

# (Un)Paved Junctions: Navigating the Progression of a Road-Building Project in Santa Cruz la Laguna, Guatemala

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The construction of a paved road in Santa Cruz la Laguna, Guatemala has been widely discussed across the municipality in recent years. This article discusses how contending narratives coexisted yet changed as the construction of the road progressed. While the road-building project became the embodiment of political disaffection and societal problems during the construction phase as it transformed the landscape, the materiality of the completed road generated hope for prosperity linked to its economic advantages. The study of this road-landscape nexus ethnographically explores the transformation of an infrastructure project as it moves from embodying possibility to reality.

Keywords: development, future, Guatemala, infrastructure, landscape, roads.

When thinking about the place of roads in our daily realities, one might be inclined to imagine being increasingly connected to one another, to view them as embodying progress, and to envision what they may bring – often quite literally so. Anthropological studies of roads and other infrastructures have pointed out that the presence as well as the absence of infrastructure, depending on their desirability, may engender feelings of both hope and uncertainty (e.g. Harvey, 2005) and that they can be explored as spaces in which longings for different or ‘better’ futures are intimated (Jansen, 2014; Reeves, 2017). A road in this sense leads to more-than-technical interventions, affecting both physical and metaphysical landscapes by functioning as a reminder of and link between ‘what was, what is, and what may come’ (Hobbis, 2019: 751).

This article examines how competing understandings of infrastructure development emerged during and after the construction of a paved road in the vicinity of Santa Cruz la Laguna, Guatemala. This particular road, which Cruceños (local residents) aptly referred to as ‘La Carretera’, was constructed between June 2017 and October 2018 and is situated in a landscape in which the road-building project created a changing and equivocal environment where social and material worlds recurrently (re)shaped one another. Whereas this first and foremost indicates the visible qualities of a landscape which came to include a road, this article revolves around what I here call an

'infrastructural landscape', meaning an environment that includes both material and non-material infrastructure-related dimensions. In terms of the social and political affect of such dimensions, this environment reveals how residents make use of and interact with infrastructures to envision their future relations with this landscape and their place in it (e.g. Hetherington, 2014; Reeves, 2017; Carse and Kneas, 2019). The progression of the road-building project, for instance, epitomised how controversies over the road were intertwined with local claims of corruption and concerns about crime throughout the construction phase, whereas the materiality of the completed road generated a sense of hope for prosperity linked primarily to the economic advantages it started to deliver.

Santa Cruz, a community adjacent to Lake Atitlán in Guatemala's Western Highlands, has hitherto not been efficiently connected to neighbouring municipalities by paved road. By 2019, most residents and visitors, despite the completion of the road, still relied on a lake-oriented transportation network, and mostly travelled by *lanchas* (small, motorised public boats). Since La Carretera would eventually connect Santa Cruz to both the departmental capital and market town of Sololá and the Pan-American Highway, municipal authorities claimed that its construction signified the dawn of a new era of local connectedness and considered it a significant stimulus for further development, broadly construed.

The promises and uncertainties that infrastructure development and increased connectivity give rise to have been thoroughly studied (e.g. Harvey and Knox, 2015; Harvey, Jensen and Morita, 2016). In addition, Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018: 3) describe how infrastructures, including roads, 'have long promised modernity, development, progress, and freedom to people all over the world' and emphasise that the success or failure of these promises to materialise is worth exploring. This stated need to focus more closely on the extent to which infrastructure development as a process is tied to changing hopes and dreams informed the present study of a local road development project in Guatemala and its different phases. In so doing, this article seeks to show how the material and non-material dimensions of infrastructure projects concurrently (re)configure perceptions of 'failures' or 'successes' (e.g. Dalakoglou and Harvey, 2012; Harvey and Knox, 2015; Reeves, 2017; Haines, 2018).

While a large number of works have resulted in an understanding of the socio-material and political dynamics of built infrastructures, on the one hand, or a road's capacity to embody promises, aspirations and expectations that the prospect of connectivity gives rise to (Harvey, 2005; Larkin, 2013), on the other, this study further looks into a coalescence of these focus areas. Following Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018), who argue that a focus on mundane infrastructures allows us to re-examine existing political, cultural and social registers, the present article seeks to be 'more fully attuned to the operations of infrastructural promises in the present' (Hetherington, 2016: 41) to explore how Cruceños interacted with the progression of a road-building project. As such, this article seeks to contribute to anthropological studies that focus on roads and infrastructures by examining the delicate relationship between different perceptions of 'development' and, hence, the affective and pragmatic reactions to a landscape shaped by the socio-political transformations associated with roads as they are constructed and taken into use. I argue that the road-building project in Santa Cruz and the territory it crosses constitute a space of socio-political criticism as well as a means of negotiating anticipatory development and transformation during its construction phase and following its completion. Instead of looking at the materiality of the road in the process of a changing physical landscape and associated livelihoods alone, in this article I focus particularly on how the construction of the road in Santa Cruz transformed the built and

social environment and, consequently, how this was narrated by diverse actors as they made reference to the road's transformative and multiplex socio-political consequences.

