

Re-learning culture in cities beyond the West

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Abstract

Urban scholars have long engaged with the role of culture in cities. Tracing this debate, this article outlines the evolutions of culture as an object of study in inquiries on the urban and wishes to trouble two persisting trends in this literature. The first is a geographical and theoretical Eurocentric vision of culture, often framing cities beyond the West as exceptions or needing validation through a comparison with a Western case or theoretical model; the second is an economic vision of culture under neoliberalism, neglecting the political and ideological dimensions of culture. As a step in overcoming these limitations, this article builds around the notion of ‘re-learning’, to re-insert memory, informality and conflicting heritage into the debate on culture in cities. Drawing on an ethnography of the street ‘Avenida 26’ in Bogotá, Colombia, the article shows that informal cultural practices in the middle of segregation and urban violence can hardly be grasped through the current framing of culture in cities. Yet, they invite an opening up of such a framing to include different ways to cohabit and navigate space through everyday minor engagements. These multifaceted cultural realities urge us to ‘re-learn’ culture in cities anywhere and advance theorisation on culture that takes non-Western urban spaces seriously.

Keywords

Bogotá, comparative urbanism, culture, post-colonial theory, urban theory

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摘要

进行城市研究的学者长期以来一直致力于研究文化在城市中的作用。为了探究相关讨论，本文概述了文化作为城市研究的研究对象的演变，并希望对相关研究中两个持续存在的趋势加以探讨。第一个趋势是地理和理论上以欧洲为中心的文化观，这种文化观往往将西方以外的城市视为例外，或需要通过与其方案例或理论模型的比较来验证；第二个趋势是新自由主义影响下的经济主义文化观，这种文化观忽视了文化的政治和意识形态维度。为了克服这些限制，本文围绕“重新学习”的概念，将记忆、非正规性和冲突的遗产重新插入到关于城市文化的讨论中。本文利用哥伦比亚波哥大“26 号大街”的民族志研究，表明通过当前的城市文化框架很难理解处于种族隔离和城市暴力之中的非正规文化实践。它们需要更开放的框架，纳入共存的不同方式，通过日常的细微活动探索空间。这些要从多方面考虑的文化现实促使我们“重新学习”各地城市的文化，并推进重视非西方城市空间的文化的理论化。

关键词

波哥大，比较城市主义，文化，后殖民理论，城市理论

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Introduction

Avenida Calle 26 or Avenida El Dorado is one of Bogotá's main arteries and one of the longest and widest streets in the city. With its six-wide lanes and various sections authorising high-speed driving, it cuts across the city for almost 15 km, connecting the airport with the city centre and thus constituting the first entrance in the city for international visitors. It has been the stage of various municipal cultural initiatives commemorating the Colombian conflict, which lacerated the country for over 60 years and whose remnants persist today.

People and urban infrastructure set the scene at the crossroads of Avenida 26 and Calle 33. On one side of the street stands the Center of Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation or CMPyR (Centro de Memoria, Paz y Reconciliación), the municipal cultural centre commemorating the conflict, which hosts seminars and exhibitions. A few metres away on the same side of the street, a group of tourists on bicycles stops to take pictures of a degraded piece of street art, sponsored by the

municipality in 2013 and never renewed. On the opposite side of the crossroads, visitors queue up at the entrance to the city's Central Cemetery. They clean tombs, light extinguished candles, pour water on the statues' mouths as if they were real and leave handmade offerings on tombstones. On the final corner, marble workers meticulously engrave portraits of lost ones, adding flower details amid the dust and the strong noise of their grooving machines.

I argue that these interactions show a diversity of cultural expressions in urban space. The main debate on culture and the city in urban studies, however, would only capture very selective elements of that diversity. Turning their attention to street art and museums as two forms of culture-led regeneration, the debate would certainly discuss their role in making Bogotá a creative city. However, it would likely leave aside other elements, such as the uses of the cemetery and tagging, as well as the informal networks between people who experience this

street daily. None of these engagements with the urban space would be considered as falling into the cultural domain.

The urgency of rethinking the role of culture in cities responds to the political call to decentre urban approaches and theories. This article employs a postcolonial framework for its call to give voice to subaltern perspectives (Roy, 2016), to address the importance of shifting knowledge production from its geographical and historical centre and to open up concepts and perspectives that do not depend on the Western epistemological model. Following Lawhon and Truelove (2020) on southern urban critique, this article aims to *re-learn* interpretations of culture and the city in urban studies. By re-learning I understand a two-folded process, reflected in the main sections of this article. The first is *troubling* the debate on culture and the city, situating the economic, political and geographical origins of urban theory-making on these questions (Müller, 2020); and acknowledging the provincialising assumptions of current knowledge production in urban theory (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020; Parnell and Robinson, 2012). The second is *re-distributing* a vision of culture and the city that includes reflections on urban challenges more widely from cities beyond the West (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012). This diversification of visions on culture valorises and emancipates the contextual elements that characterise culture in cities besides simple empirical variation (Ren, 2022). It builds a dialogue of both similarities and differences between cities (Söderström, 2014; Ward, 2010) to move beyond persisting hierarchisations based on Eurocentric criteria.

