

The Role of Art in the Urban Armed Conflict in Medellín. David versus Goliath: Living Networks and Self-Protection

Beatriz Elena Arias-López  

PhD in Community Mental Health. Nurse
Universidad de Antioquia. Medellín, Colombia
beatriz.arias@udea.edu.co

Laura Jiménez-Ospina 

Master's Degree in History. Historian
Universidad de Antioquia. Medellín, Colombia
lauj368@gmail.com

Sandra Benítez-Diosa 

Master's Degree in Literature. Communicator
Corporación Arlequín y Los Juglares. Medellín, Colombia
sandra.benitez.diosa@gmail.com

Abstract

Introduction: The relational perspective and network approaches are potent ways to understand the world of links and the construction of social issues in contexts of collective resistance, armed conflict, and social unrest. **Objective:** To analyze the scope and dynamics of networking(s) between artistic and cultural initiatives for self-protection in Medellín City. **Methodology:** A case study that included twelve artistic and cultural organizations of the city, a documentary review, semi-structured interviews, territorial tours, focus groups, and a participatory network-mapping workshop conducted between April 2022 and July 2024. **Findings:** The organizations form a non-hierarchical network structure based on political and aesthetic affinities oriented towards an alternative popular artistic movement. Links are strengthened through the exchange of knowledge between established and emerging organizations, intergenerational relationships, and collective activities based on territorial proximity and the sharing of diverse resources. **Conclusion:** These “networks of joy” represent a living movement and symbolize the metaphor of David against Goliath, in which about sixty groups face 380 criminal networks in areas with limited state presence. Under adverse conditions, these organizations seek to create a cultural, ethical, and political alternative for community protection, offering a counter-cultural narrative, especially for the city's youth.

Keywords: Social conflicts; Urban warfare; Oppression resistance; Community support; Civil protection; Civil society organizations; Art; Social networking.

Received: 10/31/2024 | **Reviewed:** 02/04/2025 | **Approved:** 02/18/2025 | **Published:** 07/07/2025



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 **Correspondence:** Beatriz Elena Arias-López. Universidad de Antioquia. Street 64 # 53-09, La Candelaria. Medellín, Colombia. Email: beatriz.arias@udea.edu.co

¿How to quote this article?

Arias-López, B. E., Jiménez-Ospina, L., & Benítez-Diosa, S. (2025). The Role of Art in the Urban Armed Conflict in Medellín. David versus Goliath: Living Networks and Self-Protection. *Prospectiva. Revista de Trabajo Social e intervención social*, (40), e20814521. <https://doi.org/10.25100/prts.v0i40.14521>

El papel del arte en el conflicto armado urbano en Medellín. David contra Goliath: redes vivas y autoprotección

Resumen

Introducción. La perspectiva relacional y los enfoques de redes son vías potentes para comprender el mundo de los vínculos y la construcción de tejido social en contextos de resistencia colectiva, conflicto armado y social. Objetivo. Analizar el alcance y las dinámicas de la conexión en red(es) entre las iniciativas artísticas y culturales para la autoprotección en la ciudad de Medellín. Metodología. Estudio de caso que incluyó doce organizaciones artísticas y culturales de la ciudad, revisión documental, entrevistas semiestructuradas, recorridos territoriales, grupos de discusión y un taller participativo de mapeo de redes. Se llevó a cabo entre abril de 2022 y agosto de 2024. Hallazgos. Las organizaciones conforman una estructura reticular no jerarquizada, basada en afinidades políticas y estéticas, orientada hacia un movimiento artístico popular alternativo. Los vínculos se fortalecen mediante el intercambio de saberes entre organizaciones establecidas y emergentes, relaciones intergeneracionales, y actividades colectivas, en función de la proximidad territorial y el intercambio de recursos diversos. Conclusión. Estas “redes de la alegría” representan movimiento vivo y simbolizan la metáfora de David contra Goliath, en la que cerca de sesenta colectivos enfrentan a 380 grupos delincuenciales en territorios con escasa presencia estatal. En condiciones adversas, estas organizaciones buscan crear una alternativa cultural, ética y política para la protección comunitaria y una contraoferta cultural sobre todo para las juventudes de la ciudad.

Palabras clave: Conflicto social; Guerra urbana; Resistencia a la opresión; Apoyo Comunitario; Protección civil; Organizaciones de la Sociedad Civil; Arte; Red social.

Summary: 1. Introduction, 2. Methodology, 3. Findings, 3.1 Links and Connections Among Organizations, 3.2 The Power of Networked Work for Self-Protection, 3.3 The Organizations’ Worldview: The Amalgam That Shapes the Networked Disposition, 4. Conclusions, 5. Bibliographic references.

1. Introduction

This article originates from a research project conducted between 2022 and 2024 in two consecutive phases, aimed at documenting the role played by artistic and cultural initiatives led by grassroots community organizations in self-protection processes in Medellín, Colombia. In the first phase, we found that legitimacy, territorial permanence, and a commitment to socially engaged art, among other factors, emerged as key elements for understanding the self-protective nature of art in the context of the city's decades-long armed and social conflict. In this context, we identified multiple human rights violations. These factors reflect the risks that women, in particular, face, children, and youth, including murder, assault, threats, recruitment, and restrictions on rights, the result of various forms of violence (Alfaya-Cardona *et al.*, 2024).

