic attention has been put on the urban cultural-historic background of the present-day megacity, too. Especially, the historic center »La Candelaria,« the Spanish foundation and later colonial city, has received scientific consideration (Mejía 2000; Escovar/Mariño/Peña 2004). Individual research works have examined urban development aspects on a territorial scale with a critical historical contextualization before colonization (Calderón 2016), providing also important map material, and a new framing

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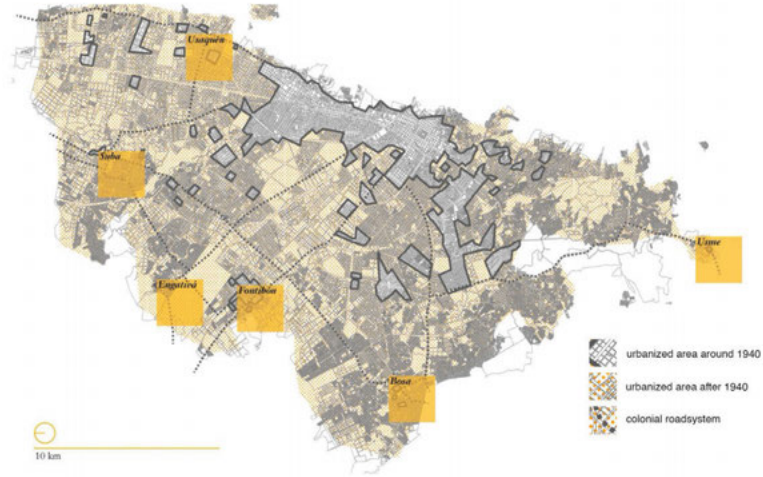

1.
Map of Bogotá showing urbanization between 1940 and 2020 and the examined former villages in the urban periphery. Image by the author.

2.
Aerial picture of the plaza of Bosa, a former village / »Pueblo de Indio,« part of Bogotá in 2014. Image by the author based on a map from https://mapas.bogota.gov.co/, accessed October 5, 2025. The marked buildings have operative and representative functions and are of different historical backgrounds: The colonial church building represents the Catholic church, the presumable republican town house hosts a metropolitan administrative unit, and the building of the Muisca community is a place of gathering and reception.

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of the pre-European territory of the high plains of Bogotá as a complex human-environment system of trans-scalar shaping (Rodriguez 2019).

The focus of this article is on the process of conurbation of formerly rural centralities into the megacity. These places have been nodes of slightly clustered, dispersive settlements in a network of the Muisca empire, were reshaped as densified »Pueblos de Indios« (Indian villages) around a characteristic central plaza during the time of Spanish colonization in the 16th century and became individual villages and centers of municipalities around the Colombian capital before turning functionally, politically, and morphologically into parts of the mega city during the 20th century (fig. 2).

Material and Methods

This research followed a culture-based, decentralized, and locally informed approach. Using the plazas of the six former villages as entry points, it explored Bogotá's periphery and its metropolitan transformation through a set of qualitative methods (fig. 3) synthesized in different mappings compiled in an atlas (Diesch 2024). The explorations ranged from gathering, classifying and processing historic plans and archive material from various sources, including gray literature and primary sources, to diverse forms of participatory action research (PAR) (Fals Borda 1978). PAR, informed here by critical cartography (Turnbull 1993; Corner 1999), is understood as a means to represent and localize different layers of knowledge, especially the perspective from which this knowledge has arisen. »[T]he place of ›the utterance‹« (Spivak 1998: 82) is highlighted, facilitating the relation between place, knowledge and power (Roy 2015) in a decolonial sense. Through mapping and linked theorization, »new geographies of theory« (Roy 2009) emerge revealing postcolonial structures and enabling integrative measures.