The first part of this article traces recent debates on culture in urban studies. It shows how interpretations of culture present strong Eurocentric roots, both in the understanding of culture as embedded in the Western tradition and in the configuration of North

American and Western European cities as geographical and theoretical models of cultural development. Such Eurocentrism equally structures a predominant focus of the urban studies literature on the neoliberal instrumentalisation of culture (Peck et al., 2009), which often ignores the political and ideological dimensions of the role of culture in cities. The second section of the article illustrates empirically what is lost in such a view of culture through a case study stemming from Bogotá, where I conducted qualitative work between 2017 and 2018. Bogotá shows how urban challenges hinder the city municipality's ambition to promote culture-led regeneration of the street 'Avenida 26'. Culture there is constantly unsettled and renegotiated. To understand how such negotiations take place, we need to widen our gaze to the broader dynamic and informal cultural practices in the area around formal cultural institutions and initiatives. The article argues that these connections have value in themselves and deserve to be taken seriously as sources of theory-making.

Culture and the city: Troubling key assumptions

This section discusses debates on culture and the city through its evolution and invites a *troubling* of persisting shortcomings of the literature. It shows that even though recent variations have opened up definitions of culture, connecting it to street art (Ortiz van Meerbeke and Sletto, 2019), heritage (Novoa, 2022), memory (Mah, 2010) and temporary urbanism (Madanipour, 2018), they have not yet displaced the current model in the literature.

Achievements of the field of culture and the city

Given the multifaceted and polysemic nature of the concept of culture, it is no surprise

that the cultural turn in the social sciences has resulted in intricate ontological discussions on its status as either entity or process, and on its symbolic, pragmatic and material articulations (see Cremaschi et al., 2021).

The literature on culture and the city in urban studies has achieved much diversity and has gone through two important evolutions. The first is to complexify what in the 1960s was seen as a dichotomy of local and global culture, structuring, for example, the pioneering works of Jane Jacobs. As she argued, local culture could be identified as ‘the intimate and casual life of cities’ (Jacobs, 1961: 4) based on trust relations, shared uses and only thriving in a small perimeter such as the neighbourhood. The literature opened vibrant subfields of urban studies that have challenged the spatial boundaries of alleged global and local culture. In their study of cultural practices of British youngsters, for example, Frost and Catney (2020: 2842) demonstrate how ‘younger people’s spatial horizons appeared to be wider, going beyond the confines of immediate community and neighbourhood’. Literature on culture, memory and place (Till, 2012; Tolia-Kelly et al., 2017) shows that cultural practices often express competing narratives of urban pasts and futures, where top-down cultural programmes are reflected in urban developments and people’s affective appropriations of them (Mah, 2010; Till, 2012). At the same time, contributions to informal cultural practices, particularly studies of street art and graffiti (Brighenti, 2016; Gama-Castro and León-Reyes, 2016; Ortiz van Meerbeke and Sletto, 2019), highlighted that, while culture might be caught in global attractivity politics, connections between street art and grassroots movements, informal practices and bottom-up initiatives negotiate this role and can turn cultural practices into forms of counter-citizenship (Rodríguez-Medina et al., 2022: 2).

The second important shift in debates on the role of culture in the city is an empirical diversification of studies on culture-led urban development. In the early days of culture-led urban regeneration in the 1990s and early 2000s, studies on culture portrayed it as a regenerative economic tool (Landry and Bianchini, 1995). Here, culture gained attention as a means to attract investment and as a recipe for cities to climb global rankings, whether due to creativity (Florida, 2003) or procuring international labels (García, 2004).

In the past 15 years, postcolonial theory has called for an urban scholarship to diversify empirically from North American cities, such as New York and San Francisco (Zukin, 2009), and European cities, with London (Brown-Saracino, 2013), Liverpool, Glasgow (Mooney, 2004) and especially Bilbao (González, 2011) as the main protagonists. Postcolonial theory has troubled key assumptions of knowledge production in the academic literature, allowing Asian (Wang et al., 2016), African (Förster, 2016) and Latin American cities (Rodríguez Morató and Zarlenga, 2018) to appear as fruitful contexts for reflection on culture and creativity. Tactical and temporary urbanism (Bragaglia and Caruso, 2022; Webb, 2018), as well as insurgent heritage, also showed how cultural practices engender ethics-based forms of sociability and care (Novoa, 2022: 1016), able to mediate social change and urban development in a tight link with social justice, more than economic regeneration (Madanipour, 2018; Webb, 2018).

