

How Infrastructure is Defined by Experiences: Unpacking the Jarillon in Santa Rita de Suba

by *Rebecca Herman*

Bogota, situated on a wetland amongst the Andes Mountain range, faces a range of challenges as a reminder of the natural environment the city sits upon. For the residents of Santa Rita and their proximity to the Bogota River (*Figure 1*), flooding is a constant danger, for example, two major floods, occurring in 1992 and 1995, challenged the community. With no government assistance at the time to manage this issue, the community began to adapt the riverbank to protect their livelihood.

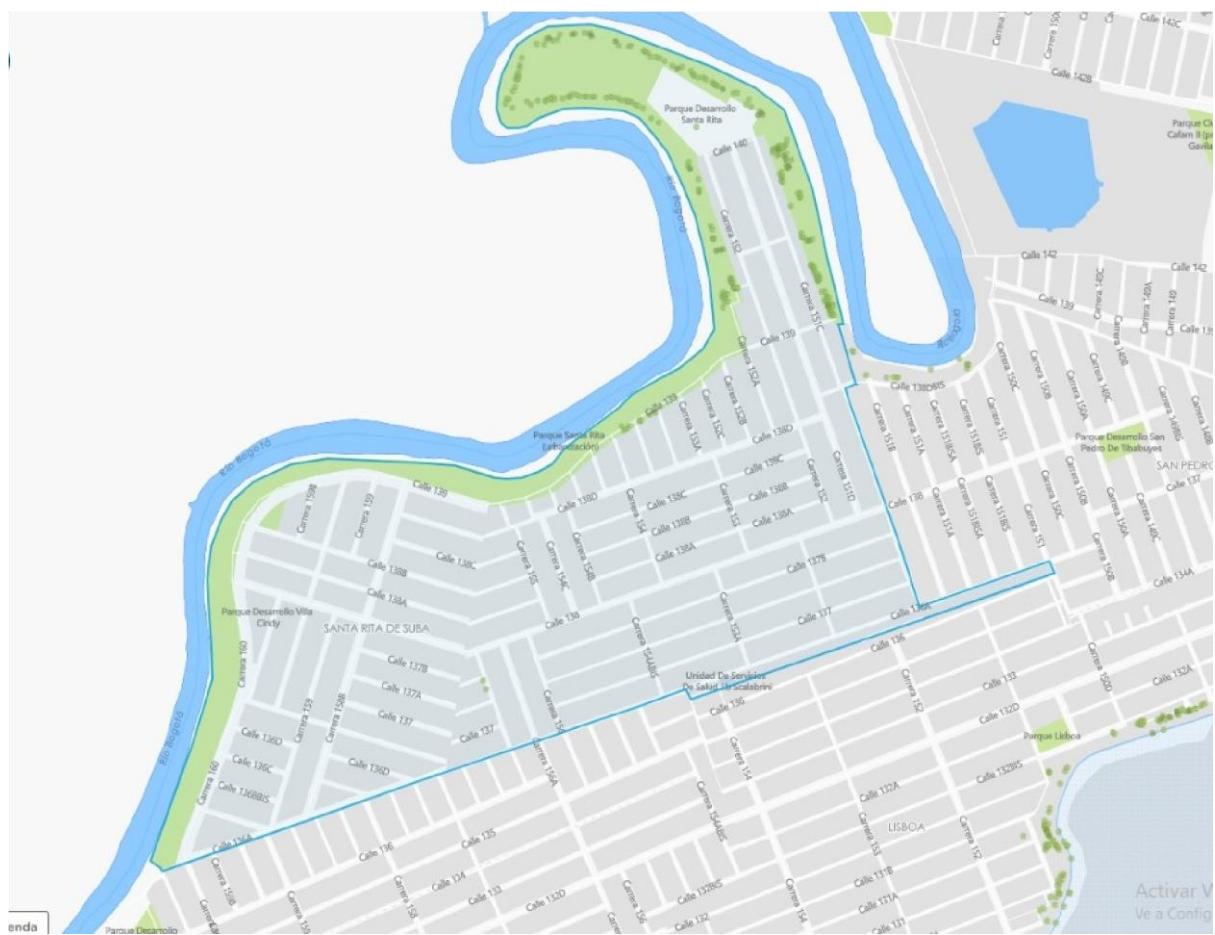


Figure 1 - Map of Santa Rita de Suba outlined in blue

The community started building a small hill parallel to the river, called a *jarillon* (Figure 2) which offers no direct English translation or an official definition in the Spanish dictionary but is used to describe a ‘natural’ flood defence infrastructure. The jarillon, which was recognised and completed by the government in 2004, is an achievement for the community of Santa Rita, indicated by the authorities shortening building requirements from 50 metres to 30 metres as the risk of flooding lessened. But, alongside the pride of a community led

initiative comes a deep fear of the activities that go hidden behind the jarillon and the increased crime rate that has come hand-in-hand with the creation of spaces into which no one can see.



Figure 2 - A photo of the Bogota River, the jarillon, and the neighbourhood of Santa Rita de Suba

The numerous street interviews and focus groups hosted by my colleagues and me whilst conducting research in Santa Rita, revealed a plethora of stories and experiences relating to safety in there particularly regarding the risks of sexual assault, harassment and the rape of women and girls. When discussing and mapping areas that residents find the most unsafe, whilst explaining their sense of insecurity exists throughout the neighbourhood, the river often came to the surface as a place of high risk. The reason for this was the jarillon and blind spots that have been created in the determination to manage flooding; a study in Bogota revealed that women felt 500 times less safe in an area with no visibility and where no one could see them (Leao et al., 2019). It seemed that though the jarillon has been successful in many ways, the dangers it could bring with it were ignored, or worse, not even