This article draws on ethnographic research in Santa Cruz la Laguna over two separate fieldwork periods in 2018 and 2019 that coincided with the construction and completion phases of the project. This allowed me to investigate the diverse meanings entangled with both the unfinished and finished phases of the road-building project. During this period, I employed a qualitative research methodology, with empirical data collected by means of participant observation during specific activities such as municipal meetings, community events and informal gatherings. Additionally, the present analysis is based on in-depth interviews and conversations with community members of diverse standings, including residents, community leaders, an engineer, international tourists and tourism entrepreneurs. All conversations and everyday observations regarding the road-building project were laid down in fieldnotes. Research participants who are referenced and cited directly in this article have been anonymised for privacy and safety reasons. Changes in attitudes became visible throughout the fieldwork, which led me to engage more with the transforming viewpoints and narratives related to the construction of road infrastructure as a means to broaden the understanding of roads as complex social phenomena. Examining the particular discursive threads related to the building of La Carretera reveals how its history, its present and its winding pathway into the future informed different meanings attached to this road.

In what follows, the theoretical connection between landscape and infrastructures is examined. First, the case is grounded in a broader socio-historical context of road infrastructure development in Guatemala and Central America, with the Pan-American Highway and its relation to the road construction project in Santa Cruz as the initial locus for development narratives. The subsequent sections introduce the relationship between La Carretera and the territory it traverses, as well as the temporal dimensions of this road. They first show how the construction of the road fuelled mainly a sense of uncertainty about a changing social and natural environment and led to increased distrust in the municipal authorities. Then, the way in which the completion and functional materiality of the finished road tied in with more hopeful narratives of (communal) development and aspirations of the future is presented. In the concluding section, a discussion follows on how these competing understandings of road infrastructure development often overlap and how expectations of the future shape different socio-economic and political dynamics of communities engaging with infrastructural landscapes. These understandings are shown to be articulated through perceptions of the landscape of which the road-building project forms part.

## Landscape and Infrastructures

Landscapes are by no means defined by their physical characteristics alone. Rather, landscapes are socially constructed spaces and the ways in which people perceive them are shaped by a range of social, political, economic and aesthetic factors (Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 2017: 10). As such, the meaning of a landscape is never fixed and inherently reflects the intricacies of people's changing lives (Tilley and Cameron-Daum, 2017: 10). How, then, could a landscape including a road-building project shape and transform the views and feelings of the *people* who dwell in it as the project progresses? As built infrastructures physically alter landscapes, they also shape how people perceive and engage with them on a daily basis as they form part of their everyday lives – a

landscape is connected to the places where they work and participate in social activities, and to what they call home. Accordingly, the term 'infrastructural landscape' is used here as a descriptive category to capture and contextualise how infrastructure development informs and transforms social, environmental and political relationships, including the expectations, promises and power dynamics that infrastructure projects give rise to (e.g. Harvey and Knox, 2012; Hetherington, 2016; Murton, 2017).

Harvey and Knox (2015) show how infrastructure projects in Brazil and Peru carry promises and hopes by becoming entangled with the social and political dynamics of a landscape. By this means, they argue that roads can be as unpredictable and disruptive as the environment in which they are constructed (Harvey and Knox, 2015). In the same vein, recent debates on infrastructure call attention to the different ways in which human actors experience the materiality of infrastructure in landscapes, such as roads that become part of them. Mónica Salas Landa (2016: 720) for example points out how infrastructures in their 'physical and technical forms produce the ambient conditions of everyday life – as well as its social character'. This, as I discuss here, includes the everyday social, political and environmental dilemmas related to the place of infrastructure, including roads, in the landscapes people find themselves in. Roads specifically remind us of the everyday existence as well as the absence of formal politics in infrastructural projects (Harvey, 2005) and offer a promise of progress and the benefits of modernity and development (Anand, Gupta and Appel, 2018). The landscape where these roads materialise forms a dynamic meshwork or, to borrow Latour's denomination (2000, 10), a 'thing full of people' to which humans give meaning because of its perceived 'complexity' and 'modernity'.