A Eurocentric vision of culture

These new developments in the literature represent important changes in the debate because they highlight the multiple, complex and porous ways in which culture is embedded within and connected to the city, refusing a fossilising

view of culture in negative terms (non-political, non-social) (Cremaschi et al., 2021).

Despite the multiple and promising theoretical and empirical shifts, this ambition remains only partially realised. The current framing of culture is still characterised by a Eurocentric geographical and theoretical perspective. It continues to portray the relationship between culture and the city as a Western model exported and adapted elsewhere, both as a geographical reference point and as a source of theory-making.

Geographically, this appears as the persistent preponderance of the Western cities in the literature, with case study papers frequently relying on Global North cities as a starting point to understand the circulation or 'landing' of culture in other contexts (Ren, 2022). As Rodríguez Morató and Zarlenga (2018) discuss in their study of culture-led regeneration in Latin American contexts, limited attention is dedicated to what cultural expressions or even models were in place in non-Western contexts before the introduction of Western cultural ones. While non-Western contexts are present empirically in discussions on culture and the city, the models that they are based on are predominantly Western (Rodríguez Morató and Zarlenga, 2018), with approaches on culture-led regeneration as their loudest voice. Mbaye and Dinardi (2019: 579) show this discrepancy when discussing the understudied role of cultural institutions in their studies of cultural governance in Rio de Janeiro and Dakar: 'These creative spaces of cultural production, located in Southern contexts of urban extremes, contribute to the vitality of informal urbanisms and unsettle predominant views that see them merely as sites of infrastructural poverty and social exclusion'. The result is that the urban studies literature frames inquiries on culture and the city in non-Western contexts as requiring validation through their comparison with the West (Robinson, 2023; Roy, 2016).

The prevalent mention of European and North American cities is not just a matter of geographical imbalance. It also reflects an imbalance in theory-making. In the literature, theoretical reflections by Western-based authors are presented as points of reference for cultural development elsewhere. Zukin's work on gentrification and culture-led regeneration (Zukin, 2009), Florida's approaches to creativity (Florida, 2003) and Scott's analyses of the cultural economy of cities (Scott, 2000) are often taken-for-granted theoretical frameworks and approaches even for articles whose main case study city is beyond the European and North American spectrum. These trends are symptomatic of the fact that urban studies are still anchored in a vision of culture directly embedded in a Western philosophical and historical tradition. More precisely, as many authors have incessantly underlined, the idea of culture in urban space is still moulded in the Western idea of urban modernity, linked to urban economic progress and secularism (Dora, 2018; Hall and Gieben, 1992; Robinson, 2006), whereby cultural activities are active representatives of urban development. While the association of modernity, urban development and secularism has been widely challenged in urban studies (Dora, 2018) when it comes to culture and its relation to urban spaces, a critical reflection on the geographical and theoretical imprint of culture is still hesitantly voiced. To give an example, the notion of creativity, so prominent in the literature, is rooted in the Western philosophical tradition of Descartes and Kant, according to which 'the creative genius conjures novel ideas that bring forth added value and new insights by breaking through conventional patterns of thinking' (Zheng, 2021: 799).

Again, the problem is not a lack of empirical evidence on the variability of

cultural phenomena and cultural infrastructure which has largely improved, but an urge for critical reflection on two main aspects linked to this persistent Western dominance: first, trend-setting on how we think of culture in cities in urban studies, which produces current knowledge on culture and the city worldwide; and second, the consequences of this knowledge production when analysing contexts beyond the West. Overall, if, as Sandler acknowledges, ‘culture is already seen as sited and site-specific’ (Sandler, 2020: 87), we need to open a conversation and be ready to challenge the neutrality of both ‘culture’ and its ‘site’.

An economist vision of culture

The geographical and theoretical Eurocentrism of the literature exploring culture and the city has been pointed out to shape an additional shortcoming: an economist vision of culture.

Debate on the centrality of capitalism in determining urban development has had considerable implications for the conceptualisation of culture for urban political economy scholars, who conceived culture as dependent on economic and material interests (Scott, 2000; Zukin, 1995). As many have suggested (Newman, 2014; Peck et al., 2009), neoliberalism as a paradigm has dominated urban studies for years now, shaping thinking in the field. Culture is also subjected to the fascination of the neo-liberalisation of cities (Belfiore, 2020; Scott, 2000). As many have underlined, the neo-liberalisation paradigm still dominates interpretations of culture in the city, reinforcing its understanding of culture mostly through commodification and consumption (Inch, 2018; Speake, 2017) and portraying culture-led regeneration as the main form of cultural urban expression in cities.

