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## MEMORYSCAPES: PLACE, MOBILITY, AND MEMORY IN THE POST-DICATORIAL SOUTHERN CONE

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Dr. Susan Larson, Director of Graduate Studies

MEMORYSCAPES:  
PLACE, MOBILITY, AND MEMORY IN THE POST-DICATORIAL SOUTHERN  
CONE

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DISSERTATION

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A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the  
College of Arts and Sciences  
at the University of Kentucky

By  
Rebecca M. Pittenger

Lexington, Kentucky

Director: Dr. Susan Carvalho, Professor of Hispanic Studies

Lexington, Kentucky

2011

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## ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

### MEMORYSCAPES: PLACE, MOBILITY, AND MEMORY IN THE POST-DICTATORIAL SOUTHERN CONE

The urban landscapes of Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay lay bare the markings of these countries' turbulent political and economic pasts, their transition to democracy, and diverse efforts to preserve memory. Claudia Feld's observation that these countries have experienced a 'memory boom'—not a deficit—in recent years manifests itself as much culturally and politically as it does spatially, through the creation of memorials, memory parks, museums, and memory-related performances and discourses. Along these same lines, narratives of memory recur among artistic and cultural works of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone—not exclusively among memorials and other designated sites of recollection, but along the everyday corridors and causeways of some of South America's most populous cities, and rather unexpectedly, among seemingly generic sites of consumerism and transit. In fact, my reading of literary and cinematic works by Alberto Fuguet, Sergio Chejfec, Ignacio Agüero, and Fabián Bielinsky, and my examination of Uruguay's Punta Carretas Shopping Center, suggests that memory has not been easily corralled into designated sites nor erased through modern spaces and lifestyles; instead, each of the works analyzed in this study reveals that palimpsests of memory can appear often and, in many cases, spontaneously among all angles of the cityscape.

KEYWORDS: Memory, Post-Dictatorship, Mobility, Alberto Fuguet,  
Punta Carretas Shopping Center

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October 27, 2011  
Date

MEMORYSCAPES:  
PLACE, MOBILITY, AND MEMORY IN THE POST-DICATORIAL SOUTHERN  
CONE

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October 27, 2011  
Date

To my Grandfather Tress, for his undeniable influence over this project, and to my Fifth Grade teacher Chet Augustine, who asked me to dedicate my first book to him.

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## CHAPTER 1

### Introduction

The study of memorialization and other commemorative practices has had an impact on scholarly research in the Humanities and Social Sciences over the past twenty years, as well as on the Southern Cone of South America, a region beset by political unrest, violence, and, eventually, dictatorship, during the 1970s and 80s. A plebiscite ended the last regional dictatorship in Chile in 1989, with the others examined in this study ending in Argentina in 1983 and Uruguay in 1985.<sup>1</sup> Scholars have defined the post-dictatorship period as a political transition from authoritarianism to democracy, and culturally, as a shift towards memory, as each country has grappled and continues to struggle with whether or not—and often, how—to memorialize its recent past.<sup>2</sup> During this time, activist organizations redirected their efforts from ending human rights abuses to preserving and defending memory as part of this period’s broader re-democratization process.<sup>3</sup> The contemporary urban landscapes of Chile, Argentina, and Uruguay lay bare the markings of these countries’ turbulent political and economic pasts, their transition to democracy, and, subsequently, their engagement with those individuals and organizations

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<sup>1</sup> This dissertation does not wish to imply that the dictatorship or post-dictatorship experience was uniform among these three countries; but rather, seeks out themes common among them.

<sup>2</sup> In their respective works on Chile, historians Peter Winn and Steve Stern identify the post-dictatorship as ending in 2002, over a decade after the country’s return to democratic governance; I argue, however, that the legacy of the Southern Cone dictatorships extends to the present.

<sup>3</sup> In her article, which contrasts two distinct sites of memory in Buenos Aires—*Parque de la memoria* and *Club atlético*—Silvia Tandeciarz notes a cultural and scholarly interest in memory, and cites formal Argentine naval officer Adolfo Scilingo’s 1995 confession as its catalyst. Political and economic instability in subsequent years would only serve to strengthen the public’s interest in memory: “the process of resignifying the past it accelerated reached a maximum visibility with Argentina’s 2001 financial and institutional collapse, which in turn set the stage for the effusive eruption of memory we witness today in the Buenos Aires cityscape” (152).

seeking to preserve memory through place.<sup>4</sup> Claudia Feld's observation that countries of the Southern Cone have experienced, in her words, a 'memory boom'—and not a deficit—manifests itself as much culturally and politically as it does spatially, therefore, through the creation of memorials, memory parks, museums, memory-related performances and other discourses (2002).<sup>5</sup>

More philosophically, writings by Pierre Nora and Andreas Huyssen on the theoretical underpinnings of official places of memory represented a watershed in discussions about the intersection of place and memory.<sup>6</sup> Both authors contend that the surge in memory discourse—in the form of secondary scholarship—and memorialization over the past decades results, somewhat paradoxically, from memory's diminished impact on daily life and space, and as Huyssen has specified in the case of newly revived democracies, fear that a traumatic past will be actively or passively forgotten.<sup>7</sup> For example, to draw on an example from the Southern Cone, Silvia Tandeciarz cites the Argentinean *Punto Final* legislation, enacted a year after the dictatorship, which provided

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<sup>4</sup> Alexander Wilde calls these displays of memory "irruptions of memory," which, he claims, "are part of a counterpoint of what might be called the expressive dimension of transitional politics, conditioning its character as they interrupt the flow of normal bargaining over budgets and public policies" (474). The title of Idelber Avelar's work on post-dictatorial Latin American literature, *Untimely Present*, evokes the same phenomenon, albeit from a literary perspective.

<sup>5</sup> In his work on memory struggles in dictatorship and post-dictatorship Chile, Steve Stern comments that Chile currently experiences what he calls a "memory impasse," as opposed to outright oblivion. The historian recognizes the role of cultural amnesia while also calling attention to the importance of memory discourse both during and after the dictatorship. This study, however, will draw more from Feld's observations about a recent surge in memory and memory-related discourses.

<sup>6</sup> James Young also contributes to this subject through his work on memorials, and more specifically, efforts to memorialize the Holocaust. Although I hope to study manifestations of memory beyond the memorial, Young does update the traditional definition of memorials—as permanent, land-anchored, and unchanging places of memory—to include the more plastic elements of memory and its expression. He writes, "I treat all memory-sites as memorials, the plastic objects within these sites as monuments. A memorial may be a day, a conference, or a space, but it need not be a monument" (4).

<sup>7</sup> Fredrick A. Jameson echoes Nora's observation that, in his words, "there is no such thing as spontaneous memory," when he writes: "our entire contemporary social system has little by little begun to lose its capacity to retain its own past" ("Postmodernism" 125). Both theorists concur that artificial reminders—be they archives, anniversaries, or memorials—help to preserve memory from wearing away with the modern society's accelerated passing of time.

legal amnesty to those accused of political violence and abuse of power, as representative of the politics of forgetting in these countries (152). In this same vein, others have argued that modernity itself—involving accelerated mobility and spatial uniformity—has only distanced the individual further from a sense of locality and a meaningful relationship with the past (Bauman, 2000; Sarlo, 2004). When juxtaposed, these perspectives suggest that contemporary expressions of memory only boom consequentially: as a reaction to an equal and sustained eruption in forgetting. Stated differently, memorials and other commemorative markers dot modern cityscapes with such frequency only because urban landscapes and lifestyles—and the politics that influence them—would be incapable of sustaining memory otherwise.

While I found this information compelling, the more I delved into artistic and cultural works of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone, the more I encountered recurring and often dovetailing tropes of memory, urban space, and mobility. Narratives of memory recur among these works—not exclusively within the realm of memorials and other designated sites of recollection, but among the everyday corridors and causeways of some of South America's most populous cities, and rather unexpectedly, among seemingly generic sites of consumerism and transit. In fact, I was surprised to learn how many works from this period incorporate memories associated with the Southern Cone dictatorships with themes of everyday practices, movements, and unmistakably modern urban landscapes. Consequently, it became increasingly apparent to me that perspectives seeking to locate memory only among places of commemoration were nearsighted in this case. Rather, to highlight instances in which the past and memory continue to imprint contemporary urban landscapes in this region, I found it useful to consider literary critic

Idelber Avelar's idea of the "oppositional intellectual," whose task is, in his words, "to point out the residue left by every substitution, thereby showing that the past is never simply erased" (2).<sup>8</sup> Thus, although Nora also uses the concept of "residue" metaphorically to reference places of memory—"There are sites, *lieux de mémoire*, in which a residual sense of continuity remains," he writes—I explore residual memories and other manifestations of the Southern Cone's turbulent past as they appear and reappear among previously underexplored landmarks of the modern cityscape (1).

The objective of this dissertation, therefore, is to demonstrate the persistence of memory—not collective oblivion—as a recurring trope of the post-dictatorship era and, perhaps more importantly, to uncover memory's indstructability from the cityscapes analyzed in this study. The novels, films, and architectural structures that undergird this dissertation suggest that memory cannot be easily corralled into designated, particular sites or erased through modern spaces and lifestyles; instead, each work proposes that palimpsests of memory can appear often and, in many cases, spontaneously among all angles of the cityscape. Alberto Fuguet's *Las películas de mi vida* (2003), examined in the second chapter, projects scenes of individual and collective memory onto sites otherwise regarded as generic, bereft of memory, and, in the case of anthropologist Marc Augé, non-places. The narrator likewise encounters traces of memory along his journey from Chile to the U.S., prompting him to recall his family's past and the dictatorship years, which suggests that these conduits for transit might also serve as unexpected

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<sup>8</sup> Nelly Richard's work *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition* (2004) draws on Avelar's observation when she writes that "residues," in this case a metaphor for signs of collective memory and the past, expose fissures in systems of representation, language, culture: "the 'residual' as acritical hypothesis connotes the way in which the secondary and the nonintegrated are capable of displacing the force of signification toward borders less favored by the scale of social and cultural values, in order to question their discursive hierarchies from lateral positions and hybrid decenterings" (3).

conduits for memory. The third chapter of this dissertation proposes that memory emerges in Ignacio Agüero's 2000 documentary *Aquí se construye, o, El lugar donde nació ya no existe* in light of Santiago, Chile's rapidly transforming historic district. Urban development provides an extended metaphor for Chile's economic advances and, socially, a desire to distance the country from its traumatic past. Even as buildings topple, however, memories emerge through the testimonies of residents and the film's efforts to document and archive the city's architectural patrimony for posterity. The fourth chapter examines how narratives of movement complicate images of urban uniformity and spatial reproducibility in Sergio Chejfec's novel *El aire* (1992) and Fabián Bielinsky's blockbuster film *Nueve reinas* (2000). Transit around Buenos Aires, in the case of the novel, gives way to the appearance of urban ruins and, in the case of the film, to the conspicuous absence of ruins from the cityscape, with each case connecting the setting to its past and to collective memory. The fifth chapter reinterprets Montevideo, Uruguay's Punta Carretas Shopping Center as a site of memory, by taking into account, among other factors, its infamous past and partial preservation of its original design. In short, each work examined in this dissertation points not to memory's disappearance from the cityscape beyond the memorial, but rather to its capability to imprint even the most generic and seemingly unassuming of places.

Consequently, the term "memoryscape," which, according to Louis Bickford, refers specifically to the surge of memorial sites in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone, captures only a limited aspect of the intersection between place and memory.<sup>9</sup> The works

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<sup>9</sup> Bickford writes: "Public monuments, memorials, and museums shape the physical landscape of collective memory. They are 'memoryscapes' that contest official truths of the authoritarian era and give voice to its victims and survivors. From statuary and war memorials, to public art commemorating past events, to roadside historical markers, to plaques highlighting the heroes or villains of history, to museums designed

I discuss in this dissertation assist in expanding this concept so that it conveys with greater clarity the continued articulation and stimulation of memory—beyond the memorial—and the flexibility of this undeniably human and social function to adapt to its surroundings and imprint even the quotidian and often banal hallmarks of the modern cityscape.<sup>10</sup> Stated differently, I argue that contemporary and cosmopolitan cities participate in place-memory, or what geographer Tim Cresswell has defined as “the ability of place to make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory” (87). In this vein, Avelar notes that contemporary Southern Cone literature—and for the purposes of this dissertation, film—has shifted its focus to the present but has not abandoned the past. Naturally, he concludes, “writers who return to the topic of dictatorship today do so in an atmosphere of media saturation on the theme of memory” (“History” 184). This is not to say that memory, as a trope, has reached obsolescence among cultural and artistic productions of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone; instead, narratives of memory and explorations of the past recur, often among modern settings, thereby extending memoryscapes beyond designated places of memory.<sup>11</sup> The memoryscapes I study in this dissertation suggest that acts of remembering do not stand in contrast to the present-day cityscape, but rather

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to remember but not repeat the authoritarian past, memoryscapes recapture public spaces and transform them into sites of memory and alternative truth-telling about the authoritarian past” (96).

<sup>10</sup> In this respect, my use of the word memoryscape better reflects the ideas about modernity espoused in Arjun Appadurai’s *Modernity at Large* (1996)—specifically the adaptability of phenomena such as identity and ethnicity to modern times—than a single, fixed definition.

<sup>11</sup> Beatriz Sarlo observes that memory is a common theme among contemporary Argentine writers. She writes that post-dictatorial memory “circulates even in the most banal forms, in memory texts and audiovisual fiction-journalism” (qtd in Avelar “History” 184). In this dissertation, I argue that memory also circulates among equally banal spaces of the modern cityscape.

remain indelible to its construction—where even the most subtle planned or unplanned gesture to the past can ignite memory.<sup>12</sup>

In this way, this dissertation intends to explore the confluence of memory and place beyond the concretization of memorials and other commemorative acts by instead seeking traces of memory—either as cultural residue or as narratives of remembrance—among outlying urban spaces and practices.<sup>13</sup> In particular, I highlight how memory coincides often (and unexpectedly) with broad themes of modernity, including transit and urban renewal. Those transformations to the cityscape supporting greater mobility and consumerism, and undergirding capitalist creative destruction, prompt literary, cinematic, and spatial narratives of memory in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone. Not surprisingly, anthropologist Marc Augé’s examples of non-place figure prominently throughout this dissertation.<sup>14</sup>

Non-places—uniform sites of transit and consumerism including shopping malls, highways, airports, chain hotels, and metro stations, among others—contrast with place-based memory and its practice in everyday life.<sup>15</sup> For example, if the anthropological concept of “place” roots itself in a specific terrain and tradition—lived sites of shared

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<sup>12</sup> Avelar writes that post-dictatorial literature must grapple with the past and also the legacy of the dictatorships, during a present in which, as he claims, “every corner of social life has been commodified” (1). Present literary and cinematic works of the Southern Cone unite the past and the present by searching the cityscape for those spatial or affective elements that might spark recollection of the past.

<sup>13</sup> I attribute the term “traces of memory” to Edward Casey and his phenomenological study of place and memory. Of particular interest to this study, Casey distinguishes between the significance of place to recall—an observation underscored in Francis Yates’ seminal work on memory—and what he identifies as “site,” or, “place as leveled down to metrically determinate dimensions” (184).

<sup>14</sup> Although I have chosen to cite Marc Augé’s observations in the introduction, complementary works by Michael Sorkin, James Howard Kunstler, Paul Connerton, Sonia Sassen, and Jean Franco, among others, appear throughout this dissertation and contribute to discussions on contemporary urbanism.

<sup>15</sup> In his introduction to the study of place, geographer Tim Cresswell defines place-memory as “the ability of place to make the past come to life in the present and thus contribute to the production and reproduction of social memory” (87). Place-based memory can be intentional (through the creation of designated sites of memory) as well as unintentional (the manner in which an undesignated space can become a place of memory based on how it is experienced).



history, identity, language, and memory—non-places seem to uphold global over local influences, transience over permanence, and individualism over collective identity and memory. Instead of fostering a meaningful sense of place, Augé proposes that non-places create a facade of spatial homogeneity and facilitate apparently boundless mobility, which contrasts with the particularities of local memory and officially designated spaces of memory, including memorials and other sites of historical and social significance.<sup>16</sup> In this vein, non-places appear to undermine the collective rituals and group identity that inscribe the past and memory on abstract space.

To complement this reality, sites of transit, consumption, and communication make moving through real and virtual space even more efficient by reducing notions of place to non-place.<sup>17</sup> The latter are functional sites that facilitate movement and consumption with the least amount of resistance possible. They are homogeneous sites of transit and mobility, familiar the world over, and the bedrock of an increasingly modern world. The non-places Augé writes of, therefore, both reflect and reinforce a culture of the fleeting—boundless transience. In this way, non-places appear to pertain only to the present by fostering individualism instead of long-lasting relationships, and transience as opposed to a meaningful sense of place.<sup>18</sup> Non-places appear not to promote social

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<sup>16</sup> Geographer Tim Cresswell observes that a similar dialogue exists in his own field. Although he ultimately disagrees with Augé by arguing for the continued importance of place, Cresswell observes: “Fast food outlets, shopping malls, airports, high street shops and hotels are all more or less the same wherever we go. These are spaces that seem detached from the local environment and tell us nothing about the particular locality in which they are located. The meaning that provides the sense of attachment to place has been radically thinned out” (43). The uniformity commonly associated with these places is antithetical to the nuances of personal and collective memory.

<sup>17</sup> After the publication of his celebrated *Non-Places: Introduction to an Anthropology of Supermodernity*, in which he introduces his theory of non-places, Augé identifies at least three different classifications: the non-places of circulation and transit (airports, gas stations, highways), consumption (supermarkets and hotel chains), and communication (in the form of screens, cables, virtual space) (“Sobremodernidad” 129).

<sup>18</sup> Augé designates non-places and their role in facilitating transit as the true spirit of modern times and its measure: “Non-places are the real measure of your time; one that could be quantified—with the aid of a few conversions between area, volume and distance—by totaling all the air, rail and motorway routes, the

interaction, even while playing an integral role in everyday life and society. In fact, Augé even suggests that, despite forming the spatial keystone of contemporary society, non-places are sites of collective solitude: “The space of non-places creates neither singular identity nor relations; only solitude and similitude” (103).<sup>19</sup> Thus, they are sites where individuals travel or shop together, but have little meaningful interaction with one another, thereby diminishing a collective sense of place and leveling all traces of local memory.

Yet, so-called non-places provide a common setting among cultural works of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone, and far from erasing memory, they can in fact yield greater insight into this region’s expressions of memory. Thus, although internationally scholars have regarded these sites as the emblem of modern transience—and, therefore, the spatial opposite of memorialization projects—and little more, non-places in the Latin American context are neither as blank nor as contrary to place memory as they would appear.<sup>20</sup> In the case of the Southern Cone, these sites have come to symbolize the transition from authoritarianism to democracy and from state-run economies to the global

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mobile cabins called ‘means of transport’ (aircraft, trains and road vehicles), the airports and railway stations, hotel chains, leisure parks, large retail outlets, and finally the complex skein of cable and wireless networks that mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself” (79).

<sup>19</sup> Sociologist Zygmunt Bauman observes the same characteristic in his assessment of non-place: “Non-places do not require a mastery of the sophisticated and hard-to-study art of civility, since they reduce behavior in public to a few simple and easy-to-grasp precepts. Because of the simplification, they are not schools of civility either. And since these days they ‘occupy so much space’, since they colonize ever larger chunks of public space and refashion them in their own likeness, the occasions to learn the art of civility are ever fewer and further between” (102). Although in theory these sites commonly promote only superficial social interaction, the primary texts under scrutiny in this study reveal them as active settings: sites that promote meaningful engagement and memory.

<sup>20</sup> Cresswell writes: “places are never finished but produced through the reiteration of practices—the repetition of seemingly mundane activities on a daily basis... the contemporary fascination with processes of flow and mobility in a globalized world often posits the end of place and the arrival of non-place. And yet place, even relatively fixed and bounded kinds of place, remains important” (82). Although these places commonly are used for functions other than remembering, that they so commonly facilitate narratives of memory in cultural works of the Southern Cone suggests that they are not as antithetical to memory as previously theorized.

market.<sup>21</sup> Fittingly, in the process of examining traces of memory among internationally recognizable sites of mobility and consumerism, this study ultimately reflects on the spatial dimensions of what Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer has identified as the “modernizing leap” taken throughout the post-dictatorial Southern Cone away from previously state-directed systems and toward free-market economies. In the southern countries of South America, this leap toward modernity meant reversing years of ISI-based (Import Substitution Industrialization) economies for neoliberal reforms, and establishing a stronger presence in the world economy. As the works studied in this dissertation reveal, this economic transition, indelible to the concomitant political shift, manifested itself spatially, not only by radically modernizing the cityscape but also by imprinting collective memory.

More globally, As Joe Moran suggests in his work on deciphering everyday life, non-places, like sites of memory, never disengage completely from the cultural climate surrounding their creation.<sup>22</sup> Moran argues that the assumed banality of non-places often disguises their cultural and political origins, including their involvement in the articulation and production of memory.<sup>23</sup> As a complement to this stance, Tim Cresswell,

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<sup>21</sup> These sites closely resemble Foucault’s heterotopias, despite the fact that non-places remain fully integrated in—not separate from—everyday life. Similar to the theorist’s taxonomy of heterotopic spaces, non-places exhibit their own rites of passage and spatialize the zeitgeist of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, which Foucault defines as “the epoch of simultaneity” (22).

<sup>22</sup> Somewhat ironically, Elizabeth Jelin and Victoria Langland use a similar line of reasoning to discuss memorial projects: “construir monumentos, marcar espacios, respetar y conservar ruinas, son procesos que se desarrollan en el tiempo, que implican luchas sociales, y que producen (o fracasan en producir) esta semantización de los espacios materiales” (4). In this way, the process involved in creating a memorial is just as important as the memorial itself. The same could be said of non-places: The indelibility of a place to its surroundings helps to give it meaning and connect it to memory.

<sup>23</sup> Moran’s thesis parallels that of the present dissertation: “I want to suggest that the notion of the non-place, which Augé defines by its blank homogeneity, also needs to be understood as a site of cultural politics. I aim to explore this politics by examining two particular aspects of non-places: their underexplored histories, which complicate Augé’s characterization of them as products of the acceleration of time and shrinkage of space in ‘supermodernity’; and their cultural representation, which has often served to obscure their political meanings” (94). In this study, I suggest that so-called non-places

in his contribution to the study of mobility, demonstrates the complexity of airspace in particular by decoding Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, which he does in part by laying bare its historic and cultural significance. As I argue in this dissertation, literary, cinematic, and material manifestations of non-places often signal a controversial and contested recent past in the southernmost region of South America.

A discussion of these types of sites would not be complete without mentioning mobility. Gilles Lipovetsky's theory of hypermodernity suggests that widespread mobility has amplified, not rarified, the tenets of modernity have become amplified: "Far from modernity having passed away, what we are seeing is its consummation, which takes the concrete form of a globalized liberalism, the quasi-general commercialization of lifestyles, the exploitation 'to death' of instrumental reason, and rampant individualism" (31).<sup>24</sup> Mobility acts as the pillar of this and other interpretations of modernity.<sup>25</sup>

Although this dissertation recognizes the crucial role that mobility plays among cultural works of the post-dictatorship and certainly those examined in this study, I disagree with Lipovetsky's proposal that the acceleration of mobility and its resulting culture of transience hinder memory.<sup>26</sup> He writes: "It is undeniable that, in celebrating the pleasures of the here-and-now and the latest thing, consumerist society is continually

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emblemize the transition period in the Southern Cone and, therefore, often act as conduits for memory narratives.

<sup>24</sup> Augé's theory of supermodernity, which he uses to explain the transition from place to non-place, resembles closely Lipovetsky's interpretation.

<sup>25</sup> Bauman outlines his theory of liquid modernity in much the same way, as a heightened form of transience: "We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic traffic and extraterritorial elite. Keeping the roads free for nomadic traffic and phasing out the remaining check-points has now become the meta-purpose of politics, and also of wars" (13).

<sup>26</sup> Lipovetsky clarifies what others, including Bauman, have observed about the modern penchant to repurpose the past for present-day use: "The past no longer provides a social foundation or structure: it is revamped, recycled, updated, exploited for commercial ends" (60). However, I contend that, even when this is the case, as evidenced in chapters two and four of this dissertation, this brand of transformation often incites memory and feelings of nostalgia.

endeavoring to make collective memory wither away, to accelerate the loss of continuity and the abolition of any repetition of the ancestral” (57).<sup>27</sup> Yet, as the present study will demonstrate, traces of memory still appear among cartographies of transit, further reinforcing the bond between memory and place, and even extending recollection beyond conventional places of memory. Cresswell observes in his study of transience, mobility, like place, can create meaningful experiences and can influence human interaction and relationships positively. In its simplest form, mobility represents a form of displacement: movement from one point on a spatial grid to another. Although traditional interpretations of mobility suggest that this displacement undermines a sense of place, as an alternative to this point of view, Cresswell maintains that mobility parallels place by creating meaning and contributing to human interaction. Since mobility can promote meaningful experiences, Cresswell infers that mobility does not necessarily preclude sites of transience from memory’s influence. Therefore, aided by the fact that many of the sites studied in this dissertation symbolize the dictatorship’s legacy, mobility may in fact serve to prompt memory, even among what would only appear to be the most generic and insignificant of urban landscapes.

Similarly, among his vast body of writings on Latin American culture and society, anthropologist Nestor García-Canclini acknowledges that global influences may subsume local particularities in some instances, but that cultural idiosyncrasies do not

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<sup>27</sup> Paul Connerton corroborates this point of view and underscores the role modernity, especially in its spatial manifestation, plays in forgetting: “A major source of forgetting, I want to argue, is associated with processes that separate social life from locality and from human dimensions: superhuman speed, megacities that are so enormous as to be unmemorable, consumerism disconnected from the labor process, the short lifespan of urban architecture, the disappearance of walkable cities. What is being forgotten in modernity is profound, the human-scale-ness of life, the experience of living and working in a world of social relationships that are known. There is some kind of deep transformation in what might be described as the meaning of life based on shared memories, and that meaning is eroded by a structural transformation in the life-spaces of modernity” (5). In my study, I argue that these aspects of modern life often prompt narratives of memory and reinforce a connection between the past and the present.

disappear entirely. In the same way, the influence of individual and collective memory does not disappear entirely from urban space. In reference to uniform, internationally recognizable sites—Augé’s non-places—García-Canclini poses the following question: “Can’t these neutral sites, like malls, turn into *places* by means of the ways in which new generations mark them and make them significant through use, incorporating them into their own history?” (73). Among the works under examination in this dissertation, so-called non-places and other manifestations of urban mobility reveal their rootedness in the cultural politics of the Southern Cone and even act as meaningful conduits for local identity and memory. Traversal of these sites inscribes even the most generic among them with meaning and memory—regional significance—thus bestowing a sense of place upon non-place.

Other theorists focusing on the practices of everyday life, space, and mobility, like Michel de Certeau, also view contemporary urban landscapes as a dynamic grid of diverse individual and collective mobilities—where daily narratives are written through movement. Certeau’s work *The Practice of Everyday Life* (1984) maintains that the “city” is nothing more than the spatial arrangement of, in his words, “the pullulation of passers-by, a network of residences temporarily appropriated by pedestrian traffic” (103). Movement around and beyond urban terrain intertwines transient bodies, allowing them to intersect and interact meaningfully, carving out a place for memory.<sup>28</sup> In the process, urban mobility weaves together infinite spatial narratives—and memories—which transform common urban trajectories, daily practices, and space into sites of social and

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<sup>28</sup> Edward Casey writes that memory is often corporeal in nature, and thus, proper of movement: “the lived body traces out the arena for the remembered scenes that inhere so steadfastly in particular places: the body’s maneuvers and movements, imagined as well as actual, make room for remembering placed scenes in all of their complex composition. In the end, we can move into place, indeed *be* in a place at all, only through our body’s own distinct potencies” (189).

cultural significance. Rather than simply imposing new meanings on existing cityscapes or even erasing their meaning entirely, mobility is central to the foundation of cityscapes as a whole as well as their discrete spaces. Indeed, Certeau writes that memory is indelible to spatial transformation: “Memory mediates spatial transformations. In the mode of the ‘right point in time,’ it produces a founding rupture or break. Its foreignness makes possible a transgression of the law of the place” (85). Therefore, movement as a creator—not destroyer—of meaning replaces rigid interpretations of place and memory with the belief that they are more dynamic and fluid than previously thought.<sup>29</sup> Memory may serve, as Andreas Huyssen has argued, to “anchor ourselves in a world characterized by an increasing instability,” especially through the construction of immovable sites of memory. But, as evidenced in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone, memory is also mobile, capable of creating place, connecting the past with the present, and reuniting collective and individual memory.<sup>30</sup>

In this way, mobility often acts as a conduit for literary, cinematic, and spatial narratives of memory in this region, with sites of urban transience and transformation—memoryscapes—as their primary setting. By seeking out memory beyond the memorial and, more specifically, among places commonly associated with uniformity, repetition, and oblivion, the works analyzed from this region explore what Frederic Jameson has called “our new being-in-the-world” and reveal continued efforts to grapple with this region’s repressive past. Justifiably, literary theorist Julio Ortega notes that contemporary

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<sup>29</sup> Cresswell writes: “Place is the raw material for the creative production of identity rather than an *a priori* label of identity. Place provides the conditions of possibility for creative social practice. Place in this sense becomes an event rather than a secure ontological thing rooted in notions of the authentic. Place as an event is marked by openness and change rather than boundedness and permanence” (39).

<sup>30</sup> Even Paul Ricoeur notes that memory is as much imaginary as it is kinetic in nature: “Memories, by turns found and sought, are therefore situated at the crossroads of semantics and pragmatics. To remember is to have memory or to set off in search of a memory” (4).

Latin American authors often act as the stewards of this new reality, responsible for dissecting it and, when possible, identifying its traces of memory (3). He surmises: “No en vano sus desplazamientos los revela no como desplazados sino como líderes, capaces de complejos ‘networks’ y nuevas ‘negociaciones’” (32). The cosmopolitan landscapes recurrent among cultural works of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone, therefore, provide a fitting staging ground for the exploration of this new reality and its continued association with the past and memory.<sup>31</sup>

While this is the case, no recent study has entertained the intersection of contemporary urbanism and mobility with the socio-spatial practice of memory in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone. Far from dulling memory, so-called non-places and movement through them help to establish a parallel between the more generic spaces of contemporary modernity and the particularities of local memory. Despite the uniform, transient aspects of modern cityscapes, efforts to grapple with the past in this region continue to imprint space, confirming what Nelly Richard has already observed about memory:

Memory stirs up the static fact of the past with new unclosed meanings that put its recollections to work, causing both beginnings and endings to rewrite new hypotheses and conjectures and thereby dismantle the explanatory closures of totalities that are too sure of themselves. And it is the laboriousness of that unsatisfied memory that never admits defeat, that perturbs the official burial of that memory seen simply as a fixed deposit of inactive meanings. (17)

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<sup>31</sup> In this case, I find Paul Knox and Peter Ozolins’ observations about the built environment beneficial to this study: “The built environment gives expression, meaning, and identity to the entire sweep of forces involved in people’s relation to their surroundings. It provides cues for all kinds of human behavior, and it is symbolic of all kinds of political, social, and cultural elements. As a result, a building or other element of the built environment of a given period and type tends to be a carrier of the *zeitgeist*, or ‘spirit’ of its time. Every city can therefore be ‘read’ as a multilayered ‘text,’ a narrative of signs and symbols. If we think in this way of the city as a text, the built environment becomes a biography of urban change” (3). Those urban landscapes that recur among the works analyzed in this study form part of a broader cartography of memory and post-dictatorial transition specific to the Southern Cone of South America.



In the examples that follow, I will examine literal and figurative representations of mobility as another outlet through which to explore memory, identity, and place in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone. In the end, these case studies will yield a new conclusion: mobility and the spaces of contemporary urbanism serve as vehicles for memory production and in many ways blur the divide between the recent past and what would otherwise seem a perpetual present.

The second chapter of this investigation, titled “Projecting the Past: Mapping Memoryscapes in Alberto Fuguet’s *Las películas de mi vida*,” analyzes a novel that projects individual memory through popular media and develops recall through narratives of transit. Beltrán Soler, the narrator of Alberto Fuguet’s semi-autobiographical *Las películas de mi vida* (2003), reconnects his previously fragmented and repressed memory—particularly of his early adolescence, spent between the US and Pinochet’s Chile—while en route, further highlighting the relationship between places of transit and memory. The novel begins in the present, with Beltrán’s departure from Santiago to Tokyo. The same earthquake that unexpectedly grounds Beltrán in Los Angeles, halfway through his trip, also serves, more metaphorically, as a catalyst for self-reflection by reuniting the reluctant protagonist with the city in which he had spent his formative years and to which he had not since returned. Previously disconnected from life, his family, and somewhat ironically, the ground beneath his feet, the protagonist finally confronts the city of his youth and—from his hotel room, just beyond the airport—reflects on the 50 movies that he considers the most exemplary of his life. These films provide a context for this young man’s past and memories; in fact, they often intertwine with the narrator’s life and unite pop culture with personal experience—thus linking collective with individual

memory. Likewise, as Beltrán extends his journey from the airport to his hotel room and, eventually, to the surrounding city—awakening dormant memories with every pass—he narrates his family’s experience in Los Angeles and their eventual return to dictatorial Chile. In the process, with little more than circumstance as his guide, the narrator revives memories of the past and reunites those previously disjointed aspects of his life.

Over the course of his travels, Beltrán moves effortlessly among sites of transit—as fluently, it would appear, as he interchanges the present with the past. Advances in his itinerary and even an unplanned delay propel the narrator further into the long-abandoned recesses of his memory. Therefore, just as film assists throughout the novel in projecting individual experiences, the setting of *Las películas de mi vida* serves as a medium through which to direct memory. Throughout much of the novel, as a parallel to its cinematic theme, places of mobility and transit often function metaphorically as a screen upon which to project memory. Fittingly, Beltrán documents many of his memories as an e-mail, and beyond the computer screen before him, he finds himself sheltered within several non-descript sites. The opening pages pose a series of rhetorical questions about where the narrator is and why: “¿Por qué sigo aún en esta ciudad? ¿Por qué, en vez de hallarme en Tokio, como era el plan, como estaba estipulado, estoy ahora encerrado escribiendo como un demente, en una habitación de un Holiday Inn con vista panorámica a la autopista 405?” (4). The narrator economizes language in this instance, as well as others in the novel, to describe a setting equally bereft of adornment and within which to explore the past and project reels of memory.

In this way, although several critics of contemporary Chilean literature—among them Rodrigo Cánovas and Ana María Amar-Sánchez—have accused Fuguet’s works of

glorifying modern society's estrangement from the past, particularly via their depiction of modern settings, I argue that the places of transit found in *Las películas de mi vida* provide a vital conduit for memory in this novel. Despite what others have sustained, material traces and other references to the past can prompt memory in even the most banal and transient of settings. This important work by Fuguet suggests not that memory has ceased to exert its influence over daily life and the modern cityscape, but instead underscores the power of memory to adapt to and shape new environments, and make a shift between generations. Where the monolithic landscapes of the Boom once stood—a testament to this generation's commitment to History—the ultra-modern city and memoryscapes of McOndo now stand in their place.

The third chapter of this dissertation, "Memories in Construction: Emerging Memoryscapes in Ignacio Agüero's *Aquí se construye, o, El lugar donde nació ya no existe*," differs slightly from the former by analyzing the connection between capitalist creative destruction and memory. The 2000 documentary visually archives the rampant urbanization of Santiago, Chile, and establishes an extended metaphor between Chile's post-dictatorship economic gains and the transformation of its lived spaces, social practices, and, above all, memory. Shot from the perspective of a modern-day *flâneur* and set in the upscale, historic Providencia neighborhood, the film captures the destruction of historic homes, theaters, and thoroughfares, only to see them replaced by more uniform, modern structures. This transformation—demonstrating little regard for historic preservation—would appear to convert the heart of the capital into what Michael Sorkin calls "[a] vast, virtually undifferentiated territory... a 'non-place urban realm' that provides the bare functions of a city, while doing away with the vital, not quite

disciplined formal and social mix that gives cities life” (xii). With regard to the spatial expression of memory, Agüero’s film proposes that unchecked urbanization strips the city not only of its identity, but also of its role as a personal and collective source of memory.

Yet, drawing on Dylan Trigg’s scholarly work on urban decay and memory, I argue in this chapter that *Aquí se construye* ultimately gives voice to memory by first underscoring the fear that it will disappear forever. As Trigg sustains, the destruction of place stirs up memory and powerful recollections that might otherwise lay dormant. Similarly, in the process of capturing changes to the city, Agüero documents its spaces for posterity as well as its inhabitants’ memories. In what Zygmunt Bauman has identified as an era of transience and reproducibility—in which those structures incapable of being repurposed are subject either to passive decay or active destruction—*Aquí se construye* calls attention to the indelible link between place and memory, and attempts to temper urban transformation with memories of the past. Thanks to its testimonial approach, a documentary intended to capture the dangers of forgetting instead demonstrates that memory remains one of the central themes not only of this film, but also of modern society. In the case of Chile, this documentary reveals that memory continues to permeate daily life and the urban experience, because of radical changes to the cityscape.

Similarly, the fourth chapter of this dissertation, “Mobilizing Memoryscapes: Ruins and the Rebuilt Environment in Sergio Chejfec’s *El aire* and Fabián Bielinsky’s *Nueve reinas*,” analyzes two works that narrate, although from seemingly opposite versions of the same setting, the negative spatial and social consequences of neoliberal

reforms in Argentina, which reached their zenith during that country's bank crisis. Sergio Chejfec's 1992 novel *El aire* and Fabián Bielinsky's 2000 blockbuster *Nueve reinas* both foretell the demise of this country's economic system, which occurred, without the help of fiction, in 2001. In the process, both works confirm what Avelar, among others, has already observed: the urban ruin, as a trope, recurs among artistic works of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone as a means of piecing together in the present fragments of a none-too-distant past. More specifically, movement in and around Buenos Aires in these two works further unfolds this shared setting and advances social chaos and disorder. In addition, the intersection of memory and mobility help to invert and ultimately to rewrite the familiar dichotomy between civilization and barbarism in which the city serves unquestionably as a beacon for order and progress.

With regard to memory, both works gesture toward personal and collective remembrance either through the visibility of urban ruins or through their conspicuous absence from the cityscape. This chapter draws on recent scholarship by Michael Lazzara and Vicky Unruh on the nature of ruins and their relevance to Latin America. Within the context of this dissertation, ruins hold particular interest, since they—as the most blatant form of spatial and cultural residue—defy repurposing and uniformity, and act themselves as large-scale traces of memory. In the case of *El aire*, by the novel's conclusion, an already unrecognizable Buenos Aires finds itself teetering on the brink of ruin, as the spatial decay and debris of the city's periphery unrelentingly supplants its center. The ruins that now overtake the megalopolis—springing up on high-rise terraces and around all corners of the city—give material form to society's decadence and serve as stubborn vestiges of a traumatic past in an otherwise non-descript cityscape, thereby

acting as what Richard has called “cultural residue.” In this case, ruins, as they parallel memory, appear spontaneously throughout the city, as cracks in an otherwise unblemished façade.

The absence of ruins from the same cityscape, especially as portrayed in *Nueve reinas*, also serves as a metaphor for memory and post-dictatorial urbanism. Although its critics, among them Deborah Shaw and Johanna Page, argue that *Nueve reinas* intentionally depicts a seemingly international cityscape—a version of Buenos Aires as interchangeable with Chicago or Paris—for the sake of highlighting the effects of globalization, I argue that the cinematic focus on the repurposed Puerto Madero emblemizes Argentina’s experience with urbanization in the 1990s. Puerto Madero, with its ruins as a viable port repurposed as a commercial center, represents the country’s leap toward global modernity following its long, violent dictatorship. That the film also ends with the city’s financial demise proposes that even the absence of ruins from the cityscape cannot separate this space from collective memory or the influence of the past.

The final chapter, “Beyond the Memorial: Punta Carretas Shopping Center and the Spatial Politics of Memoryscapes,” dovetails with the third and acts as the keystone of this dissertation by shifting its theoretical application to a tangible place. Montevideo’s highly controversial Punta Carretas Shopping Center—a former prison and torture center later repurposed as a shopping mall following the dictatorship—represents what Andreas Huyssen has identified as an urban palimpsest, complete with tangible markers of this country’s recent past, despite never being designated formally as a site of memory. Although no plaque commemorates explicitly the building’s infamous history, vestiges of this past remain intact and serve, in the present, as traces of memory.

Its detractors, among whom Uruguayan intellectual Hugo Achugar has been particularly outspoken, suggest that Punta Carretas Shopping Center represents capitalism's indiscriminate erasure of the past. Since the location does not officially recognize memory, and instead serves as a center of commerce, the shopping mall undermines memory of the gruesome actions committed there, they maintain. Yet, as Joe Moran has argued, shopping malls and other everyday sites often shroud a politically controversial past. The notoriety of the Punta Carretas building has contributed to cementing it as an icon of Uruguayan identity, politics, and even urban lore. Likewise, efforts to preserve as much of the original structure as possible during its repurposing roots the building in the dictatorship period, and chronicles the actions taken at that time to repeal the regime's brand of urbanism. The act of preservation itself thus adds a layer of meaning to the site and further tethers it to the past. Similarly, preservation of certain architectural features points to more than just a post-modern pastiche of old and new styles. Instead, traces of the building's past as a prison—preserved throughout its interior and exterior—prompt memory of this original use and present what Avelar has identified already as those often untimely and unplanned eruptions of memory so common among the landscapes of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone.

Each text under consideration in this thesis relates traces of a recent past and, more specifically, of memories of or related to the dictatorship years, as mediated through present-day urban landscapes. Thus, although set and narrated in the present, these works appropriate movement, sites of transit, and other transformations to the urban fabric as a means of exploring memory's often bifurcating and occasionally overlapping channels. The exploration and documentation of memory—through film, tangible space,

and the written word—complement what Paul Ricoeur has observed about memory and its relationship to place:

These memory places function for the most part after the manner of reminders, offering in turn a support for failing memory, a struggle in the war against forgetting, even the silent plea of dead memory. These places ‘remain’ as inscriptions, monuments, potentially as documents, whereas memories transmitted only along the oral path fly away as do the words themselves (41).

Although Ricoeur ostensibly refers to designated places of memory in this quote, I will apply this idea to the memoryscapes analyzed in this study, since the act of documenting, writing, and preserving memory spatially becomes an integral practice of daily life. In the process of locating the spatial coordinates of memory, these works actively inscribe the past on the present-day cityscape, thereby demonstrating memory’s relevance beyond the memorial.



## CHAPTER 2

### **Projecting the Past: Screening Memoryscapes in Alberto Fuguet's *Las películas de mi vida***

The crossroad of memory, mobility, and urban space in examples of contemporary literature, film, and architecture of the Southern Cone yields new insight into the relationship between place and remembrance, and more importantly, the ability of contemporary cityscapes to act as a meaningful staging ground for the practice and expression of memory. This previously underexplored intersection provides a powerful, highly focused lens through which to view the written work of the McOndo Generation's most visible (and widely studied) figure: Alberto Fuguet.<sup>32</sup> In the spirit of previous artistic and literary movements, Fuguet's and Sergio Gómez's prologue-turned manifesto of the 1996 anthology *McOndo* represented a watershed in contemporary Hispanic letters and provided a fresh perspective on Latin American cityscapes, namely by abandoning rural for urban spaces. This introductory essay, which came to represent a new generation of authors spanning the Americas, emphasizes literary illustrations of urban terrain by calling for the quick and decisive evacuation of rural Macondo—the setting of Gabriel García Márquez's *Cien años de soledad* and emblem of the Boom Generation's experimentations exoticism, folklore and magical realism—and the relocation to its updated version—McOndo—, an ultramodern world of megacities and pop icons, ubiquitous fast-food chains and mass media. Thus, McOndo—the fictitious place and the generation of contemporary Latin American authors—has symbolized as much a literary

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<sup>32</sup> Trained as a journalist, Alberto Fuguet (1964) is the author of several commercially successful novels, as well as Chile's first graphic novel *Road Story* (2004), and has directed a number of short films. Fuguet's novels include *Mala onda* (1991), *Por favor, rebobinar* (1994), *Tinta roja* (1996); and his filmography includes *Las hormigas asesinas* (2004), *Se arrienda* (2005), and *2 horas* (2009). His most recent work *Missing (una investigación)* (2010) centers on the disappearance of the author's uncle Carlos during the dictatorship.

schism from prior generations as a reinterpretation of previously held notions of space, by shunning magical realism in favor of urban realism.<sup>33</sup> In these authors' estimation, all gestures toward the exotic, isolated, and fantastic landscapes popularized during the literary boom of the 1960s are not only anachronistic from an aesthetic perspective, but also incongruous with present-day reality.

At least superficially, Fuguet and Gómez avoid portraying globalized society as uncanny or futuristic in any way; instead, they depict the urban terrain of the present realistically—complete with its technological, social, and spatial features—and as indelible to the daily lives of most Latin Americans.<sup>34</sup> For these authors, high-speed virtual connections and real six-lane corridors assist in defining Latin American urbanism: “Nuestro país McOndo es más grande, sobrepoblado y lleno de contaminación, con autopistas, metro, tv-cable y barriadas. En McOndo hay McDonald’s, computadores Mac y condominios, amén de hoteles cinco estrellas construidos con dinero lavado y malls gigantescos” (“McOndo” 4).<sup>35</sup> This literary gesture toward realism and urbanism—

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<sup>33</sup> Scholars typically group the McOndo authors based on inclusion in the anthology of the same name as well as birth year, between 1959 and 1971 (Palaversich 55). Major literary works of this movement include *Cortos* (2005), by Alberto Fuguet; *Yo-Yo Boing!* (1998), by Giannina Braschi; and *Rosario Tijeras* (2004), by Jorge Franco. Films related to this movement include *Before Night Falls* (2000), by Julian Schnabel; *La virgen de los sicarios* (2000), by Barbet Schroeder; and, somewhat less directly, *Amores perros* (2000), by Alejandro González Iñárritu.

<sup>34</sup> Although they attempt to represent quotidian life in Latin America realistically, McOndo authors tend only to depict the reality of the middle and upper-middle class. Or, in Diana Palaversich's words, McOndo “sólo privilegia a McOndo; el Macondo subdesarrollado, pobre, indígena o marginado, que sigue siendo mayoritario en Chile y en el resto del continente, es despreciado por no ser parte de su realidad” (Palaversich 58). She continues, “el mundo que dibujan coincide con los barrios altos de las metrópolis latinoamericanas. Fuera de sus límites queda lo desconocido, lo otro, lo abyecto” (61). In keeping with the focus of this dissertation, this chapter will examine only those spaces recurring among works of this generation.

<sup>35</sup> In the prologue to the McOndo anthology, Fuguet recounts the now famous anecdote about his experience at the University of Iowa International Writer's Workshop, in which his work was rejected for not being “latin” enough. As the story goes, “el editor lee los textos hispanos y rechaza dos. Los que desecha poseen el estigma de ‘carecer de realismo mágico’. Los dos marginados creen escuchar mal y juran entender que sus escritos son poco verosímiles, que no se estructuran. Pero no, el rechazo va por faltar al sagrado código del realismo mágico. El editor despacha la polémica arguyendo que esos textos ‘bien pudieron ser escritos en cualquier país del Primer Mundo’” (McOndo 1). This small excerpt from Fuguet's

and all of the grit, grime, and glamour that accompany some of the world's most populous cities—adopts the modern cityscape as a point of exploration while still considering the particular features that characterize the everyday Latin American experience. Dividing their attention equally between the more abstract qualities and minutiae of quotidian life grants these authors an ultra-realistic—although not entirely documentary—perspective, and confirms that the days of a rural, untouched, and miraculous reality, which once seemed so timeless and emblematic of Latin America itself, represents little more than a relic of the continent's literary and imaginary past.

Scholars have noted in recent years that Fuguet dedicates the better part of his literary and cinematic corpus to scrutinizing both the overexposed and overlooked aspects of everyday life and society (Cánovas, 2000; Amar-Sánchez, 2001; Forttes-Zalaquett, 2009). Fuguet's dedication to exploring the present makes him the worthy figurehead of his generation, since the focus of literary production among many McOndo and other contemporary Latin American authors has shifted from creating new worlds to realistically portraying the one society inhabits and to which it actively gives meaning. It is also worth noting that many up-and-coming Latin American authors look beyond national ties to determine the setting of their novels, a fact that sets them apart from previous generations, which often sought to pen national identity and, in many ways, to re-write the history of the continent.<sup>36</sup> The goal of many current Latin American authors

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biography helps to orient McOndo's bibliography and one of its central axioms: that everyday life in Latin America corresponds more to reality than to magic.

<sup>36</sup> Whether or not to pen the nation through literature is the choice of the author, and not an obligation. Edmundo Paz-Soldán observes: "There is, for example, the explicit desire on the part of some Latin American writers to rid themselves of the obligation to be spokespersons for an entire nation and for readers to avoid searching obsessively in their texts for the representation of a national identity or essence" (Soldán, et al. 17). Contemporary Argentine author and member of the McOndo Generation, Rodrigo Fresán, for example, has made Mexico City the setting of his novel *Mantra*, and London the setting of *Jardines de Kensington*.

may be to capture both the uniformities and idiosyncrasies of everyday life; but life, for them, is limited to neither Latin America nor the author's place of origin. Instead, many contemporary writers from the region exemplify a more Borgesian message: "our heritage is the universe" (qtd. in Soldán et. al., 18).

When these authors do portray Latin American cityscapes, it is not to highlight their vast, all-too-eagerly romanticized differences from the rest of the world. Instead, their works often demonstrate to what extent urban life is similar the world over, while still calling attention to what remains unique about this region. This is not to imply that Fuguet and members of the McOndo Generation represent cultural orphans—distanced politically, socially, culturally, and spatially from their respective countries of origin—as others, like Chilean literary critic Rodrigo Cánovas, have alleged.<sup>37</sup> Instead, the cityscapes that Fuguet and other McOndo authors illustrate in their written work give form to a cartographic exploration of the present, in which the spaces of cosmopolitan modernity co-exist with those of the past, and in which personal and often locally inspired narratives unite with the surrounding city—wherever that city may be.

As evidence of this trend, Fuguet's semi-autobiographical novel *Las películas de mi vida*, published simultaneously in English and Spanish in 2003, transcends the linguistic and imaginary borders between Chile and the United States—respectively, the country where the author was born and the country where he would spend his formative years.<sup>38</sup> Consequently, the narrator of the novel, Beltrán Soler, a reflection of Fuguet

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<sup>37</sup> Many of the generation's critics have been quick to identify McOndo as more than apolitical: as resistant to the past and present political life of the nation. Diana Palaversich associates this resistance with the rise of neoliberalism in the country: "De común acuerdo con nociones neoliberales, Fuguet y Gómez conciben la revolución y propuestas de izquierda como utópicas e irreales mientras que el individualismo, el consumo y las leyes del mercado son aceptadas como la única realidad factible" (60).

<sup>38</sup> Patrick O'Connell reinforces the autobiographical tones and political ambivalence of Fuguet's work: "Alberto Fuguet as one of the children who lived the same alienation and struggles as those of the

himself, is the quintessential traveler. Beltrán moves effortlessly from city to city and from country to country—highly observant and equally fluent in the customs, language, and culture of both places. Similar to the sites through which he travels and which he briefly inhabits, the narrator achieves a superficial sense of order, continuity, and comfort only while in a state of perpetual motion. In fact, the reader comes to identify the narrator as remaining in flux throughout the novel, either by traveling in the present or by exploring his memories of the past. It should come as no surprise, then, that *Las películas de mi vida* offers a literary and visual mapping of what Marc Augé has called non-places (1995), or the quotidian spaces that are both the product and the emblem of the global era. Movement among these spaces is integral to the novel and its written cartographies of urban terrain. The plot advances as the narrator navigates the cities of Los Angeles, California, and Santiago, Chile, and in the process, traverses international borders, hotel rooms, and nondescript suburban hamlets. The novel depicts a spatial reality in which these cities appear in their entirety only by first mapping their vast and interconnected web of discrete non-places. In the course of linking these seemingly anonymous and banal sites of transit, the reader discovers two cities teeming with life, movement, and a shared, mobile incarnation of the past: Beltrán himself. With each turn, the reader follows at the narrator's heel as he plots these sites of transit according to his recollections of the past and lays the foundation for a realm of personal and collective memory, seemingly out of nowhere.

