

-PUBLIC PROGRAM-

T O D O S A L

PARQUE

A public management case study for the
city of Barranquilla, Colombia



“Todos al Parque” Program: A public management case study for the city of Barranquilla, Colombia

**Alcaldía Distrital de Barranquilla
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How did the city of Barranquilla, in a decade, build a public park system at local, district, and metropolitan scale accessible to all its citizens?

The “Todos al Parque” program consists of the renewal and creation of public space that guarantees universal accessibility to a public park system for Barranquilla’s citizens. The strategy has focused on the recovery of existing parks, their maintenance, and the coordination of social activities, creating a system of parks of different intervention levels: local, district and metropolitan. This program has been implemented for more than a decade (since 2011) and is considered one of the main success stories of public management, not only in Barranquilla but at a regional and national level.

- In just over a decade, **Barranquilla managed to renovate and build more than 1.6 million square meters (17 million sqft) of green public space**, with 288 interventions on public squares, parks, and green areas. It has reached 188 neighborhoods, allowing 93% of households to have a renewed public park within a 8-minute walking distance.
- **The program has guaranteed spatial equity throughout the city**, concentrating interventions on those areas with high social needs, generating quality public amenities in deprived and informal neighborhoods. In fact, 53% of intervened parks are located in low-income communities.
- **For the most part, the program has been financed with its own public resources**, enhancing the local administration’s execution capacity and the social return of public investment in the city.
- The program **has been successful due to the cooperation and teamwork of more than ten local agencies, decentralized public entities, and public service companies**. It has laid the foundations for the creation of **new urban renewal entities** such as “Siembra Barranquilla”, a public-lighting mixed company “APBAQ”, and the enhancement of the institutionalization process of the District Infrastructure Agency (ADI in Spanish).
- Given its design and contracting mechanism, **“Todos al Parque” developed through an iterative process that sophisticated its interventions**. It went from recovering small pocket parks to neighborhood and metropolitan parks, leading to riverwalks, future eco-parks and urban forests. These iterative processes have had the active participation of the community that reviews and contributes to the design process, enabling the creation of a parks committee for each of the intervened spaces.
- In 2019, property tax payments in the city increased by 11% in neighborhoods with nearby recovered park or green space. Hence, **there was a clear improvement in the tax payment culture in these areas**, leading to a higher public budget for social investments.
- According to local estimates **the program reduced criminal activity in the areas of influence of recovered parks**. Between 2011 and 2022 the number of thefts within a 100-meter radius of a renewed park was reduced by 20% and had a reduction of 15.4% and 9% in a 150 and 200-meter radius, respectively.
- **The program creates approximately 500 jobs annually**: from the design, construction, and maintenance of recovered parks. The program has generated high approval from the community since they participate in the co-creation process of the parks, the amenities are of high quality and have constant preventive maintenance, and the spaces are frequently used for sports, cultural and community activities.

Context of Barranquilla

Barranquilla is the fourth largest city in Colombia, it is located in the Colombian Caribbean region with an area of 154 square kilometers and a population of 1.3 million inhabitants in the District and more than 2 million in the urban area. It has direct access to the Magdalena River to the East and the Caribbean Sea to the North. Its location and proximity to the Magdalena River have positioned the city as a port and commercial hub with an important role in the internationalization of the country's economy.

Two-thirds of Atlántico's GDP is generated within the District of Barranquilla. By 2021, Barranquilla's GDP reached \$COP 27 billion Colombian pesos (\$6 billion USD), corresponding to 4.5% of the national GDP and 30.5% of the Colombian Caribbean region's GDP. In terms of economic sectors, 20% of the GDP is concentrated in commerce, vehicle repair, transportation, storage, accommodation, and restaurants; 16.3% in manufacturing industries; 16.1% in public administration and defense, education, healthcare, and social services; 10% in taxes; 7.2% in professional, scientific and technical activities, administrative services; 6.5% in public services; 4.5% in construction, among other sectors.



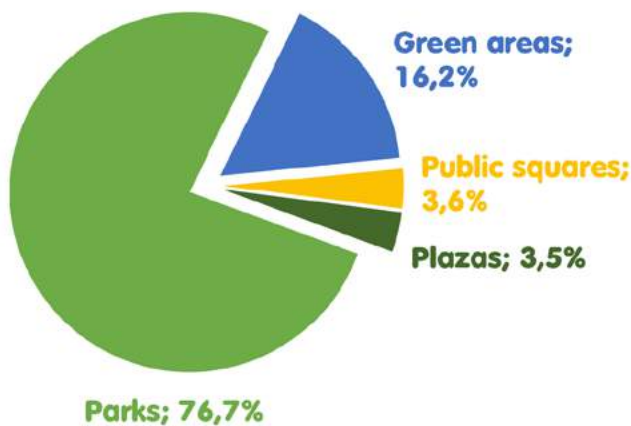
Given Colombia's economic and social dynamics, the transformation of Barranquilla has become a national success story due to the speed in which the city reduced its monetary and extreme poverty, how its citizens' monetary income increased dramatically, and because **it was the city that multiplied the most the number of created jobs in the last ten years, as well as for its innovations in high-quality public education and universal access to public health care.** In real terms, Barranquilla's GDP increased by 45% between 2011 and 2021, the per capita income per spending unit increased by 18%, and monetary poverty was reduced by 9.2 percentage points.

