MEMORIAL OF THE 1980 RIO SUMPUL MASSACRE, CHALATENANGO, EL SALVADOR: THE PARTICIPATORY DESIGN AND COLLABORATIVE REALIZATION OF A GRASSROOTS PROJECT

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INTRODUCTION: THE RIO SUMPUL MASSACRE, 14TH OF MAY 1980

From the late 1970s until 1992, the Salvadoran Army (*Fuerza Armada de El Salvador*), the National Guard (*Guardia Nacional*), and the paramilitary group ORDEN perpetrated numerous massacres against civilians in rural El Salvador, as part of a US-backed government strategy of violent oppression, including assassinations, disappearances, torture, forced displacement, and scorched earth tactics (*operaciones de tierra arrasada*). Victims were targeted because of their perceived support of different factions of guerilla groups opposing the repressive regime.

In Chalatenango, particularly the territories near San José Las Flores, Arcatao, and Las Vueltas, civilians sought refuge in a hamlet known as Las Aradas,[1] by the Sumpul River, on the Honduran border, in early 1980. By mid-May, thousands had gathered there, some escaping the military operations in the region and others repelled from across the border by the Honduran army.[2]

In the morning of the 14th of May, the Salvadoran Armed Forces, ORDEN, and the National Guard massacred approximately 600[3] civilians with the passive support of the Honduran armed forces, who prevented people from crossing the river. Many were killed on land, while others were shot or drowned in the river as they attempted to escape the onslaught. Access to the site was denied in the weeks following the massacre, preventing the retrieval of bodies for proper burials.

The Rio Sumpul Massacre (*Masacre del Rio Sumpul*) – as it is now known – was among the first large scale massacres in the region, marking a significant moment precipitating the civil war, alongside other events such as the assassination of Monseñor Romero, the archbishop of San Salvador, on the 24th of March, 1980.