Although the term "vulnerability" is commonly used in the literature to describe these populations, we depart from this way of expression due to the silencing it entails, as it places the responsibility for their situation on the individuals themselves, thereby concealing the pressures, powers, actors, and social structures that cause it (Madrid-Pérez, 2018). In this sense, we approach understanding through the concept of violation, which refers to risks and damages and the responsible parties. We understand that violations occur through a combination and overlap of social power structures over individuals and territories, which leads us to the perspective offered by intersectionality. This tool has allowed us to explore how various social structures and power systems intersect in individuals, groups, and territories, resulting in differential degrees of exposure to the harm that can occur in urban violence contexts. It also helps us understand how people deploy various forms of self-protection differently.

In our exploration, we were able to conclude that the most violated individuals, especially women, are those who lead many of the actions and logics that make art a safe space for protection, precisely through the values and forms of relationships that the sex-gender system has relegated in terms of inferiority and public insignificance. We also understood that the condition of artists socially legitimizes their place in communities. However, this does not correlate with an economic, personal, or organizational status, which increases violations and uncertainty. The armed conflict in Medellín has established militarized hegemonies aimed particularly at the construction of identities for young men, the appropriation of female and feminized bodies, the stigmatization and criminalization of youth, and the establishment of adult-centric social logics. All of this is accompanied by the persistence of structural racism within the communities, at the institutional level, and within the organizations themselves, which complicates the situation (Arias López *et al.*, 2024, p. 4).

The terms "community self-protection" and "non-armed civil protection" are linked to the literature on armed conflicts, civil resistance, peacebuilding, human rights defense, and accompaniment of human rights defenders, among others; to indicate the role played by civilians, trained or not, in protecting their peers and ensuring their safety amid conflicts through non-

violent means (Arias-López & Jiménez-Ospina, 2024). In this project, community self-protection is highly relevant for understanding the role of artistic and cultural organizations, which draw on their accumulated forms of agency and resistance to confront violations in a context of limited state presence or where state forces act as agents of violation. This leads to the inhabitants of the territories inventing and reinventing forms of protection amidst the conflict to ensure their survival in the medium and long term.

In this specific case, artistic and cultural organizations have demonstrated their active self-protective role over the years amid the changing dynamics of the conflict in the city of Medellín. They have created spaces for reflection and self-recognition to question the hidden, normalized violence and promote a non-assimilatory self-affirmation of identity, seeking justice and dignity. The organizations establish foundational principles that shape their narratives and practices over time, serving as a powerful route for self-protection, from the perspective of their political and ethical declarations and creative potential (Arias-López *et al.*, 2024).

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These actions unfold in the context of a city whose armed conflict dates back to the 1980s, with the rise of drug trafficking infiltrating all spheres of daily life, the emergence of private justice groups, predecessors of paramilitarism, and the reorganization of militia groups in different neighborhoods (Dávila, 2016). From that decade onward, urban violence escalated as processes of modernization and rapid urbanization merged with the absence of the State, the illegal takeover of social dynamics, and the establishment of a "mafia" subculture of violence—implanted and fueled by drug trafficking—eventually permeating even the most intimate spaces of family and social coexistence. (Jaramillo, 2011).

The impacts of urban warfare have been profound, evident not only in the statistics reflecting murders and other victimizing events, but also in the individual and collective emotions of the city. Fear, sadness, pain, guilt, shame, the desire for revenge, and many acts of violence grow out of anger and resentment. Distrust among neighbors, intra-urban displacements, disappearances, threats, and the murder of individuals crucial to daily life in the neighborhoods have torn apart the social fabric. According to official data, by 2024, ten Organized Criminal Groups (OCGs), eighty Organized Common Crime Groups (OCCGs), and 196 subgroups, most of which are subordinate to the OCCGs, were identified (Alcaldía de Medellín 2024, p. 428). Other studies report 380 "combos" (gangs) that are subordinated to fifteen or twenty larger groups in the city of Medellín (Blattman *et al.*, 2020; 2023), in a hierarchical structure that incorporates salaried members, the majority of whom are young.

In the face of these criminal structures, we are interested in understanding the web of relationships and alliances between artistic and cultural organizations as a key strategy that allows them to generate sustainability and "shielding" against violations, enabling them to remain in the territory. Consequently, we seek to identify the types of networks established, how their exchanges take place, and the collaborative strategies involved, among other aspects, to

understand the effects on community self-protection within the context of urban conflict in Medellín. In this regard, we aim to achieve a mirror image of the dynamics of conflict and violence, which will help us understand how these initiatives arise and sustain themselves from their common connection points, cascading links, and/or nodes that have served as sources for generating others, acting as a strategic element for sustainability, long-term permanence, and the generation of self-protection. Researchers widely use the relational perspective and network approaches to study various social phenomena, demonstrating the value of this approach for understanding the world of relationships and the construction of social fabric (Brand & Gómez, 2006; Jaramillo-Marín, 2009; Trujillo-Osorio *et al.*, 2023).

This study gains relevance because researchers have already widely studied the urban context of Medellín; however, researchers have not examined it through the lens of unarmed civil protection and self-protection, areas where most of the research has focused on rural contexts (Arias-López & Jiménez-Ospina, 2024). Therefore, exploring how these strategies have operated in the urban setting, emphasizing network connections, becomes a significant aspect from a social and academic perspective. Deepening the understanding of artistic and cultural practices, which, as previously mentioned, have helped sustain resistance amid the conflict, serves as a renewed source for reinterpreting the meaning of self-protection and contributing to other geographies affiliated with the Red Académica N+ Creando Espacios Más Seguros. This intention is supported by the statements of the Colombian Comisión de la Verdad (Truth Commission), this warns that the armed conflict has generated cultural damage in the country, but at the same time recognizes the existence of “varied and rich community and social projects that have allowed the transition from armed conflict to coexistence, and from pain to reconciliation” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, p. 574). The Commission’s report is emphatic in stating that art and culture are powerful and very useful tools for rebuilding a social fabric torn apart by the violence generated by the conflict, allowing us to “name the unnamable and make the invisible visible” (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, p. 575).

