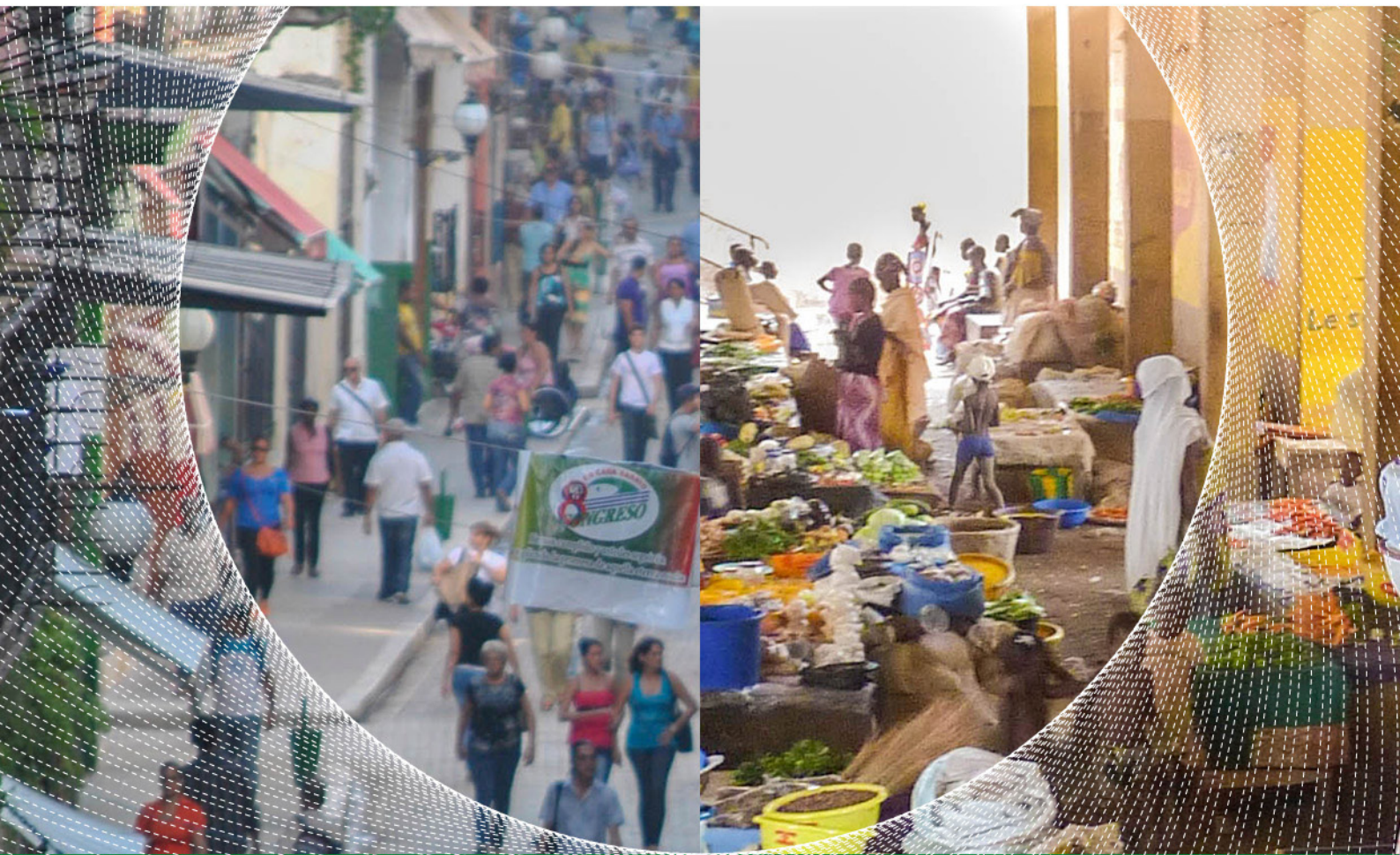




THE RISE AND FALL OF SUPERMAX : HOW THE US PRISON MODEL AND ULTRA PUNITIVE PENAL POLICY TRAVELLED TO COLOMBIA

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Abstract

In the context of the US anti-narcotic program, 'Plan Colombia', during the first decade of the 21st century, special agents of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) took position in the heart of the Colombian penitentiary administration. Their task was to lead a profound reform of the sector, based on the US ultra-punitive penal regime and its 'supermax' housing units. Based on extensive fieldwork with prison architects, inmates and other actors in the penal systems of the US and Colombia, this paper analyzes how the reform was set up on the ground, shedding light on the partially divergent interests and expectations of both governments within the neocolonial context of 'Plan Colombia'. We show how, on the one hand, the reform partially succeeded in militarizing carceral life and deurbanizing the prison system, spatially isolating inmates from their social and family environment. On the other hand, we show that the reform eventually failed, for institutional and political reasons, to meet its declared goal of modernizing Colombian prisons. From a more theoretical perspective and drawing on recent literature on the mobility of policies and built forms, the paper argues that the introduction of supermax prisons in Colombia is a striking case where a mobile policy and a traveling architectural type coincided and complemented each other, and suggests that in order to advance our understanding of how space is produced in a global arena, interconnections between circuits of policy and architectural mobilities should be more systematically considered.

Keywords

mass imprisonment

punitive turn

supermax prisons

policy mobilities

Colombia

USA

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Introduction

In 1999, US President Bill Clinton launched 'Plan Colombia', an episode in the long history of US intervention in Latin America. In the post-World War II era, the Colombian government had been a constant and faithful ally of US government's Latin American policy, first in its war against communism and then, from the 1970s onwards, against drugs, of which Plan Colombia was part. Between 1999 and 2010, the US government injected \$7.3 billion USD into this program, which made Colombia one of the largest targets of US aid in the world (Isacson, 2010) and put it under the *de facto* tutelage of the US government (Pécaut, 2000). Most of these investments were used for military action and the destruction of coca fields. In Plan Colombia, the reform of Colombian prisons – the focus of this paper – is only a small budgetary line¹ and generally a disregarded aspect of it. But it has profoundly reshaped the world of Colombian prisons. As part of this reform advised by the US Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP), 16 new prisons were built along the lines of the US prison model, increasing the capacity of the Colombian prison system by almost 70%. Amongst the 30,545 beds provided in the new facilities, 1,000 to 1,500 correspond to punishment cells of the 'Special Treatment Units' (*Unidad de Tratamiento Especial* – UTE) directly inspired by 'supermax' security blocks developed in the US during the 1990s, characterized by a quasi-total isolation of prisoners, sensorial deprivation and minimal interaction between prisoners and warders. This reform that drastically hardened detention conditions and militarized the country's penitentiary culture, supplemented the 'punitive turn' in criminal justice policies initiated in Colombia in the mid-1990s. From this period on, the Colombian government created prolific new offenses in the penal code and stiffened penalties for minor infringements committed by the poorest sectors of the population (Reed Hurtado, 2012). As a result, in less than 20 years, the Colombian prison population increased fourfold (39,676 inmates in 1996 to 120,032 in 2013, according to official prison statistics) (INPEC 2013; 2014). Two decades after the United States, Colombia in turn entered the era of mass incarceration. The primary aim of this paper is to shed light on the process through which the US prison model was introduced in Colombia and on the effects of this process on the penal system of this country. Drawing on literature dealing with traveling policies (Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2011; McFarlane, 2011; Robinson 2013) and built forms (Nasr and Volait, 2003; King, 2004; Guggenheim and Söderström, 2010; Faulconbridge, 2010; Jacobs and Lees, 2013), it also aims to better understand the parallels and divergences between the circuits of policy and architectural mobility. Policies and built forms travel sometimes independently: drug policies or legal ideas can move (McCann, 2008; Langer, 2007) without being accompanied by a specific built form. Conversely for example, the import of the shopping mall-type in a new context does not necessarily go hand-in-hand with a policy change (Söderström, 2014). Furthermore, the transnational circuits of policies and forms can differ in terms of actors, spaces of circulation, economic interests, etc. But in the case of the supermax in Colombia, changes in the penal policy and changes in the architecture of prisons are congruent and complementary. The supermax prison gives material form to an ultra-punitive penal regime where security and punishment predominate over any other function (such as re-education or dissuasion) associated with the imprisonment of perpetrators of what a jurisdiction considers as a crime. This penal regime was developed in the US in the 1980s and 1990s. One of the aims of Plan Colombia was to export it to Colombia. The US-led reform of Colombian prisons is therefore a strong example of a

