Maintenance, Care, *and* Repair *of a* Communal Architecture *in* Trouble: The Disassembling

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ABSTRACT

This paper attempts to ethnographically reflect on how material vulnerability is conceived and considered in practices of communal sustenance of architectures in trouble. Drawing on theories of maintenance, care, and repair, we will dwell on the learnings cultivated during a socio-material process that unfolded in response to the burning of a communal library in the southern periphery of the city of Bogotá. The collective practices of sustenance deployed to take care of the threatened architecture help us bring to the forefront questions of (I) distributed agency and ecology of practices; (II) unanticipated future and alternative temporalities; (III) creative and generative responses to damage or conflict; as well as (V) tentative and (IV) 'opening of black boxes' methods. Through the ethnographic analysis of the disassembling process, we will problematize the socio-material ecosystems needed to sustain lives in a 'broken world'.

Keywords

maintenance and care

repair ecologies

material vulnerability

undoing architecture

urban conflicts

AUTHOR

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Days continued to pass since that morning when Casa del Viento communal library woke up engulfed in flames. It was urgent to make a decision in the face of the imminent collapse of the structure. Debates unfolded regarding what the future held, whether the house should be demolished or rebuilt (…), and who would be in charge of it. There were days of collective reflection in the warmth of communal pots; in artistic workshops that kept the space alive; in larger and smaller assemblies with people close to the process and with related community processes and collectives mobilized against violence in neighborhoods such as 'Paz a la Calle' [Peace to the Streets]; as well as in meetings with politicians and technicians of the administration.

But Casa del Viento remained up there, feeling the passing of days with its structure exposed to the elements, increasingly weakened. Rains and winds are constant in this area of Bogotá, where gray skies rarely give a respite. The treated chipboard platform that was once the dream of the neighborhood's hip-hop collectives was now opening up and hollowing out due to humidity. Puddles, tinged by the ash that was gradually seeping in, accumulated at its feet, gradually leaking into the lower library building, where valuable material for cultural and artistic workshops, such as books and computers, were stored. On top of this now skeletal structure, the polycarbonate seemed like a tattered fabric skin.

Members of the grassroots cultural collective ZuroRiente, who, alongside the guerrilla architecture collective Arquitectura Expandida (AXP) built the structure in 2015, in a context of high conflict and violence, were now busy surrounding the Casa with a yellow danger tape. They couldn't keep a 24-hour watch to prevent anyone from entering out of curiosity. Nor to stop homeless individuals from seeking shelter at night, or to deter street recyclers from gradually extracting valuable materials for sale. Embracing the structure with the tape seemed like a final attempt to support

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it and prevent it from collapsing. The tape had to be replaced regularly, so the perimeter of Casa del Viento became covered with overlapping pieces of broken yellow tape, like a poorly executed embroidery that, nevertheless, showcased the renewed effort of the community to protect and emphasize that space.

The rain had already washed away the smell of scorching, but the blackened structure continued to bear witness to the fire, serving as a reminder to the neighborhood of the violence that took place there.
—Field notebook notes, 05/13/17

Displacement processes have played a central role in shaping Colombian cities, compelling them to urbanize and expand their boundaries in response to the urgent need to provide shelter for the incoming displaced population. Historians Gilma Mosquera Torres and Jacques Aprile Gniset (1978) consider that the modern Colombian city was one of the 'by-products' of violence, and the product of forced and accelerated urbanization. Bogotá has historically been the Colombian city with the highest reception of displaced population (Observatorio Distrital de Víctimas del Conflicto Armado, 2017). This sustained massive arrival of people over time led to the construction of self-built settlements in areas known as *lomas* (hills), such as the San Vicente neighborhood (San Cristóbal locality) on the southeastern outskirts of the city of Bogotá, where Casa del Viento is located.