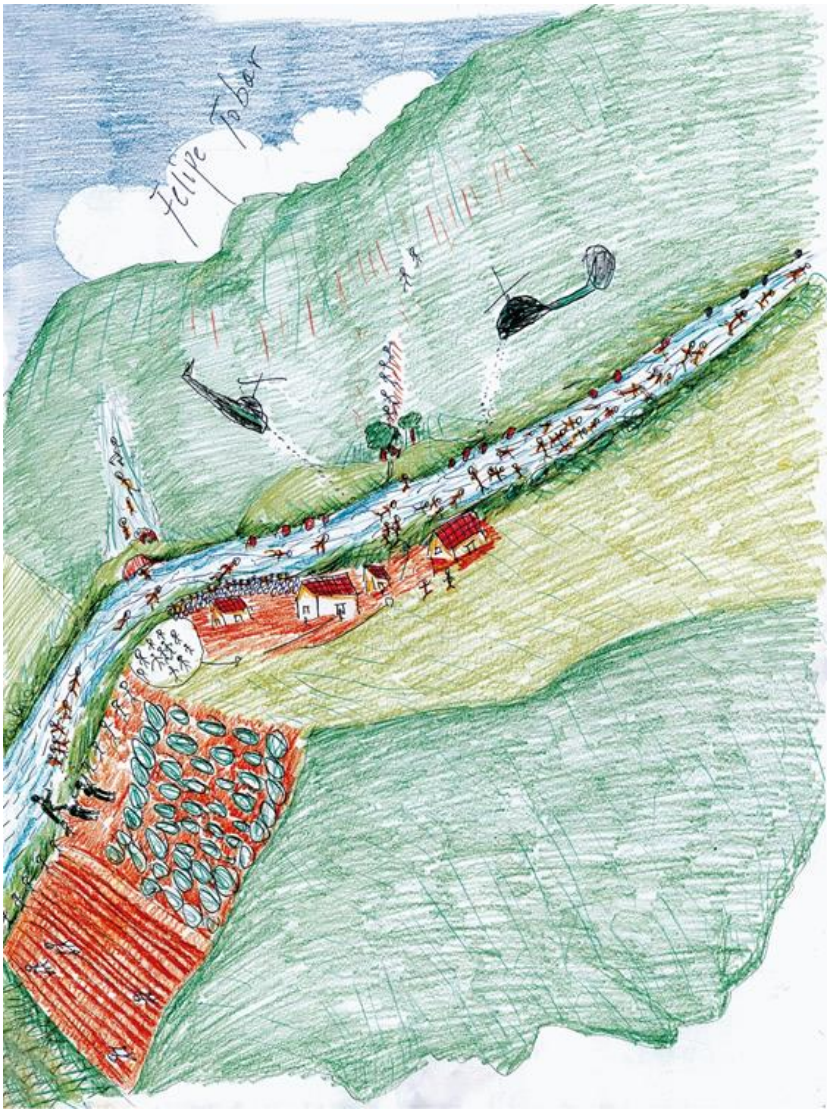

Figure 1. Map of Las Aradas, according to the remembrance of Felipe Tobar[4]

FROM MASSACRE AND VIOLENCE TO GRASSROOTS COMMUNITY BUILDING

After the massacre, surviving Chalatenango populations were forced into displacement. Some relocated in Honduras, mostly in the refugee camp of Mesa Grande. Some remained in El Salvador, living in constant flight from military operations (*guinda*[5]). Many sought periodic protection in the guerilla forces.

In the context of the guerilla, *guindas*, and refugee camps, civilians acquired emancipating skills and knowledge. Violeta Menjívar, a doctor in clandestine hospitals during the civil war and later the national Minister of Health (2014-2019, FMLN[6]), illustrates how this situation catalyzed empowerment, especially of women, amid repression:

"These young girls of 12, 16 years old, transformed and played an impressive role. Attending to seriously injured people under very precarious conditions was quite a tough task. Being trained in medical work and receiving education, these young girls underwent a transformation that empowered them, taking them away from domestic work and leading them to save lives."[7]

From 1986 on, villages such as San José Las Flores and Las Vueltas were gradually repopulated despite ongoing repression and paramilitary harassment. Building upon the experience gained during

the displacement, grassroots organizational committees emerged, essential in the repopulated areas, which were excluded from state support. Collectively, they addressed most aspects of life in their communities. Belén Monge, born and living since 1987 in San José Las Flores, recounts:

"The village was completely destroyed. The knowledge each person had acquired from wherever they had been, was used to form committees. A health committee attended to injuries or illnesses. Popular teachers who had learned to read and write during the conflict composed an education committee. Another committee worked in the cornfields, planting and harvesting for the entire community. Another group was fixing the roofs, since it was the rainy season."[8]

Having no legal status, these committees were born from spontaneous and solidary organization, to the benefit of the entire community. Their specialization guaranteed efficiency and rested upon a principle of complementarity, quite in the sense of Kropotkin's idea of voluntary associations in self-governing communities.[9]

THE EMERGENCE OF A COMMUNITY-BASED COMMEMORATION ORGANIZATION

Miriam Ayala, a survivor who participated in the first clandestine commemoration at Las Aradas in 1987, describes the experience:

"The war was ongoing. There was fear. A considerable number of people took part. We carried small white flags to identify ourselves as civilians in case a plane passed by, since the army could attack and massacre us".[10]

After the Peace Agreements, the first documented commemoration in 1992 and a small monument in 1993 led to the formation of a historic memory committee (*Comité de Memoria Histórica*). By 2016, the committee had acquired the land of Las Aradas through community fundraising, aiming to create a memorial. The committee formalized into a non-profit organization in August 2017, known and further referred to as "Asociación Sumpul".[11] Felipe Tobar, president (2017-2020), states:

"The survivors said that we should make a beautiful memorial park there, to remember the children, the women, and the elderly who died there (…) This is the commitment that we have: listening to the people, representing them, and working towards making this place a holy and living space".[12]

Contemporary commemorations include a 2-3-hours walk to reach the site, departing at dawn – reminiscent of the *guindas* –, evening activities, camping on site, and a mass with survivors' testimonies and a representation of the massacre by a youth theater group.

