

GUATEMALA CITY: THE JUNGLE IN THE CITY

Many cities strive to use urban greenery as a nature-based solution to air pollution, climate change and improved public health. But how about using ravines to bring people and their environment together? Or having an actual jungle in the middle of the city?

URBAN JUNGLE WITH ATTITUDE

The local community in Guatemala City has a bold vision, to defeat old prejudices and revolutionize the way green spaces interact with the city. One way is by merging two dichotomous things – the jungle and the city – in an ecological park known as “Jungla Urbana.” The lush park has stages for performances and community gatherings and gives residents the opportunity to wander through largely untouched nature – and experience the natural ecology of the site their city is built on. Jungla Urbana is part of a larger project to explore how the city’s unique ecosystem can be used to benefit its citizens – ecologically, socially and economically.

THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT TO HELP THE CITY

Guatemala City is home to two million people spread over nearly 700 km², but as much as 42% of that terrain is made up of ravines and the majority of urban areas (18 out of 22) border them. Ravines represent the green lungs of the city, but their full potential and the ecosystem services they provide have been greatly underrated. Within the next 10 years, the urban population is expected to double in Guatemala City, generating new challenges in social integration, mobility, air pollution, water and energy supply, waste management



and the provision of safe homes. Can ravines be part of the solution?

RAVINES – DIVIDERS BECOME CONNECTORS

Kids in Guatemala City grow up hearing, “The ravines are dangerous.” Ravines haven’t been seen as an integral part of the urban landscape, not even as part of the city itself. Instead, they’ve been

seen as dividers or walls that separate, rather than elements that provide the possibility to connect people, both with each other and with the nature that surrounds them. The project Barranco Invertido – “barranco” is Spanish for ravine – was started in 2010 to change this misconception. “There was a need to re-conceptualize how this wall could articulate or connect us,” argues the architect Alejandro Biguria, one of the initiators of the project.



“BARRANQUEANDO”

Barranco Invertido is driven by engaged citizens, architects, artists and other visionary change-makers. At the start, research on ravines was undertaken in collaboration with the municipality and the University of San Carlos. But over time, the project turned into a local movement known as “Barranqueando” that has begun to redefine the relationship between the city and its ravines.

GRASSROOTS SUPPORT

Three architectural studios – Rad and Torus, Taller Acá and JCH – became involved with the community early on when they created Jungla Urbana and gave new life to the ravines between City Zones 10 and 15. They created this ecological park using a participatory and inclusive design process. Their aim was to empower the local community and help create a sense of belonging by incorporating citizen feedback in the park design. Engaged local artists have organized photography workshops and art sessions, and educational events have also been held to involve local youth.

Julian Castillo, one of the architects working on the project, says that in the end, “A city is not made of buildings, roads and infrastructure... but of people!” And this is why the movement collaborates with the local community to bring about long-lasting change.

Dialogue between citizens and their ecosystem

Going forward, the Barranqueando movement wants to continue integrating the ravines with the urban environment to generate ecological, social and economic benefits for their city. They see unexplored potential here. Ravines could serve as natural reserves, as nodes and paths for sustainable mobility

throughout the city, as rainwater collectors, as crucial carbon sinks, as well as for purifying and cooling the air.

LET’S SEE IF IN THE NEXT STEP

Barranqueando will be able to construct bike lanes and trails through the Jungla Urbana so more citizens can discover it, and if they will continue to expand the park to the other city ravines.

The adventure has just begun, and we will be sure to check in to see what happens next.

Meanwhile, what would you like to do for your city?



Some facts about Guatemala City:

Guatemala City joined **WWF’s One Planet City Challenge** in 2017/2018. It is the largest and longest running of its kind. From 2019, participating cities will be evaluated against their alignment with the goal of 1.5°C of maximum global warming. Cities will further be guided to big win impact reductions. Want your city to join go to panda.org/opcc to read more.

Some species of birds in the urban jungle

- zolipote negro
- tortola de cola larga
- tortola comun
- paloma ala blanca
- chara centroamericana
- cuco ardilla

International acclaim

The project has already won international acclaim.

The short film “Barranqueando” won first place in its category at the “Biennale Spazio Pubblico” (Biennial of Public Space) in Rome, Italy.

Have a look to see the challenges and opportunities of ravines in Guatemala, and the Jungla Urbana as a model of citizen cooperation for the preservation of natural resources. The project has been nominated as a sustainable development model in the region.

Architectural studios involved: Rad and Torus, Taller Acá and JCH.

Want to learn more?

<http://offcite.org/the-lungs-of-guatemala-city-architects-efforts-to-serve-an-urban-ecology-by-melanie-ford/>
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