The construction of the library was a response from the neighborhood residents to the lack of cultural or social infrastructures in this locality, and from its inception, it was immersed in significant controversy. It is challenging to briefly present the complexity of the urban conflict present in this area, but we can frame it within the interweaving of a nested political conflict that cuts across the biographies of people displaced to the locality from their territories, the presence of agents in the neighborhood exercising territorial control (linked to paramilitarism), and the proximity of a large *olla* (a 'pot', an area of micro-trafficking and consumption). In this context, grassroots community processes, especially those focused on youth (such as the library initiative), are not always welcome (Equipo Colombia Plural, 2017; Gómez Nadal, 2017; Rodero, 2017).

But the burning of Casa del Viento not only illuminated the latent conflicts and violence surrounding political and cultural grassroots processes in these territories, but also shed a particularly intense light on the importance of collective care and sustenance tasks carried out there. This milestone definitively shifted the focus of my doctoral research, which initially sought to document autonomous design processes of *new* construction (from ideation to materialization), and made me question precisely the emphasis and interest of disciplines such as architecture in narrating *starts/beginnings*.

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In this article, we aim to draw attention to temporalities in architecture and design that diverge from linear narratives with a clear beginning and end. To achieve this, we will draw on theories of maintenance, care, and repair, complementing and/or nuancing them through the ethnographic material developed during the response process that took place after the burning of the communal library.

The ethnographic materials used to craft this text are part of my doctoral research (primarily developed in 2016 and 2017). They are situated within a crucial political moment in the country, following the milestone of the 'No to Peace' result in the plebiscite that intended to endorse the agreements between the government and the FARC, in October 2016. The research broadly explores uncertainties, tensions, and controversies, but also imaginations and hopes, agonisms and antagonisms, that frame the peace horizon on the outskirts of Bogotá during those years.

WHAT MAKES ARCHITECTURE SUSTAIN ITSELF? AN APPROACH THROUGH THEORIES OF MAINTENANCE, CARE, AND REPAIR

What if, instead of taking novelty, growth, or progress as a starting point, we take erosion, breakdown, and decay (Jackson, 2014, p. 221)? Even when dealing with constructs that include technologies presented to us as infallible, our daily lives are woven with objects that fail, break, fray, or are sabotaged or damaged. Repair tasks have been made invisible and are often overlooked in design processes, but we cannot escape them.

To begin by acknowledging the vulnerability of our lives—or *vulnerability as an ontological condition*, according to Butler (2017)— means placing the *everyday practices of sustenance* at the center and, therefore, challenging the liberal conception of autonomous subjects that turn their backs on feminist theories of interdependence and eco-dependence (Gutiérrez Aguilar, 2018; Mol, 2008; Pérez Orozco, 2014; Tronto, 1993; among many others). It implies breaking away from illusions of the perpetual, invulnerable, and autonomous nature of our existence. Not just ours, but also that of the objects around us: the "conditions of finitude and fragility affecting not only our organic and social bodies but also the 'bodies' of those objects we live by" (Callén & Sánchez Criado, 2015, p. 21). In this sense, it is crucial to understand the role that material vulnerability plays in our everyday sustenance practices and to broaden our perspective on the vulnerable condition of our socio-material ecosystems.

However, when we turn our gaze to research in the field of urban studies and architecture, we find that works on care, maintenance, and repair are scarce. While there are notable exceptions such as Steven Jackson's work on 'broken world thinking' (2014); or, specifically in the field of architecture, the work of

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Stephen Cairns and Jane M. Jacobs (2017) *Buildings Must Die*, and Stuart Brand's (1994) *How Buildings Learn*, these works point out how the focus is typically placed on the creative milestones of 'birth' and the triumph of creations, and how paying attention to what happens after the opening day has at least two main implications that are particularly relevant to this research. The first is shifting attention from individual authorships at the initial moments of creation, to highlight the importance of the network of agents that sustain our architectures on a day-to-day basis. The second is that sustenance tasks, along with the processes of breakage and deterioration, help us mobilize different theoretical and practical repertoires other than the traditional conception of architectures as a 'commodity' (merchandise, product, artifact), understood as something closed and always ready for use (Callén & Sánchez Criado, 2015, p. 22), opening a broader and richer canvas of possibilities to think and inhabit the material world that surrounds us differently.

