

“Concrete Peace: Building Security through Infrastructure in Colombia”

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In November 2016, Juan Manuel Santos, the President of Colombia, embarked on a historic journey. He boarded his presidential plane at a military airfield in Bogotá to become the first Colombian president to make a state visit to the United Kingdom. Santos had already made history the month before when he won the Nobel Peace Prize for his efforts to end one of the world’s longest running armed conflicts. Upon arrival in London, he and the First Lady were given a ceremonial welcome by the Queen. They were then transported by carriage procession along the Mall, lined with Colombian flags, to Buckingham Palace where a lavish banquet awaited. Unlike most diplomatic visitors, who usually return to their embassy residences after such an event, the president and his wife retired to the palace’s Garden Wing to take their nightly rest.¹

The following day, though less ceremonial, was perhaps more essential to the state visit’s mission. It began at Mansion House, the official residence of the mayor of the City of London Corporation, the governing body of Britain’s financial and business center, where over 300 executives had gathered under the auspices of the Colombia Business Forum to discuss the commercial opportunities likely to emerge in times of peace.² Santos offered the welcome address, which was followed by the signing of a taxation agreement that would reduce barriers to bilateral trade and investment and facilitate economic partnerships between the two countries. Though the forum covered business prospects across multiple sectors, much of it was devoted to infrastructure.³ With the peace accord set to be finalized later that month, this sector was said to offer British firms a potentially lucrative role to play in building Colombia’s future.

The next stop was 10 Downing Street where Santos had a working lunch with Prime Minister Theresa May. During their joint public statement that afternoon, the two leaders reported on their “excellent meeting” in which they had discussed “the contribution that peace

makes to prosperity, and vice versa” and how the end of the conflict in Colombia “offers a wide range of investment and business opportunities to British companies.”⁴ The Prime Minister promised up to £25 million “to help rebuild the country,” which she predicted would create “export opportunities worth around £6 billion for 2,500 British businesses.” This money would be aimed at “unlocking economic opportunities in areas most affected by poverty and conflict,” especially by stimulating infrastructure investment.⁵ She also pledged up to £1 billion of support from the government’s export credit agency for development projects. In his remarks, President Santos expressed gratitude for the UK’s commitment to working together to “build strong foundations for the construction of peace in the future.”

The language Santos used to register his appreciation was not incidental. Since negotiations with the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) began in 2012, the work required to achieve peace has been framed in both public and scholarly debates as *la construcción del posconflicto*, which translates rather awkwardly to “the construction of the post-conflict” or, in policy jargon, “peacebuilding.”⁶ This framing focuses attention on the imperative to build the legal and bureaucratic institutions necessary for transcending a half-century of violence and ensuring a stable and lasting transition (Rettberg 2012, del Castillo 2017). At the same time, this framing also encapsulates the work of building post-conflict Colombia in a physical sense.⁷ The latter is what Santos spent much of his state visit generating support for among London’s political and economic elite, while back at home the work had already begun. Paralleling imperatives such as demobilizing the FARC, providing reparations to victims, and bringing perpetrators to justice was a nationwide process of development aimed at laying the infrastructural foundations of “the Colombia of the future.”⁸ Although the country’s infrastructure had often been a locus of battles between guerrilla insurgents, paramilitary groups,

and state security forces, levels of physical destruction have been low relative to other warzones, and yet physical construction was now imagined as essential to the prospect of peace.

Focusing on the “construction of the post-conflict” in Colombia, and its framing as an infrastructural problem, this article examines the expectations attached to the built environment at this critical juncture.⁹ Taking inspiration from a felicitous phrase coined by the Ministry of Transport’s Twitter account, *#PazEnConcreto*, I highlight the real-and-imaginary work that goes into building a “concrete peace” through things like roads, airports, and bridges. How exactly can peace be built out of substances like concrete? Posing this question sheds light on deeply held assumptions about the relationship between “development” and “security,” especially in the midst of highly unstable political transitions. On the one hand, development is often understood as the endpoint of a historical process of social and economic improvement, and this achievement is indexed by the building of physical structures, whose primary component is concrete. On the other hand, security is generally seen as a condition of stability across a range of individual and collective domains, which must be made strong, solid, and durable—like concrete. In places like Colombia, where development and security remain conjoined yet elusive goals, the aspirational drive to achieve both amidst widespread insecurity and enduring violence coalesces around various acts of construction, which are supported by the simultaneously material and metaphorical substance of concrete. By analyzing infrastructure projects expected to mediate the transition to a new stage of history, my first objective is to examine the cultural, political, and economic logics according to which Colombia’s future is being imagined and built. My second objective is to consider what this case suggests about material politics in the domain of violence, peace, and security. As a notoriously intractable armed conflict continues alongside periodic peacebuilding efforts, materials like concrete, and the construction projects they

support, become physical and symbolic resources in the struggle to control a deeply uncertain process of historical change.

Infrastructures of War and Peace

The construction projects expected to bring peace to Colombia point to the intimate relationship between infrastructure and security. Anthropologists, historians, and geographers have shown that the networked systems that facilitate the global circulation of goods, people, and information have long been entangled with military operations and occupations (Khalili 2017b, Graham 2009, Cowen 2014, Masco 2014, Jones 2017, Carse 2016). Drawing attention to the interdependence of infrastructure and violence (Rodgers and O’Neill 2012), scholars have questioned the line dividing military and civilian histories, focusing on the centrality of logistics to both modern warfare and modern capitalism (Cowen 2014, Khalili 2017a). Around the world, infrastructures are simultaneously the targets and technologies of geopolitical conflict, but they also underpin the domestic power and authority of the security state (Graham 2010b, Weizman 2007, Masco 2017, O’Neill 2016). Even when infrastructures appear mostly civilian in nature, their close relationship with military rationalities remains unmistakable in the securitization of the networked systems and strategic spaces at the heart of the global economic order (Collier and Lakoff 2015, Graham 2010a, Dua 2013). Although in Colombia there is no shortage of evidence to support these arguments (Parish 2019), in recent years the government is trying to turn them on their head, such that infrastructures are now expected to lead to peace.