Critics have argued that unanimously seeing culture as assembled through the

circulation of global capital, images, expertise and models holds important consequences for interpretations of culture and the city, among which is an over-attention to the alleged ‘global culture’. Newer contributions to the debate on culture and the city have discussed how the over-presence of neoliberalism in urban studies debates detaches urban forms from their geographical origins, universalising a very specific Western concern with the links between culture and neoliberalism that overshadows place associations (Novoa, 2022; Till, 2012). Kanai (2014) underlines this in his study of the commodification of the Argentinian tango, promoted by the city as a cultural brand for ‘New World’ Europeaness. The attention to global models, in particular, risks ‘subsum[ing] too much under the rubric “neoliberal”, thereby obscuring other significant vectors of social and political transformation’ (Gainza, 2017: 1077). While Jacobs’s (1961) idyllic portrayal of the neighbourhood as an ideal space for community-building has been widely criticised and overcome (see the first part of this article), local politics and cultural practices are often reduced to a counterpart to economic global cultural models. In their study of cultural politics of memory in Guangzhou, for example, Chen et al. (2020: 2) portray ‘two competing conceptions of culture’: one ‘vernacular and lived’, and the other ‘a world-exhibition type of culture promoted by the global cultural industry’. This is also true for street art, where the literature often remains attached to a confrontation between the ‘social and cultural significance of graffiti and street art’ and ‘the economic process of place valorisation in the current transformations of capitalism’ (Brighenti, 2016: 165).

Instead, local politics and political ideologies can have a crucial role in the development of culture in cities and are often inseparable from economic questions. At times, they are particularly closely aligned

with symbolic representations of space (Gainza, 2017), or promote national imaginaries through urban projects, as Dinardi (2012) demonstrates in her study on culture-led regeneration in Buenos Aires and its link to political reinterpretations of the dictatorship. Political ideologies can also reveal themselves through the support of projects that respond to a certain party's political vision, as Koch (2010) shows in her study of the Nazarbayev government's investments in aesthetically pleasing miniature architecture in Astana. Though political ideologies can take different shapes and forms depending on their local context, their variety and power are more prominently acknowledged by contributions – such as those above – focusing on non-Western cities. Such recognition of politics' role in non-Western cities cannot be explained by political ideologies allegedly being more present in these contexts – potentially due to non-democratic forms of local governance (Roy and Ong, 2011). Political ideologies equally drive cultural practices in Western contexts. Still, the increasing academic interest in culture's economic dimension, plus methodological nationalism and linguistic barriers, has resulted in the absorption of local political ideologies by economic reflections.

'My museums are my flowers': Re-learning culture from Bogotá

This section mobilises a case study – a segment of Avenida 26 – to show how opening the spectrum of what the urban studies literature defines and views as culture, and more generally unravelling assumptions about the authority of academic knowledge (Lancione and McFarlane, 2021), produces alternative forms of knowing and living culture. This section complicates current interpretations of culture that associate cultural practices and cultural spaces with urban regeneration, creativity or culture as a consumable good

to experience in the city. Avenida 26 shows a series of practices and spaces that filter through the boundaries of the current literature. They are mixed, formal and informal, non-romanticisable and conflicting. While they include spatial elements and involve what the literature identifies as cultural actors or spaces – street artists, museums and participatory initiatives – they exceed both. They express a wider, more anthropological vision of culture than the one highlighted in the current literature, one that values the multiple ways in which people cohabit in an urban space and make sense of it, through collaborations and discordances.

This Bogotá case study is based on an ethnographic research project that took place intermittently between August 2017 and March 2018, for a total of four months. I conducted 32 narrative interviews with institutional representatives and different groups who were involved daily with Avenida 26 (street artists, marble workers, skaters, flower sellers and visitors to the cemetery). All interviews were conducted in Spanish and later translated into English, and I have preserved the interviewees' anonymity by changing their names. I conducted participant observations with various communities of the street – mainly street artists, flower sellers and marble workers – whom I accompanied when they were undertaking their everyday activities on Avenida 26 and in the surrounding neighbourhoods. Interviews and everyday conversations focused primarily on perceptions of, mundane practices in and changes on Avenida 26, which I valued as a lens to understand broader symbolic and urban transformations of the city.

How to locate Bogotá?

There are likely few cities in the world that have been more directly influenced by Western models of urban planning than Bogotá (Williams Montoya, 2014), whose

master plan was the creation of French-Swiss architect Le Corbusier in 1950 (O'Byrne, 2018). Amid the Colombian conflict and its aftermath, involving guerrilla movements,¹ paramilitary groups and the Colombian government, Bogotá's cultural scene has devolved to victim reparation, at least over the past 15 years. Cultural institutions have provided accountability for victims of the conflict and divulged its horrors (Villa-Gómez and Avendaño-Ramírez, 2017).

