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THE SPACE OF REMEMBERING: COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE RECONFIGURATION OF CONTESTED SPACE IN ARGENTINA'S ESMA

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Summary || This paper explores the ongoing history of the ESMA museum's development and argues that the intrinsic and conflictual collective memory work involved is characterized by competing desires to remember and to forget, rooted in the physical, visible, and public space of ESMA.

Keywords || Collective Memory | Public Space | ESMA | Dirty War | Representations of Torture.

La fotografía no tiene fin. La imagen que había conseguido reconstruir, el retrato de mi hermano de los hombros para arriba detenido en la ESMA resultó estar incompleta

Marcelo Brodsky
La Camiseta

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1 | *Escuela de Suboficiales de Mecánica de la Armada.*

2 | *Comisión Nacional sobre la Desaparición de Personas.*

0. Introduction

The Navy Mechanics School, better known by its Spanish acronym ESMA¹, sits on Libertador Avenue, the main avenue extending through the bustling sprawl of Argentina's capital city, Buenos Aires. Surrounded by lakes and parks, this 17-acre parcel of land lays claim to some of the finest real estate in the city. The two-story portico of its iconic building is an imposing Greek inspired structure accentuated by a finely manicured lawn (International Justice Tribune, 2008: 1). The aesthetic beauty of the property belies ESMA's troubled and sordid history. During the Dirty War from 1976 to 1983, ESMA was one of the most important illegal detention centers in Argentina. In this time period, the military's moral crusade, named the Process or *El Proceso*, sought to impose «Western Values» on Argentina, while quelling the supposed threat of terrorism from both the political right and left. ESMA served as one of the most notorious repositories for illegal detention, torture, and murder of anyone perceived as a threat to this campaign of terror.

The military Junta found its own expression of state-sanctioned terrorism within the many buildings of ESMA, where over 5,000 «subversives» were taken, and the great majority of those imprisoned were eventually murdered. After the military was overthrown, the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (CONADEP)² was appointed by then president Raúl Alfonsín to conduct investigations of the hundreds of illegal detention centers and concentration camps that functioned during the Dirty War. The report describes ESMA as follows: «The Navy Mechanics School (ESMA) was not just a secret detention centre where torture was used, but also the operational hub of a complex organization which may have tried to hide the crimes it committed by exterminating its victims» (CONADEP, 1986: 79). ESMA functioned as a center where victims were tortured and brutally murdered, as well as the seat of military operations that authorized and enacted state-sanctioned violence, committing grave human rights violations. After a democratic government in 1983 replaced the Junta, ESMA was not easily forgotten by the nation's consciousness, particularly after the circulation of the CONADEP report, and it rapidly became emblematic of the military repression.

In recent years, ESMA has encountered a «profound resignification» not only in public space but also within the continuously negotiated collective memories of the nation's inhabitants (Foster, 2006: 137). The process of transforming ESMA from a symbol of state power that oppresses, tortures, and murders its populace to a public space that testifies to the memory of the Dirty War, to the experience of victims and family of the Disappeared, and to human rights, symbolizes the nation's struggle to come to terms with the past³ amidst conflicting desires to forget and to remember. In a desire to remember and render visible the crimes of the state, human rights groups, city and state legislators, and survivors have all been working toward the reclamation of this contested space from the blood stained hands of the military. In the years to come, they hope to establish ESMA as a museum that educates visitors and commemorates victims of the Dirty War. This paper explores the ongoing history of the museum's development and argues that the intrinsic and conflictual collective memory work involved is characterized by competing desires to remember and to forget within national consciousness, rooted in the physical, visible, and public space of ESMA. ESMA becomes symbolic of opposing groups longing to impart two competing narratives of the Dirty War within the nation's memory.

1. Pathways Towards a Museum

The struggle for the utilization of the 34-building complex of ESMA is a reflection of the fact that creating a museum from this concentration camp was not an idea borne from the nation's unanimous consensus. Many still denied or even condoned the atrocities of the Dirty War, while others, including not surprisingly high-ranking military officers, wanted to move forward by striking this past from the nation's history. The importance of developing a museum was and still is intricately linked to a culture of impunity that has been without reparations and punishment for criminals of the dictatorship, despite the fact that amnesty laws of the early 1980s were finally annulled in 2003. Many of those criminals are alive and well in Argentina and have never been officially or legally held accountable for their crimes against humanity (Daniels, 2008: 3).