Lawson (2011: 385) notes that different narratives concerning land and landscapes do not '[n]ecessarily diverge from one another because one is right and the rest are wrong. They may diverge because of differences in [...] everyday experiences of shaping the land and of being shaped by it in return'. By exploring the embodied experiences of living alongside the development of road infrastructure, perceptions of the past and present and interconnected anticipations of the future can be revealed (Hetherington, 2016). Similarly, Dalakoglou and Harvey (2012: 460) argue that roads 'elicit powerful temporal imaginaries, holding out the promise (or threat) of future connectivity, while also articulating the political and material histories that often render these otherwise mundane spaces so controversial'. In other words, being connected by road reveals imaginaries of a still-uncertain future and at the same time exposes changing everyday experiences over time (Hobbis, 2019).

The perceptions of roads and how people navigate time and space in relation to them are thus mediated by the way in which roads, as well as landscapes, develop (Erickson, 2009). As will be shown, while Cruceños construct their lives within a framework of social, financial and environmental uncertainty, they are engaged in an ongoing struggle over the 'near future', which Jane Guyer (2007: 409) describes as the 'reach of thought and imagination, of planning and hoping, of tracing out mutual influences, of engaging in struggles for specific goals'. In this regard, La Carretera ties in with Brian Larkin's (2013) definition of infrastructure as representing 'built networks that facilitate the flow of goods, people, or ideas and allow for their exchange over space'. For some, however, transportation networks do not only help join separate places but also gain symbolic value as entities with which to live and think.

National road development endeavours and the local road-building project in Santa Cruz should thus be viewed as fundamental to the perceived construction of an infrastructural landscape in which different actors (residents, politicians, engineers and

**Figure 1.** Map of the Northern Lake Atitlán Region Indicating the East–West Trajectory of the Pan-American Highway (CA1) and the Santa Cruz Road in the Lower Middle Section



Source: Google Maps (2020), modified by author

tourists) anchor changing understandings and realities. The next section considers how the history of road infrastructure development in Guatemala ties in with national and local development narratives and engenders a parallel sense of uncertainty and hope that ultimately feeds to the local level, as the case study of La Carretera illustrates.

## Looking Back at Road Development in Guatemala

As one enters the region from the east between Tecpán and Los Encuentros on the Pan-American Highway, the three volcanoes bordering Lake Atitlán loom in the distance. After crossing the Los Encuentros junction, the route to Lake Atitlán veers to the left, and a steep descent follows as the Pan-American Highway is exited. Before entering the departmental capital of Sololá, the road crosses a patchwork of farmlands draped across waving hills and valleys, interspersed by a number of roadside villages.

The new road connects the Santa Cruz la Laguna to the nearby town of Sololá and the Pan-American Highway, easing travel to both Guatemala City lying some 120 kilometres to the east of Santa Cruz and Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second-largest city lying around 75 kilometres to the west (Figure 1). After two earlier attempts to construct the road, which failed mainly after the construction works were interrupted by heavy rains and landslides, the most recent phase of the project, discussed here, commenced in June 2017 and ended in October 2018. The finished road now connects Santa Cruz with San José Chacayá, lying a short distance to the north, from where an already paved two-lane road called El Panká leads directly to Sololá. At the point where La Carretera crosses the municipal border and enters the town, a small monument was placed in celebration

of the road's inauguration. A square, grey-green veined marble centrepiece reveals the total cost of the project (exactly 6,493,923.50 Guatemalan quetzales – approximately € 76,700.00 or US\$ 84,500.00), the names of local politicians and engineers who made the construction possible, and one line emphasising the communal importance of the project: 'El desarrollo de Santa Cruz la Laguna, es nuestro compromiso' ('the development of Santa Cruz is our commitment' or 'we are committed to the development of Santa Cruz'). This road, like others in Latin America and Guatemala, then, not only represents enhanced regional connectivity but also local development.

The promises of development and transformation constructed alongside the building of roads in Guatemala can arguably be traced back to the inception of the Pan-American Highway. In 1924, US officials actively campaigned to *sell* the promise of mobility to Latin America, offering not only vehicles but also the infrastructure necessary to use them by proposing a single highway that would connect all capital cities in the Americas (Miller, 2014). Twelve years later, in 1936, at the Inter-American Conference for the Maintenance of Peace in Buenos Aires (Fenwick, 1937: 201), the Convention on the Pan-American Highway was adopted after around three weeks of discussion. The convention proclaimed that 'direct and material contact between the American peoples would necessarily strengthen the bonds of friendship already existing between the countries of this Continent' and that the construction of a highway would be the most suitable and effective means to do so (Fenwick, 1937: 219; Welles, 1937). One of the reasons cited for approving an inter-American road network was based on the idea that inter-linking all American countries by paved road would significantly improve the overall wellbeing of all people on the continent, as there would be a 'greater facility for the exchange of the products of said countries' and 'tourists [would be able to make] use of those sections of the highway which might be open to traffic' (Fenwick, 1937: 220).