Aside from this specific focus, literature on culture in Bogotá is much less voluminous than scholarship on other urban questions, mainly mobility and urban poverty (see Montero, 2020; Thibert and Osorio, 2014). Current debate portrays Bogotá as an underperforming cultural city when compared with other Latin American cities (Gilbert, 2015). Street art is a considerable exception, with literature praising it as an increasingly important city-centre regenerative tool, a boost to Bogotá's tourism ranking, the main element that prevents it from being a transit city for other Colombian tourist attractions (Bautista Gómez, 2016).

The politics of cultural spaces on Avenida 26: Between memory and conflicting heritage

In 2014, the municipality, overseen by Gustavo Petro, the left-wing mayor of the city until 2016, renamed a section of the street 'The Axis of Peace and Memory' (El Eje de la Paz y la Memoria) (Alcaldía Mayor, 2014). This section of Avenida 26, less than 1 km, cuts between two very different areas of the city: Teusaquillo, a middle-class neighbourhood; and Santa Fe, a historically low-income neighbourhood. The decree of the 'Axis of Peace and Memory' had a very specific intention of implementing a culture-led regeneration of the street through the promotion and revitalisation of a series of spaces with a strong symbolic

connection to the Colombian conflict (Alcaldía Mayor, 2014). These were: the Central Cemetery; the Center of Memory, Peace, and Reconciliation (CMPyR), a cultural centre whose construction started in 2008; the Renaissance Parc (Parque del Renacimiento), opened in 2012; the National Museum of Historical Memory (Museo de Memoria de Colombia), expected at the time to be built by the end of 2020 at the end of the selected section of the street; and several street art pieces focusing on the Colombian conflict.

Petro was not the first mayor to invest in the street or this section. Due to its strategic location, Avenida 26 has been at the centre of several initiatives with coalescing spatial politics aiming to revitalise the city centre and the city image. The historical part of the city, bordering the end of Avenida 26, had been at the centre of a strategic operation since 2004; the Central Cemetery was declared a national monument in 1984 (Vignolo, 2013); and street art had already been portrayed as a tool for peacebuilding in a long-term public art intervention called 'El Arte por la Paz', first developed during the state-led campaign 'Bogotá Ciudad Memoria' for the celebration of the 475th anniversary of the city in 2013 (*Espectador*, 2013).

However, compared to previous initiatives on the street, the Axis of Peace and Memory conveyed more directly the leftist political orientation of Petro's administration and its alignment with leftists' interpretations of the conflict. As stated by a member of the previous administration of the CMPyR:

Let's say that this is when the disputes over memory begin ... many of these were places where leftist leaders were murdered, [...] the focus the CMPyR had in its moment, the walls of the 26 in its beginnings ... and it had a clear intention, not only to take public spaces but to leave strong political messages as well.²

When political interests changed, so did Avenida 26. When right-wing Enrique Peñalosa won the mayoral elections in 2016, the CMPyR centre saw budget cuts, and the street art on memory and peace was left in disuse. Despite disinvestment in both the CMPyR and the Axis, Avenida 26 was not abandoned by the administration of Peñalosa, who continued to sponsor calls for street art but switched the object of street art pieces to a topic less directly linked to the peace process with guerilla movements: the fauna and flora of Colombia (see Instituto Distrital de las Artes, 2017). We see here that local political interests play a crucial role in the promotion of the culture-led regeneration of the street. There is certainly continuity in both mayors' programmes in investing in the attractiveness of the street, as both are aware of the symbolic and economic relevance of Avenida 26 and the importance of investing in its image for visitors entering Bogotá. However, the intent to promote the city internationally through the street is heavily charged by a politicised and polarising vision of heritage-making and memorialisation.

The intricacy of the connection between cultural offer, memory and heritage also concerned street art more directly as one of the main cultural regeneration projects of the area. While Petro's municipality wanted street artists to act as spokespersons of reconciliation during the Axis of Peace and Memory project, they maintained a conditional relationship with institutions, often based on certain forms of collaboration – mainly to obtain financial benefits – without entirely identifying with the establishment. While some of them have collaborated with Petro's municipality on the project of the Axis, they often call this type of street art 'decorating'.³ They insist on maintaining informal and illegal practices as well, especially when wishing to communicate strong political messages, as expressed by a member

of the street art group Mal Crew: 'We want to maintain a limbo, camouflaging between the legal and the illegal, criticise from the inside, not be in a defined position' (see Note 3).