Although the massacre was recognized by the 1993 United Nations Truth Commission Final Report[13] and cultural heritage protection of the land in 2012,[14] local communities still struggle for the official acknowledgement of the more than 60 community-identified massacres in Chalatenango.[15]

The Asociación Sumpul was fortified by the completion of a strategic planning process in 2017 with the support of Dr. Amanda Grzyb, professor in the Faculty of Media Studies at Western (London, Canada). On the association's behalf, Grzyb invited architect and ceramist Evelia Macal whom she had met as an election observer in 2014, to attend their first General Assembly, accompanied by her husband, architect Harold Fallon of AgwA and professor at the KU Leuven Faculty of Architecture (Belgium). This event marked the beginning of a collaboration between the two universities,[16] Evelia Macal, AgwA, and the Asociación Sumpul for the participatory design process of a memorial at Las Aradas.



Figure 2. Commemoration at Las Aradas (unknown photographer, 1992)[17]

A TRAJECTORY TOWARDS DESIGN: PARTICIPATION AND PREPARATION

In October 2017, KU Leuven students Melina Doutreloigne and Justine Morlion, supervised by Fallon, began a Master Dissertation design studio focused on the design of the Memorial at Las Aradas. In January 2018, the students and architects conducted a participatory workshop in San José Las Flores. Three rotating groups of about 15-20 survivors and community members each, discussed the themes of Commemoration & Celebration, Landscape, and Construction. Referential photographs displayed on the walls stimulated interventions and suggestions from the workshop participants.

The first workshop discussion investigated rituals, communities, symbolic elements, spaces for celebration, etc. The second group addressed the role of the Sumpul River, plantations, trees, topography, etc. The third discussion delved into construction methods, investment, maintenance, existing skills, etc.

These interactive discussions, while not based on specific design proposals, provided critical insights for the design process and helped shape community expectations.



Figure 3. Workshop moderated by student Melina Doutreloigne (Morlion, 2018)

Notable outcomes included the preferences for steel over wood and adobe over concrete masonry, which led to considering a balance between industrial, ancestral, and popular building techniques.[18] The idea to plant flame trees (*arbol de fuego* - Delonix Regia), blooming red in May, emerged from collective reflection. The community confirmed the importance of the monument from 1993 and agreed on its restoration. Discussions on the representation of Monseñor Romero, who was the "Voice of the Voiceless"[19] until his assassination in 1980, led to a consensus on avoiding distant monumentality aiming for a more authentic connection with his legacy.

Prior to the workshops, students and architects, accompanied by Father Rogelio Poncel,[20] visited the government and church designed memorials in El Mozote in Morazán.[21] This experience, combined with Macal's documentation of the lively commemoration at Las Aradas in May 2018, solidified the vision for the memorial. In order to avoid the formal monumentality observed in El Mozote, the team focused on creating a space open to appropriation rather than representation, thereby nourishing solidarity and unity among participants. An implicit objective of community-based memorials is possibly to fluidify the connections between past, present, and future, by enabling the transition from the reality of loss, death, and trauma to the possibility of hope, life, and resilience.

In June 2018, Morlion and Doutreloigne presented two design proposals, which contributed to the process as an exploration of potential design strategies, rather than as finalized solutions. Concurrently, Thomas Montulet, an architect at AgwA and a Ph.D. candidate at UCLouvain (Belgium) researching transgression in spaces of mourning, scale models, and ruins, joined the project, contributing his architectural design and theoretical insights.

After nearly a year of research, observations, visits, community interaction, and student designerly investigations, the architects collaboratively developed a concrete architectural proposal. This proposal was then presented and discussed at a General Assembly of the association in October 2018.