In fact, the narrator of *Las películas de mi vida*, Beltrán Soler, finds that these spaces act as a springboard for exploring memory. A series of interpersonal encounters

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characters he creates... contextualizes his generation within a framework of political ambiguity and thematic paradox" ("Santiago's Children" 32).

along his route sparks his recollection of the past and connect the protagonist with another version of himself: his experience as an adolescent coming of age between the US and Chile. In this way, *Las películas de mi vida* spans genres as well as continents, acting as both the literary *Bildungsroman* and the filmic coming-of-age. Over the course of his travel from Santiago to L.A., Beltrán encounters many different images of himself, not to alienate him from his surroundings and society, as Augé has proposed, but to ground him in both present-day reality and memory of the past. Accordingly, the novel takes place in the present when an adult Beltrán, a seismologist, leaves Santiago for Tokyo to give a series of university lectures. An expected layover in Los Angeles, the city where he spent his formative years, leads to unexpected results. A tremor grounds the plane that intended to deliver Beltrán to his final destination, literally steering him from his original course. More metaphorically, this event serves as a catalyst for self-reflection.

The novel begins during a moment of introspection in which Beltrán, from his hotel room in Los Angeles, reflects on the events that disrupted his itinerary and which, more importantly, have awakened his otherwise dormant memory: “¿Por qué he vuelto a pensar—a vivir, a sentir, a gozar, a sufrir—con hechos y personas y películas que daba por borrados (superados, eliminados) de mi inconsciente? ¿Por qué volví a recordar después de tanto tiempo?” (3). Use of the first person throughout the novel represents what McOndo authors have identified as a recurring theme in contemporary society: the preeminence of the individual and subsequent transition from “who are we?” to “who am I?” This literary technique also allows the narrator to explore the world from his perspective alone and to bring into focus the details that shape this reality. In the process,

disconnected from life, his family, and somewhat ironically, the ground beneath his feet, the protagonist finally confronts the city of his youth and—from his hotel room just beyond the airport—reflects on the past and the 50 movies he considers the most exemplary of his life. The films do more than just provide a context for this young man’s past; at times, they intertwine with life and erase the divide between pop culture and personal experience.<sup>39</sup> Likewise, each new film sheds light on some long-forgotten aspect of the Soler family and collective history. As Beltrán journeys through concrete and virtual spaces—the city and memory—, he sketches a map of his family’s experience in Los Angeles and their eventual return to dictatorial Chile. In the process, he reconnects those aspects of his life, identity, and family that were previously fractured.

Therefore, although they appear to suggest a solitary, acutely individual experience, the sites of global mobility outlined in *Las películas de mi vida* are neither as dehumanized nor as placeless as they may appear initially. If nothing else, as Fuguet confirmed in a recent interview, these spaces represent the crossroads of the modern era, not as the product of an impersonal globalization, but rather as an active contributor to society itself. “Se ve la humanidad allí,” the author maintained in a conversation on the subject (interview with author). Despite the more uniform attributes of these sites—theories of non-place maintain that one can feel just at home in a Starbucks in Lima, Peru, as in Chicago, IL, for example<sup>40</sup>—something distinctly personal emerges about the way the narrator inscribes them with his search for meaning, as he retraces his family’s

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<sup>39</sup> In most instances, the films provide a counterpoint to events unfolding in the narrative. The 1970s cult film *Soylent Green*, for example, underscores Beltrán’s uncomfortable conversation with his grandfather about Chile’s disappeared. Other films include *Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory*, *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, *Earthquake!*, and *Logan’s Run*.

<sup>40</sup> Augé suggests spatial reproducibility among spaces of this kind, since they mimic one another and create a sense of fluidity among transients: “Estos no-lugares se yuxtaponen, se encajan y por eso tienden a parecerse: los aeropuertos se parecen a los supermercados; vemos la televisión en los aviones” (“Sobremodernidad” 129).

trajectory between the United States and Chile. Far from distancing himself from a sense of local history, the narrator connects his memory with urban terrain as he moves from place to place and attempts to create a meaningful context for his life in the present. In the process, he fosters a sense of continuity between the present and the past, even within a rapidly changing world and travel itinerary. In addition to recreating the cosmopolitan cities of Los Angeles and Santiago—honed by a finely tuned attention to realism—the protagonist also incorporates the non-places of these urban centers in his recollections of the past and search for identity in the present, as much by simply moving through these spaces as with the threads of memory he uses to bind them together. Non-places, in this novel, are far from lacking in meaning or cultural context, since the narrator actively inscribes his past on these sites through words and images—recollections—and redirects memories of the past through the cityscapes of the present. Along this route—which finds him between continents as well as between the past and present—he recounts the story of his life, illustrates cities of transit, and allows memory to gain footing in the city, laying the foundation for urban memoryscapes.

In fact, such an intersection of real space, memory, and movement provides the true setting for the narrator's journey between North and South America, the past and the present, remembering and forgetting. Others have already observed that references to popular culture and cinema in Fuguet's novels often provide a filter through which to contextualize the narrators' life as well as to discuss issues of the dictatorship and post-dictatorship era in Chile (O'Connell 2001).<sup>41</sup> However, no recent scholarly reading of

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<sup>41</sup> McOndo author Edmundo Paz Soldán relates Fuguet's characteristic penchant for pop culture to the entire literary movement: "Se trata, acaso, de la primera generación de escritores más influenciada por los medios de comunicación de masa que por la misma tradición literaria, lo cual, en ciertos casos, produce textos muy accesibles, de escaso vuelo lingüístico y con pocas posibilidades de perdurar" ("Escritura" 43).



Fuguet's work has entertained the importance of his novels' urban, often hyper-modern settings to the process of memory production and expression. In the case of *Las películas de mi vida* and its association of film with everyday life, the non-places that mark Beltrán's journey in the present awaken memories of the young man's past. Films may serve in this novel to contextualize the life of the narrator, and they certainly filter the life and memories of one individual through more popularly understood images and cultural references—a nod, no doubt to *Traición de Rita Hayworth* de Puig. But the non-places through which Beltrán passes and ultimately narrates the story of his life provide a crucial setting where memories of the past are likewise developed, edited, and eventually played for a wider audience. Although filtered first through his own recollection and then again through references to popular media, this past is limited neither to Beltrán nor to his family. Instead, through film, memories of the narrator's past connect with a collective experience, one rooted in Chile's dictatorship and post-dictatorship years.<sup>42</sup> Memories of an individual and a family divided as much by geographical distance as by political ideology provide a glimpse into a collective past of political and social crisis—a past observed repeatedly through contemporary expressions of memory and among the spaces of the present.

This sense of collective trauma to which Fuguet and other contemporary Southern Cone authors respond is as much social, cultural, and political as it is literary in nature. Although McOndo writers, in particular, have attempted to distance themselves from the Boom in form, content, and especially in setting, each generation has responded

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<sup>42</sup> Gilda Waldman reinforces the autobiographical tendencies of Fuguet and other McOndo authors, and contextualizes their work within the Southern Cone's recent past: "Ellos vivieron su etapa formativa en un habitat de carencias democráticas y de violencia... vive sus años de aprendizaje en el marco de una dictadura en la cual la ficción es sospechosa, la censura es un imperativo, los intelectuales constituyen un 'peligro público' y las universidades comienzan a ser dirigidas por rectores militares" (54).

artistically to perceived changes in Latin American social life and culture. The Boom and McOndo Generations, as different as they may be stylistically and in terms of each movement's preferred landscape, were both born out of a sense of social as well as political crisis. Responding as much to world-wide political upheaval as to the uncertainty of the human condition, many Boom authors portrayed Latin America as remote and exotic: at times magical, but always inherently different from the rest of the world. In contrast, many McOndo writers observe everyday life and space for the purpose of understanding the quotidian with greater clarity as well as exploring themes of trauma and crisis representative of the post-dictatorship years.<sup>43</sup> But both generations, although opposed aesthetically, construct their response to crisis and their interpretation of society, reality, and the basic conditions of human interaction on a spatial foundation.

Although these shared interests should not be discredited, the genealogy of McOndo as a movement can be traced to its rejection of what Donald Shaw has identified as the tendency among Boom authors to create mythical realities and to, in his words, "enfaticar los aspectos ambiguos, irracionales y misteriosos de la realidad" (*Nueva narrativa* 56). Fuguet and other McOndo writers have been quick to identify urban life in Latin America as their only source of awe and inspiration, and not some magical reality. "Latin America is quite literary, yes, almost a work of fiction," Fuguet observed in his appropriately titled "Magical Neoliberalism." "But it's not a folk tale... more than magical, this place is weird" (69). For Fuguet in particular, urban life and its most

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<sup>43</sup> Waldman's argument that "New Chilean Narrative," a literary phenomenon including McOndo and other authors, responds to that country's dictatorship experience roots Fuguet and his contemporaries in the past of their youth: "La nueva narrativa chilena responde, ciertamente, al autoritarismo de la dictadura y a las ambigüedades de la transición. Sin embargo, desde el minimalismo y el decrecimiento de las grandes totalizaciones en sistema unívocos ligados a un relato linear, ella reconstruye... la memoria como reinterpretación del pasado, descongelándolo y resucitándolo vivencialmente. A través de la nueva narrativa, la memoria adquiere la fuerza crítica que interrumpe al olvido" (63). The acute realism that has become the hallmark of McOndo writing serves as means to explore the legacy of the past in the present.

common spaces demonstrate just how “weird” the everyday can be, without relying on the social, cultural, and literary stereotypes of years past.

Distancing themselves from the Boom, members of McOndo have been more apt to identify their heritage to the Post-Boom, especially the latter movement’s return to urban settings, realism, and conventional literary styles.<sup>44</sup> If the Boom is characterized as an intellectual trend toward the exploitation of exotic, rural landscapes—not to mention existential philosophy, literary ambiguity, and experimentation—the Post-Boom concerned itself with the quotidian and favored urban over rural settings.<sup>45</sup> Chilean author and figurehead of the movement, Antonio Skármeta, identifies the city as the true epicenter of the Post-Boom era: “Aquí está el punto de arranque de nuestra literatura: la urbe latinoamericana—ya no la aldea, la pampa, la selva, la provincia—caótica, turbulenta, contradictoria, plagada de pícaros, de masas emigrantes de los predios rurales traídos por la nueva industrialización” (cited in Shaw 19). This shift away from bucolic scenes to the grind of urban life positions this literary movement more in line with early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Latin American authors—the likes of Argentine Roberto Arlt, for example—than with their more immediate literary predecessors and partial namesake. Likewise, this redirection away from rural settings toward more urban environments complemented the Post-Boom authors’ identification and exploration of yet another source of crisis: the dictatorships of the 1970s. The cityscapes of those years became the primary setting of

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<sup>44</sup> The Post-Boom refers to the literary production in Latin America during the 70s, and commonly encompasses the work of Isabel Allende and Antonio Skármeta, of Chile; Luisa Valenzuela, of Argentina; and Gustavo Sainz, of Mexico. More specifically, a strong parallel exists between the McOndo Generation and the *La Onda mexicana* writers of 1960s Mexico, among whom Sainz was a figurehead, whose narratives dealt with similar themes of youth, ennui, and urban space.

<sup>45</sup> Likewise, while the Boom demonstrated an interest in history, the Post-Boom and McOndo writers dedicate much of their creative work to memory.

the Post-Boom novels and allowed this generation to portray realistically the social, cultural, and spatial ramifications of authoritarianism.

It should come as no surprise that this generation's novels, in addition to documenting urban life, adopt a definite stance towards the major socio-political events of the time. Shaw, in his study *The Post-Boom in Spanish American Fiction* (1998), demonstrates to what extent the literary movement grew from a culture of political and social crisis by confirming that the Post-Boom is, first and foremost, a phenomenon particular to the dictatorship years of the Southern Cone: "Under the tragic impact of events in Argentina, Chile, Uruguay, and Central America, [the Post-Boom writers] tended to return... to fiction with greater emphasis on content, directness of impact, denunciation, documentality, or protest" (13). For representatives of the Post-Boom, everyday reality—its spaces, patterns of speech, and writing—became the appropriate object of scrutiny and the source of popular, accessible novels of political protest. Although present generations do not imitate this sense of urgency towards social commitment, the foundation this generation established in the quotidian aspects of urban life and society would provide an undeniable literary and spatial model for later writers.

In Beatriz Hidalgo's writings on this rebellious (although indebted) group of young authors, the critic connects McOndo to the likes of Post-Boom author Manuel Puig: "In the 1990s, the tendency that had been evident in writers like Puig... re-emerged in the McOndo group, who rejected magical realism and a commercial stereotype for export and chose instead to set their stories in urban landscapes and to incorporate the mass-mediated codes of pop culture" (1). Although Fuguet himself identifies Puig as the legitimate patriarch of the McOndo movement, significant differences exist between the

Argentine author's literary production—as well as other Post-Boom writers—and the works of McOndo authors.<sup>46</sup> While their literary forebearers wrote socially and politically engaged novels, Puig's heirs appear more concerned with the makings of contemporary youth and urban culture—casual sex, designer drugs, and emo, for example—and their corresponding settings than with the staging grounds of political awareness and participation: *concientización*. Likewise, the tension between high and low culture that existed for Puig and his contemporaries has little place in McOndo. For these authors, 'pop' is synonymous to culture in the same way that urban space now provides an easily identifiable reference to everyday life and, as we shall see, memory.

This divorce of overt political action from urban space in the writings of Fuguet and many of his contemporaries has not gone unnoticed. Reactions to these literary iconoclasts by scholars—among them Rodrigo Cánovas, Julio Ortega, and Diana Palaversich—and other interested parties have been mixed and very public, leaving observers to speculate about whether or not members of this generation are imitating the cultural and media spectacles they portray in their novels and short stories. In “Is Magical Realism Dead?,” published in the 2002 issue of the U.S. publication *Newsweek*—the same magazine that a year later touted Fuguet as the new face of Latin American and Latino literature—journalist Mac Margolis summarizes the McOndo anthology succinctly as, in his words, “irreverent, often aggressive, scatological riffs on contemporary urban life, told to the backseat of sex, drugs, and pop music. The mood swings from

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<sup>46</sup> Although Paz-Soldán recognizes the indebtedness of Fuguet's work to Puig, the Post-Boom, and the Onda, he maintains that McOndo differs inherently from these predecessors in its political leanings: “La obra de Fuguet, que tiene relaciones de continuidad con la obra de autores como Manuel Puig en la exploración del paisaje pop en Latinoamérica, rompe con otro tipo de narrativa que trabajó ese paisaje, la de la Onda en México o la de Skármeta en su propio país: la contracultural utópica ha dado paso a la aceptación... del momento neoliberal” (“Escritura” 45).

hallucinatory to suicidal, with a heavy emphasis on the blasé” (1). His brief observation a few paragraphs later--“some intellectuals branded McOndo authors as shallow and flippant, while the left decried the movement as an apology for Yuppie alienation”—seems diplomatic at best. McOndo author and Cornell University professor Edmundo Paz Soldán’s estimation, later in the same article, appears closer to the truth: “Many people thought of us as a bunch of upper-middle-class spoiled kids addicted to pop culture” (cited in Margolis 1). The literary establishment in Chile has echoed this sentiment as well as theorized the impetus for what they perceive as a complete lack of political awareness and a growing sense of cultural ennui.<sup>47</sup> They often locate McOndo’s seemingly banal urban settings at the crux of their argument.

The 2000 collection of articles titled *Crisis, apocalipsis y utopias: Fines de siglo en la literatura latinoamericana* represents an important contribution to the growing corpus of scholarly work dedicated to the McOndo Generation, as well as other contemporary Latin American authors, and offers insight on the spaces and places of its novels. The consensus among featured literary scholars is that McOndo writers have abandoned the political legacy of the Post-Boom and, in many ways, have also estranged their work from the past and from memory, a stance that I hope to dispel in this chapter. Rodrigo Cánovas’ contribution to the anthology incorporates discussions of urban space to observations that contemporary literary production in Chile panders only to wealthier classes and the country’s neo-liberal paradigm.<sup>48</sup> Other contributors may accuse younger

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<sup>47</sup> “El denominador común de estos cuentos,” claims Palaversich, “es el sentimiento de enajenación, desencanto y *spleen* que sienten los personajes que se aburren y deambulan de una fiesta a otra, se emborrachan o se drogan, se suicidan o piensan hacerlo” (62).

<sup>48</sup> Kathrin Bergenthal summarizes the McOndo Generation as “la necesidad de autoafirmación conservadora de parte de la clase media alta y alta chilenas, de mediana y joven edad en el marco histórico de la postdictadura chilena” (224).

generations of Chilean authors of exploiting neoliberal culture for commercial reasons alone, but Cánovas offers a more nuanced interpretation of this generation. For Cánovas, up-and-coming Chilean authors (and their contemporaries in Argentina and Uruguay) respond to similar notions of crisis as those of the Boom and the Post-Boom. They do so, however, from a radically different standpoint and, as their novels and other artistic projects reflect, they offer differing interpretation of urban terrain. Unlike previous generations, Cánovas maintains that contemporary Chilean authors write as historic, cultural, and spatial orphans: “Narran la historia de nuestras vidas desde la noción de *crisis*, padecida en este caso por seres *huérfanos*, de raíces al aire... [N]adie mejor que un huérfano para habitar ese espacio virtual: un alma solitaria, un feto, un paria, un traidor, un apátrida” (54). In his estimation, the roots that connect these authors to the cities that surround them are as shallow as the particular spaces they choose describe: virtual spaces; spaces of movement; the spaces of global modernity. In other words, what Augé has called non-places.

The Chilean literary critic compares these authors to orphans—“huérfanos... inmersos en un presente perpetuo, apenas tocados por la Historia nacional” (55)—in the sense that they and, by association, their works are disconnected from a meaningful sense of the past. By focusing on tangible space, Cánovas further hones his reading and draws a parallel between these authors’ role as orphans and their nature as urban travelers, forever going somewhere else and whose stories, as a result, oscillate between the present and the past. As orphans and as travelers, these authors

constituyen una vertiginosa crónica expuesta a través de una serie de microrrelatos que se ordenen a modo de un video-clip... [transeúntes] tanto de la ciudad *in Vitro* (Drugstores, Malls, Burger Inns) como del Santiago mítico y popular (el Mercado, el Barrio

Recoleta y los innumerables Bares y Fuentes de Soda del casco antiguo de la ciudad) (57).

The metaphor of a generation of orphans has obvious cultural and historical implications. The spatial component of their role as orphans makes them travelers by nature and by practice, as well as comfortable inhabitants of those urban spaces that seem equally unbound to the past. The metaphor of the traveler yields a connotation similar to that of the orphan, in that each figure appears alienated from a meaningful connection to the past, the rest of society, and its spaces.

Although he makes no mention of the term non-places, Cánovas does contrast the civic, political, and social functions of place with the urban sites of consumption and transit upon which Fuguet and other McOndo authors base their depiction of major world cities. The critic develops his metaphor of author-as-orphan by explaining that contemporary urban space itself plays a role in severing the roots that connect an individual to the past: “no asegura una red de parentescos discursivos, justamente porque ella misma es una compleja red de superposiciones de tiempos, atmósferas y espacios que se contradicen (56). He further contextualizes this argument within the study of contemporary Latin American letters by contrasting the socially and politically charged places often depicted in Post-Boom novels with current urban terrain: “Así, es muy distinto el tiempo (ritual) en que está inmersa la vieja pordiosera de la plaza pública en *Lumpérica*, de aquel otro tiempo (del desencanto del presente), ocupado por el apático morador de un edificio en altura.” According to this line of reasoning, the city has ceased to be a conduit to the past. Cánovas’ reading echoes theories of non-place, without citing them by name, to the extent that, from the literary critic’s point of view, neither the cityscapes of the present nor their literary representation provides a meaningful source of



social identity, memory, and history. Consequently, Cánovas suggests that the newest members of Chile's long history of literary production act as orphans trapped in a perpetual present, with no real notion of a collective past, and whose incessant movement—as travelers around uniform cityscapes—offers written snapshots of city spaces equally estranged from a sense of history and local identity.

Critics of Fuguet, in particular, have provided similar interpretations of this author's interest in urban life and realism. For example, in her article “Deserted Cities: Pop and Disenchantment in Turn-of-the-Century Latin American Narrative,” Ana María Amar-Sánchez's interpretation of Fuguet's work complements Cánovas' observations about contemporary literary production in the Southern Cone and its representations of modern cityscapes. Like Cánovas—who maintains that historical and iconic spaces of Santiago serve merely as a backdrop for a more modern urban spectacle, one that revolves around “*la plastic culture, el junk food*” (57)—Amar-Sánchez implicates discussions of space with what she also perceives as a collective disassociation from the past. This critic suggests, in her reading, that uniform places of transit and global modernity in the writings of Fuguet and other Chilean authors have replaced those spaces that once made Santiago unique among other cities:

Cities are interchangeable because as travel destinations or non-place, they have been reduced to highways, airports, and hotels where you can watch television and are always alone... in these contemporary narratives, what is outside one's window totally lacks interest unless it is apprehended through some kind of technological mediation. (213)

The city and urban life in general are integral to Fuguet's work and to this new generation of Chilean and Southern Cone authors. Somewhat paradoxically, however, as Amar-Sánchez maintains, the cities they document often resemble carbon copies of a more

universal model. The urban landscapes they depict adhere to a global rather than local prototype and, therefore, as a subtext of her argument, they weaken the bond between the present and the past—place as a conduit for memory. Accordingly, Amar-Sánchez argues that this aspect of works by Fuguet and other McOndo writers ultimately points to the estrangement between humans and society—memory and place—so common to critiques of this generation and to theories of non-place. Although Cánovas does not use the term “non-place” and Amar-Sánchez makes no mention of orphans in her work, both critics approach Fuguet and his generation similarly: by highlighting what they interpret as tropes of diminished human interaction and settings that participate in the erasure of the past from the present-day cityscape.

Unlike these critics, Patrick O’Connell does not discuss issues of space explicitly in his reading of Fuguet and other McOndo authors in “Narrating History through Memory in Three Novels of the Post-Pinochet Chile.” His analysis also differs from previous studies in its assessment of the role that memory plays among members of this generation. In fact, O’Connell claims the opposite view, by maintaining that works by many contemporary Chilean authors indicate neither social disengagement nor a disappearance of the past and its influence on the present. Instead, he asserts that many of these authors use references to the dictatorship and post-dictatorship years to contextualize the recurring social patterns of everyday urban life documented in their novels. Memory, as O’Connell argues, serves as their primary conduit through which they channel their understanding of the present and through which they interpret social (and often familial) relationships. These authors may still represent orphans of sorts, as Cánovas maintains; but they are orphans who, far from being hopelessly alienated from

the past, use historical and collective memory to guide their exploration of the present and its complex social relationships. “By blending the personal into a wider history,” as O’Connell explains, “the texts their stories contain form a collective body of work with an articulated agenda of their own: creating an introspective filter in order to demonstrate by example the reconciliatory power of recall and the uses to which it can be put if properly channeled” (190). When juxtaposed, Cánovas and O’Connell provide a new avenue for understanding Fuguet’s work, one which allows the narrator of a novel like *Las películas de mi vida* to act simultaneously as an orphan in search of his past, a traveler in constant motion, and as a weaver of memories, who continues to view the cityscapes of the present through the filter of the past.<sup>49</sup>

Thus each critic contributes toward a greater understanding of Chile’s most recent literary phenomenon—thoroughly urban and popular in both form and content—and its treatment of urban space in the post-dictatorship period. However, it is only by exploring the intersecting narratives of memory and urban space that the relationship between the two finally emerges in Fuguet’s novels. Reinterpreting Cánovas’ metaphor of the orphan in light of the search for memory can yield new interpretations of the Chilean author’s work. Although Fuguet’s narrators appear to lack a meaningful link to the past, they, like any other orphan figure might, continue to piece together fragments of memories, childhood stories, and familiar places in their quest to make sense of the past.<sup>50</sup> Their

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<sup>49</sup> O’Connell further refines his argument that personal and collective expressions of memory are integral to Fuguet’s work when he maintains that “Fuguet’s use of memory thus becomes—not only a subjective internal construct of past events—but also a necessary imaginative component both in the telling of larger collective history and in the development of personal identities. This use of memory refutes the possibility of making identity out of one’s own personal history because identity is not static; like history, it is always in the making” (34).

<sup>50</sup> For Paz-Soldán, Fuguet’s work can largely be characterized by its introspective nature and quest to better understand one’s personal history: “En Fuguet, la escritura suele hallarse asociada positivamente con el regreso a las raíces de uno mismo, con la exploración de los traumas personales. Si la cultura audiovisual es

wanderings around the real and virtual thoroughfares of the modern city thus have less to do with being trapped in the present, with no hope of escape, and more to do with the effort of these authors to reconnect with the past and with a greater sense of personal and collective memory. They do so through even the most generic of places.

Non-places of transit, consumption, and communication, as noted previously, have made moving through real and virtual a common part of daily urban life. In fact, they appear to differ from anthropological place in precisely that way. If the latter interpretation of place is commonly understood as rooted in a specific terrain and tradition—places are where people of a shared history, identity, and language live and interact—an apparent lack of social connection defines non-places (52). They are functional sites that facilitate movement and consumption with the least amount of resistance possible. They foster individualism instead of long-lasting relationships—transience as opposed to permanence—and are what Marc Augé has perceived as the real measure of global times. Sites of transit dominate the air and motorways, and, in his words, “mobilize extraterrestrial space for the purposes of a communication so peculiar that it often puts the individual in contact only with another image of himself” (79). However paradoxical it may seem, for Fuguet, this kind of hyper-individualism only spurs moments of self-reflection, introspection, and meaningful social interaction.<sup>51</sup> Time

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el espejismo en el que se pierde el sujeto joven, aquello que ocupa el vacío dejado por la falta de afectos familiares y el bloqueo de los recuerdos... la escritura es la tecnología que ayudará a la recuperación de la memoria. Pero no se trata de cualquier escritura: la que valora Fuguet está asociada con el dolor... con la anti-fantasia... con la autobiografía no tan velada.”

<sup>51</sup> In her analysis of Fuguet’s collection of vignettes *Cortos*, Catalina Forttes-Zalaquett reads the border spaces so common of this and other works by Fuguet for their liminal qualities. According to this interpretation, these spaces are, in her words, “suspendido entre estructuras—sociales, culturales, psicológicas” (140). “El espacio liminal,” she continues, “se manifiesta por un lado como confusión, ambigüedad y anarquía a la vez que por otro como instancia de posibilidad, transformación y cambio”. The spaces recurrent in *Las películas de mi vida* exhibit similar qualities—suspended between final

spent traveling in and through non-places allows Fuguet's narrator to relocate the forgotten channels of memory, all the while laying new ground for recollection among the cityscapes of the present.

Mapping the present according to the events of the past allows Beltrán to weave individual expressions of memory into not only the space around him but also a collective experience. By recounting the major events of his life, the narrator sheds light on the dictatorship and post-dictatorship years in Chile. In one of many examples, Beltrán remembers having disembarked, as a child, from the aircraft that would introduce him to not only the country of his birth but the birth of a dictatorship. These memories, as they stand alone, represent little more than fragments of individual recollection. However, as part of a mosaic which transcends conventional interpretations of past and present—place and non-place—these memories come to represent the historical continuity between this society's experience with authoritarian rule and its eventual return to democracy. Since non-places are integral to their narration, these moments of reminiscence signal the continued importance of recollection in contemporary society and even testify to the foundation of urban *memoryscapes*. In a way, by acting as screens upon which to project images of the past, the urban landscapes documented in *Las películas de mi vida* act as sites of memory and spaces upon which to contemplate recollections of the past.

Consequently, Beltrán's quest to understand the intersection of space and memory in the present can be read as a collective desire among contemporary Southern Cone society to reconcile its traumatic past. As he circulates through the channels of the present, plotting sites of memory along his path, the narrator establishes a link between

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destinations, as it were—as well as a propensity toward the articulation of memory. In both readings, that of Forttes-Zalaquett and my own, these spaces are more nuanced than theories of non-place will allow.

individual recollection of the dictatorship as well as more collective expressions of memory and mobility.

Many of the novel's literary devices play a role in this revision of everyday urban space as global *memoryscapes* and mimic the protagonist's wanderings between continents as well as the past and present. The plot progression of *Las películas de mi vida* compares to that of a film (complete with spatial montages and flashbacks), recounting in the present Beltrán's travels from Santiago to Los Angeles. The plot also develops in the form of an e-mail, in which the narrator explores his past and the 50 films that have defined his life, and through occasional phone conversations with his sister, which appear intermittently throughout the novel.<sup>52</sup> These phone conversations, in particular, summarize what will and what has already taken place in as few words possible—Beltrán succinctly reports revisions to his life and travel itinerary as they occur—and document the emotional and physical distance between the narrator and his family. Manuela comments, “Deberíamos volver a comunicarnos en inglés,” to which Beltrán replies, “Primero tendríamos que volver a comunicarnos” (9). Even when Manuela tells him that their grandfather has died in an earthquake in El Salvador, Beltrán cannot be swayed to make an unexpected stop, on his way north, to attend the patriarch's funeral.<sup>53</sup> Although the protagonist insists that his itinerary not change, Beltrán's moment of pause at the beginning of the novel suggests otherwise: an earthquake will soon reroute

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<sup>52</sup> Forttes-Zalaquett maintains that this narrative technique associates the past with the present: “La estructura episódica, los continuos *flashbacks* y los constantes cambios geográficos... subrayan la sensación de desarraigo del que no es capaz de desvincularse del pasado” (145).

<sup>53</sup> Memories of the past are often inseparable from strained family relations in Fuguet's novels, O'Connell maintains: “In many of Fuguet's stories, his use of memory as the thread that connects individual experiences is also the medium he employs to link people with one another. Conversely, family dysfunction, broken homes, and strained relationships with parents (all suggesting Chile's weakening ties to family and community) are an integral part of most of the remembrances of Fuguet's characters” (“Santiago's Children,” 35).

him, shake up and expose his memories of the past, and permanently alter his relationship with the world around him.

In particular, the reader begins to glean meaning from these phone conversations about Beltrán's notions of space and memory. Beltrán and his sister's conversations may be short and infrequent—they are often awkward and interrupted by periods of silence—but they are vital to laying bare the narrator's transformation in the present, his connection to the past, as well as his newfound engagement with his surroundings. They also reinforce images of the narrator as a character in flux, since these long-distance conversations conjure up what John Urry has called "communicative travel," or "person-to-person messages via messages, texts, letters, telegraph, telephone, fax and mobile" (47). In the first of their conversations, in which the narrator and his sister discuss Beltrán's upcoming trip, Manuela also suggests that he tour the city and their old neighborhood. "[El] lugar de donde éramos," she clarifies (8). Beltrán will not entertain this idea, either; he has already insisted that he's on a tight schedule and cannot deviate from his plans. He also shuns his sister's implicit recommendation that he reconnect with the past by way of their familiar stomping grounds. Beltrán reminds his sister that he has been through Los Angeles before, but never actually set foot in the city since they were children. He explains to his sister, "Me ha tocado combinar vuelos en Los Ángeles, pero nunca he vuelto a pisar la ciudad". This first of three phone conversations indicates Beltrán's initial understanding of travel and movement. He proposes that traversing the international space of the airport is not the same as passing through the city itself. In a way, this site of movement provides a shield to protect him from the past and even his memory. The narrator indirectly suggests that airport and other sites of transit follow the

logic of non-place to the extent that they remain separate but vital to the city—they occupy real space but lack a real, lived connection to the cityscape and its past.

The majority of *Las películas de mi vida* will come to revolve around Beltrán's recollection of the past, which he recounts in transition from Santiago to Los Angeles—travelling from one airport to the other—and later in the form of an e-mail written from a nondescript hotel room just beyond LAX. The opening pages provide context for the rest of the novel as Beltrán asks himself where he is and why: “¿Por qué sigo aún en esta ciudad? ¿Por qué, en vez de hallarme en Tokio, como era el plan, como estaba estipulado, estoy ahora encerrado escribiendo como un demente, en una habitación de un Holiday Inn con vista panorámica a la autopista 405?” (4). Beyond the computer screen before him, the protagonist finds himself somewhere he never expected to be: simultaneously sheltered within a completely unremarkable place—an otherwise unmemorable rented room in a city of never-ending movement—and immersed in memories of the past. When, in the same passage, Beltrán also wonders what, or rather, who precipitated his recollection, he remembers a woman he met on his flight, Lindsay. His observation of her, “Fue ella la que abrió mi memoria y dejó escapar la viscosa sustancia de la que están hechos los recuerdos,” reminds both narrator and reader that so-called non-places are not as predictable and contrary to meaningful social interaction and memory production as previously theorized (4). Likewise, although Beltrán originally intended to insulate himself from the past and his memories by adhering to a strict travel itinerary and locking himself away within spaces of transit, over the course of the novel, these sites prove to be more receptive to his expression and exploration of memory than even the savviest of travelers could have planned.



Upon establishing that he will eventually end up in a hotel room in Los Angeles, frantically putting his memories to page, the narrator then traces the international route that led him to that point. In many ways, these beginning chapters are really mini-chronicles that, true to the novel's form, document the narrator's memory of the past and define the spaces through which he moves. Each begins with a heading that includes spatial and temporal markers, including the date, place, and time of each leg of his journey. For example, the first of these entries reads: "DOMINGO. A bordo del van de TransVip, Alameda Bernardo O'Higgins, altura Universidad de Chile, Santiago. Hora: 7:14 pm" (17). The next finds Beltrán at the *Estación Central* exactly eleven minutes after the first entry, and so the sequence of headlines continues until he finally arrives at the Los Angeles International Airport. Since he does not narrate his trip explicitly, these captions serve to report systematically the protagonist's movement through not only the Chilean capital but also the airports that facilitate his journey. During his brief trip through downtown Santiago, these spatial and temporal markers orient the reader within the capital city and help to define its urban landscape. They map the present-day cityscape, and in just a few words and references to recognizable street names and sites of transit, the reader pieces together the city according to its fragments. These chapters, which begin to outline the protagonist's past, also highlight recollection as a phenomenon that can only occur in the present. His remembrance of the past and movement through the city appear simultaneous and, at times, mutually dependent; as one begins to unfurl, so does the other.

The spaces and memories he catalogues during this first leg of his journey evoke Beltrán's near-obsessive desire to impose order on a chaotic, rapidly changing world.

Similar to the way urban space channels otherwise erratic movement by way of its streets and other above-and below-ground corridors, at the beginning of the novel, the narrator chooses to remember a significant moment in his life that has since helped him compartmentalize and make better sense of the world. Although he will remember his grandfather at greater length later in the novel and call attention to both men's training as seismologists, Beltrán now remembers a gift he once received from Teodoro as he travels through Santiago. *The Book of Lists* might seem inconsequential, but as he confirms, it is emblematic of a lifelong effort by the narrator to control his surroundings:

Su influencia, sospecho, no ha sido menor. Desde entonces tiendo a enumerar y catalogar los eventos, la gente, los sucesos, los sismos, las cosas. No me atrevería a sostener que ese libro misceláneo y trivial me cambió la vida pero, si me apuran, no tendría problema en declarar que definitivamente me la ordenó.  
(18)

By mentioning this important and symbolic book early on, the narrator establishes a connection between the list he will cull later in the novel of the 50 most significant movies of his life and his compulsion to simplify reality to the point at which it can be easily understood, controlled, and represented. Similarly, the spaces and methods of transit he occupies early in his journey mirror his proclivity for order and allow Beltrán to transition easily from place to place, putting both his mind and his body at ease. Memory and space may intertwine from the very beginning, but neither has served yet to divert Beltrán from his original path or mindset.

In fact, the narrator claims that the act of traveling parallels his preexisting thoughts on order and controllability, and helps him maintain a peaceful existence, with nothing important to do and with little to no interference from others. Unlike colleagues of his, especially those who hope to stumble upon the person of their dreams while in the

airport, Beltrán expresses his indifference to traveling: “Yo ya tengo una existencia armada y, a pesar de lo precaria y mínima que puede ser, me siento afortunado y en paz... viajar, por lo tanto, no es para mí sinónimo de aventura y sorpresa. No pretendo encontrar a alguien que me mueva el piso” (19). The narrator’s initial beliefs on transit and its conduits echo, once again, Augé’s theories of non-place and the idea that modern forms of travel permit people to move about the globe but not to interact in a meaningful way while en route. Beltrán will find that he has a much different experience on his way to Los Angeles than otherwise expected, one that will use space as a medium to express memory of an individual and collective past.

As a foreshadowing of events to come, Beltrán concludes this early stage of his journey by remembering the advice of his grandfather, Teodoro, who, in addition to giving him *The Book of Lists*, attempted to teach his grandson a respect for that which cannot be controlled or understood entirely. His words of wisdom create a thread between the earth’s movement, trauma, and the nature of memory. Since, in the context of *Las películas de mi vida*, an earthquake will eventually reroute Beltrán and help to revive his memory, it is only fitting that he recall his grandfather’s advice: ““Los terremotos son la manera que tiene la Tierra de liberarse de sus fantasmas... Hay que temerles, respetarlos, saber qué son”” (21). Just as Beltrán begins to assume that this trip will be like any other he has experienced—safe, encapsulated, and far removed from his most remote memories—the ground will shift, divert the narrator from his intended course, and release those memories otherwise listed as forgotten.

Beltrán silences those memories momentarily as he arrives at the next stop on his trip: Santiago’s international airport. Although later experiences will prove him incorrect,

at first glance this site reflects the narrator's notions of safe, uninterrupted travel and its corresponding uniform sites of transit. As he enters the major international hub, the spatial markers that defined Beltrán's movement through the capital just moments ago give way to less specific references within the airport space. Headlines for these chapters designate police checkpoints and flight gates instead of exact street names and centuries-old stations. "DOMINGO. Aeropuerto Comodoro Arturo Merino Benítez. Acceso Policía Internacional. 8:41 pm Santiago de Chile" reads the first of these chapters' titles (27). Reference to Santiago de Chile by name suggests that the narrator still inhabits that particular city. The police checkpoint, by contrast, presents itself as a universally understood space common to all airports. This site of international transit, it would seem, does not pertain to a specific urban terrain as explicitly as the previous downtown thoroughfares. Gone are prior markers which referenced names particular to Santiago at the beginning of the novel; the airport setting represents, instead, a collection of starts and stops familiar to travelers the world over. As a result, this space appears completely unremarkable, even blank: free of local influences and seemingly without a connection to the past and the city it serves.

A sign Beltrán reads at his terminal reaffirms these initial observations and presents the airport as a space of global transit: "*Welcome to LanChile, member of the One World Alliance*" (27). Airports like the one Beltrán occupies assist, in part, to reunite a world which the conventional bounds of space and time fracture. Proponents of non-place would suggest that the largely uniform nature of these sites and their role as the crossroads of international transit facilitate movement but ultimately demote meaningful social interaction to a few stop-and-go checkpoints along an otherwise uneventful

trajectory. The airport space seems also to lend itself to vague, commercially exploitable notions of a world united through travel, with “*One World Alliance*” evoking thoughts of fleeting human contact and international travel conglomerates.

Yet, this sign forms part of a complex and meticulously planned signage system that not only helps to direct the traveler, giving the space greater functionality, but also to define the airport as a place. Or, in John Urry’s words: “Airspaces are characterized by various distinct system features that constitute it as a place, features that are engineered through design and material layout, through the sign system, through the various code-spaces, and through various social patternings” (147). With regard to the novel, more than just leading the narrator to his final destination, the sign orients Beltrán within the airport, signals the role of this space as an international hub, acquainting the young seismologist with his surroundings.<sup>54</sup> Likewise, although memory would appear to play a limited, if any, role in this kind of setting, the last phrase of the sign gives Beltrán pause. “*One world. Una vez fuimos un solo mundo. Un solo continente: Pangea. Un solo océano: Panthalassa,*” he thinks to himself before further reflecting on his grandfather’s advice about earthquakes. Although not its original intention, the sign Beltrán reads above his gate—the one familiar to anyone else flying that airline—prompts him to remember the fault lines of his own fractured life as well as the details of a more collective past.

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<sup>54</sup> For Urry, even the seemingly monotonous and predictable experiences associated with traveling create a system of practices: “There are... activities conducted while traveling including the ‘anti-activity of relaxing, thinking, shifting gears; and the pleasure of traveling itself, including the sensation of speed, of movement through and exposure to the environment, the beauty of a route and so on” (11). This line of thinking undermines the notion of space of transit as non-places, since these sites are capable of generating their own decorum and style of performance.

After contemplating the sign, he ponders the role of the seismologist as a kind of historian and the metaphorical parallel between shifts in the earth's crust and the often erratic nature of recollection. "A diferencia de lo que la gente cree, la sismología trabaja con la memoria. En eso nos emparentamos con los historiadores," he confirms (28). What he observes in the airport subsequently reinforces this conclusion. As he looks down from the sign, Beltrán notices cracks in the one of the tarmacs and determines that even a seemingly secure, controlled space like the airport cannot be completely protected from the unplanned tremors of an earthquake or, by extension, the vagaries of memory. "Reparo en el cemento de la pista trizado a causa de los cientos de movimientos telúricos que le ha tocado soportar, años tras año, década tras década. La terminal puede ser nueva, pero la pista no," he observes (27). The all-telling scars of a country fractured over the years by telluric as well as political earthquakes appear despite the intended function of the airport as a site of transit and mini metropolis.<sup>55</sup> As a microcosm of society itself, this airport space may be suggestive of a greater effort to move on, up, and away—leaving the unstable earth and an uncertain past behind. But, like the rest of Chile and its inhabitants, even this site cannot conceal its wounds entirely. Memory has left traces, even in the airport.

Beltrán begins to identify the cracks in the tarmac for what they might symbolize—a violent disruption of everyday life and the noticeable vestige of past trauma. Later in the novel, he will establish more explicitly a parallel between the earthquakes that cause these fractures and political upheaval: "Los terremotos son hitos,

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<sup>55</sup> Current trends in airport architecture propose to reinforce this structure's sense of place by appealing to its qualities as a miniature city: "like the railway station and theatre combined, the modern airport terminal is a highly charged and symbolic building. It is a miniature city reflecting the values and aspirations of society at large. National image is reflected more directly in the design of airports than in any other building type, with the passenger terminal the key element in public perception" (Edwards xi).

puntos aparte, un momento de inflexión, un megaevento colectivo que nadie se pierda, ni siquiera aquellos que no acostumbran asistir a nada... Terremotos y golpes: lo que nos transforma en hermanos, el pegamento que nos une como país” (153). Earthquakes, like presidential coups—in this case, the 1973 overthrow of President Allende in Chile—alter the path of a society, leaving behind permanent signs of destruction and social divisions. Similarly, earthquakes remain a collective experience. Even in cities of standardized, manufactured places, the earth’s tremors continue to topple buildings, permanently altering space and rerouting daily life. Beltrán’s subsequent reflections in the airport further unite these fractures with society and even call to attention its recollection of this traumatic past: “No creo que sea casual que en los sitios donde más tiembla surgen comunidades olvidadas, con mala memoria. Un terremoto remece de tal manera a la gente que, en forma inconsciente, olvidan el terror que vivieron” (30). Memory, like imperceptible tremors just below the earth’s surface and the fractures they produce, has a way of never disappearing, despite the proclivity of most societies to forget the past and the ability of banal spaces like the airport to hide it from view. That is why, in this novel of itinerancy, only an earth-shaking event could ultimately divert Beltrán from his itinerary and give him time to reconnect with his past, proving that even the most generic of places remain susceptible to the past and its collective as well as individual remembrance.

Likewise, the airport setting in *Las películas de mi vida* undermines the claim that nationality and meaningful social interaction diminish among non-places. In fact, not only do ideas of national identity remain relevant to the global era—if nothing else, through the trauma of past events and their recollection or suppression—but also they

become even more pronounced within international airports like the one Beltrán navigates. In fact, although Augé dedicates only a small portion of his study to the topic, it is important to remember that airports are highly secure areas, where individuals must often prove their citizenship, in addition to documenting where they have been and why.<sup>56</sup> Beltrán's situation presents no exception. Upon arriving to the airport, he must first pass through a security checkpoint: "Estoy en la fila de Policía Internacional, esperando que tecleen el número de mi pasaporte y que el gobierno se entere de todas mis entradas y salidas" (24). Beltrán thus enters the international zone of the airport, where it is compulsory to identify individuals according to their nationality.<sup>57</sup>

Just as national identity remains relevant among places of transit, so too do cultural markers and opportunities for meaningful social exchange. While he is waiting for clearance, Beltrán agrees to shepherd a young Chilean boy along his trip from Santiago to Los Angeles, in which he will ultimately reunite with his father. The boy's grandmother, an elderly woman from a rural area of Chile, approaches Beltrán first and asks him to serve as the boy's guide. "Siento que alguien me mira," the narrator notes before observing in greater detail, "Una mujer prematuramente envejecida, humilde, de rasgos indígenas, el pelo lacio y canoso recogido en un moño, me observa, cauta, desde

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<sup>56</sup> In his analysis of Amsterdam's Schiphol Airport, geographer Tim Cresswell calls attention to the high level of surveillance which all airports are supposed to practice: "In addition to being sites that enable global travel, airports are places where the motion of human bodies is finely managed. They are machines for mobility. There are few sites on earth where the individual motions of human bodies are so consistently monitored and micromanaged" (237). This aspect of air travel makes traveling through the airport a corporeal experience, since the body must frequently be checked and rechecked, through varying degrees of technology and human contact, before it reaches its final destination.

<sup>57</sup> As a counter argument to claims that airport spaces facilitate a seamless, uneventful transition from one destination to the next, Urry highlights the vast discrepancies exist among passengers experience while en route: "for first-class passengers, air travel is integrally interconnected with limousines, taxis, air-conditioned offices, fast check-in and fast routing through immigration... forming a seamless scape along which nomadic executives making the global order can with less effort travel. For countless others, their journeys are longer, more uncertain, more risky, and indicative of their global inferiority in a world where access to network capital is of major significance within the emerging global stratification system" (152).



atrás” (24). The fact that they hail from far beyond the capital suggests at once that airports and other sites of transit are truly the modern crossroads of humanity that Fuguet suggested previously.<sup>58</sup> At the same time, more subtly, her anachronistic appearance—in contrast with her hypermodern surroundings—implies the continued exchange between local and global influences, the past as the present, even within an allegedly synchronic setting. For Beltrán at least, the woman’s plea forces the protagonist to divert his attention from his itinerary and reflect meaningfully on himself and his past. Therefore, Beltrán’s contact with the boy and his grandmother demonstrates that social encounters within these places can go beyond the customary, secluded, and even routine aspects of transit and proposes that even an airport can serve as a staging ground for meaningful social exchange and a gateway to memory.

In fact, this encounter and others like it throughout *Las películas de mi vida* serve as catalysts for self-reflection and memory production, as a parallel begins to take shape between Beltrán’s experience and the boy’s. In the present, each is traveling to undertake life in another part of the world, but not without a certain degree of apprehension. “El niño no me mira. Está a punto de llorar, no me queda claro si de pena, miedo o vergüenza,” the narrator observes of the boy (25). Although, at this point, this stop represents little more than a necessary layover for the narrator, both he and the boy are bound for a life-transforming stay in Los Angeles. In a moment of foreshadowing, Beltrán affirms: “Los Ángeles no era más que una escala y, sin embargo, la sentía como

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<sup>58</sup> Both Cresswell and Urry underscore the airport as a social nexus when each writes, respectively, “[the airport] is not simply a part of the life-world of the kinetic elite, but a place of shelter and livelihood,” (257) and “airports are complex places since peoples and cultures from around the world overlap within them through the intersection of enormously elaborate relays. These relays come together especially within the departure lounge of airports, places of intense sameness produced by the systems of the aviation industry *and* of intense hybridity as mobile peoples and cultures unpredictably intersect through various modes of ‘dwelling-in-transit’” (152).

mi destino” (53). More significantly, however, the boy in the present-day airport mirrors Beltrán as an adolescent coming of age between two worlds. In fact, the protagonist was returning to Chile with his family at presumably the same age that this boy is departing for Los Angeles. Just as the young boy will eventually reunite with the father who left him behind for new opportunities in the United States, much of Beltrán’s itinerancy as a young man revolved around his father’s decision to seek a new life in another part of the world. In this instance, travel may represent the process of uprooting oneself—after all, the boy must say good-bye to his grandmother, friends, and the only country he has ever known to re-invent himself in another part of the world. But the encounter itself also becomes symbolic of reconnecting with others, the past, and even with another version of one’s self.

The mirroring effect of this encounter does more than just call to attention the cyclical and distinctly human aspect of travel. This moment in Beltrán’s journey defines international migration as both a collective and undeniably individual experience, one that does more to unite people than to hopelessly divide them. Interaction between them may be limited to just a few gestures, but the narrator identifies with the boy’s situation and is thus empathetic towards him. Once again, a so-called non-place becomes worthy of sustaining if not a profound, life-long relationship between the narrator and the young boy, at least an indelible impression of one individual upon another. By encountering the boy, Beltrán witnesses scenes from his own past mirrored in the present and, consequently, delves deeper into the realm of memory.

This exchange further incites the narrator to memory when he thinks, momentarily, that he has lost the boy. Beltrán finds himself circulating among the

merchandise of the Duty Free shop, lost amid his memories as a young seismologist in rural Chile, when he realizes the boy is no longer within his view. In a moment of panic, the narrator searches for the boy, but finds him already under the supervision of a young woman who is attempting unsuccessfully to console him

¿Se habrá subido a otro avión? ¿Es posible que los que cortaron los boletos no se fijen y alguien termine en el vuelo a Caracas y no el que va a Los Ángeles?... Me doy vueltas. Una chica rubia, espigada, de unos veinte, lo está consolando. Me recuerda a Federica Montt. Le acaricia la cabeza y le sonrío. El chico detiene el llanto. Yo siento que algo me sucede, una suerte de remezón. Me toco las mejillas; están secas, por suerte. Intento recuperar el aire, calmarme, parar a tiempo la fuerza de la emoción. (36)

Beltrán's quick change of emotion once again parallels the boy's, adding strength to the bond between them and, more metaphorically, the link between the past and the present. If only for a moment, Beltrán projects himself onto the boy and sees himself under the care of a significant figure from his past: a girl he met on a flight as a young man and with whom he would eventually fall in love. The boy's and Beltrán's sentiments stand in contrast to the more antiseptic and seemingly antisocial features of the airport.<sup>59</sup> For a moment at least, this site of transit and supposed collective isolation becomes a setting where the narrator begins to experience the rumblings of memory within an otherwise ordinary space—where Beltrán begins to reunite with his long-repressed past.

In fact, later in the novel, the narrator will remember the more specific circumstances in which he met Federica Montt, so many years ago, on a flight from

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<sup>59</sup> In fact, these repeated encounters, which advance Beltrán's memory of the past, contrast with what Zygmunt Bauman has written about the interaction among strangers in non-places: "Strangers meet in a fashion that befits strangers; a meeting of strangers is unlike the meetings of kin, friends, or acquaintances—it is, by comparison, a *mis*-meeting. In the meeting of strangers there is no picking up at the point where the last encounter stopped, no filling in on the interim trials and tribulations or joys and delights, no shared recollections: nothing to fall back on and to go by in the course of the present encounter" (95). In the novel, Beltrán's unplanned encounters with complete strangers pique his memory and propel him into the past.

Caracas to Santiago. Just as the young boy will help to unite recollections of the past with the present—proving that even the airport can become a site of memory production—how Beltrán met Federica further reinforces the potential of this kind of site for meaningful social interaction. They met on a plane, many years before, and as teenagers, the two young Chileans would fall in and out of love. In his youth at least, the narrator successfully established a life-long relationship based on this brief encounter at the airport. The range of emotions she inspires in him is equally prolific, even in his memory: “En el avión iba una niña chilena de más o menos la edad de mi hermana Manuela. Luego supe que se llamaba Federica Montt y se había embarcado en París. Al principio su nombre me pareció horrible pero, con los años, su sola mención era capaz de provocar en mí toda la gama de emociones posibles” (169). When Beltrán sees the present-day young woman console the boy at the airport, the narrator remembers Montt and their relationship—the sentiments associated with her imprinting the present and propelling the narrator further into the realm of memory.