The expectation that peace can be built out of substances like concrete is not unique to Colombia, and indeed features prominently in today’s security and development debates (Kovács 2018). In an overview of the prevailing logic underpinning contemporary peacebuilding efforts,

international relations scholars Jan Bachmann and Peer Schouten (2018:381) note that infrastructure “has become a prime tool in so-called stabilization efforts in fragile and conflict-affected settings across the globe.” Regardless of the level of physical destruction wrought by warfare or the need for reconstruction, the building of roads, bridges, waterworks, and other infrastructures is now “one of the main ways in which peacebuilders aim to achieve their typically wide variety of highly political goals such as local security, the extension of state authority, and the restoration or establishment of the rule of law” (Bachmann and Schouten 2018:382). In contrast to conventional approaches to peacebuilding, which focus on good governance and free markets (Newman, Paris, and Richmond 2009), and alternative approaches, which emphasize grassroots initiatives and social development (Monk and Mundy 2014, Naucke 2017), Bachmann and Schouten argue that both states and non-state actors increasingly wield “infrastructural power” with the ultimate goal of engineering peace and stability (Bachmann and Schouten 2018:383, Reeves 2017). Over the last decade, a coalition of academics, policymakers, security experts, and private actors has been instrumental in cementing an infrastructural approach to peacebuilding in Colombia.

This understanding of the relationship between security and development assumes that technical matters are political matters and that the building of infrastructure is never a neutral act, but rather one bound to generate transformative effects. While these basic assumptions are shared by scholars in anthropology, geography, and science and technology studies, there is at least one important difference: these scholars have shown that the specific effects of material or technological forms cannot be known in advance, and that their political agency is contingent and relational (Barry 2013, Braun and Whatmore 2010, Larkin 2013, Star and Ruhleder 1996, Joyce and Mukerji 2017, Appel, Anand, and Gupta 2018, Humphrey 2005, Pérez 2016). The

implication for peacebuilding is that infrastructure may reduce violent conflict or exacerbate it, depending on a host of factors, some internal to the process of construction and others external to it (Bachmann and Schouten 2018). Nevertheless, cases abound in which infrastructures are ascribed the capacity to perform political work or to generate desirable outcomes, often regardless of context. From modernity and development to peace and prosperity to equality and inclusion, infrastructures are expected to materially and symbolically mediate the transition between stages of history, the transformation of political and economic systems, the creation of different social orders, the formation of new subjects (Collier 2011, Coronil 1997, Dalakoglou 2012, Hetherington 2014, Holbraad 2018).

The promises made through infrastructure generate aspirations, expectations, hopes, fantasies, and desires (Hetherington and Campbell 2014), many of which are thwarted by the intransigence or unruliness of the social and material world (Harvey and Knox 2012). In many cases, the delay of infrastructural promises stems from collusion between government agencies and private contractors, which frequently plagues public works projects, and that regularly erupts in sensational corruption scandals (Elinoff 2017).¹⁰ However, irrespective of the eventual outcome of such promises—whether fulfilled or broken—a critical question remains: how do certain material forms get endowed with such potency in the first place? Among the analytical approaches available for thinking through this question, some locate the agency of matter in the vitality of things themselves (Bennett 2010), whereas others highlight the entanglement of humans and nonhumans, somewhere between the natural and the social (Jensen 2015). Without resolving the thorny question of material agency, we can reframe it: Why, when, and how are infrastructures (like roads, bridges, and ports) and materials (such as concrete, asphalt, and steel) endowed with capacity to do important political work? This question is germane to the domain

of peace and security in Colombia, where the built environment is increasingly shouldered with the responsibility to resolve collective problems like violence and conflict.

Among the materials endowed with political potency in contemporary Colombia, one in particular stands out: concrete. A quintessential component of the modern built environment, concrete is integral to key developmental processes, such as industrialization and urbanization, and to the infrastructures underpinning them (Gandy 2002, Sánchez-Calderón 2017).

Concrete “binds the material and ideational promises of modernity,” in Penny Harvey’s (2010:32) estimation, and the substance is often endowed with the power to generate widespread social, spatial, and subjective transformations. Harvey’s account of the materiality of Peruvian roads and public spaces is instructive, for it draws attention to “the potency attributed to concrete, its transformative capacities and its seductive force” (2010:29). Concrete’s potency is both material and metaphorical, for it derives as much from the physical properties of the substance as from the cultural or ideological values associated with it (Weszkalnys 2013, Taussig 2004:162). The potency of concrete is also fundamentally political (Winner 2009), both as extension of state power and as popular desire or demand (Harvey 2010:40, Appel 2012:455, Taussig 2004:161). As potent as concrete may be, however, it does not always possess the ability to produce intended political effects (Elinoff 2017:588, Kernaghan 2012:511–12), especially in the context of highly unstable political situations marked by widespread insecurity and enduring violence. Yet it is precisely in response to this instability that concrete emerges as the material and metaphorical mediator of historical transition in the form of large-scale construction projects.

All this becomes visible if we examine the historical and contemporary role of concrete and other materials, and the infrastructures composed of them, during Colombia’s prolonged

armed conflict—a conflict that has often revolved around efforts to threaten, protect, and control strategic infrastructural connections (cf. Parish 2019). From the mid-twentieth century, when public works were conceived as antidotes to insurgency, to later decades, in which energy networks were targets of guerrilla attacks, to the 2000s, when travelable highways became a popular index of national security, the built environment has long been central to how war in Colombia has been waged and experienced. Focusing on recent efforts to rework the historical relationship of infrastructures with violence and to cast them now as protagonists of peace, the following two sections will juxtapose the attribution of transformative power to the built environment on a national scale with the intimate knowledge and personal experience of living and working in close proximity to the objects and materials in question. This juxtaposition will show how the “construction of the post-conflict” in Colombia emerges out of longer histories integral to the country’s protracted war and the role that the built environment has played within it. We will also see that the symbolic and material investment in roads, bridges, and airports in the push for a “concrete peace” often appears more ambiguous at the scale of specific infrastructure projects and from the perspective of those whose lives unfold around them.