Based on heterogeneous historic plan material, a uniform typo-morphological plan synopsis was created, making visible the forma urbis (Moudon 1997) around the historic plazas and their transformations over time (Solà Morales 1997). The newly developed set of maps now reveals spatial continuities and transformations that were previously unreadable, enabling entirely new interpretations. These cartographic representations were correlated with sets of maps at larger scales and over broader temporal frameworks (Calderón 2016; Diesch 2022) and the results of PAR.

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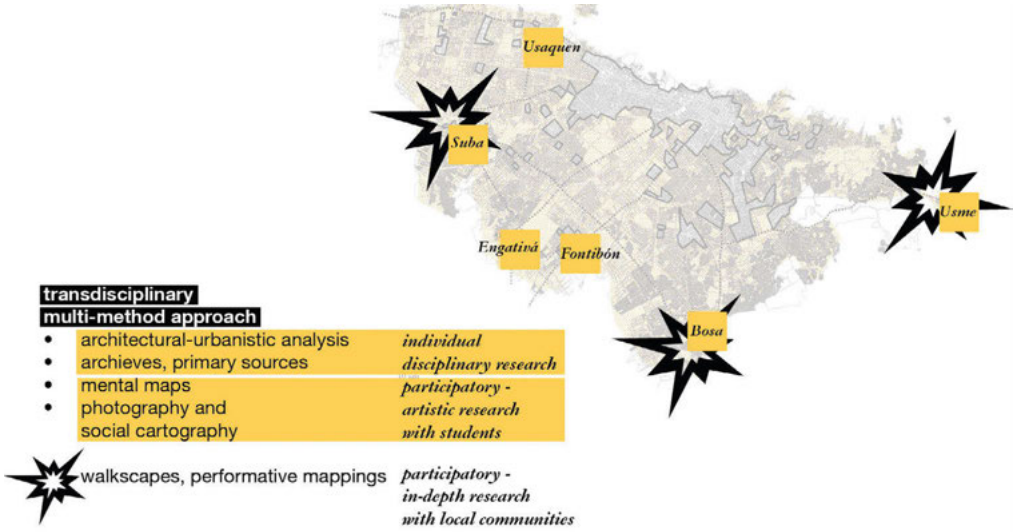

3.
Overview of research methods and sites of analysis. Image by the author.

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The concept of PAR has been developed and theorized in Latin America under the influence of critical geography (Santos 1978) and liberation pedagogy (Freire 1970), underscoring the transformative and empowering aspects of participatory knowledge creation. Especially notable is social cartography (Diez 2012; Vélez/Rátiva/Varela 2012) – collectively created maps that include conventionally unrepresented aspects such as personal relations and vanished places and linkages, that are widely employed to gather spatialized data while strengthening the sense of local belonging and agency of communities.

For the analyzed examples here, different forms of maps were created with university students in Bogotá to represent informed external perspectives, and with representatives of selected local initiatives from three of the villages, for internal perspectives.

In each case, mapping was designed as a site- and context-specific process with and for the participants, fostering transdisciplinary settings. Artistic and performative approaches helped soften conventional hierarchies, which were blurred, enabling new forms of knowledge and experience exchange. In line with a decolonial approach, this can amplify previously overheard voices and disrupt dominant structures of knowledge production (Bhambra 2014; Kerner 2012).

One source of mappings with students was individual mind maps, where students were asked to draw their ideas and concepts related to the names of the former villages, today city districts in Bogotá. Another source of collective mappings was the interdisciplinary student research group »Fotografía y Cartografía social[1].« Here, social cartography was combined with photography as a subjective-visual act of selection, omission, contextualization, and representation (Tagg 1988; Pink 2013) that allowed for the expression of perceptions without the need to verbally define concepts and definitions. It was used on-site as a first step (Casasbuenas/Diesch 2017). In a second step, cooperative selection, localization, and conceptualization of photographs articulated collective imaginaries and evaluations of the local heritage of each of the places in maps and short texts (Diesch 2024).