After his rush of emotion and brief, but intense, recollection of the past, Beltrán must take a moment to compose himself and realign his behavior with the task before him: the supposedly inviolable travel itinerary. At an earlier moment in the airport, the narrator asks himself why he is suddenly remembering the past after all these years: “¿Por qué estoy recordando esto? ¿Por qué he vuelto a recordar? ¿Pensé que todo estaba borrado, *deleted*, erradicado?” (33). Now, after losing the boy, and more importantly, after confronting fleeting but intense memories of his first love, the narrator takes a moment for self-reflection. Since the boy has served in the airport space as the symbolic reflection of Beltrán—a younger version of him, one that links the past with the

present—the seismologist finally looks himself in the eye: “Me miro al espejo. Con los dedos me bajo los párpados y me miro los ojos levemente pardos, ahora rojizos, contaminados, irritados. Saco del bolsillo de mi casaca las gotas que me recetaron. Me miro una vez más” (37). Rather than just seeing himself in the boy, Beltrán confronts himself directly in the mirror of the airport bathroom. Augé proposes that non-places “[put] the individual in contact only with another image of himself,” thereby suggesting that people travel through these sites in collective solitude (79). But Beltrán’s encounter with himself suggests a link to the past more than it does ideas of reproducibility. First seeing his reflection in the boy and later confronting himself directly in the mirror expose Beltrán to past and present versions of himself. These highly personal reflections come, in turn, to resemble the cracks Beltrán had observed earlier on the airport tarmac.

A brief layover in Lima, Peru, foreshadows future interruptions to his presumably inviolable itinerary, a fact that suggests that Beltrán cannot outpace his past. His flight has been overbooked, the attendant explains with little regard for the seismologist’s travel plans. Beltrán flatly refuses, claiming that he cannot be set back in any way. As a form of reconciliation, the agent in charge offers to upgrade Beltrán to business class on his original flight. In addition to altering his flight information, this minor setback thrusts the narrator even deeper into the recesses of his memory over the next part of his journey. Despite increased mobility among society and, in some cases, the relative ease of travel, the airport is still a place where the unexpected can happen. Or, in James Gleick’s words, the airport is a space of constant starts and stops, some of them expected and some of them sporadic:

[airports] are not only the places where people like to flirt with lateness... they serve as focal points in the modern world, places

where the technology and the psychology of hurriedness come together. Airport gates are where we contemplate the miraculous high speeds of air transport and unmiraculous speeds associated with getting into air transport... *Gridlocked* and *tarmacked* are metonyms of our era: to be gridlocked or tarmacked is to be stuck in place, our fastest engines idling all around, as time passes and blood pressures rise. (9)

Beltrán appears vulnerable not only to the flashes of memory that have marked his journey, but also to the unpredictability of air travel. The spontaneity of memory thus finds its parallel in the changeability of travel.

When Beltrán meets Lindsay during the next leg of his trip, from Peru to Los Angeles, the narrator's memory will reignite further, bridging the present and the past. A connection also forms between Lindsay and Federica Montt, creating another parallel between the past and the present. Both are women that Beltrán meets mid-flight, and both serve as the catalyst for change in his life. Federica will come to represent Beltrán's transition to adulthood, while Lyndsay will help rouse memories of this past. In both cases, the narrator is shy at first—even aloof. He refuses to converse with the young immigration lawyer, even as she attempts to exchange pleasantries, suggesting that Beltrán wishes to minimize human interaction and avoid delving further into his memory. "Y disculpa, ha sido agradable charlar contigo, pero necesito terminar de leer esto. Espero que eso no te moleste," Beltrán responds when she asks where he is from (45). Somewhat less characteristic of his prior actions and thoughts on travel, Beltrán reinitiates their conversation—as if to flirt with the unknown and the unplanned—which this time transcends niceties to include the films they both know and love. This reinitiated conversation, which delves into the movies of their lives, will serve as the last major

inspiration for Beltrán's memory production before the earthquake that will ground him in Los Angeles.<sup>60</sup>

Beltrán's perspective of Los Angeles upon final descent relies on synecdoche to give shape to the city and illustrates the metropolis according to its discrete spaces. The city becomes spatially intelligible from just a few symbolic points of reference and landmarks committed to memory, thereby fashioning a vibrant memoryscape out of otherwise non-descript convenience stores and highways. Consequently, the city of Los Angeles becomes the sum of its sites of mobility etched onto the onlooker's memory:

El avión estaba ya bajo, a punto de aterrizar en medio de la ciudad. Entonces afiné aún más el foco: dos Seven Eleven, una estación Shell, el Forum de Inglewood, la autopista 405 y, de pronto, sin esperarlo, como si lo hubiera visto ayer, el inmenso donut de Randy's brillando en la noche, a pasos de la calle Ash. (55)

Use of this rhetorical device allows the narrator an even more acute observation of the everyday, which hones his already realistic descriptions of space. In fact, according to de Certeau's observations on everyday life and space, synecdoche is integral to transit. "Synecdoche makes more dense," he explains, "it amplifies the detail and miniaturizes the whole... A space treated in this way and shaped by practices is transformed into enlarged singularities and separate islands" (101). Even before entering his hotel room— itself an island cordoned off by the 405 thoroughfare—it is impossible to perceive the city in its entirety without first observing its singular, quotidian spaces. As inseparable parts of a whole, these sites begin to give shape to Beltrán's memory of his life in the city of angels.

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<sup>60</sup> Similar to his prior encounters with strangers, Beltrán's unexpected meeting with Lindsay sends the narrator in search of memory. Therefore, in this case, Bauman's observation about the meeting of strangers is only partially the case: "The meeting of strangers is *an event without a past*. More often than not, it is also *an event without a future*" (95). The meeting of two strangers in *Las películas de mi vida* causes a future reaction: Beltrán's exploration of his long-repressed memory.

In fact, the sites he lists by name as representative of Los Angeles—the two Seven Elevens, Shell station, and the 405 expressway—may exemplify non-places, according to Augé’s line of reasoning, but they do not preclude practices of memory. Their uniformity can help ease the mind of a traveler like Beltrán when he is far from home, as the French anthropologist has already claimed:

A paradox of non-place: a foreigner lost in a country he does not know (a ‘passing stranger’) can feel at home there only in the anonymity of motorways, service stations, big stores or hotel chains. For him, an oil company logo is a reassuring landmark; among the supermarket shelves he falls with relief on sanitary, household or food products validated by multinational brands. (105)

However, as ordinary, banal, and uniform the world over as they might seem, these sites impress themselves upon the cityscape and are integral to daily life and practices.<sup>61</sup> They are also spaces where people live, create, and recall memories. For example, on the one hand, the hotel room where Beltrán will draft the memories and movies of his life is an ideal location for memory production because, to a certain extent, it is a largely solitary, nondescript place. On the other hand, the narrator still observes distinct signs of life in what would otherwise be considered an anonymous, generic non-place: “son las 6:43 A.M., el sol acaba de salir, los cálidos vientos de Santa Ana mecen el agua de la piscina allá abajo. El hielo que salí a buscar al fondo del pasillo ya se ha derretido. La alfombra acumula migajas de Twinkies y restos de semillas de calabaza” (4). Places like those

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<sup>61</sup> This stands in contrast to James Howard Kunstler’s belief that this collection of uniform spaces make Los Angeles an unappealing city estranged from emotion and disconnected to the past: “It’s the short views in LA that bring on melancholia: the stupid, boxy, cheap, flimsy, monotonous, decaying bungalow neighborhoods on the endless numbered blocks in the LA flatlands... these are sights that bring on nausea and depression” (207). Kunstler might argue that these neighborhoods induce cultural anguish, by divorcing the city dweller from the past and a meaningful relationship with the cityscape. But for Beltrán and many other people of differing origins, this place is home, and thus, at the heart of daily life and memory. See Mike Davis’ *Magical Urbanism: Latinos Reinvent the US Big City* for more on the Hispanic experience in Los Angeles.



Beltrán observes as he nears Los Angeles and the hotel room from which he writes may be more or less the same the world over and create a standard spatial paradigm for all cities to follow; but they are still the setting for daily life and memory production. These traces provide a glimpse of prior habitation and suggest that this space, for as generic as it seems, is not beyond human influence and its remnants.

The narrator continues this line of thinking by pointing out that, although the Los Angeles airport has a generic-sounding name, the international hub is located in the middle of a thriving residential neighborhood:

La mayoría de la gente que llega a Los Ángeles lo hace por un aeropuerto que no tiene nombre: Aeropuerto Internacional de Los Ángeles, o LAX, que es su código. Siempre me llamó la atención que no tuviera un nombre, que fueran tan provincianos que sintieran que con ‘internacional’ bastaba. El aeropuerto se alza a un costado de la ciudad, en medio del barrio de Inglewood, entre un trozo del Pacífico sin gusto a nada y la feroz autopista 405. (61)

This observation is significant, especially in light of Augé’s observations that space and movement inhibit social interaction and a meaningful connection to the past. Although this may seem the case, Beltrán’s perspective also places the hub within another lived place: Inglewood, California. After his initial impression of the airport, the narrator describes the ethnic makeup of the community and explains how it has shifted demographically throughout the years. In the process, Beltrán reveals his personal connection to that neighborhood, where he lived so many years ago. “Nosotros vivíamos en una callecita llamada Ash, en un departamento ubicado en el primer piso de un minúsculo edificio de dos plantas,” he recalls (61). Therefore, the airport may represent one of the city’s many islands—one among many parts that make up the whole—but it

remains indelible to the lived landscape, where individuals are more than just bodies in motion and where memories are created as well as recalled.

The hotel he will visit after leaving the airport also proves to be an appropriate setting for the expression of memory. In fact, drawing from his previous encounters in the airport and after viewing Inglewood from above, Beltrán begins to remember the details of his past and the events that set in motion a series of displacements for him and his family. Like the airport, although the hotel room he writes from would otherwise seem to shelter the narrator from his past, the solitude he encounters there allows him to develop and project his memories on the world around him. From his hotel room in Los Angeles—alone with his memories and thoughts of the movies that best represent his own life—Beltrán composes an e-mail to Lindsay outlining his past. “Podría escribirte mucho,” he writes,

relatándote lo que me ha pasado por dentro (recordar, recordar, recordar), pero creo que basta con decirte que no pude dejar de pensar en esto de *Las películas de mi vida* (y que nunca he escrito tanto en mi vida). Eso es tu culpa. Como un acto reflejo, comencé a volver a ver en mi memoria las mías. (60)

Beltrán’s brief but significant encounter with a complete stranger while aboard an international flight piques his memory and establishes the context for the rest of the novel: the narrator’s frantic exploration of his past and its relationship to collective, popular culture. In yet another so-called non-place, Beltrán examines another version of himself by simultaneously recalling and narrating his past. Although he never intended to establish a meaningful human connection while traveling, since he assumed that the sites and protocols of travel would shelter him from any such interaction, his interpersonal exchanges proved him wrong. Likewise, the unfolding of Beltrán’s memories from a

hotel room in Los Angeles will serve to further demonstrate links, rather than fissures, between the past and the present—between collective memory and individual experience.

Beltrán's recollections reveal experiences common to the dictatorship and post-dictatorship years. After identifying that his family spent many years living on Ash Street, only a short distance from his current lodging, Beltrán recounts why his family came to the United States in the first place and, subsequently, begins to meld personal with collective experiences. In this and many other instances in *Las películas de mi vida*, Beltrán calls to mind the beginning years of dictatorship in Chile. With reference to his family: "Todos escaparon de Chile antes de que fuera necesario o loable o entendible o políticamente correcto. No arrancaron por política ni por ideales, no les pisó talones la muerte ni la tortura. Tampoco fueron impulsados a fugarse al norte por hambre, sino por vergüenza" (64). Even though his family's reason for leaving Chile was not so much political as it was social, the narrator's observation reveals what history has already documented: departure from the country during that time is commonly associated with the dictatorship years. Thus, in the process of telling his own story, Beltrán establishes a narrative familiar to a wider audience, one that roots international migration in a local, historical experience, namely the threat of violence during authoritarian rule in Chile.

Similarly, the search for memory in and of itself represents a theme common to the post-dictatorship era. Rodrigo Cánovas has already identified contemporary Chilean authors and, by extension, their readership as cultural and historical orphans. This theme recurs throughout *Las películas de mi vida*, particularly in the portrayal of the young boy in the airport and in Beltrán's estrangement from his father and the rest of his family. What sets the narrator of this novel apart from Cánovas' interpretation of the orphan is

precisely Beltrán's eventual return to memory. The narrator might represent an orphan of sorts, but he is one that, despite initial resistance, embarks on a search to connect his present with the past. For example, once he has recalled his family's reason for leaving Chile, Beltrán evokes the orphan figure of one of the major films of his life: *Oliver*. "De ésta (*Oliver*) tengo un par de imágenes grabadas, pero son escenas que han sido tan mostradas que dudo que mis recuerdos surjan a partir de lo que vi este año en un *drive-in* con mis padres," he remembers in his email to Lindsay (77). No matter where the narrator viewed the film, like the boy he encounters in the airport, the orphan figure from *Oliver* provides Beltrán with yet another reflection of himself and his experience as an adolescent. This mirroring effect is not in vain, since it prompts the narrator to delve further into memories of his experience as an adolescent and of feeling orphaned.

These memories also relate individual experience to a more collective understanding of the period. Beltrán remembers identifying with the orphan Oliver in his youth, in part, because of his family's migration from Chile to the United States and back again. The narrator remembers from his hotel room in Los Angeles: "En Chile—en un principio al menos—nunca me consideré 'en casa' no menos 'parte de la familia'... arrancado de cuajo de todo lo que era mío, de todo lo que me era propio, del sol y el aire acondicionado de California, el fantasma del huerfanito Oliver me persiguió sin tregua" (77). Beltrán and his sister suddenly find themselves in Santiago, where they must relearn a language they have forgotten or run the risk of never re-integrating to their former society. In this aspect, recollection of *Oliver* expresses Beltrán's experience between the two countries and languages, and the concern he feels about never appropriating either.

In another aspect, however, the same orphan figure becomes suggestive of collective feelings of estrangement associated with a traumatic past of violence. The image of the orphan Oliver may have followed Beltrán in the past, but the ghosts of dictatorial Chile continue to antagonize him (and the rest of Chilean society) in the present:

La canción principal, *Consider Yourself*, aún hoy me llena de una extraña melancolía y, en vez de traerme recuerdos de la California de fines de los sesenta, me remite de inmediato al Chile postgolpe, a cuando retornamos o, para decirlo de otro modo, a cuando me dejaron abandonado en un país bajo toque de queda donde, a veces, en medio de la noche, se escuchaban ráfagas de metrallas que alegraban a mi abuela (77).

Memories of *Oliver* thus transcend the narrator's personal experience to reveal shared events commonly associated with the dictatorship period in Chile. Since film itself is both an individual and collective experience, the narrator is able to use this as an over-arching metaphor to connect his recollection of the past with collective memory. Likewise, if this same metaphor is to be extended to space, even the supposedly confining, solitary hotel room from which Beltrán writes is not impervious to individual and collective memories of trauma.

Beltrán's identification with *Oliver* reaches its climax when a familiar scene from the film becomes nearly indistinguishable from the narrator's experience in Chile. Similar to the orphan, Beltrán finds himself among other children waiting in line to receive a serving of milk. Unlike Oliver, Beltrán refuses his share: "Entonces, en vez de decir 'quiero más como en *Oliver*, tuve la mala idea de decir 'no, gracias; yo no tomo esto,' y no tomo esta cosa, esta asquerosa leche en polvo... esta mierda para chilenos subdesarrollados" (78). Thus, the narrator reinterprets this iconic situation according to

his experience as not only a newcomer to his country of birth and grade school, but also as a young man of middle to upper-middle class standing. In this way, the narrator melds the personal with the collective, filtering his own situation through both a mass medium and reference to a moment shared in history. In particular, his subsequent encounter with a teacher who overhears the snub refocuses the incident under the lens of the dictatorship: “La profesora, una alemana nazi, pinochetista, la *tante* Renata o la *tante* Margarethe, me lanzó sin aviso una bofetada tan llena de furia que me aterró: ‘Te lo tomas, cabro de mierda; no estamos en Estados Unidos, estamos en Chile.’” Beltrán may not remember the name of the teacher, a fact that speaks to the selectivity of memory; but he does recall her political alignment as a supporter of Pinochet and the junta. Since he is afforded no other option, the young Beltrán must accept what he has been given: “Así que abrí la boca y dejé caer las gotas de sangre sobre la viscosa nata que se formó arriba del tazón y luego, frente a la *tante*, bebí la desabrida y horrorosa leche que nos había regalado el nuevo gobierno militar.” As they stand alone, the narrator’s memories as a young boy, recently arrived to the Chile of the early ‘70s, form a singular, individual narrative. As viewed through the lens of popular media, however, these memories signal the collective trauma of violence and life under dictatorship.<sup>62</sup>

Likewise, although memories of his family’s movement between North and South America are particular to their situation, international migration represents a shared experience among many Chileans and thus serves as another point of departure for remembering a personal as well as a collective past. The relative ease with which Beltrán and his family travel, in both the past and the present, suggests their level of economic

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<sup>62</sup> President Salvador Allende initiated a reform to provide free milk to all school-aged children residing in Chile’s shantytowns.

comfort. Anthropologist Paul Connerton maintains that, despite reuniting travelers from diverse socio-economic and cultural backgrounds, travel remains a practice partially determined by class: “At the lower end of the labor market, certain mobilities are coerced, the movement of people who must leave home in order to survive, and those whose movements are organized within regimes of dependent labor” (89). With regard to the story, many Chileans could not enter and leave the country as easily as the Soler family. Many, in fact, sought exile from Chile during the dictatorship years, precisely as the Solers returned to their homeland from the United States. Although these aspects of the narrator’s family denote their class standing, *Las películas de mi vida* suggests that transit—in its many forms—reinforces a sense of place and identity, and reserves a place within collective memory. Just as random interpersonal encounters prompt Beltrán to recall his past within two nondescript places of transit—first the airport and later the hotel room—his family’s travels refer to collectively understood events, events that continue to influence the present. International migration, as presented in the novel, does not undermine an individual’s sense of place or history as much as it brings both into better focus.

Beltrán has already mentioned that his family left Chile for the United States well before the military regime took power. Although there is no direct correlation between his family’s relocation and the dictatorship at first, the narrator associates flight from the country with the experience of thousands more who found themselves in exile after the 1973 coup. In a later passage, however, Beltrán identifies a palpable link between his family’s situation and political instability in the faraway country. In contrast to the ease

with which they first migrated from Chile to the United States, Beltrán remembers being dissuaded from visiting his homeland.

Después de que Salvador Allende fue elegido Presidente, en 1970, la idea de vacacionar en Chile no sólo se diluyó sino que se volvió un asunto de desafío gubernamental. El Departamento de Estado les sugirió a los ciudadanos norteamericanos no viajar a Chile, por lo que mi hermana Manuela no pudo ingresar al extraño y ahora revolucionario país de sus padres. (91)

The inability of Beltrán and his family to return to Chile from the United States highlights the South American country's experience with civil unrest as it neared complete political upheaval. Thus, far from diminishing a sense of place, travel or the inability to travel in the novel calls attention to the historical circumstances of the time as opposed to hiding them from view.

The situation for many of Beltrán's relatives also relates explicitly to the effects of political and social instability in the years leading up to and following the dictatorship in Chile. Beltrán recalls that, since he and his family cannot leave the United States, family members began to visit them instead. "Debido a la imposibilidad de que nosotros viajáramos ('no hay leche, no hay pan, no hay papel confort')," Beltrán includes in his e-mail, "nos comenzaron a visitar sin tregua. Parientes, conocidos, amigos de desconocidos; y al final, el año 73, tuvimos que ayudar a recibir a los *exiliados* que escapaban del régimen" (91). Members of his family move between Chile and the United States as exiles escaping the material discomfort and political turmoil of their place of origin. For Beltrán's grandmother in particular, relocating to the United States represents her only means of survival:

Efectivamente, en 1972, mi abuela Guillermina, al borde de un ataque de nervios anti-allendista, llegó a nuestra casa a recuperarse. Había sido expuesta por mi abuelo, que pensaba, con



justa razón, que la vida de mi abuela corría peligro. La Mina estaba a punto de auto-inmolarse, o colgarse, o envenenarse, con tal de desafiar no sólo a la Unidad Popular, a la que odiaba con toda su alma. (116)

Despite the fact that she is not among the thousands of Chileans who found themselves in exile around the world following the violent coup, the grandmother's experience reflects the recent history of her place of origin. As she travels to the United States, it is with these events in mind—following her as she transitions from one place to another and imprinting collective memory.

Beltrán explains that his grandmother's flight from Chile also represented a certain act of defiance against the Allende government. The narrator further contextualizes la Mina's decision to leave Chile by first recalling a moment of historic significance: *el cacerolazo*, a protest staged by many middle and upper-middle class women in Chile during the early 1970s. Beltrán extrapolates on his grandmother's reaction to the largest of this gathering: "Cuando las mujeres momias salieron a la calle a exigir la salida de Allende, la Mina sintió que la revolución había llegado. Nadie, al parecer, le explicó que el asunto era al revés. Pero ella no se compró el cuento del comunismo ni de la UP ni la idea de los hijos de burgueses ahora fueran socialistas" (117). Since his grandmother never accepted the ideals of the Allende presidency, she would leave the country as a means of both protecting her sanity and of demonstrating her dissent. "Tampoco iba a permitir que el proletariado gobernara o, menos, le expropiara a sus parientes sus terrenos y su modo de vida," Beltrán recalls of his feisty grandmother. A sense of place, history, and even resistance remain integral to Beltrán's and his family's past experience of migration.

Finally, after years away from Chile, Beltrán remembers finally returning to his birth country for what was planned as nothing more than a summer-long vacation. Similar to the reflection cast between the young boy and Beltrán in the present-day Santiago airport, the narrator's return to Chile from the United States in the days of his youth resembles his current travel itinerary. On the one hand, Beltrán and his family never intended to remain in South America for more than a few months' time, and yet they stayed indefinitely. On the other, Beltrán never intended to make Los Angeles the final destination of his present-day trip, and yet he narrates memories of the past from a hotel in that city. The novel once again presents travel as cyclical: Beltrán's travels in the past and the present ultimately unite and contextualize his itinerancy. What the narrator as an adolescent notices as he departs Los Angeles for Santiago further parallels his remembered experiences and those he lives in the present: "El 4 de julio de 1974 pasé cerca del gigantesco donut que vigilaba los techos de la calle Ash y el resto de Inglewood. Entramos a LAX para embarcarnos en un 707 de la Pan Am rumbo a Caracas, primera etapa de unas vacaciones latinoamericanas que resultaron eternas" (163). Many of these are the same sites he observed upon landing in Los Angeles in the present. As such, recurring observations of Ash Street, Inglewood, and the giant donut so iconic of Los Angeles suggest continuity between not only the past and the present, but also the act of traveling and remembering.

They also serve in stark contrast to the narrator's first observations of dictatorial Chile. As opposed to noticing the more outstanding landmarks of the city below him, in his memory Beltrán finds that darkness and fog cloud his vision: "El avión comenzó a descender y por la ventana no se veía nada excepto oscuridad y nubes" (172). This dreary

setting is as suggestive of the country's grim situation as it is symbolic of the narrator's few remaining memories of Chile prior to his departure for the United States. The darkness thus signals oblivion. "El país que fui articulando en mi mente tuvo más que ver con lo que me contaban (y con lo que escuchaba que hablaban) que con el país real," Beltrán would remember at an earlier point in the novel (91). Los Angeles, in contrast, was where he lived and made memories, as evidenced in his reference to important places. Despite having little prior recollection of Santiago or Chile at this point, Beltrán does remember the jubilant atmosphere aboard the plane

Justo antes de aterrizar, un hombre comenzó a entonar la Canción Nacional de Chile y, poco a poco, se unieron más pasajeros, incluyendo mi madre. No me sabía la letra ni entendía lo que decían, pero se me puso la piel de gallina de todos modos. El avión se posó en la losa del aeropuerto de Pudahuel y de inmediato los mismos pasajeros estallaron en aplausos. (172)

Since, at this point, he has no spatial landmarks to orient him as he descends into Santiago, the narrator remembers the excitement of the other passengers as they finally land on terra firma. Their patriotic reaction to landing in Chile—presumably after an extended period away from their country—and hearing the national anthem also reminds the reader that a young Beltrán has just landed in a country in the midst of dictatorial rule, the effects of which can be observed even within the airport.

Contrary to ideas of non-place that maintain that sites like the airport are free from local, historical influences and memory production, Beltrán's first recollections of Santiago are of the airport. Once the fog has dissipated from his view—"del avión bajamos por una escalera resbolosa por la densa niebla que encubría todo" (173)—his initial reactions are of shock and disbelief. He cannot understand why, if there is no war going on in this country, it is necessary for so many armed patrolmen to stand guard at

the airport: “Si no había una guerra, ¿por qué tantas armas?” (173). These heavily armed military guards, who point to the turmoil and violence of the beginning years of dictatorship in Chile, make themselves known at each facet of Beltrán’s journey off the plane and into the airport: “Lo que más nos llamó la atención fue la cantidad de soldados que patrullaban el aeropuerto. Estaban en la pista, detrás de las columnas, al lado de la fila de policía internacional. Al bajarnos del bus que nos trajo desde el 707 me fijé que sujetaban metralletas” (173). The primary function of the airport is purportedly to facilitate travel and movement. As Beltrán’s recollections suggest, however, this site, like any other, responds to changes in society and finely weaving itself to its surrounding cityscape and the production of memory than previously theorized.

In fact, Beltrán’s subsequent observations of Santiago mirror his memories of the airport and underscore the extent to which this site connects with the rest of the city, its identity, and its traumatic history, as well as to the narrator’s recollection of the past. In both cases, the narrator remembers his surprise upon encountering military personnel at every turn. Just as armed men greet him upon his arrival to the airport, so too do they define his memories of Santiago proper:

Santiago estaba plagado de militares y las señoras de la calle aplaudían cuando pasaban los camiones con los soldados apuntando sus metralletas hacia los edificios... Todos en Santiago hablaban de la reconstrucción nacional, aunque, mirando a mi alrededor, parecía que más bien lo estaban botando a patadas.  
(180)

Likewise, Beltrán’s observation that many of the city’s residents celebrate what they view as a new day in Chile parallels the patriotic reaction he had encountered upon landing. Despite this sense of jubilation, Beltrán’s memories depict a city shrouded in darkness—“La ciudad era fría y oscura” (174)—and plagued by violence. The details of

his memories and the context in which they occur may be particular to Beltrán's life, but the history of authoritarianism they conjure up unites the narrator's experience to collective memories of a traumatic past, imprinted on a modern landscape.

Telephone conversations with his sister, Manuela, occurring midway through the novel and then again at its conclusion, reorient the reader back to Beltrán's present-day surroundings. They also serve as a reminder that Beltrán narrates these memories from a hotel room in Los Angeles. As at the beginning of the novel, the phone conversations summarize the plot and outline Beltrán's entwined understandings of space, memory, and travel. In the first of these conversations, at the beginning of *Las películas de mi vida*, revealed Beltrán's avoidance of the rest of the world and his past through endless travel, the remaining dialogues confirm that he has reconsidered. For example, when she asks Beltrán where he is, the narrator replies: "—En mi habitación. Al lado del aeropuerto de Los Ángeles. Tengo vista a la pista de aterrizaje" (143). This description would otherwise seem unremarkable: Beltrán could be anywhere in the world right now. Given the context of his recent travels, however, and the intensity of his memory, these sites—the room, the airport, and the tarmac—have formed part of a memoryscape in which the protagonist has projected individual and collective memories of the past.

Although he has spent the better part of his stay—and the novel—sifting through memories of the past, Beltrán does not openly admit that he has been writing to a complete stranger about his past. Instead, he mentions that, because of an unexpected extended layover in Los Angeles, he has spent most of his day sleeping and dreaming. His dream, coincidentally, took the form of a miniseries about his family: "Soñé con todos nosotros. Fue como si me pusiera a ver un largo serial, capítulo tras capítulo. No

podía despertar hasta verlo todo” (146). By referring to the dream and not to his hours of writing, Beltrán’s memories appear passive—as if, by finally catching up on some much-needed rest, he suddenly and unconsciously has managed to reconnect with the past. The reader knows, however, that the narrator’s exploration of the past—albeit prompted by a series of unplanned events and encounters—is an active pursuit which Beltrán has documented and will continue to document in writing, and through which he reinterprets the spaces around him. After he hangs up the phone, Beltrán’s quest to understand the past and his memories will finally reunite him with the city beyond the walls of his hotel room.

From the backseat of Ambrosio Peña’s cab, the narrator weaves in and out of the multi-lane corridors that make up the city of Los Angeles, and which he observed many times in the past and present.<sup>63</sup> At distinct moments, his observations appear to reaffirm theories of non-place which suggest that certain places “exist only through the words that evoke them,” especially through tourism-related marketing, as Augé has claimed (“Introduction” 95). The narrator’s perspective of downtown Los Angeles, for example, conjures up a mediated version of that city: “Los rascacielos del *downtown* están a la vista, la misma imagen que uno ha visto en innumerables programas de televisión” (155). For a moment at least, it would seem that the city could only be perceived through its standard visual representation—created and disseminated via the mass media, particularly through film. However, as he traverses Los Angeles for the first time in years, Beltrán proves that even this image of the city can have personal undertones. By retracing the

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<sup>63</sup> Connerton suggests the importance of driving to everyday life: “Topography is read through the car. We use a car not to see a city but to gain freedom of movement; but the view from the car’s window is often our primary experience of urban space, and much everyday knowledge of our life-space is learned through a windshield” (112). The window spaces of the car represent, therefore, another screen upon which to not only view the world but also project memories of the past.

footprints of years past and by connecting these present-day points of reference with his own past, he establishes Los Angeles' more iconic urban landscapes and movement among them as the foundation of his past and as the backdrop for modern *memoryscapes*.

In fact, the first sites he notices during his vehicular trip through the city are the same as those he mentioned upon descending from flight earlier in the novel. Whether these spaces are generic and common the world over, or whether they are representational of this city in particular, seems of less importance than Beltrán's association of these sites with the years he had spent living in Los Angeles. "Yo he estado aquí antes. He recorrido esta autopista. Ciertos hitos del camino vuelven a entrar en foco: el letrero de Hollywood allá al fondo, arriba del cerro; los interminables cementerios, el dirigible de la Goodyear circulando por el cielo infectado de smog," he reminisces while cruising the city (151). In *Las películas de mi vida*, these are more than just examples of non-place; instead, they are sites indelible from memory as well as from the comings, goings, and interactions of everyday life. Beyond their real or symbolic function, these are places where life is lived and where memories form. Movement among them, as this jaunt through the city will prove, will only serve to strengthen the bond between the narrator and his surroundings.

Beltrán and the cab driver eventually strike up a conversation, and discover that they have more in common than either had expected. Their countries' shared history of earthquakes provides a connection between the two men. Upon learning that Beltrán is Chilean, the Salvadoran cab driver replies pensively: "Chile... Me gustaría conocer Chile... El suyo es un país tan fracturado como el nuestro." After hours of painstakingly surveying even the most recondite of memories, everything suddenly becomes clear to Beltrán. He remembers that earthquakes are inextricable from memory and the place

where they occur, leaving the survivors of such an event inevitably to ask themselves and others to recall not just the past but also the place where they stood: “¿Dónde estabas? ¿Con quién estabas? ¿Qué estabas haciendo?” (153). In this way, they are similar to an equally cataclysmic event in Chile’s past, the coup d’état, and the process in which its society would begin to sift through the rubble as well as memory: “¿dónde te tocó el golpe?”, ¿dónde estabas el 11 de septiembre de 73?.” In the present, it seems that only a shift of that magnitude could extend Beltrán’s stay in Los Angeles and, with help from a series of chance encounters, prompt him to replay his reels of memory. From a hotel room, where the earth’s tremors have kept him from reaching his intended destination, Beltrán finally remembers where he was during the other earthquakes of his life, and demonstrates that even the least likely of places can provide a home for memory. Through his memories as a young man growing up between worlds and conflicting ideologies, and finally as traveler through the city of his long-neglected past, Beltrán demonstrates that memory is just as transient as the body itself and can be mapped (not erased) according to the movement of individuals, families, societies, and, at times, the ground beneath their feet.

During his closing conversation with his sister, Beltrán finally admits to having explored the past intentionally, resulting in his active search for family members still living in L.A. With memory as his guide, Beltrán retraces his steps through the channels of the past and the modern-day thoroughfares that will ultimately reunite him with his family. These efforts will not cease once he has left the city, he reassures his sister, mentioning that he has now decided to travel to El Salvador for his grandfather’s funeral. In fact, upon his eventual return to Santiago, his travels will complete their cycle as the



narrator comes face-to-face with the father he has not seen in years. When Manuela asks him what he will say to his father after being estranged for so many years, Beltrán replies tellingly: “Le voy a decir: ‘Hola, papá, tanto tiempo.’ Quizás después lo invite al cine” (287). In addition to sharing time and space together, the narrator implicitly invites his father to re-explore the past together—to remember, rewind, and eventually re-view the movies of their lives. Despite its focus on fissures—those just below the earth’s surface, those that divide entire societies, and even those that signal memory—*Las películas de mi vida* narrates connections made, rather than broken. The novel unites recollection of the past with movement through the present, reconnects members of the same family, and suggests that, in the end, an individual need look only to the landscapes that surround him for traces of memory.

### CHAPTER 3

#### **Memories in Construction: Emerging Memoryscapes in Ignacio Agüero's *Aquí se construye, o, El lugar donde nació ya no existe***

The previous chapter shed new light on the intersection of mobility, place, and memory in Alberto Fuguet's *Las películas de mi vida* (2003), and exposed with greater clarity memory's presence among sites of transit in post-dictatorial Chile as well as its nexus with diverse forms of popular culture. This reading of Fuguet's novel challenges the idea that sites associated with global mobility and modernity are non-places devoid of meaningful human interaction, memory production, and collective identity. A similar reading of the 2000 documentary *Aquí se construye, o, Ya no existe el lugar donde nació*, by the highly regarded Chilean filmmaker and producer Ignacio Agüero will further complicate this position.<sup>64</sup> This film documents the urbanization of an historic district at the heart of the Chilean capital and draws on themes also found in Fuguet's work: an interest in quotidian life and social practices, expressions of individual and collective memory, and the role these factors play in defining place.

Despite these similarities, Agüero's documentary differs significantly from the novel in its scope and approach to everyday life and space. *Las películas de mi vida* mapped only certain physical and remembered points of reference along the narrator's travels—including an airport, a hotel, and the thoroughfares that led him to each site. *Aquí se construye*, in contrast, broadens its view beyond these discrete spaces in its attempt to define the relationship between place and memory. Also unlike Fuguet, the

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<sup>64</sup> Agüero (1952) is best known as a documentary filmmaker, whose titles include *No olvidar* (1982), *Cien niños esperando un tren* (1988), and *El diario de Agustín* (2008), in addition to *Aquí se construye* (2000). Major themes of his works include the legacy of the 1973 dictatorship, collective memory, and social justice. He has also worked as a producer on more mainstream films, like *Gruiguito* (1989), about a boy whose family returns to Chile from New York, after a long exile.

filmmaker uses urbanization as a means of linking modern life and architectural styles to what he perceives as the devaluation of long-standing cultural traditions and memory's disappearance from the cityscape and everyday life. In fact, the film's overarching premise suggests that urbanization levels not only space (making all cities indistinguishable) but also memory. However, in the process of carefully documenting Santiago's dynamic cityscape over the course of two years, *Aquí se construye* depicts a scenario in which memory influences quotidian life and emerges in the form of urban palimpsests. Although an initial viewing might suggest otherwise, this documentary ultimately complicates beliefs that the modern city has declined from place into non-place—or rather, that trends in modern urbanism have dulled memory's influence over quotidian life and space. Somewhat ironically, Agüero's visual manifesto about the urbanization and standardization of urban space—a visual archive of the city—in fact discloses memory's resistance to erasure by acting as an expression of memory, which suggests the continued imprint of remembrance on the modern cityscape.

In this way, the film acts as a visual archive of the city—a fact which itself confirms memory as a salient theme of the documentary. Over the course of the film, the destruction of single-family homes and construction of high-rise apartment buildings in Santiago's Providencia neighborhood represents the primary subject of analysis.<sup>65</sup> *Aquí se construye* visually documents the creative destruction that propels urbanization and, in the process, discloses an underlying fear: that the modern city will consequently cease to

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<sup>65</sup> Jack Ellis and Betsy McLane maintain that documentary film goes beyond more narrative-driven genres: "As for subjects—what they're about—documentaries focus on something other than the general human condition involving individual human feelings, relationships, and actions: the province of narrative fiction and drama" (1). The work of the documentary filmmaker, in contrast, is to provide in-depth analysis of social and cultural concerns, albeit at the cost of plot development and other literary conventions. In recent years, however, documentaries have begun to experiment with diverse literary and artistic devices, including even elements of fiction.

be a meaningful source of memory and identity. From this perspective, urban renewal projects disconnect the cityscape from its past by diminishing its sites of personal and collective memory. In fact, Agüero confirmed that, through his film, he intended to capture the accelerated pace at which the city's landmarks were destroyed. He also hoped to save them for posterity and further align them with concepts of place, memory, and identity amid a rapidly changing cityscape. The filmmaker parallels the disappearance of historic homes, in particular, with the onset of memory loss: "las casas que había, ya no estaban. Casas que uno tenía en la memoria siempre... son imágenes. Pero, de un día para otro, esta imagen cambia, o deja de existir. Y te deja en blanco, o sin imágenes" (personal interview). Without its corresponding spatial referent, memory ceases to exist, the filmmaker suggests. Drawing on a more cinematic metaphor, memory becomes like a film reel with no images.

This perspective highlights a preoccupation recurrent among the social and architectural sciences, often in discussions of spatial homogenization. The belief that modern cityscapes have been reduced to non-place—devoid of familiar images and memories, and similar the world over—resonates with what architect Michael Sorkin, in particular, has identified as "[a] vast, virtually undifferentiated territory... a 'non-place urban realm' that provides the bare functions of a city" (xii). This fear of estrangement from the past and memory also undergirds critiques of Modernism and its often-utopian appeals to the future. This point of view maintains that inherent to the modern city's increased spatial uniformity and championing of modernity is a diminished sense of history and memory. It also presumes that memory shares an indelible and yet static relationship with place. As one forever disappears, so does the other.

Yet, memory remains the crux of *Aquí se construye*. Or, altering slightly the influential words of Claudia Feld: in this film, memory booms. Even at a foundational level, the Chilean filmmaker hoped that, by viewing what would appear to be unrelenting urbanization on film, its spectators would at once take notice of their rapidly transforming cityscape and also remember this landscape as it once was. In this way, the film serves as a visual archive of the city, its many transformations, and the nuances of quotidian urban life. From this point of departure, *Aquí se construye* becomes more of a treatise on memory and less an exhibition of its erasure, despite the film's documentation of widespread destruction and its suggestion that memory is losing ground in the city. Memoryscapes emerge, thus, not just among designated sites of memory, but among everyday historic buildings and homes. Throughout, the film does more to explore the practice and expression of memory—maintaining it consequently as one of the keystones of the post-dictatorial era—than to propose its complete and systematic erasure. Therefore, although Agüero's documentary proposes that many of the social and economic changes rooted in the dictatorship project threaten to erase memory, traces of the past reveal their obstinacy and confirm their appearance not only among sites sanctioned in memory's honor but also among everyday places and practices.

Once we understand *Aquí se construye* as a kind of visual archive, suddenly common places, experiences, and even routes taken through the city become symbolic of the practice, expression, and preservation of memory. In this vein, Dylan Trigg's observations about the phenomenology of memory and place in *The Aesthetics of Decay: Nothingness, Nostalgia, and the Absence of Reason* (2006) offer further insight into *Aquí se construye* as a work dedicated to not only the destruction of place but also the

construction of memory. “As the mutable threatens to dislodge the home from its surroundings,” he writes, “the attachment between memory and place is reinforced. When a place is destroyed, grieving often takes on the form of recollecting that place” (238).<sup>66</sup> Within the context of the documentary, this interpretation suggests that fears of memory’s disappearance from the Santiago landscape, coupled with the destruction of historic homes and the standardization of space, actually provokes recollection.<sup>67</sup> As a result, a film so highly focused on laying bare the disappearance of memory from the city in fact calls attention to its persistence and, in some cases, emergence—its construction, not its destruction.<sup>68</sup> Recounting individual memories of the past becomes an important vehicle for conveying memory in the film, complicating an increasingly uniform cityscape. Thus, even as historic residences and other buildings begin to vanish from Santiago’s landscape, *Aquí se construye* reveals that memory permeates the urban experience, and that even the destruction of historic places can construct memory.

The film depicts older structures as the remaining vestiges of Santiago’s past and renders them a source of popular identification and memory. Everyday spaces emerge as sites intrinsic to memory. In fact, the documentary presents historic homes and buildings as the only truly viable landmarks of collective memory and identity. Pangs of nostalgia

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<sup>66</sup> Similarly, in his article “Memories in Site: Toward a Renewed Understanding of Starbucks,” which problematizes ideas of non-place, Trigg maintains that the uniformity of these sites can in fact prompt memory: “the *absence* of things causes us to be heedful to the space in which that thing was meant to be placed” (author’s emphasis, 5).

<sup>67</sup> Although the documentary does not address post-modernism explicitly, it is worth noting that this brand of architecture often attempts to renew interest in the historical. Nan Ellin writes: “In reaction to Modernism’s attempt to make a clean break with the past and its futuristic orientation: historicism; historical quotation; and architecture of memory and monuments; and a search for urbanity (in its preindustrial incarnation)” (101). In a similar way, *Aquí se construye* seeks to unite memory and place as a consequence of the perceived threat that the former will become irreversibly estranged from the latter.

<sup>68</sup> Ellis and McLane remind the reader that documentary filmmakers are rarely objective in their analysis of the film’s subject: “documentary filmmakers intend to increase our understanding of, our interest in, and perhaps our sympathy for their subjects. They may hope that through this means of informal education they will enable us to live our lives a little more fully and intelligently” (2).

and sentiment recur throughout the documentary, as these buildings begin to disappear from the cityscape. Consequently, *Aquí se construye* advocates that these places previously deemed undesirable or untransformable are worthy of preserving—if not in reality, at least on film. This penchant towards preservation contrasts with concurrent trends toward urbanization and disposability, or what Zygmunt Bauman has identified as a tendency to “shun the durable and cherish the transient” (14). In this regard, the contemporary notion of the city as an increasingly generic non-place with only shallow roots in local culture, customs, and politics proves to be overly simplistic. The city has not reached its conclusion as a place, despite trends toward spatial uniformity and disposability. Rather, *Aquí se construye* captures the extent to which this South American capital struggles to strike a balance between preserving and discarding the spatial dimensions of its past and, certainly, its memory.

Similarly, the construction and destruction of an entire neighborhood becomes a memorable act. Consequently, urbanization and the buildings it produces construct yet another memoryscape. The city, as presented through the documentary, further reveals urbanization as a deeply human experience. Far from simply standardizing the cityscape, structural transformation leaves its mark on physical space and the lived experience of the neighborhood and its inhabitants. In fact, over the course of the film, urbanization becomes more recognizable for its profound influence on the lives of Providencia’s residents than for its outright erasure of memory. Even the modern structures that Agüero opposes to memory emerge over the course of the film as viable memoryscapes.

To this end, *Aquí se construye* divides its focus between memories of the neighborhood and the present-day experiences of city dwellers involved in the ongoing

cycles of destruction and construction. More specifically, the documentary draws on the perspectives of a resident and two workers to uncover the often-untold human experience of urbanization. These accounts undermine the belief that urbanization threatens memory. In his work *How Modernity Forgets* (2009), anthropologist Paul Connerton evokes Marx when he maintains that modern dwellings undermine memory, since they tend to conceal the labor process involved in their creation. Connerton parallels modern architecture with any other form of commodity in that “the precise details of the structured process of producing commodities [get] *forgotten*. In other words, the genesis of the commodity form, the human agency that creates manufactured artifacts in this particular social formation, falls prey to a cultural amnesia” (43). The modern high-rise constructed over the course of the documentary may confirm trends toward spatial uniformity among world cities, but it does not conceal memory. On the contrary, construction of the property incites the memory of nearby residents, and the film takes care to document the many aspects of the labor process, even following a builder on his path from the construction site to his home and back, thereby uncovering the transition between production and leisure time. Agüero’s documentary demonstrates the human aspect of urban change, therefore committing this transformation to memory.

Fittingly, *Aquí se construye* ultimately reveals a city that is organic and mutable—one that engages in a complex and mutually influential relationship between social life and spatial practices. Henri Lefebvre’s definition of the city as *oeuvre* helps to clarify how urban terrain is portrayed in the documentary. Lefebvre’s interpretation calls attention to the vibrant convergence between space and society, and represents the urban equivalent of a work in progress. According to this point of view, the metropolis is



“based on simultaneity (of events, perceptions, and elements of the whole in ‘reality’) which socially involves the bringing together and meeting up of everything in its environs and urban society as the privileged site of the meeting of the *oeuvre* and the product” (*Writings* 19). The city is simultaneously a participant in and an expression of a society and its everyday customs. Cities, in other words, are a society’s habitat. As societies grow and change, so do their habitats, often forming a rich, multi-layered composite of past and present influences. This definition of the cityscape further reinforces the city as a mutable entity that participates in the construction and preservation of memory. Everyday manifestations and practices of memory may change, but they do not disappear entirely.

The city as a dynamic space in constant flux also calls attention to the spatial dynamics inherent to capitalism.<sup>69</sup> The demolition of historic buildings and other landmarks in *Aquí se construye* signals more than just contemporary society’s penchant for disposable structures and uniform architecture. Instead, the documentary positions urbanization as the outcome of changes to society’s values and sense of taste, or what Lefebvre has called a modification to the city as a “system of significations.” His definition of this concept on the individual level can be applied to the city in its totality:

At the ecological level, the humble inhabitant has his system... of significations. The fact of living here or there involves the reception, adoption, and transmission of such a system, for example that of owner-occupied housing. The system of signification of the inhabitant tells of his passivities and activities.  
(152)

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<sup>69</sup> Drawing on Lefebvre’s work, Neil Brenner and Nik Theodore connect the creative and destructive aspects of urbanization with the dynamics of capitalism: “Due to its inherent dynamism, capital continually renders obsolete the very geographical landscapes it creates and upon which its own reproduction and expansion hinges” (354).

Agüero's documentary suggests that urbanization represents a new system, one resulting from the country's adoption of neo-liberal economic, social, and cultural reforms during and since the dictatorship years.<sup>70</sup> That is, the spatial transformations captured on film over the course of two years stem from marketplace dynamics—flows of monetary and human capital—as well as changing preferences to habitable space and everyday customs.<sup>71</sup> Thus, *Aquí se construye* proposes that the quest for capital gain according to neo-liberalism has left a distinct impression on Santiago's cityscape, everyday life, and memory.

The Chilean capital has undergone, in fact, significant structural and symbolic changes since the country's return to democratic rule in 1990. The free-market economic model that has since become the legacy of the 1973 dictatorship has influenced the country's transformation.<sup>72</sup> In particular, Santiago has become the epicenter of the country's well-documented economic prowess in recent years. Over the course of two decades, the capital has become a prototype for other Latin American cities wishing to invest in neo-liberal reforms.<sup>73</sup> It is not surprising that the city's newfound position has

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<sup>70</sup> These authors, among others, identify neo-liberal ideology as a force of cultural and social change in the country: Moulán, 1997; Masiello, 2001; Winn, 2004.

<sup>71</sup> "Due to its inherent dynamism, capital continually renders obsolete the very geographical landscapes it creates and upon which its own reproduction and expansion hinges" (Brenner & Theodore, 354).

<sup>72</sup> For political scientist Juan Gabriel Valdés, Chile's commitment to neo-liberal practices over the past 30 years can only be understood in terms of the country's dictatorship: "In Chile, neo-liberal economic thought became an all-pervading framework of ideas. In a context of violent change in the political power structures, it was used by the new military rulers as the requisite substance for a radical transformation of the state. Those that proclaimed these ideas argued, persuasively, that the establishment of a free market necessitated an authoritarian regime" (5). Draconian economic reforms enacted during the Chilean dictatorship—particularly, privatization of all national industries save copper mining, financial deregulation, and cuts in government spending—have since become its legacy.

<sup>73</sup> Labor historian Peter Winn maintains that the Chilean economic model has commonly been referred to, in Latin America as well as internationally, as a beacon for neoliberal reforms: "Chile was the first major Latin American country to carry out this neoliberal transformation, and it has been both the most successful showcase for neo-liberalism and the model for others... to emulate" (3). Political scientist Valdés echoes this observation: "Even today, however, some continue to stress the exemplary nature of one particular experiment conducted in Chile's polemic past, which they see as an ideal model for other developing countries or nations in the process of modernizing their economies: the neo-liberal revolution implemented

had an impact on its space. The editors of *Bifurcaciones*, an online magazine of urban cultural studies based in Santiago, identified the city's "proceso de resignificación" as a renaissance of sorts (1). In their 2004 editorial, they claim that Santiago has redefined itself both as a cityscape and as a reflection of collective identity— "cool, cosmopolita, moderno y sofisticado," as much by definition as by design. The editorial also called attention to distinctly urban phenomenon from which, as the writers argue, "han surgido proyectos inmobiliarios, comerciales, industriales... han provocado un impacto promisorio en la *geografía de oportunidades*" (4). In the process of adapting to rapidly changing demands of the domestic and international marketplace, Santiago has redefined not only its identity but also its sense of place, at home and in the rest of the world.

These transformations have helped to inspire not only Agüero's documentary but also a wellspring of secondary scholarship on the subject. Many theorists have argued that, amid these changes, the new Santiago has left little room for memory, especially in light of the country's recent dictatorship and transition to democracy. Chilean sociologist Tomás Moulian, for example, maintains in his 1997 monograph *Chile Actual: Anatomía de un mito* that Chile could neither transition from dictatorship to democracy nor become an international model for neoliberal economics without first erasing its recent past. "Era necesario el blanqueo de Chile," he writes, suggesting that the success of neo-liberalism in the country and its influence on space remain inseparable from a waning of the country's collective memory (34). Although overly simplistic, this analysis creates a parallel between collective amnesia and changes to Santiago's cityscape. In Moulian's estimation, the 1973 dictatorship did more than just usher in a wave of neo-liberal

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after General Pinochet seized power" (1). More internationally, the IMF and other financial institutions have praised the Chilean example as a model for progress.

economic reforms; the legacy of Pinochet was also to alter the urban fabric of Chile's capital city:

En todos los sentidos, Santiago ha dejado de ser una ciudad pueblerina, como lo era todavía hasta 1973. Entonces aparecía como una urbe políticamente bullente pero sin sofisticación, sin complejidad en su trama urbana. Era una ciudad de calmados barrios residenciales, modestos pero confortables. Una ciudad todavía 'tranquila' y también segura, donde era posible desplazarse sin peligro... Esta metrópoli del Chile Actual, agitada por la continua transformación de sus barrios, no es más amable ni más confortable que la de antes. Es una ciudad hostil, insegura, estresante. (125)

Although he does not parallel oblivion directly with structural transformation, the subtext of Moulian's argument proposes that Santiago's role as a symbol of neoliberal reform and urban renewal marks a systemic trend toward memory loss. A similar concern undergirds *Aquí se construye's* approach to recent transformations of the capital.

A concrete example will help to root Moulian's position in Chile's recent past and further contextualize Agüero's fear that urbanization opposes memory. Villa Grimaldi, a nineteenth-century villa-turned torture center, stands as one of the nation's foremost public sites of memory.<sup>74</sup> Towards the end of the dictatorship, a government figure sold Villa Grimaldi to an investment group with ties to a construction company. The new owners petitioned and received permission to raze the site and construct an upscale condominium in its place. When the local news media spread word of the deal, human rights organizations protested and successfully reclaimed the Villa Grimaldi as a site of memory, which the democratic government formally inaugurated in 1995 (Meade 128).

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<sup>74</sup> Katherine Hite and Cath Collins clarify that the Villa Grimaldi campus—known as 'Peace Park'—was the first site of its kind in the Americas (7). After this site's inauguration in 1995, the Chilean government has since created a museum dedicated solely to memory of the dictatorship and human rights. The Memory Museum opened its doors on January 11, 2010, thanks to financial assistance from UNESCO's Worldwide Memory Program, as well as other local organizations.

