

A MIGS OCCAISONAL PAPER

Reclaiming Community After Conflict: Reparation and Reconstruction in San Carlos, Colombia

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There are cycles in life. People say this a lot in Colombia. There are times when you focus on your children's education. There are times when you focus on yourself. There are times when you can be with your wife. There are times when you can't—like when you're fighting the guerrillas if you're a soldier, or trying to rebuild your farm after conflict and there are no services for your family. Spaces and places are not exempt from this cyclical vision of life; locations have different meanings before, during, and after conflict. This paper is about the cycles in the life of a building called Hotel Punchiná in the small Colombian town of San Carlos: what has been built, what has been destroyed, and what has been repaired, re-purposed, and reclaimed within its walls.

During the 1980s and 90s, the building housed the most luxurious hotel in town. But within a decade, it went from being paramilitary headquarters, to a perceived mass grave, an exhumation site, a construction zone, and most recently the location where victims of conflict receive legal, psychological, social, and economic assistance from a variety of organizations. There are cycles in life, and these cycles include death, afterlives, and transitions that are often messy, especially those in the guise of revolution or reconstruction, reconciliation or reparation. The story of the transformation of Hotel Punchiná provides an example of physical, psychological, legal, emotional, and spiritual reparation in practice. The building embodies the

cycles of conflict and its aftermath. It is representative of the complex cast of characters involved in the destruction and reconstruction of a community, which in many ways has been construed as representative of conflict in Colombia as a whole.

Brutal conflicts between varying configurations of left-wing guerrillas, right-wing paramilitaries, armed forces, and drug-traffickers have caused over four million Colombians to flee their homes in the past thirty years. Between 1998 and 2005, all of these armed actors were present in San Carlos, battling for control of both the interstate connecting Colombia's two largest cities, Bogotá and Medellín, and the hydro-electric complex that provides one-third of the country's energy. Thousands of people fled their homes. Hundreds were wounded by landmines, forcibly recruited into armed groups, raped, disappeared, or killed. Since 2005, however, improved security in the region has led families to return in such large numbers that the municipality declared it to be a crisis. Municipal, departmental, and national government agencies, non-governmental organizations, and private sector entities have created unprecedented alliances to facilitate return and reconstruction, implementing pilot projects in de-mining, housing, income generation, and historical memory. The area is now seen as emblematic of both the country's history of conflict and flight as well as present and future hopes for return, reconstruction, and reconciliation, rendering San Carlos a metaphor and model for the possibilities of a peaceful Colombia.

A grass roots organization called the Meeting Place for Reconciliation and Reparation, known by its acronym in Spanish, CARE, stands at the forefront of local efforts to rebuild the community's social fabric. The organization has sponsored grief circles, rituals, public events fostering community building, and legal, psychological, and political support for victims' rights. Pastora Mira, an activist and community leader, created the organization in the wake of the death

and disappearance of two of her five children at the hands of the same paramilitaries who made their headquarters in Hotel Punchiná. The offices of CARE are now located in this very building.

Reclaiming, inhabiting, and even decorating space are part of the process of creating and curating a coherent narrative of the past. The act of creating order out of chaos is the beginning of re-asserting one's ownership over life, space, and community. The transformation of the stories told about and within Hotel Punchiná plays an important role in the reconstruction of the social fabric, which requires reclaiming the spaces and places in which one lives. Detours often drive the direction of life during and after conflict. At first, one avoids locations in order to survive and later out of both habit and fear. With time, however, detours can become detrimental if the goal moves from surviving to thriving. The work of CARE has been marked by a persistent choice to take the more direct and difficult paths. The reparation of Hotel Punchiná and the subsequent work done within its walls represent a refusal for life to be defined and confined by detours around painful places. But Punchiná's pasts were not all painful.