Thus, this article aims to analyze the scope and dynamics of the network strategy that articulates the artistic and cultural initiatives developed by grassroots organizations in Medellín for the self-protection of communities against urban conflict and its violations.

2. Methodology

In this research, we conducted an instrumental case study (Stake, 1998) on the networked structure of community-based cultural and artistic organizations and their implications for their self-protection strategies. The authors derived this article from the project *Arte que Protege* (Art that Protects), whose research team consisted of five researchers, two young researchers, and a group of collaborators who supported the transcription of audio recordings and the production of research results, coming from an academic institution and a social organization.



During the study, we employed different methods for the generation, collection, and organization of information: we conducted a literature review of academic sources, including bibliographies and texts produced by the same collectives; we attended and observed activities carried out by twelve participating organizations; we conducted approximately fifteen semi-structured interviews with representatives of these groups; we carried out five territorial tours in their neighborhood work areas; we organized four focus groups with communities benefiting from activities led by some collectives; and we facilitated a network mapping workshop. The research team conducted the fieldwork between May 2022 and July 2024. In the network mapping workshop, representatives from six collectives participated, with whom we documented a relational map between organizations and assessed the scope, strength, and motivation of their links and connections. The information gathered during the fieldwork and the network mapping workshop was used as the basis for generating graphs in the open-access program Gephi, using the proposal from Saavedra *et al.* (2021) for the analysis of water governance networks. In this case, we adapted it to analyze the networks of artistic collectives for self-protection.

According to Act No., the research was conducted by rigorous ethical standards, with approval from the Comité de Ética de la Facultad de Enfermería (Ethics Committee of the School of Nursing). CEI-FE 2021-34 for the first phase and Act No. CEI-FE 2023-60 for the second phase.

3. Findings

3.1 Links and Connections Among Organizations

El Gordo, as one of the leaders of **Barrio Comparsa**, is known – a group with more than 30 years of presence in the artistic scene and the streets of the city – extends the following invitation to us:

I would like to show two photographs: how is it possible that in Medellín there are more than 400-armed groups and we are no more than sixty or seventy? It is a very uneven picture; it means that what we are doing is extremely powerful, creating spaces for the community for young people who have no alternatives. (El Gordo, personal communication, August 2024)

In table 1, we present an overview of the participating organizations. These organizations describe when they came together and what motivated them to do so; their primary artistic and cultural practices, their most significant strategic contributions in terms of self-protection, and the *comunas* (districts) of the city where their initiatives have an impact. Among the elements presented, it is worth highlighting how the genesis of these groups aligns with key milestones in the city's history: the 1970s, marked by demographic expansion especially on the hillsides and the shift from bipartisan violence to armed insurgency; the 1980s and 1990s, characterized by the violence wielded by the Medellín Cartel, the so-called "dirty war," and the emergence of paramilitarism; the early 21st century, with military operations conducted jointly by state and parastatal forces; and finally, the last decades, marked by territorial reconfigurations resulting

from changes in territorial control related to the transformations of paramilitary groups, which some refer to as the recycling of war.

In general, we found that each of these situations serves as the argument underpinning these organizations' decision to offer an alternative, particularly targeting the young population in various *comunas*, which also shifts in prominence as violent actions intensify. From the central role of the eastern *comunas*, in the 1980s and 1990s, the spotlight shifted to the western districts at the beginning of this century, prompting these social responses in various neighborhoods. In parallel with the dynamics of violence, the organizations have come together to promote parades, festivals, and different forms of community celebration in the neighborhoods, to foster knowledge exchange, influence public policy, and consolidate a popular artistic movement that is both widespread and itinerant across the city's districts. This panorama forms the backdrop for the conversation process.

Table 1. Characteristics of the Mapped Organizations.

Organization and year of Foundation	Context of Emergence	Artistic and Cultural Practices	Some Key Contributions (about the research project)	Comuna(s) of Influence
Arlequín y los Juglares - 1972	Initiative of a group of university theater artists, in the context of growing rural migration and a surge in union struggles.	Theater and performing arts (puppetry, performance, radio theater, parade, happening, character creation, dramatic texts)	Human Rights Platform - Colombia Europe United States Coordination Intercultural Theater Festival "Contarla para vivir"	Comunas 3 y 4 (Aranjuez, Manrique)
Barrio Comparsa [1983] - 1990	Initially emerged as A Recreo Teatro in the context of the rise of drug trafficking in the city of Medellín.	Parade, music, and street theater	Metodología Lúdica Acción, Participación, Transformación (MLAPT) Taller de la Alegría: Artistic and Cultural Community Awareness for the Carnival and Sociocultural Animation	Comunas 1, 2, 3, 4 y 10 (Aranjuez, Manrique, Santa Cruz, Popular, La Candelaria)
Nuestra Gente 1987	Created to "highlight the positive aspects of our neighborhoods and how art and culture are the vital means of expression for their inhabitants," inspired by liberation theology.	Theater and performing arts, community library	The "Plataforma Puente Cultura Viva Comunitaria" in Medellín-Valle de Aburrá is in 19 countries.	Comuna 2 (Santa Cruz)
Red Feminista Antimilitarista 1996	Emerged as a political youth platform that questioned and generated critical reflections against war and militarism, and alternatives for community organization and street political actions. Later, it focuses on the role of impoverished women, lesbians, and feminists as the center of its reflection.	Popular education and communication	Feminist training school School for girls on the prevention of sexual violence. Work in schools with boys and girls to prevent forced recruitment by drug cartel paramilitary groups. Legal, educational, and support actions for the guarantee of women's sexual and reproductive rights.	Diversas comunas
Casa Kolacho 2001	Youth initiative for peace and non-violence, formed by 85 artists and youth cultural managers from 25 groups.	Hip Hop (DJ, Rap, Graffiti, BBoy y Bgirl)	Kolacho Hip Hop school, steps that are not in vain. Revolución Sin Muertos/Revolución del Amor Festival.	Comuna 13 (San Javier)