Former prisoners have helped to identify the site's use during the dictatorship and have contributed to marking its interior with plaques signaling the torture committed there. Although the space now serves as a testimony to atrocities enacted under dictatorship, its conversion into a site of memory reveals a conflict between Chile's adoption of neo-liberal principles and the creation of public spaces of commemoration. The case of Villa Grimaldi emblemizes the often conflictive relationship maintained between the free-market policies enforced during the dictatorship and their imprint on Santiago, and the establishment of public sites of memory. This example also gives greater historical context to *Aquí se construye's* guiding preoccupation about the disappearance of historic sites from the city's landscape and its waning sense of collective memory.

This focus on urbanism in Chile has been exclusive to neither *Aquí se construye* nor academic inquiries. Other theorists of Latin American culture have also been forthright in connecting urban restructuring to what they perceive to be the diminishing influence of memory upon the region's societies and cityscapes. In his influential work on the relationship between urban space and violence, Jesús Martín Barbero maintains that the influence of urbanization on space is equivalent to a violent act that foretells the death of the city. In his estimation, urbanization diminishes the physical and symbolic space the city affords to memory and its spatial manifestations. Unlike Moulian, Martín-Barbero does not cite neo-liberalism explicitly. Instead, he observes that, by encroaching on the private sphere, urbanization robs inhabitants of their sense of place in the city: "It [cultural anguish] comes from the loss of collective roots in cities in which savage urbanism—which also obeys a measure of formal and commercial rationality—slowly destroys, little by little, the landscape of familiarity in which collective memory might

base itself” (28). According to this perspective, urban renewal projects strip the city of reference points of individual and collective memory and propel the expansion of neo-liberalism, all the while constituting a violent act that erases the spatial identity and memory of city dwellers.

Writer and public intellectual James Howard Kunstler, like Micheal Sorkin, also accuses newly erected modern structures of being ill-equipped to replace their successors as meaningful sites of history and identity. The “geography of nowhere,” as his work of the same title claims, inevitably replaces the geography of somewhere through spatial uniformity: “we choose to live in No-place, and our dwellings show it. In every corner... we have built places unworthy of love and move on from them without regret. But move on to what? Where is the ultimate destination when every place is No-place?” (173). If modern homes and other buildings are so unworthy of love, in this estimation, one could infer that they are also devoid of memory. Thus, this axiom maintains that the city has undermined and will continue to undermine its former sense of place. This perspective also perpetuates the fear that, as space becomes more standardized and as spatial referents of the past disappear from the cityscape, inhabitants will become further disconnected from their surroundings as a source of identity. According to this line of thinking, memory will also lose its place in the city.

These points of view appear to correspond with some readings of *Aquí se construye*, since the film revolves around the fear that personal and collective memories will be lost forever through heedless urbanization. Yet, one could argue that memory has neither disappeared from daily life nor been relegated exclusively to sites of memory, as these and other theorists have claimed (Nora 1996). Instead, memory continues to play a

central role in daily life; despite the film's focus on destruction, the city emerges as a vibrant memoryscape throughout the documentary. Amid sweeping changes to the cityscape, the film captures glimpses of the city as an amalgam of collective and individual memory through spoken and visual testimonies. Even when the documentary focuses on the destructive elements of urbanization—and old dwellings topple as swiftly as new structures replace them—signs of memory emerge from the cityscape: among the homes slated for demolition and those still in construction; in the testimony of residents and on-site workers; in the path the camera takes in and around Providencia, the neighborhood where Agüero filmed for two years.

More abstractly, the city reveals through the documentary and its study of the minutiae of everyday life that memory and place are not as rigidly bound as previously thought. Despite the more overt thesis of the film, *Aquí se construye* ultimately reveals that memory does not disappear from the cityscape with the substitution of old for new buildings. In Dylan Trigg's words, "the standardization of a place does not serve to undermine the memories that evade that homogeneity... memory resides dynamically; the relationship between the contained and the container is prone to mutability, not rigidity" (4). Memory does not vanish from daily life as much as it adapts to its new surroundings and customs. Memoryscapes emerge from the existing urban fabric of the city. Consequently, in contrast to recent secondary scholarship on the subject, memory continues to renew and reinvent itself in tandem with the city. In this way, despite the documentary's proposal that urban construction leads to its destruction, memory emerges over the course of the film, demonstrating its continued presence among Santiago's modern cityscape and its resistance to erasure.

One of the more compelling ways memories present themselves over the course of the film—even when the filmmaker attempts to demonstrate its erasure—is through the lens itself. The film captures transformations to the neighborhood’s lived spaces, social practices, architectural style, and above all, memory, from the perspective of a present-day *flâneur*, all the while establishing an extended metaphor between Chile’s economic gains during the post-dictatorship period and the subsequent alteration of its urban fabric.<sup>75</sup> Filmed between 1997 and 1999 in Providencia, one of Santiago’s historic districts, *Aquí se construye* also captures the nation’s urbanizing capital from this distinctly human perspective. With little overt interaction from the filmmaker, the camera gaze appears to take on a life of its own. To this end, the documentary attempts to offer a more direct connection to the city, since the majority of the film is shot from the ground and at eyelevel, mimicking natural movement and observation. In fact, Agüero’s work falls under the observational mode of documentary filmmaking, which emphasizes observation as its preferred method of exposing the lived experiences of certain social constellations: families, communities, and labor organizations, for example.<sup>76</sup> This technique allows the viewer to engage more directly with the subject of the film and its actors, and permits the filmmaker to work under the guise of objectivity.

Likewise, this perspective allows the camera to establish itself as an informed interpreter of urban space and practices—an ethnographer, of sorts—as it moves easily

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<sup>75</sup> It should be remembered that the *flâneur*, according to Baudelaire’s interpretation, was a gentleman figure who strolled the streets of his city to experience it more fully and directly, and also to contest the relative uniformity and anonymity of modern urban life.

<sup>76</sup> Julianne Burton adds the following characteristics to this style of documentary film: indirect address between the filmmaker and the observed, prevalence of long takes and sequence shots, and an interest toward moments of historical and social crisis (4). In their totality, these factors would seem to imply greater impartiality among documentaries cast from this mold. In the case of *Aquí se construye*, however, the documentary is highly subjective, since the point of view mimics the filmmaker’s sole perspective of the city.



around the city, revealing moments of spatial continuity and discontinuity among its distinct sectors. Similar to its human embodiment, the camera-as- *flâneur* considers the city a text of mnemonic devices and thus scours it for signs of the past. Alternatively, in Walter Benjamin's words, the *flâneur* is a native who seeks to pen the history of his life and city: "The town book of the native will always bear a relationship to memoirs. The writer did not spend his childhood there in vain" (qtd. in Leslie, 113). The *flâneur's* gaze, unlike that of the tourist, for example, looks beyond the superficial and searches for meaning and signs of the past among all the nooks and crannies of the cityscape.<sup>77</sup> Thus, the camera adopts memory as its guide and roams from house to house, weaving together interior and exterior spaces and strengthening the bond between place and memory. The *flâneur's* perspective thus complements the documentary's attempt to chronicle changes to the neighborhood by lending its keen sense of observation to the urbanization process. However, rather than suggest its erasure, this viewpoint establishes the city itself as a site of memory, including even its most recondite of corners, its most generic of buildings.

Despite the steadiness of memory, the documentary itself begins during a moment of transition, opening somewhat suddenly with the scene of an older couple removing furniture from their home. The voluntary evacuation of this house and its role in initiating the documentary should not be read as casual. The fact that the documentary is observational in its approach and not expository, for example, suggests that removing

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<sup>77</sup> That the film is shot from the perspective of the *flâneur* only serves to reinforce memory as its leit motif. In her reflections on the work of Walter Benjamin, "Souvenirs and Forgetting: Walter Benjamin's Memory-work," Esther Leslie argues that the *flâneur* often uses memory as his guide through the city, "drifting into a past made present, which transforms the town into a mnemotechnical devise... The tourist seeks the superficial, exotic, picturesque. But the native, traveling into the past, not into the distance, finds in corners and nooks, dusty and forgotten moments of childhood, encrusted in paving stones, like mislaid gems" (113). As seen through the gaze of the *flâneur*, the city itself becomes the object of memory, or as Benjamin himself has said: "The town book of the native will always bear a relationship to memoirs. The writer did not spend his childhood there in vain" (qtd. In Leslie, 113).

furniture from the house points to a more widespread phenomenon: the transformation of an entire neighborhood and city. With the camera posing as just another observer, homeowners and moving crew transfer furniture in tandem from the interior of the house to a nearby moving van. The camera captures their rushed attempt to relocate decades of personal effects as it follows the party between interior and exterior spaces and confirms the camera's ability to transcend an implicit divide between public and private spheres. The couple's efforts to empty the house of their belongings suggests metaphorically that the space is also being emptied of its memories.

Yet, the items stuffed precariously into the moving boxes continue to signal memory and represent the embodiment of years spent in the house. These mnemonic devices have not ceased to act as agents of memory simply because they are being transferred from one place of residence to another. Instead, their removal suggests that two new memoryscapes will soon emerge. The current site will soon become the repository of new memories, as will the future home of these items. In other words, each place will continue to provide the foundation for the expression and accumulation of memory. Thus, the house does not represent a memory chasm, even though it will soon cease to exist as it does in this moment. The evacuation of one structure for the arrival of another implies the construction of new memories and the emergence of updated memoryscapes.

In the scenes that immediately follow, the camera's human-like perspective continues to reveal memory's presence despite more overt references to oblivion. Once the owners' possessions have been loaded into the van, from across the street the camera pans the length of the house to the high-rise apartment buildings on either side. From this

viewpoint, the house appears fully ensconced between the two giants. More symbolically, the dual towers appear to overpower the house, implying that a new way of life redefines the neighborhood and that forgetting has overpowered memory in the city (see fig. 1). Throughout the film, *Aquí se construye* presents only the historic homes of this zone as capable of retaining memory—and for that matter, of being remembered at all.<sup>78</sup> From the beginning of the film, then, palpable tension exists between the memory-bearing walls of Providencia’s historic homes and the construction of new dwellings thought to be disassociated not just from the past—and a sense of history—but also from memory itself.<sup>79</sup>



Figure 3.1. The camera pans from one tower to the other, ensconcing the house. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

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<sup>78</sup> Drawing on ideas similar to that of Lefebvre’s ‘system of signification’, Connerton maintains that houses are emblematic of social tastes and distinctions: “houses have been compared to ‘spatial texts’, cultural representations in the form of metaphors for various kinds of social units and categories, such that actors are able to constitute meanings and different power relations through their everyday spatial practices” (19). *Aquí se construye*’s suggests that memory is indelible to the home and other manifestations of everyday life and practices.

<sup>79</sup> Gilian Naylor notes that modernity itself as well as the Modernist movement have always been considered antithetical to memory: “The icons of Modernism were designed to defy memory and deny the past” (91). Within the context of *Aquí se construye*, the disappearance of older homes for modern dwellings is interpreted as contrary to recollection.

In this moment and others, however, the camera angle remains contemplative in its juxtaposition of the older home with the new, and thus reveals its affinity to memory. By contrasting the two structures, the camera signals the importance of memory and sense of the past inherent to the older home. A scene, only moments later, in which the camera follows the owner of the older home through a corridor and into her garden provides a similar effect. As she contemplates her greenery, she remembers time spent there: tilling the earth, planting seeds, watching them take root and grow. Because of the camera and the homeowner's contemplation, memory emerges even as the surrounding buildings appear to menace the small house, and more symbolically, as oblivion threatens memory.

The documentary's title foretells the fate of the house by equating structural change with loss; otherwise, the spectator could assume that the now-empty dwelling simply awaits the arrival of its new owners. To reinforce the fleeting viability of the place, the next frame focuses on the address of the house—with the dwelling itself blurry but still visible in the background—and calls attention to the role of this nomenclature to codify lived space. The digits do more than specify a location; they act as a numerical referent to a place where people live and make memories. Sounds of birds chirping and dogs barking in the background—the individual steps a woman takes as she strolls past the house—provide further signs of life. Sounds of demolition interrupt an otherwise idyllic moment, even before images of destruction appear on screen. The next sequence depicts the demolition of the house, from the same position across the street and at the same time of day as the final scene of the first sequence, when the house was still habitable (see fig. 2). Through the technique of visual continuity between sequences, the

documentary suggests the expediency with which the house has been destroyed. In this way, the effects of urbanization appear both immediate and relentless.



Figure 3.2. The destruction of the house appears both immediate and shocking. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

During this demolition sequence, the camera's gaze does not explore the site, as it had done previously. Rather, it remains immobile and intently focused on the excavator used to break apart the house, thus reinforcing the destructive aspects of urbanization. As a cinematic technique, use of the long shot to portray demolition increases the documentary's persuasiveness.<sup>80</sup> More than just machinery, from this viewpoint the excavator in use resembles a giant hand toppling a house of cards. This method also unites cause and effect by involving the machine in the destruction of the house. Dust from the demolition site fills the air and impedes the spectator's view, contributing to the sinister nature of the scene and suggesting the erasure of memory from the cityscape. With the spectator's view limited, sounds emanating from the site become even more

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<sup>80</sup> Ana López observes the following about the use of sequence shots in documentary films: "In the narrative-fiction cinema, the sequence shot increases the image's credibility and its indirect persuasiveness. It is generally considered more 'realistic' because of its apparent preservation of the unities of time and space" (278). Although this scene in *Aquí se construye* feels somewhat less realistic than others, use of the sequence shot makes destruction sequence even more intense and focused on the minutia of the process.

deafening. Once the demolition crew has completely razed the house and the dust has settled, the camera surveys the plot and centers on the immobile excavator now perched above the rubble, as if to suggest that the indiscriminate force of urbanization and its neo-liberal underpinnings have won a battle over this site. The scene concludes when the camera focuses during several seconds on the dusty street address, a number that no longer bears significance as the marker of a lived space (see fig. 3).



Figure 3.3. The address label that once codified a lived space loses its meaning against an empty lot.  
Source: *Aquí se construye*.

Although this scene establishes an extended metaphor between the destruction of the house and the erasure of memory from the cityscape, memoryscapes emerge throughout the film and extend beyond the limits of Providencia. Now from an aerial view, the title of the film and credits appear against a panoramic view of greater Santiago. With the imposing snow-capped Andes Mountains in the background, only this geographic inflexibility appears to limit the city's continued expansion. The camera descends abruptly from far above the metropolis to the streets of Providencia, re-adopting its more human, eye-level perspective. By connecting the neighborhood with greater Santiago—and in the process, transitioning from the demolition site to a panoramic view of the city,

and then back again—Providencia becomes metonymic of the rest of the capital. The transformation of this neighborhood is not contained within its borders, but rather extends to the entire city.

Returning to Providencia, the camera explores the neighborhood where it peers between fence posts to catch a better glimpse of demolition. In the process, the gaze captures what appears less like a lived, communal space and more like a city at war. The opening sequences of *Aquí se construye* suggest a struggle over use of space in the city as well as the ideological structures that give it meaning. By focusing exclusively on the destruction of lived as well as other spatial vestiges of the past, the documentary further rarifies its position by proposing that this conflict is rooted in the desire to protect memory from the forces of oblivion.

The documentary is convincing in portraying the disappearance of older homes from the neighborhood and in its identification of the widespread socio-economic factors that undergird this transformation. However, memory has not vanished from Providencia nor has it ceased to influence daily life in the city. On the contrary, the subject of the documentary—the city itself—insists on memory's continued influence over modern life and confirms its sway over quotidian practices and places. For example, by treating the home as integral to recollection, houses which the typical urban resident might overlook in the course of a day—or, similarly, in the course of transit—suddenly regain their value as repositories for memory and as links to the past. As they vanish from the cityscape, these homes only reinforce their ties to memory. Consequently, *Aquí se construye* adopts these dwellings as unsanctioned sites of memory because the act of inhabiting as well as moving through the city, as philosopher Paul Ricoeur has noted

constitutes in this respect the strongest human tie between the date and the place. Places inhabited are memorable par excellence... As for our movements, the successive places we have passed through serve as reminders of the episodes that have taken place there. They appear to us after the fact as hospitable or inhospitable, in a word habitable. (42)

By demonstrating that memory exists among all facets of daily life—from the houses that dot Providencia to the oral testimony of its residents—and not just among sanctioned places of recollection and official acts of commemoration, the documentary reveals that memory is indelible from modern urban terrain. By recognizing everyday places and practices as potential sources for memory, the documentary challenges the idea that modern life opposes recall and invites the spectator to reexamine the relationship between memory and place. Therefore, despite witnessing the destruction of older homes and buildings, *Aquí se construye* draws on its observation of everyday life and space to establish a link between the most basic, often overlooked places and the functions of a society's memory.

The scope of the documentary proves to be somewhat nearsighted, however, in its portrayal of historic homes as the only residences capable of symbolizing and participating in memory. The opening scenes of the documentary chronicle the single-family houses so characteristic of Providencia as sites endowed with memory. More than just physical structures, these dwellings represent what Connerton has called a “medium of representation,” and which the anthropologist claims, in his own words, “can be read effectively as a mnemonic system” (19). Were these historic houses the only embodiment and conduit for memory, their disappearance would surely signal the erasure of memory from the cityscape. But, instead, new memoryscapes emerge throughout the film, in the form of memories recounted by neighborhood residents and even among the modern



structures thought to represent collective oblivion. The high-rise apartment buildings that contrast with single-family homes throughout the film imprint memory and, like any other habitable place, shape their surroundings according to their own mnemonic system. Therefore, despite the destruction of historic houses, memory continues to create palimpsests along the cityscape and thus establishes its propensity to renewal, not complete erasure.

Memory's residence among the spaces and practices of everyday life transcends physical structures to include oral testimonies. By shifting from the experiences of the couple at the beginning of the film to the recollections of one of Providencia's lifelong residents during the remainder, *Aquí se construye* ultimately demonstrates that individual memory resists erasure. The resident acts as co-protagonist to the city itself and recounts his story with little to no interaction from the filmmaker. There is no explicit narration throughout the film, no voice-overs to guide the viewer. Only the man's memories and the camera orient the spectator in their attempt to document this corner of the Chilean capital's past. Because of this focus on the resident from Providencia, *Aquí se construye* gains greater flexibility in juxtaposing the transformation in the neighborhood with the unfolding of everyday life, as punctuated by the death of the resident's mother and the birth of his first grandson, and the seamless transition from one season to the next. In this way, cycles of life and death as presented through the film become symbolic of the city's own creative destruction—its own continuous cycles of demolition and construction—suggesting that similar changes to the cityscape are not entirely incongruous to memory. The resident's recollections reveal that memory remains constant amid continuous change.

Through these chronicles, the documentary combines cinematic tropes and relies on observational as well as testimonial methods.<sup>81</sup> The filmmaker does not engage his interlocutor directly, in the form of an interview. Instead, the person telling his or her story appears unprompted. Thus, the documentary continues its observation of everyday life—directing the spectator through filmic techniques and not overt narration—, giving greater voice to memory. After observing the contractors and construction workers who have taken over the newly razed lot, the camera approaches a contiguous house and peers past its gate into its private domain. The resident introduces himself, but not before he recounts how several generations of his family have influenced the house and its corner of the neighborhood. His memories and sense of identity are intimately connected to this space. In one of only a few cases in which the filmmaker’s voice is heard, Agüero asks, “¿Cuál es la historia de la casa, la historia suya?” The resident responds, “Es larga,” in reference to the relationship between his family and the neighborhood. The interviewer’s question places the history of the house and the history of its owners on the same plane. The history of one appears inextricable from that of the other.

The resident stands within his home’s wrought-iron fence—reinforcing the connection between the owner and his property—and elaborates on the history of the house as well as his memories of the place, confirming that *Aquí se construye* is truly a work about the act of reminiscing. “Mi abuelo la compró en el ’47, más o menos,” he recalls about the house, calling to attention the natural vagaries of memory. “Compró la

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<sup>81</sup> Michael Chanan highlights four principle characteristics of testimonial film: “rapid and flexible filming of unfolding reality with subjecting it to a pre-planned narrative mise-en-scene; choosing themes of broad narrational importance; employing an audacious and intuitive style of montage; directly filmed interviews both for the narrative functions they are able to fulfill and because they provide the means of bringing popular speeches to screen” (41). *Aquí se construye* employs each of these methods and gives voice to interlocutors from distinct socio-economic and spatial contexts. By focusing on subjects from different strata, the documentary suggests that changes to the city affect all of its inhabitants, albeit in different capacities.

manzana esta. Antes, todo era un campo... se iba poblando de a poco.” When prompted to delve into his memories as a boy growing up in the neighborhood, the resident recounts with emotion his own memories as well as his father’s: “Había mucha vegetación con el potrero por el que pasaba una acequia en que jugaba con mis barcos. Era muy campestre. Yo recuerdo que mi papá me contaba que cazó su primer zorro... aquí a una cuadra y media. Entonces era muy campestre todavía. Y se fue poblando de a poco.” In both instances, the homeowner confirms that the neighborhood has become increasingly dense throughout his lifetime, transitioning from a bucolic, rural community to one of the capital’s more central (and symbolic) neighborhoods. Likewise, the resident retains memory of the neighborhood’s geographical features that have since ceased to be: abundant vegetation, creeks, and wild animals. In other words, neither the zone itself nor its memory was ever static. Providencia’s street names changed; its green spaces and houses came and went; and as a family and its members grew and changed, so did their environment—but not without imprinting memory. The resident’s memories call attention, therefore, not only to the persistence of recollection but also to the dynamic nature of place and its connection to human life (see fig. 4). In fact, as if he were a natural extension of the neighborhood and his recollections, the resident finally introduces himself not by memories of the place where he grew up but by his proper name: Guillermo Mann.

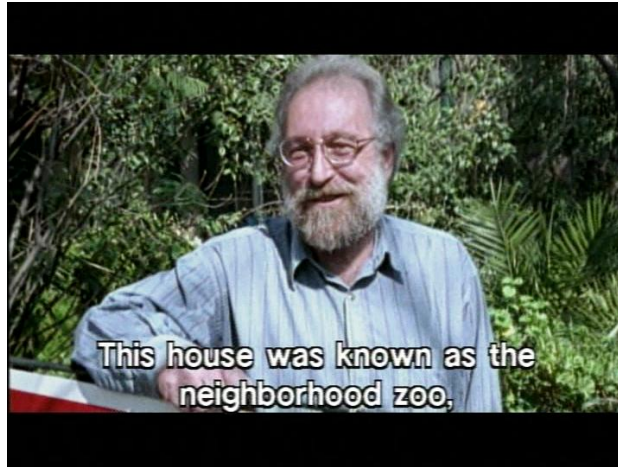


Figure 3.4. Mann recounts the history of his home and neighborhood before introducing himself. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

Memory reinforces its connection to concrete space when Mann's mother begins to recount family history from inside the house. The camera connects the exterior of the house where Mann tells his and his father's memories with the interior of the home, where his mother sits with a family photo album laid open on the table before her. Because of this separation, the film not only establishes a gendered division of space but also suggests that this family's memories are intimately bound to this home in particular. The exterior of the house connotes memory itself—memory of the neighborhood and its transformations over the years—while the interior conjures up memories that pertain only to this family in particular. Memory continues to manifest itself materially and immaterially through the photographs to which Mann's mother refers and through her spoken recollections. The film then extends this association between tangible and intangible memory to the rest of the neighborhood by suggesting that a similar relationship exists between other residents of Providencia and their homes. To reinforce its argument, memories of Mann's grandfather—his arrival to Chile from Germany and

his work as a veterinarian—trail off as the camera departs from the Mann residence and travels around the rest of the zone.

The camera roams from one house to the next as it traces the streets and alleyways of Providencia, thereby extending expressions of memory to other residences within the neighborhood and paralleling memory with the cityscape itself. In the process, the documentary suggests that these homes, although not recognized as official sites of memory or memorials, are places of individual and collective recollection worth documenting on film. As it passes down a street in which all houses appear scheduled for demolition, the documentary at once calls attention to continuous changes to the neighborhood and establishes the home as a site for the practice and expression of memory. It would seem in this moment—and others like it over the course of the film—that memory's erasure from urban terrain is unavoidable. However, by first juxtaposing space to its material and immaterial threads and by documenting the reminiscences of a family, the film reveals that memory will persist even after its external prompts have transformed or vanished from the cityscape.

Similarly, complementing its portrayal of older homes and buildings as integral to Santiago's memoryscape, the documentary does more to associate their destruction with changing social tastes and daily practices among Chile's affluent classes than to propose memory's erasure from urban life and space. Upon returning to the house and surveying the construction site next door, the camera follows Mann into his garden, establishing a link between his green space and that of the anonymous resident at the beginning of the film. In fact, the documentary repeats the same cycle established with the couple at the opening of the film. Both scenes invite the viewer first to the threshold of the resident's

house and then pans to the rest of the neighborhood, concluding with an exploration of the garden's semi-enclosed space. These complementary cycles at distinct moments of the film propose that memory exists at micro and macro levels of the cityscape. Just as that woman had quietly reminisced in her garden, Mann also recounts his memories of the living landscape: "Esta casa se conocía como el zoológico del barrio, más o menos, porque teníamos muchos bichos. Había zorros mansos, chivos de Juan Fernández... monos, iguanas... La gente venía a verlos." The house serves, then, as a site for his as well as other residents' memories. When Mann reveals what the garden meant to him in particular, his memories are clear and precise: "Allí en esta parte, donde hay una pileta de agua había un invernadero de cuatro metros por dos, y tenía cinco iguanas verdes adentro de un metro ochenta de largos, unos bichos fantásticos." Thus, just as the camera refines its perspective subtly by transitioning from open to more enclosed spaces, individual memories of specific places prove the most resistant to spatial standardization and remain salient over the course of the film.

Beyond its role as a repository for Mann's memories, the garden symbolizes a place for recollection and leisure more generally.<sup>82</sup> Likewise, the garden triggers memories of this space as a symbol of stability and economic security among the urban bourgeoisie. Consequently, Mann's garden in particular does more than reinforce the home as a site of individual memory throughout *Aquí se construye*. The garden space also

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<sup>82</sup> Connerton argues that its immobility naturally lends the garden to memory: "The working of a house as a set of coordinates, a memory devise, depends on a degree of immobility. Even mobile homes are made to lose their look of mobility; a porch, a patio, a garden may help to bind the home to its environment, and trees also help to immobilize it. The home becomes an aide-mémoire: of the ongoing necessities of everyday life" (18). While this line of thinking helps to establish the garden space as connected to memory, the question remains: Once the garden is gone, will memory disappear as well? I suggest in this study that a more flexible interpretation of space and memory and their relationship to each other will allow memory to reside along the cityscape, even as certain spaces disappear or become reinterpreted over time.

reveals more collective approaches to memory by symbolizing the dominant customs, tastes, and power structures that organize society and its terrain.

The film contrasts Mann's garden to that of Providencia's newest dwelling. At the end of the documentary, once the high-rise has been completed and its tenants begin to move in, a young couple peers down from their apartment terrace to the tiny garden below. It is worth noting that, for most of the documentary, Mann looks up toward the contiguous apartment building from his garden—highlighting a radical change in scale occurring in Providencia and the rest of the city. Similarly, that the new residents look down at their garden from high above implies that, although they are far removed, they exercise domain over this space and the rest of the neighborhood. The camera shifts its focus from the young man and woman to the green space below, about which the woman comments: “esto va a ser una especie de jardín.” This perfectly manicured swath of grass, which decoratively lines the fence, pales in comparison to Mann's garden (see fig. 5). Even the young woman's observation that the unfinished space will become “some kind of garden” in the future suggests that the space only replicates a garden of the past—the more bucolic, suburban version—without sharing any of its organic, life-bearing qualities. In this way, *Aquí se construye* suggests that this updated model of the urban garden no longer serves as a site of repose, recollection, and introspection, practices which the film fears will be forgotten.<sup>83</sup> Likewise, because this new and shrunken garden appears so unremarkable, it would also seem incapable of creating and sustaining memory.

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<sup>83</sup> Edward Casey designates the garden as a site of memory. He writes: “The garden-as-microcosm, as a place within the poetical space of landscape, is thoroughly memorial. Just as a given garden would ‘borrow’ a surrounding landscape by opening up vistas on it, so being in that garden would open up vistas of one's memory by engaging in evocations of the past” (208). The documentary suggests that, since the apartment garden is merely decorative, it does little to evoke the past.



Figure 3.5. The young couple peers down at the shared garden space. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

The film strengthens this fear by drawing the spectator's attention back to Mann's house and its garden. After recording the impressions of Mann's new neighbors, the camera returns to the biologist's garden, where a family barbeque is taking place. The site, having already been portrayed as a dynamic entity and a place for recollection, leisure, and animal habitation, now shelters a family gathering. Relatives spanning several generations unite in Mann's garden, which itself is the product of many years of care and influence. Teenagers gather around a small fire and smoke cigarettes, while mother and grandmother soothe a resting infant. Amid the contained revelry, the camera creates snapshots of the group—living family portraits—by creating a few close and steady shots of select invitees. The festivities taking place on this side of the retaining wall further contrast the apparent sterility of the apartment's green space with this home's garden. They also reinforce the single-family home as a symbol of longstanding cultural traditions and memory where daily practices and traditions become worthy of documentation.

As antithetical as the two gardens appear to be in these scenes, the soon-to-be completed garden of the modern high-rise does not necessarily oppose memory: neither



memories of the past nor memories still to come. Instead, that the garden space itself exists, albeit in an altered form, signals a reinterpretation of past space and social traditions. This space has been transformed—reduced to its most basic elements even—but it continues to represent the past nonetheless. More importantly, although radical changes to this site better suit the changing needs of urban dwellers, the garden can continue to accommodate the practices of everyday life that give it meaning. Alternatively, in John Urry’s words: “Place and movement are enormously bound up with affect... Places are not fixed, given, or unchanging but depend in part upon the practices within them” (245). The everyday practices that will take place in the refurbished garden—still under construction, like the building it surrounds—continue to make this space a place and an agent of memory. Thus, rather than vanishing from the cityscape entirely (and taking memory with it), the updated garden symbolizes a changing sense of taste among the urban elite. A new set of needs and preferences—one that puts more emphasis on urban than on suburban living—shapes the city, leaving traces of the spatial and social traditions of the past.

Similarly, the documentary also explores the dining areas of both residences as highly symbolic spaces. Earlier in the film, the camera explores the interior of Mann’s home alone, where it meanders from room to room, and focuses on the everyday items that make this space a place and that make a house a home. The camera then stops in the dimly lit dining room. Only natural evening light as it passes through curtains illuminates this space, giving the appearance that the room and its memories slowly fade from sight. The shot then closes in on a silver tea set, thereby highlighting the late-afternoon tradition so common among Chileans, especially the bourgeoisie (see fig. 6). This, among other

effects in the dining room and remainder of the house, represent what Benjamin has called “the resident’s own traces moulded into the interior,” and personalize this place by acting as traces of memory (qtd. in Naylor, 93). With little transition at all, the camera then finds itself alone in the dining room of the new apartment next door, the dining room of which boasts the latest in contemporary furnishings. It is clean and organized; everything is new; and it is sterile by comparison to Mann’s dining room.<sup>84</sup> *Aquí se construye* presents this domestic space, especially as it contrasts to the first dining room, appears void of memory and the past.<sup>85</sup>



Figure 3.6. The traditional tea set symbolizes domestic space. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

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<sup>84</sup> Kunstler highlights the effort of modernism to undermine existing social arrangements through a brand of architecture that did little to respect the city’s limits of scale, natural resources, or link to the past: “In their effort to promote a liberated and classless society, the Modernists and their successors tried to stamp out history and tradition, and the meaning associated with them, as embodied in the places where they live and work. They failed to create a social utopia, but they did tremendous damage to the physical setting for civilization... This is the essence of the hubris that tries to destroy history: Yesterday’s tomorrow turns out to be no future at all” (84). Although this line of thinking is predominant throughout *Aquí se construye*, the city reveals its traces (not erasure) of memory.

<sup>85</sup> Christopher Reed argues that modern architecture undermines domesticity as well as the past. He writes about swiss architect Le Corbusier: “Le Corbusier’s essays made him the pre-eminent early spokesman for modernist design. In these texts, Le Corbusier inveighed against the ‘sentimental hysteria’ surrounding the ‘cult of the house,’ and proclaimed his determination to create instead, ‘a machine for living in’” (9). I argue that this brand of architecture ultimately reinterprets domesticity as opposed to banishing it outright, despite the best, most utopian intentions of early proponents of this movement.

More than the erasure of memory, however, juxtaposing the two spaces signals a change in taste among inhabitants of the neighborhood. In the modern apartment, for example, wine glasses grace the central table where, in the older house, a tea set stood. Although the contrast between these items appears to signal the obsolescence of one custom for another—and therefore the erasure of its memory from everyday life—the documentary discloses what is less the act of erasure and more the reinterpretation of social customs.<sup>86</sup> If both the tea set and the wine glasses are to be understood as examples of daily customs and the objects of popular imagination, then memory does not disappear but rather becomes embodied in another form. Modern practices—like their spaces—do not erase older traditions per se, but rather adapt them to current times, or establish new traditions to be followed. Likewise, although the filmmaker might like to propose that the tea set exemplifies a more authentic version of Chilean culture and tradition—further linking it to a sanctified version of the past and popular memory—both practices represent cultural imports of the bourgeoisie. One cannot be more closely linked to memory or, for that matter, be more authentically Chilean than the other, since they both confirm the plasticity of daily practices, space, and even memory.

Beyond the individual dwellings, *Aquí se construye* suggests that structural changes to Providencia also exist in tandem with the city's elite class in transformation.<sup>87</sup> Providencia, an iconic neighborhood of historic Santiago, has served as home over time

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<sup>86</sup> Although one could argue, based on Gramscian theory, that changing tastes and attitudes about culture signal an equal change in power relations, I argue that memory does not disappear as a result, and that it continues to leave a trace.

<sup>87</sup> Uruguayan literary and cultural theorist Hugo Achugar draws on Pierre Bourdieu's groundbreaking work on social and cultural distinction to define the phenomenon from the perspective of Latin America. He proposes that questions of taste are often linked to the dynamic between remembering and forgetting: "Olvidar y recordar, además, pueden ser normas establecidas por el poder de la 'distinción' y del 'gusto'... que apuntan a construir un modelo de los que es legítimo preservar" (20). Hugo's observations are applicable to this case, since a changing sense of taste among Chile's elite can be viewed as influencing decisions over historic preservation and architectural trends in the country's capital city.

to the politically and economically privileged classes. As a result, the neighborhood adopts added significance as more than just a repository for personal memories but as a symbol of a change among the city's elite. The nineteenth century, when the neighborhood began to take shape, represented an era of commercial growth and the beginnings of urban expansion for the country. In other words, Providencia formed as a place during the height of classical liberalism. Its revival in the present era as neo-liberalism has also signaled widespread change and, although urbanization does not signal the end of private landholding, the reorganization of urban space to best accommodate Santiago's affluent sector. As urban space becomes scarcer, members of the elite compete over what remains of this coveted terrain. Mann discusses this situation from his garden by establishing a metaphor between his hermit crabs and this struggle between conflicting ways of life among the upper echelons of society:

sacan las conchas porque en la medida que crecen necesitan conchas más grandes, entonces se disputa la concha entre ellos... En cierta forma, se repite con ellos lo que se repite con la estructura social de las gallinas, por ejemplo. La gallina con el mayor rango social se siente más arriba. Entonces se reparte según el rango social las partes más abajo. Aquí también. Hay espacios dentro de aquí que son referidos y allí van a estar los más importantes, los jefes.

Similarly, coveted space at the heart of the capital continues to fall under the jurisdiction of the elite; how this space is used, however, has become an object of dispute. As Chile becomes more prosperous, changes to Providencia and its sense of taste reveal a transforming paradigm in which neo-liberalism defines not only the country's economic agenda but also its cultural and spatial currency.

With this in mind, the documentary also revives collective memories of a time when city-space figured less prominently under the influence of private interests and

served, instead, as a staging ground for broader public and political causes.<sup>88</sup> More specifically, the film conjures up memories of the Allende years to build greater historical context for changes in the present. During and following its rise to power, this administration attempted to redefine Santiago's cityscape according to its distinct brand of democratic socialism. The years before Allende's election witnessed widespread land appropriation, as urban migrants took over urban terrain in and around the capital. Lack of adequate housing prompted members of Santiago's urban poor to find shelter in the center as well as along the periphery of the city.<sup>89</sup> This phenomenon became only more prevalent and politically advantageous during the leader's time in office (Handelman 39).<sup>90</sup> As a vehicle for garnering support, the Popular Unity helped transform more than 4,400 estates into cooperatives for peasants and migrant workers. This endeavor came to be known as the "Social Property Area," and symbolized what labor historian Peter Winn has called the "nucleus of a future socialist economy" (16). With regard to Agüero's documentary, its portrayal of competing ways of life and attitudes toward historic preservation in present-day Providencia allow *Aquí se construye* to reawaken memories of this past at this juncture in the film. By calling these memories to mind, the film further juxtaposes the present urban experience with that of the past, since both cases—

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<sup>88</sup> In addition to tension among differing social and political movements, Brenner and Theodore maintain that the years predating the regime saw a rise in conflict between preservationist and modernizing spatial tendencies: "Cities became battlegrounds in which preservationist and modernizing alliances struggled to influence the form and trajectory of economic restructuring" (373). I argue that the same holds true during the post-dictatorship period.

<sup>89</sup> Howard Handelman's study of political mobilization in Santiago's urban squatter settlements notes: "As early as 1967, following nationwide municipal elections, squatters in Chile's largest cities initiated a wave of illegal land seizures around the metropolitan centers" (39).

<sup>90</sup> According to Handelman, the year before Allende's election saw a marked increase in land invasions—*campamentos*, as they were called, went from 21 to 215. Allende's party, the Unidad Popular, provided the strongest support for his and other left-wing movements. As a consequence of their (real or perceived) political association, many of these communities were subjected to harsh treatment under the military government.

the current urbanization of Providencia and the official and unofficial land appropriation of years past—involve the acquisition and vast reinterpretation of urban space.

Up to this point, the documentary focuses almost exclusively on Providencia, Mann's memories of his residence, and the demolition in the lot adjacent to his property and around the entire neighborhood. However, when Mann's son interrupts his reflections mid-way through the film—symbolizing the interruption of one way of life for the introduction of another—the camera's gaze seizes this opportunity to lift the viewer out of the historic neighborhood and explore another part of town: Renca, a working-class neighborhood to the north of Providencia. Although Renca was founded in 1894, migrant workers from the far reaches of the country acquired sections of the neighborhood in the late 60s and 70s, making Renca their home permanently. With this in mind, the film implicitly contrasts the generational system of land tenure so symbolic of Providencia—where the legacy has been to inherit both land and hearth over generations—with the act of acquiring a plot of land, legally or otherwise, and using it to construct a new life. In doing so, however, and in capturing the dynamism and mutability of the city, the documentary also exposes the inversion of these traditional roles and yet another cycle in the life of the cityscape. Renca portrays itself as a stable place in *Aquí se construye* and as a neighborhood where the original residents continue to imprint their surroundings, while Providencia is now the site of radical spatial and social change.

Despite these differences, memory remains a constant as the documentary begins to explore Renca and its past. The documentary focuses on the testimony of a lifelong resident of this neighborhood, likewise exploring this individual's connection to the place he calls home. Although he never reveals his name—a fact which suggests that he

represents the nameless masses—this new interlocutor is an injured construction worker on leave from the site adjacent to Mann’s residence. Also reminiscent of his counterpart in Providencia, the Renca tenant recounts memories of the neighborhood before divulging personal information: that he and his wife married in Concepción, where they are from; that they came to Santiago with little to nothing; and that they eventually built a house and started a family. Just as Mann’s identity appeared inseparable from the house he called home, the worker’s memories of his neighborhood give context to his life and reveal how much the city has changed since he and his wife first settled in Santiago.

Although at present he constructs high-rise dwellings for Santiago’s elite, the resident recalls that Renca itself was the site of one of many land appropriations during the early 1970s. “Este fue una toma-terreno que hubo en los ’70... fue una toma que se hizo con mucha gente, y allí es mi terreno,” he remembers from the gate of his house, just as Mann had at the beginning of the documentary, further paralleling one inhabitant and way of life with another. The resident reinforces his proprietorship over the space by leading the camera from one humble room to another, within the house that he built with his own hands and on terrain which he struggled to obtain.<sup>91</sup> He does not comment on memories lived in each of these rooms, but rather suggests that the house that he constructed and where he and his family have lived for 30 years represents a natural extension of his identity and sense of place. Similarly, the house itself and the photographs that hang from its walls evoke memory without explicit narration. Just as Mann had connected his memories of the past with the history of the house and its role in

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<sup>91</sup> City police treated early land invaders with violence, sometimes to the point of murder. Wishing to avoid any political fallout before the 1970 election, President Frei eased his previously tough stance on forced evictions. During the regime, however, these communities became the site of mass arrests.

the neighborhood, so too does the construction worker filter his recollections through his place of residence and belonging.

The two residences also communicate changing attitudes about space at distinct moments of Chile's history. Mann's place of memory appeals to a bourgeois interpretation of urban space and organization of socio-economic classes. The worker's, in contrast, sheds light on the socialist-inspired land reforms of the pre-dictatorship years. Thus, by judging one residence against another, *Aquí se construye* highlights with greater clarity the neo-liberal paradigm currently reshaping the city and recalls a time in which urban space belonged to many, not just to a few. In other words, the documentary implicitly contrasts an updated definition of land appropriation and transformation with a past version. While the former points to urbanization and the acquisition of terrain through private interests, the latter suggests that public initiative at one point precipitated the same process.<sup>92</sup> The liberalism of the past and the present, associated with the social and economic elite, has now replaced the statist and communally focused policies favoring the working class as a motor for structural change in the city. That one social and spatial paradigm has come to dominate over another does not erase memory from everyday life and space, but rather contributes to its ever-changing memoryscape.

Despite this fact, since *Aquí se construye* does not entertain Providencia's continued viability as a source of memory and link to the past—even when Renca remains intimately connected to memory despite its own radical transformation—the documentary awakens feelings of nostalgia. Sentiment colors the construction worker and

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<sup>92</sup> This is not to say that squatter communities are a thing of the past; they are not. In fact, one could argue that informal living situations, in both urban and rural areas, have become even more recurrent than in the past, particularly in the form of refugee camps and other temporary living installments. However, given the parameters of this study and the historical context of the film, the land seizures presented in *Aquí se construye* will be interpreted as a unique to the pre-dictatorship period.



his wife's recollection of their house as well as the origin of her family's corner of the neighborhood. The wife maintains that her family's quality of life depends on their place of residence: "Aquí es bueno vivir, a causa de que nosotros vivimos bien aquí. Tenemos buenos vecinos, y no nos iríamos de aquí de Renca. Aquí luchamos para tener esto y no lo dejamos... En otras partes creo que no es lo mismo." "Es bonito vivir así," she concludes, referring to a standard of living and interpretation of the good life that remain inseparable from the invasive action taken many years ago to acquire the land. The wife's suggestion that struggling for their terrain helped them to better appreciate their place of residence contrasts with the seemingly uncontested transformation of Providencia. As a testament to this point, the documentary connects the wife's concluding thoughts with Mann's neighborhood by superimposing her words onto images of the biologist's home and the neighboring construction site. The camera thus returns to its original point of departure. By viewing both neighborhoods through a nostalgic lens, the documentary attempts to impart that urbanization has and will continue to render Providencia a less hospitable place than Renca, despite the supposed comforts of the former over the latter.

Throughout the film, then, *Aquí se construye* lays bare notions of purity and authenticity, and, to be sure, nostalgia for a past imagined as static in an age of increasing impermanence and spatial homogenization.<sup>93</sup> Akin to their relationship to memory, the single-family homes lining the streets of Providencia symbolize a former way of life, one supposedly less affected by a rapidly changing modernity and neo-liberal creative destruction. As symbols of another era, *Aquí se construye* pits a seemingly more

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<sup>93</sup> In addition to observing that absence precipitates memory, Trigg argues that notions that place is permanent fosters feelings of nostalgia: "as the urban landscape beckons to become ever more homogenized, resistance against this change opens itself to the dangers of a nostalgic idealization of static place" ("Memories," 5).

authentic way of life against modern culture and urbanization.<sup>94</sup> Longing for this stationary version of the past inevitably manifests itself through nostalgia. Appropriately, the etymology of the word ‘nostalgia,’ derived from the Greek, is inherently spatial, uniting returning home (*nostos*) with pain (*algos*).<sup>95</sup> Within the context of the documentary, just as the perceived threat of memory’s disappearance ultimately propels recollection, the real threat of having no home to return to produces feelings of nostalgia in *Aquí se construye* and adds greater weight to its second title: *ya no existe el lugar donde nací*. Despite what the camera actually reveals, the film’s failure to interpret the city as a constantly evolving memoryscape—in which structural changes do not level memory but rather give it a new space for interpretation—translates nostalgia into another vehicle through which to propose memory’s disappearance from the cityscape.<sup>96</sup>

Nostalgia results, in this case, from the belief that memory only connects itself to certain places, and that the relationship that binds them is permanent. Although memory has not vanished from the cityscape—in part because recollection remains fundamental to daily life, space, and humanity—moments of nostalgia in *Aquí se construye* spring from a powerful desire to affix a sense of permanence to place. As Trigg has argued in his work on the phenomenology of memory, “The dynamic of past and present gradually become disunited is central to nostalgia, since the attraction of nostalgia structurally depends on

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<sup>94</sup> Once again, *Aquí se construye* exhibits a trait familiar to post-modern urbanism: Romanticism. Nan Ellin sustains: “Despite the formal and political variation within Postmodern urbanism, a common denominator is its romantic turn” (100). Consequently, this return to romanticism and nostalgia act as mutually reinforcing phenomena.

<sup>95</sup> Trigg recounts that Swiss medical student, Johannes Hofer, coined the term in the seventeenth century to refer to a physical condition—which today might be referred to simply as homesickness (53).

<sup>96</sup> Instead of treating the evolving cityscape as a new ground for memory, as a memoryscape, the documentary reverts to nostalgia. Fittingly, as Trigg has observed, “The culling and suppression of new experience for the sake of enabling old memory to endure means that static and morbid nostalgia prospers” (*Aesthetics*, 244).

an image of the past that is fixed in the present. The desire to return to a place is caused by the desire to return to the same place that we remember” (*Aesthetics*, 56). The inevitable outcome of never being able to return home—in this case, because that home has been leveled and replaced by another—produces nostalgia.

In one of its more poignant displays of nostalgia, early in the film the camera passes from one house for sale to the next, forming a visual sequence in which all homes in Providencia appear slated for demolition. When the camera slows to focus on the exterior of an abandoned mansion, a mournful soundtrack connotes feelings of despair and sentiments of nostalgia. As a complement to the somber tune, the camera then fades to black and casts a shadow on this place. The next scene opens to a machine demolishing the interior of the same mansion, despite leaving its exterior intact. In this case, memory of the building and the recollections it houses appear as precarious and as superficial as its now unsupported façade. The documentary proposes that a gulf exists between fantasy and reality, since just behind this building’s fragile historic exterior—a landmark of collective memory—its interior has been gutted and stripped of its prior use. The camera then zooms in on the machine until the sole object of focus becomes the claw used to rip away wires and send rubble flying in all directions (see fig. 7). The camera then returns to its former position from across the street, where the façade can be seen again in its entirety. As well as suggesting that the house is indelible from memory and worth preserving on film, *Aquí se construye* incites nostalgia for the role this place once played and expresses despair over its destruction.



Figure 3.7. Tight shots of destruction evoke emotions of despair and nostalgia. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

The documentary transfers similar feelings of nostalgia and melancholy to the construction site contiguous to Mann's residence by transitioning smoothly between the two dwellings.<sup>97</sup> Just as the camera had passed casually along the wrought-iron fence of the near-demolished mansion, so too does it peer beyond the bars of the construction site. In this way, demolition and construction invite similar sensations of nostalgia. To reinforce this point—and highlight the film's tendency toward the melodramatic—the melancholic music, which had quieted virtually to silence against previous sounds of wreckage, begins again as the camera surveys the lot where engineers read plans and discuss details with contractors, and where men in hardhats oversee excavation. Once again, the spectator is invited to feel pangs of nostalgia, but, in this case, without ever having seen the original edifice. The score reaches a crescendo as the camera then pans up toward Mann's adjacent single-family dwelling. Music continues as the camera then focuses, from eye-level, first on the tree-lined street and then on the exterior of the same house, where Mann will share his memories and eventually introduce himself. Feelings of

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<sup>97</sup> The object of this chapter is not to explore the nuances of melancholy or any of the other psychoanalytic underpinnings of memory. I would be remiss, however, if I did not mention Freud's substantial contribution to this subject.

nostalgia become even more acute as the camera view arrives to Mann's house since—after surveying the demolished mansion and razed construction site—this residence seems to embody one of the last remaining, and yet embattled, fixtures of memory in the city.

Later in the documentary, the camera traverses the neighborhood from the interior of a car, a fact which itself suggests that everyday routes taken through the city are worth remembering. From just beyond the windshield, the camera witnesses the disappearance of several buildings from one moment to the next.<sup>98</sup> In one case in particular, the camera approaches a brick building directly ahead. In the next frame, the same building has been partially destroyed. As with other examples throughout the film, the camera does not linger to capture the demolition process of the building, but rather suggests that the change has been instantaneous—as fast as changing gears or rotating the steering wheel of a car, for example. Thus, the rate of change appears immediate and unbound by time. Only nostalgia for the otherwise overlooked building, as an everyday manifestation of memory, seems capable of anchoring the structure to the present, even though nostalgia often relies on a false or selective idealization of the past.

Similarly, Mann's memories of the house and the neighborhood turn affirmations of memory and fond recollections of the past into frustration and nostalgia. From the balcony of his home, Mann admits fearing that his own memories will disappear along with the demolition and reconstruction of the neighborhood. More than an aesthetic

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<sup>98</sup> Agüero confirmed in an interview that the idea to make the film came to him as he was driving his son to school one day. Buildings that he had seen throughout his life were suddenly disappearing from his daily route: “Yo tenía que dejar a mi hijo al colegio en esta calle, Manuel Montt. Era un viaje de una hora en la mañana. Y pasaba por las mismas calles, siempre haciendo el recorrido. Y en un momento, como hay muchos tacos a esa hora, entonces pasaba mucho tiempo mirando por la ventana hacia fuera. Y me llamo la atención el ver casas en demolición.” He decided to make the documentary in order to preserve his own memory and call attention to the relationship between memory and place.

change or transforming social tastes, Mann identifies urbanization as a threat to the past, his past: “Me están matando el pasado; están matando mi cultura personal. Mis historias están ligadas a esto. Estos eran mis lugares de juego cuando niño... Cada árbol que cae es parte de la infancia que se va irremediamente... Personalmente, lo que hace es quitar el sustento del pasado.” A sense of nostalgia underlies Mann’s assertion that his way of life and childhood disappear with each new building. His fears of a lost childhood project themselves upon Mann’s youngest son, who comes to embody his father’s nostalgia over the course of the film. At various moments during *Aquí se construye*, Mann’s son climbs and then tiptoes across the top of the wall separating the residence from the bordering construction site (see fig. 8). He becomes a funambulist between the past and the present, as he carefully toes one of the last remaining barriers between his home and a quickly encroaching reality. Although Mann can still recall his memories of the neighborhood, his son personifies feelings of nostalgia for days gone by as well as fears that memories of this bygone era are now as precarious as the wall still attempting to separate one way of life from another.