NOT MONUMENTS, NOT A CHAPEL: ON SYMBOLS, SPACE AND CONSTRUCTION

The design's main feature is the planting of over 250 flame trees in a 7m*7m grid by community members. The irregular exterior edge of the plantation blends into the natural surroundings, while a central 63m*63m "square" forms a distinctive void,[22] revealing the massacre's original soil, without pointing to a specific locus.

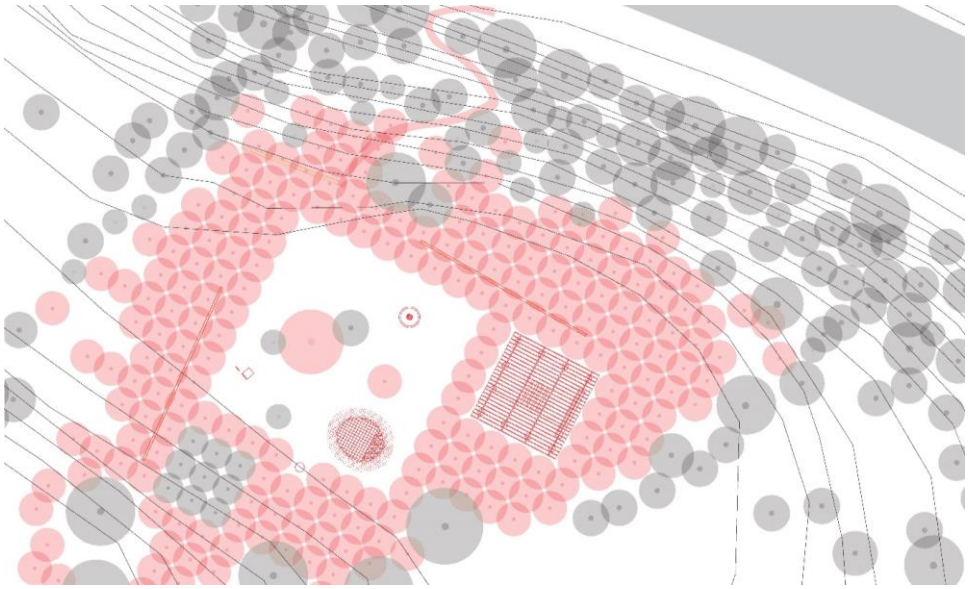

Figure 4. Plan of the Memorial of the Rio Sumpul Massacre [23]

Key symbolic elements within this space include the 1993 monument, a rounded memorial with ceramic plaques listing the victims' names slightly below the ground level (referring to the dispersion and unknown exact number of bodies), a circular bench and collective fireplace; a Maquilishuat (Tabebuia Rosea, the national tree of El Salvador), and a ceiba (Ceiba Pentandra, the sacred tree in Maya theology connecting the upper, middle, and underworld,[24] traditionally marking new settlements).

Bordering the central square, one flame tree is replaced by a polychrome, life-sized, and realistic statue of Monseñor Romero, inspired by the mural painting ornamenting the exterior of the cathedral of San Salvador since 2017.[25] Devoid of any base, Romero stands on the same soil as the participants, a humble observer to the commemorations.

The statue and the memorial were created in collaboration with Professors Lourdes Calero and Miguel Mira of the University of El Salvador (UES Escuela de Artes), involving students from their respective sections. Numerous community members, stakeholders, collaborators, and scholars participated to the transport and installation of the art pieces during two large-scale collective activities.[26]

The most imposing element of the memorial is a large, single sloped roof offering shelter to the commemoration and to a mural painting on a 15m long adobe wall. A grid of 16 columns continuing the pattern of the flame trees and a lightweight, prefabricated steel structure supports the roof. Matiz, a local collective of painters, is creating the fresco to be finalized after the completion of the works in May 2024. Three benches containing river stones frame a space for activities. Similarly to the memorial and the statue, avoiding monumentality but embracing dignity, the roof quietly navigates characteristics of sacred, utilitarian and popular architecture.