However, throughout the 1930s, tensions between Central American and US administrations delayed the highway's construction as Central American officials changed its initial route to satisfy local political and economic needs instead of transnationally connecting the region (Ficek, 2016). While the relationship between Guatemala and the United States was strengthened under the rule of General Jorge Ubico (1931–1944), it became apparent that Guatemala could not fully meet the requirements in due time. Then Minister of Foreign Affairs Carlos Salazar visited Washington in December 1942 to discuss his worries about the equipment required for the construction of the highway, the specifics of a more elaborate (paved) road network in Guatemala, and gasoline distribution (Grieb, 1977: 389). Notwithstanding governmental disputes and lopsided power relations rooted in Cold War politics, construction progressed gradually, and the Central American segment of the Pan-American Highway was officially opened in 1962 (Ficek, 2016).

Today, the Guatemalan part of the highway spans roughly 500 kilometres, connecting most of the country's major cities such as Guatemala City, Chimaltenango, Quetzaltenango, Sololá and Huehuetenango to each other and other parts of the Americas. The purported benefits of an extensive paved road network continue to shape collective prospects for the future in Guatemala, in particular the modernisation and development of the country. After assuming office in 2019, President Alejandro Giammattei promised to improve the country's inadequate road network so that it would be on par with those of neighbouring countries and would advance connectivity by road. The national road network expansion project that framed roads as catalysts of development clearly links to how municipal authorities in Santa Cruz have locally presented the construction of La Carretera. While the promise of prosperity that road-building projects carry have been



studied in different contexts across Latin America (e.g. Hetherington, 2014; Harvey and Knox, 2015), La Carretera's *de facto* local potentialities are closely linked to similar dynamics. The next section shows how uncertainty arose as the road was constructed, looking at communal contestations of local politics, and anxieties of environmental degradation and possibilities of crime in particular.

## Imagining Uncertainties through Road Construction

Monday, 12 March 2018, Santa Cruz town hall. Four weeks after my arrival in Santa Cruz, a public accusation was levelled against the municipality for its role in the rapid rate at which the Río Pasiwán riverbed was being clogged by falling boulders and rocks and for the increasing deforestation of the hillsides adjacent to the construction site. Some rockfalls had taken place as a result of soil next to the hillside being excavated for the road. Community discussions quickly became tense and questions of responsibility and (unequal) power relations were frequently raised. A group of community leaders, residents and 'los amigos extranjeros' (representatives of the migrant community) – including, but not limited to, those who owned a plot of land or lived close to the Pasiwán riverbed – assembled in one of the town hall's meeting rooms in a bid to resolve the tensions.

As soon as the mayor took the floor the crowd leaned forward to hear what he had to say. To the dismay of many of the migrant community members, the mayor addressed the room in Kaqchikel, the local language, switching to Spanish only after a grumbling from the audience could be heard. He spoke of the necessity of the road to aid the development of the community without specifying how exactly and asked no-one in particular why it is that *all* the villages around the lake have road connections and Santa Cruz did *not*. 'The safety of the village is a burden for all of us', he continued, 'we are all Santa Cruz, you should be serving your community as well'. The whispers turned into audible comments, which became disapproving shouts. The mayor's adviser authoritatively rose from his chair and carefully scanned the room, proclaiming: To those of you who do not want this road, let me tell you with all respect that you are unable to think clearly. We are all united under the guidance of God; we will have to be patient and see what comes'. Someone in the crowd jumped up and challenged him: 'It is not a game *señor*, it is not something insignificant – we want to know who will take responsibility of our safety and we want to know it now!'

The situation that precipitated the town meeting was triggered by the imminent threat of further rockfalls, considered a consequence of the ongoing road construction (Figure 2). Throughout the gathering, residents raised various doubts about the ongoing construction, citing the risk of landslides or even earthquakes that are not uncommon in this hazard-prone region, and the way in which the road could render this reputedly peaceful community unsafe due to a possible influx of crime that improved connectivity could give rise to (see also Haines, 2018). The perceived seclusion of the community was considered a benefit, and residents feared that being connected to neighbouring towns and the Pan-American Highway would transform the character of the town irrevocably.