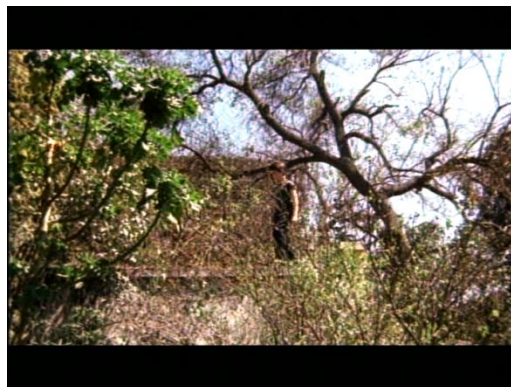


Figure 3.8. Mann’s son tiptoes along the retaining wall between the house and the construction site. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

Nostalgia, as presented in *Aquí se construye*, parallels Bauman's observations about modern trends toward spatial disposability. The sociologist proposes that society no longer reveres dwellings such as those portrayed in the film. As a result, older homes are no longer the sole markers of socio-economic security. Instead, the quickly constructed high-rise apartment buildings that have taken their place in the neighborhood represent an updated version of social distinction. Underlying this change in social and spatial capital is what Bauman has identified as a penchant for the impermanent, or as a preference for

the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement... not the durability and lasting reliability of the product. In a remarkable reversal of the millennia-long tradition, it is the high and mighty of the day who resent and shun the durable and cherish the transient. (14)

Those moments in which destruction presents itself as the only source of change in the neighborhood imply that these dwellings no longer matter to society. They represent nothing more than a nuisance, rendered obsolete by the passing of time and the adoption of new social and spatial practices. In a word, their rampant demolition proposes that these homes represent little more than trash, to be cleaned up and systematically disposed.<sup>99</sup>

Yet, by first recognizing them as sites imbued with memory, *Aquí se construye* later challenges the idea that these residences, other historic buildings, and memory itself can be discarded easily, especially without first inciting feelings of anguish and nostalgia. In other words, the disappearance of buildings supposedly rendered worthless has

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<sup>99</sup> Jose Luis Pardo draws on Bauman's observations to discuss further the theoretical and social underpinnings of trash: "son las cosas cualificadas... las que resultan desesperadamente obsoletas por irreciclables, las que se convierten en basura en el sentido peyorativo y 'sucio' de la expresión de mal gusto y pasadas de moda, las que por tener entidad en sí mismas, se resisten a la reformulación y recualificación" (4). On the other hand, society cherishes impermanent structures, flimsy construction, and what might have been, in another era, considered the true embodiment of trash.

sparked an equal interest in preserving them as sites of memory. Their disposal is neither as negligent nor entirely without consequence as previously theorized. Since these sites bear personal and collective memories, nostalgia for them represents a natural outcome of spatial impermanence and suggests that these structures are neither as obsolete nor as disposable as it might seem otherwise. In fact, in Latin American cities, where modern and traditional lifestyles and spaces often overlap, these structures act as urban palimpsests, by imprinting the current, remembered, and imagined cityscape with images of the past. Thus, in the process of documenting society's compulsions toward casting off the old in favor of the new, *Aquí se construye* also reveals its opposition: an equally matched desire to preserve what others simply throw away. Far from degenerating into non-place because of increasingly homogenous and impermanent structures, the city not only stages the removal of undesirable spaces from its terrain but also rediscovers their value, their link to memory, and the ongoing struggle that argues for their preservation. Thus, even while the film flaunts its nostalgia for an idealized past, a memoryscape emerges from a more implicit struggle to preserve those everyday places which others are quick to discard.

Likewise, although they never unite as a collective body—itsself a source of frustration and nostalgia throughout the film—individuals do find ways to protest against their rapidly transforming urban habitat early in the documentary. The camera captures onlookers whispering to one another and gawking from across the street as the mansion is destroyed. This scene adds to uncertainty about the future of the neighborhood and, even if only for a moment, slows the demolition to a standstill. Similarly, in a later scene, a man shakes his fists at construction workers and curses what they have come to represent



in Providencia: agents of radical change as opposed to maintenance. “¡Porquería de edificio!” he yells, his voice hoarse with rage. “Damn people who do this for money, they dump all this dirt on our houses and you can’t even work in peace. All day long with noise, it’s too much... tearing down houses still worth living in!” (filmmaker’s translation). This disruption of his daily life and routine angers the man enough for him to shout his ire from the streets and for all to hear. But what truly distresses this resident is the destruction of one way of life for another, as well as an ever-growing penchant for impermanent over permanent structures. Memories of how the city once was fuel his anger, which provides a point of dissent against spatial homogenization and other structural transformations.

Mann also bemoans the urbanization process and laments that societies no longer build or respect houses for their durability, an observation that complements the anonymous man’s complaint. “Se está rompiendo todo alrededor suyo,” he considers as he contemplates the neighboring construction site from his upper-level balcony. He also remembers a time when the home meant something else: “No va a durar mucho; terminó la casa de ser una cosa de cuida. Todos estamos decayendo junto con nuestro entorno.” Mann’s grief over losing the house as a space worth preserving for future generations is palpable. In fact, since space and identity are intimately connected, he equates changing preferences toward impermanent structures with a loss of one’s self and memories. In other words, allowing historic residences to decay and then to be demolished signals, in Mann’s estimation, society’s dismissal of the past.

What really underlies Mann’s concern, however, is again more symbolic of a change in social preferences and decisions made by members of the elite as to how and

where land is transformed than to the complete erasure of memory. He reflects towards the film's conclusion: "lo curioso es que supe que un apartamento de estos vale lo mismo que una casa. Un solo apartamento. A mí me cuesta entender. Esta casa no la vendería por 10 de estos apartamentos. Encuentro interesante los apetitos de la gente." His thoughts at once confirm that single-family homes like that of his family are becoming obsolete in urban centers, and yet challenge the presumption that historic dwellings can be discarded without consequence to make room for the new. His reflections also corroborate changing social tastes rather than the outright erasure of memory from everyday life. Cycles of destruction and construction impress themselves upon the individual, society, and the ground below, leaving an imprint on the city's memoryscape. Although it may usher in new social tastes with regard to space and everyday practices, urbanization in the documentary reveals the survival of memory in the modern cityscape.

Later in the film, Mann draws on his training as a biologist to further condemn the ecological and human ramifications of widespread changes to urban terrain, all the while uncovering the adaptability of memory to these transformations. While he addresses a lecture hall of students on evolutionary theory, the camera captures scenes from the center of the capital. Shots include a busy thoroughfare, the Plaza de Armas, as well as a smaller public park. In particular, the camera creates a still image of the Plaza and imposes on it the same composition as a postcard. This rendering of the square offers a static perspective of time and conjures up a souvenir of the city, or what Walter Benjamin called "secularized relics."<sup>100</sup> From this viewpoint and within the context of the documentary, the Plaza represents a spatial and historic palimpsest. It is at once the site

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<sup>100</sup> Benjamin referred to souvenirs as "secularized relics" since he believed they created forced and often false memories, resulting in melancholy. In this case, that the plaza appears to be captured in the form of a postcard conjures up nostalgia for the city and its relics of the past.

of Spanish colonial architecture, housed in the cathedral; French Baroque architecture, the government building; modern architecture, the financial building; in addition to the plaza floor itself. This overlaying of architectural influences once again reinforces the idea of the city as an *oeuvre*—an organic entity that shapes and is shaped by society and its power structures. Even in the present, buildings disposed of and replaced with new structures prolong this complex system of temporal and spatial layering within the city and continue its threads of collective and individual memory.

Upon the camera's return to the lecture hall, Mann's discussion turns to individual habitat. "¿Qué es lo que es el espacio individual? ¿Cuál es la manifestación más concreta del espacio individual?" he asks. A student responds that individual space can be defined most concretely as a square meter. Mann's continued observations persists in the form of a voice over, superimposed on moving shots of building sites all around the city. As Mann agrees that this measurement represents the minimum amount allotted to a member of society—"el mínimo de espacio de un individuo dentro de un grupo social," he specifies—the camera catches a fleeting glance of the injured construction worker and his wife in front of their home in Renca. The filmmaker juxtaposes their waves and smiles with a large advertisement of a cheery couple that covers the side of a newly constructed high-rise. This version of the good life simulates a prior model of happiness, presently associated, by physical contact, with the façade of the new structure it conceals. By paralleling the two couples, the documentary contrasts the collective action of years past with present-day individual gain.

Mann concludes his thoughts by characterizing territory as a means of defining oneself against other members of the same species and suggests that this is precisely what

current spatial configurations lack: “territorio, de punto de vista técnico, es todo espacio defendido que ocupa un espécimen o un grupo reproductivo o un grupo social definido y que defiende contra otros individuos de la misma especie.” Implicit in the determination to define one’s space is the yearning to define and defend places linked to memory. The camera returns to Mann’s house, where it lingers for a moment and then looks over the wall to the construction site, a juxtaposition suggesting that the new property threatens a more authentic place of individual expression, lifestyle, and memory. However, this reckless purging, which Bauman and others have identified as a common trend among modern societies, propels desires to preserve one’s individual space, way of life, and places of memory. In a sense, then, urbanization, by altering personal habitat, revives memory of the past and ultimately creates nostalgia for that space as it once was.

From his garden, Mann discusses changes to this microhabitat, which result from the ongoing construction next door. Parallel to human struggles over urban space, the same garden that once represented a haven for neighborhood animals has become a hotbed for territorial disputes. Mann refers specifically to the birds that the adjacent building has displaced:

Se ha destruido todo el hábito de los pájaros del jardín que vivían allá, entonces están viniendo para acá y peleando acá. Entonces el territorio para las aves es tan parcelado como para nosotros. Cada ave tiene su territorio, y si sale de allí, pelea con el territorio de al lado. Allí lo que pasó es que destruyó el territorio... están ahora intentando refugiarse en nuestro jardín

Since their established territory has been destroyed, the birds now seek refuge at Mann’s property, where they struggle to redefine boundaries. The biologist compares this situation with that which faces humans in the neighborhood: how to define individual space—a sense of place, memory, and habitat—in the face of ongoing transformation.

The spatial dynamics at work in Providencia do more than demonstrate society's penchant for disposing of or protecting older buildings; they define this space as a battleground for individual and collective efforts to redefine what remains of this territory.

Consequently, throughout *Aquí se construye*, the belief that modern structures do little to impress themselves upon memory is central to the documentary and its portrayal of efforts to preserve historic structures from rampant urbanization and the cult of the impermanent. Ideas of authenticity underlie this argument, along with the conviction that modern structures are antithetical to recollection. That *Aquí se construye* juxtaposes the longevity of Mann's house with the newness of the adjacent building is not casual—the film proposes that one dwelling is rife with memory while the other is not. One is portrayed as a viable place while the other is not, despite the fact that both are man-made and used for human habitation. As he works outside with his son, in a scene toward the end of the film, Mann grasps the wrought-iron fence that defines his property, and he confirms: “esta reja es la original; tiene 50 años.” In contrast, midway through the film, developers choose the apartment's fixtures before completing the building. This gives an added inauthenticity to the space—since the selection of pre-fabricated fixtures contrasts with the craftsmanship of building a home—and suggests that nothing links it to the past. Thus, the apparent incongruity of these high-rises to memory and the rest of the neighborhood belie the film's presentation of historic buildings and homes as the only sites that can and continue to act as unofficial sites of collective memory.

Although *Aquí se construye* invests much of its capital in portraying historic single-family homes as the truest embodiment of a society's memory, its documentation

of the modern high-rise's construction discloses the extent to which this process stamps the neighborhood and its sense of collective recall. In his work on modern life and memory—proposing that the two are fundamentally incongruent—Connerton maintains that modern architecture often conceals the human labor employed in its construction. As a result, both this process and the building's role as at once the bearer and creator of memories disappear in favor of clean, symmetrical lines and uniform floor plans, adoptable the world over. In the spirit of Marx, Connerton equates modern structures to other forms of commodity: "Since the labor process is rendered opaque, certain crucial memories about how this type of society is produced are made unconscious, the production of commodities being, at the most significant level, made unavailable to consciousness" (43). Once again, this position could offer a persuasive, albeit facile, reading of the documentary. An alternative reading might suggest that since *Aquí se construye* takes as much care in documenting the construction of new as it does the destruction of old buildings, the documentary exposes the human narrative of urbanization—particularly the inconveniences it poses on the everyday life of residents and the labor involved in transforming an entire neighborhood and way of life. In the process, Agüero's work reaffirms that the construction of modern buildings is as integral to the production of new memories as the existing urban fabric they now call home.

Thus, the film indirectly teaches that to deem an urbanized neighborhood a non-place simply based on its aesthetic uniformity would also be to underestimate the human cost of such a transformation. By carefully documenting the construction of a single apartment tower from start to finish, *Aquí se construye* demonstrates the human side of what might otherwise be considered a dehumanizing process that is inherently opposed to

memory. Mann's daily experience with the construction contiguous to his house provides a clear example of urbanization's often-untold human narrative. The erection of a new apartment building not only reawakens his memory of the neighborhood as it once was, but also actively interrupts his daily life and sense of repose. Roughly halfway through the film, the documentary finds Mann alone on his balcony, where sounds of demolition permeate through the trees and allow the spectator to hear what she cannot readily discern for herself. It comes as no surprise when Mann describes the nearby process as cataclysmic (this in a country known for its devastating earthquakes), since only a thin row of trees provides the only natural barrier between demolition and Mann's house. "Fue cataclísmico, realmente," he remembers. "A las ocho de la mañana un sábado saltaba de mi cama, pero realmente saltaba... había temblado la tierra y el ruido y el polvo era una situación realmente estresante". The ubiquitous noise, dust, and debris that accompany urbanization violently disrupt the daily lives of neighboring residents. These factors naturally imprint the memory of nearby inhabitants, so that, instead of being a non-place on the city's memoryscape, the new building becomes a memorable event from its inception.

Similarly, the documentary suggests that, far from being obscured by the finished product, the labor involved in construction is worthy of being exposed and documenting for posterity.<sup>101</sup> This is evident throughout the film, since the camera often focuses on workers and other actors involved in building the high-rise apartment building. Towards

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<sup>101</sup> As a gesture to Marx, Connerton observes: "A city is unthinkable without an infinity of hinterland linkages. The market of which it forms a nodal point in space fosters exchange relationships of immense range and complexity, while at the same time obscuring those relationships from us in the very process of creating them. If we live in a city we consume goods and purchase services in a marketplace with linkages to people and place who remain invisible to us, unknown to us, and perhaps unimagined by us" (42). Instead of relegating them to further obscurity, *Aquí se construye* intentionally highlights the labor process and routes taken through the city to advance construction.

the end of the documentary, the camera adopts one worker in particular as the subject of its observation. The camera as *flâneur* establishes another cartography of the city, one based on the worker and his daily practices and memoryscapes. After surveying the construction site's exterior, the camera first meanders through the empty rooms of the newly erected high-rise and then soars high above the city. The camera fades to black and reappears quickly, this time focusing on one of the contractors hired to work at the site adjacent to Mann's house. The worker never speaks to the filmmaker directly. Instead, the camera simply follows the man as he leaves work for home and returns the next day, always maintaining enough distance to observe the nuances of this individual's everyday life. In this way, even routes taken through the city—the necessary transit between sites of work and leisure—become the subject of everyday movement and memory. Far from being without context, the worker's journey through the city ties together its distinct sectors and spins a memorable narrative whose spatial nucleus is the construction site.

At the conclusion of his workday, the worker leaves the site behind and navigates the city's thoroughfares by bus, therefore affording the spectator a glimpse into the transition between work and leisure time. Long periods of waiting mark his commute, further extending what already seems like an interminable journey home and prolonging the workday. The bus slows to a stop at a well-lit shopping mall far from the city center, demonstrating the extent to which spatial uniformity has influenced not only Providencia but also the periphery of the capital. His commute home reminds the viewer how much the city has grown, and yet, possibly as a cause of these changes, how separated its inhabitants remain from one another. When the worker finally arrives at his own home, he is in a much different part of the same city. Despite inspiring sensations of



placelessness, the worker's twice-daily trip demonstrates to what extent place still holds relevance in the city as a socio-economic determinant. His trip also reveals the economic cost of commuting—in this case, the unproductive time the worker spends waiting for and riding the bus, which may actually impede the distribution of capital (Smith 435). Time spent navigating the city's thoroughfares is neither completely productive nor reproductive; rather, it represents idle time sacrificed from one's home and work life. Despite this fact, the worker's commute shapes his daily life and memory, and connects changes to the city to the work of individual actors. The labor involved in transforming the city gains greater transparency in the film, ensuring its incorporation into the fabric of memory.

Transit around the city reveals suburban sprawl and, thus, the spatial complement to rampant vertical urban expansion captured over the majority of the documentary.<sup>102</sup> Travel to the outer rings of Santiago suggests the extent to which one sector of the city depends on another for its transformation and captures a sector of the cityscape that might otherwise go unnoticed. Similarly, the subsequent sequence depicts how mobility reconnects these urban sectors and gives greater context to a modern building otherwise perceived as incongruous with its surroundings. The new day begins where the previous one ended for the worker: in his home. At the same time that he boards the bus, other workers from all over the city are doing the same. One worker rides the metro; another rides his bike from home to the construction site; others still commute to work in a shared

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<sup>102</sup> Urry suggests that mobility defines modern relationships and space. Just as the film creates a parallel between capitalist creative destruction and urbanization, Urry creates a metaphor between movement and the accumulation of capital: "There is in the modern world an accumulation of movement that is analogous to the accumulation of capital—repetitive movement or circulation made possible by diverse, interdependent mobility-systems" (13). At this juncture, the film parallels urbanization and increases in construction to the rise in urban mobility.

automobile. By depicting a simultaneous departure from the workers' respective homes to the same construction site, the film confirms the city's disjointed spaces and, at the same time, reunites them. By turning its attention to the more marginal areas of the Chilean capital, Agüero's exposé on the swift transformation of historic Santiago subtly juxtaposes the center of the city with its periphery, highlighting the fact that movement—whether above ground or through the city's subterranean channels—helps to blur the frontier between the center and outer rings of a city, no matter how far-removed they may be from each other. Likewise, the workers come together not at the traditional center of the city—or another site of public congregation—but rather at one its new centers of power and force for social and spatial change: the construction site.<sup>103</sup> Although Augé has called these urban conduits “non-places” since they are where, in the author's option, “many people cross paths but never meet” (65), travel to the construction site does not undermine place as much as it reveals its importance in shaping the everyday actions and memories of the city's inhabitants. Transit creates a memoryscape by proving that movement is not antithetical to memory, but rather is integral to greater narratives of everyday life and routes taken through the city.

In addition to revealing everyday routes and committing them to film, the documentary studies discrepancies in how city dwellers travel. For many, urban transit represents an inescapable reality, one that shapes the most nuanced practices, spaces, and memories of everyday life. *Aquí se construye* reveals that difference continues to exist,

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<sup>103</sup> Franco observes: “Energies that had once plowed into national ceremonies and mass demonstrations are now dispersed among different communities and interests that map the city with their own invisible and visible itineraries” (189). The sequence in which workers from all over the city reunite at the construction site conjures up ideas of mass protest and civic engagement, which are dashed when the workers arrive to their final destination at the construction site. However, because of observing their daily travel, the documentary renders visible these previously invisible itineraries, thereby highlighting the labor involved in construction.

though, between those who must rely on public transportation and those who can travel by car. For example, once the workers have all arrived at the construction site after a morning-long journey, the building's contractors appear in a large SUV, after what can only be assumed was a far shorter commute. In other cases, the complete avoidance of transit is suggestive of class standing. Guillermo Mann, the life-long resident of Providencia, only speaks to filmmakers from interior spaces, like his home or the university classroom where he teaches, which contrasts the time and energy workers must exert during their daily commute. In his study of mobility, Urry establishes movement as means of outlining social tastes and daily practices: "Bodies are not fixed and given but involve performances especially to fold notions of movement, nature, taste and desire, into and through the body. Bodies navigate... discursively mediated sensescapes that signify social taste and distinction, ideology, and meaning" (48). Therefore, urbanization and places of transit do not undermine place, since they continue to reinforce and define existing social configurations, and provide differing conduits for memory within the current-day cityscape. Bodies in transit do not necessarily level a sense of place and memory, but rather create dynamic memoryscapes.

Fittingly, the documentary concludes when the new neighbors transport their furniture into the recently completed apartment building, suggesting that the filmic narrative has literally reached full circle and that a new cast of residents will influence the neighborhood. Since the documentary opened to a family moving furniture out of their house prior to its demolition, it would seem only logical that the documentary should close with a moving company arranging the possessions of the neighborhood's newest residents. If this were not enough to signal the abrupt transition from one spatial

paradigm to another in the neighborhood, Mann and one of the apartment tenants end the film with a tense face-off from either side of the now insignificant wall that suggests to define Mann's property and physically separate the two men. The new neighbor looks down from his high-rise balcony, while the old neighbor looks up from his garden: further evidence that its newest members now influence the neighborhood's future but not without the stubborn and recurring appearance of the past (see fig. 9).



Figure 3.9. This near-concluding shot reinforces the scale of the apartment building and the radical change of lifestyle to the neighborhood. Source: *Aquí se construye*.

As with other moments in the documentary, this particular transition in the life of the neighborhood does more to reveal the cyclical nature of memory than its outright conclusion. That one spatial trend and set of practices replaces another over the course of the film highlights memory's ability to adapt to its new environment—not to be replaced by it. In the process, the city portrays itself in *Aquí se construye* as a dynamic, emergent memoryscape, where memory remains indelible to the human experience and in a constant, inalterable state of construction.

## CHAPTER 4

### **Mobilizing Memoryscapes: Ruins and the Rebuilt Environment in Sergio Chejfec's *El aire* and Fabián Bielinsky's *Nueve reinas***

The conclusion of *Aquí se construye*, in which the documentary guides the spectator away from the historic Providencia neighborhood on the heels of an unnamed worker and toward an unknown Santiago suburb, provides an entryway to a discussion of movement, spatial uniformity, and memory traces in contemporary Buenos Aires. The present chapter will examine the portrayal of ruins and their repurposing for commercial reasons in two fictional—yet prescient—narratives of urban life and financial crisis: Sergio Chejfec's novel *El aire* (1992) and Fabián Bielinsky's blockbuster film *Nueve reinas* (2000).<sup>104</sup> As difficult as it may be to comprehend contemporary urban landscapes in general—Franco contends that the ever-expanding terrain of modern Latin American cities “cannot be imagined as a totality”—narratives of urban mobility are capable of mapping these unrestrained cityscapes, thus calling greater attention to their particular as well as uniform features (190). As a product of this condition, movement in and around the city—among its many causeways and corridors—recurs as a trope of post-dictatorial literature and film across South America's Southern Cone, and offers a vehicle through which to explore the past's relationship to the present. In particular, urban transit in the works analyzed in this chapter spatializes traces of the past and exposes those vestiges of memory often found alongside the façades of modern Buenos Aires.

As in the concluding scenes of *Aquí se construye*, movement around the cityscape in works as seemingly disparate as Chejfec's *El aire* and Bielinsky's *Nueve reinas* brings

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<sup>104</sup> Although both are works of fiction, the treatment of *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* of an impending financial and social meltdown foretell the real-life Argentine bank crisis of the early 2000s.

the capital's discrete places into greater focus and frames them within the context of contemporary Argentina. More specifically, narratives of transit in these two works call attention to the city's palimpsests of memory as they chart traces of the past beyond designated sites of recollection. Itinerancy functions in each case to advance the storyline and to plot memoryscapes. While the novel's early chapters depict instances of spatial uniformity, *El aire* ultimately narrates the underworld of Buenos Aires—its images of widespread decay and urban nomadism verging, at times, on the phantasmagorical. The ruins of this cityscape serve metaphorically as traces of memory and as residual vestiges of a traumatic past. The film, on the other hand, is consistently mimetic in its approach, as a genre film about the perfect heist, carried out in the same city's newest and most desirable sectors. Neither the novelistic nor the filmic portrayal of Buenos Aires highlights landmarks of the capital's distant, iconic past—visual references to *La Casa*, for example, are conspicuously absent—, and yet each version of the cityscape serves as a reference to Argentina's post-dictatorship years, thus connecting broader swathes of the cityscape to popular memory.<sup>105</sup> Although both stories depict moments of urban standardization, the former ultimately strives to locate the spatial and cultural ruins of contemporary Buenos Aires, metaphorical scars of a traumatic past. The latter, on the contrary, highlights a stark absence of ruins in the same metropolis, an equally evocative sign of the dictatorship's legacy. Consequently, both works draw on narratives of itinerancy to plot material traces of collective memory and, as a result, give dimension to urban life after the dictatorship.

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<sup>105</sup> *La casa rosada* is home to the executive branch of the Argentine government and is a National Historic Monument of that country. This building, one of most emblematic of Buenos Aires, has served as a staging ground for political expression, most notably among the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, who have marched on the plaza extending from the entrance to *La casa rosada* for over thirty years.

In terms of setting, therefore, at first glance, the two works could not appear more distinct: the novel portrays the underworld of Buenos Aires and the film maps the city's most prized commercial sector. Yet each offers an urban memoryscape that adapts, to some degree, a trope already familiar to Argentine letters: themes of civilization and barbarism. *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* demonstrate their indebtedness, in particular, to works by literary predecessors Domingo Faustino Sarmiento—namely the work *Facundo: Civilización y barbarie* (1895)—and Roberto Arlt, authors of the mid-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries, respectively.<sup>106</sup> Themes of civilization and barbarism—cited frequently throughout the history of Latin America—reappear in *El aire* and *Nueve reinas*, albeit adapted to contemporary circumstances.<sup>107</sup> The present-day works draw on the traditional dichotomy that defined civilization spatially as the city center and barbarism as the indomitable, sprawling countryside; but, eventually, they invert this binary by portraying the city as a lawless, corrupt, and barbarous place. Consequently, this shared trait aligns *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* more with Arlt's tales of modern disillusionment and decadence than with Sarmiento's idealistic interpretation of city space. More specifically, the works analyzed in this chapter reinvent the civilization-barbarism dichotomy by filtering it through Argentina's post-dictatorship experience, namely the working through of traumatic memories and, more concretely still, the

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<sup>106</sup> This assertion would lend credence to Jameson's observation that allegory and post-modernity support each other mutually. He writes about auto-referential nature of post-modern film: "the new post-generic genre films are allegories of each other, and of the impossible representation of the social totality itself" (5). The allegorization of previous tropes and artistic works thus parallels post-modern trends toward pastiche and cultural recycling.

<sup>107</sup> In her analysis of *El aire*, which explores more extensively the influence of Sarmiento on this work, Annelies Oeyen maintains that the city returns to its barbarous roots in the novel: "se cumple un proceso de desintegración, de regreso a un estado arcaico, de una vuelta de la barbarie a la ciudad, en el que los habitantes vuelven a ser nómadas y grandes baldíos invaden la superficie urbana" (1). Nomadism, itself a throwback to more primitive times, ultimately exposes urban barbarism behind the veneer of spatial uniformity.

neoliberal reforms of the 1990s. In fact, each work is prescient, to a certain extent, in its portrayal of a city on the brink of social and financial ruin, a foretelling of the country's bank crisis in the early 2000s. *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* create an artifice of spatial uniformity and order, which appears, at times, to reinforce previous tropes of city-as-civilization and an orderly transition from authoritarianism to democracy. Movement around the metropolis, however, eventually weakens this surface and exposes a barbarous reality, where traces of collective memory emerge from a façade of spatial uniformity and the city finds itself in financial, spatial, and social ruin. Thus, in each work, urban transit assists in not only giving dimension to a cityscape otherwise unimaginable in size and seemingly uniform in style, but also in fleshing out traces of Argentina's recent past, shedding light on its present, and foretelling its future. In this way, the unraveling of memory through movement yields another layer of meaning to the intersection of memory and place in contemporary Southern Cone film and literature, and illuminates memoryscapes among all corners of the urban landscape.

As dissimilar as they might seem, therefore, *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* both employ narratives of movement and urban transit to reconnect the present to the past by exposing the material traces still woven into the urban fabric of Buenos Aires. The urban ruin, or in the case of *Nueve reinas*, the repurposed and commercialized vestiges of the past, gestures to a traumatic past in both works. Appropriately, this chapter will draw on the scholarship of recent Latin American theorists who have already located the ruin at the heart of post-dictatorial Southern Cone discourse, as an unmistakable symbol of memory, specifically that of a troubled and unresolved past (Avelar, 1999; Richard, 2004; Lazzara, 2009). In Chejfec's novel, the urban ruin not only materializes traces of



that country's past by calling to attention the imprint of collective memory on space, but also foretells the demise of its economic system, which culminated in the bank crisis of the early 2000s. In this way, Avelar's observations about the ruin as an unmistakable, untimely, and often unexpected symbol of the past in an otherwise orderly present shed light on Chejfec's depiction of a ruinous city landscape still charged with memory and nearing the brink of its own demise. The ruins that spring up along this semi-apocalyptic depiction of Buenos Aires likewise undermine ideas of the city as unquestionably civilized, and, within the context of the post-dictatorship, they mark the failure of the regime's efforts to impose long-lasting and far-ranging social and spatial order.

At the same time, this chapter will expand these interpretations of the ruin as a post-dictatorial trope by understanding the patent absence of ruins from the cityscape, as observed in *Nueve reinas*, as another gesture towards this region's recent and tumultuous past. The dearth of ruins from this filmic version of the capital, which transit around the city helps to uncover, also points to the years preceding the bank crisis and their link to Argentina's recent past. The scarcity of ruins from the cinematic version of this cityscape—particularly in the repurposed and commercialized Puerto Madero district, where the majority of *Nueve reinas* takes place—serves as a metaphor for the country's embrace of free-market capitalism during its transition from despotism to democracy. Thus, even the intentional repurposing of urban ruins into an economically viable zone yields insight into collective memory and its relationship to space.

With regard to mobility as another shared theme, this chapter will explore narratives of urban transit common to both *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* as conduits for vital plot development and, somewhat ironically, as the mortar that cements the present to the

past. In this way, de Certeau's observation that urban dwellers narrate the city, and give it meaning through their transit provides a compass for this discussion. In his words: "Their story begins on ground level, with footsteps... Their intertwined paths give shape to spaces. They weave places together" (97). As opposed to de Certeau's affirmation in the same work that "to walk is to lack a place," this chapter maintains that urban mobility provides the keystone for two versions of the same city, which, although one would seem to undermine the other, ultimately root their foundation in the past and, therefore, forge a place within the realm of memory.<sup>108</sup>

A brief sketch of each work's plot will underscore how their settings differ and how, at the same time, they intersect through movement and the foretelling of Argentina's financial crisis in the early 2000s. Sergio Chejfec's 1992 novel *El aire* attempts to strip away the city's artifice by narrating, in third person, the simultaneous collapse of the protagonist Barroso and his city, Buenos Aires.<sup>109</sup> The narrative is at once psychological and spatial, thus, as the protagonist and the city experience in tandem their own forms of ruin—one figuratively and the other literally—a quality which suggests that the condition of one depends intrinsically upon that of the other. Barroso discovers a rapidly transforming cityscape after learning in the beginning of the novel that his wife has mysteriously disappeared, leaving him only a hand-written note, insisting that he not search for her. This fact itself evokes this country's dictatorship experience—namely the

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<sup>108</sup> It bears mentioning that, in the same observation that walking creates placelessness, de Certeau concludes his thought by reminding the reader that movement around the city simultaneously helps to create that place: "The moving about that city multiplies and concentrates experience that is, to be sure, broken up into countless tiny deportations... compensated for by the relationships and intersections of these exoduses that intertwine and create an urban fabric, and placed under the sign of what ought to be, ultimately, the place by its name, the City" (103). This chapter will allow this last insight to guide its analysis into the creation of place and allegory through movement.

<sup>109</sup> Writer, publisher, and professor of Creative Writing at NYU Sergio Chejfec (1956) has also authored *Los planetas* (1999), *Boca de Lobo* (2000), and *Los incompletos* (2004), along with collections of essays and poetry. Common themes of his works include memory, urbanism, and the Jewish-Argentine tradition.

thousands of individuals disappeared at the hands of the regime—and its continued influence in the present. Perplexed, Barroso descends from his apartment to the streets of Buenos Aires, where a disturbing trend emerges: the marginal neighborhoods that previously had lined the city now encroach upon the center; once-modern structures now verge on utter ruin; and the currency system upon which the city once depended is now obsolete. In short, the city descends into chaos and, unmistakably, barbarism. Only increasingly ominous headlines appearing in the daily newspaper mark the passage of time until the protagonist meets his ultimate demise, a fate that the city shares with him by experiencing its own financial, social, and spatial ruin. Barroso's movement around the city marks his discovery of urban transformation and exacerbates his diminishing mental health, incites his memories of the past, and reveals with increasing nuance the decay and, eventually, the disappearance of the cityscape—a process whereby the country begins to take over the city. In particular, the ominous appearance of ruins, charted during his trips around Buenos Aires, suggest the collective, tangible scars of the past, and act as irrefutable traces of memory in a city otherwise seemingly devoid of recall.

Bielinsky's *Nueve reinas*, in contrast, projects a starkly antiseptic image of the same cityscape.<sup>110</sup> Whereas Chejfec's urban landscape eventually borders on the surreal—even nightmarishly at times, as the city degenerates into chaos—the setting of this modern-day shakedown could be described most appropriately by an opposing term:

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<sup>110</sup> The now-deceased director (1959-2006) is also responsible for *El aura* (2005), his second film, which premiered shortly before his sudden death in 2006, at the age of 47, and is credited for making compelling and complex storylines accessible to a wide audience.

hyperreal.<sup>111</sup> In the crime drama, which eventually pits one con man against another—and artifice against reality—the plot develops among a series of internationally recognizable (and reproducible) spaces: a gas station, an urban garage, and the luxuriously modern Hilton hotel in the newly refurbished Puerto Madero sector of Buenos Aires.<sup>112</sup> It is among these landmarks of a globally focused Argentina that Juan and Marcos first attempt to swindle a corrupt Spanish businessman into purchasing a collection of precious (but falsified) stamps, an ill-fated heist that keeps the conmen itinerant throughout the entire film.<sup>113</sup> After a series of events that would seem to undermine their plot, the two conmen finally receive payment for their merchandise in the form of a certified check, only to discover that the bank system has just crashed, making their payout worthless. All hope would seem to be lost for the two thieves if it were not for a pivotal twist at the end of the film, in which the spectator finally discovers that she herself has fallen victim to the heist. After witnessing his partner’s unfortunate experience at the bank, Juan returns to a nondescript urban garage where he finds Marcos’ sister, Valeria, and the other actors involved in the alleged business transaction.

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<sup>111</sup> In her assessment of the post-modern aspects of *Nueve reinas*, Cristina Gómez Moragas also attests to the international, seemingly placeless feel of its setting: “A su vez, las calles representadas no son las más emblemáticas de Buenos Aires, podrían ser las de cualquier ciudad, así como el logo de la multinacional ESSO y de la cadena *Hilton* simbolizan, también, los no lugares que han proliferado como resultado del proceso globalizador. El lugar central que ocupa el hotel *Hilton* en la narración alude a la mutación del hiperespacio posmoderno” (38). Although she argues in favor of the setting as a non-place, this chapter maintains that transit around the city ultimately complicates these sites, revealing their local context and connection to memory.

<sup>112</sup> I would be remiss if I did not mention, albeit in a footnote, the influence of literary giant Jorge Luis Borges on the works analyzed in this chapter. The often ludic tension between artifice and reality, for example, is particularly Borgesian, and is a device that Deborah Shaw studies at greater length in her reading of *Nueve reinas*. Although this theme is integral to each of the present works, this chapter will examine the intersection of movement, memory, and narratives of civilization and barbarism as its primary focus.

<sup>113</sup> The Buenos Aires cityscape portrayed in *Nueve reinas* parallels architect Hans Ibelings’ observation of many world cities: “cities and agglomerations around the world have undergone comparable developments and assumed similar shapes. Wherever one looks there seem to be high-rise downtowns, low-rise suburbs, urban peripheries with motorway cultures and business parks and so on” (67).

They, in reality, have just helped Juan and Valeria swindle the \$200,000 that Marcos had stolen from his younger brother's inheritance. This grifter and the spectator share the same dubious honor, thus, as victims of a well planned scheme which, in addition to allegorizing Argentine culture of the late 1990s and foretelling the eventual bank crisis of the early 2000s, casts doubt on the relationship between reality and artifice. Similar to the heist itself, transit around the city exposes the film's setting as complex and profoundly influenced by the cultural politics of the era, thus wearing away at the façade of spatial uniformity and order, and revealing that traces of a traumatic past continue to influence urban space, even in the absence of ruins.

Both works employ narratives of movement to develop their respective stories, to unfold their shared cityscape, and consequently, to create increasingly complex images of an otherwise generic urban terrain. With each step—advancing literally into previously uncharted sectors of the city and figuratively into madness—Barosso witnesses as a non-descript modern city succumbs to ruin. Similarly, Juan and Marcos' fraud becomes increasingly complex as they channel the ultra-modern corridors of Buenos Aires, finally exposing the city and the heist for what they really are: a façade, a ruse in spatial form. The city becomes complicit in attempting to veil—through generic, modern landscapes—the precariousness of the social, cultural, and economic environment.<sup>114</sup> The fact that the works foretell the demise of the Argentine capital and its economic ruin—in the case of *El aire*, nearly a decade before that country's banking crisis—makes them as prescient as

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<sup>114</sup> In his review of the film, the critic Roger Ebert identified the city itself as part of the con: "The story plays out in modern-day Buenos Aires, a city that looks sometimes Latin, sometimes American, sometimes Spanish, sometimes German, sometimes modern, sometimes ancient. Is it possible the city itself is pulling a con on its inhabitants, and that some underlying reality will deceive everyone?" (1).

they are sensitive to the zeitgeist of the era.<sup>115</sup> In this vein, each works creates the appearance of spatial uniformity only to reveal, through narratives of movement and urban transit, a city on the brink of its own demise and incapable of concealing the traces of its traumatic past.

*Nueve reinas'* portrayal of a generic, anywhere city has already been studied widely, with many critics focusing only on the international features of this aesthetic (Shaw, 2007; Copertari, 2009; Page, 2009).<sup>116</sup> Throughout much of the film, the camera focuses intently on Juan and Marcos—often with tight shots and from the waist up, to minimize the view of the cityscape—as they navigate the city's thoroughfares, none of which would distinguish this terrain as the Argentine capital to an international audience (see fig. 10).<sup>117</sup> The conmen do not attempt to circle the Plaza de Mayo, for example, or to cross the iconic Avenida de Julio as they traverse the city, in pursuit of what would seem to be the perfect heist.<sup>118</sup> These and other traditional landmarks of Argentine identity, history, and popular memory remain noticeably absent from the film, which

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<sup>115</sup> Fabián Bielinski maintained in an interview that his goal for making the film was to capture the spirit of 1990s Argentina: "I was just observing the zeitgeist, I wasn't trying to document what we are as a people, but a feeling. A mood that everybody's a liar, everybody's cheating you. It's not reality—you know that everybody's not like that, but I wanted to capture that feeling, even if it's momentary. That the law of the world is cynicism" (<http://www.filmfreakcentral.net/notes/argentinecinema.htm> 5).

<sup>116</sup> The political rhetoric of those years, identified popularly as *menemismo*, eponymous of then president Carlos Menem, upheld economic reform as the clear path to first-world status. "[La] modernización económica [...] habría de permitir salir de la crisis y entrar [...] al primer mundo," Menem was quoted as saying (qtd. in Sábato 44).

<sup>117</sup> Although this chapter does not aspire to enter into such a debate, Deborah Shaw argues cogently that the relatively non-descript cityscape projected in *Nueve reinas* aided in this film's popularity among international audiences and, ultimately, in its reproducibility in Hollywood, as the 2004 English-language film *Criminal*: "This potential [to be popular in the international market] is also exploited through the use of a contemporary, urban setting, with much of the action taking place in the international space of the ultramodern Hilton hotel in Buenos Aires, which ensures that the national context is easily transferable for audiences" (72).

<sup>118</sup> Themes of internationally homogeneous cityscapes recur throughout the works examined in this dissertation, a fact that reinforces urbanism as a central trope of the post-dictatorship period. Just as editors dismissed Fuguet as portraying cities more proper to the U.S. than to Latin America, critics of *Nueve reinas* accuse the film of reducing Buenos Aires to a generically reproducible landscape.

focuses instead on the city's sites of transit and international tourism.<sup>119</sup> The preferred settings of the film would appear to parallel what Beatriz Sarlo has observed about post-modern landscapes in this country and throughout the Americas: “[son] paisajes urbanos trazados según el último *design* del Mercado internacional y servicios urbanos en estado crítico” (5).<sup>120</sup> Yet, in a twist paramount to that of the closing scenes of the film, movement around these sites, particularly the Hilton hotel and the surrounding Puerto Madero district, reveals fissures in this façade. The conmen's development and execution of their heist in this zone expose the complicity of the setting, which at first had created an artifice of order, stability, and anonymity; but that, over the course of the film, suggests broader implications of corruption and deception. Those sites featured in *Nueve reinas* act as collectively recognized symbols of future prosperity and the country's inclusion in the international marketplace, thereby directly linking the setting to recurring themes of the post-dictatorship and to Argentina's economic ascendance during this period. Transit among these sites over the course of the film, however, reveals not only their complicity in the heist, by contributing another layer of artifice to the plot, but also uncovers via these spaces—where corrupt businessmen and desperate conartists

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<sup>119</sup> Adrián Gorelik identifies cosmopolitanism as integral not just to this film but to the Argentine imaginary: “Buenos Aires is forever preoccupied with where and to whom it belongs, seeking models and embodiments of virtue and progress in other international cities” (62). Gorelik cites Buenos Aires' centenary celebration as exemplar of how even this city's iconic landmarks are often associated with other world cities: Avenida de Mayo to Paris, the banking district to London, La Boca de Genoa, and so on (65). Even if it were to capture these important landmarks, *Nueve reinas* might still be accused of portraying an international cityscape, since that is, at its core, what Buenos Aires purports to be.

<sup>120</sup> As a complement to Sarlo's observations, Shaw continues her line of reasoning by maintaining that *Nueve reinas* omits spatial symbols commonly associated with Argentine identity: “There is an absence of identifiably Argentine images from two of the main settings of the film: the garage and the hotel. Theories of hotels and hotel lobbies have stressed the anonymity of the location and the dissociation of the hotel space from its neighboring environment, and the same point can be made for the use of multinational garage shops” (72). Although references to well-known port city landmarks are conspicuously absent from the film, I will argue at a later point that the Puerto Madero zone, where the majority of the action occurs, emblemizes Argentina's modernizing leap during the post-dictatorship and its efforts to repurpose historic sectors of the city.

comingle—the country’s continued precariousness after years of dictatorial rule. Therefore, the setting of *Nueve reinas* refers less to an international, reproducible urban model, and more to a period of recent Argentine history imprinted on collective memory. As a result, these sites act less like non-places—banal, reproducible sites of transit and consumption common the world over—and more like integral landmarks of the Argentine capital, its collective identity, and post-dictatorship experience.<sup>121</sup>



Figure 4.1. Tight-angle shots of this type accompany the conmen as they move about the city but, at the beginning stages of the film, downplay the importance of the setting to the heist. Source: *Nueve reinas*.

*El aire* shares this feature in common with *Nueve reinas*, as the novel presents a similar brand of uniformity and spatial reproducibility during its opening pages. The reader, in this case, wonders whether this cityscape belongs particularly to Buenos Aires or generically to an unnamed global city. As a consequence, both versions of the cityscape—the novelistic and the cinematic; the account that exposes ruins and the account that exposes their absence—appear initially as landscapes bereft of collective

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<sup>121</sup> Although she does not reference the Southern Cone post-dictatorship in particular, Saskia Sassen remarks that many of South American countries joined the world market in the late 1980s “hacia fines de los años ochenta en algunas de las principales ciudades del mundo en desarrollo... se integraron a varios mercados mundiales: São Paulo, Buenos Aires... la ciudad de México son algunos ejemplos” (40). I argue in this chapter that a setting as intentionally uniform and international as that of *Nueve reinas* refers implicitly to these years and, therefore, to the post-dictatorship.



identity and memory. The title of the novel itself points to this characteristic by conveying that the city's moniker, Buenos Aires, has been stricken of the aspect that distinguishes it as a proper noun and the name of a capital city. Without the 'Buenos,' the city reduces itself to the singular form and a universal element: *el aire*, mere air. Likewise, throughout the entire novel, the narrator only occasionally evokes the city by name, reinforcing periodically the moniker of a metropolis whose identity and place in popular memory might otherwise remain up in the air for a better part of the novel.

The protagonist's name, Barroso, reinforces a connection between the narrator and his surroundings, and, at the same time, highlights the indeterminacy of the cityscape.<sup>122</sup> The name by which the protagonist identifies himself, really his surname, at once conveys that the city has been erased of its mnemonic devices and that its limits are unclear: *borroso*, or indistinct and blurred. Similarly, his name and the connection between the protagonist and his urban landscape suggest that the city has—or rather, will be—returned to its most basic, primal element: *barro*, or mud. In this way, the character's title—his name—and the title of the novel gesture similarly to a leveling of the cityscape, or, the process by which the previously identifiable traits and characteristics of this metropolis have become at once as blank as the air in the sky and as turbid as the soil below. After the city's eventual ruin, only soil and air remain. Therefore, by evoking these seemingly opposing poles early in the novel, *El aire* clarifies a desire to narrate the cityscape holistically—literally, from top to bottom—and presents a foreshadowing of the city's demise and return to its most vital elements, the process of which will provoke individual and collective memory and materialize their traces.

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<sup>122</sup> The name Barroso also references the poem by Borges: "Fundación mítica de Buenos Aires."

Although urban transit will eventually reveal nuances of place in both works, thereby uncovering palimpsests of the past and memory, this same occurrence is also partially responsible for creating uniform cityscapes. Just as Sarlo maintains that the landscape of postmodernity inhibits the creation of authentically distinguishable characteristics among urban landscapes, she also cites what she calls *nomadismo contemporáneo*, as a leveling agent that reduces the impact of place, history, and culture, so that a city in one part of the world might seem the same as that in another (17).<sup>123</sup> Other contemporary theorists, representing as many countries as they do academic disciplines, have also considered the intersection of mass circulation and the homogenization of place through movement (Augé, 1995; Castells, 1996; Bauman, 2000; Cresswell, 2006; Urry, 2007).<sup>124</sup> Although these inquiries each bear relevance to the works considered in this chapter, the concern of *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* is not to dissect the causes of this brand of nomadism, but rather to depict its spatial consequences, from which, as I argue, memoryscapes emerge. In *Nueve reinas*, this phenomenon manifests itself through sites of transit recognizable the world over. Although they would appear to transcend the city that surrounds them, a series of shady dealings, propelled by the comen's transit around the capital, undermines the artifice of these seemingly

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<sup>123</sup> From his position as an anthropologist, Néstor García-Canclini suggests that transit decreases a sense of belonging among city dwellers: "Cada grupo de personas transita, conoce, experimenta pequeños enclaves, en sus recorridos para ir al trabajo, a estudiar, hacer compras, pasear o divertirse. Aun cuando sean viajes largos ofrecen visiones fragmentos. De manera que se pierde la experiencia global de lo urbano, se debilita la solidaridad y el sentido de pertenencia" (65). Despite his observation, I argue that narratives of movement in the two works examined in this chapter allow for the mapping of an indisputably local version of the cityscape, one that continues to exhibit traces of its recent past.

<sup>124</sup> Cresswell, who has written extensively on theories of movement and place, creates a term similar to Sarlo's, what he calls: "foundationless nomadism." While Cresswell distinguishes himself from other theorists by asserting that nomadism cancels neither place nor culture, he does recognize mobility as the unifying condition of twenty-first century societies: "Culture, we are told, no longer sits in places, but is hybrid, dynamic—more about routes than roots. The social is no longer seen as bound by 'societies,' but as caught up in a complex array of twenty-first century mobilities. Philosophy and social theory look to the end of sedentarism and the rise of foundationless nomadism" (1).

predictable, international places, and exposes the influence of barbarism on daily life in contemporary Buenos Aires, a gesture to the continued legacy of the dictatorship. In *El aire*, spatial uniformity represents only a glimmer in the complete narrative of this city on the verge of destruction. In other words, nomadism—the hallmark of the present era—finally exposes elements of barbarism that underlie the civilized cityscape, thereby adapting the traditional civilization-barbarism dichotomy to post-dictatorial Argentina and plotting traces of the past among modern urban spaces.<sup>125</sup>

In *El aire*, Barroso first takes note of widespread spatial uniformity within his own apartment building, despite having just received the devastating news that his wife has abandoned him, leaving behind only a hand-written letter as brief as it is cryptic. The homogeneous interior of the building mimics its exterior, thus implying that the city's standardizing aesthetic permeates the façade to influence the space just beyond the resident's front door. In his observation of the doors lining the hallway—each new door virtually identical to the last and, thus, intentionally serialized—the narrator parallels this uniformity with the suspension of time:

‘¿Cuánto dura el presente?’, continuó interrogándose, ya una vez adentro, mientras descendía: cada una de las puertas idéntica a la anterior, ofreciendo el mismo rectángulo de luz a medida que bajaba, cada determinados metros y segundos. ‘¿Y si la repetición fuera la medida del presente?’, murmuró en voz alta al salir, frente a un vecino que esperaba. (51)

With the articulation of his first question, the reader participates in an interior monologue in which the narrator ponders the nature of space and time as shaped by his specific

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<sup>125</sup> Bauman finds his theory of liquid modernity on a return to nomadism: “We are witnessing the revenge of nomadism over the principle of territoriality and settlement. In the fluid stage of modernity, the settled majority is ruled by the nomadic traffic and extraterritorial elite. Keeping the roads free for nomadic traffic and phasing out the remaining check-points has now become the meta-purpose of politics, and also of wars” (13). Although rootedness and *sui generis* previously girded concepts of citizenship and national sovereignty, contemporary society places more value on change and mass mobility.

question and subsequent observations. Those aspects of the apartment building appear to answer his question—“How long does the present last?”—by suggesting that spatial reproducibility creates a perpetual present, in which each door resembles the last in every way and in which the same amount of light shines through from underneath, cast out across the surface of the floor. In a way, this scenario creates the illusion of a film reel, with only a steady sliver of light to frame its blank images. Likewise, by reintroducing the top-bottom dichotomy evoked by the title of the novel and the protagonist’s name, the narrator links metaphorically the sameness and repetition he experiences in his apartment building—the feeling that uniformity perpetuates the present—to the entire city, where the present is continually performed and re-performed as if on film.

At street level, immersed now in the stimuli of the bustling capital, Barroso is struck by how little each building differs from the next. In fact, he repeats to himself several times that “todo es igual,” remarking at the uniformity of this sprawling urban terrain, before calculating obsessively the invisible coordinates that define his surroundings. His murmurings give way to measurements:

y ya olvidado de lo que murmuraba--, se le dio por calcular el espacio que separaba la calle de su balcón. El pensamiento dejaba de estar con Benavente, como tampoco seguía en la escena que sólo unos momentos antes se había afanado por reconstruir, ahora más bien se plegaba a la idea de distancia—de medida—, a aquella abstracción global, según Barroso, convalidada en general por las magnitudes. (54)

Thoughts of distance and scale offer a means of classifying and dissecting this spatial monotony. For Barroso, they yield an imaginary mapping of the more subtle planned and, perhaps, unplanned dimensions of everyday structures. They also permit the protagonist to engross himself in his present-day surroundings. Somewhat paradoxically, therefore,

the narrator, in attempting to locate spatial variegation along an otherwise unremarkable cityscape, consigns himself momentarily to the same perpetual present.

Warding off thoughts of his recently disappeared wife, Barroso also measures his surroundings as a form of amusement, engaging in a ludic diversion from the tedium of urban life. Pursuant to this version of reality, his viewpoint verges on photorealism, in which each detail of the protagonist's environment merits careful documentation and scrutiny, but which his psychological state continues to influence.<sup>126</sup> Although this sense of order will contrast with later scenes of urban chaos, ruin, and memory, initially it provides Barroso with a means of contextualizing his otherwise bland environment and knowing in detail an otherwise generic cityscape:

Fuera de estas opciones científico-experimentales, admitió otros dos tipos de soluciones, diferentes también entre sí: recurrir a registros confiables para conocer la distancia, información del encargado del edificio; crear términos de comparación... o establecer si su balcón—hipotéticamente—se encontraba al mismo nivel de la fronda del árbol que estaba más allá de la puerta de entrada; y así con otras cosas. (55)

Barroso's obsession with realism reflects sociologist George Simmel's observation that "punctuality, calculability, [and] exactness" are the product of urban living, and at the same time, the protagonist's focus on quantifiable minutiae provides a means of playfully scrutinizing this reality.<sup>127</sup>

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<sup>126</sup> Luz Horne, in her reading of Chejfec's work, has already noted the photographic aspect of Barroso's perspective: "*El aire* adopts Barroso's perceptive mode and pretends to 'document' the order of the real—to describe a state of affairs—in a photographic manner" (238). Although I believe that Horne's argument has merit, I use the term "photorealism" judiciously to imply an interpretation of reality that is at once photographic, and thus dedicated to realism, and fictive—subjected to a degree of interpretation. Barroso's vision of the world is both the product of careful documentation and the creation of his psychosis.