In addition to the scarcity of literature, a second problem arises: this literature has a very partial perspective, not only due to the pronounced viewpoint of engineers and economists, as noted by Shannon Mattern (2018), but also due to the noticeable absence of a framework in contexts outside the so-called 'Global North'. How do these issues, primarily developed by Western academics, travel to the so-called 'Global South'? How do we bridge the gap between maintenance literature and the practices encountered in the peripheries? What horizons open up for us?

Hence, pausing to study the everyday maintenance of architectures from the Bogotá periphery and through an ethnographic lens is, in itself, an act of maintenance. Our task will involve rescuing literature, drawing connections between disciplines, connecting threads, patching holes, or amplifying small voices (Mattern, 2018).

REBUILD, DEMOLISH... DISASSEMBLE!

The imminent collapse of the structure and the silence of the institutions precipitated the decision to autonomously disassemble the construction of Casa del Viento.

The disassembling day started early with the slow-cooking preparation of the communal pot in the center of the square, intended to last until the sun went down. The task was not simple.

On the one hand, the structure was severely damaged, and any movement jeopardized the stability of the whole. Additionally, it was an emotionally charged day, a day of farewell and mourning. Only people wearing helmets were allowed to access the slab upon which the weakened guadua (bamboo) structure stood. Two

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members of the AXP collective, perched with astonishing agility on the damaged structure, were in charge of loosening the polycarbonate that formed the façade. The sheets measured approximately 1.5 by 2.5 meters and were fastened with screws and washers to a wooden frame, which, in turn, was anchored to the guadua. The ease of deciphering the assembly of pieces facilitated the disassembling task.

The joints were rusted, the material had given way, and the guadua pillars and beams, exposed to the elements without protection, felt damp, likely harboring rainwater inside. The water could be rotting the material and overloading the structure, compromising overall stability. Hence, they moved slowly at height among the guaduas, testing the strength of the structure with each step before releasing their weight onto it. The guaduas creaked, and some frames couldn't bear the weight, breaking apart. The closer they moved to the fire's focus, the more careful and hesitant their movements had to be.

— Field notebook notes, 06/03/17

Paying attention to details, it is difficult to overlook the role of corporeality and materiality in disassembling practices. People take charge of the structure through their bodies. They feel out which beams to step on, how much to tighten or unscrew, and how much force to exert to loosen a joint without breaking it. "Just like your fingers got eyes" (Harper, 1987, p. 126, as cited in Henke, 2019, p. 261) or "a particular way of seeing-touching" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009, p. 310). Disassembling requires groping, without a fixed or pre-designed navigation chart, thus dealing with the lack of certainty. It is a trial-and-error method that involves making decisions *in situ*, in a kind of bodily negotiation between skills, intuitions (incorporated through embodied experience), and materials (their weight, their anchors, and their deterioration).

In the overhanging areas where the structure was particularly damaged, the disassembling work resembled a game of *Jenga*, where pieces are removed slowly and carefully, hoping that the tower forming the whole is not affected and does not collapse. The hesitancy of movements, as in *Jenga*, is crucial. With each modification to the structure, each frame removed, one could only wait to see how the whole reacted, and cross fingers for the weights to redistribute without the structure crumbling.

Tentative probing involves a careful approach that avoids sudden or violent actions. As a first option, less destructive actions are used, such as unscrewing or loosening a joint, to recover the material in the best conditions. But

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Figure 1: Casa del Viento disassembling process. Source: Own elaboration, 2017.

Figure 2: Sorting of materials during the disassembling of Casa del Viento. Source: Own elaboration, 2017.

when that does not work, circular saws are used— more effective, but more destructive—, breaking the joint abruptly and preventing the recovery of the material.

The disassembling process allowed a large number of pieces to be separated and materials classified: guaduas, planks, slats, metal pieces, and polycarbonate sheets, following a logic learned from material recovery really prevalent in these peripheral territories, where each material can have many lives. This becomes evident when looking at the constructions surrounding Casa del Viento, where one could see —in the windows frames, closures, planks, or the buildings' railings— diverse compositions that testify to the many lives of the materials.