The road to a future museum merits a brief narrative history that captures the struggle to claim this space both within and outside the government. In 1998, President Carlos Menem signed a decree that transferred ESMA to the Naval Base of Puerto Belgrano. This decree was later declared unconstitutional in 2001. In 1999, many military leaders, including the Minister of Defense, openly opposed the conversion of ESMA into museums or places for study. The year 2000 brought Resolution 131 that officially established the «Working

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3 | Theodor W. Adorno explores *Aufarbeitung*, inadequately translated into English as «coming to terms with» in his essay entitled *What Does Coming to Terms with the Past Mean?* He examines Germany's post-war position as marked by a desire to move from the shadows of the Nazi period and, in doing so, evading a past that Adorno views as still «so intensely alive» (1986: 115).

Commission for the Creation of a Museum of Memory» formally titled «The Never Again Memory Institute» This institute later disbanded over disparate views. The governor presented the proposal for the «Space of Memory»⁴ to the legislature in 2001. In 2002, Law 961 created the «Space for Memory Institute» with the express purpose to «safeguard and protect the transmission of memory and history of events that took place during the State terrorism of the 70s and early 80s» (memoriaabierta.org.ar). In a formative step in the Museum of Memory's establishment in 2004, President Nestor Kirchner signed an agreement that ensured ESMA as the site for the future Museum of Memory. This year also marked an agreement, which has yet to be ratified by city legislature, between city and national government to work together for a «Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights» (memoriaabierta.org.ar)⁵

2. Forgetting

The Government has vacillated between preserving these buildings and tearing them down (Guembre, 2008: 64). This ambivalence is due in part to the often-troubled relationship between the Argentine government and the specific human right's groups working towards the creation of the museum. Many of these groups, including the Mothers and Grandmothers of the Plaza de Mayo, formed during the military dictatorship to search for the Disappeared (Guembre, 2008: 63). At great risk, the Mothers and Grandmothers had made themselves visible through their spectacles in protest in the Plaza de Mayo situated outside of the Casa Rosada, the main seat of government and home to many troubled acts of history. The military's anxiety with their visibility in the public space of the Plaza de Mayo, which was so deeply rooted in the national politic, was carried over into the struggle surrounding ESMA as the possible designation for a museum after the dictatorship had been overthrown.

After the Dirty War, the military continued the use of the buildings as a Navy school. ESMA was only fully vacated in 2007, three years after President Kirchner secured ESMA as a site for the museum. Before leaving the grounds, soldiers had placed a shooting-target on the front door of the entrance and destroyed some of the buildings (Daniels, 2008: 4). Through this act of hostility, as well as open resistance from other persons and factions, it is clear that the possibility of a pure reclamation of this space was not possible, and these particular memories of the past were subject to complex negotiations in the nation's present.

The buildings of ESMA continued to serve as a reminder to the military of a past they wanted to forget and to «disappear» from the memory of others, and, through their physical destruction hoped

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4 | *Espacio para la Memoria*

5 | Memoria Abierta or «Open Memory» is an association of five human rights organizations that have been crucial to the process of claiming the space of ESMA. Most of the member organizations were developed during the Dirty War to search for the Disappeared (Guembre, 2008: 63).

to erase this memory from national consciousness. This logic paralleled tactics used in the Dirty War. The Argentine government took victims in the «nacht und nebel erlass» in order to avoid making public martyrs of them and to diminish the public's ability to assign blame or responsibility to the state (Arditti, 1999: 13)⁶ Many maimed and dead bodies haunted the streets of Argentina, but the state was quick to divert blame elsewhere for how and why these dead kept floating to the surface⁷. After the Junta's fall was inevitable following the disastrous Falklands War, the military took pains to destroy documents, bodies, and evidence of their crimes. Many years later, the attempt to destroy the buildings at ESMA appears to be an extension of this intent to eliminate physical evidence in order to discourage memory of the experience.

