

MAX PAGE

# The Arc of Memory and the Arc of Justice

THE FORMER TORTURE CENTERS of Buenos Aires display a rarefied elegance. Old military schools, rusticated neoclassical police stations, Gothic churches, French-inspired mansions, Spanish colonial *estancias*: state terrorism in the 1970s took place in the aged splendor of what is often called the “Paris of South America.” At the edge of the Spanish Empire, Buenos Aires was slow to win the role of capital of the new nation (it celebrated its two hundredth anniversary in 2010) and slow even to consolidate its own boundaries. So too was the system of repression in the 1970s dispersed, based in neighborhoods across the city and nation. The so-called *Guerra Sucia* or Dirty War was no war between equal armies but rather an everyday system of state terror.

A Fulbright fellowship in 2009 took me to Buenos Aires and into the middle of a long-delayed national reckoning with the state terrorism, variously called the last dictatorship, the Dirty War, or, in the words of the dictators who ruled between 1976 and 1983, the Process for National Reorganization—the state-sponsored, U.S.-supported, internal war of repression, torture, and murder of those a part of or perceived to be a part of a left-wing revolutionary movement. I visited the Clandestine Detention Centers as well as official and neighborhood memorials to the *desaparecidos*, or disappeared, and interviewed human rights activists, museum officials, memorial designers, and artists obsessed with creatively keeping the legacy of that time in the public eye.

Argentina was the leader of a continent-wide wave of state terrorism: more paranoid about left-wing movements and more committed and organized in its repressive policies than other nations, inspiring and teaching the neighboring countries linked together by Operation Condor, a campaign of terror by right-wing dictatorships against perceived threats from the communist Left. Participant nations in *Plan Cóndor*—Argentina, Paraguay, Chile, Uruguay, Bolivia, and Brazil—were aided by the United States. The regime of Carlos Menem, the president of Argentina beginning in 1989, put an end to the persecution of those involved in torture and insisted on closure through erasure. Indeed, he proposed that sites

related to the dictatorship, for example, the ESMA detention center, be razed as acts of “national reconciliation.” The election of Nestor Kirchner as president in 2003 reopened the debate over the era of state terrorism and how it should be remembered. Kirchner, whose wife, Cristina Fernández de Kirchner, succeeded him as president (he died in October 2010) and was elected to a second term in 2011, was much more sympathetic to the victims and their memories and built political support on the left in part by demanding new accountability of the perpetrators and new respect for the victims and their families.

Today, Argentina is at the vanguard of the struggle over how to preserve sites, remember that time, and honor the victims. Thirty-five years after it was turned into a detention center, the main building at ESMA is slowly being opened to the public, while the debate over the larger site continues, seemingly endlessly. Just a mile east is the vast Parque de la Memoria (Park of Memory), the national memorial to the desaparecidos. And everywhere in Buenos Aires are popular, grassroots memorials and public art installations, flourishing on the sidewalks and walls across the sprawling city. Those memorial interventions into the landscape of the city hold powerful lessons for other nations wrestling with their own painful pasts.

IN A COLLECTION OF LECTURES titled *Seven Nights*, the Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges highlighted a peculiar paradox of someone learning a new language: their ignorance makes these learners especially sensitive to the resonances of each word. Borges wrote that “language is an aesthetic creation . . . . A proof is that when we study a language, when we are obliged to see the words up close, we experience them as beautiful or not. Studying a language, one sees the words with a magnifying glass.” Recounting a group of students, himself included, who were learning Anglo-Saxon, he noted that “what always happens, when one studies a language, happened. Each one of the words stood out as though it had been carved, as though it were a talisman.” The visitor to a new language, paradoxically, has the capacity to connect to the nuances of a language in ways native speakers have often lost. A neophyte to Spanish, I was able to take note that the word we in English use for something “really deep”—profound—comes from the word meaning deep in the physical sense (*profundus*)—as, in Spanish, a “lago profundo,” a deep lake.

I think something similar happens to a visitor to a new city. In our eagerness to learn the ways of the city and connect it to past travels and

our home, we are alive to every detail, even as we are oblivious to the many layers of experience that the inhabitant knows deep within herself, which operates almost like instinct. As I explored Buenos Aires, all my senses were in peak form, absorbing and filtering the uniqueness of the city.

But as much as was revealed and as much as can be gleaned from seeing, listening, smelling, so much cannot be known. The great events of the past are narrated in buildings and monuments or in the words of tour guides. But the horrific events are often rendered mute in the landscape of the city, unless they are given a voice. That voice is made through the intentional work of art or craft in the physical environment of the city.

In other words, to explore in the spaces of the city the public memory of that awful time, *porteños* and visitors alike need a guide. Traditional guidebooks I had: four guides to Buenos Aires, soon to be supplemented by additional books acquired on my walks through the city and its glorious bookstores. But what was missing—for me and for human rights activists—was a guide to the memory of the desaparecidos and to the memory of state terrorism, which tore this society apart in the 1970s and 1980s and which to this day remains in the minds of many people the most horrible episode of a century that experienced many coups, assassinations, and ill-conceived wars.