However, the mayor's assertion that the road represented an opportunity for local development, intended as a counterbalance to the rockfalls and deforestation evident during the construction period, was ill-received just because the *de facto* policy mostly disregarded such and other latent environmental threats. The perceived incongruity of this development narrative was often cited as evidence of a corrupt and unreliable

Figure 2. Landslides in the Pasiwán Valley



Source: Photo by author (2018)

municipal government, which was the only sensible explanation that many residents could find to explain why the mayor continued with the road construction despite the threats and risks. Indeed, the mayor's proclamations about the community's future modernisation on the one hand, and the downplaying of potential hazards as a result of poorly managed construction work on the other, reveal how such visions of modernity are juxtaposed against and perhaps oblivious to local realities. While for some Cruceños, the potentiality of a 'better future' justified any failed promises that the road may have given rise to, for most of the people I worked with almost everything related to the road seemed distressing.

The sense of failed promises driven by distrust in local politics, a sense of ulterior political motives, and the ways in which policies manifested in people's lives in particular drove a growing disjunction between local authorities and Cruceños opposing the road-building project. The idea of a completed road was often associated with the creation of opportunities for imagining prosperous futures, yet the communal belief that the construction process was incompetently managed strongly influenced the community's attitude toward the road while it was still being constructed. In the process of constructing the road, the company had stripped the hillside bare, causing rocks to fall into the riverbed of the Pasiwán river. It had also earlier evaded responsibility for what residents considered 'a disaster waiting to happen' by letting the hillside erode without acting to prevent it. The main concern was that besides rocks that obstructed the river, the bare slopes could cause landslides during the rainy season and could destroy houses and damage plots of farmland.

Earlier, the construction company together with local authorities had tried to convince residents and local tourism entrepreneurs that the road would economically benefit the community since the town, they asserted, was 'increasingly lagging behind on other



communities in the area in terms of modernisation'. Yet no risk assessments took place before the road was constructed, and despite the dangers that became evident as it was built, construction works were not halted. Relating to this, members of the Consejo Comunitario de Desarrollo (COCODE, Community Development Council) – a Guatemalan associational form whereby community leaders mediate between development projects and residents' concerns and actively participate in local policymaking processes – at the municipal gathering in the town hall maintained that local authorities and the construction company had 'no incentive at all' to finish *or* maintain the road. Allegedly, the municipality was given funding for 'development projects' by the national government and, in turn, the construction company was granted indemnities by the municipality throughout the construction (interview with Andrés, 2018).

The municipal assembly mentioned earlier eventually culminated in a set of agreements signed by local authorities, community leaders and residents, which stated that the safety of the entire community was to be prioritised. A few days later, a visit to the construction site was arranged, and residents could witness the road being built. On the occasion, the mayor again seized the opportunity to reiterate that the road 'as soon as finished [...] will provide economic prosperity for [the] community: provisions, access and tourism'. Yet almost directly after the meeting, municipal authorities had promised the fallen stones – useful for construction purposes with the right stone cutting tools, but largely valueless otherwise – to volunteers who would help clean up the riverbed, thereby redirecting the responsibility for clearing the stones to the residents themselves. These actions – inspiring the acceptance of the road's construction through supposed improved transparency and providing an immediate tangible benefit in the form of stones – reveal attempts by the local authorities to regain control of the narrative of the road.

However, residents continued to criticise these seemingly contradictory actions taken by the local government and its unmet promises of putting residents' safety first by halting the project as yet another example of municipal incompetence. Don Joaquín, a born-and-bred Cruceño in his early fifties, for instance illustrated how the difficulty in dealing with uncertainty enforced his idea of the road construction as an unduly risky project. Without weighing his words, he proclaimed that: '[This road] is awful – it is destroying trees, polluting the lake, and will probably kill people soon [...] It is pure corruption. [Everyone] involved is only interested in three things: money and power and more money' (interview with Don Joaquín, 2018). Despite his cynicism and his political and environmental concerns, Don Joaquín's expectations tie in with other narratives about the connectivity the road promises. He observed that, like himself, 'there are many poor people here' and the community 'could use a road for people to go to Sololá and collect cheaper food and water and to sell *leña* [firewood] at the market'. While Don Joaquín was unsure about the future of the town after the road was built and was unable to point out possible alternatives to the current situation that would erase his doubts, the conversation reflects how the construction phase evoked competing perceptions of possibility and led to the imagination of two possible future pathways related to connectivity, the one linked to environmental degradation and the possibility of corruption and the other to the prospect of prosperity.