We braced the two facade porticos well with perpendicular elements. We decided that the safest option was to let them collapse towards the inside of the park slope and, once on the ground, unscrew

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them. We started with the facade closer to the slope (the north one). We tied that portico on its upper beams at four points. Some of us positioned ourselves on the park slope to pull and make the portico fall in that direction, while others inside the house manually supported the weight of the beam and accompanied the movement of the structure to prevent it from falling freely. 'Gently!' It was exciting, although not as spectacular as we expected; the fall of the large porticos was slow, silent, and very controlled. 'And now?' It was impressive to see the large porticos collapse, revealing the beautiful view of the city in the background.

— Field notebook notes, 06/03/17

DISASSEMBLING ARCHITECTURES, PROCEDURES, AND CATEGORIES

'Who', 'in what way', 'under what conditions' and 'exposed to what risks' are making the fragility and vulnerability of our everyday material infrastructures (...) matter.

—Blanca Callén and Tomás Sánchez Criado (2015, p. 32).

Paying close attention to the life of the architectures we inhabit mobilizes alternative sensibilities towards contemporary material cultures, urging us to take their fragility and temporality seriously. Precisely in the peripheries, where the full expression of the urban is questioned, we locate spaces for experimenting with other ways of taking care of communal life that disassemble the categories, procedures, and architectures we might associate with a modern-developmental paradigm.

Taking maintenance out of modern contexts implies—perhaps—questioning one of the most repeated claims: "Infrastructures are infallible." This assertion ignores contexts where the relationship with the material occurs through patching, transformation, recovery… activities we can associate with the 'back rooms of cities', where maintenance ecologies are an important part of the urban experience, where those practices are closely linked to sustaining inhabitant's life in contexts of precariousness. The periphery is constructed through 'repair ecologies' (Mattern, 2018) that include informal economies, recyclers, self-construction of housing or infrastructure, tinkering, and transient and improvised fixes; but also, more intangible maintenance work such as the regular organization of communal pots to take care of common spaces.

In this regard, the aim is to emphasize the need to incorporate and theorize deterioration not as a loss, but as an equally productive means of possible material futures (DeSilvey, 2017). The unique characteristics of the disassembling

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process of architecture in the periphery, as we have seen, allow us to transcend discourses of innovation and progress, and also broaden current studies on maintenance, care, and repair to jointly build a theoretical-practical framework that expands and complexifies the understanding of architectural practice towards (I) ecologies of practices and distributed agency; (II) alternative temporalities and unforeseen futures; and (III) 'openness' (or openings of black boxes); as well as towards (IV) tentative methods and (V) creative and generative responses to damage or conflict. We will now delve into analyzing each of these elements.

Firstly, the disassembling process makes it easier for us to transcend the material object to glimpse the *ecology* of the socio-material and affective practices that sustain it, in line with what Fernando Domínguez Rubio (2016) proposes when suggesting to 'think ecologically', that is, to stop thinking in terms of objects and instead understand the conditions and discursive and material practices that surround them (Domínguez Rubio, 2016, p. 60). This perspective helps us shift the centrality of the architectural dimension, populated by *a priori* stable and robust objects, to illuminate the ecology of precarious sustaining practices involved in daily maintenance, constantly negotiated over time. This approach leads us to ask, what exactly is being maintained in Casa del Viento? "Is it the thing itself, or the negotiated order that surrounds it, or some 'larger' entity?" (Graham & Thrift, 2007, p. 4). To which Shannon Mattern (2018) would respond, "Often the answer is all of the above," which also includes "the social and political relationships in which [those objects] are embedded."

Therefore, the disassembling capacity of the structure precisely emphasizes the transient or even evanescent temporal condition of architectures. In their making and unmaking, they articulate and mobilize a kind of ecology of practices, the same ones that characterize the collective sustaining that ultimately maintains and cares for, through the changing lives in the periphery. And it also brings to light the *distributed agency* involved in maintaining our material worlds. Focusing on studying the material vulnerability of our environment means shifting our focus away from the initial moments of design made by 'heroic producers', as Domínguez Rubio (2016, p. 82) calls them, to redirect it towards the diversity of hands and tinkering necessary for making and unmaking, repairing and maintaining, and ultimately inhabiting our architectures.