Although in the last 14 years the city has gone through a process of economic and social transformation, it should be noted that the urban development of **Barranquilla has also been considered as a national example regarding solutions to structural infrastructure** problems such as flash floods, the expansion of road corridors, and especially the recovery of public spaces, parks, and green areas. Regarding effective public space, in 10 years, the city has gone from having 0.86 sqm/inhabitant to 2.8 sqm/inhabitant, reaching over 3 million square meters of effective public space. These new renovated spaces are distributed by parks (45%), green areas (10%), separators (13%), sports fields (9%), complementary road space (8%), and other types of public spaces (15%). Although the amount of effective public space per inhabitant is of great value, the program also aimed to improve accessibility to public spaces during its execution. As a result, the city managed to ensure that 93% of all households had a renovated park within an 8-minute walking distance.

Barranquilla's Public Space

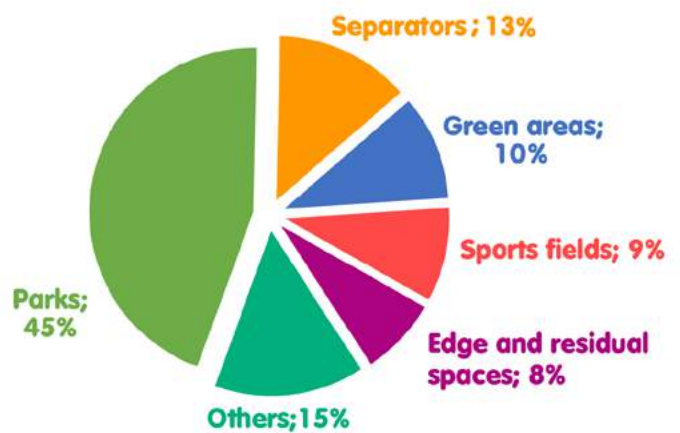


Public space distribution by sqm - 2011



0,86 sqm/hab

Public space distribution by sqm - 2021



2,8 sqm/hab

The “Todos al Parque” Program

Public spaces with poor conditions

In 2011, citizens had low access to green and public spaces for recreation, leisure, and sports, and those few available spaces were under-used due to the presence of crime, drug trafficking, and dangerous infrastructure for children, young people, the elderly, and people with disabilities.



Parks in 2007

According to the “Barranquilla Cómo Vamos (2011)” survey (a non-governmental organization in charge of monitoring local public management), **only 10% of citizens were satisfied with the conditions of the city’s parks.**



Parks in 2007



Hence, one of the main requests expressed by the community was to have high-quality public spaces to practice physical and leisure activities and have access to green areas.



The “Todos al Parque” initiative

Parks in 2022

The “Todos al Parque” program was born as a strategy for the recovery, enhancement, and generation of open green public space in the city. It focused on the renewal of existing parks, guaranteeing their maintenance, constant event agendas, and the generation of new public space on different scales.

The public entity responsible for the program is the District Infrastructure Agency (ADI in Spanish), whose objective is to develop, plan and structure public infrastructure works, aimed at the preservation, conservation, protection, improvement, and environmental recovery of water resources, parks, public space and gardens at the District of Barranquilla.

At the end of 2011, after the city had managed to settle part of its basic social debt and the citizens requested new amenities, a baseline situation of parks was analyzed by the local government, resulting in two main issues:

- 1) The city had a low availability of green areas and public spaces for recreation, leisure and sports activities.**
- 2) The few available spaces had low use by its citizens.**

Faced with this need, in the same year, Agreement 007 of 2011 was signed by the District establishing the urban and environmental policy for the recovery, maintenance, management, and financing of public parks, squares, boulevards, and green areas.

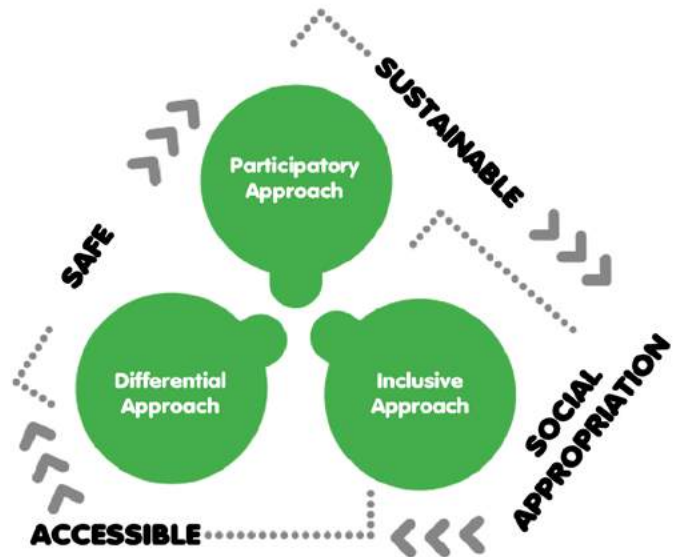
In 2012, the coordinating team (ADI) was in charge of structuring the program, and organizing national and international exchanges with different cities for their insights and know-how, as was the case with the sister city of Tampa in the United States. Consequently, creating the first designs, estimating public space needs by spatial criteria, raising community awareness, and coordinating the first pilots of the program's interventions.

Since its inception, the program has articulated three approaches based on criteria that benefit the entire population: differential, participatory, and inclusive approaches:

- **Differential Approach:** It promotes real and effective conditions for equality.

- **Participatory Approach:** social appropriation of renovated spaces through increased citizen participation in all stages of intervention (design, execution, and approval) to strengthen confidence in the local institutions.

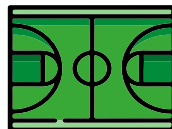
- **Inclusive Approach:** Social needs analysis by area is an essential part of the selection of parks to intervene in, taking into account accessibility indicators between boroughs and imbalances between supply and demand.



