

# SITES OF MEMORY AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF DEMOCRACY: SPAIN AND CHILE

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**Abstract:** This article compares the histories of two sites of memory located in the capital cities of Spain and Chile. Both sites are considered outstanding symbols of the last military dictatorship and their evolution over the past decade reflects the difficult construction of public discourses on dictatorial violence. Both processes take place at the end of two transitions to democracies that have followed similar patterns and have interacted with each other in many ways. Still, these two societies have handled very differently the dictatorial past and its representations.

**Keywords:** Sites of memory, military dictatorship, transition to democracy, Chile, Spain

## I. INTRODUCTION

This article presents a reflection on “urban representations” of past state or institutional violence in two contemporary democratic regimes that have followed dictatorial ones. The investigation adopts the perspective of memory studies, which is to say, that its final objective are the social and collective processes

related to memory –as a cultural phenomenon that can be defined as the *present of the past*<sup>1</sup>-, and that has specific representations, practices and politics. In particular I refer to memories related to a past of dictatorship, characterized by different forms of institutional violence, physical and symbolic.

Following this perspective, the observation focuses on certain spaces, which can be considered as *sites of memory*. Urban places or buildings or ruins that somehow have a symbolic linkage to the dictatorial past: prisons and detention centers, but also monuments, buildings of public administration, landscapes, etc. These places are like special “lenses” through which we can observe the social administration of the past: the ways the society conserves, destroys, transforms, recycles these places, shows –intentionally or not- the relations that the society maintains with a specific past, and the practices and politics *of memory* that have been implemented to deal with it in different moments. I focus especially on places that belong to urban space, and therefore are domains reserved to State authorities and governments –that are the ones

that can finally decide what to do with them-, thus their stories can show the relations between “official” or State memories, and other types of memories that emerge in public space. I am especially interested in the modalities and possibilities of social participation in the public decisions related to memory, which can be an aspect of the relation between memory and democracy.

The comparison focuses on the cases of Chile and Spain, two societies that have gone through relatively recent and comparable processes of transition to democracy, after a military dictatorship: the Pinochet regime, from 1973 till 1990 in Chile; and the francoist regime from 1939 till 1975 in Spain. In both cases, transition to democracy has meant a difficult process of conflict and re-adjustment in many fields, with a dictatorial regime leaving the government with a great level of legitimacy. One of the matters that have been objects of conflicts and claims in recent years, are the so called “politics of memory”, and, especially, the public administration of the violence connected with the dictatorship. This violence has been and still is in different ways a problematic heritage that democratic regimes have to manage in both countries.

The interest of this comparative investigation moves from the fact that those two societies seem to handle in very different ways their dictatorial past. There surely are infinite differences between both processes, starting from their chronology, but at the same time, there have been important similarities. On one hand, the political path of both transitional processes were designed on the same model (the so called *Spanish model*) and, on the other hand, in the last decade, both countries have experienced changes and mutual connections in the field of politics of memory: in social ac-

tivism against impunity, Chilean –and Argentinean– practices have inspired in many ways the Spanish groups mobilized for memory issues<sup>2</sup>; and in both countries, in the last decade, new politics and laws<sup>3</sup> have been implemented to address the issues related to reparation and memory.

If we look at the history of some sites with a symbolic meaning connected with the dictatorial past in the capital cities of Chile and Spain, we notice a difference in the management of this kind of urban heritage: in the case of Santiago de Chile, many of those places have been investigated and converted in sites with a specific role in the public discourses that declare the importance of preserving memory for democratic values; in Madrid<sup>4</sup>, the majority of these places have been destroyed or abandoned, or they have been recycled without any discourse on their history and functions during the dictatorial times. The differences and similarities between these two processes, as they happen in each specific site, obviously remit to the complex interaction of many historical, political, economical factors. But, I am especially interested in the difference that exists in the public expression and management of the social conflict -or collective expressions of discordance- involved in memory issues.

Following these premises, this article presents the experiences of two of these emblematic sites in Madrid and in Santiago de Chile: two urban constructions that share the facts of being highly symbolic of the dictatorial past and of having been in ruins in recent times. The mean of the following pages is not to make a refined comparative analysis, neither to explain the causes and consequences of their differences, but to give a look to each of them through the mirror of the other. These two stories show two different models of

administration or relation with the past and, especially, with the social disquiet or conflicts involved in it.

## II. THE RUINS OF THE *DIEGO PORTALES* BUILDING, SANTIAGO DE CHILE



Fig.1 The Diego Portales building, 2006. Source: Dirección de Arquitectura, Ministerio de Obras Públicas de Chile (MOP).

