

*Empowering Local Initiatives: building food sovereignty from the social tissue*  
Colombia

College of the Atlantic

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*Section I. Description of the project*

The goal of this project was to revitalize a vacant public lot at the bank of the river Fucha, in the Bogotá neighborhood of San Cristobal, by initiating a community-based effort to inhabit the public land and strengthen the social tissue from the core. It was also our goal to use this plot as the first ecoclassroom in Bogotá and as a convergence space for community members and groups working towards the renaturalization and rooting of life in the city.

Apart from the Davis Projects for Peace award, our project has been supported by Casa Nativa, a collective that partnered with us to facilitate the construction of a garden and bring youth participants into the project, Mesa de Agricultura Urbana (MAU) de San Cristobal, a local urban agriculture grassroots organization which supported us with knowledge and camaraderie, and the Rochester School of Bogotá, which donated several trees and compost for the garden.

This project was conceived and executed by four joint minds. Maytik Avirama and Maria Alejandra called on Natalia Londoño and Esteban García, close friends who are currently finishing their majors (sociology and anthropology, respectively) at the Universidad Javeriana in Bogotá. For over a year, Natalia and Esteban were the local links who established the foundations of what our project would become. At the moment the four of us reunited in Bogotá, we became a synchronized group of young minds that will stay together to develop similar projects in the city. Besides the four of us, we had the luck and privilege to receive the help and support of many volunteers who, encouraged by the nature of our project, invested their time and energy in the transformation of the garden.

Initially we thought that our project was going to support MAU's vegetable production efforts, but soon we realized that it was out of our hands to encourage such an endeavor because we had limited knowledge of markets and finance and because our budget would not allow us to buy enough land. Instead, we became more interested in addressing a second issue in which just some of the MAU members were interested: the passing down to younger generations of the traditional knowledge of working the land. This transfer of knowledge and experience became our motto.

At this point we realized that we lacked contact with youth in the neighborhood because most of our contacts were elders in MAU. Also, we realized that if we wanted to reach out to the community we needed to go out of our MAU comfort space, because our real challenge was to involve people who were not already interested in urban agriculture. We started to do some networking and discovered that there were multiple initiatives focusing on social transformation in San Cristobal.

One of the people that we met was Hamid Nativo, a man who works with a collective called Casa Nativa and guides the social service program of a group of 30 youth from a local school. Their two year-long work has been based on the renaturalization of the Fucha river, one of the main water resources of Bogotá. The river used to be a social and ecological center of the city but is now ignored and greatly polluted by the urbanization process. Thus far, Casa Nativa has focused primarily on the cleaning of garbage on two public terrains by the riverside. After meeting Hamid and sharing with him our visions of our project, he opened up the possibility of using one of those terrains as our community garden. At first, we doubted whether this was the right direction for our project, because the public nature of the space required us to change the focus of the project and to take the MAU members out of their comfort

space. At the same time we saw potential for connecting the work of the young activists with the elders, and to include the objective of renaturalization (meaning understanding the changes of the land over time due to urbanization and acting upon those changes in a conscious manner). Additionally, the idea of revitalizing a center of waste and violence into a place of life and harvest was very appealing.

Therefore we designed and built an ecogarden, a public park where people could hang out, work the land, and learn about native species of trees and shrubs while enjoying the river and the ecological path. In the short term we aimed to create a bridge between different generations, built upon practical work and a shared objective – the transformation of a space. In the medium term we aimed to strengthen the network of environmental, social, and agricultural activists around Bogotá, so we organized a festival called *Escucha al Río en Tí* where different groups from the city could see our work and then talk about and celebrate their own work. In the long term, the whole community of San Cristobal will benefit from this space, the first ecological garden along the river Fucha. Local political leaders have told us that there is interest in replicating our experience on several other strategic points along the Fucha river. We also consolidated a strong network of volunteers from different universities in Bogotá who will continue supporting Natalia and Esteban in the further development of the project. Bringing people from different socioeconomic background to work together and learn from each other is also an important achievement of this project. Members from the MAU, Casa Nativa and volunteers have committed to continue work on the transformation of the space and to produce a documentary about their experiences on the site.

### *Section II. Peace & Learnings*

Peace can be defined as the fighting of fear while filling the emptiness with elements that allow the making of a space where love can be shared, explored and expanded.

Our project was relevant for peace building in the short term because we transformed a space dominated by fear and violence into a fertile garden where trust and collaborative work are needed in order to succeed. In the long run, we hope that the reclaiming of the public space as a place to share, celebrate and harvest, strengths the community's resilience capacity.

This project showed us that social empowerment indeed exists beyond theory, but to make it tangible there needs to be a constant commitment to every step of the process. This commitment is expressed by accepting that initial plans will always fluctuate, and that such changes should be accepted with flexibility as an inherent part of working within complex networks of human relationships. Because of their fragility and fluidity, these networks require constant care and attention, and when cultivated can become powerful tools for enacting social change. Recognizing that these tools operate by their own rhythm becomes paramount in understanding the speed, evolution, and magic of working with people and their environment. In order to sustain healthy interactions it is important to understand others' needs. Exchange and reciprocity are at the base of love and success.

### *Personal Statements*

Natalia Londoño - The space we inhabit and take care of is always teaching us something about ourselves and about our community; the rivers, mountains, and natural beings are also attached to us by the same social tissue. Working with people and nature has taught me to listen; not only to peoples' voices, but to the voices of those places that surround us and that we fill with stories, willings, hopes, and meanings.

Esteban García - Dreams do come true, but we have to involve our effort in making things happen, to move, engage, encourage us and others to take chances, to discover collectiveness.

Maria Alejandra Escalante - Academia does not necessarily teach us how to relate to real life circumstances, to contexts that are far unknown to us. In order to do social activist work, you need to ground yourself, be moved by peoples' lives, listen carefully and with humility to those more experienced than you, and believe that your ideas are worth pursuing.

Ana Maytik Avirama - Every human interaction is a deep peacebuilding process where love, care, and listening are necessary in order to build trust and a balanced exchange.

*Photography*

*Herbal Medicinal Garden with mural background, San Cristobal, Bogotá, Colombia*



*Community members during the first festival Escucha al Río en Tí, San Cristobal, Bogotá, Colombia*