Figure 5. Installation of the memorial and statue of Romero [27]

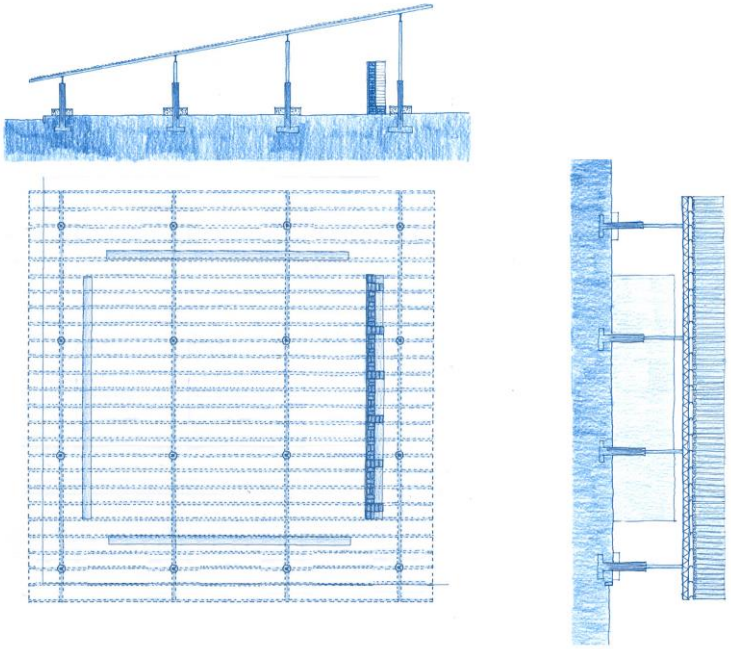

Figure 6. Plan and construction details of the roofed space[28]



Figure 7. the site at Las Aradas, with the different elements of the memorial under construction[29]

The adobe wall represents ancestral, low impact building techniques supporting local economics. The rationality of industrial building techniques, such as the prefabricated steel structure, is essential for the feasibility of the project. Popular building strategies, such as the benches of cement and river stones, the formwork made with reused corrugated metal sheets for the concrete columns, or the steel bars supporting the roof tiles, facilitate construction and identification. Together, they create a hybrid yet rooted architecture, resting upon the equal treatment of different types of knowledges and skills.

Fundraising for the construction was a significant effort, with scholars, architects, and artists surpassing their usual roles to support the Asociación Sumpul in this aspect and to activate international solidarity.[30]



Figure 8. The memorial at Las Aradas under construction in May 2023 with flame trees in the foreground [31]

MEMORIAL FOR THE EL MOZOTE MASSACRE: A COMPARISON

The memorial in El Mozote, Morazán, is associated with a massacre comparable in magnitude to the Rio Sumpul Massacre. The Interamerican Court of Human Rights' decision (Article 370) mandates constructing spaces for memorial and remembrance, and protecting the community-erected monument.[32] Situated on the village's square, it consists of a modest wall with the victims' names, a memorial to Rufina Amaya Márquez,[33] and a stylized representation of a family. Next to the church, the Garden of the Innocents (*Jardín de los Inocentes*) includes a mural with the names of the children killed. On the main square, a roofed podium with an informative wall, erected by the FMLN government, was replaced in 2022 by the Nuevas Ideas government with a non-commemorative, walkable fountain. A painted brick wall, representing a brief timeline with key moments leading to the memorial's construction, was added at the back of the Garden of the Innocents. It omits specific naming of the perpetrators and shows signs of degradation. A House of Memory (*Casa de la Memoria*), built in 2022, is currently nonfunctional due to roof leaks.