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Corporación Altavista 2001	Emerged to propose an alternative in a territory stigmatized by episodes of violence that have deeply impacted its inhabitants, as part of an initiative led by a schoolteacher convinced of the need to create opportunities for youth.	Educational programs in visual arts, music, theater, literature, stilt, and parade.	Escuela Comunitaria de Artes Laboratorio de Comunicaciones	Corregimiento de Altavista
Agroarte 2002	Emerged in the context of military operations in Commune 13, also associated with la Escombrera, a large mass grave of disappeared people, as a response from the city's memory and resistance	Training programs, agrarian production, music, communication, and symbolic resistance	Semillas de futuro. Cuerpos gramaticales Rituales vivos Partido las Doñas, acción política participativa	Comuna 13 (San Javier)
Acrobatic 2005	A group of young people decided to form their group, driven by the need to find income sources. Now, it is a social and contemporary circus organization.	Acrobatics and circus arts	• Acrosport for children • Escuela de No-Violencia	Comuna 7 (Robledo)
Ziruma 2005	Emerged as an initiative to collect toys for children, which later grew from a reflection on the violent context and the contribution of the arts.	Theater and performing arts		Comuna 8 (Villa Hermosa)
Robledo Venga Parchemos 2012	A proposal to “hang out” in the neighborhood through art and culture, as at that time, armed actors did not allow free and peaceful movement of people.	Circus arts	La Lunada artística y Cultural Las Mingas al TAL Las Cerveceadas Literarias El Circo al puente Escuela de Arte y Cultura para la No-Violencia	Comuna 7 (Robledo)
Corporación Biblioteca Comunitaria Sueños De Papel 2016	Emerged from the motivation of a psychology student with a deep interest in literature. Thus, the idea arose to create a community library to work on the neighborhood's mental health issues and social problems.	Community library and literature	Biblioteca Comunitaria Periódico Entrecruzados	Comunas 3 (Manrique)
Biocomunidad 2021	The initiative emerged to exchange recyclable materials for social and cultural needs such as food, painting, and dance.	Art workshops	Clothing and toy bazaars	Comuna 13 (San Javier)

Source: research project, 2024.

For the people who took part in the research, the reflection on the networked structure that allows these sixty grassroots artistic and cultural organizations to remain in the territory refers to a cartographic exercise of their aesthetic and political visions and relationships, materializing in a “cultural network of joy” and an ethical-political manifesto derived from this collective fabric:

In the face of the toughest hardships and the fiercest violence, we lift our heads high, unite, bring our myths, legends, and cosmogonies to the stage, and survive in hostile territories, despite many difficulties. Survival is possible, but only when we are not alone or together – that is where the mountain blooms. (F. García, personal communication, August 10, 2024)

In order to do this, it is necessary to turn to memory, to know and recognize the processes carried out by the groups over time, their legacies, and the continuous movement that allows

them to respond to adversities and demands of their communities. We must ask ourselves why and for what purpose they come together, and the reasons hindering these connections.

The motivations for articulation are varied. They range from aesthetic, political, organizational, and social affinities, which give them common goals, one of which is the consolidation of an alternative artistic-cultural movement for the city, one that decentralizes from the commercial, consumer-oriented cultural enterprises and addresses the needs of their territories. They come together because they recognize each other's trajectories and knowledge as a possibility for emerging organizations that find enough expertise and leadership in those that preceded them, combining motivations of legitimacy with those of support. However, they also come together for "less noble" reasons, of a contingent or pragmatic nature, which bring them together by chance or obligation, although these appear to be less frequent cases. In this sense, we speak of networks in motion, nodes connecting and disconnecting like intermittent flashes. This is not a formally structured network, but a living possibility of connection, ephemeral or permanent, that operates based on the dynamics of each organization and territory, under the logic of will rather than obligation.

They articulate different, non-exclusive objectives they can combine like a kaleidoscope, resulting in multiple forms of coming together. They connect to develop activities with their communities and territories, manage resources, collectively create, carry out training processes, energize guild processes, mobilize communication strategies, and engage in political advocacy. In this context, the "networks of joy" seek Collaboration for internal and collective management processes, strengthening their creative projects, expanding their community and pedagogical initiatives, and broadening their political potential in territorial disputes.

In terms of self-protection, we can highlight several outcomes. The first relates to the occupation of safe spaces as an achievement of networked work: community festivals, collective parades, marches and celebrations, cultural takeovers, among others, are strategies that fight for the occupation of the street and the redefinition of public space, often appropriated by illegal armed actors. Through these actions, they challenge invisible borders, communities reclaim spaces once denied to joy, people assert their occupation of the space, promote the value of caring for the common good, and mobilize the collective trust that the armed conflict has undermined in the city. The second outcome intertwines with collective creation processes that update memories, highlighting and strengthening the various capabilities of those who inhabit the territories. These participants often also become co-creators. These two elements converge in the third outcome: the expansion of political training that allows them to interact with and challenge local armed actors, and through this, identify, recognize, support, and enhance emerging leadership within the communities.

