Journal of Transport Geography 42 (2015) 188

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Transport Geography

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jtrangeo

Book review

Urban Mobility and Poverty: Lessons from Medellín and Soacha, Colombia, Julio D. Dávila (Ed.). (2013). London and Medellín: Development Planning Unit and Universidad Nacional de Colombia. £10 (paperback), ISBN: 978-0-9574823-2-6. £0 (pdf), ISBN: 978-0-9574823-3-3

In most places, aerial cable-cars are used to transport skiers and tourists. In South American cities, they are increasingly used for commuting and planned as a way to reduce poverty. *Urban Mobility and Poverty* documents the case of the *Metrocables*, a cable-car system in Medellín, Colombia's second largest city. The book is available in print in English and in digital format in Spanish and English. The 23 chapters are all written by different authors, providing a wide range of perspectives about the subject.

The *Metrocables* project in Medellín is presented as a success story, where an imaginative and audacious idea led to the creation of an equitable and environmentally sustainable transport system. The lines connect poor, high-density hilly neighbourhoods with the Medellín overground metro system, providing local residents with a safe and affordable means of transport to the central parts of the city. But readers are alerted early in the book that it is not enough to look at the ways that transport enables access to opportunities and reduces social exclusion, a common approach in developed countries (Lucas and Stanley, 2009). Instead, the book adopts a broader political and sociological view of mobility, much in line with the work of Vasconcellos (2001).

This approach is entirely appropriate for a city such as Medellín, characterized by income concentration and spatial and social segregation. In fact, one the most interesting conclusions is that the system reduced the marginalisation of the poor neighbourhoods not because it improved the material quality of life of their residents (as there is no evidence that it did), but because it helped to revaluate the neighbourhoods in the eyes of the local and outside populations. However, this could only be achieved because the project was implemented in conjunction with measures to improve housing, public spaces and social infrastructure. The involvement of the state was therefore essential, which leads some of the authors to question whether this type of projects could be put into practice using the public–private partnerships that are becoming increasingly popular in developed countries.

The emphasis on the political and sociological aspects of the project may not please all readers. Geographers and urban planners will notice the insufficient attention given to the effects of the system on patterns of urban land use, a topic only briefly covered in a 3-page chapter. Economists may also find that their views are underrepresented. One chapter does examine the impacts of the system on the local economy. However the analysis is based on a before-and-after comparison of variables such as employment, number of business and property transactions. This approach has limitations, recognised by the authors, because it is difficult to disentangle the effects of the project from those of trends affecting the whole city. Another chapter presents the results of a discrete choice model of people's travel decisions. This statistical analysis gives interesting insights into people's preferences, but it does not fit very well with the rest of the book, which is largely descriptive.

The success of the *Metrocables* is clearer when compared with the failure of similar projects, such as the *Cazucables* in Soacha, a municipality adjacent to Bogotá. The local municipality has limited technological, financial and management capacity. The implementation of a large project such as a cable-car system is then dependent on decisions from the Bogotá and the national government. The political and institutional obstacles to the project are discussed in detail in several chapters, but once again, economic aspects are left relatively untouched, especially those related with the demand for the cable-car service.

The book closes with a series of chapters about other South American cities where similar systems have been recently introduced or proposed in Colombia, Venezuela, Bolivia and Brazil. While these chapters are quite interesting on their own, no links are made with the case of Medellín. One of the chapters dealing with the Soacha case already identifies some of the lessons learned from the Medellín's *Metrocables* project. However, the readers would more fully understand the importance of this project if those lessons were set in the context of those other four cities, as they provide a wider set of geographic, political and socio-economic terms of comparison.

References

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http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.jtrangeo.2014.06.012