considered. We heard harrowing tales of kidnap and rape, and women being taken from different parts of Santa Rita to the river. We saw the community once again pioneer engineering in the form of barbed wire fences to deter the criminals but also heard the vicious responses and threats to those who tried to intervene or call the police for help. It seemed that while the government had approved the jarillon in 2004, 20 years later the same government are ignoring the consequences of the build – with not even a streetlamp in sight.

For this reason, the word *jarillon* is extremely emotionally charged, evoking a confusing sense of alertness in conversation and uncertainty about whether its creation has caused more issues than it has solved. It lends itself as the perfect example of women's issues not being prioritised in the construction of infrastructure as well as indicating the contrast in the authorities to response to the issue of flooding. The definition in Santa Rita for the word *jarillon*, is defined by the experiences resulting from its construction.

This is not to say that the issue of flooding is unimportant, because it certainly is and management of the wetlands that carry Santa Rita is crucial for prosperity and opportunity for all its residents, especially as climate change indicates issues like flooding will become more frequent. However, what the *jarillon* did for me was highlight the importance of having women in leadership roles and the importance of women in decision making (Loughborough University, 2007). Whilst in Santa Rita, my colleagues and I worked with the local community board known as the JAC which is formed of women fighting for environmental justice and the recognition of their struggles by the government. The JAC facilitate recreational activities for the community such as gardening and dancing but have also created a space where women feel they can safely share their experiences. All the testimonies we heard in the field came in the presence of a JAC member, and whether they personally knew the woman speaking or not, they created a sense of security in a neighbourhood which so severely lacks it. After working with the women involved in JAC and hearing the history of the *jarillon* and the ongoing struggles on the riverbank, I could not help but think of how vital it is to consult women in the future of Santa Rita regarding the creation of ethical infrastructure that is inclusive and safe for all.