Following these approaches, in 2013, the first interventions began with standard characteristics and amenities:



1. Playgrounds for younger children.



2. Multiple sports fields.



3. Open gyms.



4. Anti-impact foam zones.



5. Designs with wide visuals and flat areas.



6. Security cameras.



7. Green areas, gardening and tree planting.



8. Park rangers (Guardaparques) and coordination with the public cleaning company.



9. Cultural and sports agendas.

"Todos al Parque" Program Timeline

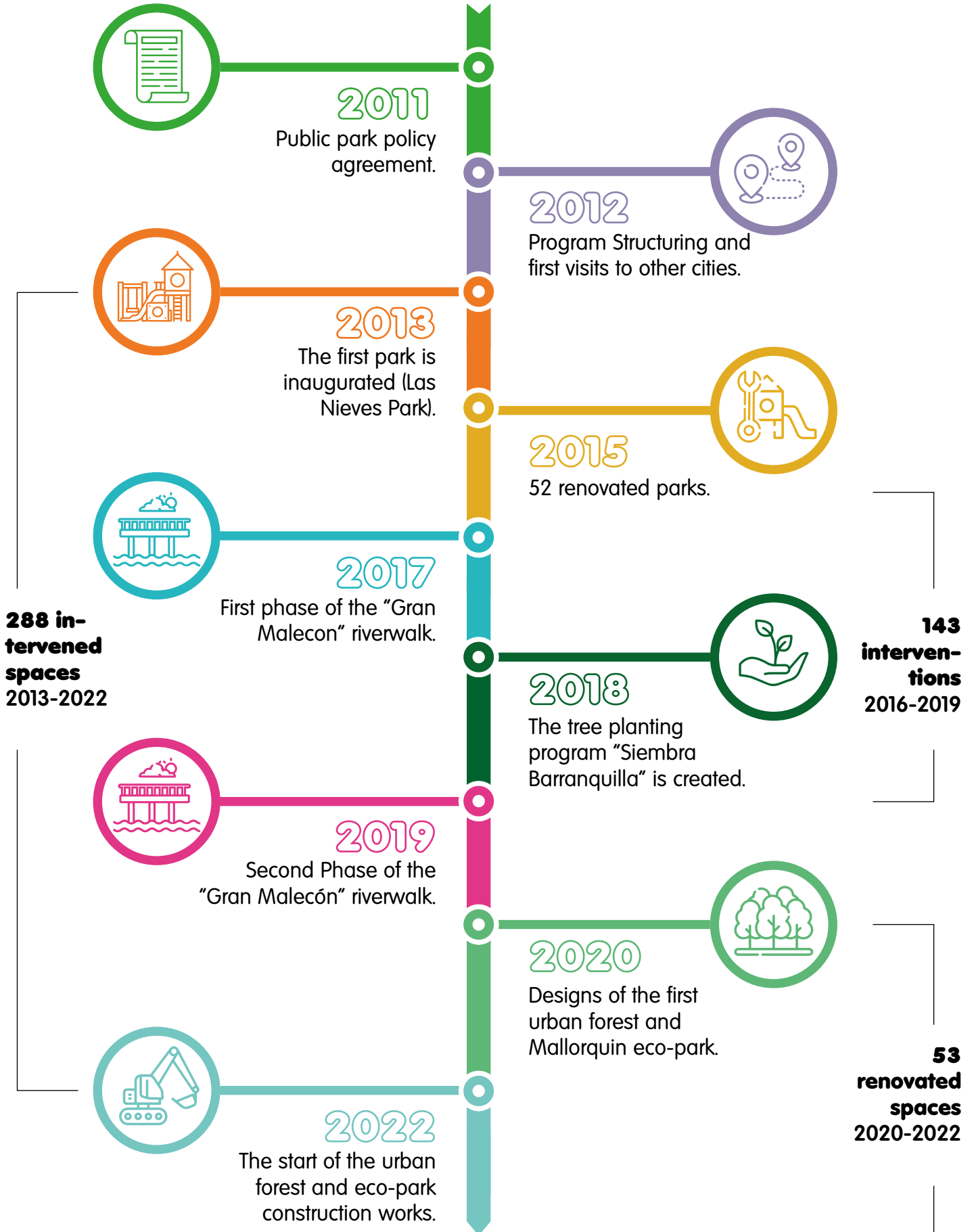


Table 1: “Todos al Parque” Program Phases

PHASES AND RESOURCES	PARKS AND INTERVENED ZONES	Renovated SQM
PRELIMINARY PHASE	9	127.294
PHASE I	21	121.837
PHASE II	25	188.680
APPRAISAL RESOURCES	1	27.033
PHASE III	22	100.614
POCKET PARKS	53	60.251
PHASE IV	30	155.384
PHASE V	16	145.123
PHASE VI	58	424.864
NEIGHBOURHOOD PARKS	9	26.816
PUBLIC SPACE EXCHANGE OF PRIVATE URBAN DEVELOPMENTS	10	150.761
GREEN AREAS, BOULEVARDS AND ROUNDABOUTS	31	113.286
MALLORQUIN ECO-PARKS	2	31.232
MIRAMAR URBAN FOREST	1	300.000
TOTAL	288	1.973.175

Source: ADI & City Management Office.

One of the main factors for the success of the “Todos al Parque” program has been its design by contracting and execution phases.

Since its beginnings (2011):




288
interventions have been carried out in parks, green areas, boulevards, and roundabouts.



More than **1.9** million square meters of public space in the city have been recovered.

This phased program design allowed an:

- 
 - Increased scale of interventions from pocket parks to metropolitan parks, to the creation of new public spaces.
 - Generation of a continuous learning process in corrective maintenance and cultural agenda of renovated spaces.
 - Spatial equity between interventions throughout the city, focusing in areas with high-social vulnerability.