The Legend of El Dorado Airport

Around the time of President Santos’s state visit to the United Kingdom, I boarded a plane going in the other direction, landing at Bogotá’s El Dorado International Airport. The airport had recently undergone a \$1.2 billion-dollar renovation and enlargement, which was immediately recognizable in the concrete expanses of the additional runways that had recently materialized. As I passed through the new international terminal, its glass and steel glistened in the early-morning sun. Adding to the shimmer were the gilded embellishments adorning the

interior—a resplendent motif invoking the mythical city of gold from which the airport takes its name. The legend of El Dorado, originating in the early colonial period, enticed countless European explorers to scour the rugged terrain of South America in search of immense riches. The source of the fantastical tale is widely believed to be an initiation ritual conducted by the indigenous Muisca people, whose tribal chief, covered in gold dust, immersed himself along with an abundance of precious offerings in the Laguna de Guatavita, an Andean lake just over fifty kilometers from present-day Bogotá.

When the airport was first built at the behest of President Gustavo Rojas Pinilla in the mid 1950s, the name “El Dorado” was chosen to symbolize Colombia’s economic potential (González Penagos 2015). The country was coming out of a horrific civil war known as *la Violencia* in which gruesome battles between rural militias had claimed over 200,000 lives. After taking power in 1953 following a bloodless coup, Rojas Pinilla, a civil engineer and military general, promised to set Colombia on the path to peace. He initiated a broad program of modernization centered on ambitious public works, such as a hydroelectric plant along the Lebrija River, a railway connecting the interior to the sea, an oil refinery in the city of Barrancabermeja, and a new international airport in Bogotá (Bushnell 1993:219). With these infrastructure projects, Rojas Pinilla sought to demonstrate, both at home and abroad, that Colombia had broken with its violent, barbaric past and was ready to join the modern world order. Things did not go according to plan, however, as the armed conflict continued in spite of the infrastructural development efforts that sought to contain it.

Following the airport’s recent makeover, which began in 2007 and took five years to complete, the name “El Dorado” was retained. Its official title was changed slightly, however, from “Aeropuerto Internacional Eldorado” to “Aeropuerto Internacional El Dorado Luis Carlos

Galán Sarmiento.” This subtle addition reinforced the connection between the airport and the armed conflict by adding the name of the populist politician assassinated in 1989—one of Colombia’s most emblematic victims. At the dedication ceremony in October 2012, President Santos drew parallels with the first inauguration over fifty years before. He remarked that what was true then—that this was the most important infrastructure project to date—remains true today. Moreover, the new airport would again symbolize Colombia’s economic potential. Santos used the occasion to argue that increasing public spending on infrastructure will “allow us to become a competitive country, to create employment, to create prosperity” (Presidencia de la República 2012). This was a pillar of Santos’s first term (2010-2014) and to his subsequent mission to end the armed conflict. Like the public works initiated by Rojas Pinilla following *la Violencia*, infrastructure projects, including an even greater expansion of El Dorado Airport, were again expected to integrate Colombia further into the global economic order and to inaugurate a new era of peace.

The legend of El Dorado reflected in the airport’s name and design is not incidental to the potency associated with this flagship national project. After all, few materials are endowed with as much potential as gold. As Michael Taussig puts it: “Gold is the ur-stuff, what we might call the ‘original capital,’ the ‘quintessence’ of capital, and it comes chockablock full of dreams, fairy tales, biblical resonances, and mountains of excess creating further excess” (2004, 24–25). Gold objects, Taussig observes, are “enchanted, material things, aglow with a power emanating from deep within” (2004, 24). In his study of gold miners in Colombia, Pablo Jaramillo (n.d.) finds that their coveted material possesses an ambivalent potency—gold is simultaneously desirable and dangerous, blessing and curse, the source of wealth and ruin—and this potency is understood to belong to the material itself. The airport is not adorned with real gold, and the

substance simulating its presence is insignificant relative to other materials, such as concrete. But like concrete, once gold becomes materially and metaphorically attached to an infrastructure like El Dorado Airport, some of its transformative power is transferred to an otherwise inert transport hub.

After disembarking, I passed through the bright, airy spaces of the terminal to enter the arrivals hall. After winding my way through the crowd, I glimpsed an unusual sight. Assembled in a public waiting area was an exhibit of about thirty full-color posters mounted on wooden easels (Figure 1). Each poster displayed an image of a bridge, tunnel, road, port, or railway along with the name of the project (e.g., Puente San Marcos), the amount of money invested (e.g., 2.4 billion pesos), the holder of the concession (e.g., Ruta del Sol Sector 1), the expected completion date (e.g., January 2020), the number of jobs created (e.g., 8,200), the project’s length (e.g., 61.3 kilometers), and the department that stands to benefit (e.g., Cundinamarca). The only statistic missing was the amount of concrete the construction of each project would require. The display’s most striking feature was perhaps the command topping each image in bold capital letters: *INFRAESTRUCTURA ¡EN MARCHA!* (“Infrastructure, forward march!” or “Infrastructure, in progress!”)

<IMAGE 1 HERE>

This command seemed fitting, since it juxtaposed the military and civilian nature of the large-scale construction projects on display—projects expected to symbolize and generate both peace and prosperity. This was the view of Rojas Pinilla in the 1950s, and it remains central to the imperative to build Colombia’s post-conflict future through the building of infrastructures like bridges, highways, and tunnels. But the slogan *Infraestructura en marcha* also referenced an earlier political moment. *Revolución en marcha* was the platform of President Alfonso López

Pumarejo's first term (1934-1938), during which he introduced a broad set of social and political reforms that challenged the dominance of the traditional landholding elite and supported programs to reduce inequality. The development of transport infrastructure also took off during the López Pumarejo administration, with the number of kilometers of roads nearly doubling in just two years (Ardila Duarte 2005). In recent years, the built environment is again expected to mediate a process of historical transformation. And while the updated slogan, *Infraestructura en marcha*, invoked its forbearer's commitments to development, it substituted "infrastructure" for "revolution" as the engine of change.

