



Colombia Green Building Council: taking and offering inspiration in equal measure

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"It is not true that people stop pursuing dreams because they grow old, they grow old because they stop pursuing dreams." *Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1927-present, Colombian/global literary phenomenon/Nobel Prize winner)*

When I began to prepare last month for my speech at the [Colombia Green Building Council's Urban Sustainability in Action conference](#), I realized that I was pretty ignorant about Colombia. I knew that the author of "One Hundred Years of Solitude" and the author of "Hips Don't Lie" were both Colombian-born. But there is nothing like the prospect of a real life visit to motivate me to educate myself in order to not come off as an ignorant Yankee.

By the time I arrived in late April, I knew the country was the second-largest Spanish-speaking country in the world (the size of Portugal, Spain and France combined), with one of the most politically and economically stable governments in South America over the last 50 years (e.g., never experienced hyperinflation or defaulted on international debts).

I also knew it was experiencing solid GDP growth (e.g., 4.3 percent in 2012) and that the former mayor of Bogota, Enrique Penalosa, was now a leading advocate internationally for livable, walkable cities. In fact, he is chair of the board of directors for the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy (ITDP), a New York-based NGO with astonishing and highly progressive global influence on sound urban transportation policy. This bit of education was particularly interesting to me, as ITDP has been a great ally and role model for USGBC when it comes to global policy impact.

Coincidentally reinforcing the Colombian commitment to livable cities, *The Wall Street Journal* and Citibank just announced in March that Medellín, Colombia, had won their "City of the Year" competition, a global program developed in partnership with the Urban Land Institute to recognize the most innovative urban centers around the world.

The city now boasts well-attended civic space, libraries and art galleries. Business is also thriving. Its former mayor, Sergio Fajardo, is credited with much of this transformative vision. When reflecting on the strategy that focused heavily on investments in the poorest neighborhoods of the city, he remarked, "Some people say, 'Well, it's just a building.' It's not just a building. It's a public space,

and the dignity of the space means the whole society has invested there. The whole society is present there.” It’s “architecture as a social program,” he told *Newsweek* in 2010. That’s vision.

When I arrived in Bogota, I quickly found the Colombians were very proud of their country and that their business community was beginning to show a visible interest in sustainable green construction and development. As part of the council’s continuing policy commitment, it is working with the United Nations Environment Programme to advance the state of knowledge on sustainable building practices globally and in South America.

I was a guest of the Colombia Green Building Council, whose members promote through a sophisticated network the “transformation of the country’s cities and its building industry toward sustainability.” It has been particularly effective as a trusted expert adviser to the government of Colombia in an effort to ensure the government formulates responsible and rational policies when it comes to greening the built environment. The council members are also active in the international activities of the World Green Building Council, including its promising Sustainable Cities Initiative (SCI) Task Force, chaired by Jason Hartke of the U.S. Green Building Council. The SCI works closely with networks of the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40) to advance “cool cities,” sustainable urban development, retrofit financing and climate-positive developments. One of the SCI/C40 “visioning pilots” is under way in Bogota.

So at [Greenbuild](#) in Philadelphia, look for the delegation of Colombian architects, contractors and product manufacturers. They are the ones taking and offering inspiration in equal measure.



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