Location of Renovated Spaces



The different phases of the project were accompanied by a learning process and refinement of the interventions that consolidated a system of parks that initiated with small neighborhood parks, to interventions on a metropolitan scale such as the "**Gran Malecón**", a universal tree planting program, the creation of urban forests, up to the renewal of degraded ecosystems through eco-parks such as the **Ciénaga de Mallorca**.



GRAN MALECÓN

The "Gran Malecón" consists of the creation of more than 5 kilometers (3.1 miles) of public space parallel to the Magdalena River, which contains green areas, public squares, theme parks, pedestrian zones, roads, food markets, sports fields, contributing more than 133,000 square meters of new public space to the city.

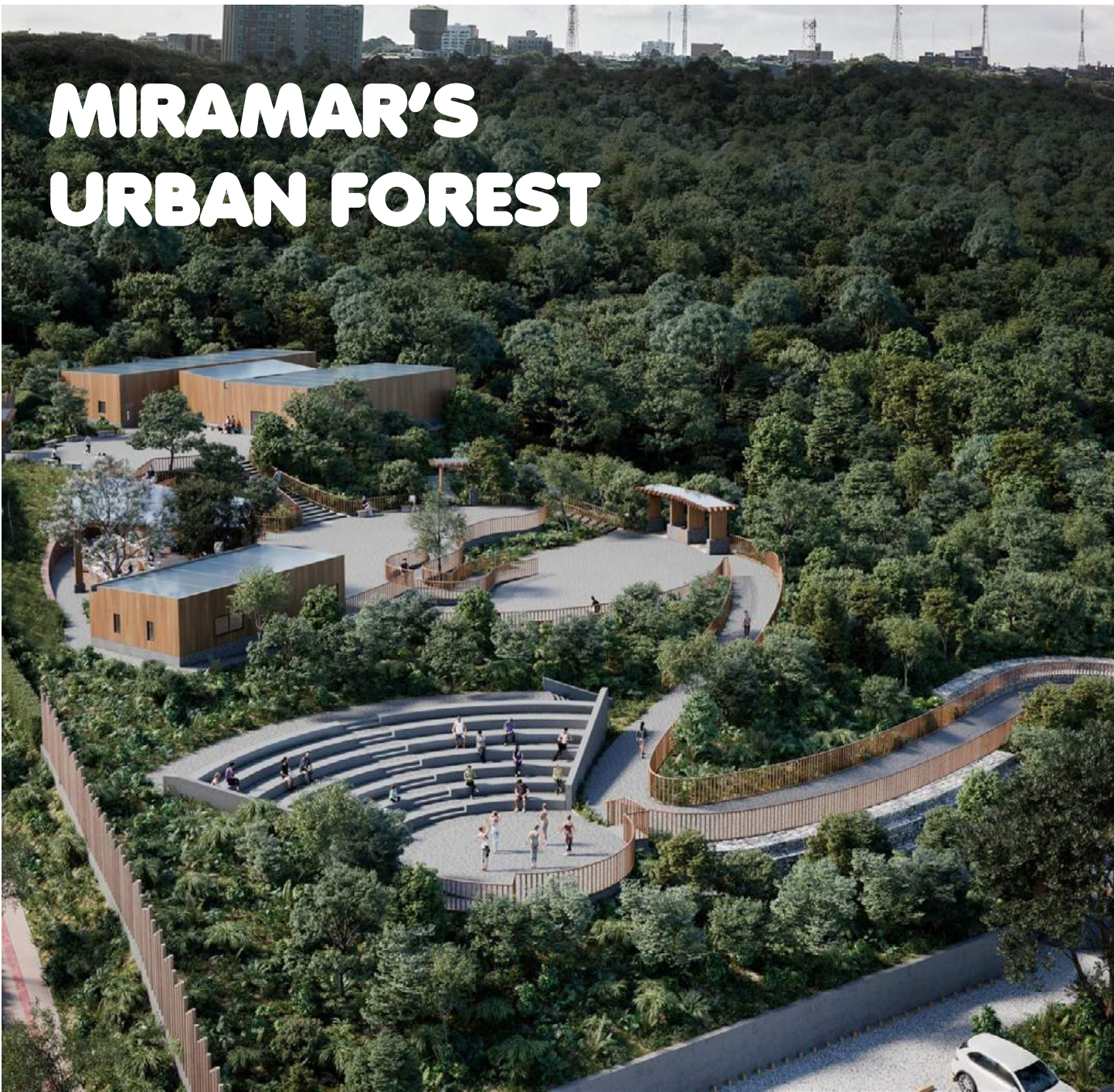
Due to its touristic, gastronomical, cultural, recreational, and sports amenities, the "Gran Malecón" has become the most visited public space in Colombia, with more than 22 million visitors since its inauguration in 2017.



Credits: WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities.

The project has also been awarded for its urban and architectural design at a national and international level.

MIRAMAR'S URBAN FOREST



On the other hand, the future **Urban Forest of Miramar**, with its 30 hectares of extension, will increase the green public space of Barranquilla and its metropolitan area, providing a place for outdoor activities. The project has a Co2 capture potential of 2,500 tons per year, which constitutes a great effort to advance the city's sustainability objectives.