Searching online for other manifestations of the inspiring command donning the poster display, I would later find a number of YouTube videos promoting the same vision. One disseminated by the president's office begins with the image of then Vice President Germán Vargas Lleras descending from a military helicopter in a dry, dusty landscape. It then follows him and President Santos as they address public gatherings, sign construction contracts, visit building sites, and celebrate project inaugurations. The voiceover, taken from speeches given by the two politicians, creates a narrative around the political potency of the construction work on display. Airports, highways, railroads, bridges—these are the things that will lead Colombia further along the path to security and development. The video ends with the slogan, *Estamos construyendo la Colombia del futuro!* ("We are building the Colombia of the future!"), superimposed on the image of a tower crane. Unsettling the intimate relationship between infrastructures and violence that has been evident elsewhere, but also in Colombia, here we see infrastructures attributed with the power to create peace.

This attribution is partly accomplished through discursive moves found frequently in public and political debates. When decades of violence are blamed for holding back economic

development, as they often are, it follows that security must inevitably lead to prosperity and, conversely, prosperity to security. Threats against oil pipelines, power stations, and bridges, as well as efforts to protect them, have been central to the armed conflict in Colombia, and securing the flow of people and goods throughout the country has been a priority for the Colombian state. Emerging out of this background, which has shaped how both the conflict and its potential end are imagined, the building of infrastructure is positioned as the key to unlocking the country's much-heralded growth potential and to achieving a long-awaited peace. Add to that the fact that *la ausencia del Estado* ("the absence of the State") is an explanatory frame applied frequently to Colombia's armed conflict. Though scholarly and public critiques of that explanation abound—for example, Teo Ballvé shows that state formation in Colombian "frontier" regions has often depended on economies of violence (2012:603)—the myth of "state absence" continues to hold sway (Serje 2012). And like most myths, this one is productive (Monk and Mundy 2014). One thing it produces is the belief that extending the state's reach to areas supposedly neglected or abandoned by it will bring an end to conflict. Again, the cornerstone of this argument is infrastructure, since there are few better ways to stage the effect of state presence than to build a highway or bridge (Serje 2012, Uribe 2017, Mitchell 1991).

The logic expressed here is evident in a number of snappy wordplays, such as *la construcción del posconflicto* and #PazEnConcreto, but also in phrases like *carrerteras hacia la paz* ("highways to peace"), *corredores de equidad* ("corridors of equity"), and *caminos al progreso* ("roads to progress"). Language of this sort has proliferated since negotiations with the FARC began in 2012, becoming all the more pervasive since the peace accord was finalized in 2016, and it obviously plays on the dual meaning of words like "construction" and "concrete." Yet not only in a metaphorical or semiotic sense (cf. Karatani 1995, Newell 2018). These are not

simply figures of speech in which a word (concrete) used primarily for one thing (a durable building material) is applied to another thing (peace) to invoke similar qualities (fixed, lasting, and unalterable). The metaphorical function is present, but something else is going on: both meanings are simultaneously active and mutually constitutive. Peace in Colombia is not merely being *compared* to concrete—it is also assumed to require an extensive process of physical construction—and the material, along with the infrastructural forms made of it, become integral to the prospect of transcending the armed conflict.

As such, the transformative power invested in things like airports and roads is not merely the effect of persuasive rhetoric, catchy slogans, and authoritative proclamations; it also draws energy from the materiality of objects and from the aesthetic and affective work performed by them. Sometimes the object in question is the infrastructure itself, while other material practices are frequently deployed in the process of promoting it: the smart design and flashy décor of the new El Dorado Airport; a carefully curated public display of infrastructure projects greeting international arrivals; an impeccably dressed politician confidently discussing economic opportunities with wealthy investors. Alongside the images, words, and symbols that endow infrastructure building with the power to bring about security and development, these material practices work simultaneously to invoke the same promising potentials. But the endowment of infrastructure with potency is also an effect of the peace agreement itself.

The initial agreement posited six key transformations necessary for the creation of a stable and durable peace, the first of which was “Comprehensive Rural Reform.” Recognizing the extreme disparity between rural and urban Colombia as a primary driver of conflict, and responding to demands for roads and bridges expressed by people in poor rural areas, the agreement set out an ambitious agenda for reducing the inequality between cities and the

countryside (Bencardino 2014). According to the logic of the agreement, these promises were predicated on regional integration, and regional integration was based on promises of infrastructural development, which became central parts of the plan for how to close the rural-urban gap and reduce inequality. Regional integration achieved through infrastructural development was also expected to provide productive alternatives for demobilized guerrillas and to create economic opportunities for rural populations. In tying rural underdevelopment to violence, the peace agreement invested things like concrete, cables, and pipes with the responsibility to bring an end to conflict. Indeed, the signing of large-scale infrastructure contracts has increased substantially since negotiations with the FARC began, with the number peaking between 2013 and 2015, and many of them are clustered around economically strategic conflict zones (Figures 2 and 3).¹¹ The industrial production of cement—the key input for this process of physical construction along with sand and gravel—also increased by 30% between 2010 and 2014, with the production of the primary ingredient required for cement manufacturing (limestone) rising by nearly 20% (Wacaster 2014). Infrastructure projects, and the substances of which they are made, have become central to the objective of building a “concrete peace.”

<IMAGE 2 HERE>

<IMAGE 3 HERE>

Having spent more than enough time admiring the poster exhibit in the airport’s arrivals hall, I eventually made my way outside to find a taxi. As I joined the long queue of passengers with limited options for reaching their destinations, I was reminded of debates surrounding the airport expansion. Many had criticized the project’s planners for the excessive amounts of money spent on increasing the airport’s capacity without establishing efficient connections to the city’s public transportation network. A terminal of the TransMilenio bus rapid transit system was not

far and a conventional bus service had been added recently, but neither worked well enough to compete with taxis, even considering the crowds and traffic. While the new airport and its impressive displays of infrastructural modernity made a lasting impression, the banal experience of its actual function cast doubt on the grand expectations attached to it. How could the airport possibly mediate a process of historical transformation if it failed to offer effective ground transport connections?

