



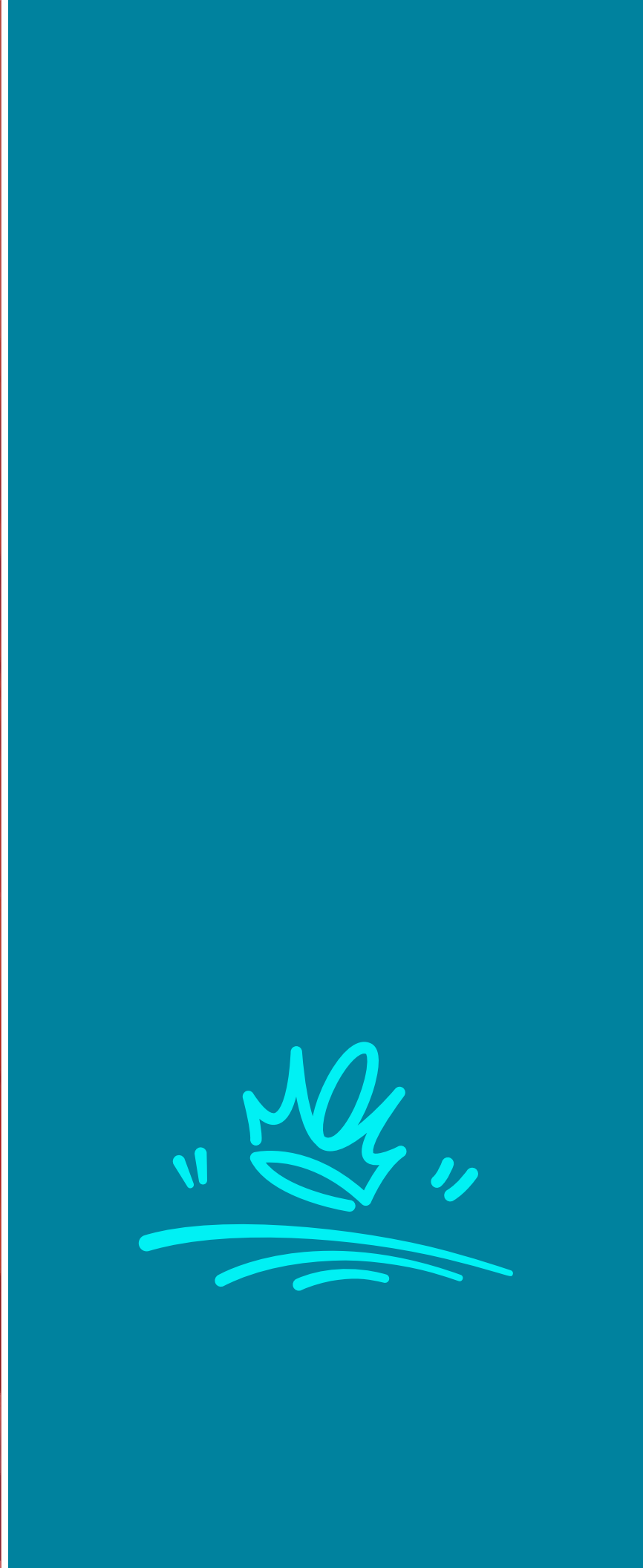
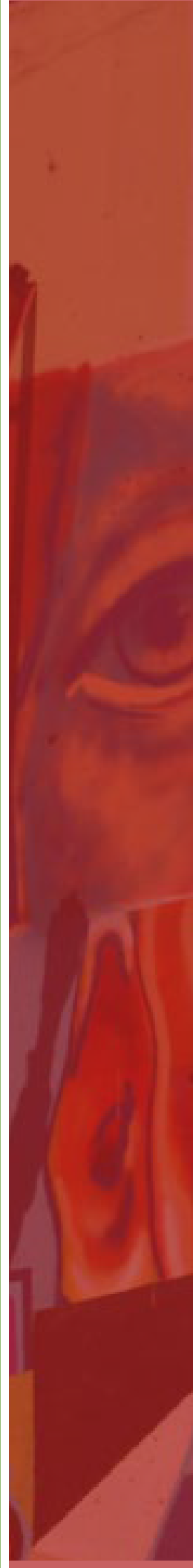
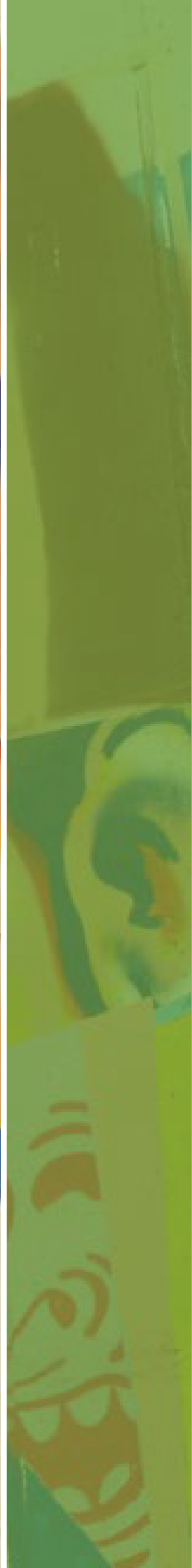
Youth, Peace, and Security Program

