CONNECTIONS

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Concrete forges connections, not all of them good. In Colombia, infrastructures like bridges not only link commercial nodes, but also serve as vectors for violence and peace. These built forms have the power to evoke collective memory and to produce conditions of mobility that enable new connections and threaten to sever old ones. This chapter explores the question of connectivity near a river town whose violent past and uncertain future both hinge on concrete in infrastructural form.

Concrete infrastructures are storehouses of memory that connect past to present. They may conjure biographical minutiae, but their size and scale suggest histories that are shared, not only with those near and far, but also with those before and after. The capacity of infrastructures to summon collective histories is magnified for those whose lives unfold around them. People with intimate knowledge of a stretch of highway, for example, can be especially attuned to events that once transpired along it. In Colombia, where the following account is based, concrete in infrastructural form is inextricably linked to people's experi-

Figure 6.1. New bridge over Magdalena River under construction, Puerto Berrío. Photo by the author.

ences of armed conflict, as connectivity produces new kinds of relations and severs others.

For a septuagenarian whom I will call Don Raúl, concrete infrastructures like bridges and their constituent materials give shape to memories of violence endured over half a century. 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 his father-in-law, Don Raúl, who happened to live in Puerto Berrío, the town where I was headed. Puerto Berrío was an epicenter of violence, the site of numerous massacres and countless disappearances—a place where knowing whom 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 and made my way to the bank of the Magdalena River. I bought a ticket for a motorboat and climbed aboard, wedging myself into place for the three-hour journey.

Once the passengers were seated, the pilot fired up the outboard motor. The boat skimmed the water's surface, whizzing past farms and ranches that had seen more bloodshed than al-

Figure 6.2. Piles to be filled with concrete, Puerto Berrío. Photo by the author.

most anywhere 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. A flagship project in the National Infrastructure Agency's "Highways of Prosperity" plan, this bridge spanning the Magdalena River would facilitate travel between the departments of Antioquia and Santander, while connecting to a major transport corridor known as "Route of the Sun," which runs for over 1000 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. The ideal material to enroll in this transformative process is concrete, for it offers the smoothness and continuity necessary to move valuable things quickly and efficiently (Harvey 2010, 32). Significant delays have been a chronic problem, however, and corruption scandals have severely damaged the public perception of large-scale infrastructure projects. Nevertheless, despite recurring denunciations,

lawsuits, and convictions, these megaproyectos, as they are called, and the materials required to build them, remain integral to the goal of constructing what in Colombia has frequently been called a "concrete peace."

Construction on the bridge had begun the year before, and the cylindrical piles that would serve as its foundation were close to completion. Thin-walled steel tubes had been sunk vertically into the riverbed and floating nearby was a pontoon barge carrying heavy machinery tasked with filling the tubes with reinforcement cages and wet concrete. The abutments that would eventually support the approach, also made of concrete, had been installed. Piles of rock and sand 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 after spotting the bridge.

As the department of Antioquia's riverport, Puerto Berrío once handled all 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 were loaded onto riverboats at these very docks. 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. The railroad, which traversed the rugged mountains between the interior of Antioquia and the Magdalena River, brought connectivity, and therefore 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 industrialists in unparalleled comfort. Even the United States Trade Commissioner, Purl Lord Bell (1921), 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 in the country outside 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 global connectivity for local and foreign visitors alike.

I reached Don Raúl on his mobile phone and he agreed to meet at a riverside gas station. I arrived early and was immediately waved down by a man whose sprightly walk and sporty attire defied his age. We sat in an open-air saloon by the docks, shouting over blaring 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, when barge convoys and passenger steamers would stop over on their way upriver. As the inland head of commercial navigation had since moved 100 kilometers downstream, 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 downstream, but to one on the other edge of town, dating back to the late-1950s. Enabling vehicle traffic to cross the river with ease, the Puente Monumental reduced demand for fluvial transport. One kind of connection severed another, hindering the movement of goods and people along the waterway, 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 a strategic riverport, much of the commerce once concentrated there began to bypass 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 an exaggeration—Puerto Berrío may no longer be prosperous, but it 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 the waters surrounding Puerto Berrío 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. 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, 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 composed of their former members infiltrated the port, capitalizing on its strategic location for the distribution of drugs, weapons, and other contraband. Coinciding in space and time, the economic decline of the town became inseparable from the cloud of death that hung over it, and both were linked to the construction of the bridge. Concrete, here, fostered infrastructural connectivity, though with deleterious effects.

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 dumped upstream, often from the bridge itself (Nieto 2012). During the twenty-six years he spent enforcing fluvial transport codes, 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,

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. A 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 2015).

The bridge was clearly something Don Raúl thought about often, not only because he blamed it for the decline of fluvial transport and for attracting 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 the bridge project began, and at 17 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. Upon arrival, the first thing to catch my eye was a decommissioned locomotive of the now-defunct railway elevated on a concrete pedestal. Surrounding this monument to the town's prosperous past was an installation of black-and-white photographs mounted on concrete frames. Here concrete was the backdrop to a project seeking connection to the past, but in fact it revealed disconnections. 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, some townspeople criticized the mayor for the memorial, but Don Raúl thought younger generations should know what the town and the river once were. Eventually we arrived at a photograph of the bridge Don Raúl helped build. He explained 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, the once-illustrious hotel had functioned as a military base for the Fourteenth Brigade of the Colombian Army. The Fourteenth, 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. 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." 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 what seemed to me like a remarkably brisk pace for a 77-year-old, 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, the rails were now used by makeshift motorcycle-powered trolleys ferrying passengers across. Although the bridge once accommodated 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. The bridge now has two lanes, yet is so narrow that automobiles have to straddle the barrier that once separated road from rails. We took the pedestrian walkway to the bridge's middle point, where Don Raúl fell silent, gazing pensively at the river with head in hand. I eventually broke the silence by asking 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 reading 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 raw materials needed for concrete 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 would form the bridge's foundation were now filled with concrete and the next phase of construction had begun.

We idled 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 it would bring big changes. 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 commercial shipping. But neither project seemed to promise a peaceful and prosperous future. After all, not all infrastructure projects possess transformative potency, and for those that do, that potency may be neither controllable nor desirable.

This story highlights the power of infrastructures and their constituent materials to connect and disconnect. Walter Benjamin so strongly felt the power of the built environment to bring people together that he dedicated much of his life to the study of one iconic example—the Parisian arcades. Benjamin described how the arcades once promised "dreamworlds of mass utopia," but their subsequent decline was also a unifying force, which could awaken the masses to truths about their history (1978, and Buck-Morss 1995). The vestiges of these structures juxtaposed with memories of their former grandeur, Benjamin thought, could stimulate not only a critical excavation of the past but also a collective reckoning with the future. Don Raúl's reflections on Puerto Berrío's bridges and their concrete foundations perform

similar political work: they simultaneously confront Colombia's history of violence and scrutinize the aspiration to transcend that history through infrastructure building.

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