¹ Between 1999 and 2012, the US government invested \$140M USD in the Colombian justice sector, of which \$7M were used for the provision of technical assistance in the penitentiary system (US Embassy in Colombia, 2012).

mobile policy and a 'traveling' architectural type aiming to radically reshape the application of the law, the behavior of prisoners and warders and the architecture of prisons. Methodologically, it thus leads to the following questions: How do different policies and forms complement each other? Do they follow the same routes? Are they put in circulation by the same actors? These are some of the methodological questions raised by this case study.²

In this paper, we argue that the journey to Colombia of the US penal regime and its architectural icon – the supermax – has been of critical importance in the rise of mass incarceration in the country. We also show that the introduction of US-inspired prisons in Colombia inaugurated a unprecedented pattern of isolation operating at different levels: on a regional scale, with the relocation of a large part of the prison population in 'deurbanized' correctional facilities where contacts with the social and family environment are drastically weakened or destroyed; and on a local scale, through an architectural and normative arrangement aiming to break the collective dynamics and eliminate the significant margin of freedom that characterized the Colombian prison system. However, we argue, the reform did not succeed in wiping out the traditional (or '*criolla*') prison culture, based on social bonds of inmates within and outside of the prison, and that it eventually failed. Our analysis shows that the divergent interpretations of the prison reform's 'program of action' by the US and Colombian governments – two States whose relations were marked by an asymmetry of power in the neocolonial context of Plan Colombia – and the heterogeneous nature of 'institutional spaces' between US and Colombian carceral milieus are the main reasons of this failed transfer.

This paper draws on extensive fieldwork both in the US and Colombia between 2009 and 2011, at a time when some of the US-inspired prisons were already functioning and others were still under construction in Colombia. As for most scholars engaging with prisons, the question of access was a crucial methodological challenge for this study. Fieldwork in prison studies has become rather rare in the last 30 years, first because prisons, in many countries, have turned into highly bureaucratic and opaque institutions that are very difficult to penetrate to conduct inquiry and, second, because funding agencies and universities today are reluctant to support long-term and sometimes 'risky' field research in prisons (Rhodes 2001: 72; Wacquant, 2002: 387). However, these obstacles can be overcome, as evidenced by the new and fast-developing geographic scholarship focusing on spaces of incarceration and confinement in the era of 'new punitiveness' (Pratt et al., 2011) in a variety of countries (Bear, 2005; Dirsuweit, 2005; Moran et al. 2013; Moran, 2015; Peck and Theodore, 2008; Sibley and Van Hoven, 2008). For the present research, the difficulties in gaining broad access to prisons were circumvented thanks to the collaboration with a Colombian NGO specialized in the monitoring of human rights in detention facilities and humanitarian assistance to prisoners in Colombia³. Methodologically, the study is based on documentary analysis, statistical data, 50 visits to a broad range of Colombian prisons (including supermax 'UTE' wings), as well as in-depth interviews with prisoners, former prisoners, family members, prison officers, prison directors, human rights defenders and penal reform lobbyists. Additionally, a series of interviews were conducted with prison architects and entrepreneurs in the US.

We develop our analysis in three steps: we first situate our study within the recent literature on mobile policies and built forms, arguing for a comparison between different circuits of a relational processes of space production; we then analyze the reform of the

² This means that we do not focus on prison design *per se* but rather on its transnational circulation.

³ Colombian Non Governmental Organization 'Fundación Comité de Solidaridad con los Presos Políticos' (see CSPP, 2013).

Colombian penal and penitentiary system during the first decade of the 21st century by describing its political context, deconstructing the process through which reform took place and highlighting some of its consequences. In the final part of our paper, we argue for a broader view of relations in the analysis of processes of space production.

From policy mobility to relational space production

Since the early 2000s a series of publications studying the mobility of public policies in geographical space have developed new understandings of policymaking in an age of fast-paced globalization (Peck and Theodore, 2010; McCann and Ward, 2011; McFarlane, 2011; Robinson, 2013). In discussing policy *mobility* instead of *transfer* – a term generally used in political science – geographers have highlighted the selective, power-laden, spatially complex and often unpredictable process through which policies travel (McCann and Ward, 2010; McCann, 2011; Peck, 2011). Pursuing and deepening the debate, other authors have in turn recently questioned the concept of mobility, with its material connotations, as a limited concept for grasping the variegated ways in which a policy in one place can be influenced by a policy somewhere else (Allen and Cochrane, 2010; Robinson, 2013). It has been suggested that researchers need to use a repertoire of different conceptual descriptors and methodologies in order to capture the material, immaterial, imaginative and sometimes elusive ways in which policies cross geographical spaces (Roy and Ong, 2011; Söderström and Geertman, 2013). The debates on how to make sense of policies on the move also stretches beyond the boundaries of geography. Other fields of research – in particular urban history with studies of inter-municipal exchanges (Saunier, 2002; Saunier and Ewen, 2008); and planning theory with studies of cross-border planning practices (Saunier, 2002; Nasr and Volait, 2003; Saunier and Ewen, 2008; Healey and Upton, 2010; Healey, 2012) – have dealt with similar (or quasi-similar) processes for a long time. An emergent dialogue across these research fields is opening the possibility for greater thematic breadth and historical depth in policy mobility studies (Clarke, 2012; Harris and Moore, 2013). This conversation is also potentially fruitful as it brings together, as Cook et al. (2014) remark, theoretically sophisticated work in geography with empirically rich work in other disciplines.