CIÉNAGA DE MALLORQUÍN ECO-PARK

Due to Barranquilla's location, the city has an ecosystem where the Magdalena River and the Caribbean Sea come together within a mangrove system, which has historically suffered from sedimentation, mangrove destruction, and contamination. **As part of the complete restoration of the "Ciénaga de Mallorca" system, the city is currently undergoing the construction of a 31.232 sqm Eco-Park that consists of elevated wooden paths that run across the mangrove and swamp.**



The different institutional processes of the “Todos al Parque” program led to the modernization of all the local public institutions of Barranquilla, allowing the sustainability of the program over time, transcending different political governments in a country where immediate re-election is not possible. Said modernization **generated a change of perspective on the necessities of the city in terms of urban development, such as the need for tree planting and LED public lighting not only in renovated parks but throughout the entire city.**



Therefore, the **“Siembra Barranquilla”** program was initiated in 2017 and sought to create a tree planting plan for the city, guaranteeing its maintenance through irrigation, nutrition, technical pruning, and structural improvements of the trees, as well as the creation of a 53-hectares tree nursery unique in Latin America.

Since its implementation, more than 135 thousand trees have been planted in the city and more than 530 thousand square meters of public space have been renovated landscaping in roundabouts, boulevards, and parks.

On the other hand, due to the importance of public lighting in the renovation of public parks, a mixed economy company was formed to guarantee a sustainable LED public lighting service in the entire city. The “Todos al Parque” program helped as well to improve and re-direct the mission of the coordinating entity (ADI) and enhance its institutional activities.

Impacts of the Program

Having urban amenities like a park has multiple benefits that improve the quality of life of its citizens, given that they:



Encourage healthy lifestyles and reduce health costs.



Strengthen local economies and create employment opportunities.



Increase resilience to climate change.



Strengthen the communal social fabric.



Increase urban visibility, encourage natural surveillance, and reduce the risk of crime.

The impact of the “Todos al Parque” program is summarized in the following:

1. Physical environment: The park system created by the program led to a substantial improvement in accessibility to quality public space, where currently 93% of households have a recovered park within an 8-minute walking distance; it also contributed to strengthening climate resilience due to a greater number of green areas and more than 135 thousand trees planted in the city.

2. Governance and participation: Citizen participation within the program has enhanced social capital in neighborhoods, catalyzing a sense of appropriation towards recovered spaces, and generating empathy and trust towards public institutions. The sense of belonging towards recovered parks, the design changes implemented in the various parks promoted by the community, and the daily use of any type of outdoor activity are all examples of community participation. Besides, it has improved interaction between the public administration and the community, enhancing transparency and communication channels between the government and citizens.

3. Economic: The renewal of parks has impacted different economic sectors of the city, especially the real estate market, generating property appraisals surrounding a recovered park. The foregoing leads to a positive impact on the District’s public finances due to an improved culture of tax payment, generating more public resources for social investment.

4. Perception and behaviors: The program reduced criminal activity in the areas of influence of the recovered parks. According to the District’s estimations, between 2011 and 2020, the number of thefts within a 100-meter radius were reduced by an average of 20%, 15.4% in a 150-meter radius, and 9% in a 200-meter radius. Furthermore, parks have become public venues for cultural events, local entrepreneurship fairs, and places of recreation during the pandemic restrictions, as well as spaces where citizens congregate and interact.

¹ Monroy, L.E. & Salazar, A.M. (Diciembre, 2021). “Los Parques como Espacios Seguros: Una Evaluación de Impacto del Programa “Todos al Parque” en la ciudad de Barranquilla”. Secretaría de Planeación. Alcaldía Distrital de Barranquilla. Recuperado de <https://www.barranquilla.gov.co/documentos-tecnicos-preliminares>

Various uses of public parks in Barranquilla



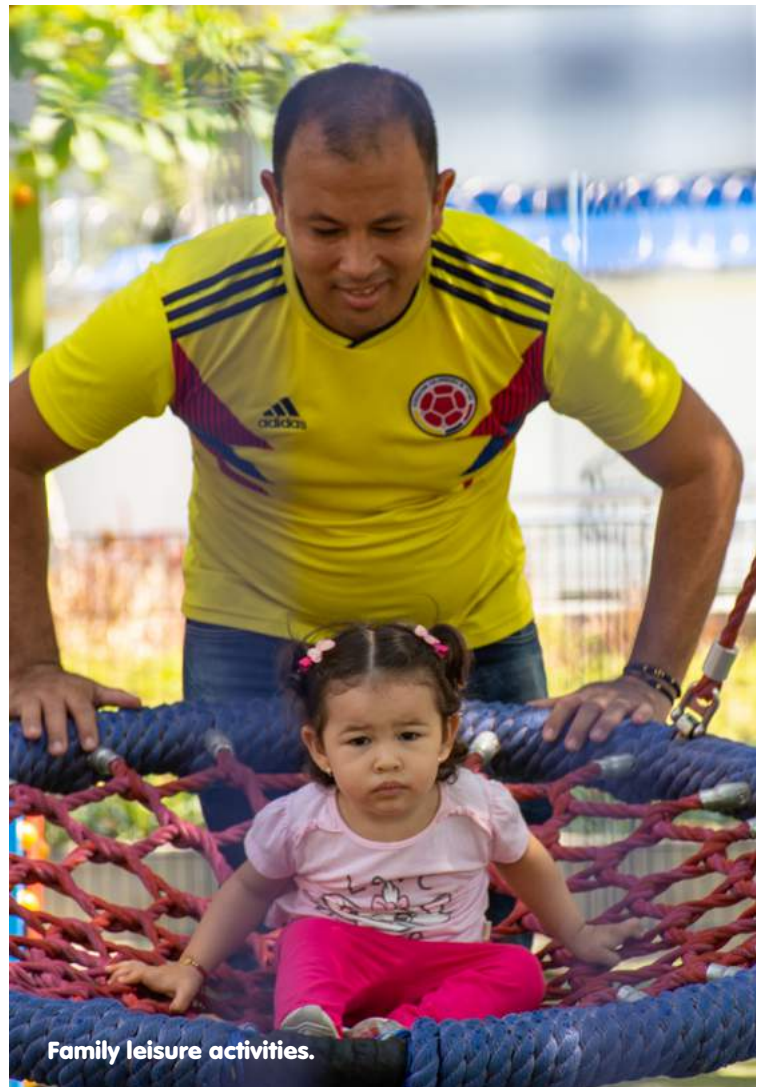
Cultural activities.