Before, as they say, "the violence touched us," Hotel Punchiná was a symbol of the wealth generated by the construction of the hydroelectric complex. While today it's a drab concrete building the color of an unhappy marriage between mustard yellow and burnt sienna, in its heyday Hotel Punchiná was said to be lovely, boasting outdoor tables where guests could lunch under the shade of umbrellas and enjoy the nicest accommodations in town. Many people from Medellín have fond memories of San Carlos, vacationing in hotels such as Punchiná and visiting the many swimming holes and waterfalls for which the region is known. "San Carlos

used to be a really nice place to live,” a friend notes as we talk about the hotel. “The violence,” she concludes in a typically Colombian understatement, “really set us back.”

When the paramilitaries entered the region in the late 1990s, the owner, who has since been extradited to the United States on drug-trafficking charges, fled town. The building stood empty until 2001, when the paramilitaries claimed the space as their own. They exerted ownership by maintaining a visible presence outside the building and throughout town. During this time, it was common to see people tied up in public or kidnapped in the middle of the day. For many such individuals, the last place they were seen alive was outside Hotel Punchiná. It was widely believed that those brought to Punchiná were kidnapped, raped, tortured, or killed.

After two years, the paramilitaries abandoned the building. While no one entered for the next three years, the past retained a powerful presence, causing the building and its previous purpose to loom large in the imagination of the population. In the absence of evidence, stories and suspicions reigned supreme as spirits and fear came to effectively claim this space. Many avoided walking in front of it, some would get dizzy and feel faint when passing by, and the neighbors felt terrorized by the vestiges of violence they believed continued to inhabit the building. Hotel Punchiná became a powerful landmark in the geography of recent violence, taking up a space far greater than its physical confines. A central reason for both entering the building and creating CARE was to transform the image and imagination not just of the building but also of individuals’ perceptions of their community and their roles within it.

Community members and officials from the prosecutor’s office first entered in 2006 to search for bodies and begin the physical and spiritual work of cleaning the building. Since it was impossible to obtain the keys from the owner, the neighbors lent them ladders so they could

climb over the walls. I asked Pastora what it was like to enter this space that housed unknown horrors in order to begin to answer the community's questions regarding what lay within: what it felt like to climb into the overgrown back yard, which she said was like a jungle, filled with garbage the former occupants left and neighbors continued to throw over the wall, to not know what lay inside or buried beneath the ground they walked.

“I felt we had advanced,” she says. “That we had been able to place the face of pain and have a powerful transformation of what the imagination and image had been and the fears that had existed in the community. That we could do it. That the victims could organize themselves.” The knowledge gained through entering, however, dashed hopes for many family members of the disappeared. “I don't know if it closed chapters or increased pain,” Pastora explains, “because a lot of people had thought they would find their disappeared loved ones in the building. People had said there were maybe more than 50 people buried in the building. And when we arrived and found that wasn't the case, it caused a lot of people anguish. But for the neighbors, it brought them peace. When we started to clean the space, the neighbors said, “we don't feel scared anymore. “

Community members learned from demobilized paramilitaries that most of the bodies had already been removed from the premise. A fifteen-year-old girl, however, was said to still be buried there. In 2007, a team of people, including the girl's mother, Doña Lilia, and Pastora, began the search for Leidy Giovanna. This process garnered much media attention and has played a key role in the evolving narrative of the building. In August 2008, the exhumation team found Leidy's body after a year's search. Several months later, CARE claimed the building as their own, marking the beginning of a new cycle in the life of Hotel Punchiná—one of physical and psychological reparation.

While CARE began two years earlier, they first worked in Pastora's house and later rented an office. The funding ran out after a year, however, and they didn't have the money for rent. Hotel Punchiná, which the state had confiscated due to the owner's pending drug charges, offered a rent-free option. Since CARE had already been using the building for activities and workshops, they decided to move there. Like the paramilitary had done seven years earlier, CARE took over the space, this time with the goal of repairing some of the physical and mental damage armed conflict had caused. One of the first tasks was to tackle the many repairs necessary in the building, which had been left for years without maintenance.