A Tale of Two Bridges

The expectations and responsibilities attached to the built environment in public and political discourse can be usefully juxtaposed with the intimate knowledge possessed by those who have lived and worked on and around the infrastructures and materials in question. This knowledge derives from the historical experiences people throughout Colombia have had with the armed conflict and with the role of infrastructure within it, and who are now living alongside large-scale construction projects that carry with them promises of peace and prosperity. One such person is a septuagenarian I will call Don Raúl, who I met by chance. As I was leaving Colombia's oil capital of Barrancabermeja at the break of dawn, the night watchman at my hotel, in a gesture of kindness, gave me the phone number of Don Raúl, his father-in-law, who happened to live in Puerto Berrío, the town where I was headed. Puerto Berrío is known to have been one of the epicenters of violence, the site of numerous massacres and countless disappearances—a place where knowing who to speak to is vital. Don Raúl, I was told, knew the area better than anyone. I pocketed the scrap of paper with his number on it and made my way down to the bank of the Magdalena River to catch the 6:30am *chalupa*. I bought a ticket for the motorboat and climbed aboard, wedging myself into place for the three-hour journey.

Once all the passengers were seated and their belongings strapped to the canopy, the pilot fired up the outboard motor. The vessel's breakneck speed moderated the heat, and on that day a low blanket of greyish clouds offered additional relief. We stopped briefly in places like Caño Arrecho ("angry channel") and El Caballo ("the horse"), which, according to Google Maps, did not exist. At one point, we idled midriver so an elderly woman could be picked up by a dugout canoe. Most of the time, however, the boat skimmed the water's surface, whizzing past farms and ranches that had seen more bloodshed than almost anywhere else in Colombia. As we neared our destination, the site I had come to see appeared on the horizon: a new bridge in the early stages of construction (Figure 4).

<IMAGE 4 HERE>

A flagship project in the National Infrastructure Agency's "Highways of Prosperity" plan, this bridge spanning the Magdalena River was designed to facilitate travel between the departments of Antioquia and Santander, while connecting to a major transport corridor known as the "Route of the Sun," which runs for over 1,000 kilometers from the interior to the sea. As one of the regions most affected by the armed conflict, the Middle Magdalena has been a priority for the national government, and significant funds have been invested in infrastructures of mobility and connectivity (BID 2016). The ideal material to enroll in this process of transformation is concrete, for it offers the smoothness and continuity necessary to move valuable things more quickly and efficiently (Taussig 2004, Harvey 2010:32). Significant delays have been chronic, however, and recent corruption scandals have severely damaged the public perception of large-scale infrastructure projects.¹² Nevertheless, despite recurring denunciations, lawsuits, and convictions, these *megaproyectos*, as they are often called, and the materials required to build them, remain integral to the goal of constructing a "concrete peace."

As we passed the worksite, some of these materials were in plain sight. Construction on the bridge had begun the year before, and the cylindrical piles that will serve as its foundation were already close to completion (Figure 5). Thin-walled steel tubes had been sunk vertically into the riverbed and floating nearby was a pontoon barge carrying heavy machinery, which was tasked with the job of filling the tubes with reinforcement cages and wet concrete. The abutments that would eventually support the approach to the bridge, also made of concrete, had been installed. Piles of rock and sand on the riverbank were standing by, waiting to be mixed with water and cement to produce the additional concrete needed to complete the project. We arrived in Puerto Berrío a few minutes later.

<IMAGE 5 HERE>

As the department of Antioquia's main riverport, Puerto Berrío once handled all the goods coming from the coast or from overseas on their way to the industrious city of Medellín. Many of the coffee exports that fueled Colombia's modernization drive in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries were loaded onto riverboats at these very docks (Palacios 2002). To facilitate access to national and international markets, the department of Antioquia signed a contract in 1874 with the renowned Cuban railway engineer, Francisco Cisneros, to build the Ferrocarril de Antioquia (Horna 1982:39–40). The railroad, which traversed the rugged mountains between the interior of Antioquia and the Magdalena River, brought wealth and status to the town.

Puerto Berrío's golden age materialized in the construction of the majestic Hotel Magdalena, which hosted travelers, tourists, and businessmen in unparalleled comfort. Even the United States Trade Commissioner, P. L. Bell, was "favorably impressed" by the hotel, praising it as a "comfortable, modern, and hygienic stopping place for travelers." In his 1921

“Commercial and Industrial Handbook” for Colombia, Bell rated the Hotel Magdalena the best hotel in the country outside of Bogotá and expressed admiration for the materials used in its construction: “Among its features are the modern white-tiled baths—a great boon to the river passengers...The building was designed by an American architect and is constructed of reinforced concrete, with all interior fittings of hardwood. All floors are of tile laid in cement, and all features are specially adapted to the tropical climate” (1921:395–96). Indeed, the Hotel Magdalena was the first concrete building in all of Colombia, and it symbolized modernity for local and foreign visitors alike.

I reached Don Raúl on his cellular phone and he agreed to meet me at the gas station near the river. I arrived a few minutes early and was immediately waved down by a man whose sprightly walk and sporty attire defied his age. We sat down in one of the open-air saloons clustered around the docks, shouting over the blaring sounds of *vallenato* music. I ordered a coffee, Don Raúl a beer. He began by telling me how he had spent his working life: first in command of commercial riverboats and then in the fluvial inspector’s office. He was now semi-retired, occasionally taking the helm of smaller vessels carrying shipments to nearby destinations. He recalled the days when Puerto Berrío was the region’s commercial hub, and both barge convoys and passenger steamers would stopover on their way upriver. As the inland head of commercial navigation had since moved 100 kilometers downriver, and river traffic in these parts was now limited to small watercraft, I asked what had happened to bring those boomtimes to an end. His response: “The bridge!”