Vaccination campaigns.



Sports training.



Family leisure activities.



Civic engagement.



Safe activities for children.



Sports activities for children.



Leisure and sports activities for the elderly.

How can other cities replicate this public space renovation model?

The “Todos al Parque” program is a public management success story that can be replicated in different national and international contexts and has a direct short and long-term impact on people’s quality of life. Just as the district administration learned from other cases such as that of the city of Tampa in the United States, other cities can learn from Barranquilla, especially those with similar geography, climate, and environment (high humidity and an average annual temperature of 78.5 F).



To replicate this type of public program, we consider that it is necessary to follow the following steps:

1. PROPOSE A LONG-TERM PUBLIC POLICY THAT ALLOWS CONTINUITY REGARDLESS OF CHANGES IN GOVERNANCE:

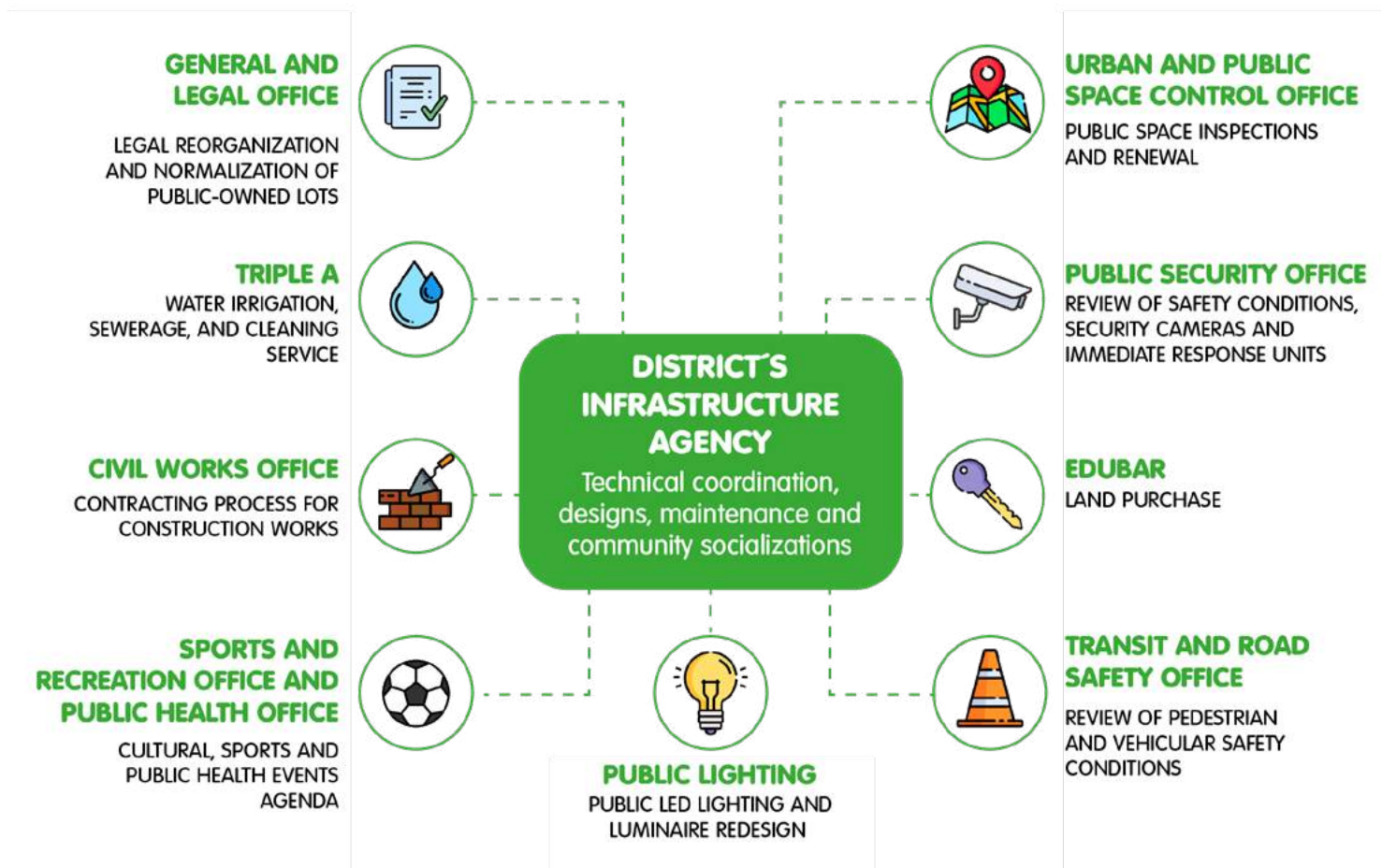
The process of continuity that the program has undergone has been a determining factor for its success. With a public policy proposed in 2011, endorsed a year later by the local 2012 Development Plan, it achieved its first intervention in 2013, and ever since it has intervened in increasingly innovative spaces with transparency, efficiency, and iterative processes.