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Lessons from Conflict-ridden Landscapes





**“Like graffiti, peacebuilding initiatives led by communities, are unstoppable”
--Mr. Shifo, graffiti writer and community leader.**

Members of the Social Lab Castilla gathered to explore the meanings associated with ideas of peacebuilding, social transformation, violence, and social conflicts, which, for a long time, have conditioned their lived experiences in Medellín. The Social Lab Castilla is an initiative led by a variety of community members that seeks to address in a systemic way some of the most pressing issues that affect their lives, especially the lives of the youth of the neighborhood. Castilla can be conceived as a setting in conflict, or transitioning out of conflict, given that, in spite of governmental and community-led efforts, this comuna (Medellín is politically and administratively divided in 16 comunas), continues to be one of the most violent sectors of Medellín.

We met at Castilla’s Urban Gallery. This space represents the transformative force of community led initiatives. It sits between newly built concrete bridges that send the signal, to distracted or disinformed by-passers, that the city is becoming more inclusive by connecting the so called marginal barrios to the city’s center. Where yesterday only people looking for illegal narcotics and maybe a stranded dog would dare to pass by, today sits a park; with green shades accompanied by broad strokes of pink, red, black, yellow... this space leaves no trace of what it used to be. Youth artists from this neighborhood took the initiative to utilize the paint they buy with much effort, to claim a piece, a space, under a pale bridge that was erected by the government without involving the community in the process.

After years of fieldwork and hearing many people talk about the social significance of this place, it can be claimed that the Urban Gallery in Castilla represents the ongoing effort of this community to respond peacefully to violence and to create spaces of peace amidst violent conflicts. This Gallery also offers lessons for those who are interested in the ways social spaces are shaped and re-shared: social spaces, like cities, are collectively constructed and reconstructed; and communities, even if marginalized and disenfranchised, when they operate collaboratively and with a sense of belonging, actively participate in the making of a city’s history, and thereby contribute to the de-escalation of armed and otherwise conflicts. The Urban Gallery in Castilla testifies to that.

This photo essay exercise attempts to capture some of the narratives about the social imaginaries, i.e., the plurality of ways people conceive social spaces and their role in them, attached to the Urban Gallery in Castilla. This exercise was part of the collective sensing and observation phase of the Social Lab Castilla, which looks to construct a pluri-perspective understanding of Castilla's social life.



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“The one (graffiti) depicting the eyes really impacted me. It invites you to look at things from a multiplicity of perspectives. And I think that this art form (graffiti) is precisely that: an invitation to look at things from another perspective. It opens new paths, it gives landscapes a special touch... makes them look different. Something that may appear small, simple, ends up making great transformations. There's also a graffiti depicting the face of an indigenous person, which to me represents inclusion and that we can and should build our communities together in spite of, or actually celebrating, our differences”.