Street artists highlight street art's capacity, when free from institutional pressure, to contribute to remembering the brutality of Colombia's past. Ana, a street artist, comments: 'That [call for street art on memory] goes against graffiti itself ... how do you tell a graffiti artist who's not interested in the topic of memory, "oh no, here you must paint about memory"?'⁴ Collaborating with institutions only fleetingly, street artists strive for a movement of street art in and out of the formal frameworks imposed by the decree 'Axis of Peace and Memory', avoiding its branding, and highlighting the intrinsic ties between street art and questions of commemoration and heritage.

Spatial and symbolic exclusions over access to culture

The physical separation that Avenida 26 creates between Teusaquillo and low-income Santa Fe neighbourhoods turns the street into a frontier, both spatial and symbolic. The infrastructural elements of the street, with its six lanes, persistent traffic and suspended pedestrian bridges, discourage crossings between the two neighbourhoods. The left pavement, on the side of Santa Fe, is dominated by the presence of Bogotá's Central Cemetery, around which one finds flower sellers and marble workers who build gravestones and funerary decorations. Santa Fe is also located next to the Zona de Tolerancia, where prostitution is permitted. Here, insecurity and theft are also present daily and mark the area surrounding the cemetery. Even the pavements are different. While the Teusaquillo side is cleaner and only a few streets behind Avenida 26 there are cafes and green areas, the Santa Fe side is characterised by a lack of maintenance: dust

from marble cutting, excrement and signs of drug consumption affect the area daily.

The spatial division and the imagination of Avenida 26 as a frontier contribute to creating a symbolic division between groups claiming to mobilise on culture and memory, whether museum actors or street artists, based and working mostly on the Teusaquillo side, and groups of people using Avenida 26 on the side of Santa Fe, particularly flower sellers and marble workers.

Despite their claim to promote social justice and collective memory through their art, street artists, just as much as members of the CMPyR or leaders of the future National Museum of Historical Memory, reproduce this stigmatisation of Santa Fe. The CMPyR's 2018 coordinator describes the centre's location as a constraint:

The people of Teusaquillo don't go through the 26. They don't know about this [i.e. the CMPyR]. One is always between two parallel worlds. [...] Let's say that, amongst ourselves, we know that on the other side [i.e. the Santa Fe side] there is the jungle.⁵

The spatial exclusion of the actors of Santa Fe from the cultural activities in the street is also due to the physical location of the CMPyR and street art. The CMPyR was built in a previous section of the cemetery – the Globo B. The demolition of this area for the construction of the CMPyR is the main cause of the drastic drop in sales for this community, constituting a recurrent opposition in the discourse of a glorious past and a dramatic present situation. Emilia, a marble worker, sighs and tells me: 'This was blessed, I'm telling you ... one would sell up to 10, 15 gravestones!'⁶ Many of these communities not only deem the CMPyR responsible for their economic precarity but they also do not venture into that area for fear of disturbing the dead of the previous Globo B. The planning measures to transform a mass grave into the Renacimiento Park and the

CMPyR were unable to completely erase the funerary vocation of this section of Avenida 26. As Miguel – a security guard at the Renacimiento Park – tells me:

People say that there are scary people who are ghosts, that they hear noises. [...] What they [i.e. the municipality] shouldn't do is to leave remains, the remains should have been removed because many people believe in those things of paranormal phenomena ... because they won't come to the park mainly for that reason.⁷

This isolation of the communities on the Santa Fe side also concerns a familiarity with the vocabulary employed by the cultural politics on the street. While street artists impose a certain level of informality through their practice, they speak the same language of official municipal cultural actors: that of 'culture', 'memory' and 'peace'. One of the representatives of the CMPyR during Petro's administration describes the area in which the CMPyR is situated as 'everything in this area spoke of memory'.⁸ 'Memory' or 'culture', however, are not words that the actors on the Santa Fe side mobilise voluntarily or that any of them feel comfortable using. Instead, they associate 'memory' with personal grievance and 'culture' with their everyday relations on the street. When asked what she thought of the commemorative initiatives of the CMPyR, Sandra, a flower seller, expressed her sense that the cultural projects on the street are made for a different audience. To her, a museum:

is like for kids who are studying [. . .] It's not for everyone, for example, for me . . . Why should I go to a museum, what for? All these museums, what for? Me, my museums are my flowers.

While speaking, she pointed at the photo of her disappeared brother, who used to be a

flower seller as well.⁹ Overall, on Avenida 26, the actions of cultural institutions and municipal branding strategies contribute to the experience of the street by marginalised actors as divided and fragmented (Torre, 2020).