The physical work of reparation largely fell to Pastora's family, particularly one of her nephews, Fernando. His wife, Diana, who was among the group of women working in the building, noted they needed someone whose work was "bueno, bonito, y barato"—good, pretty, and cheap. Fernando fit the bill to a tee. He does plumbing and construction and has an artist's eye. He's creative and a hard worker, when interested in the task. In this case, the task was enormous. "The building was in a disastrous state of abandon when we first entered," Fernando explains. "It didn't have doors or bathrooms, there were drawings of people killing people, drawings of weapons, vulgar things written on the walls, used clothes, trash. That's what used to be in CARE. The people who had been in there left it dirty, filled with weeds, the whole building was dirty, dirty, dirty."

Fernando did the work bit by bit, starting with painting over the paramilitary graffiti that filled the walls of the two rooms that would serve as the organization's offices, erasing paramilitary claims to the space they were beginning to make their own. When Pastora was able

to marshal the resources to buy doors, windows, glass, pipes, office material and furniture, Fernando would make the necessary repairs in his free time. While Fernando dedicated himself to the physical reparation of the building, the women engaged in its emotional and spiritual reparation. They decorated and tried to make it a little more cheerful. They lay the tiles on the floor and cleaned the building, the walls, and the yard.

While I've seen video footage of the building when the exhumation team first entered, I can't really imagine what it felt like to face a physical and emotional disaster zone and begin the process of trying to repair it, one tile at a time. It took great courage for this group of people to walk into the door of a building that was known as a "house of terror" and not run away. They washed the blood off the walls. They painted over the death threats. They staked a claim on a space that would have been far easier to avoid. They dug in their heels and transformed the ground on which they stood. They built something positive out of the materials that remained, tainted as these were. These are extraordinary acts of everyday courage. The line between courage and crazy, however, is often debatable. "I thought it was crazy," Diana says with characteristic bluntness when I ask her opinion on entering the building. "We didn't have the resources, it was terribly damp, and in a horrible condition. Whatsmore, a lot had happened there previously during the war and these things were really powerful. It was a challenge but we succeeded. But we succeeded by clawing our way there." Like all impossible tasks, the transformation of Hotel Punchiná took a little while.

Removing the visible evidence of the past does not rid space of its memories. Just as in this fertile part of the world plants uproot asphalt and consume people's homes in their absence, human nature also corrodes space, weakening and defiling it with memories of painful events. The process of repairing and repurposing this building and the community as a whole is

painstaking work. It took tremendous effort for people to walk in the door, including many of those who helped repair the building. Members of CARE employed a variety of strategies to convince people the space was safe. Part of this involved gently removing the spirits that had taken residence both in the building and the imagination of many community members.

“The first activities were just getting people to enter and get used to it and get to the rest of it slowly, so that people would start to lose their fear,” Pastora remembers. “Some people would enter the first door and would be really scared, look all around them and say—oh, there’s a spirit, I’m leaving. And we would say, don’t worry, there’s nothing, don’t be scared, they’re imaginary. I know that you’re scared but it’s fine.” Both the evangelical and Catholic churches conducted rituals in the building, as did CARE. “We did a ritual of saying good-bye to the spirits that remained with unresolved business,” Pastora explains. “We invoked the spirits around us and asked them to rest fully, to leave peacefully. We told them there are people here who are worried about them, who will take care of them, who will help them receive justice. And this was healing, totally healing, this was something we did with much love.”

They also used more indirect strategies to make the space habitable. One of the first groups to use the building was mothers who taught infant health care to women in their communities. For many, the building evoked painful memories of conflict. One woman in particular would sit beside the door, refusing to enter. So they instituted the “snack strategy” in which refreshments were placed in the office. At first, she asked people to bring the snacks to her; at the final meeting, however, she got her own food. They used this technique in other workshops, Pastora recounts, “until they found themselves in the office without having been pressured or dragged there.” The women later asked to use the space for other activities and

workshops. “These are the kinds of things,” Pastora explains, “that transformed the imagination of this space.”

