

# Postcolonial Imaginaries: Care and Concrete

Daniel Williford

Concrete's contemporary ubiquity risks obscuring the conflicts and contradictions that have shaped this substance's global rise to prominence. As transnational construction firms and today's global cement industry promote technological fixes for curbing carbon emissions, there is also a need to confront the complex colonial histories that rendered concrete central to grand visions of development as well as to intimate forms of coercion and care. In Morocco, concrete's trajectory from an instrument of colonial rule to a central node within postcolonial imaginaries of development has been troubled by the ambiguous ways in which workers within the country's cement industry experienced changes to their livelihoods in the aftermath of formal independence.

Under the French Protectorate (1912–56), cement production and concrete construction in Morocco supported colonial projects to build roads, ports, military outposts and police stations – structures and infrastructures for extending French influence over land, labor and everyday life in the country. After Morocco's independence, the production of cement played a key role in nationalist conceptualizations of modernity, development and decolonization. When mixed with water and aggregate to form concrete, cement bound together postcolonial programs to deliver water, electricity and low-cost housing,

as well as a powerful “sociotechnical imaginary” (Jasanoff 2015: 4); these were public promises and performances of a safe and comfortable future for Moroccan citizens. From the speeches of public works ministers to the pages of industry journals, this sociotechnical imaginary oriented large development projects as well as the minute details of building codes. Officials, engineers and architects after independence argued that the material stability and calculability that concrete enabled – though essential for achieving national autonomy – would require maintaining certain forms of technical surveillance, labor organization and professional hierarchy inherited from the Protectorate. In this sense, concrete stabilized a paradoxical relationship between the ideals of independence and progress on one hand, and the reality of ongoing colonial relations on the other. This imaginary was interwoven, in intimate and uneven ways, with the lives and labor of workers at what was once the country’s largest cement plant.

*Shade and shadow in concrete alleyways are vestiges of Lafarge’s designed social space, the Cité Lafarge, Casablanca.*  
Photo: Daniel Williford, May 2017.



In colonial Casablanca, Cité Lafarge, today also known as Bashar al-Khayr (بشار الخير), was the heart of Morocco’s cement industry. Designed by the French architect Edmond Brion and completed in 1932 to house workers at the nearby cement plant, the project was among the first of its kind in Morocco with 142 dwellings, a mosque, collective fountains and artisanal decorative features typical of the Neo-Moroccan style (Pauty 1936: 140). By reproducing the trappings of ‘traditional’ life, the Lafarge company’s managers sought to limit the mobility of plant workers, many of whom had been recruited from the Sous region in the south and would periodically return to their villages of origin

(Hubert 1946: 7).<sup>1</sup> Colonial officials cast the careful management of this labor force as critical for producing urban modernity elsewhere in the city – as cement from the plant was employed to make concrete apartment buildings for European residents, in addition to utility poles and subterranean pipes.

<sup>1</sup> On the design and development of the Cité Lafarge, see also Cohen and Eleb 2002: 233–34.

Decolonization only heightened cement's importance to the Moroccan polity. On the eve of independence, an article appeared in the construction industry's leading professional publication, *Construire*, on the future of cement in the country. Given its status as “the foundational material for the building trades and for public works, the premier industries of a new country” and as a core “economic indicator,” cement production, Morocco's “oldest local industry,” was a source of both anticipation and anxiety for investors, officials and urban professionals during the transfer of power (Bonnett 1955: 815). Morocco's new administration would declare mass homeownership a national priority and single out autonomy in cement manufacturing as a form of decolonization and a metric of development. Cheap cement would fuel the fabrication of cinderblocks for building low-cost housing which had uncomfortably poor levels of thermal insulation.