The picture above was taken in March 2006 and it shows the *Diego Portales* building, as it was left after an accidental fire damaged an important part of it. It was a very big building, standing in a central location of Chilean capital.

Before the fire, the tower of the building hosted the Ministry of Defense and, the lower plaque was used as a conference center. It was a very dark and heavy building, all closed up with steel. In the front of it, homeless people used to sleep and it was not recommendable to walk nearby, especially at night. In general, people of Santiago used to hate this building. First of all for its aesthetics: it was considered one of the ugliest buildings of Chile<sup>5</sup>. And secondly, because it was a symbol of the military dictatorship: it had been used

for many years by Pinochet and the military Junta as the house of government, some of the most famous public pictures of the dictator were taken in this place, and it used to be the main scenery of many military parades and public commemorations in those years.

For these reasons, the building was a “disturbing”, or “uncomfortable” or “negative” urban heritage<sup>6</sup> and many people would have been glad to get rid of it. But the fire of 2006 changed its destiny. In the first days after the fire, in national press, some rumors said the building was going to be destroyed and in its place a commercial mall or some other structure was to be built. When the building was under the threat of being destroyed, a citizen movement – initially made basically of artists and architects- gathered around this issue, bringing to the public attention a part of the history of this place that had been forgotten for a long time. Due to a particular political and cultural context, the possibility of the demolition, started a process that, using the words of Alex Wilde, can be defined as an “irruption of memory”<sup>7</sup>.

Writing articles in newspapers and webpages, and organizing some interesting urban interventions, this “memory movement”, started evoking in public space that the building had not been a creation of Pinochet, but it had been built in 1972, during the government of president Salvador Allende<sup>8</sup>. It was initially built to host a conference of the United Nations that took place in Chile that year, and after the conference it became a popular cultural center, called *Centro cultural Gabriela Mistral*. During its construction and the short time it actually functioned as cultural center, the building became an outstanding symbol of Allende’s popular government, both for its partisans and its opponents.

It is very interesting to notice that, before 2006, the memories related to the history of the building during Allende's government were completely absent in public space. Even people that used to go to the cultural center before the military coup, say that somehow they had forgotten about it for a long time: when Pinochet took the power in 1973, the name and function of the building were immediately changed, new security measures changed its aspect and accessibility, with the patios being closed and its big windows covered up with metal sheets. After the military coup, a social oblivion was imposed over the previous story of this place.

The citizen movement born after 2006, even if reduced and with few access to the mainstream mass media, brought back to public space stories belonging to those times and started to claim for the recuperation of the building's old name and use, as an important symbol of memory. Still, there also was another part of the citizenship that, even if they didn't necessarily identify themselves as "pinochetistas", they wouldn't have wanted to see this place transformed into a sort of tribute to Allende's government, and would have preferred to have it demolished. It is possible that a large part of society remained indifferent – which can be considered as another way of social memory-, or at most they felt suspicious due to the economic and political interests involved.

The discord between those currents of opinion found expression in the medias, especially in columns and letters published by some newspapers, and also in the parliament, where, shortly after the fire, a long discussion took place over a proposition of law made by a group of deputies to restore the building's old name<sup>9</sup>. These debates lasted various months, showing the ex-

istence of different memories or projects of memory, conflicting in the public space.

Finally, one year after the fire, president Michelle Bachelet announced the decision of the government to convert the building into a Cultural Center, and to give it back its old name, *Gabriela Mistral*. The basic principle of the project of restoration that won the public contest at the end of 2007 was to recover as much as possible the architectonic and artistic elements of the original building, now officially declared as a symbol of Chilean recent history, but integrating them into a space with a brand new look, a living place devoted to the society as a whole.

For the Bachelet government, the construction of the new cultural center corresponded to the decision to listen to a specific memory demand, which was in accordance with its political identity and discourse.

Nevertheless, we can say that, through all this process, the place has functioned as an urban device able to trigger, but also to contain and address different processes, attitudes and incongruities related to memory issues. First of all, the projects of restoration and artistic arrangement are themselves innovative proposals of memorialization, resulting from specific creative processes related to the collective management of the past. Also, the governmental decision to restore the building, contributed to the "explosion" of memories related to the history of the place, since, during all this process, the projects in academic and artistic field devoted to the history of the building have multiplied, and many testimonial narrations about this subject have been published and performed. Finally, the new cultural center, especially due to its symbolic value as a recognized historical symbol, it has become setting for different practices of memory, for example for aca-

democratic and artistic events that have promoted here different kinds of debates and collective practices of remembrance<sup>10</sup>, and for guided tours that offer the opportunity to visitors to share and debate over the past of the building, and of the country in general.

