

Urbanism and Accident Prevention in Cities of developing Nations: the Case of Bogota, Colombia

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The number of persons who died in Colombian due to transportation-related accidents in 1998 was 7.595 (in 206.283 reported traffic collisions), more than twice the people killed (3.500) the same year as result of the different wars the country is suffering from in the last decades. Despite the fact that most of the fatalities occurred within the cities (Bogotá accounts for almost 1.000 of them) so far, neither urban studies nor urban planners have approached the phenomenon in a way that permits both to understand the internal logics of such injuries and to prevent such high statistics. That is why traditionally this has been a field exclusively looked after by engineering, a discipline which on its own has studied it only in a quantitative and descriptive manner.

For the first time in Colombian history, in the year 2000, a research project (“Accidentality pertaining to roads and streets in Bogotá”), undertaken by the Secretaría del Gobierno Distrital, the Engineering Faculty and the Centro de Estudios Sociales (CED) of the Universidad Nacional de Colombia, inquired about the possible relations that could exist between Urbanism and Architecture in the streets and cross-streets of Bogotá- and between city planning and the planning of road and transportation systems – with the rate of accidents in traffic in the capital: this project began with an inquiry about the incidence of the spatial dimension, both local and metropolitan, on street and road accidentality in the city.

This paper constitutes a presentation of the contribution provided to the project from the point of view of urbanism and it has two fundamental objectives:

To show, based on a critical analysis of the spatial, architectonic and urbanistic composition and of the limitations and functional errors, in what way and up to what extent physical, constructive and cultural aspects are involved in accidentality in two of the main crossings in Bogotá; and consequently, the manner in which broadening and widening the determination of the spatial component (the urban planning, the architecture and the urbanism of the place and of the metropolis) can influence accidentality.

In the second place, to expose some of the theoretical elements of architecture, urbanism and planning that show both the increasing responsibility of these disciplines in the occurrence of collisions from different fluxes of mobility of the metropolis, but also the enormous potential they could have in the prevention and decrease of the consequences of such collisions.

The study showed the pertinence of the incorporation of the systematic urbanistic gaze to the spatial context of accidentality and it potentialized contributions both in the areas of diagnosis and analysis as well as in the conclusions and recommendations.

In this manner, it opened an area that allows for prevention to be taken on in an institutional framework beginning with the stage of design and planning of the entire city and, especially, of the street and transport systems, overcoming the traditional idea that accidents are the responsibility of the persons that are involved in them (pedestrians, occupants and drivers).

As this is obvious, the afore-mentioned allows for the possibility to design policies in the general order of the State, and to summon other citizen actors to confront a problem that is the basis of the modernization of a metropolis of a significant size as is Bogotá (7.000.000 inhabitants, the political and administrative capital of Colombia).

In any case, this is a seminal study and it still encounters resistance, both in the field of traditional research as well as in the administrations both of the city as well as in the academic world: traditional urbanism offers resistance in assuming street accidentality as a component of its disciplinary corpus.

However, the way this study has been assimilated when explained both in the institutional context in which it was contracted as in the public arena of congresses and academic events, makes it possible to assume the magnitude and significance of the contribution in a positive way, particularly in the methodological approach, but also in terms of the perspective of helping create better living conditions for Colombian citizens, male and female.

As this is a problem that most possibly presents itself in many cities of countries that are beginning to enter in the process of modernization, and therefore of rationalization of its systems of daily functional bearing, I consider it to be enormously important to share this experience in the context of this sixth World Conference on "Injury Prevention and Control."