2. ESTABLISH A COORDINATION TEAM:

The program has relied on different local government entities working together in a centralized committee in charge of deciding on all stages of interventions, from the legal status of public lots and the construction works to their use and maintenance. **The District Infrastructure Agency (ADI in Spanish)** carries out technical coordination, design, socialization, and maintenance, while different public offices and decentralized entities are in charge of the legal reorganization and normalization of publicly-owned lots, the contracting process for construction works, property purchasing, public lighting, mobility conditions of the park and its surrounding areas, and the public events agenda, among others.

This inter-institutional coordination has allowed interventions to be carried out efficiently and monitored through weekly committees. The renewal process of public parks goes through multiple stages, iterations, and phases that can be summarized in three categories: preparation, execution, and maintenance and sustainability.

Figure 1. Activity Coordination Structure.



Source: Transformado a Barranquilla: El caso del programa de todos al parque del Distrito de Barranquilla 2012-2018. Casos de éxito de la gestión pública, enero de 2019.

3. SET UP A PHASED INTERVENTIONS MECHANISM:

The coordinating entity (ADI) along with other offices and decentralized entities review the legal status of publicly-owned parks and perform land and topographic recognition to submit a preliminary design to the community. Subsequently, the committee decides contractual processes for a specific bundle of parks, streamlining contracting and increasing the program's coverage.

4. EXECUTION:

Initial meetings are held with neighborhood leaders and representatives to exhibit preliminary designs, pricing studies for construction inputs, and inspections to prioritize materials that facilitate and reduce costs of subsequent maintenance.

Figure 2. Execution Phases



PREPARATORY

1. Review and legal normalization.
2. On-site recognition.
3. Topographic survey.
4. Topographic digitizing
5. Model digitizing process.
6. Preliminary park design.



EXECUTION

7. First meeting between ADI and community representatives (preliminary design review)
8. Design adjustments.
9. Park design socialization with the community for the approval of construction plans.
10. Construction works.
11. Final community approval.
12. Inauguration event.