<sup>127</sup> When Barroso comes into contact towards the end of the novel with an acquaintance of his wife, the one moment in which the protagonist interacts directly with another person, she comments on the photographic quality of his perspective. In reference to Barroso's wife, the woman recounts: "ella a veces cuando fuimos más conocidas, me hablaba de usted, me preguntaba si no creía que su obsesión por calcular las distancias, los pesos o las magnitudes tuviera algo de fotográfico" (175). His perspective suggests at once a heightened

This perspective allows Barroso to not only decode the discernable aspects of an otherwise non-descript and sprawling cityscape, but also to document the manifold daily performances for which it is a primary setting. These small performances contrast with the banality of the protagonist's initial surroundings and prepare the stage for later articulations of memory. As a complement to spatial uniformity, *El aire* implicates consumerism and its street-level performance as another condition of the modern cityscape, thereby further reinforcing this setting as a city that might exist anywhere in the world, and not just along the Río de la Plata. Upon leaving his neighborhood, Barroso stumbles upon a *mise en scene* of arrested consumerism. A family of would-be shoppers gazes upon a storefront window display, thus performing the idea of shopping to potential on-lookers. The narrator interprets a scene in which human and mannequin performers mimic each other:

A pesar del dominio casero de sus comentarios, la solemnidad de los caminantes competía con la de los maniqués; aunque diferente, ambas se hermanaban en el hecho de reconocerle al cristal de la vidriera el rol de escenario; que para unos estuviera a los efectos de observar y para otros para ser observados, no le agregaba complejidad a la escena, sino todo lo contrario, la tornaba más simple. (58)

Although only a thin sheet of glass separates one group from the other—reducing the divide between the animate and the inanimate to a transparent gesture—the spectacle of consumerism which Barroso observes calls attention to a scene familiar the world over: merchandise on display throughout the city and an ever-growing public incapable of purchasing it. In this way, consumerism, or, in this case, exclusion from consumerism, become a means of performing quotidian urban life. Consequently, the act of observing

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sense of realism and a degree of abstraction, since Barroso commonly reduces tangible elements to their most basic, often unnoticed attributes.

and of being observed reduces itself, in this instance, to a function of the pedestrian and of the everyday, an act for which the individual and spatial anonymity of the modern cityscape serve as an ideal backdrop and amid which memory would seem to hold no place.

Barroso's fleeting encounter with a mischievous woman in the apartment building facing his contrasts with this self-perpetuating, reflective performance by breaching an otherwise unquestioned contract of mutual anonymity. As in the shopper scene, only a pane of glass separates the protagonist from the housekeeper he observes in the apartment across from his, as he gazes at her from his balcony. In contrast, now aware that Barroso observes her, the young woman incorporates provocative gestures into her standard repertoire of motions, thereby combining the unassuming act of cleaning with a private performance intended solely for this onlooker. Also unlike the window shoppers, the housekeeper knowingly jeopardizes the barrier between herself and her audience by kissing the window that she cleans: "Transcurrió un tiempo muy breve, que a Barroso le pareció prolongado, al cabo del cual se detuvo agitada, consciente de la inutilidad de su puesta en escena. A modo de último recurso, o de despedida, estampó un beso prolongado en el vidrio, lamiendo enseguida la superficie como si quisiera borrar la marca" (17). In this moment, the young woman's actions openly mock the uniformity and anonymity that acted previously as the load-bearing pillars of the modern cityscape. This small, suggestive act begins to strip away at what Chejfec himself contends might remain invisible to city dwellers: "Los habitantes de la ciudad entienden en general de qué se trata, pero las señales de la ruina social se han instalado de tal modo firme y permanente que, o bien por la pesada carga de la evidencia o bien por su constancia, de hecho para

muchos se han vuelto invisibles” (145). Her actions and Barroso’s subsequent travels around the city, hoping to ameliorate his thoughts of despair, serve ultimately to unravel the cityscape, revealing a coexisting, memory-charged reality behind the city’s orderly, generic façade.

*Nueve reinas* departs from a similar intersection: one in which the cityscape initially provides a blank stage upon which to perform everyday life and which might appear to reinforce the city as the beacon of civilization. *Nueve reinas*, as many critics have already noted, projects spatial uniformity by choosing as its primary setting international spaces at the expense of those historic landmarks inseparable from popular Argentine memory and identity. *El aire* presents a brand of spatial uniformity that appears at once realistic and unmistakably staged, photographically real and filtered through the lens of its observer. In both works, the cityscape seems initially to lack the nuance of a real place; it is not a coincidence that the reader cannot readily identify Buenos Aires according to its landmarks in the beginning of either story. In her analysis of the Argentine blockbuster, Gabriela Copertari writes that conmen Marcos and Juan hope to lose themselves within the confines of what would appear to be the most neutral and secure place in the city: the ultramodern Hilton Hotel and cornerstone of the newly repurposed Puerto Madero district. Copertari notes:

Los hoteles como el de Puerto Madero en el que Marcos va a *perderse*, de diseño clásicamente posmoderno, acentuadamente americanizados con la amenidad impersonal del *lobby* de un aeropuerto o de un *shopping mal*, se convirtieron en el símbolo del ‘ingreso de Argentina al primer mundo,’ ya que el destino de estos hoteles era fundamentalmente el creciente *management* empresarial de una economía globalizada. (87)



Thus the theorist associates this hotel with other non-descript, global landmarks—even Argentina’s ambitions of first-world status, something which this chapter will eventually consider at greater length. In doing so, she implies that the hotel and places like it remain separate from the rest of the city, as sites where one could *perdersse*, or lose oneself, among a collective of anonymous travelers. Joanna Page echoes this sentiment in her reading of the film in which she maintains that, in her words, “this sterilized, ordered space contrasts with the chaos of the streets outside” (89).

Yet, in both cases, movement around that environment drives plot development, sending the protagonists into the city and plotting, with each pass, a version of urban terrain incongruous with its previously uniform exterior. Therefore, the same urban nomadism responsible for weaving spatial uniformity and anonymity into the urban fabric eventually reveals a complex and memory-charged cityscape in *Nueve reinas* and *El aire*, through the appearance and absence of ruins. By citing this setting as an antiseptic and anonymous site, existing apart from the rest of the city and its history, these interpretations neglect to recognize the hotel as an agent of artifice and deception, and as the site where shady dealings occur. The setting is indelible to the crime itself and to ideas of social corruptibility and barbarism.

There is no way, then, for the conmen to lose themselves in a place like the Puerto Madero Hilton, since the site actively influences the heist and plays an increasingly pivotal role, in concert with transience, in developing the plot. In his frequently cited analysis of hotel lobbies, cultural critic and sociologist Siegfried Kracauer maintains that the detective novel often exposes society’s ills by showing, in his words, “civilized society its own face in a purer way than society is usually accustomed to seeing it. In the

detective novel, proponents of that society and their functions give an account of themselves and divulge their hidden significance” (34). Hotel lobbies—which reinforce feelings of collective anonymity, as the theorist claims—recur among novels of this genre, which contextualizes the setting of *Nueve reinas* not only as an emblem of post-modern society, but also within the canon of detective narratives. Consequently, the luxury hotel where the conmen develop and execute their heist becomes an accomplice to the crime. In other words, the hotel is more than just the scene of the crime—it becomes complicit in the crime itself, therefore undermining its alleged sterility and inability to act as a referent for memory.

As previously mentioned, tight shots of the conmen as they move around the city permit just enough scenic information to confirm the film’s urban setting, although not the precise urban co-ordinates of the two men.<sup>128</sup> In contrast, the camera pans the hotel lobby from ceiling to floor before reaching the recently arrived Juan and Marcos, who admire momentarily their luxurious surroundings. As a glass-enclosed elevator descends from the lodging section of the inward-looking hotel space, those on the ground level move about fluidly, thereby communicating perpetual movement at all strata of the hotel space (see fig. 11). Likewise, to reinforce this image of bodies in constant, seemingly unrestrained motion, the camera captures lodgers as they move about the lobby floor on foot and chat with associates, thereby creating out of this otherwise antiseptic space a

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<sup>128</sup> Ricardo Darín, the actor who played Marcos, confirmed for the Argentine newspaper *El Clarín* that much of the film was shot on the streets of Buenos Aires, projecting a natural, spontaneous urban experience: “Muchas de las escenas se filmaron en la calle, entre peatones, sin escenografía. Íbamos a un lugar, nos subíamos a una camioneta, filmábamos la escena y nos íbamos” (2). Shaw maintains that the film’s dedication to naturalism at once calls attention to the artificiality of the hotel space and also makes the outlandish plot more believable: “The naturalism achieved through the understated acting styles, the location shooting, and the natural lighting are intended to make the highly contrived plot believable and to set the audience up for the trap revealed in the ending” (75). Such an emphasis on realism would appear to contrast with the hotel lobby, as Shaw has already observed, were it not for the eventual resemblance between the hotel and the street as the plot progresses.

microcosm representative of society itself and the city just beyond the threshold of the hotel. This introduction to the hotel setting parallels the street scene of the cityscape, but not without adding its own dimension of artifice. While the city street provides a referent for lawlessness—in fact, it is on the street where Marcos calls Juan’s attention to a series of petty crimes taking place, many of which would go virtually unperceived otherwise—the hotel lobby conjures up feelings of security and predictability. In a city given over to barbarous ways, the hotel lobby at first connotes ideas of civilization, given its effort to convey a version of urban life in which all events appear pre-planned and all movements carefully choreographed.

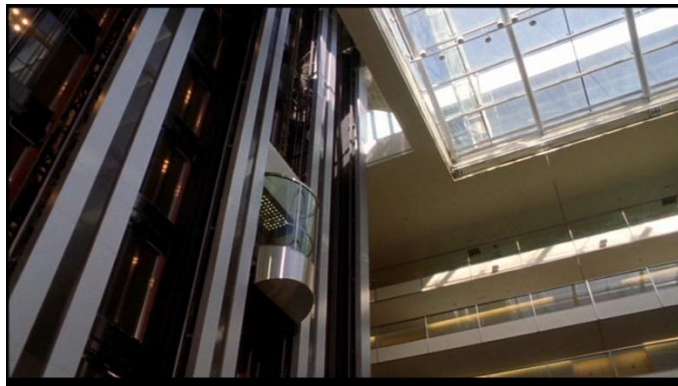


Figure 4.2. The hotel setting depicts unrestrained mobility and luminosity, a gesture to its supposedly transparent façade. Source: *Nueve reinas*.

This attribute of the hotel lobby becomes even more apparent in *Nueve reinas* when Valeria insists that the two conmen conduct their affairs out of sight and that they not arouse the suspicion of others, especially her superiors. Valeria’s intentions are clear: she wishes to maintain a sense of professionalism in her position, as an employee of the hotel, and to adhere to the decorum of this site, which stresses order and manageability. She insists on several occasions, as the men enter and exit the hotel, that they keep up

with appearances, and she warns them, in a particularly *porteño* way, not to “hacer un quilombo,” or make a mess.<sup>129</sup> At first blush, Valeria’s concern for not jeopardizing the presentation and performance of the hotel lobby would appear to separate this space from the chaos of the streets. Yet, their tense interaction in this section of the Hilton complex simply underscores the rules of engagement particular to this setting. These social guidelines serve to create the appearance of an orderly place, which is not without influence from the world beyond its façade.

Even Valeria, as intent as she is on maintaining a sense of order and neutrality in the hotel foyer, admits that these qualities are not inherent to the site—as it would appear—but rather the product of hard work, on her part and others. Once Valeria and the conmen pass the lobby and enter the interior labyrinth of the hotel—a series of interconnected corridors and workstations, where the hotel staff works without being seen—she confesses that she works hard to maintain her job and the performance it requires of her. “Me rompo el culo 12 horas por día para conservarlo,” she confirms, to which Marcos replies, “no literalmente,” a foreshadowing of his depraved attempt later in the film to offer his sister to the Spanish businessman as part of their transaction. The hotel lobby, for all of its gestures toward order and predictability, mirrors the conmen’s ruse, which despite its sophisticated level of artifice is merely a façade for a more complex and even damning reality.

When the grifters leave the hotel lobby, which they do at pivotal moments of the film, their exits establish direct moments of contact between this space and the rest of the city, further reinforcing the hotel as part of the urban fabric of its surroundings. In the

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<sup>129</sup> Despite the international feel of the film, its script draws largely on *porteño* slang and even Lunfardo, a dialect particular to this city and its immigrant tradition, particularly from Spain and Italy. In this way, language itself presents another fissure in the cosmopolitan veneer of the hotel site and lobby.

first instance, after Marcos' former associate tips them off to a potential scam involving a falsified version of the nine-queen stamp collection, the conmen exit the hotel with continued threats from Valeria that they not disrupt the forced tranquility of the hotel lobby. Upon their departure from the building, the glass doors of the entryway shut tightly before Valeria and reveal the hotel logo for the first time: the encircled 'H' common to Hilton Hotels the world over (see fig. 12). The automatically closing doors would appear to suggest that this space seals itself off hermetically from the rest of the city and that this hotel, in particular, represents but one among many in a series united under a common cipher. The fissures already exposed in its façade, however, indicate a different reality.



Figure 4.3. The closing doors confirm the hotel as part of an international brand and imply that this setting is closed off from outside influences. Source: *Nueve reinas*.

Later in the film, when the conmen exit the hotel in a rush, after the Spanish executive has paid Marcos and Juan for the stamps, the camera lingers on the glass façade of the hotel. The skyline of Buenos Aires, which the hotel entryway faces—itsself symbolic of the connection between the city and the hotel—, and the morning light of a new day reflects against the panes of glass united seamlessly along the building's exterior

(see fig. 13). This detail has far-reaching implications, as it suggests a break in the spatial monotony which the Hilton logo imposes, and situates the supposedly placeless hotel within the Argentine capital. Thus the hotel setting is not as separate from the city as it would seem, but rather reflects its urban surroundings. As with several scenes from *El aire*, the glass partition that intends to divide one social group or space from another instead turns out to be transparent, serving as a medium through which life in the city can be reflected and reflected upon. Instead of seeing a generic, global city, the viewer witnesses a reflection of Buenos Aires—cast onto the windowpane and, ostensibly, onto the movie screen—thereby connecting the hotel space metaphorically to the rest of the city and, by extension, to its past and traces of individual and collective memory.



Figure 4.4. Marcos stands in contemplation of the heist, wondering if he has fallen victim to a swindle, while the view contemplates the skyline of Buenos Aires. Source: *Nueve reinas*.

Movement of the conmen through the hotel, in an effort to further their heist, further weakens the divide between reality and artifice. In fact, the hotel adopts new, often unexpected dimensions with each zone entered. Although for much of the film their behavior in the hotel lobby must conform to the strict norms of order and predictability conveyed through this site, they undermine the seemingly rigid divide between the ultramodern hotel and the street in less conspicuous areas of the hotel. Juan smokes a

cigarette in the hotel basement, for example, just as he would have above ground, on the street. Likewise, when the two conmen approach the Spaniard's room to discuss their impending deal, the tight camera angle of their trip down the hall is at once reminiscent of their transit around the city and emblematic of the tension they feel in this moment. Even the hotel lobby—which had previously connoted order and the stability of perpetual motion—undermines its own pristine exterior when Valeria slaps Marcos there towards the end of the film, his punishment for having included a night with her in his dealings with the Spaniard, and Juan returns to the hotel to kiss her (see fig. 14). Thus, as uniform, antiseptic, and hermetically sealed off from the rest of the city as the hotel setting of *Nueve reinas* may seem, movement around this site wears away at its own artifice, revealing a place complicit in the crime. The hotel likewise inverts the civilization-barbarism dichotomy by casting doubt on the hotel space as a safeguard against what society deems undesirable and, within the Argentine context, by aligning this site metaphorically with themes of post-dictatorial corruption and deception.



Figure 4.5. Valeria, whom Juan has just kissed passionately, must now explain to her superior why she has just transgressed so openly the norms of the hotel lobby. Source: *Nueve reinas*.

Similarly, *El aire* departs from a setting of widespread uniformity and spatial interchangeability to expose, through movement, a vastly contrasting reality. Others have

already observed that *El aire* emphasizes movement; in fact, Eduardo Berg claims that transit, as a theme, recurs in all of Chejfec's works: "Los personajes de Chejfec, muchas veces, desprovistos de un lugar seguro y caracterizados por un nomadismo crónico, son sujetos desterritorializados que sólo fijan residencias transitorias" (4). *El aire*, like other works by the contemporary Argentine author, is one of urban itinerancy, in which the protagonist gives form to the faceless nomad of post-modern times. However, Barroso's wanderings around the city do more than just display transience as a sign of the times. They also assist in developing this setting, and although others have cited mass movement as a complement to spatial uniformity, I maintain that Barroso's movement around the city exposes specifically its expanding underbelly and the traces of memory concealed behind an increasingly fragile exterior. Thus Annelies Oeyen's observation that *El aire* parallels Barroso's corporal deterioration to the city's decadence and ultimate ruin—"en cuanto crecen el vacío, la inercia y la decadencia corporal en la vida de Barroso, también la ciudad se arruina y se esfuma," she writes—can be expanded to account for the protagonist's movement through the city (4). As he moves between his apartment building and the city that fans out just beyond its threshold, navigating alone its alleyways and side streets, the narrator discovers a cityscape unlike any he has seen previously. Urban ruins replace the uniform, generic buildings of the beginning of the novel, and uncover the scars of a traumatic recent past, still plottable along the urban landscape.

Despondent and desperate to locate his disappeared wife, whom he identifies only by her surname, Benavente, the protagonist leaves behind the comfort and monotony of his surroundings to scour the city. His efforts at finding his wife are futile, since she and



what she represents in namesake—the city’s name and its identity as a promising nation of immigrants—have vanished. Tellingly, as Barroso meanders from street corner to corner, in fruitless search of what he has lost, the cityscape evolves from spatial order and uniformity to a site of disorder that splinters under the crushing weight of poverty. With each step, he comes closer to the other, previously invisible version of Buenos Aires:

A medida que avanzaba por este sector marginal, el paisaje parecía desordenarse: la línea de edificación era irregular. Había sábanas tendidas delante de las fachadas, aceras rotas cuyas baldosas sostenían, a metros de su lugar original, asumiendo el papel de ruedas, autos deteriorados. (38)

While Barroso previously stood immobile, calculating the distance between buildings, figuring with exactitude the height and breadth of each, hoping to dissect an otherwise unremarkable environment, his present movement animates a sector of the city previously unperceived and unimagined by the protagonist, filtering its aesthetic of disorder through an acute sense of realism.

At one moment, the protagonist openly connects his movement through the city to his changed perspective of this urban landscape. “Andando ligero se tenía una impresión diferente del panorama usual,” the narrator observes of Barroso’s experience, which provides a contrasting version to the uniform and spatially repetitive landscape depicted earlier, when the protagonist was still in familiar territory. This note about the protagonist’s perspective also suggests that proximity to the changes occurring on the street allows for a break from his more habitual point of view. The urban panorama of before, as viewed from Barroso’s high-rise balcony, has given way to a rawer, sensorial version of the same cityscape—one in which ruins act metaphorically as reminders of a traumatic past. In that exact moment, Barroso wonders whether spatial and social

disorder have simply become more apparent, or if the city was simply ill-equipped to support change—in this case, its impending collapse: “el de desorden se ponía de manifiesto o, en todo caso, a la inversa, la geografía habitual no estaba preparada para soportar la premura sin riesgo de fragmentación, como si la prisa acelerara el tiempo, y con ello la disgregación de la ciudad” (61). Barroso relies on his sensitivity to detail to identify changes in the cityscape as he moves through this urban labyrinth; but, from his position on the street, the shape, magnitude, and cause of such changes remain as mysterious as his wife’s disappearance.

The fact that the catalyst for the city’s undoing—poverty—reveals itself to Barroso via newspaper headlines places further importance on movement as a key theme of the novel, since this mass medium conveys physical dissemination of information, as opposed to virtual or telephonic forms. What remains novel about this situation, however, is that these radical changes occur not among the outlying sectors of the city, but rather perched above the city—on the rooftops of its sky-scraping towers. Barroso experiences an inkling of this other city in the beginning of the novel, when he cannot identify where certain sounds are coming from, especially those emanating from the ascending staircase (14). The newspaper headline clarifies his confusion:

El subtítulo de la nota aclaraba ‘La tugurización de las azoteas’. Más abajo explicaba que muchos habitantes, ya que se veían obligados a residir en viviendas precarias porque carecían de medios para hacerlo en otras no-precarias, preferían vivir en ranchos levantados en las azoteas de las casas de la ciudad en lugar de construirlos en la Periferia... dado que evitaban así gastar en transporte el poco dinero que ganaban, y perder viajando el tiempo que les quedaba. (63)

In addition to Barroso’s movement, the fact that the headline itself announces the formation of elevated mini cities—‘Ciudades elevadas y ocultas,’ it reads—and its

photograph depicts an inverted version of urban sprawl, likewise undermines the relative uniformity of one city block to another, or what the narrator identifies in this same moment as “manzanas con rasgos más o menos semejantes... [y] el perfecto cuadrículado de las calles.” With this information now at his disposal, Barroso extends his acute perception of spatial inconsistencies to include the city’s inhabitants, observing the role they play in complicating an otherwise monotonous cityscape and the faulty dichotomy that has assigned civilization to the urban realm and barbarism to the countryside.

In particular, the markers of abject poverty upon which Barroso refocuses his perspective provide a rupture from the perpetual present of earlier in the novel. Previously, images of spatial uniformity compelled the protagonist to question the duration of the present and to seek subtle architectural inconsistencies. His trips around the city, in contrast, reveal spatial fragmentation and a newly forming web of precarious dwellings—at street and sky level—and, consequently, a growing concern for the future:

De acuerdo con las ropas que llevaban, los futuros moradores eran pobres. Barroso también podía distinguir los escasos bultos o paquetes que en muchos casos conformaban no sólo un magro equipaje sino más bien los únicos bienes tangibles. Hasta los chicos, escondidos a medias detrás de los padres, reflejaban la preocupación familiar frente a la incertidumbre del futuro. (72)

Radical changes occurring along the contours of the cityscape reveal a present weakened by thoughts of a precarious future, and burdened by the legacy of an uneven past. Thus, as a complement to undoing the implied safety and inalterability of spatial uniformity, Barroso’s interaction with the city beyond his front door ultimately jeopardizes the protection of an unchanging present.

With each step he takes, Barroso discovers a city less and less like the one photographed in his imagination—uniform and orderly— and encounters instead a

version of a city on the verge of total collapse. The protagonist discovers that even the economic system that undergirded society has been compromised. Once again, Barroso relies on textual information to confirm what he has already witnessed: people paying for goods and services with shards of glass instead of standard issued currency. He finally reads that the supermarket will only accept glass as a valid form of payment, a nod to the suddenly primitive conditions of the urban sector:

Una vez llegado al supermercado descubrió que en el caso de abonar con envases—el letrero que colgaba del techo era ominosamente despectivo: no decía pagar con botellas sino PAGAR CON VIDRIO, como si aquello que mucha gente llevaba careciera ya de categoría utilitaria alguna y sólo representara un valor material arbitrario. (79)

In this way, the collapse of the city finds an ominous parallel in the collapse of monetary currency and the disintegration of an entire economic system. Consequently, the people he observes while moving about the city—and even Barroso himself—must scavenge the streets of Buenos Aires in search of any form of advantage in this new economy, demonstrating the precariousness of city inhabitants and the monetary system that once helped to give their lives meaning.<sup>130</sup> Therefore, just as the seemingly homogenous, repetitive cityscape ultimately reveals the reality beyond its façade—or rather, above its façade, since the city’s periphery has become its new elevated center—the monetary system that once seemed so infallible has suddenly been reduced to its most primitive form.

The same ruinous fate awaits the rest of the city. Beyond the escalation and expansion of urban poverty, the cityscape of *El aire* experiences a transcendental fall

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<sup>130</sup> Similar to the city dwellers he observes, Barroso scours the streets in search of this new form of capital: “Pensó que serían las tres de la mañana; y la furia que sintió contra sí mismo no tuvo límites: toda la noche perdida, juntando botellas por la ciudad para terminar baldado sobre un umbral como si fuera un vagabundo” (172).

from grace—from a beacon of civilization to a pit of barbarism. Recalling themes common to the nineteenth-century trope, the narrator describes the fleeting divide between the civilized city and its more barbarous version according to a familiar chromatic register. Swaths of the city remain illuminated while pitch darkness shrouds the others; more metaphorically, the darkened areas have succumbed to barbarism:

Las dos ochavas que antecedían la penumbra parecían soportar un telón negro, invisible pero eficaz, más allá del cual la escasa luz de la lámpara que colgaba sobre la bocacalle de hecho no ingresaba. Había una línea definida pero intangible que dividía la penumbra de la zona iluminada; se veía a personas que de pronto emergían desde la masa oscura y personas en la cual de repente y sin mediaciones entraban, desapareciendo. (79)

A literal interpretation of this passage might suggest that the more quotidian manifestations of the city as civilization—features like roadways, sewer systems, and in this case, street lighting—remain absent from the marginal sectors of the metropolis, the product of disadvantage. More metaphorically, the fact that darkness enshrouds ever-expanding sectors of the city suggests that urban space itself no longer acts as a singular source of illumination: an unequivocal symbol of enlightenment and reason. Instead, the Buenos Aires of *El aire* reinterprets the dichotomy of its past—the one that held barbarism at bay from the city by relegating it to the expanses of the Argentine countryside—by now superimposing its periphery onto the city center.<sup>131</sup>

In general, movement can lead to the synchronization of space and time and to the relative uniformity of urban landscapes, as Sarlo and others have suggested. She writes:

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<sup>131</sup> Although Chejfec's urban scene verges on the phantasmagorical, Argentine anthropologist Néstor García-Canclini notes that this process often colors city life in Latin America: "En América Latina muchas veces observamos ciudades 'invadidas' por el campo, campesinos circulando aún en carros con caballos, usos de espacios urbanos que parecen rurales, como si nunca fuera a pasar un coche, es decir, intersecciones, entrelazamientos, que vuelven insuficiente o insatisfactoria esa definición de lo urbano por oposición con lo rural" (59). The confluence between urban and rural spaces reveals with greater clarity the precariousness of the original dichotomy.

“El tiempo de la ciudad y el del espacio campesino, que estuvieron separados por distancias que el ferrocarril, los diarios y los libros reducían semanalmente, ahora son tiempos sincronizados” (109). Nevertheless, *El aire* interprets this phenomenon literally by transplanting the countryside, and its connotations of barbarism, to the cityscape until the two are virtually indistinguishable and the traditional dichotomy is inverted. As the novel progresses, movement around the city accelerates this process and exposes, with increasing clarity, the “pampaneization” of the cityscape, rather than its homogenization. In fact, by the end of the novel, urban residents escape the hostile city, in search of a better life in the country: “los sucesivos contingentes de pobladores... acabañan dispersándose por el campo, si no a la búsqueda de una ventura incierta, en todo caso con la intención de escapar el oprobio, de la ominosa hostilidad de la ciudad” (187). Before the city meets this final, barbarous destiny, thereby forever vanquishing Sarmiento’s Manichean vision of reality, Barroso’s transit around the city brings into focus the literal and metaphorical ruins that dot this landscape and its transition from civilization to barbarism.

Thus, the appearance of ruins in *El aire* simply extends the process which movement around the city has already begun—to undermine spatial uniformity and connect the setting to Argentina’s recent past and collective memory by rewriting civilization vs. barbarism according to the contemporary cityscape. In particular, ruins symbolize the urban fallout of the post-dictatorship period, as couched between the end of the dictatorship and the 2001 bank crisis, and its mourning process. Similarly, they stand in stark contrast to the modern, orderly, and uniform cityscape; its embedded connotations of modernization; and in its extreme, its implications of collective oblivion.

To accommodate this trend, Avelar rarifies his observation that allegory provides the foundation for post-dictatorial literary expression by identifying the ruin as the symbol *par excellence* of the past and memory. “These texts thus carry the seeds of a messianic energy, which, like the Benjaminian angel of history, looks back at the pile of debris, ruins, and defeats of the past in an effort to redeem them, being at the same time pushed forward by the forces of ‘progress’ and ‘modernization,’” he writes about contemporary literature of the Southern Cone (3).<sup>132</sup> Therefore, ruins do more than suggest the demise of the city; they also represent the materialization of the past and act as palimpsests of memory throughout the city, even one as eerie and yet familiar as that of Barroso’s Buenos Aires.<sup>133</sup>

As a society’s spatial leftovers and the remnants of an obsolete past, ruins also indicate waste. Accordingly, ruins—especially modern ruins, those left behind with the ebbing of industry—share an association with the peripheral zones of a city. The outer rings of a city and its ruins stand in contrast to the city center, where the latter is a desirable location and the former has become, in Trigg’s words, “expendable.” Since the city center often represents economic vitality and, according to traditional civilization, “places which deviate from the activity of the center—not least suburbia, but also wastelands—are thought of as peripheral, even expendable.... A place bereft of people is

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<sup>132</sup> In the introduction to their edited volume on ruins in Latin America, Michael Lazzara and Vicki Unruh describe ruins accordingly: “A central premise is that the ruin—as a merger of past, present, and future, and as a material embodiment of change—offers a fertile locale for competing cultural stores about historical events, political projects, and the construction of communities” (1). Thus, in addition to complicating an otherwise uniform landscape, ruins create a sense of place by acting as a palimpsest of the past.

<sup>133</sup> Jean Franco parallels ruins to social and spatial fragmentation, and suggests that each exists because of the modern cityscape: “the signs of the modernist city have become completely scrambled; memories are insecure as city centers disappear or are remodeled and as populations move further into the suburbs. And since the megalopolis cannot be imagined as a totality, community, identity, and subjectivity have had to be rethought or refashioned from fragments and ruins” (190). In contrast to what she has written, I align myself with Avelar’s interpretation that ruins act as the materialization of memory and allegorically tether a city to its past.

often viewed as deficient, wanting, lacking, and thus a ‘waste,’” the philosopher maintains (“Architecture” 9). Ruins indicate undesirability and, in this case, residual memories of a past through to have been suppressed.<sup>134</sup> Therefore, similar to Bauman’s observations about modern transience and its resulting accumulation of waste, ruins return to memory what society has forgotten or cycled through already by acting as allegorically charged debris.<sup>135</sup>

As Barroso’s perception of the city evolves from encountering rooftop shantytowns to discovering urban ruins—a byproduct of the rapidly encroaching countryside—the narrator identifies the rubble not as the result of a natural or manmade catastrophe, but as waste. The protagonist contemplates the city in ruins for the first time in a published collection of photographs, which call to mind Barroso’s own realistic point of view. Words like *restos* (remains) and *renuncia* (renunciation) associate the images and the city they capture with thoughts of waste:

Parecían fotografías superpuestas, a franjas verticales, que representaban los restos de una ciudad o... las ruinas del campo; era sin embargo una sola fotografía reproducida en diferentes copias. Restos y ruinas no provenían de catástrofe alguna, sino tanto de la renuncia humana como del paso del tiempo: o sea, de la misma actividad de la gente mantenida con ignorancia día tras día.  
(90)

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<sup>134</sup> Chejfec notes that humans themselves are often treated as forms of waste: “los cirujas son invisibles, lo que la gente prefiere no ver, y aparte son redundante, el exceso inútil de su trabajo es directamente proporcional a su propia necesidad: como exhalación incógnita de la villa, cargan con lo que de todos modos se llevará el camión de la basura” (150).

<sup>135</sup> Bauman asserts that modern society prefers the transient over the durable: “it is the mind-boggling speed of circulation, of recycling, ageing, dumping and replacement which brings profit today—not the durability and lasting reliability of the product. In a remarkable reversal of the millennia-long tradition, it is the high and mighty of the day who resent and shun the durable and cherish the transient, while it is those at the bottom of the heap who... desperately struggle to force their flimsy and paltry, transient possessions to last longer and render durable services” (14). Ruins, because they often cannot be discarded easily, stand in silent testimony to society’s penchant for waste.



The photographs—which themselves appear in excess, since what first appears to be many different images is only one shot reproduced many times—reveal with clarity those aspects of the landscape which might otherwise go unnoticed. In this way, these images of the ruins act as a *memento mori*, reminding city dwellers not only of the relentless passage of time, in contrast to the stagnant banality of everyday life, but also of the persistence of memory.

These ruins shock Barroso and the reader by standing in stark opposition to earlier depictions of a uniform cityscape. Likewise, these signs of urban decay undermine the city as a perpetual present and expose the alacrity with which the former pillars of this urban landscape have fallen in ruin. Unlike the rest of the city, ruins “remain in and of time,” as Trigg maintains (“Architecture” 2).<sup>136</sup> Depictions of this ruinous underbelly are shocking for this reason and because that which had remained separate previously—as society’s unwanted and unused remnants of the past—now encroaches upon the city center. The city’s growing marginal sector takes advantage of this mysterious, widespread decay by seeking shelter in the ruins. The narrator observes of this trend: “Los nuevos pobladores estaban inclinados a ocupar terrenos que tuvieran el máximo de ventajas posible en cuanto a comunicación y servicios, y en este sentido preferían las zonas del casco urbano medio demolidas” (135). Instead of remaining, like the ruins, among the peripheral areas of the city, the new urban dwellers—to whom the narrator never refers as “citizens”—permeate and redefine its very core.

As a complement, the narrator’s first eyewitness account of this process reveals that urban ruins now tangle with everyday life:

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<sup>136</sup> Trigg writes: “Modern ruins, by contrast, such as those we find beneath the underbelly of the city and on the fringes of suburbia, maintain the ability to startle us. The reason for this is because these ruins, with their acrid smells and still rotting wallpaper, remain in and of time” (2).

Al llegar al borde de la zona de ruinas vio un nuevo gentío, una segunda multitud de personas estaba jugando al fútbol a lo largo de un territorio sin término. Las piedras, las columnas o las medianeras destruidas hacían las veces de arcos. En el interior de lo que habían sido habitaciones, niños de corta edad hacían sus primeras armas en la destreza de dominar el balón, como recordó Barroso que ese decía en su juventud. (121)

Ruins that would otherwise serve as somber reminders of time and decay, in a city that had appeared to shun such variegation, act now as sites of residence and leisure. Appropriately, upon observing the children of this zone playing soccer among the rubble—demolished archways and pillars as their goalposts—Barroso’s astonishment gives way to memory, as he recalls memories of his own childhood and the games he used to play. As remnants of the past and as mnemonic devices, the ruins introduce elements of the unplanned and the unknown to a carefully planned and, in many ways, generic environment. Therefore, the ruins themselves and their contrast to the modern cityscape provide an element of shock in the novel, as well as their proximity to daily life, the city center, and their ability to prompt, as Avelar would call it, untimely recall.

From within the ruins, where daily life continues to emerge as a theme in the novel, influenced, no doubt, by this deteriorating landscape, quotidian objects become mnemonic devices. Everyday domestic effects, exhibiting no real use value among the high-rise shanty towns and dilapidated ruins that dot the city, become ruins of a past life—a life now in ruin. The narrator observes, closing in on the city’s newest trend in urban living:

Podría ser habitual el uso de una licuadora en las casas, sin embargo allí, en equilibrio inestable sobre alguna caja de cartón y recortada contra el horizonte, confirmaba, previsiblemente, estar en el sitio equivocado. Así, los pobladores acarreaban en su nomadismo artefactos ahora inútiles como si fueran rastros, recuerdos de un mayor bienestar antiguo. (137)

The narrator's speculation, earlier in the novel, that inhabitants of the rooftop shanty towns were previously middle-class city dwellers—perhaps even former tenants of the apartment building below—finds confirmation in this passage. Items like a blender, upon which the narrator focuses in this case, appear out of place rather than wholly anachronistic; and yet, serve as synecdochic reminders of a past that no longer bears meaning on the present, except through memory. Therefore, quotidian household items now cluttering the precarious shantytown dwellings become ruin-like themselves: artifacts, temporal fissures in an otherwise perpetual present.

*El aire*'s ruins speak, metaphorically, not only to economic devastation—as an ominous precursor to the 2000 bank crisis—but also the country's dark past of military dictatorship. This recent stain in Argentine history manifests itself in various ways and at distinct moments throughout the novel: in the wife's mysterious and sudden disappearance, and Barroso's fruitless search for her; in the divisive economic reforms that further separate those who have something from those nothing at all; in the narrator's direct reference to military violence: “A Barroso le habían resultado familiares las descripciones de las matanzas cometidas por los militares de ese país” (132). Perhaps the most latent gesture to this period and its legacy can be found in the city itself—its ruins—and its descent into hostile barbarism.

Curiously enough, the narrator connects present-day urban transformation in the novel with the dictatorship by drawing on a metaphor common to this period. The military regimes that came to power throughout the Southern Cone in the early and mid-1970s routinely justified their abuse of power metaphorically, as an ongoing and aggressive campaign against *el cáncer marxista*. The implications of this metaphor, it

was hoped, would rally the troops around a shared cause: to defeat the disease and return the body to good health. In literal terms, this meant to rid the body public and politic of socialist influences. Therefore, that the narrator refers to the post-dictatorial cityscape as being in a state of “remission” is not coincidental (159, 172). Instead, Argentine society and its capital city, as portrayed in *El aire*, still experience the effects of this battle, even during its momentary remission.

The narrator uses this word in its literal sense, to describe the process by which the countryside overtakes the city: “De manera literal, el campo avanzaba sobre Buenos Aires. De este modo, con la *remisión* de la ciudad, el espacio... se estaba desvaneciendo como el material en suspensión producido por las topadoras” (159, emphasis mine). The former city and its spaces, symbols, and even its monetary system, recede as the periphery swiftly encroaches. At a later moment, the narrator evokes its more figurative interpretation: as a city in remission from a previous illness. After noting that the terrace shantytowns remain beyond view from street level, the narrator remarks that other signs of deterioration do remain plainly visible: “Sí había algunos signos de degradación, pero podía advertir que eran los usuales... aquellos a partir de los cuales la gente no olvidaría que habitaba una ciudad en remisión” (172). These signs of structural and social wreckage stand as reminders that this city has not yet cured itself of its violent history. The ruins, tied as they are to memory and the past, remind the urban dweller that the city in fact recedes and that, more figuratively, it has entered a state of remission between its past and future. Therefore, although the narrator worries that the city will soon find itself bereft of identifiable landmarks, leaving city dwellers disconnected from their memories and “incapaz de reconocer la ciudad,” the retreat of the city and the rubble left behind

serve as constant reminders—scars, even—of a society still recovering from its past (159).

Although it might seem counterintuitive, I argue that the absence of ruins, specifically as portrayed in Bielinski's *Nueve reinas*, equally roots this setting in memory. In their edited volume on ruins in Latin America, Lazzara and Unruh maintain that a society's treatment of ruins is just as evocative as the ruins themselves. "Equally important is the idea that what a human group does with its ruins—maintain them in disarray, restore them, transport them to alternative sites, linger on them with pause, or banish them from view—unleashes compelling social, ethical, or political consequences for the present and the future," they write in the introduction to their work (1). Therefore, the fact that the film takes place primarily in the rehabilitated city port—the ultra-posh Puerto Madero district, an urban wasteland transformed into the Argentine capital's beacon of international tourism—is as allegorical of the city's buried past as are other forms of ruins left behind.

In fact, the setting of Bielinski's *Nueve reinas* is less anonymous than others have interpreted previously. Instead, the Puerto Madero sector evokes a new phase in the life of this city and an urban planning model centered squarely in this country's sweeping neoliberal reforms of the mid 1980s and 90s. Thus, although the film intentionally skirts recognizable landmarks commonly associated with *porteño* identity and national history—the Casa Rosada, Plaza de Mayo, and the monolithic Avenida de 9 de Julio, which would surely orient the *bonarense* and tourist alike—it is not just to portray a globalized city, set on currying favor among international capitalists and courting tourism dollars. Rather, the film captures those areas of the capital city most emblematic of

international capital and commerce, and in the process, establishes a landscape that appears, at first, to oppose that of *El aire*, as a city in which ruins would seem not to exist.<sup>137</sup>

In his writings on the phenomenology of ruins and decay, Trigg maintains that repurposed ruins, among which the Puerto Madero could be included, lose some of their ability to shock onlookers and prompt memories of the past. “In the worst examples, commoditized ruins, delimited and guarded, are presented as an alternative to clean space. Thereafter, the ruin becomes a novelty as an object that startles us by simultaneously maintaining a distance and by having a legitimate purpose,” he maintains (*Aesthetics* 241). In the case of Puerto Madero, discussions of either demolishing or urbanizing the inactive port began as early as 1926, after construction of the new port, or *Puerto Nuevo*, concluded a year earlier. Plans for the riverfront space, which opens onto the city’s financial district, always revolved around commercial development, with some of the most influential minds of the time considering the site to be the Argentine capital’s entryway to the future.<sup>138</sup> Only in the late 1980s, with the election of Carlos Menem, a president now more famous for his pro-market reforms than for his past as an outspoken

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<sup>137</sup> David Keeling writes in his assessment of the Puerto Madero project: “Buenos Aires, Argentina, is an excellent exemplar of urban landscape change in Latin America driven by conditions of globalization. With the emergence of globalization both as an ideology and as a process in Argentina beginning in the later 1980s, attention began to turn towards more integrative urban planning and to development strategies designed to attract international capital and capitalists” (128). That *Nueve reinas* takes place in this district is at once suggestive of blanket globalization and of the Argentine post-dictatorship era.

<sup>138</sup> The French architect and urban planner, LeCorbusier, is said to have marveled at the space and its potential, according to former Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach: “The eminent French urban planner Le Corbusier recommended after a 1929 visit to Buenos Aires that only strong and enforceable land-use and development laws could rescue Puerto Madero from decay. His plan called for the restoration of the riverfront as a symbol of the city’s future and for the construction of an artificial island—the Cité des Affaires—with five skyscrapers” (133). This kind of counsel was common from LeCorbusier, whose controversial designs for the city of Algiers cemented his vision of the ideal cityscape as thoroughly modern in both style and functionality.

Peronist, did city officials finally organize the Puerto Madero redevelopment project.<sup>139</sup> From that moment on, an important swath of urban real estate, which had fallen on disrepair and decay—and had become one of the city’s most dangerous and crime-ridden areas—would come to represent what former Minister of the Interior, Carlos Corach, has called “the new plan that defines the future city... the road to follow to achieve a destiny of progress and it is the new configuration of urban space that emphasizes the public good” (13). In this way, the main setting of *Nueve reinas* at once evokes an international space—one shaped through globalization—and a landscape deeply embedded in the Argentine experience, particularly the ebbs and flows of its relationship to commerce.

Thus, although Trigg maintains that rehabilitated ruins only masquerade as meaningful artifacts, which their new use-value inevitably undermines, the Puerto Madero district demonstrates how the absence of ruins remains connected to the past, most of all metaphorically. As much as actually existing urban ruins and those portrayed fictionally in *El aire* evoke the past and memory, the primary setting of *Nueve reinas* reminds the viewer of this country’s recent past and ambitions for the future it outlined during the post-dictatorship period. Beyond metaphor, the Port does maintain some tangible references to its past as an active port: now-obsolete cranes dot the waterfront, as do warehouses and other markers of this city’s maritime and industrial heritage. These features testify to one of the major linchpins of the Puerto Madero project: to preserve as many of the site’s existing historical attributes as possible.<sup>140</sup> One could argue, however,

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<sup>139</sup> Corach also reveals that that same year, government officials, including the mayor and the president of the city’s Urban Planning Council, created the Old Puerto Madero Corporation, or *Corporación Antiguo Puerto Madero*, to oversee the rehabilitation of the defunct port. The Municipality of Barcelona, a city that had already successfully revitalized its waterfront, took the helm in developing a master plan for the project’s design (134).

<sup>140</sup> In their work on waterfront revitalization, Ann Breen and Dick Rigby maintain that historic preservation was integral to the Puerto Madero design project: “Early on the *Corporación* took a crucial step in insuring

that the impetus behind historic preservation had more to do with capital gains—and the ever-growing tourism industry—than with maintaining heritage for its sake.<sup>141</sup> Therefore, although these vestiges do serve as palimpsests of the past in general, they speak more clearly to the 1990s surge in urban preservation that repurposed the ruins of Buenos Aires.

In this way, the cityscape beyond the hotel also becomes part of the ongoing heist—literally, the conmen in action, and figuratively, the reality-artifice dichotomy developed throughout the film. The setting suggests at once that revitalization efforts have not and cannot rid this space entirely of its prior seediness and that, as a metaphor for the post-dictatorial city, widespread corruption ultimately mars visions of future success and prosperity. Unlike shots of other city sectors, more intent on capturing Juan and Marcos than the cityscape itself, the camera captures much of the length and width of the Puerto Madero district, as the conmen attempt desperately to preserve what they still believe is the perfect heist. Upon leaving the hotel, after a meeting in which they successfully convince the Spaniard to purchase the stamps, the man who had just verified the worth of the collection attempts to extort the conmen. This shakedown within a shakedown underscores not the reputability or security of the Puerto Madero district, as planners of this zone might have hoped, but rather its own complicity in corruption and shady business dealings. The abundance of ruins in *El aire* parallels the absence of ruins in *Nueve reinas*, as both call to mind similarly the precariousness of Argentina's post-

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the preservation of the buildings by having the warehouses, wharves and docks declared an 'Area of Patrimonial Protection'" (131).

<sup>141</sup> While the reasoning behind such efforts remains beyond the scope of this dissertation, Breen and Rigby credit cultural tourism for a rise in protecting historic buildings under the law: "The trend toward cultural tourism has caused more than one city to take a second look at the economic potential inherent in the preservation and restoration of their historic buildings and landscapes" (17).



dictatorial quest to modernize and, when read as a prescient works, the city's eventual fall from grace.

The subsequent theft of the stamps, in broad daylight, along one of the Puerto Madero walking paths, only further reveals the corruptibility of this place. The conmen, momentarily dumbfounded from having just been swindled, suddenly find themselves in hot pursuit of a pair of thieves who, from a motorcycle, have just swiped the stamps from a completely unsuspecting Marcos. As they chase the pair of thieves, a mirror image of the conmen themselves, the camera firmly establishes the Puerto Madero district as their setting. In fact, the camera follows the getaway motorcycle as it nears the river—one bank flanked with revitalized warehouses and the other with modern high-rises; distant cranes appear in the center of the frame (see fig. 15). Likewise, the motorcycle stops abruptly before running into a chain-link fence, which would normally cordon off the flow of pedestrian traffic. A sign establishing this zone of the city as the Puerto Madero district displays itself prominently in the background, thereby encasing the drivers (see fig. 16). In this way, filmic representations of petty crime, corruption, and the larger-scale equivalents they portray enmesh with the fabric of this zone. Thus *Nueve reinas* does more than simply highlight an international, seemingly uniform sector of the city; instead, the film reinterprets this highly symbolic place, easily identifiable among locals and within the Argentine post-dictatorship, as a place still connected to its recent past.



Figures 4.6 and 4.7 capture a high-speed chase between the comen and the thieves who have stolen their stamps. In the process of adding another layer to the heist, the film stresses visually the Puerto Madero setting. Source: *Nueve reinas*.

In this way, both the appearance of ruins and their absence from the cityscape gesture metaphorically to Argentina's post-dictatorship period in the two works I have analyzed in this chapter. If, as Chejfec has maintained, certain characteristics of the contemporary urban experience remain invisible to city dwellers, ruins and movement among them, *El aire* and *Nueve reinas* display these features prominently by establishing them as the object of focus and by making them inseparable from the telling of the story. Consequently, the act of movement and its connection to storytelling in these post-dictatorial works ultimately makes visible the previously invisible. Through narratives of urban transit, these works depict landscapes in which memory continues to appear through traces, ruins, and the absence of ruins, resulting in a traceable rewriting of the cityscape.

## CHAPTER 5

### **Beyond the Memorial: Punta Carretas Shopping Center and the Spatial Politics of Memory**

Previous chapters of this study have explored the intersection of place and memory as displayed in contemporary Southern Cone literature and film, to examine how memory—particularly that of the 1970s dictatorships—continues to influence quotidian places and practices in these South American nations. The present chapter looks beyond the erection of memorials and other officially sanctioned sites of memory, and provides the keystone for this dissertation’s overarching argument by shifting its theoretical application to a physical place: Uruguay’s premier Punta Carretas Shopping Center in Montevideo. By studying the site itself—not just its representation—and the events involved in its conversion from a prison to a high-end shopping mall, this discussion will reveal that Punta Carretas Shopping Center remains an indelible fixture of Montevideo’s memroyscape, despite never having been designated as an official site of commemoration.

To begin, for as incongruous as they might seem, the site’s history as a symbol of both Uruguayan modernity and infamy continues to imprint the newly repurposed Punta Carretas Shopping Center, thereby securing its location among the annals of popular memory. As a result, tangible remnants of this past—the original façade, watch tower, and retaining walls, among other features—and attempts to preserve them also help bridge the gap between the past and present, memory and oblivion (see fig. 17). Finally, more than just a nod to consumer culture, Punta Carretas Shopping Center yields insight into designs for a more inclusive, democratic cityscape, popular among urban planners

and municipal leaders in the years following the 1973 military dictatorship. In short, these factors propose a confluence between the present and the past, and designate Punta Carretas Shopping Center as a place that continues to create and sustain memories still linked to this country's recent history. Traces of memory both tangible and intangible offset the cultural amnesia often associated with the post-dictatorial Southern Cone and suggest that Punta Carretas Shopping Center maintains a sense of place and memory within the city, demonstrating that even everyday sites can act as places of remembrance: taking memory beyond the memorial.



Figure 5.1. The original façade of the penitentiary now serves as the main entrance to Punta Carretas Shopping Center. Source: author's photograph.

Somewhat paradoxically, from a more theoretical perspective, the proliferation of memory discourses over the last twenty years has inspired many scholars, including Pierre Nora, to correlate an increase in commemorative practices with what the historian

interprets as an ever-widening gulf between memory and modern everyday lifestyles.<sup>142</sup> Discussions and expressions of memory have likewise been prevalent among countries of the Spanish-speaking Southern Cone, although not necessarily resulting from memory's perceived incongruity to quotidian experience.<sup>143</sup> Rather, Andreas Huyssen maintains that a history of institutionalized violence and its repression during this region's most recent dictatorships have prompted efforts to memorialize this traumatic past, not the waning impact of memory on place and daily practices.<sup>144</sup> The dictatorship era cemented memory as the keystone of everyday life during the post-dictatorship, making it more than just a calculated event, removed entirely from daily pursuits. Interest in memory—either through memorialization projects or human rights and other social justice campaigns—has resonated during the post-dictatorship era in the Southern Cone and become virtually indistinguishable from these countries' transition from authoritarian governance to democracy.

In fact, Uruguayan critic and National Director of Culture Hugo Achugar argues that memory remains central to debates about this country's post-dictatorship experience

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<sup>142</sup> Pierre Nora's significant contribution to the study of memory proposes that modern life no longer relies on memory as a basis for social institutions and traditions. "Societies based on memory are no more: the institutions that once transmitted values from generation to generation—churches, schools, families, governments—have ceased to function as they once did," he writes (2). As a result, designated places of memory (*lieux de mémoire*) play an increasingly important role in everyday life and space as a way of replacing more spontaneous forms of memory expression. Nora's concept of 'place of memory' encompasses but is not limited to the creation of archives, memorial celebrations, and commemorative sites. Andreas Huyssen draws in Nora's work when he notes similarly the impact of modern lifestyles on memory: "The undisputed waning of history and historical consciousness, the lament about political, social, and cultural amnesia, and the various discourses, celebratory or apocalyptic, about *posthistoire* have been accompanied in the past decade and a half about memory in the cultural, social, and natural sciences" (*Twilight Memories* 5).

<sup>143</sup> An extensive body of scholarship on the post-dictatorial Southern Cone does analyze the repression of memory during and following the dictatorship. See Francine Masiello's *The Art of Transition: Latin American Culture and Neoliberal Crisis* (2001) and Nelly Richard's *Cultural Residues: Chile in Transition* (2004) as examples.

<sup>144</sup> Huyssen creates an addendum to this thesis to account for the Southern Cone experience as well as other regions of the world working through a traumatic past. The theorist writes: "the culture of memory are linked, in many parts of the world, to processes of democratization and struggles for human rights... trying to heal the wounds inflicted in the past" (*Present Pasts* 27).

and its future goals. He focuses specifically on the period between the dictatorship's end and Uruguay's inclusion in the Mercosur in the early 1990s when he writes: "El tema de la memoria es central en el debate que, en la sociedad uruguaya y por razones propias, se abre con la década de los ochenta. Por un lado, por el trauma de la dictadura y el proceso de elaboración de dicho trauma durante la llamada 'posdictadura' y por otro, por la integración regional del Mercosur" ("El lugar" 192).<sup>145</sup> In the years following the dictatorship, memory of this trauma has been as integral to exploring and memorializing the recent past as it has been to influencing the future, namely these country's evolving political economies, experience with democracy, and creation of new memoryscapes. With this in mind, as Achugar indicates, memory continues to shape the physical, imagined, and spatial landscapes of Uruguay and other countries of the southernmost region of South America.