Don Raúl was referring not to the new bridge being built just downstream, but to one on the other edge of town that dated back to the late-1950s. Enabling traffic to cross the river with ease, the Puente Monumental reduced the demand for fluvial transport, which led the

government to defer maintenance on the navigable channel. Before long, Don Raúl told me, this stretch of river filled with sediment and larger boats were unable to pass. “The river dried up,” he said, referring as much to the flow of water as to the flow of goods. With Puerto Berrío no longer serving as a strategic riverport, much of the commerce once concentrated there began to ignore the town altogether. Other factors contributed to this reversal of fortune, but Don Raúl’s attribution of agency was significant. *Ese puente es lo que mató al pueblo*, he lamented. “That bridge is what killed this town.”

This statement initially struck me as a slight exaggeration—Puerto Berrío may no longer be prosperous, but it certainly was not dead. However, Don Raúl’s invocation of the relationship between infrastructure and violence had a dual meaning. He was also alluding to the decades in which Puerto Berrío and the waters surrounding it were overflowing with dead bodies. The town was once a stronghold of the National Liberation Army (ELN) and other leftist groups, where rebel flags could be seen flying from the highest point on the bridge (Nieto 2012:36). This lasted until the right-wing United Self-Defense Forces of Colombia (AUC) and the Colombian military with support from the United States began their systematic annihilation of anything resembling insurgent activity. Another paramilitary group with a ruthlessly simple name, Death to Kidnappers (MAS), eventually launched its own counterinsurgency war, assassinating “subversives” to protect its wealthy patrons from abduction. When the paramilitaries officially demobilized, criminal organizations comprised of their former members eventually infiltrated the port, capitalizing on its strategic location for the distribution of drugs, weapons, and other contraband, as they have done and continue to do throughout the country. Coinciding in space and time, the economic decline of the town became inseparable from the dark cloud of death that hung over it, and both were linked to the construction of the bridge.

When he was working on the water, Don Raúl said, he saw things he would rather forget. I chose not to push him further, but I knew what he meant as I had read numerous accounts of Puerto Berrío's fishermen and riverboat pilots finding floating body parts from corpses that had been dumped upstream, often from the bridge itself (Nieto 2012). During the twenty-six years he spent enforcing transit codes for the fluvial inspector's office, Don Raúl also came across situations he simply had to ignore: "Did you see something? No. Did you hear something? No. That's it. That's how it was in those days. If you opened your mouth, they'd shut it for you." Don Raúl asked me whether I'd visited the town cemetery. I hadn't, I responded, but I had seen a documentary about the residents of Puerto Berrío who visit the graves of anonymous victims, give them names, and pray for their salvation. Many of those interviewed in the film reference the bridge's macabre history. The man who has taken it upon himself to communicate with the dead surmised: "If that bridge could talk, good God, it would tell us how many have been thrown from there" (Echavarría 2013).

The bridge was clearly a topic Don Raúl thought about often, not only because he blamed it for the decline of fluvial transport and for attracting the attention of armed groups. As a young man, he also had a hand in the bridge's construction. Born in 1940, he was coming of age when work on the bridge project began, and at 17 he was hired as manual laborer. He spent two years on the job and said he felt great pride when President Alberto Lleras Camargo presided over the inauguration in 1961. But it was bittersweet, since by that point he had already taken up the vocation of riverboat pilot and could sense that the bridge might threaten the livelihoods of watermen like himself.

Having spent nearly two hours talking, Don Raúl suggested we walk to the central plaza, where artefacts of the town's history were on display. Upon arrival, the first thing to catch my

eye was a decommissioned locomotive of the now-defunct railway elevated on a concrete pedestal in the middle of the tree-lined square. Surrounding this monument to the town's prosperous past was an installation of black-and-white photographs mounted on concrete frames. As we examined each image, Don Raúl provided explanations, since everything on display was now out of operation: cranes and warehouses along the pier, seaplanes, the train station, the cinema. Apparently many townspeople criticized the mayor for the memorial, but Don Raúl thought it was important for younger generations to know what the town and the river once were. Eventually we arrived at a photograph of the bridge Don Raúl helped build. He explained that it was built in phases, with the first (the one he worked on) involving the mixing of aggregate from the riverbank with cement to form the concrete columns that would serve as its base.

We resumed our walk and soon passed the grand Hotel Magdalena. The buildings and grounds appeared well-maintained, but the entrance gates were locked. The only way in was through a security checkpoint with "Decimacuarta Brigada" inscribed across the top. Don Raúl told me that, for the last thirty years or so, the once-illustrious hotel had functioned as a military base for the Fourteenth Brigade of the Colombian Army. The Fourteenth Brigade, according to their website, was established in 1983 to confront the critical security situation in the Middle Magdalena and Northeast Antioquia region—a jurisdiction of 20,000 square-kilometers, which is equivalent to the size of Wales. The regiment's initial mandate was "to counteract the subversive escalation that was taking over the Magdalena Medio," whereas today the Fourteenth is dedicated to "the mission of maintaining peace and tranquility" (Ejército Nacional de Colombia 2010). In Don Raúl's lifetime, the country's first concrete building had become a critical infrastructure in a counterinsurgency war, and then subsequently an agent of peace.

At a remarkably brisk pace for a seventy-seven year-old man, Don Raúl led me uphill on the road heading out of town. As we approached the bridge, the railroad tracks came into view, but instead of wagons carrying freight across the river, the rails were now used by makeshift motorcycle-powered trolleys ferrying passengers to a small town on the other side. Although the bridge was built to accommodate both trains and automobiles, the railway ceased to run soon after the bridge's inauguration due to an accumulation of debt and competition from trucks. In its current configuration, the bridge has two lanes, but the roadway is so narrow that automobiles have to straddle the barrier that once separated road from rails. Traffic jams are frequent. We took the pedestrian walkway to the bridge's middle point, where Don Raúl remained silent for a while, gazing pensively at the river with his elbow supported on the railing and his head in his hand. I eventually broke the silence and asked him for his current thoughts on the Puente Monumental. Echoing his earlier comment, he said he felt both pride and lament, since the bridge he helped build had "killed the town he loved."