The external pressure of the military and other high-ranking government officials has been met with internal strife between human rights organizations that want to see the museum project through (Daniels, 2008: 4). Both groups are negotiating remembrances of the past while calling attention to the notion that there is no such thing as objective and unadulterated history. Maurice Halbwachs, the French sociologist credited with coining the term «collective memory», emphasizes the notion that a nation's memory of the past is constructed with the needs of the present in mind (McCormack, 2007: 4). The military desires to avoid further scrutiny from the public, while human rights groups, many members of which are survivors and family members of the Disappeared, want a public museum space that advances knowledge of the crimes committed during the state-run terror of the Dirty War and establishes a permanent remembrance of them. In this sense, the physical possession of ESMA is also endowed with the symbolic custody of memory space within the nation's consciousness. Those opposing the formation of the museum assert that they want to «move forward» into the future with the unspoken knowledge that transforming ESMA into a site of memory would only encourage the populace to scrutinize the military's crimes further. By physically displacing the military from ESMA, the «fiction of power» that made their crimes possible in the first place and that supports and reinforces the concept that human rights violations were necessary for the future of Argentina, was also being dismantled in the process (Scarry, 1985: 18).

These opposing group memories or narratives of the Dirty War continue to be «in a constant state of rearrangement under the pressure of competing sources of information often in conflict with each other» (Sorlin, 1999: 105). Within a very visible urban space, the ruminations and struggles over ESMA have been the source of controversial and competing memory work that points to a conflicted national consciousness of what to remember and what to forget. Collective memory is selective, which highlights the shared

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6 | Given Argentina's troubling historical relationship with Nazi Germany, it is no surprise that the military junta borrowed many of their «tactics» from the SS. The «Night and Fog Decree» was no exception.

7 | The Argentine military state's fictions became increasingly more difficult to preserve: «As evidence of atrocities accumulated—bodies, tortured and dismembered, were washing up along the Plate River—official denial became harder to maintain, and explanations grew increasingly bizarre» (Feitlowitz, 1998: 25).

importance of both what is remembered and what is forgotten. The most appealing «campaigns» to the public are often those that gain strength in national consciousness. It has only been through a multi-year struggle that human rights groups have been able to obtain ESMA as their own and embark on their own process of memorializing their view of the nation's history.

3. Remembering

For survivors and families of the Disappeared, the presence of a museum is also a means to reengage and manage the trauma of the past. Through the museum, these groups can produce a narrative that pays homage to their family members while educating the public to the human rights violations that were committed. It should be noted that many families have not received word and do not know the whereabouts of their family members who disappeared and are presumed dead. By embodying their memory within a historical museum context and producing a coherent narrative of remembrance, they participate in acts of mourning that had been thwarted by the vicissitudes of their trauma. The grounds were officially vacated in October of 2007, and ESMA was relinquished to the national human rights secretariat and, in turn, to the Memorial Institute. Purveyors of the museum project were faced with what exactly to do with the buildings⁸. The management of buildings at ESMA has been divided amongst several organizations, which have transformed several of them into a cultural center, National Memory Archives and human rights exhibits (International Justice Tribune, 2008: 2). All of these are notable, non-traditional approaches to museums. Although the development of the Museum of Memory is still an ongoing process, the diverse range of actions taken in just a few of the buildings at ESMA reflects the varied interpretations of the representations of memory.

The debate over how to transform the buildings from an emblem of state violence into a space that adequately addresses questions of memory has divided human rights groups, victims' families, state entities, as well as intellectuals and artists. Further complicating matters, the museum's administration is divided between both the city offices of Buenos Aires and the Argentine National Government. In his aptly titled book, *Memoria en construcción*, Marcelo Brodsky, a photographer who was exiled to Spain during the Dirty War and whose brother was imprisoned in ESMA, gathers photographs, essays and texts from leading intellectuals and artists that addresses questions of memory related to the development of the Museum of Memory at ESMA. He poses several pressing questions at the outset of his text that capture the essence of the debate: «How do you explain torture

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8 | Museum doors were officially opened to the public in October of 2007. Still today, visits are only permitted if solicited in advance by email.

and sadism? How do you transform a space of horror into a space of memory or are the two inextricably bound to each other in this case? How do you tell the stories of individuals who have disappeared? Should the space be dedicated solely to memory or should it also be dedicated to human rights? How do you remain hopeful for younger visitors? How does the space dictate representation and transmission?» (Translation mine from Spanish, Brodsky, 2005: 45). In order to address these extremely complex questions, he notes that the Museum of Memory should not be a traditional museum or simply a morbid reconstruction of a death camp.