I didn't have the guidebook I needed, until one day late in September 2009, when I met Patricia Tappatá de Valdez, the head of Memoria Abierta, the leading human rights organization in Argentina, at a conference it sponsored to celebrate the publication of *Memorias en la Ciudad: Señales del Terrorismo de Estado en Buenos Aires* (Memories in the City: Signs of State Terrorism in Buenos Aires). Dozens of books have been written about this era in South American history, but there has never been anything like *Memorias en la Ciudad*. It immediately caught my attention: it was a beautifully executed history and guide to sites and memorials related to the era of state terrorism. While I was initially drawn to grand public obelisks and fountains, *Memorias en la Ciudad* steered me to neighborhood memorials, such as *baldosas* (street tiles) that mark the homes from which people were forcibly removed, never to be seen again. Where I looked up and saw a magnificent pile worthy of a place along the Champs-Élysées, *Memorias en la Ciudad* revealed a Clandestine Detention Center where hundreds had been incarcerated. There are dozens of such places all across Buenos Aires, as documented in the book. *Memorias en la Ciudad* instantly became my guidebook to the history of that time

and to the history of continuing attempts over the past thirty years to remember and interpret that horrific era. The book became, very simply, my guidebook to the city, the book without which I never left home. It essentially remapped Buenos Aires for me and will do the same, I believe, for many other English-speaking visitors and scholars.

One of the most compelling aspects of this book is that it eliminates the line between historic site and memorial site. The book is organized geographically, revealing, neighborhood by neighborhood, the network of places related to the system of repression. But it identifies both the spaces where state terrorism was executed and the communal memorials to that era. The book is therefore a record of three decades of approaches to public history and historic preservation, a history of the events of the dictatorship but also of the echoes of response by citizen activists. It begins in 1977, less than a year after the coup, at the *Plaza de Mayo*, where the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* (the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo) began what is the longest running act of defiant memory making, marching in circles in front of the presidential palace, the *Casa Rosada*, their children's diapers tied to their heads like kerchiefs. It charts the varied memorial responses, all the way up to 2009 and the opening of the national memorial to the disappeared.

The book is, then, not only a map but also a history of memorial efforts, not particular simply to Argentina but to other nations that have contended with their own difficult pasts. Indeed, *Memorias en la Ciudad* is a record of an international trade in memorial ideas over the past three decades. The baldosas, those tiles which mark with great simplicity the homes of those who were disappeared, were inspired by Gunter Demnig's *stolpersteine* ("stumbling blocks"), placed, at first illegally and with little ceremony, in front of the homes where Jews of the Nazi era once lived. And the national memory to the disappeared, with its wall of names, was impossible to conceive without Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C. Argentina's citizens and artists have taken these ideas and made them their own. They have become exporters of their own unique approaches, such as the ubiquitous graffiti and murals. Buenos Aires is a city in which every wall is considered an artistic canvas or a political chat board. *Memorias en la Ciudad* is a record of memorials that will be visible for years as well as of those that will disappear tomorrow. Spray-painted images of a man's cap, the symbol of Jorge Julio López, who disappeared after testifying against torturers, appear and then are covered over. Trees lining the Avenida San Juan, planted there to

mark the disappeared of that neighborhood, are dying in the inhospitable environment of a busy road. But the *baldosas* and the national memorial and the hundreds of markers in schools and stores and theaters may remain for decades. By providing a map not only of Argentina's efforts to remember the era of state terrorism, but also of the universal attempts to hold on to the memory of victims and of a state that saw in its own citizens a threat, *Memorias en la Ciudad* is invaluable.

Argentina is "supremely enigmatic," writes the historian Marguerite Feitlowitz in her magisterial *Lexicon of Terror*. A nation of enormous wealth, high literacy, and enormous scientific and industrial achievement, Argentina has had, through much of the twentieth century, a propensity toward "self-destruction," she writes, in the form of violent coups, the most pronounced symptom of an apparent aversion to democracy. But in its citizens' quest to remember, recall, warn, and demand, Argentina and Buenos Aires are a model of the power of public history. Just as the dictators predicted in the 1970s, Argentina has been the vanguard of the left, if not in the ways the regimes of the 1970s predicted. Argentina's artists and human rights activists, family members of the disappeared, and graffiti muralists have forced their country to confront the era of state terrorism, and in doing so they have inspired a similar process in Chile, Uruguay, Guatemala, and Brazil.

IN A POSTSCRIPT to *Whigs and Hunters*, his remarkable study of the implementation of the Black Act in eighteenth-century England as an attempt to control the rural poor, the great historian of the working class E. P. Thompson made what appears to be a complete about-face in his argument. After maintaining for over four hundred pages that the law and the courts had conspired to control and punish the poor in Great Britain and that, more universally, the law was a tool enabling the ruling classes to oppress the poor, Thompson sought to rescue the principle of the rule of law for the political left. "The law," he wrote, in its forms and traditions, entailed principles of equity and universality which, perforce, had to be extended to all sorts and degrees of men. What had been devised by men of property as a defence against arbitrary power could be turned into service as an apologia for property in the face of the propertyless.