We met again the next day for a journey downriver on his friend's motorboat to visit the site of the new bridge. Don Raúl gave me a lesson in how to read the river while his friend guided the watercraft between sandbars. Along the way, we passed machines installed on the riverbank to extract sand and stones from the boats of *areneros* (sandmen) who make a living by submerging themselves to collect the raw materials needed for construction. Nearing what Don Raúl referred to as *la cuestión del puente* ("the matter of the bridge"), I noticed the machinery was no longer active. The steel tubes that will form the bridge's foundation were now filled with concrete and the next phase of construction was about to begin.

We idled for a few minutes alongside the semi-submerged pilings to allow us time to talk. I asked my companions about the motive for the project and got a refreshingly straight answer: a

four-lane bridge will be a huge improvement on the current situation. I then asked whether they thought the new bridge would bring changes to the area. They responded affirmatively but referred only to a tiny riverside settlement built on dredge spoil, which will abut the base of the bridge. “El Aterrado will come to life,” Don Raúl said with optimism for the fate of this humble homestead. More worthwhile from his perspective was the government’s plan to improve navigability on the river and revive fluvial transport. But neither project seemed to promise a peaceful and prosperous future for the Middle Magdalena or for Colombia more generally. After all, not all infrastructure projects possess transformative power, and for those that do, that power may be neither controllable nor desirable. The material histories of Puerto Berrío’s bridges, past and present, throw into question the assumptions according to which security and development are being pursued. As Don Raúl’s lifetime of experience suggests, building new infrastructures may produce the conditions for peace, it may reactivate latent dynamics of conflict, or it may do nothing at all.

Voyage of Hope and Blood

To conclude, the story of another diplomatic mission in which the built environment was again expected to play a proactive role in the pursuit of peace: Pope Francis’s 2017 visit to Colombia. The Holy Father had deferred an earlier invitation, but the moment had arrived for a five-day tour in support of efforts to bring an end to the armed conflict. His visit was declared the “Week for Peace” across the country, schools and offices were closed, and enormous crowds were expected at each of the planned ceremonies in which the Pope would give the peace process his blessing. Throughout the Pope’s stay in Colombia, infrastructures would mediate the historical transformation he had come to endorse, though not exactly as planned.

I was on the banks of the Magdalena River at the time, and every television seemed to be tuned in to non-stop coverage of the smallest details of his journey. Watching his arrival, one of those details caught my eye: when the Pope's flight landed at Bogotá's El Dorado Airport, it was met by a set of bright red mobile stairs adorned with the catchphrase #ViajeDeEsperanza (“#VoyageOfHope”).¹³ So, too, the aircraft provided for his in-country flights was decorated with large red lettering bearing the same message.¹⁴ This slogan would appear frequently in the media as Pope Francis returned to the airport multiple times for side trips to Villavicencio, Medellín, and Cartagena—scenes that both signified infrastructural modernity and foreshadowed a peaceful and prosperous future. The Pope, of course, brought his own message of hope, which needed little amplification. But as news of his journey through Colombia was omnipresent, the infrastructures enabling his travels came to play an important role. Huge numbers of devotees admired as the Holy Father moved smoothly through the streets of Bogotá—a notoriously congested city that had been reconfigured for the historic occasion. Bus routes had been rerouted, traffic restrictions put into effect, and prominent avenues repaired. The Pope's visit was planned to reinforce the peace process at a crucial moment, but infrastructural measures had to be taken to ensure that his positive message would have the desired effect.

As with other aspects of peacebuilding in Colombia, there was again historical precedent. The first pontiff to travel to Latin America was Pope Paul VI, who visited Colombia in 1968 for the International Eucharistic Congress. His visit was religious in nature, but its political and economic significance was made clear by the time spent with poor and working-class Colombians celebrating the “Day of Development.” At a moment of radical ferment around the world, which in Colombia had already begun to take a violent turn, the security implications of development were clearly at stake and, indeed, Pope Paul VI's visit marked a moment of

national infrastructural expansion. The second papal visit to Colombia in 1986 followed shortly on the heels of two tragic events: the siege of the Palace of Justice in central Bogotá and the ensuing massacre of combatants and civilians, which coincided one week later with a volcanic eruption that led to the death of over 25,000 people. Pope John Paul II visited the sites of both tragedies and gave his blessing to the processes of mourning and reconstruction the country was undergoing. The 2017 visit by Pope Francis followed this tradition by attaching itself to the “construction of the post-conflict,” the very process I was in Colombia at the time to investigate.

During my research trip, the Pope’s visit was an unavoidable topic of conversation. When people weren’t watching or listening to the coverage, they were chatting about it. In meetings and interviews, my interlocutors’ mobile phones would often light up with WhatsApp messages conveying the most recent viral joke or internet meme. Many of these cleverly juxtaposed the elusive promise of peace with the persistent reality of violence. And it turned out that Pope Francis’s visit, somewhat fittingly, involved some of both, with infrastructure again taking center stage.

On his final day, while riding the popemobile through the uneven streets of Cartagena, the Pope lost balance and bumped his head on the vehicle’s protective windshield, suffering a bruised cheekbone and cut eyebrow, and staining his white cassock red.¹⁵ For days, all anyone could talk about was this event. And they often did so with the characteristically sharp but playful wit that is practically an art form in Colombia, and which is often used to make sense of bloodshed. “Typical,” one said; “not even the Pope can set foot in Colombia without becoming the victim of violence.” “Having God on your side can’t save you from getting caught up in this conflict,” someone quipped. “I guess he didn’t pay the *vacuna*,” remarked another with a particularly dark sense of humor, referring to the “vaccination” fee charged by paramilitary

groups for protection. While these responses to the Holy Father's unfortunate accident made reference to the continuity of violence in "post-conflict" Colombia, other observers added an additional layer of commentary: they poked fun at the poor quality of Cartagena's roads, lamented municipal disinvestment and corruption, and questioned the Pope's failure to don a helmet. In pointing out the infrastructural dimensions of the event, these commentaries suggested that the built environment, while expected to promote peace, could just as easily cause injury. The Pope himself, however, beat everyone to the punch.