Participatory walks with representatives of three local initiatives (Diesch 2020) – a heritage group consisting of peasants and students, an academic-pedagogy collective and an indigenous community – constituted »walkscapes« (Careri 2009). By roaming the territory in question, space is perceived and created, and the character, meaning, and relationships (Certeau 1988)

1 https://miradas.poligran.edu.co/index.html, accessed October 5, 2025.

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4.
Plan synopsis of the sites 1940 (black) - 1980 (gray) - 2020 (light gray). The urbanistic typology of the square colonial plazas sticks out as the centers of the historic village (in black). Image by the author.

5.
Impressions from the plaza of Bosa. Images by Luis Ramos (top and bottom center), Maria Fernanda Corredor (left center), Roger Niño (right center) taken in the framework of the student research group »Fotografía y Cartografía social« coordinated by Maria José Casasbuenas, Politecnico Grancolombiano and Alissa Diesch, Universidad la Gran Colombia 2015-2018, all the other images by the author.

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of different places are transmitted performatively (Wolfrum/Brandis 2015). Just like in photography, selection, omission, and context can be surfaced in a non-verbalized way. In the intense exchanges during the on-site research and follow-up meetings with cartographic and photographic material, situations of actual transdisciplinary knowledge generation were achieved (Diesch 2024).

Results

All the information extracted from the different sources was spatialized into cartographic form. A broad set of different maps – compiled in an atlas – brings together knowledge from diverse sources, initiating a hermeneutic dialogue and prompting further inquiry (Cavalieri 2019), in line with the iterative nature of abductive research.

Synthetic typo-morphological maps for 1940, 1980, and 2020 (fig. 4) reveal the persistence of both colonial urban design principles and Indigenous land-use patterns (Diesch 2022). The historic colonial plazas remain spatially-typologically central, functioning as reference and meeting points equipped with representative architecture (Diesch 2024): They act as »significant places [that] do not lose their importance. […They] offer an open tableau for constantly changing social and urban use. They are at the same time places of conciseness and contingency« (Wolfrum 2015: 18). The specific urban layout of the colonial plazas has largely remained unchanged, proving to be a robust framework for changing realities in the last 500 years. Qualitative findings – from academic publications, gray literature, (social) media, personal observation, students' mind maps, and participatory walks with local heritage initiatives (Diesch 2024) – demonstrate that these plazas continue to embody and related to pre-Hispanic, colonial, contemporary, rural, and urban spatialities (fig. 5). As such they create »third spaces« (Bhabha 1994).

In addition, the plan synopsis reveals that, beyond the clearly delimited colonial-founded village cores, there exists – to varying extent across cases and especially prevalent near rivers and wetlands – a continuity of rural typologies and land use patterns characterized by a dispersed settlement structure (fig. 6). These correspond closely to archeological patterns, attributed to pre-Hispanic Muisca settlements (Boada 2006; Herrera 1998). The plans illustrate their presence in the transforming rural-urban fabric until the 1980s and show how they continue to influence the morphological structure of the contemporary metropolis. This suggests a continuity

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6.
Indigenous settlement structures in the transforming city, top-left in each of the maps. Marked with a hatching as mixed cultivation areas in a map from 1915 (Estado Mayor General. Carta Militar de Colombia. 1:25.000, from: Universidad Nacional de Colombia (http://cartografia.bogotaendocumentos.com/mapa, accessed October 5, 2025) and typo-morphologically identified by comparison with archeologically proven Muisca settlement patterns in maps in different phases of urbanization, here highlighted as shaded area. Image by the author.

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of Indigenous socio-spatial relations to the territory. When contextualized with additional historic map material, (gray) literature, and in-depth participatory research with local Muisca community leaders, the evidence supports the assumption of continued, territory-bound practices (Diesch 2021).