The second element is related to *alternative temporalities* compared to the canonical forms of linear time implicit in urban processes. Although repair thinking (Jackson, 2014) already questions the modern premise that infrastructures are infallible and proposes focusing on deterioration and breakage, it still finds a fixed anchor point to return to: when we fix something, we restore its previous properties somehow. Even if some scratches may remain, the damage is reversed, and there is an idea of restoring or maintaining order.

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Disassembling practices allow us to amplify the temporalities at play: when we disassemble, we reverse the assembly, but we do it towards a different point than where it started: disassembling is not about "nothing happened here" (as is the case with demolitions, which produce erasures). Disassembling transforms the zero point, exposing us face to face with the instability or temporariness of architectures, unfolding alternative forms of reversibility that transform the orders at play.

In recent years, a concept that has many points of contact with the argument presented here has been discussed: *unbuilding* (Hoffman, 2023; Hommels, 2008; Li, 2019). These studies provide useful examples that complement the one we present here, to explore alternative forms of architectural experience that navigate the ruins of capitalist development in the 20th century, unlocking the creative potential of processes like the ones discussed here and giving rise to new spatial practices and afterlives of architectural materials.

Third: *openness* (or *de-blackboxing*). To disassemble an infrastructure, we need to know how it is assembled, not only in terms of material order (construction systems, anchors), but also in other orders such as urban planning (land ownership or applicable laws) and neighborhood dynamics (tensions, threats, or complicities). Disassembling practices provoke a recurrent self-problematization, which is related to their unstable and threatened characteristics, as openness also involves dysfunctionality and conflict. A dismountable structure, in short, functions as a *pre-broken* (or *open*) architecture, insofar as it incorporates the capacity to take care of itself (Corsín Jiménez, 2014).

Fourthly, *tentative methods* as a form of assumption and exposure to risk. Tentative probing (*tântonnement*) implies experimentation that moves between light and darkness by placing the body based on intuitions, trials, and errors (Rheinberger, 1997, p. 74). The use of tentative probing for disassembly speaks to ways of taking care of instability through careful, embodied, creative, and generative forms: "engage with touch to reclaim vision," pay "deep attention to materiality and embodiment," which invite us "to re-think relationality, as well as suggest a desire for tangible engagements with worldly transformation" (Puig de la Bellacasa, 2009, p. 308).

The last element is related to *responding to damage*. The unexpected burning of the Casa illuminated the conflict and revealed the fragility and precariousness of the collectives inhabiting it. Had the attacks and threats achieved their goal? Did the disassembling mean giving up? In her text *Violencia, luto y política* (Violence, Mourning, Politics), Judith Butler asks if there is something in the mourning process that we can rescue to avoid being overwhelmed by a sense of loss and helplessness, or the pursuit of a solution based on violence. It might be precisely that sense of shared vulnerability and agency in the face of "collective responsibility for the lives of others" (2003, p. 88). We can understand the disas-

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sembling process as a practice of care and affective sustenance among collectives, making mourning itself a resource for politics: "It is not to be resigned to inaction (…) From where could a principle emerge by which we vow to protect others from the kind of violence we have suffered, if not from the apprehension of a common human vulnerability?" (Butler, 2003, pp. 87-88).

By disassembling, the goal was not to cancel the conflict, and neither was it seeking to make it invisible or 'solve' it. The decision to retract the physical part of the structure served as a temporary measure to address a conflict without rearming, a way of addressing the conflict without triggering a spiral of violence. The disassembling aimed to make the necessary readjustments to minimize risks, ensuring, as much as possible, the maintenance of the ecology of future practices that nested and shaped Casa del Viento.

In summary, and by way of conclusion, the disassembling process of Casa del Viento provides valuable insights into alternative methods of city-making that acknowledge material vulnerability and fragility. This approach shifts the importance away from solid or enduring architectural features, highlighting the capacity for modification, transformation, or disappearance. Ethnographic analysis reveals that disassembling is a careful, tentative, and speculative method, that reflects the richness of *city-making* through community processes focused on sustaining life in a context of conflict. **D**

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