

# Anatomy of a bus sign



PHOTO: SARA RAFSKY

The Carrera Septima connects more than 170 bus routes in the city.

Learning your way around Bogotá on the bus system requires a course in 'sign' language as Karen Greiner finds out.

Learning how to read a bus sign in Bogotá took three weeks of interviews and some mental re-conditioning. My first query was addressed to a 'calibrador,' one of the clipboard wielding men who log the times of passing buses and shout mysterious instructions to the drivers.

"Excuse me sir. I am new to Bogotá. Can you tell me how to read these bus signs?" "Where do you want to go?" His response, a question in lieu of an answer. I would hear this question repeatedly over the next few weeks. Everyone I talked to was willing to help me get somewhere but few could tell me how to do so on my own. I began to believe that there was simply no logic whatsoever behind signage on the buses. "Look at this illogical sign from Carrera 7," I complained to my friend Wilmer, showing

him a photo of the offending bus sign. Appearing on the sign in descending order were Germanía, Usaquén, Centro, and U. Javeriana.

"This makes no sense," I said, my exasperation evident. "Germanía," which is listed first, is near the center of the city, then "Usaquén", which is in the north, next is "Center" which is back down south and lastly "U. Javeriana" which is at 45th and 7th. This sign makes no sense read top to bottom or the inverse. Wilmer replied: "It makes sense if you know the city."

Alas, the simple truth: If you know Bogotá, the signs make sense. They are not illogical, they just aren't linear. The words, numbers and symbols on the bus signs are like a language that is painstakingly learned over years of bus riding in Bogotá. When I began investigating bus signs, questioning friends and strangers alike, it became clear that some are more "fluent" in this language than others.

Leida Arbelaez, a librarian at the Fundación Gilberto Alzate Avendaño and life-long resident of Bogotá, is a master philologist of bus language. I asked her help with all of the words and symbols I couldn't decipher on my own. "What's CAN?" "That's the Centro Administrativo Nacional." "What about SAO?" "Super Almacén Olympi-

ca." "How about the three blue arrows on this sign here." "That's the symbol for Colsubsidio."

On the other end of the bus language spectrum is beginner Anna Volk, a young woman from Ohio who teaches English at the Universidad Nacional. "I don't know what CAN is but I know it's somewhere on Calle 26." When I asked her how she learned which buses will take her to work, Anna replied: "Trial and error."

My weeks of questioning taught me that foreigners are not the only ones employing the "trial and error" learning method. I had a long discussion with a woman from Barranquilla on a bus marked "Germanía" that started like this: "Does this bus go to Calle 19 with Carrera 7?" "I hope so," she replied, "I'm trying to go there too." We discussed the various routes a "Germanía" bus can take and laughed about our shared incomprehension of Bogotá bus language. "The signs in Barranquilla aren't much easier to read," she explained, "but there are fewer to learn because the city is smaller."

Among the variety of people I talked to about reading bus signs, some curious strategies emerged.

"It's all about finding the 'corridor' you need," said Francisco Miranda, Opinion Editor at *El Tiempo*. Fulbright

fellow Bernard D'amours said: "I have a theory: the larger the letters on the sign, the longer the bus stays in that area." Carmen Pacheco, a documentary filmmaker, thinks that it comes down to size. "When the letters are really big it means that a lot of people are headed there." "When people don't know the city, I give them the route number," said Francisco Gomez, professor of graphic design. "No one uses the route number," countered Camilo, drama student. Each person I spoke with had their own form of bus logic and used different reference points to navigate the city.

Still seeking clarification, I went to see a sign maker. Emperatriz Orbando, is the owner of Porky's Publicidad in the south of the city, and confirmed one important piece of information. "The word in largest letters at the top of the sign is the final destination." Final destinations are usually neighborhoods, shopping centers, parks or other recognizable institutions. She also explained that above the route number is often marked the name of the bus company and that the colors of the buses, and sometimes the colors of the signs, correspond with the company. "Different companies have different routes. And different routes are served by different size buses." So beyond what is written on the signs, one can attempt to decipher the gestalt of bus color, sign color and bus size.

"So what advice would you give to someone for taking the bus if they aren't for Bogotá?" I asked Emperatriz, hoping to learn the secret logic of the bus sign directly from the source. "It depends." She answered, her shoulders forming the same tentative shrug offered when someone says: "who knows?" I was temporarily disappointed with this answer. Then I realized that in failing to find the holy grail of bus logic I had learned a lot of other things about Bogotá. I learned that a nice-sounding neighborhood, (Isla del Sol, Patio Bonito, Paraíso) doesn't necessarily make for a nice bus ride. I learned that smaller buses are often faster because they fill up quickly and make fewer stops. I learned that neighborhoods in Bogotá are often named after well loved figures who have passed away, like "Diana T.", the journalist and daughter of former President Julio Cesar Turbay Ayala. But the most important discovery in my exploration of Bogotá's bus sign language is a lesson that applies beyond transport: when in doubt, ask a local.