Informal practices of memory-making

Despite these spatial, discursive and symbolic exclusions on the street, cultural practices persist, beyond both the physical perimeter of a cultural centre of memory and the cultural practices of memory it foresees. Forms of collaboration have developed among communities on the Santa Fe side. Marble workers rely on waste pickers, highly present in this area, for the provision of water. Informal coffee sellers and lottery sellers coming from Santa Fe include this community in their rounds and offer coffee or a lottery ticket in exchange for the possibility to charge their phones or rest in marble workers' laboratories. Informal flower sellers use marble workers' laboratories as a deposit but help them carry heavy tombstones at the beginning and the end of the working day.

Most of these practices orbit around the Central Cemetery, where marble workers and flower sellers spend their days. Even though the cemetery hosts fewer and fewer funerals today (Klaufus, 2021), visitors to the CMPyR and tourist-guided groups are still encouraged to take a tour of this historical monument, as part of the path of the Axis of Peace and Memory. However, the proximity to the Zona de Tolerancia, and the labyrinthic shape of the cemetery, invites prostitutes, transexuals and drug addicts from the Zona de Tolerancia to spend time within its walls, more protected than the adjacent streets. During the time of my fieldwork in 2017 and 2018, the Peñalosa administration had increased police presence at the entrance to prevent unwanted visitors from

entering. Despite this effort to exclude local visitors, informal cultural practices constantly evade the CMPyR's intended use of the cemetery due to popular beliefs (Donovan, 2008). Every Monday, commonly considered 'the day of the spirits' (el día de las almas), the cemetery fills up with actors of the Zona de Tolerancia: prostitutes, transexuals and other communities of the Santa Fe bring flowers and light candles on graves, sometimes on what appears to be a well-established route. They ask the buried souls for protection from evil spirits, treating the dead affectionately (Klaufus, 2021). The belief is that graves play the role of a medium between the dead and the living; prayers will not only reach each person's loved ones but will also allow souls to accomplish favours, and to heal pain from loss and grief (Vignolo, 2013). When discussing 'memory' with communities of Santa Fe, not a single interviewee neglected to mention 'the day of the spirits' as an occasion when the Colombian conflict and its consequences were at the centre of people's uses of the cemetery and Avenida 26.

Mixing personal and official memories of the conflict, these circuits at the cemetery speak of the past of Colombia and discuss reconciliation and peace even though through a vocabulary that is not formally recognised as belonging to culture or collective memory. They show affective attachments to Avenida 26's most functional spaces, outside of the cultural circuits that street artists and other cultural actors employ. Luz, marble worker, goes on to describe her long experience with the street: 'Here I saw when the first cycleway [Ciclovía] was made, I saw Pope John Paul II when he came, and also the 26 every day when I went to school'.¹⁰ Because of their unpredictability, everyday activities such as cleaning up pavements, painting a wall or carrying an offering to a gravestone can easily result in exclusionary practices and forms

of intolerance. However, these practices shift the notion of culture from the frames of officially recognised cultural spaces and initiatives by the decree 'Axis of Peace and Memory' to a more anthropological vision of culture, mindful of the different and often conflicting ways that people try to cohabit, make sense of a violent infrastructure and navigate conflict heritage and interpretations of the past through everyday minor engagements with the street.

Redistributing culture-led regeneration

These different impressions and vignettes on the street aimed to show a different version of what is considered culture in the city in the urban studies literature. First, Avenida 26 shows that what debates on culture-led regeneration, but partly also approaches on street art and memory-making, understand as local cultural practices are unpredictable and marked by episodes of urban violence – hardly romanticisable and exceeding current vocabulary. Cultural practices on Avenida 26 constitute grounds for politicising the city but can also simply dissolve into new uses without being consolidated into political vanguards (Amin, 2008; McFarlane, 2011). Social ties on Avenida 26 can be 'rough', as in 'conflictive, ephemeral, spatially bounded, and affective' (Rodriguez-Medina et al., 2022: 1), but act as occasions to challenge the fragmentation in the city, particularly one that celebrates selective uses as 'cultural'. The developments and halts of the Axis of Peace and Memory project are due to the constant interaction of culture-led regeneration with urban violence and symbolic and spatial segregation paradoxically caused by cultural actors themselves. These encounters, albeit conflicting, expose more directly how memorialisation practices, urban violence and conflict heritage are potential (and, I would argue, productive) dimensions of

what constitutes culture-led regeneration in a non-Western context such as Bogotá.