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“We women can transform many things... we bring something different to the community, to the comuna. This photo really impacted me. Urbanization processes can also be positive. This bridge allows us to look at our comuna from a distance, to look at ourselves from a different perspective, and especially to participate in the re-making of our neighborhood... it was in part due to this bridge that this beautiful space exists”.

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“graffiti is a young form of art. I make reference to graffiti because, socially, it is a form of art that gives voice to the voiceless...anyone, just with some paint, an aerosol, can make his or her claims public. Because opportunities are limited for many youths in this city, many make themselves visible, create a name for themselves, in the world of graffiti”.

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“Urban transformations are also social transformations because they generate a better livelihood (buen vivir, or the good life). Processes of urbanism are not completely negative; they can also transform for good. In this case, the building of these bridges, along with the community’s appropriation of them, created the space where we are having this picnic. Urbanism can also contribute to a better co-existence”.

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“Nature and art have always brought profound social transformations to the world. And this image captures that. Both nature and art establish the physical conditions that allow humans to inhabit places, transforming them in areas to walk, meet, co-exist, and therefore construct peace”.

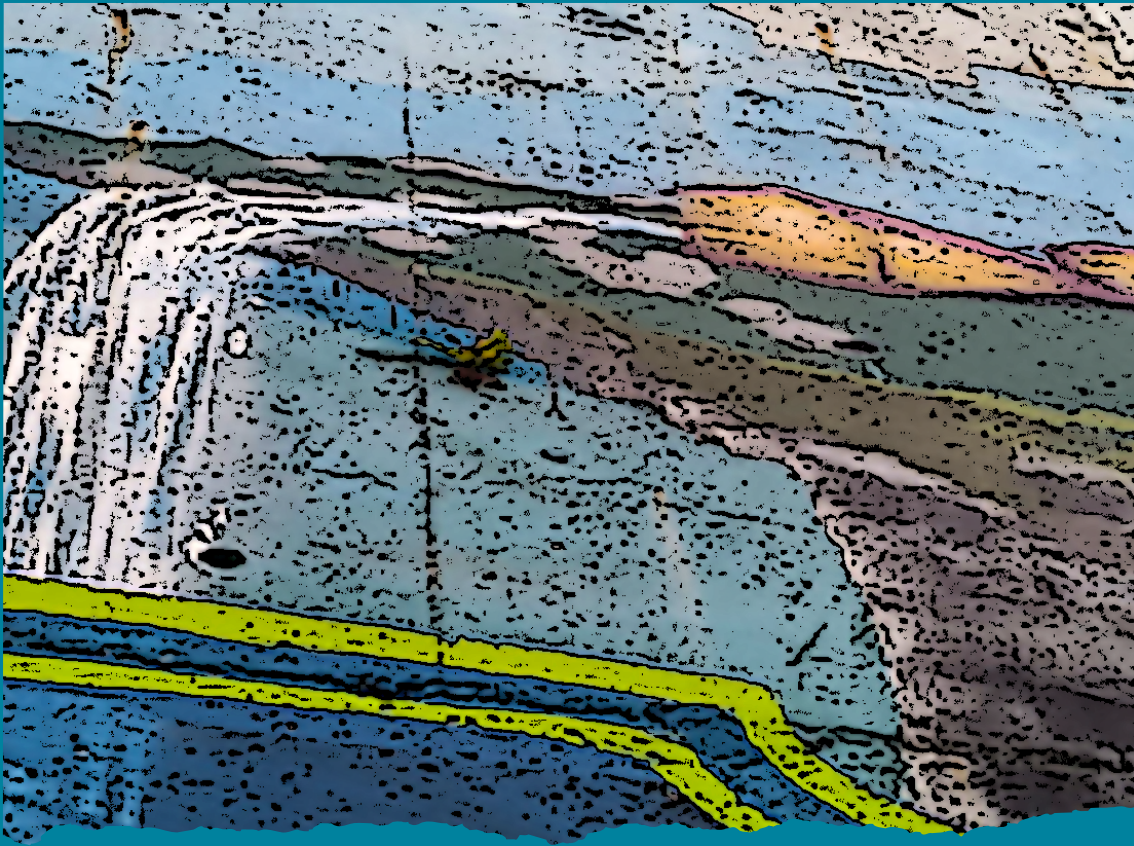
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I took a picture of you...of the group. This space has really been transformed. Where no one dared to come around, now we, a group of dreamers, are here planning on how to continue building profound transformations in this community. I wanted to show this transformation, though not through the infrastructural perspective. But by showing the impact of social transformation on the everydayness of people's lives...we are here, projecting ourselves towards the future. We are occupying this open space... very fresh, sunny, beautiful. There are also some other interesting transformations in the community, such as the public library, but this one is special given that it is outside, allowing people to transit it at any time of day”.