In conclusion, we can say that this building has functioned as a space for memory, for its expressions and its experiments.

### III. THE RUINS OF THE *CARABANCHEL* PRISON, MADRID



*Figs 2, 3, 4: The Carabanchel prison in 2008. Source: Plataforma Salvemos Carabanchel.*

As in the case of the *Diego Portales* building, the story of the Carabanchel prison can start from its ruins. The images above show how the building was in 2008. No accident or fire had occurred here: the build-

ing had just been abandoned by the responsible authorities and homeless people were living in it. People were removing and stealing all the useful materials of the building -basically everything made of iron, copper or wood- and youngsters used the walls of the old prison to draw graffiti.

This prison was built at the beginning of the francoist regime, in the first forties, to be the most important and “model” prison of Spain. It was an enormous panoptical structure that was inaugurated in 1944. It hosted a great number of political prisoners during the dictatorship and was surely the setting of many executions and probably of illegal burials, which have not been investigated until now. The building continued working as a prison after the francoist regime ended. In the first years of transition to democracy, after 1975, it continued hosting some political prisoners, but the population of Carabanchel became more and more a population of common prisoners, especially of those related to the heroin market.

In 1998 the building ceased to be used as a prison. In the first year after its closure, some kinds of practices of “memorialization” took place there: the General Direction of Penitentiary Institutions organized guided tours and a photo exhibit about the prison; in 1999 a famous rock singer played a concert in one of the interior yards, with an explicit reference to the history of the prison. However, in the following years, little other attention came to this site. During the most of the decade 2000-2010, the structure was abandoned by public authorities, except that, in 2005, one of the buildings of the prison was restored and started being used as a detention center for undocumented foreigners (CIE). Except for this “recycled” building, the rest of the old prison was abandoned.

As we saw in the case of the Diego Portales building, this place became an *uncomfortable heritage*: people that lived in the area disliked it because it was a mark of stigma for their neighborhood, and the rest of the population – including the ex-prisoners that had been in there during dictatorial times- hated it because it was a symbol of Francoist regime. At those times, the majority of society would have preferred that building be thrown down.

The story changed when the city government together with the Minister of Defense – who were the authorities in charge of the place- manifested their intention to demolish the old prison and sell the territory to permit the construction of houses on behalf of private companies. As we saw in the case of the *Diego Portales* building, in opposition to this initiative, a citizen movement emerged. At first, a neighborhood association started rallying against this project and demanding that the territory be used to install social services needed in the area; shortly after, the existing social movement for “historical memory” –which included some ex political prisoners- then joined this neighborhood initiative. Around 2007, the two groups together formulated and presented to the authorities a refined project for the use of that territory: the idea was to install there various social services, and to keep the dome of the panopticon to convert it into a space of memory and a documentation center about the Francoist era. The promoters of this initiative say that this last part of the project was directly inspired by the experience of many *sites of memory* existing in other countries, especially in Argentina and in Chile.

These people spontaneously implemented some “memorialization” activities in this place: they organized guided tours in the abandoned building, they cre-

ated a photo exposition that was shown in various places, and they started a webpage to store and disseminate pictures, information and testimonies about the old prison<sup>11</sup>. They tried to have the building declared as a “Site of Cultural Interest” and they had the College of Architects write a report showing the good state of the building and its historical singularity. Some of them even managed to contact with Judge Baldasar Garzón –the same man that had incriminated the Chilean dictator ten years earlier- to support their cause<sup>12</sup>.

However the destiny of that site was already signed: denying this social demand, and despite the interest that this situation was grasping in the medias, the building was destroyed in October of 2008. The demolition started during the night. Hundreds of people gathered in front of the half destroyed dome in the following days: some pictures taken in those days show some of these people standing in front of the dome with posters demanding to preserve it in the name of historical memory, while the machinery kept working on the demolition.

What happened to the debris of the destroyed building can be considered as a certain practice of “involuntary memory”<sup>13</sup>: instead of being removed, they were buried under that very same land and now they conform just a natural layer of that territory, while, above the ground level, the only remnants of the panopticon is a door, standing in the middle of nowhere.

