Ximena Sevilla

Diego Molina. *Planting a City in the Tropical Andes: Plants and People in Bogotá, 1880 to 1920*

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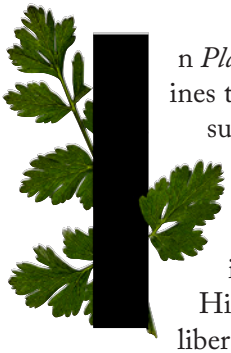

In *Planting a City in the Tropical Andes*, Diego Molina examines the cultural and ecological exchanges that shaped cities such as Bogotá, Colombia, between 1880 and 1920. By centring his analysis on the ways plants and humans together contributed to urban development, Molina offers new lenses for understanding the socio-ecological conditions that impacted Bogotá's urban planning. His attention to trees and ornamental plants, and their deliberate placement in the cityscape, highlights a dimension often overlooked in urban histories. Despite the pervasive presence of plants in the making of cities, scholarship that traces the movement of plants and the strategies people used to facilitate this circulation remains limited. Whether by human design or by chance, plants have persisted over time, adapting organically in ways that often yield unintended consequences. Molina's book ultimately invites us to reconsider the paradigms that have constrained the study of ecological change in urban settings.

The book is divided into two sections that together offer a rich and nuanced exploration of these themes. The first examines the encounters between people and plants, the creation of urban spaces emerging from

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those interactions and the role of traditional ethnobotanical knowledge in sustaining the cultural and economic transformations Colombia underwent from the colonial period to the republican era. The second section focuses on the intentional introduction of plants into urban spaces for specific purposes. In the late nineteenth century, the creation of public gardens served both aesthetic and public health goals. Colombian physicians promoted these gardens and promenades as spaces that benefited citizens' health, with trees functioning as organic filters while also signalling modernity. Throughout the book, Molina highlights how colonial authorities and, later, national elites viewed the city as a representation of progress and civilisation. Ultimately, these groups sought to construct a city that would symbolise modernity and demonstrate Colombia's openness to the global market.

By adopting foreign architectural styles and planting European flowering plants and trees, Colombian elites demonstrated that their vision of a modern city largely excluded native plant species. Yet, beyond the elite's gaze, native species often proved better adapted than imported ones, thriving both in urban green spaces and on the city's outskirts. At the same time, Indigenous descendants who migrated to the city from rural areas continued to develop and sustain their cultural traditions and plant knowledge. Although this dynamic was not unique to Colombia, Molina emphasises the broader failure of Latin American elites to value their own resources, noting in particular the nineteenth-century neglect of the region's 'native local floristic richness' (p. 121).

Molina's analysis of Bogotá's *alamedas* (promenades), conceptualised as public spaces, reveals how these green areas functioned not only as symbols of modernity but also as sites of social encounter across classes. While the city became a space to showcase ideals of progress and civilisation, in practice these urban spaces also brought together people who did not necessarily embrace 'modern' values. Parks, gardens and *alamedas* served as meeting points for leisure as well as for the exchange of resources and knowledge. Despite elite fears that the absence of public parks and gardens would signal backwardness, social encounters among different social groups flourished. This dynamic led to formal gardening projects to transform colonial plazas into parks, which officially began in 1880. Until then, the weekly Friday market drew people from neighbouring towns to exchange goods from different regions and environments. This market experience forced elites to coexist with peasants

and other marginalised groups whose social status dated back to the colonial period. As Molina notes, outside observers often saw these markets as not only dirty but also overwhelmingly chaotic. The shift from markets where edible and medicinal plants were traded to gardens dominated by ornamental plants illustrates the impacts of modernisation in Bogotá. The construction of parks and gardens ultimately served to demonstrate the national government's role in promoting and funding elite visions of urban improvement while deliberately disrupting the organic relationships that had long existed in those spaces.