Despite recognizing the significant role memory continues to play, especially in post-traumatic environments, scholarship on the cultural, social, and spatial dimensions of remembering has remained narrowly focused on the creation and nature of memorials. For example, Huyssen maintains that Argentina's urban memory park—the *Parque de la memoria* in Buenos Aires—emblemizes this persistence of memory: its connection not to vacuous traditions or removed places, but to society's struggle to remember. Other theorists from Latin America and around the world have also designated memorial spaces as the exclusive focus of their studies on spatialized memory (Young, 1993; Jelin and

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<sup>145</sup> In another work of his, Achugar frames the post-dictatorship around the *Ley de la caducidad* debate: "Four years after the reinstatement of democracy, in order to block amnesty for human rights violators, the country held a referendum against the *Ley de Caducidad* of 1989, which had imposed a statute of limitations on prosecutors for such crimes" (200). Referendums such as this underscore the importance of memory to the post-dictatorial period, particularly to efforts by the social justice and human rights community.

Langland, 2003). Even Achugar, in addition to underscoring the role of memory in post-dictatorial Uruguay, maintains that memorial sites provide society with a necessary link—or “*clave*,” in his words—between the past, present, and future (192). He writes: “memoria, comunidad y relato o preservación del pasado han estado ligados desde siempre en la construcción de monumentos” (“El lugar” 198).<sup>146</sup>

Yet, since memory is not indigenous to place, memorial sites only become landmarks of memory through the practices and procedures involved in their creation and with giving them significance: the events and stories that convert them from abstract space to socially meaningful place.<sup>147</sup> In their work on commemorative practices in Argentina, Elizabeth Jelin and Victoria Langland theorize that memorial sites become significant places of memory through the creative and often political work involved in their creation and designation as repositories of memory: “construir monumentos, marcar espacios, respetar y conservar ruinas, son procesos que se desarrollan en el tiempo, que implican luchas sociales, y que producen (o fracasan en producir) esta semantización de los espacios materiales” (4). If this is the case, and memory is linked more closely to socially meaningful events, practices, and history than to space itself, memory becomes less about the memorial and more about the occurrences that meaningfully connect that

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<sup>146</sup> Uruguay’s Memorial to the Disappeared, or *Memorial a los desaparecidos*, is located in a remote corner of the Vaz Ferreira Park. Although the site was designed as a place of collective memory, the memorial is disconnected from the daily lives of most Montevideans. Fernando de Sierra writes about the Vaz Ferreira Park, “Es un parque no acondicionado para el tránsito peatonal,” and about the memorial site, “el sitio mantiene privacidad y vista al mar como referencia lejana” (178, 181). These observations underscore that some memorial sites actually reinforce forgetting over remembering, by cordoning off expressions of personal and collective memory from the practices of everyday life.

<sup>147</sup> In his analysis of Holocaust memorials, James Young writes: “By themselves, monuments are of little value, mere stones in the landscape. But as part of a nation’s rites or the objects of a people’s national pilgrimage, they are invested with national soul and memory” (2).

place to its surroundings and the past.<sup>148</sup> Thus the cultural politics involved in their creation or preservation can commit to memory even those sites not officially sanctioned as places of remembrance, thereby giving memory a place beyond the memorial.<sup>149</sup>

The ability of cultural and political practices to imprint memory to place reveals itself clearly through Montevideo, Uruguay's Punta Carretas Shopping Center. However, critics of the Center have focused only on its most recent transformation—from a prison to a shopping center—which they claim obscures memory of this site first as a penitentiary and then, more controversially, as a detention center during the country's 1973 dictatorship (Achugar, 2000; Martínez, 2004; Ruetalo, 2008). Likewise, its detractors propose that the site's current embodiment as a center of commerce undermines efforts to construct a more democratic city following 12 years of dictatorial governance. They argue, in general, that the rehabilitated site represents Uruguay's embrace of modernity and free-market capitalism at the expense of a meaningful connection between the past and the present.<sup>150</sup>

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<sup>148</sup> In his work on the phenomenology of memory and ruins, philosopher Dylan Trigg writes: "a qualitative property inherent in the monument does not make it memorable, but rather the events that contextually surround the monument which, in turn, animate the monument. What distinguishes a monument from an inert mass of material is the possibility of lived experience being entangled with it" (60).

<sup>149</sup> Rebecca Biron introduces her edited volume on Latin American urbanism by maintaining that urban space must be understood as the confluence of many influences: "Approaching cities as sources of cultural information requires us to recognize their simultaneous status as elaborate physical spaces, economic systems, collective as well as individual experiences, communities, sites of alienation, zones of social conflict, and dreams (both idealistic and apocalyptic) of modernization and globalization" (3). Similarly, the city also becomes a mnemonic entity, as the staging ground for the expression and practice of memory.

<sup>150</sup> Curiously enough, Punta Carretas was not the only former prison renovated and repurposed during the post-dictatorship. The Miguelete Penitentiary, inaugurated in 1888, also closed its doors in 1986 and reopened in 1988 as the *Centro de Diseño Industrial*. More recently, under President José Mujica, himself a former Tupamaro and 14-year political prisoner, a wing of the building has been designated as a cultural center for contemporary art. An executive announcement on July 27<sup>th</sup>, 2010, described the transformation as an urban palimpsest, or *palimpsesto urbano*, signaling a celebration of art and culture. In his new role as *Director Nacional de Cultura*, Hugo Achugar stressed the importance of protecting the space from international interests and envisioned a similar future for other prisons. "Qué mejor destino que imaginar que en el futuro, todas las cárceles viejas y todas las cárceles futuras a construir tengan como destino final convertirse en centros culturales, no en lo que ahora son," he commented in the announcement, making implicit reference to Punta Carretas. This example from the present illustrates to what extent Achugar, and



Achugar has been vociferous in defending this position, since he believes that Punta Carretas Shopping Center represents an attempt to erase the past:

Punta Carretas representa... un escenario donde la historia ha sido borrada, demolida o reconstruida de un modo eficiente o al menos favorable a los designios del discurso hegemónico -político, turístico y cultural- y de la lógica del mercado que aspira a representar sus deseos y a imponer sus representaciones al conjunto del país. (“Territorios y memorias” 9)

Similarly, Victoria Ruetalo proposes that Punta Carretas, in its current form, “bears witness to underlying economic motives that continue to push forward similar policies in the neoliberal post-dictatorship era” (40). Her argument that the site allegorizes Uruguay’s recent past and step toward the future is compelling.<sup>151</sup> Even as a penitentiary in the early 1900s, Punta Carretas stood as a beacon of modernity for the ever-prosperous and expanding South American capital. As a shopping mall almost a century later, it came to embody similar aspirations of economic gain and growth—not coincidentally at the same time that Uruguay joined the world and regional marketplace.<sup>152</sup> The country’s adoption of neo-liberal reforms both during and following the dictatorship, and its inclusion in the Mercosur some nine years later, make the commercial center a fitting symbol of Uruguay’s transition from state-sponsored interpretations of progress to neo-liberal reform.

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other theorists of his school, take issue with capitalism than with the refurbishment of former prisons. This chapter will argue that even a shopping mall, and especially a mall as rooted in the past as Punta Carretas, can earn the title of urban palimpsest.

<sup>151</sup> Ruetalo draws on Walter Benjamin’s concept of allegory as the foundation of her argument: “allegories are, in the realm of thoughts, what ruins are in the realm of things” (qtd. in Ruetalo, 42). Since Punta Carretas itself is a palimpsest of the past, its very existence yields insight into Uruguay’s history as well as its sense of mourning.

<sup>152</sup> In his work on the subject, Hugo Achugar suggests that Punta Carretas Shopping Center symbolizes an increasingly uniform form of culture that resulting from the international marketplace, and more specifically, Uruguay’s inclusion in the newly formed Mercosur trade bloc of Southern Cone nations. He writes: “En el marco del proyecto de un Uruguay moderno que busca su nueva función histórica en el proceso de integración del Mercosur, el discurso hegemónico promueve una versión edénica del país. El Punta Carretas Shopping forma parte de esa edenización del país a la que aspira el discurso modernizador y ‘pacificador’ al presentarse como un espacio ‘seguro’ en que la antigua violencia ha sido erradicada” (9).

At the same time, Ruetalo interprets Punta Carretas Shopping Center as emblematic of collective oblivion and thinly veiled efforts to repress the more insidious aspects of Uruguay's recent past. The cultural theorist juxtaposes the building's transformation with what she views as the erasure of memory:

Its history recounts how at this crucial juncture in 1991, when the building was sold for renovation, the nation—more specifically, the state—was not ready to face the horrific events of the recent past and opted to leap into the construction of a privately funded consumer's utopia, one that consciously meant the erasure of that memory. (43)

Although her theoretical scope differs somewhat, Uruguayan architect Graciela Martínez corroborates Ruetalo's position and suggests that Punta Carretas Shopping Center undermines the past by celebrating consumerism and spatial uniformity, phenomena that have transformed similarly the surrounding neighborhood and namesake to the shopping mall. Martínez maintains that converting Punta Carretas Penitentiary into a commercial center has subsequently transformed its neighborhood into a non-place devoid of local influences, a sense of belonging, or meaningful ties to the past.<sup>153</sup> Thus, similar to Ruetalo, Martínez proposes that Punta Carretas Shopping Center levels its surrounding urban terrain, a process which, on a global scale, renders cityscapes the world over virtually indistinguishable.

However, as much as Ruetalo and Martínez's positions reinforce the belief that Punta Carretas bears no link to its troubled past, they tend to disregard the significant role of this place in the storage and production of memory, and its impression upon the

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<sup>153</sup> Martínez writes: "Los nuevos sellos del Cerro y de Punta Carretas—un estigma común a quienes no se reconocen iguales, el uno, el emblema de un no-lugar implantado, el otro, no identifican a su gente, no son una construcción propia, no provocan sentimiento de adhesión ni de pertenencia" (14). She continues: "Mientras el Cerro es un emblema de la ruina del país productor, Punta Carretas lo es del advenimiento del país consumidor. Mientras el primero es una cruda evidencia de la descomposición de la civilización del trabajo, la segunda es la mejor escenografía de la civilización del simulacro" (17).

capital's cityscape. If Punta Carretas Shopping Mall is to be interpreted as allegorical of Uruguay's recent history, it must also act as a palimpsest of that past, one in which traces of past imprint the present and future cityscapes.<sup>154</sup> In this case, Ruetalo is somewhat less convincing in her proposal that Punta Carretas signals an erasing of memory from Montevideo's cityscape.<sup>155</sup> Artifacts preserved from the building's past suggest that it is not caught in a time warp—or a perpetual present, as Ruetalo has alleged (41). Nor does the renovated space lack the fundamental attributes of place—the concrete manifestation of local influences and relationships—as Martínez has proposed.<sup>156</sup> Instead, efforts to preserve the site and vestiges of its prior role fully engage the past in a present-day setting, doing more to prompt than to erase memory. Fittingly, remnants of the building's past embody memory of more than just Uruguay's neoliberal reforms. They also testify to that country's renewed commitment to historic preservation begun during the waning days of the dictatorship, thus ensuring that the past would continue to reappear in the present.

Therefore, the site's history, particularly as a symbol of both modernity and infamy, and its role in Uruguay's recent national trauma establish this site as a continued

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<sup>154</sup> For Walter Benjamin, allegory is inseparable from the act of mourning: "In allegory the observer is confronted with the *facies hippocratica* of history as a petrified, primordial landscape. Everything about history that, from the beginning, has been untimely, sorrowful, unsuccessful" (166).

<sup>155</sup> In fact, her article exposes Ruetalo's own struggle to determine whether or not Punta Carretas plays a role in preserving and promoting memory. She begins the article by writing that the space "consciously meant the erasure of... memory" (43), and concludes by conceding that "despite all this evidence of a desire to neatly hide away this past, physical and virtual traces remain in the aura of Punta Carretas, making a complete and ultimate erasure [of memory] quite difficult" (54).

<sup>156</sup> In this case, philosopher Dylan Trigg might argue that Punta Carretas Shopping Center connects the past with the present in a more meaningful way than does a more traditional memorial space: "In light of what French historian Pierre Nora has termed 'the acceleration of history,' whereby the tradition of memory is displaced by the insertion of sites of memory, monuments come to embody the seizing of time, reinforcing the objectification of memory simultaneously" (224). The Uruguayan shopping mall marries in the present elements of the past with visions of the future, not to create a timeless place, but rather to reinforce the persistence of memory.

source of meaning and memory, despite its complete repurposing in the early 1990s.<sup>157</sup> Since its foundation, the Punta Carretas site has represented not one but at least two modernizing projects, a fact which invariably forges a bond between the past and the present. At the same time, this place has also come to signify moments of revolt and the worst of dictatorial oppression. That the Punta Carretas site has had such a contentious history and, in turn, has constituted a recognizable and culturally significant aspect of Montevideo's cityscape for over a century lends credence to the strength with which even the repurposed space remains tethered to the past and to popular memory.

Thus, in contrast to these points of view and what has already been written on the subject, the first proposal of this chapter is that this newly transformed space still engages with memory, largely through its history as a beacon of modernity and as a site of infamy in this small South American country.<sup>158</sup> Joe Moran's reading of everyday life and place will assist in guiding this analysis and its proposal that Punta Carretas Shopping Center is a far more nuanced place than has been credited previously. The theorist structures his analysis by arguing against non-place, citing as the crux of his proposal the belief that even presumably banal, place-inhibiting sites—among which shopping centers are included—become meaningful and memorable when viewed within the context of their

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<sup>157</sup> Although Achgar argues that memory and market-driven spaces are not incongruous, he maintains that social and historical trauma obfuscates the past, particularly in the case of Punta Carretas Shopping Center. In his words: "The accelerations of temporality become especially visible when a particular space—a map, a region, a city, or a building—is configured by social or historical trauma. Such is the case of the symbolic, political, and economic reconfiguration of the Punta Carretas Shopping Center and of present-day Uruguay" (207). The present study argues against this position and maintains that Uruguay's recent traumatic past—and the past of the site itself—brand memory indelibly to this place.

<sup>158</sup> Philosopher Dylan Trigg proposes that traces of memory link the present with the past: "instead of being a substitute for memory, traces can be seen to establish continuity in the sense of being a medium between temporal episodes" (59).

history and the cultural politics involved in their creation.<sup>159</sup> More specifically, Moran proposes that delving into the often underexplored history and cultural representation of so-called non-places reveals that these sites are much more complicated and historically significant than previous interpretations have allowed (94). Similarly, in their writings on the built environment, Paul Knox and Peter Ozolins write that, in order to be understood, a building's historic and political foundation must first be established:

the built environment must be seen as the culmination of land development processes that involve all of these key actors. Understanding the built environment requires us to identify the key actors [landowners, developers, builders, politicians, and bureaucratic officials], the motivations and objectives, their interpretations of market demand, and their relationship with one another” (4).

By drawing on these insights, this section will explore the history of Punta Carretas Penitentiary and its role as, on the one hand, a symbol of modernity and architectural patrimony, and on the other, a site of infamy, which continue to impact its constitution as a place and conduit for popular memory.

This foundational argument rests on the building's history, first as a penitentiary and symbol of progress, and subsequently as a site of subversion.<sup>160</sup> That Punta Carretas Penitentiary was one of Uruguay's first prisons, based on a French model, which itself

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<sup>159</sup> In response to critics' claims that Punta Carretas Shopping Center signals the death of memory in postdictatorial Uruguay, this chapter argues that delving into the building's history, and, more importantly, the many factors influencing its preservation, will give its past greater context and allow it to be reinterpreted as a site branded upon collective memory. James Young creates a similar argument for studying the origins of more traditional memorials: “Were we passively to remark only the contours of these memorials, were we to leave unexplored their genesis and remain unchanged by the recollective act, it could be said that we have not remembered at all” (15). Although the Uruguayan shopping mall is not a memorial per se, its history uncovers this place as a site indelible to popular memory.

<sup>160</sup> Anthropologist Paul Connerton maintains that its history and impression upon collective and personal memory gives a place meaning: “it is impossible to talk about places without encompassing biographies; place-names summon up an immense range of associations, about history, about events, about persons, about social activities; and historical narratives are given precision when they are organized spatially, when temporal order is given shape as a sequence of localities associated with events” (13). Punta Carretas Shopping Center maintains its ties to the past and to memory by way of its long history as a site of controversy.

represented the paragon of modern prison architecture at the time of its construction, suggests an early attempt to modernize the small country, since prisons have been commonly associated with the social mechanisms that underlie capitalism and modernity.<sup>161</sup> The turn of the century brought this and other modernizing changes to the Punta Carretas neighborhood, traditionally a suburban hamlet and home to fisherman, members of the armed forces, and other representatives of the city's burgeoning middle class during most of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Beyond the construction of an ultra-modern penitentiary, housed on no fewer than six city blocks, the most significant of these changes included the installation of a cross-town trolley.<sup>162</sup> If the trolley facilitated greater mobility of ideas, goods, and people, the establishment of a prison—the first of its kind in Uruguay in terms of its architecture and security system—signaled a modernizing leap for the country of approximately three million, and its commitment to discipline and order.<sup>163</sup> From this period on, Punta Carretas neighborhood was known to city planners and the public alike as the dividing line between the old city and the new—the past and the future (see fig. 18). Punta Carretas

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<sup>161</sup> One needs only to reference Michel Foucault's *Discipline and Punish* (1975) to locate the juncture between modernity and correctional facilities. More specifically, France's Fresnes Prison emblemizes that country's modernizing turn and the early strength of the Republic. Similar to this study, Christian Carlier's work on the history of the Prison confirms it as a symbol of French modernity and ponders whether or not this highly-symbolic prison can act presently as a site of memory: "Ce rapprochement entre la Bastille, dont la chute symbolise la fin de l'Ancien Régime, et Fresnes, dont l'ouverture coïncide très exactement avec la pérennité assurée de la république... nous sommes quelques-uns, membres de l'Association du centenaire de Fresnes, à l'avoir effectué et à nous être posé la question : une prison peut-elle être célébrée comme 'lieu de mémoire', dès lors qu'elle continue d'être un lieu de vie et d'enfermement?" (7).

<sup>162</sup> In 1868, the *Sangre de Unión* railway extended to Punta Carretas, bringing the construction of its station, the *Tranvías del Este*. The establishment of a railway uniting the city center with the periphery brought more members of Montevideo's middle class to Punta Carretas (Álvarez 25).

<sup>163</sup> Uruguay lagged somewhat behind neighboring Brazil (1836) and Argentina (1877) in establishing its penitentiary system. It was the first, however, to adopt a modern architectural style and security system, both of which were based on a French model: Henri Poussin's Fresnes Prison near Paris (Ruetalo 59).

transitioned from being a mere extension of the Old City to providing its own spatial referent as *la ciudad novísima*, or the “newest city.”<sup>164</sup>



Figure 5.2. Even in the present, the Punta Carretas neighborhood demonstrates a bridge between the past and the present, with the comingling of new and old architectural styles. Source: author’s photograph.

Carolina de Robertis’ fictional portrayal of the Punta Carretas neighborhood in her novel *The Invisible Mountain* (2009) yields a glimpse into life in this rapidly changing sector of Montevideo in the early years of the twentieth century. An early chapter of the novel recounts how Ignazio, who has recently emigrated from Venice, like so many other turn-of-the-century inhabitants of the Uruguayan capital, finally settles in the Punta Carretas neighborhood, or what the narrator describes as the “outskirts of town, in a rustic area called Punta Carretas” (43). Concurrent with Ignazio and his family’s settlement in the neighborhood—symbolic of the expanding limits of the Old City, a city

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<sup>164</sup> In Luis Álvarez’s study, which pens the history of the foundational neighborhood, the author maintains that the neighborhood’s main thoroughfare, Bulevar Artigas, represented the literal and figurative divide between Montevideo’s past and future: “Punta Carretas era todavía un amplio descampado atravesado por el proyectado bulevar Artigas, que significó, en 1878, el establecimiento de un límite oficial para la nueva planta urbana: la *Ciudad Novísima*, segundo ensanche de Montevideo respecto a la Ciudad Vieja colonial. El Bulevar Artigas dividía Punta Carretas en dos: una parte dentro y otra fuera de la Ciudad Novísima” (14). Punta Carretas was the tangible site of Montevideo’s modernization projects long before the installation of the military regime in 1973 or its neoliberal reforms in the waning days of the dictatorship. For further reading on the “ciudad novísima,” consult Salvador Schelotto’s *Montevideo: Capital de la esperanza* (1989).

once cordoned off by water and man-made walls—the narrator then describes the construction of the Punta Carretas Penitentiary, whose “vast” and “castle-like” walls, although they would appear to contradict urban expansion, only further reinforce the modernizing cityscape (50). The construction of such an imposing addition to the neighborhood prompts other characters to reflect on their changing environment: the newly paved sidewalks and cobblestone streets that have since replaced their unpaved versions; the houses that push up against one another, competing for space; the beam from a nearby lighthouse that no longer shines in Ignazio’s house, as bigger, taller buildings now fracture its beam. More tellingly, for the mayor of Montevideo, who inaugurates the new prison from its steps, Punta Carretas Penitentiary emblemizes Uruguay’s continued progress:

My fellow *montevideanos*, we are here today to celebrate progress, to celebrate this formidable new building, but above all to celebrate this city... Montevideo is one of the most beautiful and modern places on the continent. Our climate, our beaches, our literature are unparalleled, and in the past twenty-five years, we have become a world-class city... And so, my dear *montevideanos*, as we mark this day, as we open this state-of-the-art facility here in Punta Carretas, let us also look to the future. With all we have achieved in this country so far, just think of what awaits us in the rest of it. Our children and our children’s children will stand on the foundations we have built for them, and carry us forward to our destiny. We are a city of the future. The future belongs to Montevideo! (52)

Although this piece of historical fiction is, indeed, fictional, the mayor’s pronouncement in *The Invisible Mountain* affirms Punta Carretas Penitentiary as a herald of Uruguayan modernity. Viewed in tandem, the *ciudad novísima*, as the Punta Carretas neighborhood was known, and the penitentiary of the same name signaled a new kind of growth in the city: away from its traditional center and toward the future.



For this reason, although the original purpose of the facility was to reform women and youth, the prison quickly changed direction and began housing only men. The changing demographics and social dynamics of the neighborhood influenced this modification of the penitentiary's original use. Given its role as the crossroads of Montevideo's path to modernity, the Punta Carretas neighborhood quickly expanded its commercial and residential base, becoming home to recent immigrants, mainly of Spanish, Italian, and British descent.<sup>165</sup> With them came new and what were often perceived as threatening ideas. In fact, the Catholic women's group *Damas Católicas del Uruguay* lamented in a 1917 proclamation that Punta Carretas, despite its progress, had become home to such socially undesirable groups as, in their words, "formidables agrupaciones de anarquistas y protestantes [...] persiguiendo a los católicos por todos medios a su alcance" (qtd. in Álvarez 58). These women were instrumental in building a Catholic church in the Punta Carretas neighborhood, further evidencing their desire not only to maintain the dominant religious and social paradigm but also to reform its detractors (see fig. 18).<sup>166</sup> It should not be read as coincidental, therefore, that the *Iglesia de Nuestra Señora del Sagrado Corazón*, or the *Parroquia de Punta Carretas*, as it is known popularly, was constructed only a few steps from the penitentiary, nor that some of the earliest prison inmates were foreign-born anarchists. These international rabble-rousers were also the architects of the first among many prison breaks throughout the history of Punta Carretas Penitentiary, each of which helped to establish the site as a place of infamy, further carving the penitentiary into the city's popular memory.

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<sup>165</sup> Álvarez notes the spike in immigration to Montevideo: "entre 1923 y 1931 arribaron cerca de 180,000 inmigrantes, que se concentraron mayoritariamente en la capital y sus alrededores" (25).

<sup>166</sup> Architect Elzeario Boix not only designed the *Iglesia de nuestra señora del sagrado corazón de Jesús*, as the church is known more formally, but also accepted the project *pro bono* (Gaeta and Folle 101). This and other contributions facilitated construction of the church.



Figure 5.3. The *Parroquia de Punta Carretas* overlooks what is now the Punta Carretas Shopping Center parking lot. Souce: author's photograph.

In 1931, nine inmates—seven of them foreign-born anarchists—undermined the supposedly impenetrable walls of the ultra-modern Punta Carretas Penitentiary.<sup>167</sup> Authorities arrested and incarcerated the majority of the escapees for a series of Robin Hood-inspired robberies they committed and which the band called *expropiaciones*. The most famous of these events was the assault and robbery of the *Cambio Messina*, or the Messina Currency Exchange (Álvarez 65). During the long months of their subsequent imprisonment, the anarchists schemed with fellow ideologues on the outside to excavate a tunnel between the prison and a neighboring business, *El buen trato*, which a supporter had rented. At three o'clock in the afternoon on the 14<sup>th</sup> of March, 1931, the escapees fled through a hole they had created in the shower room floor and crawled through nearly 60 meters of tunnel space before finally reaching their endpoint: a business bordering the prison on Solano García Street (Fernández Huidobro 26). The convicts escaped successfully but soon were apprehended and sent to Buenos Aires, where they were tried

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<sup>167</sup> In total, seven anarchists and two inmates being held on minor charges escaped to Punta Carretas to a neighboring business.

and sentenced for additional crimes (Ruetalo 51). The prison's earliest breakout not only shed doubt on the site as a modern, hermetic fortress—at the heart of the *ciudad novísima*—, thereby shrouding the penitentiary in infamy, but also imprinted the history of the city and its lore.<sup>168</sup> Rumors from the time suggested that the anarchists were eventually condemned to death in Argentina and disposed of in the Río de la Plata, an unfortunate fate shared by many during the region's dictatorship nearly 40 years later (51).

Punta Carretas Penitentiary housed other ideological and political prisoners throughout its history and, in the process, became one of the defining symbols of authoritarian rule during Uruguay's dictatorship.<sup>169</sup> In particular, members of the 1960s urban guerrilla movement MLN, whose *nom de guerre*—Tupamaros—evoked the iconic eighteenth-century indigenous-rights leader, Tupac Amará II, were incarcerated at Punta Carretas during the latter part of that decade and into the mid 1980s. They were considered among society's most dangerous criminals and were treated with corresponding cruelty.<sup>170</sup> Not all of those locked up during the regime's twelve years in

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<sup>168</sup> The prison was designed to be as spacious as it was secure. Its original layout assigned one inmate to each cell and boasted the latest in security measures. The breakout of the early 1930 and severe overcrowding in the 1950s would undermine each aspect and call into question the efficacy of the space. Eleuterio Fernández Huidobro writes about the approximate dimensions of each cell: “las celdas de Punta Carretas tienen más o menos unos cuatro metros de largo por dos y medio de ancho y una altura de tres metros y medio... son bastante amplias y altas” (37). Eventual overcrowding would convert the spacious cells into “latas de sardinas,” or sardine cans (39).

<sup>169</sup> Fernández Huidobro cites 1967 as the year in which members of the Tupamaros began to populate Uruguay's prisons: “a partir de 1967, primero en Cárcel Central, luego en Miguelete y finalmente en Punta Carretas (fines de 1968 y principios de 1969), los tupamaros fueron arribando cada vez a mayor ritmo a las playas de ese mundo [penitenciario]” (110).

<sup>170</sup> The MLN (*Movimiento de Liberación Nacional*, or National Liberation Movement) was a well-known urban guerrilla movement in Uruguay during the 1960s and 70s, whose members included students, unionists, and other members of the middle class. Similar to the Uruguayan anarchists of the 1930s, this group was known for robbing banks and other businesses during the early part of their formation; however, they soon incorporated the use of violence and staged various political kidnappings and assassinations. Somewhat ironically, since many Tupamaros were arrested and incarcerated during the dictatorship, the MLN famously kidnapped the British ambassador to Uruguay, Sir Geoffrey Jackson, in 1972, holding him in the “people's prison,” a site used for interrogation and to house those kidnapped. Upon the country's

power were participants in this organization. In fact, members of trade unions, student organizations, and other civic groups were also suspect to arrest and detainment. So severe was the prison culture in dictatorial Uruguay that in 1976 the tiny country of just over three million had the highest rate of political prisoners per capita in the world (Ruetalo 47). Although not all political prisoners were treated equally—those considered most dangerous were kept in solitary confinement, while the least dangerous were held in provisional jails—, Punta Carretas Penitentiary came to represent a society under lockdown. Despite this fact, a copycat performance of the 1930s breakout would again call into question the penitentiary’s imperviousness as an urban citadel—undermining its previous role as a symbol of unquestioned modernity—and would further sanction the site as a place of infamy among the channels of shared recollection.

In the early spring of 1971, two years before the installation of the military regime, 106 Tupamaros escaped Punta Carretas Penitentiary in what would be honored dubiously as the largest jailbreak in recorded history, according to the *Guinness Book of World Records*. Operation “Abuse,” or *El Abuso*, as it is known popularly, took all of twenty-two days to orchestrate. Quick planning ensured the Tupamaros’ escape before that year’s national election, making the prison break an unmistakable act of political rebellion (Fernández Huidobro 36). Such a feat would have been impossible were it not for the tunnel system already in place since the early 1930s.<sup>171</sup> Once the prisoners had

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return to democracy in 1985, the group reorganized as a political party, the *Movimiento de Participación Popular*, a splinter of the left-leaning Frente Amplio party. Uruguay’s current president, José Mujica, was an active member of the Tupamaros movement, and is known to have spent much of the dictatorship in solitary confinement, as a political prisoner. For more information, see Wolfgang Heinz and Hugo Frühling’s *Determinants of Gross Human Rights Violations by State and State-sponsored Actors in Brazil, Uruguay, Chile, and Argentina: 1960-1990* (Cambridge: Kluwer Law International 1999).

<sup>171</sup> Similarly, as Ruetalo points out, two decade’s worth of overcrowding by the 1970s undermined vigilance in the prison and suggests how else it could’ve been possible for over 100 political prisoners to escape without awakening the suspicions of prison authorities (51).

descended from the second and third floors to the first, along a series of connections among cells, they navigated a recently forged tunnel system linked to that of yesteryear. Escapees traversed the subterranean system—over a kilometer in length—before finally reaching Constitution Street, where they celebrated, received a change of clothes and a firearm, and reintegrated themselves into the external MLN movement (Fernández Huidobro 214). Many participants of the jailbreak were eventually captured and sentenced to death for their transgression. Despite the grim outcome of their efforts, the fugitives were victorious in exposing Punta Carretas Penitentiary as a site in decadence, whose overcrowding undermined its efficacy as a penal institution. They exposed a point of tension between the site’s intended role as a beacon of modernity and its degeneration into the pits of infamy. After one final escape attempt and subsequent shoot-out with local police, the prison finally closed its doors in 1986, as a nod both to the Penitentiary’s inefficiency as well as the country’s return to democracy one year prior.<sup>172</sup> The building sat derelict for nearly ten years, before it was purchased and finally reopened in 1994 as a completely reconceptualized place. In less than a decade, Punta Carretas Penitentiary had become the second embodiment of Uruguayan modernity, Punta Carretas Shopping Center, but not without having secured first its position as a place of meaning and popular recollection, straddling modernity and infamy.

Thus, when understood as a source of meaning capable of imprinting place, its historical and political context assists in securing the Punta Carretas site as an urban

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<sup>172</sup> In addition to its inadequacy as a penal institution, it might be argued that, by 1986, approximately one year after the country’s return to democracy, Uruguayan society no longer demanded another prison. *El País* reported retrospectively that overpopulation, escape attempts (and successes), and the formation of internal gangs led to the site’s demise (“La gran cita”). Since many political prisoners were granted freedom following the dictatorship—other inmates were transported to the ironically titled *Libertad* prison—one could also argue that the urban site suddenly seemed superfluous and ran counter to the new democratic era.

palimpsest capable of rooting the past in the present. In particular, on the symbolic level, its oscillation between modernity and infamy undermines this site as anaesthetized, blank, or lacking in historical relevance, and, instead, charges it with memory. The site's conflicting narratives—of future prosperity and of subterranean flight—call attention to more than just mortar and brick; they symbolize the dreams and nightmares of an entire nation. Likewise, that these threads of history continue to influence this repurposed place only strengthens the implicit bond between memory and the everyday. Punta Carretas Shopping Center presents no need to relegate memory to a designated (and most likely separate) place of remembrance, since the building's controversial past continues to serve through its material vestiges as a wellspring for memory. Therefore, although the building and its purpose have changed, the narratives upon which the site was founded link the Center to its past, fusing memory with quotidian life.

By acting simultaneously as a place of modernity and order—infamy and disorder—Punta Carretas locates itself squarely among scholarship dedicated to Latin American urbanism and, indeed, writings on architecture itself.<sup>173</sup> Within the context of Latin American cities and their analysis, the Punta Carretas site gestures equally to two opposing figureheads: Angel Rama and Alberto Flores Galindo. While the crux of Rama's work proposes that the spatial and textual development of Latin American cities—the lettered city, or *la ciudad letrada*—ultimately imposed on these landscapes a sense of order and modernity, Galindo suggests just the opposite: Latin American cities

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<sup>173</sup> Knox and Ozolins comment that themes of legitimacy recur in architectural history and that, as a consequence, built environments, in particular, often obscure the socio-economic realities involved in their construction. They write: "The physical arrangement and appearance of the built environment can help to suggest stability amid change (or vice versa), to create order amid uncertainty, and to make the social order appear natural and permanent" (4).

have been submerged, since their founding, in confusion, chaos, and violence.<sup>174</sup> One theorist proposes order, while the other proposes disorder—one modernity and the other infamy. In much the same way, the Punta Carretas site represents the junction between two poles, since it has acted, in its history, as a beacon of modernity and as a pit of infamy. Consequently, the Punta Carretas site holds a special place not only in the Uruguayan popular imagination but also within the framework of centuries-old Latin American urbanism, and its own concretization of order and disorder.

In this same vein, beyond just its history, the transformation of Punta Carretas Penitentiary into Punta Carretas Shopping Center further roots this place in the past by exemplifying the delicate balance between historic preservation and modernization that ensued during and after the period of authoritarian rule, and which has assisted in characterizing this country's experience under dictatorship. Therefore, the second section of this chapter will explore the repurposing of this central landmark of Montevideo's city and memoryscape, yet another meaningful context through which to interpret Punta Carretas Shopping Center. Although its transformation paralleled a vast restructuring of the country's economy and cultural institutions during the dictatorship, the Center also symbolizes efforts by architects and city officials to preserve Montevideo's historic landmarks and cultural patrimony. Because of this commitment to preservation, remnants of the building's prior role as a prison chosen for conservation supply more than just the backdrop for the shopping center. They establish a link between the present and past use of the building, and contextualize this site as an everyday place of memory. In this way, among others, Punta Carretas does less to represent a non-place or spatial void along

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<sup>174</sup> The two works to which I refer are Rama's *La ciudad letrada* (1984) and Galindo's *La ciudad sumergida: aristocracia y plebe en Lima, 1760-1830* (1991).

Montevideo's memoryscape, and more to reveal the coexistence of memory and place—past and present—embedded in its walls and their preservation.

During Uruguay's first modernizing era, the capital's historic center inspired awe among early proponents of Modern architecture; even French architect Le Corbusier, whose death in 1965 occupied the entire front page of the national periodical *El País*, marveled at this tiny South American capital and its love of architecture.<sup>175</sup> Neighboring *porteños*, for whom Uruguay has always served as an escape from persecution and as a place of leisure, took notice of Montevideo's commitment to design, with Argentine essayist Jorge Luis Borges having famously described the capital as having the perfect "luz de patio," or faint courtyard light—a result of the city's European-inspired interior patios.

Despite these images of Montevideo as a wellspring for fine architecture and as the Switzerland of the South, as it was popularly known, the country's 12-year military dictatorship—beyond its creation of an authoritarian police state—aided in widespread urban transformation, often to meet the spatial demands of its draconian economic and social reforms.<sup>176</sup> The demolition or neglect of historic buildings and monuments concurred with a boom in new real estate, particularly among existing and newly created coastal neighborhoods. This trend was common among other countries of the Southern Cone and represents the spatial dimensions of what Argentine critic Josefina Ludmer has

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<sup>175</sup> Montevideo, which is home to roughly half of the country's population, boasts diverse architectural styles and trends, thanks, in part, to its influx of European immigrants in the late nineteenth century. Since 1915 the prestigious Facultad de Arquitectura of the Universidad de la República has sponsored its best students to study architecture around the world, with the hope of putting them in contact with marvels of classical and modern design (Carmona 79). The scholarship further testifies to the city's commitment to international architectural trends.

<sup>176</sup> The public sector stimulated this growth during a two-year period between 1974 and 1976, while privately funded construction increased by 29% between 1978 and 1980. This shift from the public to private sector, in terms of construction, nods to economic reforms.



identified as a common “modernizing leap” away from previously state-directed systems and toward free-market economies. More specifically, for many of these countries, the 1970s dictatorships signified replacing existing Import Substitution Industrialization models, in place for much of this region since the 1930s, for neo-liberal policies.<sup>177</sup> Additionally, in Uruguay, after nearly a century of *batllismo* and its socio-spatial reforms, and under the title of Latin America’s first welfare state, the military regime radically transformed the pillars of the country’s previous political, economic, and architectural institutions.<sup>178</sup>

In other words, Uruguay’s experience under authoritarian rule manifested itself spatially. Newly enforced legislative and economic practices fueled Montevideo’s structural transformation, which reached its zenith during the 1970s and 80s.<sup>179</sup> More specifically, these transformations played a fundamental role in transforming the Old City in particular—the original nucleus of Montevideo—at virtually the same time that other sectors of the city underwent a major boom in new construction. As part of broader fiscal reforms, the government decontrolled rents and encouraged foreign and other private financiers to invest in Montevideo—especially along its coast—and Punta del Este’s

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<sup>177</sup> Architect Mariano Arana and Fernando Giordano explain neoliberal reform from the perspective of Uruguay in their work “Montevideo: Between Participation and Authoritarianism: “the dictatorship outlined a putative ‘national’ project to open up the country to foreign trade. The plan set aside the idea of the welfare state for its neoliberal alternative. As a result, speculation took priority over production, an exaggerated external debt was contracted, salaries dwindled in real terms, and pauperization of the population increased” (151).

<sup>178</sup> Uruguay’s President José Batlle y Ordóñez imprinted the capital city according to his brand of social welfare: “Montevideo evidenció en sus tejidos los nuevos ideales democráticos, liberales y de justicia social, implementados por un Estado benefactor, interventor y regulador, soporte del equilibrio económico y social” (*Propuestas* 22). More specifically, the Plazas Independencia and Libertad became the city’s new focal points, as well as the construction of state and civil service buildings.

<sup>179</sup> Members of Grupo de Estudios Urbanos wrote in their study of Montevideo’s Old City: “Es un hecho, la creciente preocupación pública surgida en el país ante la magnitud de las pérdidas recientemente sufridas en su patrimonio cultural y ambiental. El fenómeno es generalizable, en terminus globales, al territorio nacional y aún a buena parte del ámbito latinoamericano, y registró, para el caso uruguayo, significativa” (7).

burgeoning real estate market (see fig. 20).<sup>180</sup> Although demographic changes also influenced the degradation of historic sectors of the city, since the country experienced a steep decline in its population, either to forced or voluntary exile; reversing years of spatial protectionism deeply impacted the urban and historic terrain of the capital, and was at the heart of a more widespread experiment with bureaucratic authoritarianism and similar gestures toward social and economic order.<sup>181</sup>



Figure 5.4. Punta Carretas is now one of Montevideo’s wealthier neighborhoods, a change from its origins as a fishing community. The neighborhood was and continues to be recognized for its embrace of Modern architecture. Source: author’s photograph.

When private interests were not involved in transforming the cityscape, the dictatorship assumed responsibility for rearranging city squares and changing place

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<sup>180</sup> The authors of *Propuestas a la ciudad Montevideo—1986* characterize the real estate boom retrospectively as an “incipiente estancamiento y deterioro de las áreas centrales que quedan al margen de la transformación acaecida por un complejo número de factores... cambio en los usos asociados a la expansión de las actividades comerciales y de servicios, que hacen crecer el centro de la ciudad más allá de sus límites tradicionales; fuertes cambios en los gustos y las escalas de valores asociados a una franca irrupción de la sociedad de consumo—valoración de la movilidad y un aprecio sensible por la costa” (53).

<sup>181</sup> Historian Teresa Meade writes the following about Montevideo’s structural degradation: “Montevideo, once a stunning port city of European-style architecture similar to Buenos Aires, fell into disrepair... much of Uruguay’s prosperous middle-class life ceased to exist” (262). Similarly, according to Arana and Giordano, Montevideo’s population increased by a mere 6% in the decade between 1975 and 1985, which they account for accordingly: “The slow growth throughout the country can be explained not only by low birth rates but also heavy emigration, the result of economic and political crisis. Despite the end of the military dictatorship, this outward flow has continued” (151). Reductions to Montevideo’s middle-class population and to government spending on structural preservation helped precipitate new development, often through foreign investment, at the cost of historic preservation.

names throughout the capital, thereby leaving its own imprint on the city. During its years in power, the military government directed its public works projects to maintaining city parks, especially those paying tribute to the armed forces in one fashion or another. Architect Liliana Carmona argues that many of these plazas were not designed for public participation, but were used only as sites of commemoration: “Estas tuvieron en común la presencia de monumentos laudatorios del poder militar o bien de la nacionalidad... así como también un diseño pensado para la contemplación y no para la participación, coherentemente con la doctrina sustentada” (133). Historic sites that did not fall into this category were at risk of abandonment or even complete destruction. In fact, the administration demonstrated to what extent it supported the real estate boom by enacting the 1979 Resolution of Executive Power, which removed hundreds of buildings from the national registry of historic monuments.<sup>182</sup> Many of those buildings suddenly excluded from the list were in Montevideo’s historic Old City (see fig. 21).

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<sup>182</sup> Arana and Giordano cite this piece of legislature as the most evident of the regime’s neglect of the city’s architectural and historic patrimony: “the clearest evidence of official complicity with the widespread decay brought about by speculation, ignorance, and neglect was the now infamous Resolution of Executive Power of October 1979, in which hundreds of buildings were removed from the list of ‘Historic Monuments’ and for the most part demolished” (153).



Figure 5.5. Despite past and more recent efforts to preserve the Old City, many buildings remain derelict or have been demolished. Source: author's photograph.

Only in 1982, after several years of compromising the capital's historic and cultural patrimony, did city government bend to pressure from diverse groups to protect that sector of the city from further destruction and decay.<sup>183</sup> The municipal government of Montevideo placed a 90-day moratorium on construction and/or demolition in the Old City. In the words of its architect, Dr. Rachette, the 1982 resolution would, “mantener y valorizar el caracter testimonial que poseen las construcciones y entornos urbanos que conforman la Ciudad Vieja de Montevideo” (qtd. in Schelotto 16). Preservation, the reform suggested, was not necessarily antithetical to other kinds of structural changes.<sup>184</sup> Instead, this declaration symbolized a desire common among a growing number of Uruguayan architects and other citizens to reconcile preservation with change. Thus

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<sup>183</sup> In response to the structural deterioration of Ciudad Vieja, the *Sociedad de Arquitectos del Uruguay* (Society of Uruguayan Architects) held a symposium in 1981 to address concerns of cultural and natural patrimony. The event's title reflects its mission: *Patrimonio cultural y natural*. A working group resulted from the symposium and worked closely with the *Departamento de Planeamiento Urbano y Cultural* (Department of Urban and Cultural Planning) of the city government. This working group, which was likely influential in crafting the 1982 resolution,

<sup>184</sup> Julio Gaeta's work on Ciudad Vieja includes excerpts from the 1982 decree that also proposed creating a taxonomy of historic sites, so that investors and city officials could make more informed decisions about where and how to urbanize: “Resulta imprescindible conocer sus partes, sus construcciones e historias, de ahí la necesidad de una publicación que se detenga frente a cada hecho edilicio, para luego abordar aquellos desafíos que trascienden la estética formal... y proponer las iniciativas de un ‘urbanismo estratégico’... que hagan evolucionar la discusión de preservación hacia la de construcción” (17).

architectural transformation constitutes an important aspect of the Uruguayan dictatorship, including themes of exile, draconian economic reforms, and state-sponsored violence, common among other countries of the Southern Cone. Appeals to preserve sites of national patrimony became, consequently, a means of undermining authoritarian rule and directly influenced the partial preservation of Punta Carretas Penitentiary, demonstrating just how deeply the country's cultural politics have influenced this site.

Of the groups to publicly endorse historic preservation, the *Grupo de Estudios Urbanos* (Urban Studies Group), which formed in 1980 to document Montevideo's architectural degradation and denounce the regime's spatial reforms, was the most influential in stressing the importance of marrying preservation with change. In their 1983 manifesto on the conservation of Ciudad Vieja, *Grupo* distanced itself from ideas that historic preservation opposes urban growth and renewal. "Reclamar el cuidadoso control y el permanente equilibrio del área urbana," members of the group wrote, "no implica aceptar la concepción de 'ciudad museo' que rechazamos de plano, pues genera la esclerosis de su estructura física y la desvitalización o excesiva especialización de sus usos y actividades" (46). Similarly, the group and its figurehead, architect Mariano Arana, questioned the government's interpretation of historical patrimony, especially as it appeared in the 1979 Resolution of Executive Power. The regime's definition of historical monuments as those sites relevant to national and military tradition was seen as myopic by the members of *Grupo de Estudios Urbanos*. For them, the city's patrimony encompassed its rich architectural tradition. Renovating everyday historic buildings and

residences to better suit contemporary lifestyles represented a more favorable alternative to losing them forever, they argued.<sup>185</sup>

Consequently, in addition to correlating structural deterioration with government reforms, *Grupo* earnestly raised awareness about Montevideo's architectural patrimony and its degradation.<sup>186</sup> The fear that disappearing historic buildings undermined collective memory shaped their argument in favor of historic preservation. The regime was responsible, in their opinion, for negative structural changes to the Old City and other historic sectors of the capital, and, consequently, for a waning sense of collective memory. Fittingly, the organization of architects and other citizens produced a video in 1982 called *Una ciudad sin memoria* (A City without Memory), and then a book of the same title, one year later.<sup>187</sup> These documents capture the deterioration of historic buildings and monuments, and suggest that the country's changing economy and depreciation of the past caused the decline in preservation.<sup>188</sup> In the process of touring the city and documenting its historic sites on film, *Grupo*'s visual representations not only created a visual archive of Montevideo's architecture, but also appealed to collective memories of the city. *Grupo* held that maintaining a sense of past and future was integral to a vibrant, dynamic city, with which all of its inhabitants could identify: "nuestro

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<sup>185</sup> *Grupo* lists preservation and revitalization among its founding goals: "el mantenimiento, la recuperación y la revitalización de zonas y edificios de la Ciudad Vieja con vistas a la preservación de valores históricos, culturales y ambientales de importancia relevante" (*La ciudad* 3).

<sup>186</sup> *Grupo* juxtaposed explicitly the real estate boom in some sectors of the city and the concurrent deterioration of others, namely the Old City: "el auge constructivo de los años recientes —así como su reverse: el deterioro de la ciudad—son los síntomas visibles de trasfondo que lo explica y lo vertebró: la liberación de alquileres y una política económica a nivel nacional que desalienta el esfuerzo productivo y privilegia el capital especulativo y la actividad de intermediación" (5).

<sup>187</sup> The working group also counted postcards of Montevideo among its campaign materials to endorse architectural preservation. Each card contains a photograph of either an historic building or a neighborhood iconic of Montevideo's past. A quote at the lower left corner of the blank side reads: "La construcción de la ciudad no es tan solo una responsabilidad de especialistas sino esencialmente de la comunidad" (*Postales*).

<sup>188</sup> The cinematic version of *Una ciudad sin memoria* also captures the contrasting outcome of neoliberal reforms: Montevideo's sprawling shantytowns.

pasado forma parte de nuestro future... no es posible eliminar sustentos básicos de nuestra memoria colectiva, sin mengua de nuestra gente y de nuestro ser nacional” (*Una ciudad* 6). Although *Grupo*’s vision of the city was, at times, nostalgic for a city once considered capital to the Switzerland of the South, the organization suggested effectively that the ongoing deterioration of the city might negatively affect collective memory.

To prove its point, the textual version of *Una ciudad sin memoria* includes images of the Old City’s more impressive historic buildings and contrasts them either with structures at various stages of despair or with modern edifices, which they maintain do little to improve Montevideo’s cityscape or to support collective memory (see fig. 22). In a nod to political rhetoric of the time, *Grupo* maintained that only greater awareness of Montevideo’s structural devastation could save the city and its sense of memory from oblivion. The work concludes: “Sólo mediante una toma de conciencia colectiva, la ciudad actual podrá preservar su identidad y su memoria” (*Una ciudad* 93). Thus arguments for greater preservation became another vehicle for denouncing the regime and its many injustices. The movement for greater conservation, which the *Grupo de Estudios Urbanos* emblemizes, became analogous to retaining collective memory and its landmarks. Similar to human rights work, defending the city and its architectural patrimony played an integral role in the cultural politics of the era.



*Entre el ayer y el hoy, las comparaciones son elocuentes.*

Figure 5.6. In this example from *Una ciudad sin memoria* (59), the Grupo invites the reader to contrast an old and new building. The caption suggests that no comparison exists between the two.

Although *Una ciudad sin memoria* excluded Punta Carretas Penitentiary from its cartography of historic Montevideo—after all, the prison was still in use at the time this work was published—, the existence of a project like that of *Grupo de estudios urbanos* and the eventual conservation of the prison reveal the significant role historic preservation played during the late and post-dictatorship period. Thus, in its current form, Punta Carretas Shopping Center allegorizes more than just Uruguay’s economic transformation. The mall also symbolizes efforts to conserve the country’s architectural patrimony during a time of great structural and cultural transformation.<sup>189</sup> This association between the present-day shopping center and the cultural politics of the dictatorship and post-dictatorship period reveals the complexity of this place and its links to the past, and weakens interpretations of this site as a non-place. Evidence of the past prompts collective and personal memory and situates this place within the spatial,

<sup>189</sup> Jorge Abbondanza writes in an architectural guide to the Old City that restoration projects represent a nexus between the old and the new, and a truce to social tensions rooted in structural transformation: “la tendencia reciente al reciclaje y parcial transformación de viejas casas... ha permitido la paulatina batalla entre un impulse devastador recostado en la especulación y un empeño recuperador cuyos indicios comienzan a sembrarse... a través de la península matriz, como demostraciones incipientes de un espíritu reparador” (10).



political, and cultural context of the era. Nothing could undermine more effectively the assumed banality of an everyday site like a shopping mall than to demonstrate its dynamic relationship to memory and the continuity between its present and recent past.

When the democratic government facilitated a contest in 1989 to propose new uses of the space, proposals included a site of public memory and a community center. It seemed evident, however, that the highest bidder, the Alian S.A. architectural firm, would win domain of the prime (albeit controversial) real estate.<sup>190</sup> By 1991, the firm had purchased the site, and by 1994, had completely re-envisioned Punta Carretas away from its past as a penitentiary and towards its future as an ultra-modern shopping center. Despite its role as Uruguay's premiere shopping mall, the new owners agreed to two caveats upon purchasing the space from the Ministry of the Interior and the Municipal Government. They were not to raze the site, and they had to incorporate as many of its original features as possible into the new floor plan (Erosa, qtd. in Ruetalo 39).<sup>191</sup> That Arana, the founder of *Grupo de estudios urbanos* served as mayor of Montevideo 1994, the year that Punta Carretas Penitentiary reopened as Punta Carretas Shopping Center, bears remembering. From his position as a city leader, Arana, and others concerned with historic preservation, could exercise their ideals for a cityscape in which the past and the

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<sup>190</sup> Controversy ensued with the former Minister of the Interior, Dr. Marchesano, who also oversaw the administration of the nation's prison system, also joined the investment group financing the new mall. Many viewed his involvement as a sign of corruption and the desire of many to forget the past (Achugar). Given the controversy surrounding Chile's Villa Grimaldi (see footnote 11), Marchesano's role in funding Punta Carretas Shopping Center reveals the extent to which former regime leaders were involved in rewriting the city after the dictatorship.

