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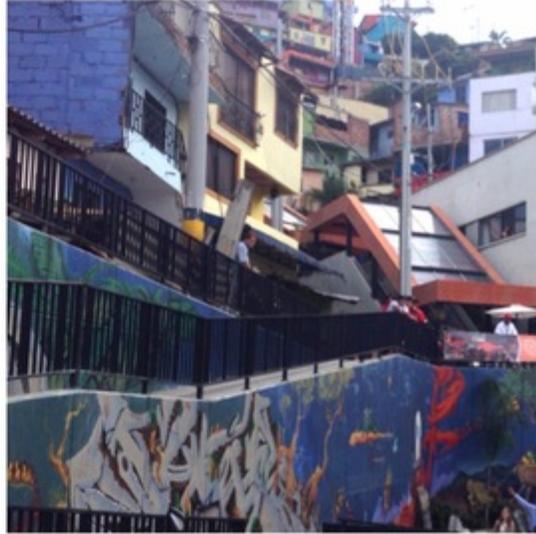
## SIMPLE SOLUTIONS TO SERIOUS PROBLEMS

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It is a mindset--nimble, adaptive, and outside-the-universe--that has transformed an entire city, shifting Medellín, Colombia's status from the ['World's Most Dangerous City'](#) to the ['World's Most Innovative City.'](#)

We were in town to attend the [UN Habitat World Urban Forum](#), where my husband [Richard Florida spoke](#). But before the speech, our forum guide told us that we must see the escalators. Together with members from ACI, [the Agency of Cooperation and Investment](#), we climbed a steep hill and came upon the first of the six artistically-designed escalators that rise almost a quarter of a mile up the mountainside that the city is built upon.



Medellin was home to one of the world's most vicious and notorious criminals, [Pablo Escobar](#), but [Comuna 13](#), one of its poorest neighborhood, was considered especially dangerous. Its 12,000 residents had to negotiate vertiginous paths and stairways--the equivalent of a 28-story building--to get access to the city center.



Simply by installing these outdoor escalators, Medellín fundamentally transformed the entire fabric of the community. Once isolated and desolate, cut off from the rest of the city, Comuna 13 is now lively and vibrant. As we rode up the elevators, groups of young girls surrounded us, asking where we were from and if any of us spoke Spanish. Elderly women smiled and said *Qué Dios los bendiga*. Even fully armed *Policia* came up and asked us what was the fastest way they could learn English, showed off the brightly-painted murals, and happily posed for photos.



The landings at the tops and bottoms of the escalators had become impromptu public spaces. A playground slide was installed in one of them that was dedicated to the memory of a child who had been fatally shot during the drug violence.



*Amalia Toro Restrepo and I rode the slide with a local boy.*

Whether we are engaged in community development, city planning, or business, we are often confronted with enormous challenges. Sometimes the simplest of solutions are right in front of us, if we would only look.



Residents of other hillside barrios spent as much as four hours a day traveling in buses between their homes and their jobs in the heart of the city. Now gondalas--hanging cable cars--whisk some of them up and down the hill, saving hours of time and as much as 50,000 pesos (\$26) a month.



Medellin's [Mayor Anibal Gaviria Correa](#) proudly showed us how he had transformed another neighborhood, whose development had been stifled by the presence of a giant water purification plant. He and his team simply asked the plant manager to 'take down their fence.'



"When we spoke to the residents of the house across the street from the plant," he explained, "they said, 'we've lived here for 40 years and never have seen what was over the fence.'" So the fence was taken down and a spectacular light show was installed on its façade, transforming an eyesore and a cause of blight into a public space, where residents could gather, dance, and connect. An amazing transformation, and it was accomplished just by removing the fences that separate us.

The city of Medellin has earned its namesake as the 'City of Innovation' by teaching us the true definition of innovation; a break-through, something new and different, a transformation or upheaval. At the heart of this lesson; the farthest-reaching solutions may just be the simplest.

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