Colombia's integration into the international trade system further shaped these green urban spaces by introducing foreign plant species and expertise. These changes, however, did not eliminate the contributions of local and self-taught gardeners to the foundation and development of Bogotá's modern green spaces. The prestige sought by regional and national administrations went hand in hand with their preference for European practices over local gardening knowledge. Molina supports this claim by examining multiple instances in which foreign perceptions and models of urban nature shaped cities and influenced urban dwellers' interactions. Drawing on archival research, Molina reconstructs the network of specialists responsible for designing and maintaining Bogotá's gardens. On one hand, formally trained gardeners such as Robert Thomson embodied the authority to bring progress to Bogotá's urban spaces. On the other, self-taught local gardeners such as Casiano Salcedo played an equally important role. Although they all shared a common aspiration to use green spaces as symbols of progress, they contributed distinct understandings of plants in urban settings. Molina carefully unpacks this point by noting the significant role of local actors who engaged in importing and acclimatisation of exotic plants to create the illusion of Bogotá as a temperate city. While Bogotá's unique ecosystem is renowned for its diversity, it is not naturally temperate. Through artistic and romantic representations, however, the misconception that Bogotá shared the environmental characteristics of Europe became widespread and even normalised. Molina ties this point to the ways in which replicating European models often blinded planners and elites to local ecological differences.

During the twentieth century, the interplay of urban green spaces and hierarchies of power persisted. Foreign and native plants coexisted in public spaces where entrepreneurs saw opportunities to profit from

displaying exotic species as well as technological innovations. Even as elites sought to maintain social structures that had survived Colombia's independence, they imposed restrictions on access to these green spaces. Entry to parks was tightly controlled and policed from 'immoral behaviors' of visitors deemed insufficiently 'civilized' by elite standards. Iron fences and the visible presence of police officers became symbols of exclusion and control. Park administrators focused on maintaining order and enforcing elite norms within these botanical spaces. The role of *celadores* or caretakers extended beyond tending plants to regulating human interactions within the parks. Pairing this discussion with a compelling image of the *Ruana* and *Cachacos* (p. 134), Molina illustrates the social distinctions between these groups and their perceived suitability – or lack thereof – to share these spaces. The *Ruana* represented marginalised people in traditional Andean clothing, while the *Cachacos* embodied the ideals of a 'modern' society. Usually formally educated, this rising high and middle class modeled European values and behaviours. Following this logic, early twentieth-century planners imagined parks and their trees as having a civilising effect on visitors, hoping that the *Ruana* might eventually adopt the modern norms represented by the *Cachacos*.

Finally, Molina emphasises that this transformation of public green spaces would not have happened without the presence of *celadores*, who mediated the complex relationships between humans and plants. Despite elite aspirations, Bogotá's growing 'modern' population still required wood, which could be obtained only through the labour of those charged with caring for the plants, including servants and women. Throughout the book, Molina avoids reducing his analysis to familiar binaries such as urban/rural, foreign/local, civilised/uncivilised or Western/Indigenous knowledge. Instead, he explores the ways plants functioned as bridges that disrupted these oppositions and transformed green spaces into points of contact. Molina's training as both a biologist and a historian allows him not only to move beyond these binaries but also to develop a nuanced perspective that recognises plants as autonomous entities and political actors in their own right. By dissolving these categorical divides, the book offers a masterfully woven historical account of people's relationships with plants. *Planting a City in the Tropical Andes* is an essential resource for environmental historians,

urban historians and anyone interested in the development of cities in Latin America and beyond.

Ximena Sevilla is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Rhode Island, where she teaches Latin American history. Originally from Lima, Peru, she is an environmental historian whose research combines fieldwork and archival sources to study frontier zones, Indigenous communities, and oral histories of the Andes-Amazon interface known as the Montaña region. She holds a Ph.D. in History and an M.A. in Anthropology from the University of Kansas. Her current book project, *Crossroads of Two Worlds: Living and Resisting Between the Andes and the Amazon, 1500-1850*, examines the entangled relationships of Indigenous peoples and outsiders with the region's unique ecological conditions from the sixteenth to nineteenth centuries, showing how ecological, sociocultural, and ideological considerations shaped its central place in the territorial imagination of colonial Peru and the broader Andean world.

Email: sevilla@uri.edu