The rule of law itself, imposing of effective inhibitions upon power and the defence of the citizen from power's all-intrusive claims, seems to me to be an unqualified human good. To deny or belittle this good is, in this dangerous century when the resources and pretensions of power

continue to enlarge, a desperate error of intellectual abstraction.

I THOUGHT OF THOMPSON'S EMOTIONAL PLEA in May 2011 as I sat behind a glass wall in a dingy courtroom in the basement of a nondescript government building near the new port of Buenos Aires. While traveling with a group of students and faculty, I had read that one of the hearings of the newly launched trials against members of the dictatorship and military would be taking place while we were there. I ventured down past the elegant Plaza San Martin, the English Tower, the decrepit, once-grand train stations to a drab complex of bureaucratic warehouses on the edge of the city's port.

The proceeding was quite boring, as a healthy, democratic judicial system should be. The wheels of justice do not spin—that sounds far too efficient and energetic. Rather, they roll forward, as if in an endless fall, again and again, around and around. In the courtroom people testified, the stenographer recorded, family members listened, the accused sat expressionless. The experience of the trial was, on its face, unexciting, endless, and frustratingly inconclusive.

At the very end of 2009, twenty-six years after the dictatorship, some of the key leaders of the military dictatorship were finally forced to appear before a judge or were brought before the court again after having been pardoned. In the spring of 2012, with the conviction of Jorge Videla, the dictator who led the coup in 1976, as well as of other leaders and military officials who conspired to steal some five hundred children from their imprisoned mothers, there was a sense that closure might be more imminent in Argentina than ever before. None of it is final, and certainly not for the families whose loved ones remain unidentified, simply disappeared. (There is a minority but strongly held view that there can be no closure until those on the left who killed and tortured their enemies are also brought to justice. *Memorias en la Ciudad* is unapologetically focused on acts of state terrorism, not on the crimes of guerrilla groups or individuals.) But the conviction of the most notorious perpetrators was enough for one of the stolen children, Victoria Montenegro, who learned of her true identity thirty years after being kidnapped, to declare that “with this verdict we are repairing what happened.”

The act of repair—“making one whole,” as the law frequently declares—is often seen as the work of the courts. In the debates over public history and the difficulty of remembering the difficult pasts of nations and communities, we often separate public memory from procedural jus-

tice. Prosecutions, or truth commissions, must do their work to bring the guilty to justice, while artists and community members must remember and recall, bringing healing to a family or community. Artists and activists, we commonly understand, create *baldosas* and national memorials as a way of recalling the past and coming to terms with it. *Porteños* are remembering their loved ones and also bearing witness to the evil perpetrated by their political leaders, sometimes with citizens' silent complicity. The work of public art and memorialization is to peer into the past for solace and in order to warn the future.

But *Memorias en la Ciudad* suggests something different. What struck me as I walked the streets of Buenos Aires with the book in hand is how crucial the artistic efforts to expand public memory were in creating the conditions for procedural justice in the present. The post-dictatorship-era political leaders—the democratically elected Raúl Alfonsín and the conservative Menem—worked to move beyond legal justice in order to achieve national reconciliation, Alfonsín fearing another coup and Menem defending his allies. Alfonsín imposed a “full stop” on judicial trials after launching one of the most far-reaching investigations into the era of state terrorism, the so-called *Nunca Más* commission. Menem rescinded many of the convictions, rehabilitated many of the perpetrators, and moved forward with many of the economic policies of the dictatorship, including a disastrous privatization and deregulation plan which brought Argentina to bankruptcy at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

With the judicial system hijacked, it was up to grassroots organizations to keep up the drumbeat for real justice. The memorial interventions in *Memorias en la Ciudad* were not simply looking backward or far into the future. They were political acts, keeping alive the fact that there would be no closure until the perpetrators, many of whom were living in wealth in Buenos Aires's northern suburbs, had been punished in a court of law. When that day came, there was a sense that the wall had been climbed, and Argentinians could look out to a world beyond these crimes and victims. The punishment of the guilty and the prospect of a new Argentina were made possible by the memorial efforts of grassroots activists over the course of three decades. They redeemed the rule of law and the honor of the nation from those who hysterically and violently, methodically and ideologically murdered thousands.

To this day I keep my courtroom ticket from that day in my wallet. It is nothing but a piece of paper with some xeroxed signature on it, the squiggled mark of a bureaucrat—so very different from the inven-

tive, creative, often brightly colored memorials to the desaparecidos. It is, however, the most important token—call it a memorial—I could bring back from Buenos Aires. The goal of the artists and activists who painted the murals, preserved the detention centers, and designed the memorials goes far beyond punitive justice. They also worked to remember their loved ones and to remind the Argentina of today and of the future of its violent past. In addition, they worked so that the historical record would be set right. But one of the important goals of *Memoria Abierta*, the *H.I.J.O.S.*, the *Madres de Plaza de Mayo* and all of their efforts at remembrance was directed toward achieving justice: bringing the perpetrators to face their accusers and be punished for their crimes against society and humanity.