Many human rights groups wish to see at least part of the space dedicated to the promotion of human rights. This indicates that much of this «collaboration of the community in acts of remembrance» binds memory with justice (Young, 1988: 189). The name of the museum actually reads, «The Space for Memory and the Promotion and Defense of Human Rights»⁹. Miriam Lewis, one of only 150 ESMA survivors, is a proponent of a «living museum so that future generations don't commit the same mistakes» (Daniels, 2008: 2). By linking justice with memory, the Museum of Memory creates a temporal relationship between past, present and future that keeps alive the memory of the past in the present and, in turn, discourages future «mistakes». This concept of memory as dynamic stands in opposition to that of memory as static, unchanging, and fixed in time «that allows our icons of remembrance to harden into idols of remembrance» of more traditional museum spaces (Young, 1988: 189).

The Mothers of the Disappeared also support a «living» museum that encourages visitors to interact with the space through lectures, exhibits, and performances that promote participation. Mercedes Morofío, one of the leaders of this organization states that: «We don't want a museum because we haven't buried our children. Until they tell us where they are, as far as we're concerned, our children are still alive» (International Justice Tribune, 2008: 2). The documentation and focus on memory related to the museum's space speaks to the difficulty in representing the figure of the Disappeared who is neither alive nor dead. By creating the symbolically infused presence of the Disappeared, devotion of the space to «living» memory serves to grant a humanizing perspective to their life stories. At the same time, it repels the attempt of the military to eliminate, from sight and memory, evidence of their crimes, and serves to counteract the dehumanization of the individual body in ESMA. Living memory is just one of many methodologies that some of the buildings at the museum have embraced. With a diffuse administrative structure, the Museum of Memory can positively accept varied approaches to memory, but on the other hand, it may constitute a risk to overall

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9 | «Espacio para la Memoria y para la Promoción y Defensa de los Derechos Humanos»

cohesion for visitors in its final development.

4. Conclusion

ESMA is not just a physical space; it is more importantly a repository of memory. As visitors step inside its gates or walkers take a casual stroll in front of its impressive structure, the building stands as a reminder to remember. The collective memory that settles itself into Argentina's national consciousness is selective and subject to the narratives that are produced in and around ESMA. Two opposing groups, participating in continual and conflicting negotiations of how the Dirty War should be remembered, have characterized this competitive memory work. This debate is rooted in an edifice that once stood as the «gorgon's head» of state power, but has now been transfigured into a space in which victims of this regime remember the Disappeared (Coetzee, 1986: 4). Although proponents of the museum are united in the belief that this metamorphosis is necessary, they cannot agree on the memorializing process that should take place. This exposition on the history of ESMA raises further questions about the relationship of physical place to mental space in national consciousness as well as other questions that warrant further exploration: What ethical considerations, particularly in relationship to representations of torture, are important in the emergent Museum of Memory for both the developer and the museum visitor? How will history transform the ways in which visitors interact with the museum? How do survivors interact with the museum space? Does the museum serve a therapeutic function? Does communal memory work allow the nation to mourn and forget? What are the repercussions of forgetting? What does the viewer take away from the museum; what does the viewer remember? How does the struggle over ESMA compare or contrast to Germany's struggle to transform concentration camps into museums? How does ESMA's high visibility in an urban space increase its effect and importance in memory negotiations? Only time and the unmet future of the Museum of Memory will answer many of these questions. But it is certain that memory matters and binds us as nations, while in that untamed, often wild and unpredictable terrain of national consciousness the history of the past will continually assert itself in the experience of the present.

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