In geography, urban history and planning theory, the focus is on policies and how municipalities, planners and other experts are involved in the business of policymaking beyond the place in which they primarily intervene (a specific city, region or country). However, city relations are not restricted to policies, but include a wide range of exchanges from business to social movements or lifestyles (Söderström, 2014). In this paper, we argue that in order to grasp contemporary dynamics of space production, the scope should be widened further to include work focusing on the geographies of architecture. Built forms in different cities are indeed connected through the mobility of architectural types or models, as another strand of research in geography and urban studies has demonstrated (King, 1984; King, 2004; Jacobs, 2006; McNeill, 2009; Faulconbridge, 2010; Guggenheim and Söderström, 2010; Faulconbridge, 2012; Jacobs and Lees, 2013). This literature highlights processes that in many ways are similar to those described by policy mobility studies showing, for instance, that intermediaries such as professional journals or local experts play an important role in the mobility of built forms and that forms are adapted during their ‘travel’ rather than simply copied off the shelf.

At the same time, we also highlight the differences between the logics governing policies and built forms on the move in terms of actors, circuits, motivation and effects. This will allow us to reflect in the conclusion on the convergences and divergences between these

transnational relations and thereby to put these two strands of literature in conversation at a methodological and conceptual level. More generally, we suggest that the type of broadly-designed comparative research developed in this paper points to the necessity of aiming at a synthetic understanding of how space is relationally produced, thus moving beyond too narrow a focus on connections in terms of policies, forms or urban cultures.

As our paper looks simultaneously at the circulation of a penal policy and of a prison model, it quite naturally draws on conceptual resources from both policy mobility studies and geographies of architecture. Concepts such as, 'globalized micro-spaces' of negotiation – stemming from policy mobility studies (McCann, 2011: 118-119) – and 'institutional embeddedness' (Faulconbridge, 2012: 340) – stemming from the geography of architecture, are thus used to make sense of the empirical phenomenon on which this paper focuses.

According to McCann (2011: 120), the concept of globalized micro-spaces refers to 'key relational sites that are central to the social process of teaching and learning about policy'. Those sites - such as meeting, conferences, on-site visits, workshops, award ceremonies and other networking events – are important nodes in the global circulation of policy knowledge 'where trust is developed, where reputations are made or unmade ... and where acquaintances, or "weak ties," are made among copresent conferees' (McCann 2011: 118-120). Among the main globalized micro-spaces are fieldtrips associated with 'policy tourism' (Ward, 2011; Cook et al. 2014; Gonzalez, 2011) - i.e. policy experts travelling to particular host places to share experiences or fact-finding visits to specific places - as well as meetings and conferences that include 'micro-scale activities of policy packaging, communicating and persuading' (Jacobs 2012: 414). As we will see below, such globalized micro-spaces played a central role in the 'mobility' of the US prison system.

If attention to these spaces allows an understanding of mechanisms facilitating policy and architectural mobilities, the notion of institutional embeddedness draws our attention to how heterogeneous institutional contexts create frictions in these mobilities. Recently, scholars have paid more attention to the role of institutions, highlighting the fact that policies and built forms do not smoothly travel across spaces regulated by different legal, administrative, political and cultural systems (Faulconbridge 2012; Healey, 2013). In this context, Faulconbridge (2012; 242) suggests it is essential to have a broad definition of 'institutions':

'Existing studies define institutions as both *formal* rules and regulations set by recognized authorities in a particular institutional field, and the *informal* norms, customs and traditions that support and result from formal rules ... Together these two dimensions of institutions are said to influence the priorities, behaviors and decision-making of actors'.

Using such a wide analytical angle, we will show that the institutional divergences between Colombia and the US in the penitentiary domain are crucial to an explanation of why this part of Plan Colombia eventually failed. Informal norms of the prison institution – or to put it in other terms, the cultural habits of the *criolla* prison – played as we show below a major role in preventing a full conversion to the US model. *Criolla* prison culture, expressed by the routine practices, discourses and representations of all the agents of the Colombian prison system (including prisoners, warders and prison authorities), could not be transformed by decree. It was only temporarily dampened during the years the BOP and local authorities attempted to transfer the US maximum security blueprint to Colombia and then made its way back.

New penology and mass imprisonment in the US

Since the second half of the 1970s, the United States has been the birthplace of a drastic shift in the field of crime control, towards ultra-repressive 'law and order' policies. This 'punitive turn' (Wacquant, 2010) represents not only a new trend in policies, but also a profound cultural change. What David Garland (2001a) named the 'culture of control' elevates safety from crime – and related themes such as zero-tolerance and war on drugs – to the highest priorities of government as well as people's concerns and public debate. In addition, US neoconservative thoughts, practices and policies regarding crime control, far from being a domestic issue, have become highly influential on a global scale. Scholars have described the international convergence and homogenization of security and penal policies following the American example, highlighting the role of US think tanks, transnational networks of experts, professional associations and international conferences in this process of worldwide influence (Christie, 1994; Garland, 2001a; Peck, 2003; Wacquant, 2004; Newburn and Sparks, 2004; Melossi, Sozzo and Sparks, 2011).

One of the key impacts of this ultra-repressive scheme has been to push the United States into an age of mass imprisonment (Garland, 2001b), a phenomenon without precedent in the history of contemporary democratic societies (Wacquant, 2005; 2009a; 2009b). After decades of stability in the incarceration rate, the breakneck pace of growth in the prison sector since the late 1970s took all observers unawares. The number of prisoners in the US rose from 379,000 in 1975 to 2,267,000 in 2010 (i.e. a 600% growth over 35 years) and that same year, reached a record of 730 inmates per 100,000 inhabitants (Wacquant, 2009a: 136; Pew Center on the States, 2012). The US prison sector not only changed dramatically in scale, but also in nature. From the 1980s onwards, the objective of rehabilitation was progressively abandoned and replaced by other fundamental justifications for prisons: punishment, deterrence and incapacitation (Garland, 2001a: 61). This was not only a rhetorical change, but also had material implications that led to a profound transformation of the correctional world in the US. Prisons were increasingly built in remote rural areas and prisoners subjected to draconian rules, permanent supervision, harsh treatment and geographical, social and emotional isolation (ADPSR, 2004; Gilmore 2007). In the spirit of the law, as well as in the architectural design and internal rules of the facilities, *security* became the absolute priority above and beyond all other considerations. Security also became the 'trademark' that distinguished US experts and builders among the well-informed circles of the global prison industry⁴.