Self-protection, understood as protecting civilians by other unarmed civilians, is also shaped when we ask what would lead them to break the possibility of synapse and network.

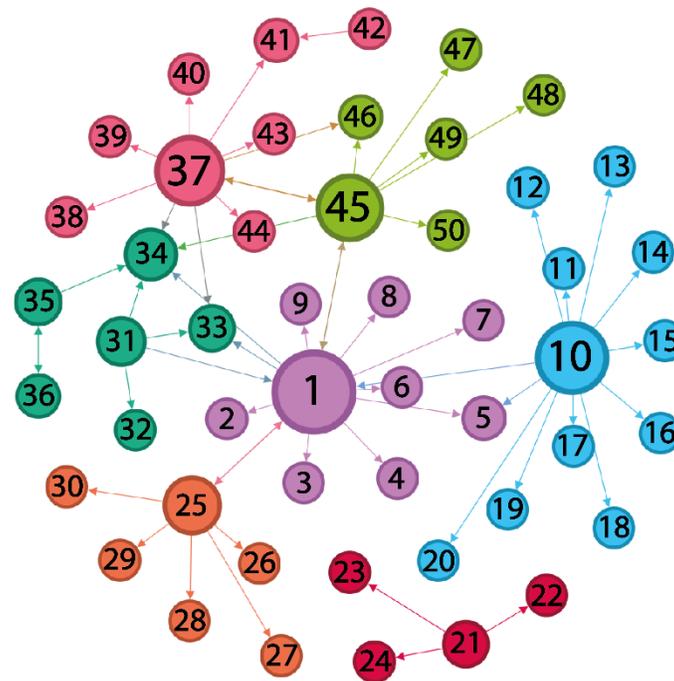


Their responses reflect many of the postulates of unarmed civil protection, which aligns with non-violence as part of its ethical-political orientation and, for our study, expands the notion by rejecting not only physical violence but also any other form of violence. Their answers refer to avoiding connections with political brokers and corrupt individuals, with those disregarding community processes and violating cultural rights. The network would break due to the violation of human rights, especially those of girls and boys, not only by the direct perpetrators of these victimizations but also by those who uphold them through their silence or omission. This also includes those who exercise cultural and symbolic violence that fuel stigmas and exclusion: sexist, racist, homophobic, and classist people. Some organizations reaffirm their postulates of non-violence by denying any possibility of articulation with legal or illegal armed forces.

To conduct an exploratory exercise, we attempted to construct a network map in which each organization had a link with a maximum of twelve actors. Researchers reconstructed the information through semi-structured interviews and a collaborative workshop with some organizations. We clarify that this representation does not aim to be absolute, nor does it encompass the entirety of the reality of the links established by these organizations, considering the notion of a living network in constant motion.

Figure 1 illustrates these collaborative networks around the self-protection established by twelve community-based artistic and cultural organizations in Medellín. As previously mentioned, in Phase I of this project, the role of these initiatives in the territories was identified, raising a question about their permanence and sustainability, not as an issue derived exclusively from the particular and internal dynamics of each organization, but precisely from the interconnectedness between them as a central element. We explored this network mapping and used Gephi to conduct it, a software developed for social network analysis. One of the measures this program allows is modularity, a metric that indicates the number of groups with similar or related characteristics. In this case, seven modules were identified and represented in different colors; the larger circles correspond to the actors with the most recognized connections.

Figure 1. Map of collaborative networks around self-protection established by twelve community-based artistic and cultural organizations in Medellín.



Purple module	Blue module	Red module
1. Arlequín y los Juglares	10. RVP	21. Biocomunidad
2. ADIDA (union)	11. Botones	22. Old Guns
3. Área Artística	12. Escuela Popular	23. Todos Podemos
4. CUT (union)	13. Voces del Territorio	24. Interarte
5. UdeA	14. Politrarte	
6. USO (union)	15. Acrobatic	Orange module
7. Corporación Unicornio	16. Congreso de los Pueblos	25. Sueños de Papel
8. Coeuropa	17. El Taller	26. Señales de Humo
9. Secretaría Cultura Gobernación Antioquia	18. JAC Aures	27. Mujeres Mandala
	19. Finca 369	28. Mi Comuna
	20. Secretaría No Violencia, Medellín	29. Casa de Encuentros
		30. Ludobiblioteca Manuel Burgos
Aquamarine module	Pink module	Green module
31. Ziruma	37. Nuestra Gente	45. Barrio Comparsa
32. Color Teatro	38. Convivamos	46. Consejería Presidencial, Medellín
33. Ministerio de Cultura	39. GTZ	47. Corporación Región
34. Secretaría de Cultura, Medellín	40. Fundación Sumapaz	48. Corazón Tambor
35. Casa Kolacho	41. Red Juvenil	49. Corporación Altavista
36. Agroarte	42. Red Feminista	50. Red Plataforma Puente
	43. Paisa Joven	
	44. Pastoral Social	

Source: research project, 2024.