Discussion

The Dilemma of Formal Recognition

The findings show that each of the plazas represents and continuously reproduces multiple simultaneously existing spaces – referencing pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial times, expressing Indigenous, rural and urban characteristics, which elude the simplifying dialectic of colonial ideology and modern technocratic thinking. These spatial, discursive and functional continuities encounter ruptures and transformations, whereby the reading, interpretation, creation, and appropriation of spatial-material traces depend heavily on differing social perspectives: Residents from the surroundings of the plazas, farmers, indigenous people, other inhabitants of Bogotá, planners, and scientists perceive and evaluate the plazas differently and form changing relationships. The interpretative and performative range is far more complex and contradictory than the dichotomous division of urban/rural, indigenous/European, or modern/traditional. From the perspective discussed here, the plazas appear as highly polyvalent spaces in the urban fabric – spaces that have actively shaped both historical and current dynamics and hold significant potential as agents for future urban transformations.

They are simultaneously historic and contemporary places with an effective agency for the current metropolis. As a recognizable urban typology, they act as a symbol (Eco 1968), whose signification has drastically changed from spaces of submission to places of community, gathering and exchange. In this »seizure of the sign« (Bhabha 1994: 193), the current »mestizo« society has deconstructed implicitly the logic and authority of the colonial system in a gradual and ongoing process (fig. 7). This powerful transformation has not been made explicit so far and reflections in the present decolonial discourse in Latin America are still pending.

Their official recognition as »componentes del patrimonio construido« (components of built heritage) (Decreto 190 de 2004, Art. 125) at the metropolitan level in Bogotá; however, it follows a mere preservationist approach and

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7.
Example of third spaces. A graffito at the door of the local Muisca community space at the plaza of Suba: The urban Indigenous community, rooted in their ancestral territory, academically educated, and bearers of ancient wisdom, continues the tradition of corn cultivation and the use of petroglyphs – symbolized in a graffito of the »Tunjo,« a water deity. The community space at the colonial-founded plaza highlights the plaza's continuous significance as a central urban site – now appropriated to assert Indigenous presence in the territory. Photograph by the author.

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reduces their heritage value to the urban layout rooted in colonial rule and selected historic buildings representing state and church power. This framing limits their broader significance as historical centralities (Carrión 2003) by omitting the simultaneous presence of more diverse historical traces and transformations on a material, social and discursive level. The plazas are not static, they are embedded in a permanent dynamic that continually generates new »third spaces,« where multiple temporalities and spaces emerge (King 2009). A purely chronological perspective only partially reveals their character, as what appears to be the past continues to actively shape the present and the future. A transversal reading, focusing on this simultaneity and thus on the space offers deeper insight. Such a reading reveals their architectural capacity as concise structures with a high contingency (Wolfrum 2015), enabling drastic shifts in significance and highlighting their potential as catalysts for urban renewal. Their generic, repetitive appearance makes them a rhetorical figure in the urban space that can turn out to be a powerful symbol of community-led change, unleashing transformative dynamics.

For the high plains of Bogotá, Calderón (2016) points out that today's territory is the result of many interlocking phases, emphasizing that these historical layers are not just an inert substrate, but rather an active principle that is still effective today. The traces of the past in the present city are not silent witnesses, but rather spaces that still characterize the metropolis today. The palimpsest character of the territory (Corboz 2001 [1983]) manifests itself in different ways, and the impact of these spaces depends on their meaning and interpretation, which can be turned into an active measure for urban renewal. These considerations call for a new understanding of heritage, a shift from a mere preservation of historic structures to empowering the transformative agency of significant places and structures.

Continuous Territorial Presence

Indigenous infrastructures and territorial systems have been systematically dismissed for centuries, usually reducing human intervention to isolated settlements and framing natives as simply adapting to or taking advantage of so-called »natural environments« as Heckenberger and Góes Neves (2009) exemplify this in the Amazon. Recent studies reveal that in the high plains of Bogotá as well, complex systems of water management, settlement and agricultural structures were carefully developed and expanded over centuries, transforming the entire territory that has often been labeled as

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8.
Indigenous settlement structures highlighted as shaded areas in original map material: 1915 (Estado Mayor General. Carta Militar de Colombia. 1:25.000, from: http://cartografia.bogotaendocumentos.com/mapa, accessed October 5, 2025) –1940 (Instituto Geográfico Militar y Catastral. Cundinamarca. Carta preliminar. 1:10.000, from: Universidad Nacional de Colombia, http://cartografia.bogotaendocumentos.com/mapa, accessed October 5, 2025) –2007 (Martinez et al. 2007; this map shows current residences of Muisca families). Tight relations between the place of dwelling and the river become evident. Shadings by the author.