Figure 9. Memorials and public spaces in El Mozote [34]

The Catholic Church's Monument to Peace and Reconciliation [35] (*Monumento a la Paz y la Reconciliación*) is located at a crossroads, offering limited commemoration space, and avoiding explicit references to the massacre, except for the family profile reused from the community's monument. According to Padre Rogelio Poncel,[36] who guided the architects in 2018, the community members view the statues composing the monument as critiquing the civil population's organization and the emergence of the guerilla in the repressive context. The statues include Pope John Paul II, who criticized the Liberation Theology embodied by Archibishop Romero's positions;[37] Mahatma Ghandi and Martin Luther King, known for their pacifist struggles; and Mother Teresa, who was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize in 1979, when Romero was nominated. A parklet in the back of the memorial features a statue of Saint Francis of Assisi, "who loved the animals," as Padre Rogelio Poncel remarked with a smile. The figure of Archbishop Romero himself is notably absent, except for a distant statue on a fenced house set back from the street.

These memorials, supported by the church or government, appear to serve an agenda disconnected from the event's commemoration and the community's feeling and experience, contrasting with a community-driven approach to memorialization. Despite fundraising challenges and lengthy processes, it allows communities to define and embed their agenda, to reflect, participate in design, and collaborate on realization. This results in a space that mirrors their expectations and promotes solidarity and community building. They strengthen the connection between past, present and future, by enabling the transition from the reality of loss, death and trauma, to the possibility of hope, life, and resilience.

CONCLUSION : AN ARCHITECTURE OF RESISTANCE

In April 2021, the now called Surviving Memory in Postwar El Salvador research team received a significant Partnership Grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada and was further supported by Western and KU Leuven. The team, including new partners and collaborators, transformed into a deeply multidisciplinary initiative, grounded in participatory, community-based, and decolonial methodologies.[38]

Architecturally, the project includes the commemoration sites such as *Guinda de Mayo*, massacres of Laguna Seca/Laguna de San Ramón, Gualsinga and El Higueral, community-based museums in Arcatao, Las Vueltas, San José Las Flores, an Ecclesial Base Community in Comunidad Segundo Montes, Morazán, and the extension of the Museum of the Word and Image in San Salvador. This expansion aims to empower the association on a regional level and to establish a self-sustaining network of historic memory museums in El Salvador, promoting solidarity networks.

Recent commemorations have seen survivors criticize the anti-historic rhetoric and policies of El Salvador's president, who dismissed the Peace Agreements as a "farce",[39] and suppressed their commemorations since 2021. Community members often highlight the youth exodus led by fear of arbitrary or targeted imprisonment, under the current state of emergency and the "war on gangs".[40] The country's trend of centralization, illustrated by the fusion of the country's 262 municipalities into 44 entities,[41] is another source of concern.

In this environment, preserving memory and supporting grassroots organizations, the fundaments of societal engagement, is vital. The physical spaces embodying this empowerment, as constant public reminders, are crucial for community building, democratic processes, and resistance to authoritarianism. It is not a coincidence that the plan of the Memorial at Las Aradas resembles the foundation of a new city. Architecture has a role to play.



Figure 10. Map of the City of México (1572, based on a previous map dating from 1524)[42]