Like Don Joaquín, many Cruceños were trying to make sense of this crossroads reality and some seemed anxious, or even fearful, of taking further action against local authorities. These observations echo the findings of Harvey and Knox (2012: 529), who argue that while '[r]oads are supposed to be technologies of integration', in an unfinished or 'crumbling' state they may simultaneously function as objects that accentuate contested relationships between local audiences and (trans)local authorities (Harvey and

Knox, 2012: 530). Considering how La Carretera seemed to symbolise a condition of political vulnerability, it underlines a connection between the impact of the road's materiality during construction and the imagined putative consequences of its finished form (see also Carse and Kneas, 2019). Instead of being a visual representation of the promises of financial stability the road embodied, central to the development narratives propelled by local authorities, the unfinished road rather invoked a wide-ranging sense of political and social uncertainty.

Moreover, people I worked with expressed their concerns about what (or who) might appear from beyond the mountain ridge, which served as a metaphorical barrier protecting the community from 'the outside world'. As such, many Cruceños associated the connection with Sololá and the Pan-American Highway with opening up the community to unfamiliar outsiders. They often mentioned nearby towns such as Tzununá, San Marcos la Laguna or San Pablo la Laguna as examples of places where a road connection had allegedly caused an increase in crime and drug trafficking, and simultaneously emphasised the perceived absence thereof in Santa Cruz (interview with Gustavo, 2018).

For many Cruceños, such associations of the road as a carrier of crime and 'the unknown' originated from stories and news items on crime-related development and a rise of violence across Guatemala in general. Ultimately, however, with no registered cases of delinquency in Santa Cruz, stories about the increased possibility of crime were mostly rooted in criticism of local authorities. Carmen, an avid opponent of the road's construction, for example, positioned her criticism vis-à-vis what she called 'a downward spiral of impunity and violence', which she considered to be part of a general fear of the intentions of major construction companies and (local) authorities, who themselves were linked by some to shadowy networks. She asserted that 'at least with the foreign community backing us, the people behind the construction company will not send hired killers or make people disappear' (interview with Carmen, 2018). Although Carmen considered it unlikely that their relatively modest resistance efforts would trigger such retaliation, these worries echo nationwide concerns about and struggles with impunity, corruption by officials, and the criminalisation of and violence against activists who oppose megaprojects in Latin America in general and Guatemala in particular (e.g. Rasch, 2017). Carmen's apprehension and discomfort, rooted in a critique of the road and the government, reflects the ways in which Cruceños more broadly related to the imaginable harmful effects the road could bring about.

By 2019, some anticipated outcomes of the road construction phase and the road itself had not materialised. Aside from irregular torrential showers during the 2018 wet season, the rain was less heavy than expected. Subsequently, the road did not collapse as had been anticipated, and there were no official reports of harassment or violence against those criticising the project. The next section discusses how accusations of corruption and fears of environmental disaster and crime during the construction phase generally gave way to optimism after its completion, how the road created hope for a future-in-the-present, and how it mobilised Cruceños to navigate the advantages of the transformation it enacted (cf. Hetherington, 2014; Reeves, 2017; Carse and Kneas, 2019).

## Moving Forward: Articulating Narratives of Hope

Thursday, 28 February 2019, Casa Ajmaq. It was already getting dark when Mateo and Pedrito, two children who regularly play football on my apartment's front lawn, came

running towards me, shouting: ‘¡Está bajando una camioneta!’ (a lorry is coming down the road!). With hushed voices, they urged me to come and take a look. In the distance a small lorry was crawling down the road towards Santa Cruz. Its headlights grew brighter as it snaked along the twisting road, making the shadows of nearby undergrowth dance against the mountainside. Occasionally, a discordant, bellowing noise coming from the vehicle’s air brake cut through the near-silence of a town coming to rest as night slowly fell, drowning out the muted sound of barking dogs and clucking chickens. Mateo moved back a few steps and dropped to his knees. He kept his eyes locked on the moving lights in the distance. ‘Maybe the man who sells cookies is here again!’, he then exclaimed in anticipatory excitement.