Among the recent transformations in prison design, the super-maximum security prison ('supermax') is emblematic, as it materializes in built form the punitive turn in criminal justice policies. This prison model spread in the United States between the late 1980s and the late 1990s, at the height of the carceral boom (Reiter, 2013). Officially named 'Secure Housing Units' (SHUs), supermaxes operate like prisons within prisons. They are stand-alone facilities or special housing wings built inside larger state and federal prison complexes, and held, in 2013, about 20,000 prisoners who cannot allegedly be controlled in the general prison population (mostly Latin-American gang members condemned to lengthy prison sentences) (Ross, 2013: 11; Reiter, 2012: 550). People detained in supermax facilities are subjected to long-term solitary confinement under conditions of radical sensory deprivation (Kurki and Morris, 2001). They remain in their cells for 24 hours a day, except for brief solitary exercise periods or in order to shower, they are exposed to permanent artificial light and have little or no human contact for weeks, months

⁴ Series of four interviews with US prison architects and entrepreneurs (13.05.2011; 16.06.2011; 17.06.2011; 20.06.2011)

or even years at a time (Reiter, 2012: 531). Whilst it involves only a small minority of the prison population of the country, the supermax is of symbolic importance, as it has become the architectural icon of the new regime of ultra-punitiveness in the US. In the light of the mass worldwide influence of US penal thinking and policy, it is hardly surprising that the supermax has played a role in the exportation of the US prison model, as we show below.

Exporting the US prison

While the ideas and practices of the 'culture of control' have crossed borders and greatly influenced penal policies worldwide in the last quarter of a century, the international mobility of the US prison model – a phenomenon almost ignored in the scholarship on circulating criminal policies to date – started to increase markedly in the 2000s, through two separate and complementary corporate and governmental circuits. On the one hand, after the domestic prison market started to dry up following the slight but continuous drop in the US national prison population since 2009 (Pager and Phelps 2011), a 'for-profit circuit' – clearly trade-oriented – has mobilized categories of agents such as the architects and planners of the powerful US correctional industry, as well as companies producing prison security devices, to redirect part of their business strategies toward the acquisition of overseas markets⁵. On the other hand, a 'state circuit', led by the US government or its agencies (Federal Bureau of Prisons - BOP, National Institute of Correction, and State Department), operates through the transfer of the US prison model during armed intervention abroad, in the context of the global 'war on drugs' and 'war on terror'. In this military context, deployment of correctional facilities inspired by US architectural standards and disciplinary regimes is mostly aimed at neutralizing the threats to US 'vital interests'. Thus, all major US military interventions in foreign countries occurring since the beginning of the twenty-first century – Iraq and Afghanistan wars, Plan Merida in Mexico – have included a carceral component; the facilities of Guantánamo (Ross and Rothe, 2013) and Abu Ghraib (Rothe, 2013) being by far the most publicized cases. The prison facilities built in Colombia in the context of the US anti-narcotic program in the 2000s are clearly also part of this second circuit of exportation.

The state and the for-profit exportation circuits do not have the same objectives and do not involve the same key actors; however, multiple collaborations, encounters and friendships connect the public and the private sectors engaged in the US correctional world. Agents from the prison industry, civil servants and authorities from prison administration converge in different 'globalized micro-spaces' (McCann, 2011: 118-119) that play a key role in policy mobilities. In the for-profit circuit, for example, conferences such as the annual meeting of the International Corrections and Prisons Association (ICPA) are essential for the US private sector to re-enforce its position in the global correctional market and obtain new contracts abroad. Bringing together private actors and representatives of local and national prison administrations from 90 countries, the ICPA has become a focal point for the international circulation of policies, practices, business models material devices and architectural types related to penal confinement, as well as the incubator of profitable contracts for prison entrepreneurs (ICPA, 2010, 2014).

⁵ See, for instance, the building of Ezeiza Federal Prison in Argentina by US multinational corporation AECOM, or the public contracts for prison design and building won by the leading US correctional planning and design company CGL in Mexico, Singapore, and the United Arab Emirates (interviews with US prison architects and entrepreneurs, 17.06.2011; 20.06.2011).

In the case of the state circuit carrying the supermax prison model to Colombia, a key micro-space of persuasion was the site visits both in the US and in Colombia. Short trips to US prisons for Colombian civil servants were organised by Washington in the early 2000s, and, in turn, US experts of the BOP were invited for a long-term stay in Colombia to bring technical assistance. A participant in the Colombian delegation invited to visit five prisons in the United States explained the impact of a trip in 2004 in the following terms:

‘The Americans showed us that everything must function according to a strict procedure and that any kind of space must be designed for that purpose. While analyzing the architecture and the buildings’ typology, we could see that everything was functional. When we got back to Colombia, we took all this information, we consulted the national penitentiary law and we reconfigured our own model’⁶.

Similarly, the long-term stay of US experts in the heart of the Colombian prison administration was an important part of the transfer process, as the next section shows.

The US prison in Colombia: one script, different motivations

In 2000 and 2001, the transfer process of the US prison model was planned jointly by the US and Colombian governments and was ratified in a bilateral agreement known as the ‘Improvement Program for the Colombian Prison System’, which was included in the broader framework of Plan Colombia (Agreement, 2000; 2001). In order to comprehend the workings of the policy mobility process, it is useful to borrow from the extended metaphor of the ‘script’ developed in Actor Network Theory (Akrich, 1992). A script is a scenario or program of action inscribed in a technology or artifact. A ‘script analysis’ of an innovation ‘follows’ a program of action from its conception to its inscription in technologies or artifacts and finally to its adoption or rejection by its users. This concept can be applied in an enlightening way to travelling policies and built types (Söderström 2013).

In Colombia, the script of the new prison system was broadly contained in the essence of Plan Colombia: that is, in the implementation of ultra-punitive ‘tough-on-crime’ policies especially regarding counter-narcotic and counter-terrorism issues. This program of action set out a series of measures that were inscribed in the bilateral Agreement settling different aspects of the technical input of the Federal Bureau of Prisons (BOP) of the United States in the Colombian prison sector. According to the Agreement, the BOP was tasked with advising on: the design, construction, equipment, and internal rules of new high security facilities; upgrading of security levels in the facilities; redesigning the training program in the national penitentiary school; the creation and training of new special groups of commandos within the Colombian National Institute of Prisons (INPEC); and the formation and training of intelligence groups, auditors and instructors. Additionally, this program of action prescribed the implementation of a new architectural model. Financially, the US government only funded technical aid by the BOP experts’ delegation, as well as some computing and security devices, while Bogota was accountable for the largest investments in the prison sector, such as Colombian personal expenses, building costs, equipment and maintenance (Agreement, 2000; 2001).

From many possible examples provided by the US penitentiary building stock, the BOP chose the Maximum Security Prison at the Coleman Federal Correctional Complex in Florida as a model to be reproduced in Colombia, as BOP liaison agents in Colombia explained in a laudatory report published in specialized press in 2002 (Wilkey and Rivera,

⁶ Interview with former Chief of the Civil Engineering Office of the Colombian National Institute of Prisons INPEC, Bogota, 20.05.2011.

2002). However, the transfer process that eventually resulted was much more problematic than the ideal of cooperation described by the BOP at this time would suggest. Although the content of the transfer was engraved in the letter of the Agreement and the choice of the architectural design of Coleman, a closer analysis of the process reveals that, because of their respective political context and interests, the interpretation of the script differed depending on the points of view of actors at both ends of the process.