It’s hard to know the exact reasons that motivated the demolition: the people involved in the movement for its conservation say it was obviously because the authorities -both the presidency of the region of Madrid (from the main right wing party) and the Ministry of Defense (from the main left wing party)- wanted to prevent any public conflict related to the

Francoist era. But actually, the authorities involved never clearly justified their decision: they just completely ignore the demand of symbolic reparation that was being expressed. Thus, the public debate about the building –about its past and the possibilities of its conversion- did not gain a legitimate space in this decision.

The social movement involved in this issue did not disappear after the demolition: one could even say it got stronger in the few years following October 2008. Despite the demolition, the place kept functioning as a “device” of memory, mainly due to the initiatives of these groups. Nevertheless, these initiatives were never able to involve a majority within the society, and they continued being limited to the marginal circles of memory and neighborhood activism. At present days, the movement that gathered around the prison, seems to have lost strength: on one hand, the ex political prisoners that were the core of this demand, are mostly elderly people, and many of them have health problems or have died; on the other hand, it has been very hard for these people to find economic and political support for their projects, like the edition of testimonies of the prisoners or an in-dept investigation of the story of the prison. At present moment, there is an ongoing academic project, somehow connected with this social movement, which has recently published a book devoted to the history and memory of this place<sup>14</sup>. But not much else is happening.

It is still unknown what will be the future use of the territory. Until now, with the exception of the building that is being used as a CIE, and some sporadic activities carried on by neighbors and ex political prisoner, the huge territory stays abandoned and probably indifferent to the majority.

#### IV. EPILOGUE

The stories of these two buildings over the past few years show two different processes of memory in public space.

In the case of the *Diego Portales* building, the social conflict or discomfort linked to the past of this place has been overcome through an exercise of debate and negotiation in public context, and a sort of engineering of memory has been carried on by the authorities, to re-codify the place with a new discourse: a discourse that uses an architectonic and artistic language to integrate the past in the present, and that makes this place acceptable to the majority. It is basically acceptable for example, for the architects and artists that had once started the claim for the restoration of the building, and it is also mostly acceptable for the right wing government that inaugurated the cultural center and administrated it from 2010 until now.



Fig. 5: Commemorative plaque. *Gabriela Mistral Cultural Center*, 1973. Source: *Dirección de Arquitectura, Ministerio de Obras Públicas de Chile (MOP)*.

To conclude with an example of this new discourse we can mention an inscription, located in one of the patios of the building, which has become a symbol of the historic meaning of this restoration.

The original stone used to be in one of the patios, but had disappeared from the building when the military occupied it. The stone said:

«This building reflects the work, the creativity and the effort of Chilean people, represented by its workers, its technicians, its artists, its professionals. It was built in 275 days and finished on the 3rd of April of 1972, during the government of president Salvador Allende Gossens».

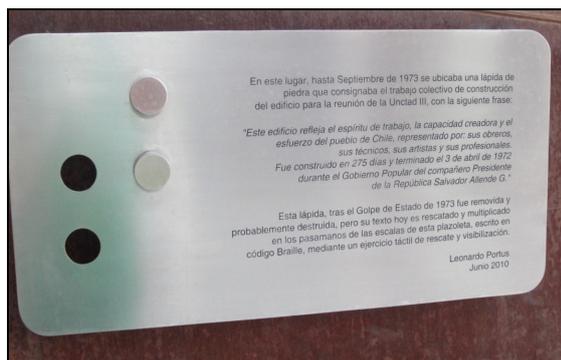


Fig.6: Commemorative plaque, GAM Cultural Center, 2013. Artist: Leonardo Portus. Source: Picture by the author

The artistic curators that worked in the reconstruction process in 2009 decided to put a new inscription to replace the lost one. The new inscriptions says that «In this place, until September 1973, there was a stone that commemorated the collective work in the construction of this building», and then reproduces the words that were written on the old one. Finally, the

new inscription says that original stone had been destroyed after the military coup, but that now its words have been recovered and reproduced in the same place.

Even if the general public of the cultural center probably barely notice this plaque, it shows an interesting way of *memorialization*: the objective of the artist was not to reconstruct the stone as if the dictatorship never occurred in the story of the building, but to bring back to life the old one, together with a testimony of its destruction. This specific practice of memorialization aims to repair the violence of the past –in this case the violence to repair is the imposition of oblivion-, without losing an awareness of it.



Fig. 7: Commemorative stone, Carabanchel prison, 2011.

What has happened in the Carabanchel prison in the last years represents a different process of “administration of the past”. In the case of the Chilean cultural center, after decades of silence, a public debate about the recent past has opened up, and conflict has been

somehow managed toward the construction of a shared memory or, at least, of a public discourse that is acceptable for the society as a whole. In the case of the Spanish prison, this public debate has not been possible, and memory conflicts have been ignored by the authorities when they have emerged.

