Understand Expert Citizens in Bogotá and their Role in Transportation

Figure 1: “No decision about us without” us painted on a wall above a bicycle path in Bogotá

I. Introduction

In June 2018 a generous grant from the Roger Thayer Stone Center for Latin American Studies allowed me to travel to Bogotá, Colombia for the second time to continue my exploratory research on public participation on mobility in that city. This summer my goal was to narrow my focus to the role of “expertise,” specifically investigating organizations which Sosa López and Montero (2017) describe as “expert citizens.” Overall my research was conducted according to plan and I achieved my objectives. This report summarizes my main data collection activities and some preliminary findings.

II. Data Collection

A. Participant observation
The most basic component of my research was participant observation. This involved moving
around the city via various modes of transport and taking notes. For example I took the TransMilenio
(Bogotá’s famous BRT system) and Uber/taxis for trips across the city. For shorter trips I would roll in
my wheelchair. I took photographs and made notes about what I saw and experienced. Some of these
insights would have been difficult to make without this first-hand experience. For example: when I enter
some of the buses some drivers do not allow me to pay (presumably because I am a wheelchair user)
while others expect me to pay. Also, I made notes of where I saw signs opposing a new TransMilenio
route along one of Bogotá’s most important thoroughfares—La Carrera Séptima.

Another type of participant observation involved attending/participating in relevant collective
events. Each Sunday many of Bogotá’s main streets are closed to cars between 7am-2pm. This event
intends to promote non-motorized transport and is known as Ciclovía. I went to different parts of the city
participate and observe, taking notes about what and who I saw. For example, the most common type of
participants were bicyclists, followed by joggers/walkers and other miscellaneous users such as
skateboarders, and roller skaters. An addition to this, there was one protest march called “Marcha Por
Los Arboles” (March for the Trees). In this a group of environmentalists, and concerned citizens held a
small march that proceeded along La Carrera Séptima from Parque Nacional to Parque de la
Independencia. I made mental notes (later transcribed) about who participated, the chants and slogans of
the march and how non-participants reacted to the march.
B. Interviews

The other main component of my research entailed semi-structured interviews with key informants. My first priority was to meet Professor Sergio Montero (Universidad de los Andes). His PhD research (Berkeley) was similar to the work I intend to do and furthermore he has recently published an article about “expert citizens” who influence policy on the issue transport/mobility. After reading his work I was eager to meet him and hear his impressions of my own research plans. He gave some encouraging and helpful comments and offered support going forward. In addition he also recommended several other people with whom I could speak while in Bogotá. Using these recommendations as well as several “cold calls” I was able to conduct eight more interviews with various stakeholders. Interviewees included:

- Executive director of a prominent NGO that acts as an expert citizen on mobility
- Organizer with a group opposing a major development project along La Carrera Séptima
- Bicycle activist who organizes bi-weekly cycling tours through the city
Bicycle activist and historian who initiated the Ciclovia in the 1970s

Staff member of prominent expert citizen NGO

Two representatives from the Secretary of Mobility who work on separate, but relevant themes

Tactical urbanism activist who also consults for the city government on issues of participation

These interviews ranged from 20 minutes to 2 hours. I took notes by hand and then transcribed them after I returned to my apartment. All interviews went relatively smoothly and I believe that I will be able to maintain contact with my interviewees for future communication or interviews.

III. Conclusions

As mentioned this experience was a continuation of my exploratory work in Bogotá. I feel as though the research was important in at least two significant ways. First it allowed me to meet important stakeholders and gatekeepers such as professor Montero as well as relevant government representatives. Second, it allowed me to witness first-hand some of the important events that are unfolding. For example, the fight over the development of La Carrera Séptima is a case that I will be following closely over the next year and may become an important case study in my dissertation about how transportation decisions are made and contested in Bogotá.