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“There’s something called Collective Environmental Rights. This image made me reflect about that. Until now we have taken nature, natural resources, as this “thing”, non-renewable, that exists for the sake of our consumption. And we have used science and technology to try to domesticate it. But we must also look at the way we behave and at our consumption patterns. What is our relationship with nature? And this image that depicts water falling from a mountain can be taken as a metaphor that represents the way nature flows, and its non-returning essence, when wasted”.

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“When we look at the world, we mostly focus on the most obvert things, don’t we? For instance, when I walk on this path, I mostly see the pathway made out of concrete... the bridge. Though when I saw these green blades of grass flourishing, in spite of all the conditions that are in place to not let it thrive, I was shocked. We know a lot about the most pressing problems our societies face today. We know much about the way our economic systems have failed to face the material conditions of many, and how the public education and health systems are never able to solve people’s needs and desires. But we know very little about the way these little plants are thriving in the middle of all this cement and steel. Just like these plants are thriving, many individuals and collectives are making peace and coexistence possible in the midst of conflict and violence. This image suggests a distinct approach: to focus on the things that make transformations possible; on the elements that reinforce peaceful dynamics, rather than to invest our energy only in making sense of the things that do not work”.

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“Resilience. This image represents resilience to me. I’ve seen this plant grown for years. It is a metaphor for youth. It is growing, and as it grows it transforms. It is also peace, given that it not only thrives in the midst of conflict without harming anyone or anything, but it also beautifies the space. This image represents co-existence, peace building, and resilience... a lot of resilience”.

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Concluding Remarks: A Defense of the Story and Storytelling

In a world that seeks to reduce the human experience to numbers and figures in articles that look more like police reports, the stories told by people who respond peacefully to armed conflicts remind us that at the center of our exploration of conflict and peace should be the people and their representations of the world.

Eduardo Galeano, a recognized Latin American poet and journalist, claimed during an interview that the world is not made of atoms, as we think; “it is made of stories”. Atoms are the material substance that make up the physical “things” that we touch with our hands and see with our eyes. But they, in themselves, do not tell us much about the world. Stories are different. They are the ideological substance that make sense of those material “things” we experience with our senses. In fact, when we talk about atoms we are recreating stories about the atom; we are talking about the stories and not about the atom itself. Thus, stories are entry points to the understanding of the human experience because they connect what seems abstract, foreign, obscure, with that which is concrete, familiar, palpable; they are the glue that makes the human experience comprehensible and thus tolerable.

There is no conflict and peace at work without the experience of people. In studying violent conflicts and peacebuilding it is important to pay attention to the stories people tell about their experiences in conflict and peace, as much as we pay attention to the instances of conflict and peacebuilding, i.e., wars, homicide rates, et. al., and peace treaties, truces, disarmament, et al. The experiences around conflict and peace, such as the ones offered here, allow us to conceive peacebuilding as a process that is led by particular human beings as they navigate ways to make life tolerable against all odds.

Instances of peacebuilding are like atoms, they do not say much. It is the story about such instances that have specific effects on people given that they re-center the experience of people in the process of peacebuilding. It is the people, and their experiences, that produce instances of peacebuilding and not the other way around. Moreover, an instance of peacebuilding is like a pixel in a picture of Peace, and the story around it is the picture in its totality. The Urban Gallery in Castilla is an instance of peacebuilding, a pixelated image of Peace; and the stories about it, the ways people experience it and tell the tale, is the complete picture of how peace is envisioned.



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