Mateo was now delighted because while an imagined future had earlier structured anxiety in the present for some (see also Ringel, 2020), it now also amounted to ‘a precondition for hope’ for others since, as Kleist and Jansen (2016: 379) argue, for ‘the articulation of any hopes for different futures to be possible, there must be a degree of uncertainty, an awareness of it and a willingness to act in it’. In early 2019, the road fuelled the imaginations of many residents so that different, more hopeful, narratives started to prevail as a way of ‘virtually pushing potentiality into actuality’ (Bryant and Knight, 2019: 134). For, as was revealed with the passing of time, the finished road connecting Santa Cruz to Sololá and the Pan-American Highway not only increased the ability of residents to engage more actively in the market by facilitating the circulation of people, goods, produce and other types of supplies (e.g. snacks, sodas, beers or construction materials) – it also allowed for the exchange of stories of and perceptions of the town’s potential as a ‘paradisiacal’ tourist destination (Cremers, 2020) and, as such, possible alternative income sources arising from tourism. Such stories and ideas are, imaginably, grounded in the road’s materiality, which had become a tangible part of people’s everyday lives. Moreover, they contributed to a way of enacting a future-in-the-present (Reeves, 2017) by helping envision the future of the region, illustrating how the materialisation of roads in general may become meaningful in articulating hopes for future security (Reeves, 2017) – of livelihoods and of a community in a transforming world. This section presents some observations that engage with the more-than-technical interventions of the finished road as a driving force behind a sense of optimism among Cruceños.

On one occasion, while walking past a newly opened vehicle repair shop with cars lining up along the main road from the dock to the centre (Figures 3 and 4), Arturo, the owner of a small grocery shop, explained how, since the opening of the road, basic necessities such as concrete blocks, tin roof panels, bottled drinking water and vegetables were increasingly being transported by lorry or pickup truck instead of by boat. The main reason for this, Arturo pointed out, is that pickups and lorries had a larger cargo hold than boats and offered a direct connection to Sololá (interview with Arturo, 2019). The boat ride to Panajachel takes about 15–30 minutes, depending on weather conditions, where one must transfer to a public bus that takes another 30 minutes to reach Sololá. Because many Cruceños are still ‘only just’ able to make ends meet, Arturo claims, they are especially keen to secure lower-priced bottles of carbonated drinks and potato chips and are appreciative of the possibility of sharing the costs of a pickup truck to transport these coveted goods to the town.

Many people with whom I spoke similarly felt that the finished road was a powerful symbol of an advancing community. Gustavo, one of the main initiators of the remonstrations a year earlier, envisioned a prosperous future when reflecting on how the road transformed the possibilities for Santa Cruz as an ever-developing town. He radiated

Figure 3. 'New' Cars Lining the Main Road between the Dock and the Centre



Source: Photo by author (2019)

joyiality as we strolled along one of the streets behind the main plaza. Gustavo was convinced that his aspirations would be realised: he was certain that Santa Cruz residents could reach the same wealth as those living in most countries in the Global North (interview with Gustavo, 2019). Gustavo had always had the desire to travel to unknown places, but he had given up on travelling years ago and had settled in Santa Cruz instead. The community to him embodied a worldly energy and appeared to provide opportunities that he had not imagined before. Santa Cruz became a junction of global interconnectedness resembling the experience of travelling – a place where he could meet people from all over the world and where his deep-rooted longing for going abroad eventually subsided. Besides picturing development in Santa Cruz as akin to his own cosmopolitan desires, Gustavo also estimated that the further expansion of tourism could help establish a public space free from plastic waste and maintain ‘traditional village aesthetics’ – his nostalgic and somewhat romanticised longing for cobblestone streets and adobe block houses which he both ironically and romantically called *ruinas* (ruins).

Arturo, like Gustavo, considered La Carretera a promising source for (further) tourism development and, hence, for diversified livelihoods and stable incomes. All the other communities around the lake, as well as most of the major tourist destinations in Guatemala, he said, attract larger numbers of European and North American visitors, who pursue new experiences and prefer to relax with the soothing view of Lake Atitlán in front of them (interview with Arturo, 2019). The safest way of travelling in Guatemala, he claimed, was not by public transport, since bus drivers allegedly value money and speed over human lives. Moreover, he asserted that the road allowed tourists to experience the landscape around Lake Atitlán all the more without being packed onto a crowded public bus. Thus, while the role of La Carretera was still contested by some, it did seem to invoke different hopes for the future and had already become emblematic of a promising time to come (e.g. Reeves, 2017).



