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Tarnished miracle of Medellín, Colombia, holds a lesson for Mexico

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MEDELLÍN, Colombia – The name alone, Medellín, once evoked mayhem. Then, after years of drug violence, high-profile kidnappings and criminal groups operating with near impunity, the city transformed itself.

Crime and violence plummeted. The arts and culture thrived. It became known as the Medellín Miracle. And leaders from drug-plagued cities in Mexico came to see how it was done.

Today, with its gleaming buildings, rolling hills, thriving arts scene and stunning libraries that rise above impoverished neighborhoods, Medellín remains a beacon of hope for troubled Mexican border cities. But the miracle has been tarnished. With a recent spike in violence and the re-emergence of longstanding problems, Medellín also stands as a reminder of how entrenched the drug trade can become and how long and complicated is the road to recovery.

Just three years ago, former Mayor Sergio Fajardo, Colombian President Álvaro Uribe and U.S. politicians touted the city as the Medellín Miracle, a title apparently well-deserved. Civic improvements, new architecture, and an 80 percent drop in homicides brought the city new wealth and swagger and made it a model for drug-plagued Mexican border cities like Ciudad Juárez.

"Much of what we're doing in Ciudad Juárez is based on the Medellín model," said Mayor José Reyes Ferriz, who has visited Medellín and is working on building schools and cultural centers and creating jobs for unemployed youth – favorite targets for recruitment by organized crime. "The focus in Medellín is social, and we realize that our problem is socially generated."

But a closer look reveals that the success Medellín enjoyed had more to do with finding accommodations between organized crime and the government than with eradicating organized crime. In short, Medellín is a lesson of how the mayhem may be just one killing, one arrest or one extradition away from exploding again.

The key figure here was a paramilitary leader turned drug trafficker named [Diego](#) Murillo, also known as Don Berna. A tough goon respected by gangs, he enforced a peace pact with the government. He ordered other criminal organizations to put their arms down, respect each other's territories, and stop the kidnappings and killings.

"Don Berna was the real boss of the city," said Moritz Akerman, one of Medellín's top intellectuals and writers.

Nearly three years ago, however, Don Berna was arrested by Colombian law enforcement officials and extradited to the United States. The violence resumed, with gangs fighting to fill the power vacuum.

In 2009, killings in Medellín, a city of 3 million people, rose dramatically.

"Miracle story? Not at all," said María Elena Saldarriaga, a human rights activist. "They wanted to make everything beautiful, make us feel pretty, but along the way they couldn't get rid of poverty, and inside we continued to die slowly. It was just a matter of time before the old, deadly picture returned. Medellín is a reminder that you cannot cover the mess for too long, that the past haunts us."

The Medellín model will be on center stage Sunday, when voters go to the polls to elect the next president of Colombia. The choice is between [Juan Manuel Santos](#), a former defense minister who is campaigning under the policies of the incumbent, Uribe, of strengthening security and restoring government authority.

His opponents are [Antanas Mockus](#), former mayor of Bogotá, and his running mate, former Medellín Mayor Fajardo. Both men want to change direction and focus more on educational initiatives to promote social and economic development, following the model of Medellín.

"Our definition of education as one of the engines for social transformation is precisely about projecting what we effectively achieved in Medellín on a national stage," said Fajardo, whose success as mayor made him an international celebrity. "To open the doors for opportunities is to close the door on violence, illegality and inequality."

During his term, Fajardo, known for his long hair and blue jeans, successfully changed the image of the city from the violent playground of drug baron [Pablo Escobar](#) – "Don Pablo" or "Pablito," as he is still known here – into a thriving cosmopolitan metropolis.

The transformation began after 2003, when the government and paramilitary groups ironed out a peace pact. Suddenly violence fell, from 6,500 killings in 1991 to 2,193 in 2003 and 788 in 2007, according to the National Institute for Legal Medicine. (Escobar, leader of the notorious Medellín cartel, was killed by government forces in 1993.)

Medellín soared. Parks, libraries, schools and museums were added or refurbished, including the largest collection of art by famed Colombian sculptor and painter [Fernando Botero](#). Cable cars were added to connect the city to remote neighborhoods such as Santo Domingo, high in the mountains with a stunning overview of the city.

"Fajardo gave us hope in ourselves," said Akerman. "He convinced us that we were not a culture of violence, that we were human beings."

Last year, Fajardo visited Ciudad Juárez, across the Texas border from El Paso, and preached hope. He acknowledged the renewed violence in Medellín but stressed that social development must be at the root of any change. He got a standing ovation.

Mayor Ramón Garza of Nuevo Laredo, across the Texas border from Laredo, studied the lessons from afar and implemented several cultural ideas, from poetry readings to a museum inspired by Colombian writer Gabriel García Márquez.

How much Medellín really changed remains a source of debate, in part because local conditions are influenced by factors that local officials have little control over, such as the demand for cocaine in distant places like the United States, Brazil or Europe. A regional saying acknowledges the powerful pull of drug money: "*Vaya hijo consiga plata honradamente. Si no, consiga plata.*" (Go, my son, find money the right way. If not, just find money).

Giovanny Galdarraga, 34, a machine operator, showed off his neighborhood of Santo Domingo to a visitor. Walking through streets that he said were once uninviting, he pointed to the cultural center where his 14-year-old son, Federico, practices music, learns computers and reads books. On weekends, he plays soccer. Galdarraga talked proudly of seeing teenagers walking the streets carrying books instead of guns.

But as sunset turned to darkness, the roar of motorbikes drowned him out. Teens with menacing looks stared down Galdarraga, forcing him to cut the tour short. The killings have returned, he warned, as have worries for his son.

"Medellín did change, and it's still changing for the better," he said. "I tell my son we have to be patient and we must not stop believing. But, yes, all it took was a little scratching to reveal the ugly truth: The culture of violence remains just beneath us."

Freelance journalists Isabel Morales in Medellín and Lauren Villagran in [Mexico City](#) contributed to this report.

AT A GLANCE: TWO CITIES TORN BY VIOLENCE

Killings in Medellín, Colombia

(population 3 million)

1991: 6,500

2003: 2,193

2007: 788

2009: 2,186

2010: 500

Killings in Ciudad Juárez, Mexico (population 1.3 million)

2008: 1,500

2009: 2,700

2010: 1,043

SOURCES: Colombia's National Institute for Legal Medicine; Chihuahua state attorney general's office; media reports