For the US government, building more stable judicial institutions and secure detention facilities in Colombia was a compelling necessity in order to get Colombian drug traffickers (and to a lesser extent, guerilla leaders) prosecuted and eventually extradited to the US, where they were recognized as criminals in the eyes of US law. Indeed, according to the US Embassy in Colombia, between 1999 and 2011, at least 1,200 drug offenders were extradited to the USA, where most of them have been tried, and condemned to harsh sentences (Caracol Radio, 2011). It was thus in Washington's interests to build high security prisons, from which it was almost impossible to escape, so that prisoners would remain safely in custody during months or years before their extradition to the United States.

From the Colombian perspective, the Agreement raised broader expectations. Beyond the will to please Washington, Bogota perceived US aid as an opportunity to 'modernize' its penitentiary system and put an end to the endemic crisis of prisons, plagued by nightmarish conditions of overcrowding, disrepair and insecurity. At the end of the 1990s, the Colombian government was not only under pressure from the United States – it also had to face strikes by prison staff and mutinies by prisoners. Additionally, in 1998, the Constitutional Court declared the whole prison system unconstitutional, due to systematic violations of the inmates' fundamental rights (Corte constitucional de Colombia, 1998), a situation exacerbated by the explosion of the prison population that started in the mid-1990s. According to governmental messages addressed to Parliament, the US intervention in penitentiary affairs was aimed at nothing less than wiping the slate clean and launching a new model of order and security, inspired by the American model. The Colombian government even harbored ambitions to position the country at the top of the most modern prison administrations in the continent (Ministerio de Justicia de Colombia, 2000). The very name of the reform, 'New Prison Culture' (*Nueva Cultura Penitenciaria*), reflected this will to revolutionize prison policies: it was not merely the introduction of a few practices and architectural changes; rather the goal was to achieve fundamental transformation of the penitentiary culture. Despite the importance of this issue, prison reform and collaboration with the BOP were carried out in a discrete - almost secret - way by the Colombian government. The Agreement was never submitted to the national Parliament and the government directly managed the prison reform with discretionary powers, without having to account to Congress at any point.

Soon after the signing of the first part of the Agreement in 2000, a delegation of BOP experts was sent to Bogota. They rapidly gained considerable influence, such that they became a kind of hidden management board within the Colombian prison administration, a position they held until they left Colombia in 2005. This status is reflected in the comments of several agents within the INPEC, notably a leader of the Warders' Trade Union:

'We all knew that the key figure in the INPEC was J. [the chief of BOP delegation]. Everybody knew perfectly well that the prison system was managed from the [BOP office in INPEC's headquarter], at least for the main strategic issues. The employees used to go to his office to ask for personal favors, due to his influence'⁷.

⁷ Interview with a leader of Colombian Warders' Trade Union, Bogota, 05.08.2011.

In terms of policy mobility, this is therefore a case where far from having a symmetrical relation between municipalities or nation states, we have officials of a foreign government creating an enclave in another country to directly steer the implementation of a new policy within very asymmetrical international power relations.

Between 2000 and 2003, the design of Coleman Prison inspired the construction of six large high security 'New Prison Culture' facilities of 1,600 beds each in different regions of the country (high security prisons of Valledupar, Cúcuta, Acacias, La Dorada, Giron and Popayan) that were officially classified as '2nd generation' prisons. As generally happens in policy mobility processes, the original model was not literally copied. Rather, the general high security features of the Coleman penitentiary were taught to the Colombian authorities.

In 2003, despite the opening of 10,000 new beds in the six new prisons, the Colombian government admitted that, contrary to what had been promised, the rate of overcrowding had not been reduced. The sustained growth of the number of prisoners resulting from increasingly severe penal laws had by far exceeded the pace of construction. In 2004, on the advice of the BOP, Colombia began to design ten '3rd generation' prisons – carceral mega-complexes designed to hold up to 4,300 inmates each, that include on a single very large site, separate facilities with different security levels (low, medium and high security). Ten of those mega-complexes were built after the BOP had left Colombia in 2005 (See figure 1). Despite the unprecedented proliferation of prisons during the years of the 'New Prison Culture' reform, the new constructions never could keep pace with the dramatic growth of the prison population resulting from the massive incarceration of minor offenders. As with the 'penalisation of poverty' that occurred in the United States since the end of the 1970s (Wacquant 2009a; 2009b), the punitive turn that started in Colombia in the mid-1990s clearly targeted the poorest fractions of the population. Statistics on education levels among the prisoners in Colombia clearly bear this out. Almost half of the inmates (45%) have received no education after primary school (5 years of schooling) (INPEC 2012), an education rate by far below the national average (World Bank 2011).

From *criolla* culture to a pattern of isolation

A central aim of the 'New Prison Culture' was to get rid of the old habits of the traditional or '*criolla*' prison culture, which was based on flexibility, as well as geographical and social integration. Borrowing the emic notion of *criolla*, broadly used by Colombians in everyday speech to mean 'typical of our own land' or 'distinctive of our culture', we define the *criolla* prison culture as a set of culturally-embedded practices forged over the twentieth century that considerably improved quality of life behind bars by limiting the depersonalization and the desocialization inherent to imprisonment, despite dreadful conditions of infrastructure deterioration, poor management, corruption and insecurity. *Criolla* carceral culture can be defined by four characteristics: firstly, prisoners' communal and self-managed lifestyle; secondly, a significant margin of dialogue and negotiation between the prison population and the prison management; thirdly, the preservation of regular and intimate contact with family (notably through a sort of 'open day' each week-end, with tens of thousands of visitors, including children, entering for long hours the living spaces of prisoners); and fourthly, the geographical location of the prisons in accessible sites within urban areas. *Criolla* prisons were certainly designed to punish penal offenders, but not to radically exclude them from society. The New Prison Culture's blueprint of isolation abruptly collided with this older institutional framework and represented a dramatic change, as it inaugurated an unprecedented phase of extremely severe control and deprivations, which