In addition to changing the stories thought and told about the space, they also changed the narratives recounted in this place. Families whose loved ones had been disappeared met with lawyers and psychologists in the building unless they chose another location. CARE hosted symbolic events and conducted workshops on the peaceful resolution of conflict, non-violence, reconciliation, and grief. Demobilized actors later worked to repair the roof and third floor, engaging in a direct form of reparation in a building many had helped nearly destroy. The fishing and livestock associations now use the space for their monthly meetings. Since November, the building has also served as headquarters for the national institution, Acción Social, that provides assistance to internally displaced and returning individuals. This has led many more people to enter and use this space as a source not only for emotional but also economic assistance. While there are still people who refuse to enter the building, Pastora estimates that eighty percent of the population now sees it as a location for workshops and activities meant to benefit the community. It was important, she explains, for a variety of actors to use the building for different events “so that this space didn’t stay enshrined in the myth of conflict because this was a myth of what was and what we need to be building is our future.”

She acknowledges there are risks to offering psychosocial support to victims in a location with such a traumatic history. The organization thus sponsors events in sites such as the town square and the Catholic Church. According to Pastora, however, the direct relationship the building holds to past conflict offers unique benefits. “With the victims,” she suggests, “it’s not enough that someone tells me this animal doesn’t bite. You need to have enough confidence to touch it to know if it bites or not. In this building, the victims had the opportunity to tell their

stories and recreate them in this very space, to draw them and heal themselves. From the inside, you take out everything. I'm going to use a rough example: If I'm going to throw up or defecate, I'm going to do this in a toilet and that's what this place was for us victims. For victims, what better place to go do these things, to take out all of this pain, this anguish, these things that were eating us up inside? This is why we always sought to be in this place.”

Location matters. Places hold memories, spaces tell stories. It's not enough to rebuild homes, recultivate fields, and reconstruct roads if one's environment is filled with mental landmines of memories and myths that render certain places uninhabitable. Claiming Hotel Punchina is an act of defusing the power of harmful myths and memories while creating order and intelligibility out of the past, integrating it into the present through a constant process of curation and creation.

The host of inhabitants who have trespassed and squatted in the building over the past ten years have all found ways to mark the territory as their own, often in direct relationship to those who came before. In a strange symmetry, many of the paintings victims created in grief workshops feature the same content as the drawings young paramilitary men left in their wake. Images of the implements and aftermaths of death and destruction now line the walls of the building that were so recently filled with scrawled drawings and death threats. There's a far greater variety and organization, however, in these and other images than existed during conflict. The writing on the walls today—posters and paintings from historical memory projects, calendars and maps organizing aid deliveries--represent five years of activities, events, and assistance offered in the aftermath of violence. There is now a curated order that begins to make the past an inhabitable and comprehensible country, even as the present remains a contested and evolving territory.

Despite the accolades, awards, and attention given to this small community and the hopes it represents for a post-conflict Colombia, it is impossible to say San Carlos has bounced back. No one bounces back, and if they do, they're in for a quick fall as the gravity of reality does its work. We don't bounce back. We plow through. They have taken the hard road home and they're not there yet. In the light of the beauty of this place and its people, it is disturbingly easy to forget the severity of violence that so recently occurred here. Armed actors remain and few of the structural and personal problems that led to violence have been resolved. In the aftermath of conflict, all peace is precarious and thus that much more precious. That much more in need of constant care.

The path to peace is not linear nor the cycles in life circular but instead form spirals and scrawls, detours and dances driven by the restive rhythms of re-creation. This is not restoration. It's a small story of a big effort. When I asked Diana how she felt about her work with CARE and the reparation of Hotel Punchiná, she said, "I feel proud to be part of CARE because we could do so much for victims, things that are priceless. The changing of the meaning of that building, that is priceless."

And this is how it begins and ends, with the transformation wrought through the priceless efforts of impossible actions.

This is how the cycle continues.

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