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natural (Rodriguez 2019). A decolonial perspective calls for a reframing of these cultural achievements (Hernández 2020), a reevaluation of socio-spatial continuities and, hence, the derivation of new insights that support their integration into contemporary planning. A significant yet underrepresented heritage value of these systems lies in their trans-scalar multifunctional logic which – beyond their historical relevance – offers a form of culturally rooted framework for future planning.

Cross-referencing written sources and the developed cartographic data reveals previously overlooked continuities. Several colonial sources refer to the refusal of the Muisca – among others in Usaquen (Zambrano et al. 2000) – to abandon their original places of residence, settlement and lifestyle in favor of relocation to the colonial urban structures around the plazas, despite drastic coercive measures such as torture and the burning of dwellings. Maps from the early 20th century show typical pre-colonial Muisca settlement structures in various of the examined places (figs. 6 and 8), emphasizing the endurance of Indigenous settlement structures. Additionally, academic work, mostly authored by community members, evidences continuity in Indigenous, territorially related cultural practices throughout the 20th century (Durán 2004; Fernandez 2014; Niviayo 2017). These practices coincide with the described settlement patterns, underscoring the strong relationship between spatial organization and cultural practices. The analysis of the spatial transformation points out the reciprocal impact urbanization and communities have had: Urbanization has affected habits and cultural self-awareness of the communities (Durán 2004; Niviayo 2017) and the mapped-out Indigenous typologies along the river – though highly altered – have molded the basis for contemporary urban structures that are still home to Muisca families (Diesch 2021) (fig. 8). These structures represent third spaces, they are simultaneously rural, indigenous, urban and modern but in a new, consciously and commonly crafted way. This leads to the assumption that, on the one hand, socio-spatial structures have been maintained throughout colonial and post-independence periods; and on the other, that territorial relations and spatial configurations, or, more simply, architecture, have been used as spatially articulated resistance to colonization measures and capitalist urbanization processes (Diesch 2021). These socio-spatial structures, proven to be resilient even throughout critical ruptures, today represent a call to reactivate such interlinked systems – technically and culturally – as part of a broader, culture-based urban design strategy.

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Disruptive Appearance

Urbanization has acted as a catalyst for the literal »uncoverings« of Bogotá's Indigenous past and ongoing presence. Around the year 2000, physical excavations for infrastructure and housing projects revealed archeological evidence in Engativá (Muñoz 2004) and Usme (Urrea 2011), indicating pre-colonial significance of these sites. Likewise, land-title processes in Bosa uncovered long-suppressed Indigenous roots and enduring territorial relationships of the current inhabitants (Durán 2004). These examples illustrate how archeology here shifts from merely digging in the past towards a relational, interdisciplinary practice with territorial and transformative perspectives (Heckenberger/Góes Neves 2009). Community initiatives have taken these clashes and the conflicts they expose as a starting point to claim their right to co-create the city. By drawing on the history of their places, they were developing action-related, community-based concepts of heritage (Diesch 2020). While the rapid and uncoordinated urbanization of Bogotá reflects crises of the 20th century, these grassroots responses reveal a spatial-temporal collision of crises. Here, accumulated ruptures appear as turning points – in the Greek sense of »krisis« – enabling a reframing of the present and creating new possibilities for future city-making.