The end of the Protectorate in 1956 brought few changes, however, to the day-to-day operations of the Lafarge cement plant. One long-term resident, Mustafa, described how for many years after independence inhabitants of the Cité continued to live without running water in their homes, relying on a handful of fountains as well as the collective oven in the middle of the neighborhood.<sup>2</sup> Electricity was rationed, but Lafarge covered the costs of the housing project as a whole. For Mustafa, shared water and electricity – and the resulting limited opportunities for personal consumption – engendered a deep sense of solidarity among residents. Company repairmen fixed cracks that appeared in the walls of workers' homes. Through the regular maintenance of the Cité's concrete dwellings, Lafarge appeared to deliver, at the scale of the project, on a promise of limited prosperity that was central to nationalist visions of progress. Yet state violence formed the backdrop to this corporate social pact. The entrance to the Cité Lafarge lies less than a hundred yards from the site of *Derb Moulay Cherif* (درب مولاي الشريف), a secret prison for political detainees during King Hassan II's reign (1961–99). Built in concrete beneath a local police station, the facility and its victims remained invisible to most of those living in the neighborhood.

<sup>2</sup> I have anonymized the former cement plant workers and residents of the Cité with whom I conducted interviews from May to July of 2017.

In the decades after independence, the company organized celebrations for state and religious holidays, such as 'Id al-'Adha (عيد الأضحى), 'Ashura' (عاشوراء) and Throne Day ('Id al-'Arsh, عيد العرش), inserting itself whenever possible into the social worlds of workers. Lafarge sponsored a New Year's festival (Ras al-Sana, رأس السنة) during which representatives of the company gave cement sacks stuffed with candy to the children of the Cité. At the time, it offered an array of welfare programs to workers: basic healthcare, schooling and small, low-interest loans. Cement sacks filled with candy presented semiotically rich moments where the company, already acting as employer, physician and banker, aimed to effect enjoyment in workers and their kin. Cement production supported stable structures, electrified homes and other forms of collective wellbeing, but for many in the project the material itself was bound up with imagined relations of familial provisioning. A single phrase recurred in interviews with former plant workers: “Lafarge was a mother” (كانت لافارج أمًا).



The company's investment in sustaining these performances of limited prosperity extended from the designed space of the housing project to the factory itself. Ahmed, a former worker, discussed developing a distinct expertise during his time at the plant. Beginning as a day laborer in 1975, he participated in professional training programs that the company sponsored and eventually became a mechanic, responsible for assembling machine parts and maintaining and repairing the plants' pumps, grinders and conveyor belts. "Lafarge was a school" (لافارج كانت مدرسة), he explained, a space to acquire meaningful technical knowledge through practice. As we spoke, in a moment of excitement, Ahmed took my notebook and quickly sketched a detailed diagram of the production process.

Another former worker, 'Aziz, lamented never learning about the operations of the machines he worked alongside. He characterized his first experiences at the factory in Casablanca as "forced labor" – inserting the French term, *travaux forcés*, to emphasize the harsh working conditions. As an example, he mentioned manually carrying cement to the silos for drying, without elevators or forklifts. 'Aziz alluded to hierarchical forms of discipline on the factory floor where many of the managers and foremen were still European when he started at the plant in 1974. Later in the conversation, he referred to his early days at Lafarge as a form of *la corvée*: the infamous regime of colonial forced labor. He also compared working at the plant to mandatory military service. In both subtle and explicit ways, 'Aziz underlined continuities between the colonial period and the nationalist project – linking unpaid labor for the colonial state and service to the Moroccan nation to his experience at the country's largest cement plant.

← *The collective oven that once served all of the Cité's residents, Casablanca.*

Photo: Daniel Williford, May 2017.

→ *The entrance to Bashar al-Khayr whose archways offer manifold openings – to doors, streets, courtyards, and toward new possible lives and livelihoods, Casablanca.*

Photo: Daniel Williford, May 2017.

As production declined at the factory during the 1980s in favor of new sites, Lafarge gradually withdrew from direct management of the Cité, which was turned over to Casablanca's Urban Agency. The inhabitants gained ownership of their homes, and the city installed individual meters for water and electricity. Residents constructed additional storeys, overshadowing the shared streets that the company gradually stopped maintaining after waves of corporate restructuring. Fresh coats of paint every few years, tree-lined avenues and clean sidewalks – these were material manifestations of a corporate social pact that has fallen apart along with the Cité's walls and alleyways. Imaginaries of development that once rested, materially and symbolically, on cement have withered since the era of structural adjustment. For former residents like Mustafa, the decay of the neighborhood's shared spaces indexes a deeper loss: the decline of forms of sociality and care which were intertwined with the extractive projects of the company.