Second, cultural practices on Avenida 26 show that culture in Bogotá is hardly only understandable through an economic reading. The most micro elements of Avenida 26 are in tight connection with and even indissociable from global dynamics, particularly the branding of Bogotá as a street art capital. Processes of neo-liberalisation and the commodification of cultural expression such as street art are present and are common between Petro and Peñalosa's mandates. However, this notion of neoliberal culture can be troubled by the impact that political affiliations and conflict over memorialisation have in defining what counts as a cultural practice or a cultural space. Informal networks and cultural practices interact with the street's violent urban infrastructure with an unpredictability that opens new circulations between scales. This, in turn, shows that the allegedly unitary local culture that the literature continues to portray as 'vernacular and lived' (Chen et al., 2020: 2) is, in fact, multifaced, more fractured and less passive to global dynamics. The cultural practices in Bogotá challenge the understanding of these circulations as context-specific exceptions to a model, for example that of culture-led regeneration. Theorising from Bogotá means acknowledging that urban regeneration, albeit being potentially a relevant framework for describing some of the cultural dynamics in Bogotá, is historically, geographically and theoretically situated and thus inevitably interacts with other, more minor, dynamics.

Conclusion

This article has unbundled and troubled the limits of the urban studies literature, between a Eurocentric geographical and theoretical scope and an economic vision of

culture. Building around the move to ‘re-learn’, it has suggested ways to overcome these shortcomings by introducing other elements – memory, informality and urban violence – constituting culture in an urban context. While key elements of the DNA of Avenida 26 are mostly ignored in dominant approaches in the urban studies literature, the street’s cultural practices actively connect culture’s facets of meanings without reducing it to a panacea for urban regeneration. This multiplicity of experiences on Avenida 26 constitutes subtle responses that hold the potential to trouble assumptions in the current literature and to redistribute them to think of cultural challenges more globally (McFarlane and Robinson, 2012), legitimising contexts where both cultural actors and cultural spaces might work in different configurations from what the literature defines as models.

The case of Bogotá, partly in line with postcolonial approaches as well as recent subfields of literature on culture, requires us to follow the movement, the ‘in and out of the cultural polis’ (Mbaye and Dinardi, 2019: 579), inviting the circulation of different visions of culture and its place-based articulations, whether with memory, heritage or street art. Cultural practices on Avenida 26 provide a new vocabulary and, as suggested by Ren (2022), potentially a new language, to re-learn culture beyond the frames established by the current literature. Discussing culture in Bogotá is not a theoretical exercise to prove that non-Western contexts are empirically different. Rather it provides elements to fill some current epistemological gaps in the urban studies literature. It shows the necessity for researchers to deconstruct their assumptions concerning both Western and non-Western cities (Lawhon and Truelove, 2020), to refrain from reducing the West to a monolithic construct.

These elements do not claim to be exhaustive: they are path-openers to re-learn

definitions of culture through the multiple realities and experiences of city dwellers anywhere. This effort can help turn culture into a form of connection, not a list of criteria to be checked for validation and travelling from the West to elsewhere. It would appear that the challenge is to make this malleability of culture a strength, not a burden for reflection in urban studies, embracing positively the idea that ‘concepts must grapple with the inexhaustibility of social and material worlds’ (Robinson, 2023: 2). The starting point could be avoiding thinking of culture only through an ontological quest, which depoliticises the cultural realities of a city and limits culture to the existing milestones of the urban studies literature. To create these connections, we can redirect our attention towards the present and potential of cultural experiences, of what culture is and could be, ‘rather than what [it] should be’ (Mbaye and Dinardi, 2019: 581).

As suggested by postcolonial scholars, it is necessary to retrace these connections, to re-distribute them, find relations and compare patterns. Most importantly, we can introduce the idea that considerations stemming from a city such as Bogotá can enrich debate in the West as well, which allows them to circulate in a positive and multidirectional dialogue.

Troubling, re-learning and re-distributing once again what constructs culture in different places is the challenge that scholars interested in spatial and cultural issues must begin confronting if we want the academic debate to chart current cultural and urban challenges and be relevant in their understanding.

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Notes

1. The most significant being FARC (*Fuerzas Armadas Revolucionarias de Colombia*, The Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia) and ELN (*Ejército de Liberación Nacional*, The National Liberation Army).
2. Interview with a member of the previous administration of the CMPyR. Conducted on 23 January 2018.
3. Interview with Camillo, street artist. Conducted on 17 February 2018.
4. Interview with Ana, street artist. Conducted on 26 February 2018.
5. Interview with the coordinator of the CMPyR. Conducted on 22 February 2018.
6. Interview with Emilia, marble worker. Conducted on 1 March 2018.
7. Interview with Miguel, security guard at the Renacimiento Park on Avenida 26. Conducted on 2 March 2018.
8. Interview with Alejandra, member of the previous administration of the CMPyR. Conducted on 22 February 2018.
9. Interview with Sandra, flower seller. Conducted on 1 March 2018.
10. Interview with Luz, marble worker. Conducted on 3 March 2018.

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