In Colombia, despite the illegality of sexual assault and rape, there are prevailing “patterns of victim-blaming [...] and a lack of gender sensitivity” (Kreft, 2023; Parra-Barrera et al, 2021). In Santa Rita, all the interviewees, male and female alike, explain how they do not venture outside after dark and would not walk by the river alone at any time of the day. These responses perpetuate the notion of ‘victim blaming’ as mentioned above, as individuals would blame themselves if an incident occurred rather than the poor planning of infrastructure which has created a hotspot for crime. An example of this is clear when a male participant within a focus group states something is “*bound*” to happen if one goes to the river alone or just with his wife. A female participant in a focus group supports this notion but explains that as woman she does not feel safe anywhere alone and would not let her children go alone either. She shares an experience of sexual harassment just metres away from the JAC community centre and expresses how now she feels she always needs to be with a man to feel somewhat safe outside the home.

A study in the Colombian city of Manizales, calls this topic of women's agency to move around their neighbourhood ‘gendered mobility’ and seeks to relate how planning impacts behaviours and travel choices (Rodas-Zuleta et al., 2022). The study explains how this immobility “limits individuals' rights to the city, as well as access to opportunity”, and, in the case of Santa Rita, all participants, especially those who are female, lack access and opportunities in the only open-green space in the neighbourhood, in which safety issues have

been exacerbated by the completion of the jarillon and the increased blind spots where crime can take place (Rodas-Zuleta et al., 2022).

In Bogota, the infringement on women's mobility as a consequence of urban planning, extends out of Santa Rita and can be seen at city scale. A study in the city which examined women household-employees who travel from the less affluent south to the more affluent north for work found that outside of this necessary commute, participants "abstained from travelling, effectively curbing their active appropriation of urban space" (Flesicher and Sanabria, 2020). The differences in transport and infrastructure in each half of the city highlights socio-economic disparities and creates what Massy (1994) describes as 'exclusionary space' where women do not feel safe in public spaces for fear of sexual violence (Flesicher and Sanabria, 2020). This risks simultaneously exist on Bogota's public transport networks which is why commuting between neighbourhoods can feel insecure for female passengers. The Transmeilenio, completed in 2000, was a large urban development project which aimed to equalise mobility so that everyone was able to travel around the city (Freshicher and Sanabria, 2020). Despite this mobility theoretically being granted, "many planners lack information about transit sexual assault in their city" and therefore the projects do not account for women's needs (Kash, 2020). Moreover, due to this lack of information planners often victim blame as outlined earlier which isolates women further within urban spaces.

Much like the jarillon, the case of sexual crimes occurring on the Transmeilenio speaks loudly about the absence of gender inclusive urban planning at a range of scales. The juxtaposition between the proposed benefits of infrastructure such as flood defences and improved buses, and the risks that come with it, limit the mobility and agency of women in Bogota both in their local neighbourhoods and whilst moving around the city. For this reason, although the term *jarillon* for a planner might simply refer to a piece of engineering, for women in Santa Rita the term is packed with uncertainty and fear which offers an ethical dilemma in terms of understanding the real needs of all residents in the neighbourhood. After learning this word, and how the community defined it to highlight their feelings of insecurity, as a future practitioner it is crucial to consider the experiences attached to urban projects in specific contexts to understand personal experiences within urban space, and how definitions change throughout different contexts based on the experiences associated with it.

Although the jarillon is successful in mitigating flood risk in Santa Rita, the associated trauma and attendant feelings of unsafety must be heard and applied to future developments, not just in Santa Rita, but Bogota as a whole. Therefore, for me, the jarillon has been redefined through storytelling from a structural flood defence to something much larger; the lack of consideration for girls and women who would be negatively impacted by the creation of hidden spaces resulting in subsequent marginalisation.

The involvement of women in urban planning necessitates gender mobility and freedoms, and the collaboration with the JAC and understanding how existing infrastructure interacts with girls and women will hopefully transform the way urban planning manifests in Santa Rita to increase safety and wellbeing (Leadbetter, 2023). Similarly, as a future practitioner, this

project will transform the way I approach discussion around urban infrastructure given my increased understanding as to how lived experiences in reality define infrastructure.

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