It is important to note that, given the longevity of the organizations and their strategies aimed at young people in the neighborhoods through participatory, formative, and creative processes, the generation of new initiatives remains ongoing. Those pedagogical processes

nurture these initiatives and serve as a source of renewed leadership and generational change. This is why the network illustrated in Figure 1 also contains relationships of belonging, affinity, and affection that flow from one organization to another through the connection between their members, consolidating shared legacies and heritage, which often go unnoticed or remain invisible. Indeed, collectively building this relational mapping is an opportunity to make these treasures visible, which are part of everyday life and, as such, are normalized, overlooking the value of the many relationships built to keep the political-aesthetic vision alive in the city in the face of armed actors and the evolving armed conflict.

The work of the first groups that emerged in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s served as the vanguard of the community and popular artistic movement in the city. They were the seed of a cascade whose torrent continues to flow today. During one of the research team's visits to the Taller de la Alegría (Workshop of Joy), the headquarters of Barrio Comparsa, in 2022, one of the founders of *Robledo Venga Parchemos* (Robledo Come Hang Out) RVP, highlighted that the parades organized by El Gordo – the founder of Barrio Comparsa – were a key precedent for the creation of their group in 2012, amid a context of significant student mobilization.

In the context of self-protection, these interaction networks are intergenerational and intragenerational. We have already mentioned the efforts made by Arlequín and Los Juglares, Barrio Comparsa, and Nuestra Gente. This pattern is repeated decade after decade. For example, after creating the Secretaría de la No Violencia, RVP teamed up with organizations like Acrobatic to implement the schools' project for non-violence. This initiative sought to fund spaces for dialogue on conflict resolution through non-violent means.

On the other hand, establishing these networks also responds to territorial circumstances. RVP has woven multiple connections with organizations and actors that have an impact in the same commune where they work. With the Voces del Territorio Platform, they have sought to create recognition among different organizations and reflect on the processes of artistic advocacy in their work area. People who were once part of RVP founded Casa Cultural El Taller, and together they develop training spaces for community leadership for young individuals. With Finca 369, they also aim to promote leadership training through art in other parts of the neighborhood. Furthermore, they have gradually tried to establish friendly ties with local governance bodies, such as the Junta de Acción Comunal (Communal Action Board), to promote collaborations that enable the development of projects in the neighborhood. Lastly, a community leader from the neighborhood where their headquarters are located consistently works with them to organize activities for women and strengthen spaces for citizen participation.

Within these self-protection networks formed within the territorial framework, we cannot overlook the work carried out by organizations like Casa Kolacho and Agroarte in *Comuna 13*. In 2002, the national and regional governments conducted twelve military operations in this city area to "pacify" the territory and remove the militias operating there. Two of the most notorious

operations are Orión and Mariscal, which left alarming numbers in terms of human rights violations, arbitrary detentions, and the murder of civilians. Furthermore, several institutions such as the National Center for Historical Memory have documented the Collaboration between the Army and paramilitaries in these violent interventions. These events left deep scars on the population and prompted the emergence of numerous community-based artistic organizations, including Agroarte and Casa Kolacho. Both groups have created an alternative cultural offering based on hip hop. They have also joined forces to promote festivals like Revolución Sin Muertos (Revolution Without Deaths), roundtables, and public acts of commemoration.

The organizations have also established ties with state entities, embodied in government institutions and academia. On one hand, they have connected with the Secretaría de Cultura de la Alcaldía de Medellín y el Ministerio de Cultura (Secretariat of Culture of the Medellín City Hall and the Ministry of Culture) to access funding through projects. Although these funds seek economic sustainability –a fundamental element for continuing self-protection processes– it remains an asymmetric relationship, in which there is a disadvantage, with the institution acting as a "master demanding more than it gives." On the other hand, in their relationship with the University of Antioquia, they have found a dialogue for exchanging knowledge. This academic validation reinforces the work they do at the neighborhood level by recognizing it from a 'formal knowledge' perspective.

3.2 The Power of Networking for Self-Protection

According to the *Medellín Cómo Vamos* report (2020), formal cultural sector businesses in the city showed a growing trend –from 472 in 2012 to 1,178 in 2019– a number which decreased to 998 due to the pandemic. Within this universe, Non-Profit Entities (ESAL) stand out. These are foundations, corporations, or associations that operate where the State does not have a presence, or where they complement institutional work in the territory, which is the focus of our research.

By 2020, ESALs accounted for one-third of the total cultural organizations in Medellín, with 267 foundations, associations, and corporations in the city, operating as small or micro-organizations in 96% of cases, and concentrated in 75% of the higher-income communes. As a result, the number of organizations operating in neighborhoods with greater armed conflict is inversely proportional, remaining at just 60 organizations –a situation that has undoubtedly not seen significant changes to this day (*Medellín Cómo Vamos*, 2020). They may include additional organizations; some operate without formal legal status in these territories.

We reference this in the article's title when we use the biblical metaphor of David against Goliath. The results show that the network of 60 nodes represents the miniature shepherd facing daily battles against criminal structures, which, as mentioned before, can number up to 380 organized gangs with hierarchical structures and solid financial and political backing –echoing the figure of the giant Goliath. The networks formed by grassroots cultural and artistic



organizations have taken on the challenge of protecting communities in territories where the State does not fulfill its protective role, whether through action or omission. While they may not defeat Goliath, they keep the territorial dispute alive by appropriating safe spaces for the lives of children, youth, and women in Medellín. These populations are strategic for both networks in a contest that is not only aimed at recruitment but also at offering contrasting ways of life, where a militarized masculinity and submissive femininity affect the socialization of children and influence cultural consumption patterns, producing subjectivities that fuel many of the conflicts. It is here that these organizations offer, daily, their cultural, ethical, and political counter-proposals.