<sup>191</sup> A report in *El País* on the 3<sup>rd</sup> of July, 1994 confirms that the city government of Montevideo was involved not only in the mall reconstruction project, but also the alteration of the nearby boardwalk: "Desde el punto de vista urbanístico, corresponde resaltar como lo hizo el Cr. Mario J. Garbarino, que el Punta Carretas Shopping está realizando en coordinación con la Intendencia, una complete reformulación del tramo de la rambla que va desde Trouville hasta la actual curva cerrada de la Punta ("El martes 5"). The city had a vested interested in changing this section of the *rambla*, since it had proved dangerous to motorists and pedestrians, further proof that the mall developers and the municipal government worked in tandem.

present coexisted. Because of this agreement, much of the past structure remains intact—including its façade, wrought-iron fence, interior archway, etc.

Just as Punta Carretas Penitentiary had captured the attention of Le Corbusier and other architects of a bygone era, Punta Carretas Shopping Center, in its new form, fascinates current architects and proponents of historic preservation.<sup>192</sup> One present-day architectural guide to Montevideo describes the site as a balanced combination of previous and contemporary styles: “Se trata de una obra que alcanza destacados logros en términos formales, con un doble desde de integración a la arquitectura preexistente y de utilización explícita de un lenguaje contemporáneo” (Gaeta and Folle 102). Thus, in addition to symbolizing unequivocally the country’s great leap from its statist past to its neo-liberal future, Punta Carretas also represents a site tethered to its place in history. The politics of the past, focused on historic preservation and architectural patrimony during the dictatorship years, imprinted themselves on the present use of the site and its legacy. Punta Carretas, in its current embodiment, does not erase the past as much as it continues to reveal and reaffirm testimonies of its prior use.

Therefore, although Luis Bickford’s article “Memoryscapes” limits its analysis to explicit memorial sites and therefore consciously excludes Punta Carretas Shopping Center from its list of “reconstituted spaces”—or everyday sites used as detention centers and then transformed into official or unofficial sites of memory—the building’s repurposing binds memories of the past with the country’s present and future.<sup>193</sup> The

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<sup>192</sup> Upon reporting the inauguration of Punta Carretas Shopping Center, *El País* recounted Le Corbusier’s impressions of Punta Carretas as a lugubrious albeit stylish building: “cuando Le Corbuseir visitó Montevideo dijo que el penal más allá de su lúgubre función era uno de los edificios arquitectónicamente más lindos de la ciudad” (“Obra majestuosa”).

<sup>193</sup> Bickford defines his concept of reconstituted space in greater detail as the following: “memoryscapes [that] were not purposefully created to serve as memorials. Rather, through time, they form part of the memory of the past for individuals and communities traumatized by the authoritarian regime’s repressive

Center's signs of the past—including but not limited to the entire exterior of the building, watch tower, and adjacent administration building—indicate more than just the post-modern aesthetics popular at the time of its renovation or to the many parallels between prisons and shopping malls.<sup>194</sup> Instead, these testimonies of the past display a renewed awareness and interest in preserving Montevideo's everyday and historic memoryscapes, trends that adopted increasing importance during the country's dictatorship and have since come to define its cultural fabric. Likewise, in his analysis of post-dictatorial Latin American literature, Idelber Avelar proposes that everyday references to the past resist the creative destruction of the marketplace and are integral to exploring memory: "the anachronistic, obsolete commodity, the recycled gadget, the museum piece, are all forms of survival of what has been replaced in the market. These images are crucial for post-dictatorial memory work, for they offer anchors through which a connection with the past can be reestablished" (2). Traces of the original Punta Carretas building connect the present with the past and further contextualize the site within the cultural politics of the time: first to preserve historic buildings from destruction and decay, and then to map out the newly democratic city. The crux of this perspective suggests that whether or not the

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apparatus. Their meaning often proves opaque to passersby" (101). Chile's Villa Grimaldi and National Soccer stadium are among those spaces considered in his study. Neither of these sites was originally intended to house political prisoners—in fact, Villa Grimaldi was a villa on the outskirts of Santiago whose owner is known to have used the space, ironically, to entertain left-wing intellectuals, including Pablo Neruda and Fidel Castro—, but they have since become emblematic of the dictatorship years because of atrocities committed there and efforts to reappropriate them as sites of memory. Villa Grimaldi was slated to be demolished and replaced with a condominium complex, when the building was sold in 1987 to a regime insider (Meade, "Holding," 128). Bickford contrasts the work required of former prisoners to preserve Villa Grimaldi as a site of memory with the situation of Punta Carretas: "such success was not achieved in Uruguay, where a former torture center is now an exclusive shopping mall" (102). That the Uruguayan government did not sanction Punta Carretas as a memorial excludes the site from Bickford's definition of memoryscape and as a reconstituted space.

<sup>194</sup> Victoria Ruetalo draws largely from Mike Davis' work *City of Quartz: Excavating the Future in Los Angeles* on the creation of prison-inspired shopping malls in inner-city Los Angeles in her study of Punta Carretas. Although Ruetalo is astute in likening the Uruguayan case to a more widespread prison complex, this study will establish the local origin of efforts to preserve historic spaces such as Punta Carretas.

site is an officially sanctioned site of memory is suddenly less important than previously theorized. Instead, it is of greater consequence that Punta Carretas Shopping Center represents a confluence of the past with the present, one that imprints both the city and memory.

Consequently, transformation of the site from a correctional facility to a commercial center may have mirrored national trends toward consumerism and urbanization, but not without incorporating signs of the building's past into its current layout. In the waning days before Punta Carretas Penitentiary's grand reopening as Punta Carretas Shopping Center on July 14, 1994, the national newspaper, *El País*, announced the site's inauguration with excitement and touted the prison-turned-shopping center as the second coming of Uruguayan modernity:

Sesenta y cinco mil metros cuadrados construidos a un costo de 42 millones de dólares, configurando un shopping center que marcará un hito en la evolución urbanística y comercial de Montevideo, sustituye en seis manzanas de Punta Carretas al viejo penal construido hace más de ocho décadas que, en el momento en que se edificó, fue uno de los más modernos de Sudamérica. (“El martes 5”)

Beyond its use value as a retail site, the newly restored place gestured toward the nation's *fin-de-siècle* experiment with modernity. To this end, just as the Punta Carretas neighborhood transformed over time from a suburban settlement to the center of the *ciudad novísima*, the creation of an upscale mall signaled changes of equal magnitude to this zone and in the rest of the city.<sup>195</sup> Those characteristics chosen for preservation

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<sup>195</sup> Álvarez correlates the beginning of this neighborhood-wide transformation with the fall of Punta Carretas Penitentiary in 1986: “Desde el punto de vista edilicio, Punta Carretas es el resultado... de un proceso iniciado en 1986, cuando el viejo barrio cambió un presidio que había regulado normativa y culturalmente su perfil por un gran centro comercial” (13).

testify at once to the shopping mall as a repurposed symbol of modernity and to the site's original role as a correctional facility.

The Center's name alone, for example, conjures up the role of this site as both a beacon of modernity and as the staging ground for the penitentiary's (and the country's) most notorious events.<sup>196</sup> The choice to preserve that part of the name that directly links the neighborhood to its surroundings equally connects the shopping center to its iconic past and to popular memory. Paul Connerton maintains that place names often conjure up memories of corresponding events and biographies: "At the moment when names are assigned to places, those who do the naming are often particularly aware of the memories they wish to impose" (11). Although the more explicit part of its title has changed according to its function—from Penitentiary to Shopping Center—, that the Center and its surroundings are united in name also links the site to past narratives, biographies, and urban lore. The cultural significance of the Punta Carretas building as a place of modernity and of infamy remains easily conjured simply by pronouncing its name.

Likewise, the exterior of the building attests equally to the architectural value placed on the site at the time of its construction, confirming its place within Uruguay's cultural patrimony, and its embattled history as an urban prison and detention center. The building's original façade, therefore, is arguably its most recognizable link to the past. The French Fresnes Prison, upon which Punta Carretas Penitentiary was modeled, represented a major advancement in the development of prison architecture and layout

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<sup>196</sup> Trigg echoes this opinion when he writes: "in conjunction with the limits of space, deferred only by intervention, the conferment of names on space reinforces the establishment of place. Place names withdraw a space from abstraction by situating it in a particular context" (122). Punta Carretas Shopping Center, in name alone, confirms itself again as a nuanced, memorable place, with its own position along Montevideo's memoryscape.

(see fig. 23).<sup>197</sup> As an urban prison, Fresnes, and other penitentiaries based on its prototype, many of which were constructed in the United States and South America, were intended to resemble fortresses, both architecturally and in security features (Roth 264). In this way, the exterior of Punta Carretas Shopping Center at once connects the building to the country’s general architectural heritage—at the vanguard of popular trends on both sides of the Atlantic—and in a style specific to prison spaces and other citadels.

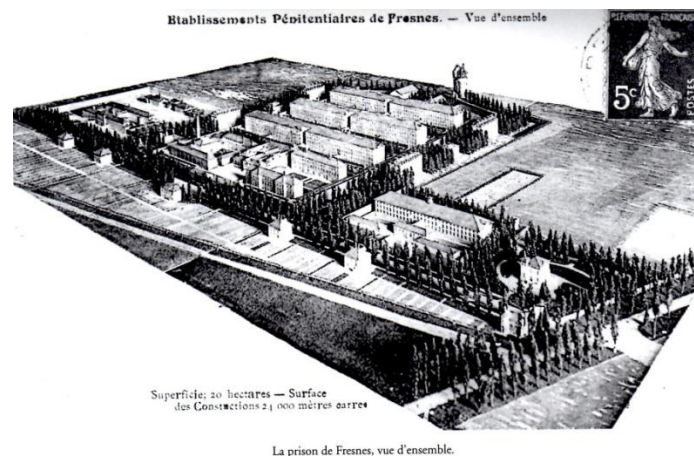


Figure 5.7. In France, the Fresnes Prison represented the New Republic; similarly, in Uruguay it symbolized this country’s own gestures toward modernity (Carlier 128).

Once again, scenes from Carolina De Robertis’ *Invisible Mountain* yield insight into the how the site has been perceived popularly. If previous descriptions of Punta Carretas Penitentiary suggested its nod toward modernity, when the narrator focuses on Eva, Ignazio’s daughter, the reader is reminded of the distinctly fortress-like features of the space:

<sup>197</sup> The prison’s website boasts of its innovative design and break from nineteenth century prison architecture: “inaugurée le 19 juillet 1898, la prison présente une architecture innovante en totale rupture avec les conceptions traditionnelles du XIXe siècle.”

When Eva was very small, her world still lambent and unbroken, she loved to walk past the Punta Carretas prison. She feared it with the vague and hallowed fear of a child, and yet she slowed down as her family passed it on the way to church. Those high, pale walls; that entryway, its lofty arch sealed by iron gates; beyond those gates, a courtyard, and glimpses of the thick-walled thing itself. It was so big. And pretty too, with its castle pattern along the top, the same up-down-up-down shape her brother made when building a fortress in the sand. (81)

As a result, the exterior of Punta Carretas Shopping Center is at once evocative of Montevideo's long and distinguished architectural heritage—with the city's adoption of innovative European styles serving as a metaphor for its own experience of modernity—and of its original reason for being: a penitentiary and the spatial embodiment of discipline and order.

With the exception of an updated placard to accommodate the building's new title and a series of signs tempting potential shoppers to enter, the original façade, wrought-iron fence, and entryway remain virtually unchanged. From beyond its gate, there is little to distinguish the prison of yesteryear from the shopping mall of the present. So similar is the exterior of the repurposed space to that of the past, that a 2009 documentary, aired on the History Channel Latin America, detailing the Tupamaros flight from Punta Carretas Penitentiary juxtaposed images of the current shopping center with old footage of the prison. Even as the program's interlocutors recount the events of the infamous escape from Punta Carretas, thereby rooting the narrative in a bygone era, images of the past meld with those of the present, and establish a continuum between periods. The fact that the present exterior retains the earlier façade produces a similar phenomenological experience in the shopping center's observer. The building's historical significance and its place in popular recollection bond with its current purpose and structural presentation,

thereby inciting memory, rooting it in place, and reinforcing the nature of Punta Carretas Shopping Center as an iconic place of memory, beyond the memorial.

As a testament to historic preservation, the Center's architects even attempted to conserve those traces of memory found deep below the building's foundation. *El País* reported in the days before the Shopping Center's inauguration that engineers had attempted to conserve the tunnel system used in the site's numerous prison breaks, and in the process, had discovered other tunnels previously unrecorded. A photographic exposition of this subterranean web accompanied the opening of the Center. In this way, even those aspects of the building's past that directly implicated it as a detention center both leading up to and during the dictatorship remain intimately tied to the space and its new role. One could even argue that the underground tunnel system—which allowed political prisoners to subvert the even prison's most sophisticated surveillance measures—and the chain of openings that connected one cell to another, find their natural parallel in the web of interior corridors that now connect the back of one shop to another in the completely repurposed Punta Carretas Shopping Center. Although developers did not salvage them as part of the preservation process, the fact that images of the tunnels formed part of the building's reopening, confirms a vested interest in this site not only as an architectural marvel but also as a functional prison for nearly a century and as the iconic site of civil unrest in the years preceding and during the dictatorship.

Fittingly, the building's watchtower and thick retaining wall do not contribute to this site as a cipher of modernity or the city's architectural heritage. Instead, they serve only to further distinguish Punta Carretas Shopping Center as a former prison, giving testimony to the building's more macabre past. The watchtower, in particular, represents



a vestige of the past that performs a similar function in the present. Far taller than the three-story building, the tower announces to all that this place was a correction facility previously, one of the most secure of its time—a fact tinged with irony (see fig. 24). At present, the tower provides the dual function of promoting the mall to potential shoppers and establishing a culture of surveillance, similar to that of a panoptical prison.<sup>198</sup> In this way, the *raison-d'être* of the prison converges with that of the state-of-the-art shopping mall, creating a direct point of contact between the past and the present, and providing a spatial conduit for popular memory. Differing somewhat, the retaining wall that once enclosed this space from the rest of society makes no overt reference to architectural aesthetics, only to prison function. The wall provides no use-value within the current site, other than as a *cicatrix*: scarring both space and memory.



Figure 5.8. Although it is now used as a means to a different end, the original watchtower remains a focal point of the mall. Source: author's photograph.

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<sup>198</sup> In his study of inner-city Los Angeles, Mike Davis maintains that security is an essential feature to the success of a shopping mall and that parallels can be drawn between Bentham's ideal prison space and the modern retail environment: "the guarantee of fail-safe physical security was the *sine qua non* in persuading retailers and franchises (and their insurers) to take up leases. The prototype plan shared by all four shopping centers plagiarizes brazenly from Jeremy Bentham's renowned nineteenth-century design for the 'panopticon prison' with its economical central surveillance" (242).

Even the shopping center's abundant natural light forms part of the building's legacy. *El País* presented this attribute of the mall in the days before its inauguration in a way that calls attention not only to Montevideo's past, particularly its architectural heritage, but also to the shopping center as an updated symbol of modernity. With reference to Borges' comment about Montevideo's faint interior light, the national periodical boasted:

En todo caso el Shopping Center que se inaugura en el predio que ocupó el penal de Punta Carretas sí la tiene. El cuarenta por ciento del techo es vidrio templado, configurando un lucernario de 130 metros que permite mirar al cielo cualquiera sea el punto en que uno se encuentre. A esa agradable sensación que disipa cualquier posible síntoma de claustrofobia se añade la luminosidad que entra a través de paredes variadas ubicadas en lugares estratégicos, que relacionan al visitante con los puntos de referencia del entorno como la torre de la Iglesia de Punta Carretas, por ejemplo. (“La gran cita”)

The author's reference to Montevideo's spatial traditions and implied in the creation of a large skylight spanning the roof of the structure evoke past and present phases of modernity. They also reveal the importance of incorporating the past into the building's repurposing and the history involved in establishing it as a cultural landmark. More subtly, one of the main characteristics of the shopping center, its incorporation of natural light, is also a gesture to its original layout as a prison. The telephone-pole design upon which its architect modeled the prison allowed for greater amounts of light within its interior. In fact, the revolutionary style created a new emphasis on openness and often incorporated large security windows, according to Michel Roth (264). In this way, for all of its symbolic connections to Montevideo's architectural heritage—not to mention its metaphorical implications in reason and modernity—, something as apparently

inoffensive as light can also be understood as indelible to Punta Carretas, the penitentiary and the shopper's paradise.

Perhaps it is the layout of the building itself that best connects the prison of the past with the mall of the present, thereby creating a spatial continuum upon which to observe physical traces of memory. The telephone-pole layout that provided the foundation for both the prison and the shopping mall not only represented the latest in security apparatuses at the time in which Punta Carretas building was constructed, but also boasted a completely revolutionary design. What distinguished this one-time innovative layout was its long central corridor, surrounded on either side by cellblocks, dormitories, administrative offices, and rather tellingly, even small shops. The blueprint for the prison could be easily translated into the familiar language of retail architecture. It is no wonder, then, that the chief architect involved in transforming Punta Carretas Penitentiary into a shopping mall, Juan Carlos López, once referred to the site as a “mall of prisoners.” More specifically, he alluded to the structure's telephone-pole design when describing his first impression of the then derelict prison: “When I first entered the space of the ex-prison, I was impressed because it had three levels with rails facing the central corridor and I said to myself this is a mall, a *mall of prisoners*, and there sprouted the seed of a special idea that I couldn't put out of my mind” (qtd. in Ruetalo 39). As a result, the building's past provides a literal and figurative foundation for its present, demonstrating a spatial continuum between the building's purpose and imprint on Montevideo's city and memoryscape. The function of the site may have changed significantly—at times overlapping but never converging completely—, but its blueprint remains the same, by providing a foundation for traces of the past and memory.

Therefore, although other theorists may argue that the renovated site shrouds the past and ultimately dulls memory, Punta Carretas Shopping Center and remnants of its prior use as a penitentiary reveal—rather than conceal—the past. Testimonies of the past, here in tangible form, interrupt the otherwise banal, safe space of the shopping mall and provide a gateway to memory. In fact, remainders of what the building once was represent what philosopher Dylan Trigg and others have called traces of memory (Casey 2009). Traces of past events—in this case, the building’s original features—are not a substitute for memory itself.<sup>199</sup> Instead, they revive memory from oblivion and represent its embodiment in the present. Traces of memory are often spatial, as Trigg confirms: “Images [of the past] are possible because memory presupposes a ‘trace’, stored until retrieval. Thus, memory of the past is caused by present remembering which relies upon the notion that traces guarantee a bond between past and present. Correlating memory traces with spatial metaphors is unavoidable” (*Aesthetics* 59). These traces of the past allow memory to remain ambiguous and non-linear. In other words, what prompts recall appears less overt than the plaques and markers that define official sites of memory and instruct participants on what to remember. Punta Carretas’ testimonies of its prior existence as a prison—as a site of modernity and infamy—co-exist with its modern features as a luxury shopping mall, not to erase memory but to keep it in place.

In fact, in addition to exemplifying the debate favoring preservation, this study maintains finally that Punta Carretas Shopping Center also reflects similar campaigns to

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<sup>199</sup> Trigg’s analysis of modern urban ruins influences his interpretation memory traces, which he suggests are more powerful among sites in disrepair: “preserving the state of disrepair establishes a constant reminder of an event which is grounded in the assumption that the act of destruction imparted a trace upon the building” (60). This chapter suggests the opposite: that traces of memory, like those found in Punta Carretas, stand in stark contrast to their modern, rehabilitated surroundings, and, thus, call memory to the past unexpectedly.

map out a more democratic city directly following the dictatorship and then again after Uruguay's integration to the Mercosur regional trade bloc in 1991. Proponents of this revision of the cityscape intended urban terrain to match the newly democratic political system, to encompass greater collective engagement, awareness of the environment, and, of course, a common respect for the country's architectural and cultural heritage among its features. With the exception of *Grupo de estudios urbanos*, architects, urbanists, and city leaders began working in earnest in 1985, the year in which Uruguay returned to democratic governance. That year, the newly elected Dr. Julio Sanguinetti, members of his cabinet, and the UNESCO organization presided over a forum in which participants proposed creative changes to the city of Montevideo. The results from that forum resulted in the publication, one year later, of a work titled *Propuestas a la ciudad Montevideo—1986*. The text outlines a uniform plan to reinvent Montevideo according to their ideals of the democratic cityscape.

The axiom underlying this work and its portrayal of the democratic cityscape upholds modernity and democracy as mutually beneficial, wherein the past must always influence modernization projects. *Propuestas* contributors Drs. Pedro Mercader and Antonio Viña appeal to cultural identity as a facet of modernization in their prologue: “la modernización del Uruguay no puede realizarse sin recrear su propia identidad cultural, de lo cual son muy conscientes los proyectistas al tener especial cuidado en la preservación, calificación y dinamización de elementos existentes en la ciudad,” and conclude the work by stressing the importance incorporating the old with the new: “resulta fundamental incorporar a la ciudad tradicional los tejidos generados en la Ciudad Moderna. En estos casos, las prioridades y urgencias exigen incorporar edificaciones

nuevas, rellenar vacíos urbanos con nuevos trozos de ciudad, reurbanizar los espacios abiertos” (200). *Propuestas* gives credit to the *Grupo de Estudios Urbanos* for its tireless efforts to promote historic preservation and the city’s architectural heritage, and proposes that only by integrating the spaces and traditions of the past to those of the present and future can the city of Montevideo hope to reflect the country’s return to democracy.<sup>200</sup>

In this way, movements to memorialize the capital’s long and distinguished architectural heritage were motivated by more than just aesthetics. Rather, proponents of democratizing the cityscape united preservation with urban planning immediately following the dictatorship, and during the ten years leading to the country’s inclusion in the Mercosur.<sup>201</sup> In fact, Mariano Arana, who transitioned during that period from the figurehead of the *Grupo de estudios urbanos* to a senior official in the municipal government and eventually to mayor of Montevideo, stressed the importance of urban restoration and defended its place alongside other concepts he considered parallel, such as social integration and a common respect for diversity. In collaboration with the Urban Planning Board of the municipal government, Arana outlined *Plan Montevideo* in 1997, a citywide plan to further the democratic ideals articulated earlier in the post-dictatorship period. *Plan Montevideo* hoped to steer conservation efforts away from the creation and designation of monuments, and towards the preservation of other historic spaces. A desire

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<sup>200</sup> The Introduction of *Propuestas* reminds the reader: “la labor de Grupo de Estudios Urbanos... logró asociar la ciudad con el momento socio-político reciente de la crisis y el manejo autoritario y conservador de la realidad urbana, reivindicando con entusiasmo una nueva actitud hacia la ciudad” (7).

<sup>201</sup> In 1992, the City of Montevideo created the *Unidad Central de Planificación Municipal*—or the Municipal Central Planning Board—to oversee city and environmental concerns. The Board recognized the destruction and deterioration of historic buildings as a problem in its 1994 publication *Montevideo: Visión de ciudad: document de discusión*. For this organization, as with those already mentioned in this chapter, historic preservation became a question of promoting democratic ideals and civic inclusion: “la idea de preservación supera el propósito de conservación del pasado y el concepto de monumento, para proyectarse en el futuro de la ciudad, con la atención de los bienes patrimoniales socialmente significativos” (27). The authors further parallel visions of a democratic city with protection from radical changes to the real estate environment: “una concepción democrática de la ciudad debe preservar dicha área de la especulación de tierras que puede tener como grave consecuencia la expulsión de gran parte de sus habitantes” (29).

to reinforce the city's collective identity and its relationship to the past contextualizes this definition of urban recuperation. "Preservar los barrios tradicionales de Montevideo no solamente por sus características testimoniales sino por su valor como elementos fortalecedor de la identidad colectiva, y como modelo alternativo al de la ciudad segregada espacial y socialmente," in the words of *Plan Montevideo*'s authors, integrated historic preservation to visions of a more democratic Montevideo (161). Far from treating the city as a living museum or an architectural taxonomy of the past, these city officials, architects, and other visionaries from the time hoped that memory of the past and its everyday artifacts would solidify a more inclusive, democratic city.

The fact that discussions for the architectural groundwork of Uruguay's newly democratic capital existed well into the post-dictatorship period, and the country's inclusion in the regional trade bloc in the early 1990s is not coincidental. For some, like theorist and current National Director of Culture Hugo Achugar, the small country's addition to the Mercosur signaled a brand of democracy based more on forgetting than on preserving the past. From Achugar's perspective, joining the trade alliance reinforced the market-driven reforms of the dictatorship period and signaled yet another wedge separating Uruguay from its troubled past. In fact, Achugar parallels economic integration with the reopening of Punta Carretas Penitentiary as Punta Carretas Shopping Center, since both represent yet another launching pad for Uruguay's modernizing leap:

En el marco del proyecto de un Uruguay moderno que busca su nueva función histórica en el proceso de integración del Mercosur, el discurso hegemónico promueve una versión edénica del país. El Punta Carretas Shopping forma parte de esa edenización del país a la que aspira el discurso modernizador y "pacificador" al presentarse como un espacio "seguro" en que la antigua violencia ha sido erradicada. ("Territorios y memorias" 9)

This point of view suggests that Punta Carretas Shopping Center reveals, at best, Uruguay's attempt to rebuild its democracy on a foundation of the regional and international marketplace, an interpretation which steers the repurposed site away from its past and towards further cultural, political, and economic integration.

There is little doubt that Punta Carretas Shopping Center demonstrates Uruguay's commitment to expanding its economic and commercial spheres during and following the dictatorship period. Yet the cultural politics of the era—that strove to marry historic conservation with the country's return to democracy—have also imprinted this site with its function as a memoryscape. The penitentiary-turned shopping center arguably represents a more inclusive interpretation of modernity, a nod to its role as one among many symbols of Uruguay's newest phase of democracy. In fact, with the regional trade partnership in mind, architect Julio César Abella Trías evokes that rhetoric used immediately following the dictatorship to defend notions of the democratic city, when he suggests that Uruguayan modernity establish itself on foundation of the past.<sup>202</sup> From this perspective, prior versions of modernity, which served only to erase the past, should yield to an updated model which, in the architect's words, “contempla la ciudad como es, realizando debidamente sus valores, creando centros de interés... que tienen los Monumentos Históricos que se levantan al lado de los modernos edificios torres, mostrando que el alma de la nueva ciudad convive y se nutre de las mejores tradiciones del pasado” (88). By symbolizing this updated interpretation of modernization in Uruguay, Punta Carretas Shopping Center reveals not only its continued indelibility to

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<sup>202</sup> He writes: “Necesitamos emprender un nuevo camino con la modernidad de sus soluciones, que hagan que todos se sientan responsables de su ciudad, en momentos en que la integración latinoamericana con el Mercosur, será una realidad para mejorar la vida de nuestros pueblos” (9).



Montevideo's urban, political, and memoryscapes, but also the extent to which ideas of democracy and modernity were redefined to incorporate the past to the present.

Indeed, the very architectural features that uncover the building's past also reveal its aspirations of uniting the past and the present to forge a new brand of modernity in the democratic country. *El País*, in its report on the reopening of the site, lists the Center's modern features alongside its commitment to architectural integrity and history, or "diseño arquitectónico vanguardista y rupturista" and "patrimonio histórico propio," respectively ("El martes 5"). In particular, the report suggests how its modern and historic features underscore in tandem the Center's democratic function as a place of congregation. For example, the site's original interior archway—once an imposing feature of the penitentiary—now provides as a central meeting spot for people of all ages: "[el] enorme arco que ahora será el punto de encuentro en el hall de entrada del Shopping Center" (see fig. 25). Thus an artifact from the Center's past function adapts to its current role as a place that materializes the aspirations of a more democratic, inclusive cityscape.



Figure 5.9. The central archway of Punta Carretas Shopping Center, testament to the site's past as a penitentiary, currently serves as a focal and meeting point for shoppers. Source: author's photograph.

A two-page ad in *El País* on the day of Punta Carretas Shopping Center's inauguration underscores themes of modernization and democracy, and identifies the site as a pastiche of historic and modern architectural features. Similar to the site itself, the advertisement subtly revives memories of the dictatorship while also providing a framework for the democratic city. That the ad reads 'Usted merecía un shopping así,' or 'you deserved this kind of mall,' simultaneously attracts the attention of an individual as well as collective audience (see fig. 26). The ad obliquely implies that after many long years of struggle and hardship, the people of Uruguay deserve not just another shopping mall, but one that is both luxurious and committed to democratic ideals—as a recompense for what they have endured. Although the mall's lavishness implies exclusivity, the text appearing alongside each letter highlights the Center's inclusive elements. In the position of greatest prominence, within the 'u' of *usted*, the text underscores the union of historic and modern architectural features: "El diseño exterior del Punta Carretas Shopping Center conjuga armoniosamente la recuperación de los valores arquitectónicos de la construcción original." This important distinction provides a central gateway through which to present subsequent texts, some of which highlight the site's democratic features, including its location on a major intercity bus route and the incorporation of naturally lit interior gardens, intended as much for respite as for public congregation. The final block of text provides a counterpoint to the first and stresses the site's new role as a point of encounter for all Uruguayans: "El Punta Carretas Shopping será el 'Punto de Encuentro' de los uruguayos donde todos los aspectos de la vida social y cultural tendrán un espacio propio." Therefore, although the commercial center—evoked, here, through an advertisement—indeed represents Uruguay's inclusion in the

international marketplace, as Achugar has already claimed, its various appeals to the past, its mark on the cultural politics of the time, and its status as a symbol of a renewed, modernizing democracy all reveal Punta Carretas Shopping Center as a nuanced place indelible to that country's memoryscape.



Figure 5.10. The central message of this ad appeals to a select group of people, while its intermittent text reveals a more nuanced and inclusive message. Source: author's photograph.

Similarly, that the majority of the Center's shops are local or regionally operated, suggests that the space has not undergone some form of capitalist whitewashing as a result of Uruguay's participation in the MERCOSUR trade bloc, as Hugo Achugar has suggested. Instead, the nature of the Punta Carretas Shopping experience, although high-end, is distinctly local, and even includes the brick-and-mortar outfit of a national artisans' cooperative: Manos del Uruguay. The shops just beyond the enclosed storefronts do not suggest a completely foreign or unfamiliar experience, thus; instead, they underscore the local, rooted, and highly contextual reality of shopping at Punta Carretas.

In this way, when understood in its totality—from its inception to the present—the Punta Carretas site reveals the ability of memory to inscribe itself on place, not just on the memorials designated to prompt and store collective remembrance. Its history as a site of modernity and infamy coupled with the efforts of urbanists first to preserve

Montevideo's cityscape and then to inscribe it with democratic ideals, influenced the preservation of this iconic site and linked it indelibly to the past. As a consequence, the Punta Carretas Shopping Center reveals what others have taken for granted: the many and varied places and manifestations of modernity often serve as the foundation for contemporary urban memoryscapes.

## CHAPTER 6

### Conclusion: Towards Public Memoryscapes

While changing, it rests.

—Heraclitus

Throughout this study, I have sought to identify moments in which modern urban scenes do not erase, but rather stage literary, cinematic, and spatial narratives of memory in the post-dictatorial Southern Cone. In the process, I intended to demonstrate that memory remains a vital aspect of everyday life and, therefore, continues to imprint the cityscape beyond those sites designated as official memorials. The works I have analyzed in this study demonstrate that memoryscapes recur among those landscapes previously dissociated from remembrance: places of transit and uniformity, repurposed places, entire cities on the brink of ruin. Emergent memoryscapes suggest complementary efforts to work through memories of the past and to understand with greater clarity its influence on the present, since space becomes a medium through which to articulate memory. As a consequence, those places most emblematic of the legacy of the Southern Cone dictatorships—places symbolic, more generally, of international commerce, mobility, and modernity—provide a staging ground for articulating memory.

The second chapter of this dissertation examined the intersection of personal memory and transit as evidenced in Alberto Fuguet's *Las películas de mi vida* (2003). In particular, drawing on cinematic themes recurrent throughout the novel, this chapter understood the generic, often homogeneous places along the narrator's itinerary between Chile and the United States metaphorically as blank screens upon which to project

memories of the past. These so-called nondescript non-places act as an *aide-mémoire* throughout the novel—not as a symbol of oblivion. Similarly, these sites along the narrator’s journey support meaningful, spontaneous social interaction between Beltrán and others, consequently advancing his memory reels. By the novel’s end, the narrator has not only catalogued memories of his formative years—including those of the early dictatorship—but also transformed the present-day cartography into a memoryscape of the past.

The third chapter also sought to identify spatial expressions of memory—in this case, however, through urban transformation and the disappearance of historic residences from the cityscape. My analysis of Ignacio Agüero’s 2000 documentary *Aquí se construye o, El lugar donde nací ya no existe* reveals that urbanization, although thought to undermine memory, simultaneously piques recollection and sentiments of nostalgia. As older buildings begin to disappear from the cityscape—only to be replaced by newer, modern high-rises—the documentary races to document the remaining structures, archiving them visually for posterity. Likewise, by relying on a testimonial style of filmmaking, the documentary records inhabitants’ memories of the neighborhood and, more specifically, the structures that gave shape to those memories. Although notions of a static, almost immemorial past threaten to dull the impact of memory almost as much as do the demolished buildings themselves, *Aquí se construye* ultimately demonstrates that memory remains a constant, amid continuous change.

The fourth and fifth chapters dovetail with the second by incorporating urban ruins and their absence, through historic preservation, to narratives of memory. Sergio Chejfec’s 1992 novel *El aire*, which I analyze in the fourth chapter, connects memory to

urban ruins—wherein the appearance of ruins along the contours of the Buenos Aires cityscape foretell this city’s precarious economic ascent and crash during the post-dictatorship. This city’s ruin, I argue, ultimately inverts the nineteenth-century dichotomy that sought to categorize urban spaces as civilized and rural spaces as barbarous. By rewriting this classification of space and exposing urban ruins, the novel suggests that residual memory of a violent past—and other cultural residue of the dictatorship—can undermine already faulty narratives of the city as a beacon of civilization and, by extension, unwavering progress.

*Nueve reinas* (2000), also analyzed in the fourth chapter of this dissertation, and Uruguay’s Punta Carretas Shopping Center, analyzed in the fifth chapter, demonstrate how memory continues to imprint place, even among those sites repurposed through historic preservation. I juxtapose Fabian Bielinski’s blockbuster crime film to *El aire* in the fourth chapter to demonstrate the absence of ruins in the same city. Although the film’s Puerto Madero setting captures a repurposed ruin—a port space once fallen into disuse and disrepair, later restored as a tourist destination—it maintains a link to the past through contemporary Argentine imagination. Far from symbolizing the erasure of popular memory from the cityscape, the absence of ruins in this context emblemizes the post-dictatorship experience and its transformation of the cityscape via neoliberal reform.

Similarly, I propose in chapter four that the Punta Carretas Shopping Center of Montevideo, Uruguay, although also a repurposed space, maintains traceable vestiges of memory and the past. Its current embodiment as a shopping mall might seem to undermine this site’s past first as a prison and then as a detention center during the dictatorship. Yet material traces of this past and efforts to partially preserve the site—as

opposed to razing it completely—help to bind Punta Carretas to popular and individual memory. Thus, even in an era when, as Lipovetsky argues, the past is “revamped, recycled, updated, exploited for commercial ends,” manifestations of the past incorporated into repurposing projects can continue to prompt recollection and serve as a medium through which to articulate memory (60).

Beyond tropes of mobility and memory, however, a common theme among each of these chapters, heretofore underexplored in this dissertation, is that of public space and social participation. The fear that modern built environments undermine memory and its expression parallels a similar, complementary fear that these sites also disavow a sense of publicness and collective engagement. To be sure, geographer Don Mitchell writes that many trends in modern urbanism, such as that already discussed in this dissertation, weaken the public sphere and its influence on civil interaction. He writes:

In the hyper-planned urban public spaces of the postmodern city, as in the spaces of the mall, the ‘impression of transparency’ and the ability to move without resistance is made possible only by planning for the overall *orchestration* of individuals’ movement... People become comfortable by giving up their active political *involvement* in space and acquiescing instead of becoming *spectators* of the urban ‘scene.’ (138)<sup>203</sup>

Despite Mitchell’s observation, in the process of demonstrating instances in which the urban fabric of the post-dictatorial Southern Cone continues to incite literary, cinematic, and spatial narratives of memory, I also build a case for the continued publicness of the hyper-modern cityscape and its hallmarks: so-called non-places and other built environments. Consequently, here I hope to complement the second chapter of this

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<sup>203</sup> Bauman expresses a similar preoccupation that non-place diminishes public space: “Non-places do not require a mastery of the sophisticated and hard-to-study art of civility, since they reduce behavior in public to a few simple and easy-to-grasp precepts. Because of the simplification, they are not schools of civility either. And since these days they ‘occupy so much space’, since they colonize ever larger chunks of public space and refashion them in their own likeness, the occasions to learn the art of civility are ever fewer and further between” (102). However, I argue that so-called non-places, including airspace, do exhibit public, socially centered qualities.



dissertation by focusing on Uruguay's newly constructed Carrasco International Airport as a concrete example of the more public elements of modern sites of mobility.

The Carrasco International Airport, or officially the *Aeropuerto Internacional de Carrasco General Cesareo L. Berisso*, provides a fine example of the intersection—not bifurcation—of modern themes of mobility and public life. The result of this, I argue, echoes what Urry has already observed about airports in general: “airspace is a place of material organization and considerable social complexity. They are not simply ‘non-places’” (147). Fittingly, Uruguay's only international airport underwent a major expansion in 2008 to include a new passenger terminal, with the short-term goal of increasing the airport's yearly capacity of over one million passengers and the long-term goal of increasing tourism and trade in the region. In this way, this airport is more than just a site of transit between final destinations; instead, Uruguay's Carrasco International Airport mirrors major themes of the post-dictatorship already outlined in this dissertation.

Although Rafael Viñoly, the Uruguayan-born architect commissioned to undertake this project, has commented on the paucity of public space among modern cityscapes, he acknowledges the ability of the architect to incorporate public elements to modern structures, and to establish what he calls “a certain sense of the responsibility that every investment of this nature represents in the civic and public realm” (“A sense” 1). In fact, on the website of his New York-based firm, Viñoly defines his design philosophy and, more generally, architecture, as

a dialogue with the forces of life. As a major form of social intervention, its essential responsibility is to elevate the public realm. In every project, I seek to maximize the opportunity for civic investment with a goal of forming iconic works that fulfill the needs of the client. For me, this makes architecture the most unique form of artistic endeavor. (n.p.)

Viñoly applied this belief to his expansion and, indeed, revisioning of the Carrasco International airport, thereby taking into account how the air terminal would surely be used—as a place where family and friends gather to welcome or farewell loved ones—and how it could potentially be used—as a place of congregation and as a destination in its own right.

Without succumbing to the biographical fallacy, I believe it is relevant to note that Viñoly roots his design philosophy not only in a vested desire to promote public usage of space, but also his own history as a political exile of Argentina’s Dirty War. After he witnessed a shooting at the School of Architecture at the University of Buenos Aires, grappled with the disappearance of a close friend, and himself became an investigated person, Viñoly and his family left Argentina for the United States in 1979. In an interview with Lars Müller, Viñoly referenced this period and a lack of accessibility common to Argentine society as the genesis of his architectural vision. With reference to the Kimmel Center in Philadelphia, Viñoly articulates his belief in “translating those formal ideas [of urban context and scale] into designs incorporating genuine accessibility and openness to the public at large.” In the same interview, he outlines his understanding of the power of modernity to undergird civic participation, often by reinterpreting traditional spaces:

to create the sense that the traditional lobby has been replaced by a new kind of civic space, we enclosed the [Kimmel Center and concert hall for the Philadelphia Orchestra] within a rectangular glass-and-brick perimeter and gave them a glass barrel-vault roof. This unified public space fosters a sense of community among visitors... You can’t avoid seeing other people; there are no barriers. (“Viñoly” 125)

Similarly, Viñoly designed the Carrasco International terminal to contrast purposefully with a political past bent on diminishing public participation, and to dispel fears that increased mobility necessarily dulls collective identity.

To this end, Uruguay's new international terminal recognizes both the intended and the circumstantial uses of this space, with each of its three striations accommodating these distinct forms of use. The ground level of the building channels the arrivals, and the first floor directs flight registration, security and departures. Nothing novel exists about these aspects, for they do nothing more than facilitate rote transit and thereby sustain the overt use-value of the airport terminal. The second floor of the terminal space, however, which cannot be viewed in its entirety from the first floor, provides a public zone, including several benches, a small manicured green space, and ceiling-to-floor views of the concourse (see fig. 27). This naturally lit and welcoming strip of the terminal provides a site for travelers and non-travelers alike to congregate, thus reinforcing the public elements of airports, what Deyan Sudjic has called "the surrogate for the public realm."

He writes:

The airport, alongside the museum, and the shopping mall, is one of the key public spaces that serve to define the contemporary city... one that offers at least the illusion of a meeting place in which the rich and poor are in closer proximity than almost anywhere else in an increasingly economically segregated world. (148)

To be sure, the public zone and other areas of the airport, as well as facilitating contact among diverse members of society, also maintain spaces designated for cultural use (see fig. 28).<sup>204</sup> In this way, Uruguay's biggest airport supports the public attributes common

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<sup>204</sup> Viñoly refers to one of his most important projects, the Tokyo International Forum, in a way that resembles his airport design: "The plaza is both a space of transit and a destination, both a void between buildings and a positive volume. The ambiguity in the legibility of the space is intentional. People can

among these kinds of spaces and reflects more universal trends to incorporate the dynamic elements of urbanism into airport design.



Figure 6.1. Viñoly incorporated areas of public congregation to terminal design. Source: author's photograph.



Figure 6.2. A photographic exposition on display in May of 2010 titled “El Uruguay visto desde el cielo,” which provided a bird’s eye view of popular Uruguayan destinations and industry, exemplifies the airport’s cultural installations. Source: author’s photograph.

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actually feel propelled through the space but, at the same time, have the sense that this is a static place. A series of civic functions—a library-mediatech, restaurants, cafes, shops, an art gallery, and a 24 hour multimedia theater that tells the story of Japan—provide the activities that give the space its public character” (20). The Carrasco terminal also exhibits public characteristics by providing a space for travelers and non-travelers to congregate.

More than just defining the cities they serve, airports like Carrasco International often mimic these cityscapes. Architect and champion of sustainable design Brian Edwards maintains that trends in contemporary airport design seek to create within these sites a microcosm of already existing urban landscapes, complete with commercial, cultural, and congregational space.<sup>205</sup> Although airports are not the sole embodiment of the civic public sphere—instead, they form part of a constellation of urban public spaces—a demonstrated commitment to modeling these sites on real cityscapes redirects attention toward their city-like qualities and away from their purely functional attributes. In this vein, like the cities that surround them and upon which they are based, airports can contribute to a sense of public space simply by providing complex sites of collective engagement, imagination, and memory creation.

Fittingly, as a gesture towards its public and civic features, the airport's main exit—although it may seem paradoxical, the exit from the arrival section—displays a photographic installation composed only of the headshots of participating Uruguayans. A caption below the collection of miniature portraits reads: *5.000 uruguayos les da la bienvenida*, or 5,000 Uruguayans welcome you (see fig. 29). This attribute of the terminal assists in distinguishing Carrasco International from other airports and evokes those elements of air travel and mobility in general that reinforce individual and social relationships. Likewise, the installation functions similarly to the public zone of the airport in that the photographs slow movement to a halt—for passersby either to find one's own picture or to identify that of a friend or loved one, not entirely unrealistic in a

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<sup>205</sup> Edwards notes that, similar to other forms of urban planning, airport design demands a long-term vision which sees beyond the more manifest use-value of this site as a place of transit: "Airports are our new cities and need all the qualities we associate with real places. That means a commitment to urban and landscape design, to building as well as interior design, to long-term visions (50 years) rather than short-term goals, and to city-making rather than airport-making" (xii).

country as small as Uruguay. More symbolically, the installation suggests that people and the infinite connections among them inscribe meaning on place and from it shape memorable experiences. In this vein, that this photographic installation resembles those so often created to remember the disappeared acts ostensibly as a trace of memory of that period (see fig. 30). Although it does not share the same commemorative attributes as these politically charged collages, the Carrasco International installation underscores the ability of photography to preserve fleeting moments for posterity and to create a sense of collective belonging, and suggests the likelihood that traces of memory can appear unexpectedly along all contours of the cityscape.



Figure 6.3. The Carrasco International exhibit suggests that a larger public is indelible to the airport space. Source: author's photograph.



Figure 6.4. These walls of photographs commemorating the disappeared formed part of Argentina's larger bicentennial celebration in May of 2009. Source: author's photograph.

In this way, airports and other sites of mobility may assist in creating new memoryscapes by demonstrating that memory extends beyond fixed, immobile sites of remembrance. By acting as miniature and contained cityscapes, airports become another staging ground for the performance of everyday life. Consequently, Edwards rightly argues that these sites often exhibit tension between their utilitarian function as places of transit and their more abstract characteristics as public, social places that can produce and sustain memory:

Public transport architecture is torn between utility and the romantic... The volume of the building acts as a container for memories as much as it provides the mere means of access to continents and the growing number of planes that serve them. This is perhaps why the building type has evolved not just into a space of height and volume but into a landscape of romantic and cultural associations. (xv)

Accordingly, architect Hans Ibelings similarly argues that airports have replaced museums in importance as sites of interest and international attention (78). Themes of meaningful social interaction, long-term sustainability, and local culture indelible to contemporary design can ensure that airports function as more than just nondescript,

utilitarian sites of mobility, by positioning these sites as destinations in and of themselves.

Justifiably, airports ultimately mirror, in Edwards' estimation, "the aspirations, wealth, and prestige of the country" (29). The construction of a new airport or the expansion of an existing space represents a major event in the life of a city and, in many cases, an entire nation. The Carrasco International Airport provides an example of how airport space acts not only as a site of public congregation and comingling, but also as the gateway to a country, through its efforts to welcome travelers to Uruguay. A space between the ground and first floors welcomes arriving passengers to Uruguay—"Mundo, bienvenido a Uruguay," or "Welcome to Uruguay, world"—as they descend the escalator, and, conversely, introduces departing passengers to the world—"Uruguay, bienvenido al mundo," or "Uruguay, welcome to the world" (see fig. 31). Depending on the direction that she faces—whether she arrives or departs the country—the traveler enters this important gateway to the world or she exits it, setting foot on Uruguayan territory. In this way, by identifying itself with public cityscapes, the airport provides a meaningful first impression and intertwines with the world beyond its walls.



Figure 6.5. The traveler is welcomed to Uruguay before she exits the airport space. Source: author's photograph.



Airports may not conjure ideas of political participation with the same intensity as a city plaza or a nineteenth-century salon, especially in a region of the world whose city squares have acted and continue to act as the most significant spatial manifestation of the *vox populi*. However, like many other sites symbolizing an era of boundless transit, airports exhibit qualities previously disregarded as part of their constitution—chiefly, their ability to undergird memory and, as I have shown, foster a sense of public space. When understood as a constellation of spaces, this and the other so-called non-places examined in this dissertation reveal how mobility can project memory and ideas of collectivity beyond notions of fixed, permanent spatial constructions and toward sites of seemingly effortless mobility. In this way, the fact that such keystones of social life as memory and human interaction now conform more to routes than to roots does not suggest that they have diminished in importance. Instead, as a means of maintaining their bearing on the present, these phenomena articulate themselves through new, ever-evolving surroundings. In an age of mobility and unyielding change, assigning memory exclusively to ideas of permanence and designated spatial fixtures is, almost surely, to condemn it to oblivion. Instead, the persistence of memory ensures that memoryscapes can emerge among even the most unsuspected and generic of landscapes, confirming memory's constructability, not destructibility: a constant amid perpetual change.

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Yates, Frances. *The Art of Memory*. Chicago: U Chicago P, 1966. Print.

Young, James. *The Texture of Memory: Holocaust Memorials and Meaning*. New Haven: Yale UP, 1993. Print.



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Curriculum Vita

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Date of birth: December 12, 1981  
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**EDUCATION**

M.A. Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky, 2007  
Coursework in Latin American studies, Universidad de la República, Montevideo, Uruguay, 2008  
B.A. Hiram College, 2004, *magna cum laude*  
Majors: Spanish and Latin American Studies, with honors  
Minor: Economics

**ACADEMIC AND CREATIVE PUBLICATIONS**

“Novela en blanco: los espacios poéticos de *La última niebla* de María Luisa Bombal.” *South Carolina Modern Language Review*, 2010.  
“Ignacio Agüero’s *Aquí se construye, o, El lugar donde nació ya no existe* and the Will to Urbanize.” *ALEPH*, 2009.  
“Mapping the Non-places of Memory: Reading the City in Alberto Fuguet’s *Las películas de mi vida*.” *Ciberletras*, 2008.  
“Parque Rodó.” *Paréntesis*, 2008.  
“De la calle a la autopista de la información: *Las Precarias a la deriva* y sus sitios de resistencia.” *Letras Femeninas*, 2008.

**CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS**

“An Unlikely Memorial: Punta Carretas Shopping Mall and the Politics of Memory.” MMLA, November 2010.  
“Testimony and the City: The Spatial Politics of Memory and Forgetting in Ignacio Agüero’s *Aquí se construye*.” LASA, October 2010.  
“Punta Carretas Shopping Mall and the Spatial Politics of Memory.” University of Kentucky Graduate Student Interdisciplinary Conference, April 2009.  
“Entre la utilidad y la patria: José Celestino Mutis, Francisco José de Caldas y la reinención científica de América.” The South Atlantic Modern Language Association, November 2007.  
“Reinterpreting Familial Bliss in Diamela Eltit’s *El cuarto mundo*.” The Midwest Modern Language Association, November 2006.  
Chair, Women’s Studies Panel, The Midwest Modern Language Association, November 2006.  
Discussant, “Exteriorizing Women.” The Midwest Modern Language Association, Nov., 2005.  
“Artificial Realities: The Politics of Space in Diamela Eltit’s *Mano de obra* and *Lumpérica*.” Kentucky Foreign Language Conference, April 2005.

**AWARDS**

Department of Hispanic Studies award for excellence in teaching, 2007  
McCrary Award for the outstanding second-year graduate student, 2007

## **RESEARCH GRANTS**

Dissertation Enhancement Award, 2010 (\$3,000)

Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholarship, 2008 (\$26,000)

University of Kentucky Education Abroad Scholarship, 2008 (\$1,000)

University of Kentucky Conference Travel Grant, 2005-Present (\$1,200)

## **TEACHING EXPERIENCE**

Teaching Assistant SPA 314, University of Kentucky, Spring 2010

Teaching Assistant SPA 202, University of Kentucky, 2009

Teaching Assistant SPA 201, University of Kentucky, 2007

Teaching Assistant SPA 102, University of Kentucky, Spring 2007

Course Leader SPA 101, University of Kentucky, Fall 2006

Teaching Assistant SPA 101, University of Kentucky, 2005-2006

## **ADDITIONAL PROFESSIONAL SERVICE**

### **Rotary International Ambassadorial Scholar, RI District 6780, 2008**

- Gave formal speeches to Rotary clubs in Montevideo, Uruguay and the U.S.
- Collaborated with four Rotary clubs and Rotary International District 6780 to facilitate international community service project
- Authored and received Rotary International Matching Grant for \$5,000
- Designed website for Rotary-sponsored community center

### **Assistant to the Director of Graduate Studies, Department of Hispanic Studies, University of Kentucky, Fall 2006-2007**

- Worked directly with the Director of Graduate Studies to recruit 16 students to doctoral program in Hispanic Studies
- Revised Graduate Student Handbook for the benefit of 50-person department
- Assisted in maintaining department website; proficient in Adobe Dreamweaver
- Drafted official correspondence in the name of the Director

### **Editorial Board/Co-Director of Marketing, *disClosure: Journal of Social Theory*, University of Kentucky, 2007**

- Reviewed submissions for publication with an eight-member board
- Copy edited submissions selected for publication
- Solicited yearly subscriptions from major U.S. libraries

### **Director of Communications, Middlebury College Spanish School, Middlebury, VT, 2006-2007**

- Created and maintained public-access website
- Served as liaison between the Middlebury College technology staff and faculty
- Assisted over 50 faculty members with educational technology
- Designed weekly newsletter and promotional materials

## **LANGUAGES**

Native speaker of English; near-native speaker of Spanish; conversational Portuguese; advanced reading knowledge of French and Latin

## **REFERENCES**

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