In contemporary Morocco, concrete remains central to state-supported megaprojects such as the Casa Anfa (الدار البيضاء أنفا) business district, even as the corporatized vision of urban renewal underlying such endeavors leaves little room for the ambiguous solidarities associated with postcolonial developmentalism. For those who resided in the shadow of Morocco's first cement plant after independence, concrete still embodies surveillance and stability – two sides of a corporate social pact that has since collapsed. From the space of Cité Lafarge, cement's capacity to hold together the built environment as well as forms of life seems diminished. Yet colonial and nationalist imaginaries of modern concrete cities – with all of their contradictions – are still a lively presence here, embedded within the materialities and memoryscapes of Casablanca.

#### References:

Bonnet, Marc. 1955. "Le ciment au Maroc." *Construire* 800: 815–19.

Cohen, Jean-Louis and Monique Eleb. 2002. *Casablanca: Colonial Myths and Architectural Ventures*. New York: The Monacelli Press.

Hubert, Michel. 1946. "Casablanca: Le développement industriel: L'habitat de l'ouvrier marocain." Centre de Hautes Études d'Administration Musulmane. Fondation du Roi Abdul-Aziz Al Saoud (Casablanca). 715 MC.

Jasanoff, Sheila. 2015. "Future Imperfect: Science, Technology, and the Imaginations of Modernity." In *Dreamscapes of Modernity: Sociotechnical Imaginaries and the Fabrication of Power*, edited by Sheila Jasanoff and Sang-Hyun Kim, 1–33. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Pauty, Edmond. 1936. "Tradition et modernisme à Casablanca." *L'architecture outre-mer*: 137–48.

**Cite as:**

Williford, Daniel. 2024. "Postcolonial Imaginaries: Care and Concrete." *Roadsides* 11: 64-69. <https://doi.org/10.26034/roadsides-202401109>

---



**Daniel Williford** is Assistant Professor of History at the University of Wisconsin-Madison. He is a historian of technology with a focus on twentieth-century North Africa and the Middle East. His work examines the links between colonial modernization projects, the construction of racialized technical hierarchies, local forms of political contestation and labor, and the remaking of urban environments in the region. His current book project, *Concrete Futures: Technology and Decolonization in Modern Morocco*, narrates the history of expert efforts to govern Moroccan cities through material, organizational and financial technologies that structured who could intervene in the urban environment and how. Daniel has also published work on the history of disaster, infrastructures and the environment, and the politics of expertise and decolonization.

*Roadsides* is a diamond Open Access journal designated to be a forum devoted to exploring the social, cultural and political life of infrastructure.



⊕ [roadsides.net](http://roadsides.net)  
✉ [editor@roadsides.net](mailto:editor@roadsides.net)  
🐦 [@road\\_sides](https://twitter.com/road_sides)  
📷 [@roadsides\\_journal](https://www.instagram.com/roadsides_journal)

#### Editorial Team:

Julie Chu (University of Chicago)  
Tina Harris (University of Amsterdam)  
Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi (University of Fribourg)  
Madlen Kobi (University of Fribourg)  
Galen Murton (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)  
Nadine Plachta (James Madison University, Harrisonburg)  
Matthäus Rest (University of Fribourg)  
Alessandro Rippa (University of Oslo)  
Martin Saxer (LMU Munich)  
Christina Schwenkel (University of California, Riverside)  
Max D. Woodworth (The Ohio State University)

Collection no. 011 was edited by: **Max D. Woodworth** and **Cecilia L. Chu**

Managing editors: **Agnieszka Joniak-Lüthi** and **Tina Harris**

Copyediting: **David Hawkins**

Layout: **Chantal Hinni** and **Antoni Kwiatkowski**

Cover photo: **Vanessa Feri**

**ISSN 2624-9081**

#### Creative Commons License

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



University of  
Zurich<sup>UZH</sup>



Swiss National  
Science Foundation

UNI  
FR

UNIVERSITÉ DE FRIBOURG  
UNIVERSITÄT FREIBURG