Studies on networks have been prolific around various phenomena, ranging from approaches aiming to understand the network as a metaphor for social relationships, inspired by the works of Norbert Elias and Bruno Latour, to those that take it as a methodological approach for analyzing information exchange, derived from Manuel Castells' concept of the "network society" (Acioli, 2007). As this article outlines, we take some elements from relational approaches as "tools." We seek to understand how organizations group to protect and protect themselves through art., without intending to delve deeply into the theoretical concept of the network. Instead, the goal is to comprehend the self-protective potential they hold in their forms of relationships and the factors that bind them.

14 To better understand these relationships, we start from the idea that they can be the result of projected or institutionalized intentions, which can arrange the connections between organizations from the perspective of networks with a hierarchical structure, directed and oriented towards prescriptive ends, according to the guidelines of political and/or financial decision-makers. As a criterion, we decided to exclude those formed by institutional structures in order to shift away from that possible perspective and understand how the network of relationships between organizations is built from their dynamics and shared purposes, but also particular ones, with an effort to position the contingent and/or situational as a connecting element.

We adopt Bertrand's (2009) proposal, which points to the triple analytical content of the network. The first element is the morphological aspect, with its structure of nodes and lines to represent the relationships, which we find in Figure 1. However, we are also interested in the relational dimension and the exchanges that ultimately give rise to versatile, variable, and mobile ties, which can remain valid and active for specific periods but may also enter temporary inactivity, break, or change intensity. We must understand the relationships from their structure and fluidity as two complementary dimensions.

The power of the "network of joy", symbolized by the small David, is grounded in a proposal for relating and exchanging affections, meanings, knowledge, and practices related to the city, which have been produced over time and through the experiences of different



organizations. These organizations arrange to create the synaptic connections to protect their territories appropriately. These connections form topologies that include nodes and mobile connections, which extend or retract according to these demands; they also imbue these actions with biographical meaning, personal, and organizational memories, as products of living in the city over time (Lindón, 2017). The mobility of these networks implies traversing diverse relational scales according to trajectories and places: sometimes they are encapsulated in the microlocal, and other times they expand, as a strategic move, rather than a product of chance.

Organizations and their networks have open, heterogeneous biographies and are in permanent transformation. Understanding "the networks of joy" from these approaches invites us to think in relational and contingent terms, rather than structural ones. It means establishing connections with other networks and creating a space for other actors to build ties (Escobar, 2020). In any case, the ethical-political declaration we find in this research process shows us that solidarity emerges as the core of exchange, which nourishes a form of relationship that has undoubtedly been crucial for maintaining the dispute with the great Goliath of their neighborhoods and communes. The organizations themselves may have reticular architectures within them. However, undoubtedly, it is in the expansion beyond their most immediate scales that the support for the continuity of these proposals is produced, even after more than 50 years in such an adverse context.

From the architectural perspective, these "networks of joy" are characterized by protecting and consolidating safe spaces, which extend across the city in a mirrored image of the decentralized structure that characterizes it. While occasional hierarchical relationships between organizations have occurred, this is not the general rule. Instead, the preferred architecture resembles a mesh, with no significant hierarchy between nodes, which connect and integrate at various scales (Escobar, 2020), favoring diverse flows (Acioli, 2007). This is important because it allows for greater autonomy and sovereignty for the organizations, regardless of their trajectory or size, by promoting inward and outward mobility while ensuring permanence over time and space. As shown in the results, older organizations often nurture the generation of new initiatives through their seedbeds and pedagogical processes. Peer organizations maintain strong links from a generational standpoint, and the dynamics also reveal the "synchronization" of generational shifts, which keeps the network alive.

This "synchronization" is how one of the leaders of Arlequín y los Juglares gives meaning to the exchange and generational shift, which is key to the permanence of the "networks of joy." It involves protection, security, and trust with younger organizations through collaborative accompaniment that avoids the competitive processes embedded in performance-driven societies (Han, 2012). However, it does not disregard tensions and frictions. It is important to remember that these nodes correspond to those organizations in the cultural sector that have aligned themselves with the non-commercial side of culture. In this sense, they understand their ethical and political horizon as the driving force behind their actions.



We do not intend to romanticize the dynamics that intertwine the organizations involved in this research; we do want to highlight that, without the support of the network strategy, the organizations may not have had the permanence and persistence in their self-protective role for urban territories. This statement aligns with the multiple works that show in social networks and support a central factor for the well-being of individuals and territories exposed to adversity (Álvarez-Fontalvo & Guzmán-Estrada, 2013; Campos-Tavares, 2008; Díaz-Esterri *et al.*, 2021; Fernández-Cediel, 2019). While the results presented some elements of the architecture of the “networks of joy,” indicating their size and connections, we find that the fundamental element that amalgamates and sustains them is related to their ethical-political postulates, where solidarity, as mentioned earlier, seems to be the central axis.

Link, territory, and temporality in this experience are pillars for constructing collective history and relationships that, through the network metaphor and architecture, invite us to interweave with others and recognize the potential of this inexhaustible dynamic. This is about developing epistemology and relational aesthetics (Najmanovich, 2007), combining curiosity and exploration to understand self-protection in the open space of exchanges.