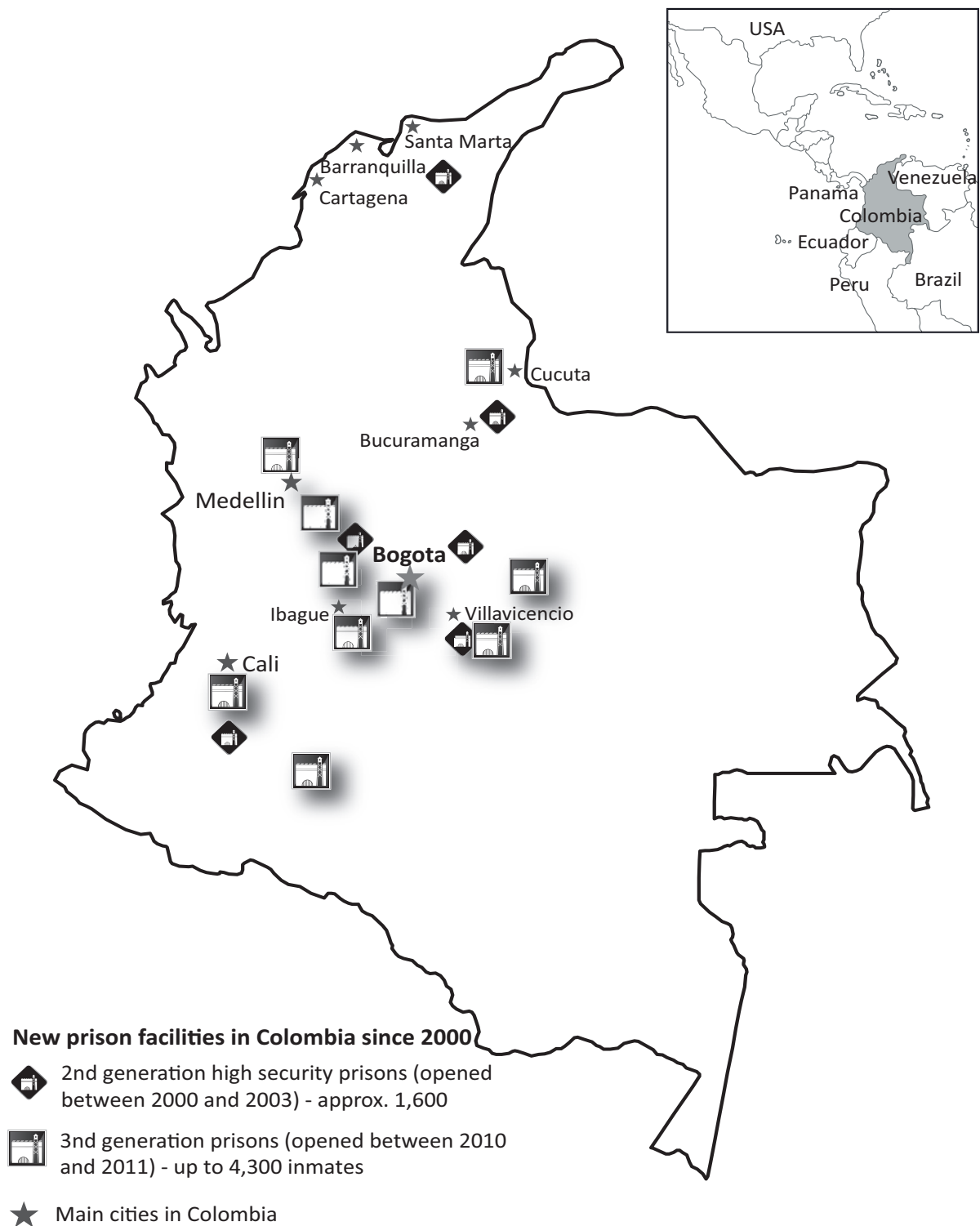


figure 1

Map of the new prisons built after 2000 in Colombia with the advice of the US Federal Bureau of Prisons

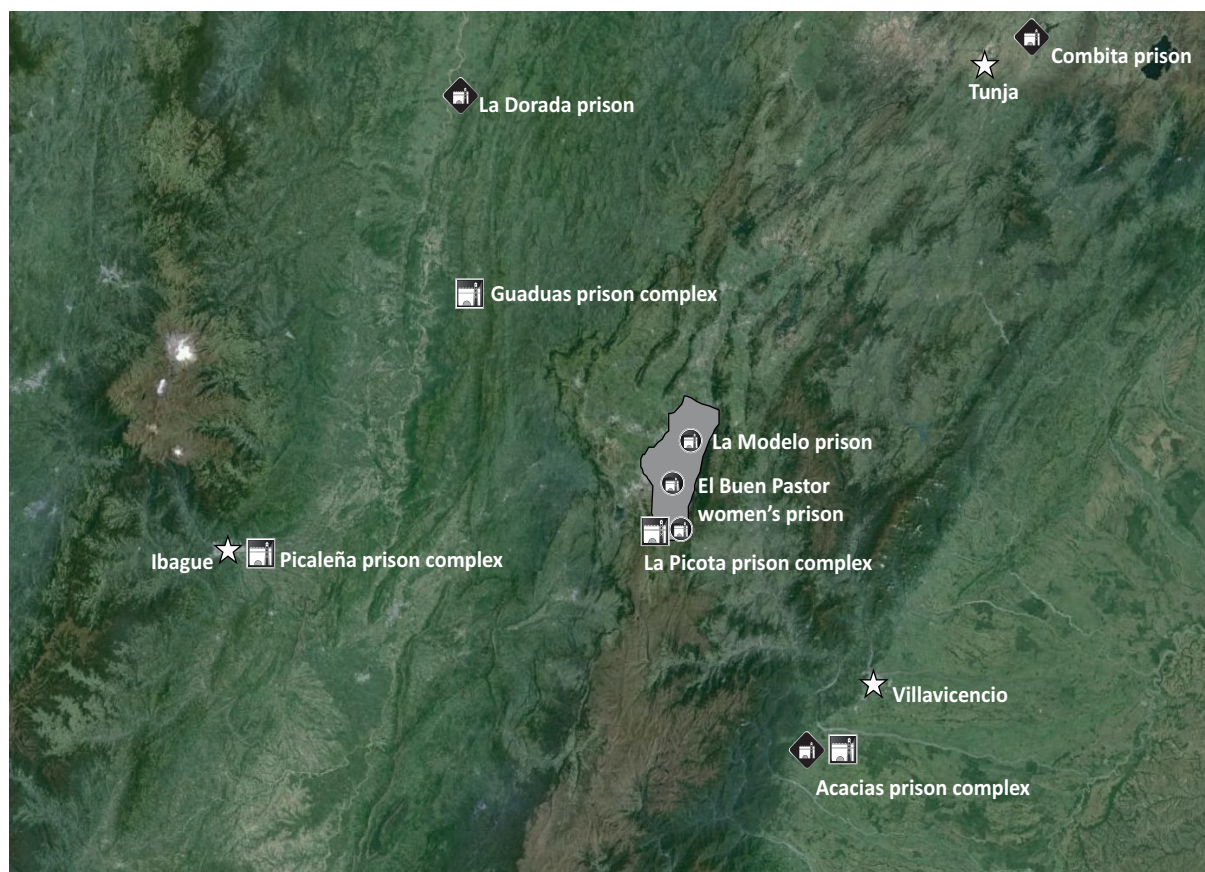
precisely targeted the destruction of 'permissive' *criolla* habits, operating over several spatial scales: regional (location of the prisons in or outside of urban areas), local (transformations of the space of the prison itself) and micro-spatial (social interaction, practices and regulations of everyday life in prisons).