Figure 4. The Road Entering Santa Cruz's Built Environment



Source: Photo by author (2019)

Even though the road is still hardly accessible to regular car traffic (let alone public buses) – narrow, muddy and slippery during wet weather, and dusty when dry – it is cited by, for example, Google Maps as *the* most convenient route to use in order to reach Santa Cruz. A substantial part of the local economy is bolstered by tourism and most tourists arrive by public boat. Some, however, make the trip by car and indicate that it is primarily the perception of safety and the experience of freedom – the possibility of going wherever, whenever, and being able to stop at any given instance – that made them travel by car, instead of using a public bus and boat. One specific slope, just a couple of hairpin bends away from the village, was often mentioned. Contrary to the promises of the construction company, this specific section of the road had not yet been cemented even though it was officially open for traffic by then, and in several sections the rain had turned the soil into thick mud. In late 2018, a German couple, relying on a navigation system, decided to travel from Sololá to Santa Cruz by car. About halfway down, their car became stuck in the mud and broke down after the road had been washed out by rain. Without cell phone coverage, the couple decided to get out and sought shelter underneath one of the heavy equipment vehicles parked nearby, only to be rescued from their precarious position hours later by firefighters from Sololá. After the incident, ho(s)tel owners and employees in a bid to retain the image of the town as tourist destination specifically started recommending travelling to the town by *lancha* instead of by car (interview with Henry, 2019).

Such stories enabled Cruceños to widely discuss the road's unpredictable condition as well as its perceived importance for the consolidation of tourism infrastructure. Consequently, many engaged with ideas of further 'bringing the road into being' (see Harvey, 2018) to maintain its promise of future development. The reasons people gave me were often forthright: there was a scarcity of work, tourism was an important



income source, and the status of the community among tourists should not have to be affected by a road perceived as dangerous. In the same vein, Carmen, who now also seemed more optimistic about the road, stressed that it should be communally managed to generate communal benefits so that not only local authorities would profit from it (interview with Carmen, 2019). Hence, the emergence of more hopeful narratives does not always change ideas that ex-ante the road was mired in controversy; this remained a concern even after its completion. In fact, such prospects illustrated the anticipation of an unpredictable future and tie in with challenges faced in both former and novel perceptions of a future-in-the-present.

In sum, the ambivalent views Cruceños have of La Carretera can be read in light of Anand, Gupta and Appel (2018: 11), who fittingly note that '[i]nasmuch as roads are associated with development, improvement, and modernity, roads are sites of representation and aspiration'. In Santa Cruz, this dynamic mainly revolved around shifting desires and doubts. After completion, meanings attached to the road were mostly twofold: on the one hand, people pointed to the increased connectedness and possibilities of tourism development to which its construction gave rise. On the other hand, the perceived perilous materiality of the road simultaneously underpinned the idea of further establishing proper (municipal) management and stressed the importance of consolidating people's livelihoods through tourism.

## Conclusions

This article discussed the competing understandings of the role of road development in Santa Cruz la Laguna, showing how the road became the embodiment of aspects of political disaffection and societal problems in relation to the context in which 'infrastructures, and their developmentalist projects are situated' (Anand, Gupta and Appel, 2018: 9). While the examples of engaging with road development discussed in this article support existing scholarship on the importance of what infrastructures 'do' (Harvey, 2012), they specifically show how uncertainties and even fears surrounding the road-building project were often shaped by ideas of corruption and incompetent municipal management. On the other hand, the completed road invoked hopes for a future that engendered progress, such as the promise of cheaper goods and better facilities, increased connectivity, and more sustainable income sources derived from tourism. The project as such also represented an evocative space in which socio-political critiques could be raised and facilitated the negotiation of envisioned future development pathways.

The ethnographic focus on the road project revealed how ideas of a future-in-the-present (re)constructed socio-economic and political community dynamics and aspirations, articulated through perceptions of a landscape which came to include a road. The perceptions of both La Carretera's construction phase and its completion, then, largely coincide with Dalakoglou and Harvey's (2012: 460) description of roads more generally: they 'can disconnect as effectively as they forge connections' as they often 'fail to fulfil their promise' (Dalakoglou and Harvey 2012: 460). The present case suggests that this is not contradictory or even engenders radical changes in perspective per se; road-building projects may be simultaneously experienced as 'failure' and 'promise', depending on how imaginaries of the future become conceivable in the present (e.g. Ringel, 2020: 125–126).

Even after the road's inauguration, many residents still considered it an overly hazardous project to have embarked on and the completion of the road did not change the

assessment before completion that it was a reckless or even unscrupulous development. The coming into existence of La Carretera within a heterogeneous landscape was thus imbued with political and social uncertainties. These uncertainties, in turn, reconstruct the conditions for navigating a landscape that is shaped by a road-building project. Hence, the role of roads and their effect on a landscape do not emerge through a road's materiality and symbolism alone – rather, their materiality is mobilised by those who engage with it on a daily basis and at the same time it comes to mobilise them in diverse ways.

## Acknowledgements

I am grateful for the constructive comments on earlier versions of this article. I would like to thank E. D. Rasch, K. Koonings, V. Bäumer Escobar and I. Lively for sharing their insights.

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