NOTES

[1] Dorothee Molders, *Memorias del Sumpul, testimonios del genocidio contra la población campesina organizada en Las Aradas, Chalatenango, mayo de 1980* (San Salvador: Equipo Maíz, 2019), 14-15.
[2] Marcela Zamora, *Las Aradas, Masacre en Sietes Actos*, documentary film, (San Salvador: El Faro, 2014), accessed February 10, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zfsIx79MpLQ.
[3] United Nations Security Council, “From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador,” S/25500 (1993): 5-8, accessed February 10, 2024, https://archive.org/details/S25500EN/page/n5/mode/2up.
400 death are acknowledged in the UN Report on the Civil War in El Salvador. Due to numerous unidentified victims, the Asociación Sumpul estimates a minimum of 600 death.
[4] Molders, *Memorias del Sumpul*, 104
[5] Harold Fallon, Amanda Grzyb, and Thomas Montulet, "Guinda," in Vesper Journal of Architecture, Arts & Theory, No. 3, Nella selva-Wildness, IUAV (Venezia: Quodlibet, 2020).
[6] FMLN, Frente Farabundo Marti por la Liberación Nacional, is the umbrella group from five guerrilla organizations during the civil war, and a left-wing political party after the Peace Agreements of 1992.
[7] Evelia Macal, interview with Violeta Menjívar, February 2024.
[8] Evelia Macal, interview with Belén Monge, February 2024.
[9] Pyotr Alexeyevich Kropotkin, *The Conquest of Bread* (Paris, 1892).
[10] Evelia Macal, Interview with Miriam Ayala, February 2024.
[11] “Asociación Sumpul”, accessed February 10, 2024, www.asociacionsumpul.org.
The Association of Survivors of the Sumpul Massacre and Other Chalatenango Massacres (*Asociación de Sobrevivientes de la Masacre del Sumpul y las Otras Masacres de Chalatenango*) is also known and referred to as Asociación Sumpul.
[12] Interview with Felipe Tobar, “Parque Memorial de Las Aradas, El Salvador”, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46U3umBXYKc – accessed 10/02/2024
[13] UN Security Council, Annex, “From Madness to Hope: the 12-year war in El Salvador: Report of the Commission on the Truth for El Salvador”, S/25500, 1993, 5-8.
[14] Decision of the Secretariat of Culture of the Presidency of El Salvador in 2012 under the first FMLN-led government: Secretaria de Cultura de la Presidencia de la República, Resolución Interna 007/2012 (San Salvador, 2012), accessed February 10, 2024, http://biblioteca.utec.edu.sv/hemeroteca/NOT_svdo_/2012/DO_20120607t395n104.pdf.
[15] Amanda Grzyb, et al., "Mapping the Chalatenango Massacres: Community-Based Research in El Salvador," presented at the FIMS Seminar Series 2023/24, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University, January 17, 2024.
[16] The project was funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Partnership Development Grant from 2018 and 2022, and matching contributions from Western and KU Leuven.
[17] Molders, *Memorias del Sumpul*, 190
[18] Harold Fallon and Thomas Montulet, "Las Aradas Memorial: Engaging in Popular Building Techniques," in *Structures and Architecture: A Viable Urban Perspective?*, Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Structures and Architecture (ICSA 2022) (Aalborg, Denmark: CRC Press, 2022), 317-320.
[19] Oscar Romero, Michael J. Walsh, Jon Sobrino, and Ignacio Martin-Baro, *Voice of the Voiceless: The Four Pastoral Letters and Other Statements* (New York: Orbis Books, 1985).
[20] Padre Rogelio Poncel (Father Roger Ponceele) is a Belgian priest living in Perquín, Morazán, and who accompanied the communities during the entire civil war.
[21] Rafael Medina Alarcón and L. Binford, "Revisiting the El Mozote Massacre: Memory and Politics in Postwar El Salvador," *Journal of Genocide Research* 16, no. 4 (2014): 513-533.
[22] A reference used during the design process was : Barry Flanagan, “A hole in the sea”, 16mm colour film, Black & white copy held in the collection of Stedelijk Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 1969
[23] Lisa De Visscher, Lara Molino, and Iwan Strauven, AgwA 2006-2022 – 23 Projects (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022).
[24] Charles Zidar and Wayne Elisens, "Sacred Giants: Depiction of Bombacoideae on Maya Ceramics in Mexico, Guatemala, and Belize," *Economic Botany* 63 (2009): 119-129.