First, the new model targeted the previous pattern of social and geographical integration of the prison system within Colombian society. Thus, two apparently contradictory dynamics rose simultaneously during this period: there was on one hand, an unprecedented growth in the number of correctional facilities and of the prison population; and on the other hand, the carceral archipelago was rendered invisible, by being extracted from cities and relocated in remote rural areas (Figure 1). This deurbanisation was particularly acute in the region of Bogota. There, between 2003 and 2011, seven new prisons were built within a 200 km radius of the capital, providing 14.400 beds, - an additional capacity of beds 2.5 higher than that of the three *criolla* prisons of Bogota, where prisoners had been concentrated for decades⁸ (figure 2). Consequently, prisoners' contact with their families was not only weakened through a dramatic reduction of 'visiting rights', but also as a result of the physical distance separating them from their family, lovers and friends.

Second, the new model transformed the prison itself, with the introduction of a series of architectural and regulative standards emulating the Coleman prison in Florida: the construction of separate self-contained housing blocks (intended to easily suppress any kind of unrest by the prisoners and to prevent the propagation of protests to other housing blocks); the use of massive grey cement structures to create an austere atmosphere of punishment and obedience; the introduction of individual or dual occupancy cells; and of a series of security devices, such as generalized video surveillance and glass-separated visitors' parlors. In addition, a 'Security Housing Unit' wing was constructed in each prison, better known in the US as *supermax*. In Colombia, the *supermax* was renamed the 'Special Treatment Unit' (*Unidad de Tratamiento Especial* – UTE), designed to hold allegedly dangerous or recalcitrant prisoners for short or long term solitary confinement, as a means of disciplinary punishment.

Third, transferring the US prison to Colombia was also about promoting new practices and rules at a micro-level within the new carceral spaces. Prescribing what kind of disciplinary regime had to be implemented and how to behave in the high security prisons was considered by the BOP as important as the construction of the prisons themselves. Therefore, precise instructions on how to run US-inspired facilities were transmitted through training manuals and practical sessions for the warders and the administrative staff. If *supermax* is the ultra-punitive script turned into stone, we here have, to use Akrich's (1992) words again, the pre-scriptions about the correct use of this new type of carceral architecture in Colombia. According to the US experts' team, the cultural transformation of the prison system had to occur through the implementation of efficient administrative and operational procedures that were translated word by word from US training books to create new manuals at the Colombian National Penitentiary School (INPEC, 2002). The administrative staff and the warders were thus taught 'New Prison Techniques' borrowed from US correctional protocols. New Special Forces created by the US advisors – the Immediate Response Group (GRI) and the Special Escort Corps (CORES) – were trained according to US security methods, including brutal use of force to

⁸ The three *criolla* prisons in Bogota are still among the most overcrowded facilities of Colombia, with an average overpopulation rate of approximately 100%. More generally, the 128 *criolla* '1st generation' prisons that are still functioning in Colombia bear the bulk of the huge overcrowding of the whole prison system, since they provide 60% of the national capacity ('beds' available), but hold 74% of the national prison population (figures: INPEC 2013, INPEC 2014).



-  1st generation "criolla" prisons (opened between 1936 and 1960) - 2,200 -5,000 inmates
-  2nd generation high security prisons (opened between 2000 and 2003) - approx. 1,600
-  3rd generation prisons (opened between 2010 and 2011) - up to 4,300 inmates



Bogota (urban boundaries)



Secondary cities (population < 550,000)

figure 2

The deurbanisation of the prison system : map of the prison facilities built since 2003 within a 200 km radius of Bogotá.

subdue recalcitrant individuals or groups. Warders in watchtowers were armed with large-caliber weapons. The practices and clothing of prison guards were modeled on the military and camouflage uniforms replaced civilian clothes. Militarization became, *de facto*, a key aspect of good understanding and smooth communication between US experts and local staff, the Colombian prison administration having long been trained according to military organizational and operational frames. For decades, the highest posts of the penitentiary administration had been exclusively assigned to high-ranking members of the army or the police, from the Director-General of the INPEC to the wardens of the main prisons of the country. As the former chief of the Civil Engineering Office of the INPEC stressed:

'We have always had a military profile at the top [of the INPEC]. And the military forces have worked for years under the lead of the Americans, so they master their language; they immediately know how to execute the instructions and procedures'⁹.

Toughening of the procedures was also reflected in the treatment of prisoners. Warders were instructed to break with the 'bad habits' of the *criolla* prison culture, such as talking to the prisoners or greeting them with a handshake. Unprecedented interventions on the body of the prisoners were introduced, such as the use of US-inspired orange uniforms, the compulsory shaving of heads and facial hair and the binding of hands and feet while being moved out of the housing block.

In sum then, the planned elimination of the *criolla* system was through the combined action of a new penal policy, geographical location, architectural standard and training program of staff.

The failure of the policy transfer

However, things did not work out the way the BOP and the local transfer agents originally expected. Taking stock of the evolution of the Colombian prison system over the last 15 years, the gap between the initial script of the US model and the reality of the 'New Prison Culture' is striking. Whilst the pattern of isolation did have an important and long-term impact on Colombian prisons and prisoners, the radical change to flawless order and absolute control within the prison system did not occur. In this last section, we suggest a set of explanations as to why this policy-cum-architectural transfer failed and analyze what were nonetheless the effects of the prison reform.

The reform failed to the extent that it did not succeed in reaching its proclaimed objectives for a series of institutional and political reasons. From the beginning of the transfer process, due to the differences in the formal rules between the US and Colombian penitentiary systems, the BOP experts had to adapt to local conditions that limited their capacity to manoeuvre. For example, a lack of finance in the Colombian penitentiary sector restricted the installation of technological security devices, and prevented increases in the number of warders; while the relatively restrictive Colombian legal framework limited the use of force inside prisons, in comparison with the US.

Moreover, beyond this initial adaptation process, none of the announced goals of the reform, such as getting the ISO 9000 certification in high security facilities or ending overcrowding, have become a reality. Over the years, the new prisons – that were initially proudly presented as a successful symbol of modernization – proved to be plagued with problems of poor construction, endemic malfunctions and human rights abuses. From the

⁹ Interview with prison architect and former chief of the Civil Engineering Office of the Colombian National Institute of Prisons INPEC, Bogota, 20.05.2011.

late 2000s onward, the negative image of the prison system was such that the Colombian government even stopped mentioning the 'New Prison Culture' policy or the collaboration with the BOP in any official document or public intervention.

The predicted profound cultural transformation of the penitentiary world did not materialize either. In this regard, the informal dimension of institutional embeddedness (Faulconbridge, 2012: 340) played a great role. The cultural habits of the *criolla* prison were a key factor that inhibited a full conversion to the US blueprint of radical isolation, draconian rules and strict control. This blueprint collided with deeply rooted practices such as the strong communal life style among the prisoners, the broad visiting rights for families and friends and the leeway for negotiation between the prisoners and the prison management (de Dardel 2013: 194). Thus, in the sixteen prisons inspired by Coleman (all of which including supermax units), where a fourth of the Colombian prison population live today, the severe regime instituted by the US advisers continue to apply, but it has been broadly infiltrated by the practices and unofficial norms of *criolla* culture, especially after repeated prisoners' protests and acts of resistance (de Dardel, 2013: 188-195), which received the support of Colombian Human Rights NGOs denouncing the trumpeted 'New Prison Culture' as a totalitarian nightmare. Furthermore, the 'New Prison Culture' did not take hold in the vast majority of old prisons. In those jails, thousands of prisoners overcrowded in dilapidated and insalubrious facilities continue to live according to *criolla* carceral culture; they have never known the US model, except through hearsay. In sum then, the universe of the Colombian prison institution has become a dual system in which two contradictory penitentiary cultures coexist.