3.3 The worldview of the organizations: the amalgamation of the network disposition

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In the network mapping workshop, one of the participants pointed out that the formation of the network seems to be animated by an ethical-political manifesto, sometimes explicit, sometimes silent, that motivates an organization to decide to link with some and not with others, thus shaping a worldview, which we refer to here as a cosmology. How organizations and their members view the world constructs the narratives, discourses, aesthetic narratives, places of enunciation, and ethical-political positions. This connects with personal and organizational memories related to the inhabited territories and their processes of appropriation: “It is not just about talking about violence for the sake of it, [it is] how we address that violence, how we focus on it, or how we transform it” (Ziruma, personal communication, July 2024). From here, groups build agreements and define routes that consolidate specific identity markers or senses of belonging: for example, opting for the self-protection of youth, children, and women, as a counteroffer to what the gangs and criminal structures in the city’s neighborhoods do, these are decisions rooted in the cosmologies of the organizations.

According to Herrero (2002), cosmology is a person or group's beliefs about reality, including the assumptions and values that shape their understanding and practice of the world. In this sense, artistic organizations infuse their creations with the nuances of this cosmology, viewing it and defending it as a genuine path to achieving the work and constructing a final narrative in community, groups often express this through a theatrical scene, a parade, a celebration, or a ritualized object with mystical significance. The cosmology translates into social



practice that questions and reacts to local power structures and dynamics; it takes on meaning in what damages, but also in what protects: "We had to defend ourselves through art against a war that was an obvious monster, a very real monster, that whispered in our ear, that whispered in our ear and made us tremble" (Ziruma, personal communication, July 2024).

The cosmology acts as a collective category that connects the organizations. The members establish agreements on observing the world and engaging in practices that respond to the various ethics involved, which become key strategies for self-protection in adverse situations. Maintaining spaces for the appropriation of the public through street occupation, collectivizing pain, and turning resistance into a celebration are shared postulates that flow through "the network of joy." The members of the organizational structure widely recognize and celebrate these expressions through public symbols and shared meanings. The symbol protects because it outwardly exposes what amalgamates the connections inwardly. In this sense, cosmology, beyond the ways of inhabiting and employed in self-protection networks, facilitates communities finding ways to honor the anonymous, build new thought frameworks, and redefine other scales of reflection and evaluation.

4. Conclusions

The artistic and cultural groups in the city we approached for this research carry a history deeply rooted in the city and the particularities of its neighborhoods. This history has granted them legitimacy in the areas they influence and allowed them to weave networks that affect self-protection that extend to the organizations and the populations involved in their activities. Recognizing these trajectories and memories reaffirms decades of work, understanding that today's popular artistic movement arose from social, political, and armed conflicts that subjected the city's civilian population to violations. Their resistance stands as a living legacy for new generations.

These trajectories have translated into a self-protective network and support structure that rests on the following certainties. There is no single network but a superposition of network formations that transform kaleidoscopically based on what happens within the artistic organizations and their territories. The basic architecture supporting their connections is a fluid mesh of exchanges in motion. This architecture avoids hierarchical structures in order to maintain autonomy and creative possibility. The "networks of joy" are nourished by diverse memories and biographies updated with each new connection. This calls for a synchronized generational relay that exchanges legacies and understandings.

An ethical-political commitment to art, deeply rooted in the territories, fundamentally shapes the network's connections. Without these amalgamations, the "networks of joy" would not have the power they display. In this cosmology, people strengthen self-protection and give it meaning, as it becomes an active counter-statement to the pressures of criminal structures on the

territory and many inhabitants. Finally, the metaphor of David against Goliath shows us how network formations operate in social life in all its complexity; in our experience, both cultural and artistic organizations and criminal gangs turn to these interconnections to make their offers in the territories and energize their actions. However, what stands out is the disproportion in the material and symbolic magnitude of both networks and the achievements of art that protect against that giant Goliath or the multi-headed Medusa that represent these armed organizations in neighborhood life.

Acknowledgments

We want to thank Adriana María Diosa Colorado and Freddy Giovanni Pérez Cárdenas, members of the research team for the project, for their contributions to the reflections in this article. We also thank Arlequín and Los Juglares, Barrio Comparsa, Robledo Venga Parchemos, Ziruma, Biblioteca Sueños de Papel, Biocomunidad, Nuestra Gente, Corporación Renovación, Casa Kolacho, Pasolini en Medellín, Red Feminista Antimilitarista, Agroarte, KGP, Mi Comuna/Eduardo Galeano, Casa Loma, Acrobatic, Corporación Oficina Central de Los Sueños, Corporación Teatro El Grupo, and Casa Morada. These organizations shared their time, knowledge, and reflections.

We would particularly like to thank El Gordo—founder of Barrio Comparsa—for his intellectual, emotional, and spiritual contribution to the construction of this article. He is the primary author of the concept "network of joy" and the inspiration of the paradox of the confrontation between art and criminal structures.

Funding

The authors declare that this article is derived from the research project "Art that Protects, Phase 2. Networks as Strategies for Self-Protection in the Context of Urban Conflict in the City of Medellín, 2023," carried out by the Facultad de Enfermería de la Universidad de Antioquia and by the Corporación Cultural para el Desarrollo Arlequín y Los Juglares, with the support of the Red N+ Creando Espacio Más Seguro and funded by the UK's Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) through the Global Challenges Research Fund (GCRF).

Author's Contributions

Beatriz Elena Arias-López: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, resource acquisition, research, methodology, project administration, writing (original draft), writing (draft revision and review/correction); Laura Jiménez-Ospina: data curation, formal analysis, research, software, writing (original draft), writing (draft revision and review/correction); Sandra Benítez-Diosa: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, research, writing (draft revision and review/correction).



Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the writing or publication of this article.

Ethical Implications

The authors declare that this is a minimal risk project that received approval from the Research Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Nursing at the Universidad de Antioquia in both phases.

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