[25] Iván Escobar, “Cristian López, Monseñor Romero y el mural,” Puntosd3encuentros, October 24, 2017, accessed February 10, 2024, https://puntosdeencuentros.wordpress.com/2017/10/24/cristian-lopez-monsenor-romero-y-el-mural/.
[26] Memoria Histórica Sobreviviente en El Salvador, “La memoria en camino / Memory on the Way (Las Aradas, El Salvador),” YouTube video, accessed February 10, 2024, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NwkEC237juA.
Memoria Histórica Sobreviviente en El Salvador, “Construir la memoria / Building Memory (Las Aradas, El Salvador),” YouTube video, accessed February 10, 2024,
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-0mYTtrkHsU&t=324s.
[27] Lisa De Visscher, Lara Molino, and Iwan Strauven, AgwA 2006-2022 – 23 Projects (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022).
[28] Lisa De Visscher, Lara Molino, and Iwan Strauven, AgwA 2006-2022 – 23 Projects (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022).
[29] Lisa De Visscher, Lara Molino, and Iwan Strauven, AgwA 2006-2022 – 23 Projects (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022).
[30] The main funders are the Canadian Workers Union LiUNA local 183 and LiUNA OPDC, SSHRC for the art works, and the Arthur Fallon Donations in Belgium. In-kind donations by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) El Salvador for roof tiles and other materials, and civil engineer Guillermo Candela (CIVING) for the structural design and calculations.
[31] Lisa De Visscher, Lara Molino, and Iwan Strauven, AgwA 2006-2022 – 23 Projects (Cologne: Verlag der Buchhandlung Walther und Franz König, 2022).
[32] Inter-American Court of Human Rights, “Case of the Massacres of El Mozote and nearby places v. El Salvador, Judgement of October 25, 2012 (Merits, Reparations and Costs),” 2012, accessed February 10, 2024, www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_252_ing1.pdf.
[33] Rufina Amaya Márquez was the sole survivor of the massacre, and she was instrumental in the United Nations investigation and the trial at the Interamerican Court of Human Rights.
[34] Harold Fallon, and Thomas Montulet. "Las Aradas Memorial: Engaging in Popular Building Techniques." In *Structures and Architecture: A Viable Urban Perspective?,* Proceedings of the Fifth International Conference on Structures and Architecture (ICSA 2022), 317-320. Aalborg, Denmark: CRC Press, 202
[35] Medina Alarcón and Binford, "Revisiting the El Mozote Massacre," 513-520.
[36] Father Roger Ponceele (*Padre Rogelio Poncel*) is is a Belgian priest living in Morazán since the early 1980, who accompanied the local populations and the guerilla movements during the entire civil war and after the peace agreements.
[37] Peter Hebblethwaite, “Liberation and John Paul II: The Vatican’s Perception of Latin America,” Index on Censorship 12, no. 5 (1983): 10.
[38] "Surviving Memory in Post War El Salvador," accessed February 10, 2024, www.elsalvadormemory.org.
[39] Carlos Salinas Maldonaldo, “Bukele provoca indignación en El Salvador tras calificar de ‘farsa’ los acuerdos de paz,” *El País Internacional*, January 25, 2021, accessed February 10, 2024,
https://elpais.com/internacional/2021-01-25/bukele-provoca-indignacion-en-el-salvador-tras-calificar-de-farsa-los-acuerdos-de-paz.html.
[40] Alejandro Artiga-Purcell et al., State of Deception, *Fact Finding Report on the Detained El Salvador Water Defenders, Mining, and the State of Human Rights under the Bukele Administration* (Institute for Policy Studies, January 11, 2023).
[41] Jimmy Alvarado, “Bukele reducirá los municipios de El Salvador a 44 y los diputados a 60,” El Faro, June 2, 2023, accessed February 10, 2024,
https://elfaro.net/es/202306/el_salvador/26871/bukele-reducira-los-municipios-de-el-salvador-a-44-y-los-diputados-a-60.
[42] Gonzalo Prieto, "Historia de la Ciudad de México a través de los mapas," Geografía Infinita, 2016, accessed February 10, 2024, https://www.geografiainfinita.com/2016/12/evolucion-de-la-ciudad-de-mexico-a-traves-de-los-mapas/.

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