These institutional differences are augmented by political reasons for the failure, resulting from the divergent interpretation of the script according to the particular interests of each government, but also from a lack of political will to make sustainable improvements in the prison sector. Since the beginning, the objectives of the US government were clearly related to their agenda in the 'war on drugs'. As soon as the program stopped serving their interests (i.e. after the extradition of hundreds of drug traffickers), they abandoned the collaboration. After the BOP left the country in 2005, Washington erased the prison sector from its broad program of intervention in Colombia, even excluding the creation of a follow-up mechanism to monitor the high security and supermax prisons in the country. Additionally, exclusively concerned with security issues, neither the American nor the Colombian government ever had the intention to include in the reform process essential elements to address the mismanagement of the prison system: corruption; lack of basic health assistance and educational programs; privileges for organized crime bosses, white collar criminals and high ranking army officers; as well as practices of torture and human rights violations. Even more importantly, on the Colombian government side, there was an inherent contradiction between the proclaimed goal of solving the overcrowding of the prison population by building new prisons and the simultaneous active planning of a quantitative explosion of the prison population. The priorities of the Colombian authorities had thus increasingly diverged from their ambitions of order and modernity to focus on the management of mass imprisonment.

If the reform failed to meet its objectives, significant transformations in the world of Colombian prisons have however taken place. First, indicators of violence in prisons have reduced during Plan Colombia: the number of violent deaths (essentially homicides by firearms), along with the mortality rate, declined steadily between 2000 and 2008. Second, while for many years power had been in the hands of inmates involved in organized crime and drug trafficking, to a large extent, the state has been able to regain control and authority inside the prison system. However, how much the US inspired prison reform

contributed to this evolution is highly uncertain. Credit for such change cannot be fully attributed to the US ultra-punitive prison model, as it is likely that these indicators would have improved anyway. Indeed, the high rates of violence in prisons at the end of the 1990s was a reflection, or an extension of, the generalized violence in Colombia caused by the intensification of the armed conflict, widespread paramilitary terror, the uncontested power of drug lords, and a weakening of state authority. It is likely therefore that the registered drop in the prison homicide rate after 2000 mostly reflects the end of a particularly bloody episode in Colombian history rather than a change in prison policies.

Second, the introduction of the US prison model led to the partial imposition of a new blueprint of totalitarian control aiming to radically isolate prisoners geographically and socially. This bedrock of the US model was reflected in the architectural design but also in the prison policies prescribed by the BOP experts. The location of correctional facilities in remote and inaccessible areas, the broad use of transfers which sent prisoners hundreds or even thousands of kilometers away from their place of origin, and the strengthening of militarization, all contributed to a situation of disconnection and social disaffiliation among prisoners. In this regard, the deurbanization of the prison system that goes hand in hand with the move towards mass incarceration will have long-term consequences that we discuss in our conclusion.

Conclusions

This paper has explored the travel to Colombia of the US prison policies and in particular the ‘supermax’ prison – the architectural icon of US ultra-punitive penal policy. Our analysis provides an understanding of how, on the basis of US policy and architectural models, such transnational relations transformed Colombia’s penal and carceral cultures. It also explains how the planned revolution of Colombian prison system through the ‘New Prison Culture’ reform eventually largely failed. Although our goal in this paper is mainly empirical, this story also addresses interesting methodological questions relating to the phenomena of policy and built form mobility, which are usually analyzed in two largely unconnected research fields. Therefore, our conclusion first returns to the questions posed in our introduction. How do policies and forms complement each other? Do they follow the same routes? Are they put in circulation by the same actors? We then briefly reflect on two often neglected aspects in such processes: power asymmetries and failures.

Built forms make policies tangible and durable. Looking at the connections between penal policy reform and new prison architecture highlights how new strategies of the state are inscribed in tangible forms and how this allows us to better grasp the effects of policies on mentalities, bodies and daily lives. In the reverse direction, connecting forms with the policies – or scripts – from which they stem gives us a better idea of what built forms do: it unveils their pedagogical program (Söderström and Geertman, 2013). Like Latour’s (1991) technology, built forms are also ‘society made durable’: they disclose the obduracy of policies even after their apparent death. Thus, supermax prisons have continued – through their location and spatial organization – to shape Colombian carceral culture after the end of the penal collaboration with the US, even though *criolla* practices have crept back into these prisons. Because built forms perpetuate the effects of policies beyond their lifetime, so to speak, it is heuristically very fruitful to make connections between analyses of policy mobility and architectural mobilities.

Policies and built forms follow distinct but intersecting circuits. Built forms have their specific circuits of circulation related to the reach and networks of architectural firms, as well as to the influence of journals and architectural schools (Knox and Taylor, 2005;

Faulconbridge, 2010; Guggenheim and Söderström 2010). They differ from inter-municipal policy networks organized around mayoral meetings, bilateral cooperation or large city networks such as United Cities and Local Governments (UCLG). Moreover, if journals and academics play an important role in architectural circuits, international conferences and fieldtrips play an important role as 'global micro-spaces' for urban policies. However, our analysis of the travel of supermax shows that these circuits also intersect: actors involved in prison and criminal policy and prison architecture meet at the conferences of the International Corrections and Prisons Association. To advance our understanding of how space is produced in a global arena, systematic comparisons between these different circuits would thus be needed.

More generally, the convergences and divergences between these forms of mobility should encourage us to move towards fuller analyses of the relational production of urban space. In order to do that, we need to reduce the barriers between research fields such as studies of policy, architectural and planning mobility. Each of these fields identifies different logics of relational space production implying different circuits, actors and motivations. A systematic comparison of these logics would provide us with a better understanding of how places develop through different 'politics of relatedness' (Söderström 2014).

To conclude, returning to our case-study, the analysis of the rise and fall of supermax highlights two neglected aspects of such relational processes of space production: power and failure. While symbolic, economic and political power asymmetries in policy and architectural mobility studies are rarely addressed, our case-study shows how central they often are in the way models circulate. The creation of the sort of enclave of foreign rule that took place within Plan Colombia is difficult to imagine in the North-North policy relations predominant in the literature, but it is far from exceptional when North-South relations are considered. Finally, as this case shows and Jacobs (2012: 419) argues, it is a mistake in a period where 'best practice talk' is so influential to disregard what we can learn from failed transfers and their very real consequences.

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