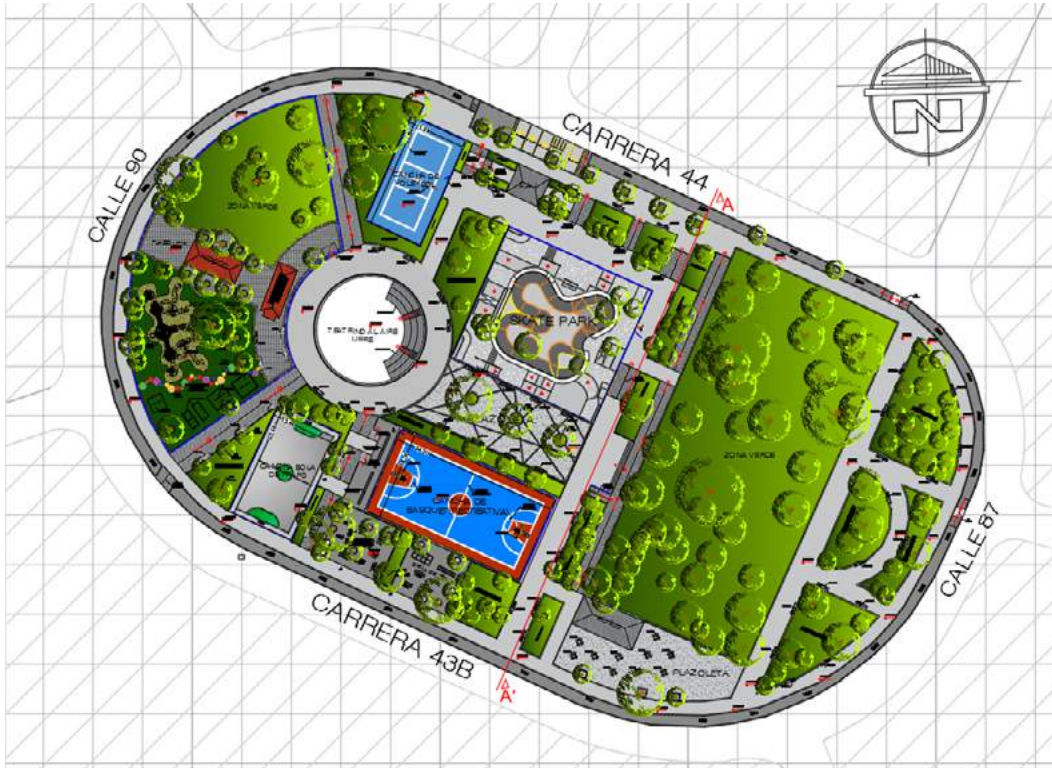


MAINTENANCE AND SUSTAINABILITY

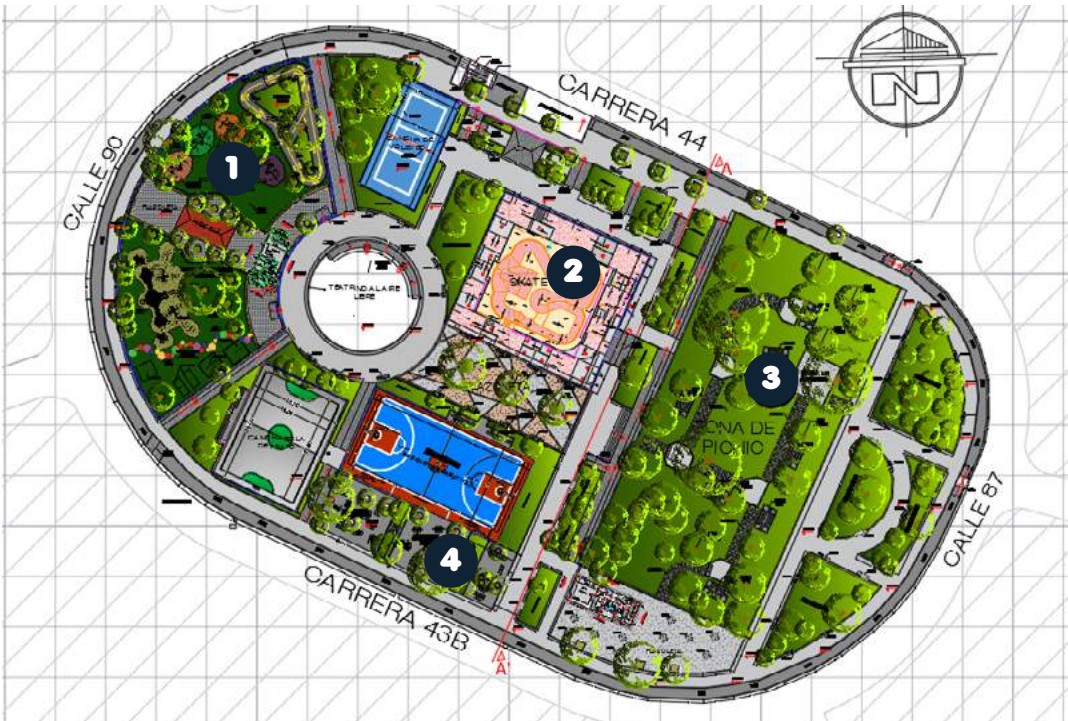
13. Preventive maintenance
14. Cultural, sports and leisure events agenda.
15. Corrective maintenance.

Figure 3. Co-creation

PRELIMINARY DESIGN



NEW DESIGN INCLUDING CHANGES SUGGESTED BY THE COMMUNITY



- 1.** Children's playground extensions.
- 2.** Structural adjustments of the skate park as requested by local skateboarders.
- 3.** Picnic zone.
- 4.** Addition of a Calisthenics in the open gym zone.



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5. ENCOURAGE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION AT ALL STAGES:

A main cause of the program's success has been how the City has involved the community in the design process, ensuring that each intervention meets standards and preferences of neighboring communities regarding recreation, leisure, and comfort. Furthermore, intervened parks are only opened if the community approves, creating a sense of belonging among the neighbors towards their park and leading to its proper use and protection.

6. ESTABLISH A MAINTENANCE MECHANISM THROUGH A TEAM OF PARK RANGERS (GUARDAPARQUES) AND TEAMWORK WITH PUBLIC SERVICE ENTITIES:

Recovered spaces have a maintenance team called "Guardaparques", who are constantly present in every park and guarantee maintenance, cleaning, and replacement of urban furniture. They have become important actors in the peaceful coexistence and good use of public spaces. In addition, an agreement was established with the city's public water, sewerage, and cleaning service company for the irrigation of green areas and their cleaning, as well as tree planting, landscaping, and public lighting with the respective entities.



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7. CREATE A PUBLIC PARK SYSTEM VISION:

Cities should consider the gradual nature of the interventions and the iterative learning processes they lead to. As an initial phase, cities can start with the recovery of pocket parks (small parks) that have a direct impact at the neighborhood level and transition towards metropolitan parks with a broader scope and greater complexities.



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In the case of Barranquilla, this transition is reflected in how the city passed from recovering pocket parks to building metropolitan parks, riverwalks, and, currently, urban forests and eco-parks within the Ciénaga de Mallorquín mangrove system. The last two projects are essential to the city's aim of becoming a national biodiversity pioneer.

8. LOCAL RESOURCING:

Cities interested in replicating the program model must have their own financing sources. The program has been a success due to the fact that financing has been almost entirely through local public resources, with the support of the national government for specific small interventions. This indicates that these types of strategies depend on a local vision and political will, given the level of public services they require.



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Awards and Worldwide Recognition



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For the program and Barranquilla, being among the five finalists for the World Resource Institute (WRI) Prize For Cities award, along with cities such as Paris (France), Odisha (India), Peshawar (Pakistan), and Iloilo (Philippines), is an important milestone since it validates worldwide the impacts of parks and public space renewal in the city and strengthens the vision of a biodiverse Barranquilla.

The case of the “Todos al Parque” program has resonated at a national level, especially due to one of the most important urban renewal projects in recent years in Barranquilla, the “Gran Malecón” river walk. **The project was born as part of the sophistication process of public space interventions in the city, and the need to transition from recovering spaces in poor conditions to generating new high-quality public spaces.**



Due to the river-walk’s touristic, gastronomical, cultural, recreational, and sports amenities, it has become the most visited public space in Colombia, with more than 22 million visitors since its inauguration in 2017. The “Gran Malecón” has been awarded for its architectural and urban design in the XXV Colombian Biennial of Architecture and Urbanism and the 2022 International Architecture and Design Award. Also, in the last consecutive years, it has gained multiple recognitions for its tourist dynamics in the TripAdvisor digital platform.

The urban forests and the Mallorquin swamp eco-park projects are key initiatives for the construction of a biodiverse city, which is aligned with Barranquilla’s vision and participation in the network of Biodiver-cities of the Latin America and Caribbean Development Bank.



The Arbor Day Foundation and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO) publish the list of cities that best manage their forest systems, and Barranquilla was included in the last three consecutive years as a part of the Tree Cities of the World. This list brings together cities that demonstrate leadership in urban tree management and have different approaches to environmental solutions.



Credits: WRI Ross Center for Sustainable Cities.



Although the recognition is associated directly with the “Siembra Barranquilla” program, the latter was born from a knowledge and technical spill-over process of the public parks program.



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