This reframing implies new responsibilities for architects and urbanists. Rather than relying on conventional top-down solutions, professionals need to explore how these initiatives can become transformative actors in processes of urban transformation. This requires a careful balancing – avoiding both the delegation of responsibility onto under-resourced grassroots initiatives and the paternalistism of top-down approaches (Heindl 2024). Architecture then comprises discursive and functional linkages with large-scale human-environment-relations that can be reactivated by integrating these communities into future planning. In this light, the »tabula plena« (Roberts 2016) becomes a basis for actively engaging past eras in present-day interventions, fostering a creative dialog across centuries. Significant sites such as the plazas and the layered territorial dynamics of Bogotá's periphery can be activated through »horizontal« relationships (Viganò 2019). Recognizing the rhythms and traces of the past becomes essential to sustain the evolving »dance« of urbanism (Solà-Morales 1997).

In all these cases, spatial analysis and mappings have been essential tools: They help to disentangle complex realities, reveal interrelated dynamics, and transform them into agents of urban transformations. Under this lens, the

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spaces, relations, and dynamics presented here can be seen as counterprojects of coexistence, »radically different systems, alternative world visions, and as such they may legitimise positions currently marginalized by mainstream thinking or dominant discourses« (Viganò/Pietropolli 2024: 73). The role of architectural thinking – recognizing these principles as active assets and a creative resource for urban design – is crucial for developing the skills needed to transform cities into sustainable urban spaces.

Conclusion

Understanding crisis as a potential turning point – a way out of a malfunctioning situation – the described ruptures, clashes and outcomes offer insights for new opportunities in urban design. However, while strategies that demonstrate community resilience must be recognized, they should not be overburdened with expectations (Appelhans 2024). The role for architects and urban designers is to uncover the underlying socio-spatial structures – a decolonial perspective helps to identify and name them – and to develop context-sensitive frameworks and strategies for transformation. This article illustrates how unraveling complex urban constellations and reframing them through spatial and cultural analysis can generate empowering starting points for urban transformation – rooted in local context and communities' practices rather than in problem-driven, technological solutions.

Using the example of rapid urbanization as a consequence of poly-crisis, where ruptures of different times and contexts spatially clash, the shifting meanings and appropriations of originally colonial plazas and the continuity of Indigenous spatial practices in the territory call for a new notion of heritage. Based on the relationship among significant places, territorial structures, and active communities, heritage becomes a means of »exploring and proposing [a] counterproject« (Viganò/Pietropolli 2024: 73). *Transformative heritage* a concept based on an expanded creative and relational understanding of heritage enables the uncovering of rooted site-specific as well as structurally ignored trans-scalar places, structures and interactions (Diesch 2024).

Through a wide set of participatory methods, this research highlights the agency of communities as key actors in the making of the city. This recognition enables the empowerment of overlooked organizational principles and socio-cultural significance to places and territories that continue to shape urban spaces. Alongside material traces, conventional recognition

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and overall known relations, these principles, communities and networks are relational, spatial, and discursive resources for future design strategies. While these systems may appear fragmented, subtle and complex, they have proven resilience as they have endured through colonization and urbanization. Recognizing their structuring logic allows planners to draw on them as cultural assets. In this sense, spatial analysis becomes a tool not only for diagnosis but also for the discovery of latent capacities for renewal.

Transformative heritage calls for new relational and design-driven paradigms: Inherent transformative structures and narratives can replace rigid dichotomies and open new pathways for action. Through existing discursive references, social structures and paradigmatic architecture can support new narratives, while triggering cooperative transformation processes. For this to be effective, planners and decision-makers must be trained to recognize and integrate these rooted practices into formal systems and understand them as bases for design-driven projects (Aschner/Forero/Sarmiento 2025). This includes shifting institutional frameworks to support community-led design, culturally rooted urban strategies, and multi-scalar approaches to territorial transformation. Ultimately, this article advocates for urbanism as a practice of co-creation – where local knowledge, community agency, spatial practices, and heritage are understood as active, relational resources for designing resilient urban futures.

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