After surviving that rough ride, Pope Francis visited the home of one Señora Lorenza—a *cartagenera* known to care for the injured and the needy.¹⁶ There the Holy Father was greeted by the gruff yet concerned interrogation: *¿Oiga, qué le pasó?* "Hey, what happened to you?" The Pope, anticipating that his accident would be interpreted in Colombia as sign of the impossibility of peace, and not at all phased by what had just transpired, responded with a wry smile: *¡Me metieron una puñada!* "They slugged me!" Though the Pope's skillful handling of the incident was widely admired, coming as it did on his last day in Colombia made the overall symbolism of his trip less than straightforward.

The Pope's visit in support of the peace process allows for additional reflection on the cultural, political, and economic logics according to which Colombia's future is being imagined and built. The built environment, and in particular infrastructures of transport and mobility, have been given the responsibility to facilitate the transition from war to peace and to help achieve development and security on a national scale. Concrete along with other building materials have become both metaphorical and material mediators of processes of construction that are themselves simultaneously physical and symbolic. On the one hand, the logic underpinning this process of peacebuilding may seem sensible and straightforward: why would a notoriously

violent conflict not be followed by an extensive program of reconstruction? On the other hand, recognizing that attacks on the built environment in Colombia have been infrequent and levels of physical destruction relatively low, even as critical infrastructures have figured centrally in the armed conflict, the drive to build a “concrete peace” appears less inevitable. However, as development and security in Colombia remain conjoined yet elusive goals and as the precarious post-conflict transition stumbles along, it is precisely this uncertainty that allows concrete, as both material and metaphor, to mediate the pursuit of historical change.

As Penny Harvey cautions: “concrete is quite literally a surface form and, as such, seems to preclude any deeper engagement with the relations and problems that it is brought in to solve” (2010:37). After all, no matter how much potency is attributed to the built environment, there is no telling what will actually be accomplished—especially in the midst of one of the world’s longest-running armed conflicts, which has regularly blurred the boundaries between war and peace (Gill 2008). Airports, roads, and bridges may have a positive impact on levels of violence, or they may have no effect whatsoever (Bachmann and Schouten 2018). The ecological implications are also worth considering: the development paradigm based on building structures made of concrete is now widely recognized as unsustainable due to its extensive appetite for resource extraction, its massive contribution of CO2 emissions, its creation of heat island effects, and its exacerbation of vulnerability to flooding (Beiser 2018). Peacebuilding may turn out to be extractive capitalism under a different name (Serje 2012:106, Serje and Ardila Luna 2017), or it may be something else. My goal here is not to spurn the peace process, however, but rather to shed new light on it at this critical juncture by examining the power invested in infrastructure to advance Colombia to a new stage of history.

Also at stake here are conceptual concerns that resonate more broadly—in particular, around the political agency of the material world in the domain of violence, peace, and security. To chart a path between approaches that focus solely on cultural values, political logics, and economic rationales and ones that overemphasize the intrinsic liveliness of objects themselves, I have sought to reframe the question of material politics by asking why, when, and how certain things are invested with the power to effect change in the world. When that change has to do with the intrinsically complex and all-encompassing matters of war and peace, the expectations are unusually high and they cross scales from corridors of government to sites of construction, from diplomatic missions to personal histories, from media campaigns to casual jokes. Paying close attention to the political imagination and the lived experience of peacebuilding (Knox 2017), I have tacked back and forth between state-backed infrastructure projects and everyday interactions with them. Though the object of inquiry has been a nationwide push for development and its entanglement with an elusive quest for security, I have examined that process through detailed descriptions of specific sites and situations, which have revealed the degree to which the potency of the built environment emerges out of contingent histories of conflict that are as much social as they are material. These histories may not provide a definitive guide for how the future will unfold, and whether that future will be more peaceful than the present and the past, but they do offer insight into the possibilities and limits of existing forms of material politics by highlighting their engrained assumptions about how development and security—indeed, historical change more broadly—ultimately come about.

<IMAGE 6 HERE>

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Endnotes

¹ For coverage of President Santos’s state visit, see Glanfield, Linning, and English (2016).

² Department for International Trade (2016b).

³ Department for International Trade (2016a).

⁴ Foreign & Commonwealth Office & Prime Minister’s Office (2016b).

⁵ Foreign & Commonwealth Office & Prime Minister’s Office (2016a).

⁶ For critical discussion of *el posconflicto* in Colombia, see the 2015 *Cultural Anthropology* online forum.

⁷ In Colombia, these initiatives have often appeared under the umbrella of *paz territorial*, or “territorial peace,” through the Programas de Desarrollo con Enfoque Territorial (PDET), which were established to promote development in conflict-affected areas. Occasionally, the concept of “peace infrastructures” has been used in an institutional rather than a physical sense (Pfeiffer 2014).

⁸ Such phrases have been common among government agencies, such as the Ministry of Transport and the National Infrastructure Agency. For example, see Zaninovich (2017).

⁹ This article builds on over a decade of ethnographic and archival research on security politics in Colombia to account for the recent changes generated by the peace process. The scope of the argument is large, as it contends with a national project—peacebuilding. However, that project is examined through a fine-grained analysis of situated actors, ordinary events, and specific sites. The choice of first-person narrative is deliberate, as is the decision to focus on the case of one key informant: both help convey the lived experience of peacebuilding in close detail.

¹⁰ A deeper analysis of the recent conflicts and debates surrounding infrastructural development and corruption in Colombia and Latin America would add significantly to this analysis.

However, corruption is an exceptionally complex field of anthropological inquiry (Muir and Gupta 2018), and for reasons of space must remain beyond this article's scope.

¹¹ This table and map are based on research conducted by Lina Quiñones using the Colombian government's database of infrastructure contracts. The data represent large-scale infrastructure contracts (over 100 billion pesos, or \$35 million) signed from 2012, the year in which the peace process began, until 2017. A national law passed in 2012 (Ley 1508) made it easier for the government to sign infrastructure contracts and create public-private partnerships.

¹² These corruption scandals have been associated primarily with the Brazilian construction giant Odebrecht, and they have disrupted many infrastructure development projects throughout the country. See *Semana* (2019).

¹³ *Semana* (2017).

¹⁴ *HSB Noticias* (2017).

¹⁵ *El Tiempo* (2017).

¹⁶ *El Herald* (2017).