As in the case of the cultural center, the handouts of the process of the Carabanchel prison can be exemplified observing a plaque.

After the prison was demolished, groups of former political prisoners and activists kept organizing in that territory some autonomous activities of memorialization: for example, they constructed a memorial made of cartoon panels, which collects hundreds of names of people imprisoned in Carabanchel during the dictatorship. In October 2011, commemorating the anniversary of the demolition, they inaugurated, in a corner of the huge territory of the prison, a plaque, that says:

«In remembrance of all the people that were imprisoned here because they were defending freedom, democracy and social justice. For peace and memory, that history may not be forgotten nor repeated».

It is notable what happens to this plaque at present time. The original plaque actually does not exist anymore: they had to rebuild it because the first one had been seriously damaged and defaced by anonymous people. But also the new one, every once in a while, is target of attacks. Many times the plaque has been knocked over to the ground and damaged and many times it has been put back to its place by other anonymous people. This happens over and over, showing that conflicts coming from a past of violence can survive for a long time and cannot be solved just silencing them, or burying the past and its remnants.

If we look at this place, as said in the beginning, through the mirror of the *Diego Portales* building, we see in this story that an opportunity was missed: an opportunity to open the box of the past, to recognize the unsolved issues it still carries along, to give them legitimacy, and to experience ways to overcome them collectively.

#### ENDNOTES

- [1] This definition is used by Saint Austin in its *Confessions* (quoted in Stabili, 2007: 10).
- [2] In the last few years, this phenomenon can be noticed, for example, in the adoption of the iconography of the *desparecidos* to represent the victims of the francoist dictatorship, or the replication of practices like the "walk rounds" against impunity that the movement for memory in Madrid has adopted from the Argentinean organization *Madres de Plaza de Mayo*.
- [3] We refer here especially to the measures for juridical and symbolic reparation taken by the Chilean government starting from 2003, during the presidency of Ricardo Lagos and Michelle Bachelet; and to the so called *Law of Historical Memory* approved by the Spanish congress in 2007.
- [4] We refer here to the capital city of Spain especially because it's not in the object of this investigation to analyze the memory processes in the perspective of the different regional identities that characterize them in the Spanish territory
- [5] Negative opinions about the building were expressed in national press before and after the fire of 2006, especially in the right wing newspaper *El Mercurio*. For example, in November 1999 it published a survey in which several architects declared this building as one of the worst constructions of the last thirty years. After the fire, the same newspaper published several letters that expressed the same kind of opinion and were favorable to the demolition of the building.
- [6] These definitions are used by Carmen Ortiz, 2013: 42,43.
- [7] Wilde, 1999: 473-500.
- [8] Some of these articles were published in the pro-government newspaper *La Nación*, and in the web page of the independent organization *Plataforma Urbana*: <http://www.plataformaurbana.cl/>

- [9] Chamber of Deputies, Proposition of Law: «Denomina Edificio Poetisa Gabriela Mistral al actual edificio Diego Portales», 22<sup>nd</sup> of March of 2007. The documents related to this proposition of law and its discussion are available in the web page of the Chamber of Deputies of Chile: <http://www.camara.cl/>
- [10] For example, in September 2013, when the 40<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the military coup was being commemorated, in this cultural center there was a large conference of historians, devoted to different aspects of the history and memory related with the dictatorship. The conference was organized by a group of Chilean universities and it was open to general public. It has been one of the largest academic events related to this issues u to this date. The program and presentation of the conference can be seen in the webpage of the cultural center: [www.gam.cl](http://www.gam.cl)
- [11] The webpage run by this platform is: [www.salvemoscarabanchel.blogspot.com](http://www.salvemoscarabanchel.blogspot.com)
- [12] I was informed about this process by Antonio and Jesus, activists of the organization *Salvemos Carabanchel*.
- [13] The expression “involuntary memory” is used by Aleida Assman, to define certain social attitudes and spontaneous practices that, without being rationalized in a specific discourse or project about the administration of past, denote the existence of a cultural “underlay” of memory or a “milieu de memoire”, as in the concept used by Pierre Nora. According to Assman, involuntary memories can be seen, for example, in the indifference or abandonment or re-utilization of certain spaces, linked to a specific past, that are not objects of any voluntary project related to memory issues. Assman, 1999: 372-377.
- [14] We refer to the resear project ongoing in the Center for Social Ciencies of the CSIC (Madrid, Spain), and to the book edited in 2013 by its director, profesor Carmen Ortiz.

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