The London School of Economics and Political Science

UNSETTLING THE CULTURE PANACEA

The Politics of Cultural Planning, National Heritage

and Urban Regeneration in Buenos Aires

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Abstract

This thesis is concerned with how a controversial heritage redevelopment project in downtown Buenos Aires enables social actors to produce and contest meanings of culture, the city and the nation. The research is an in-depth case study of the politics of a culture-led urban regeneration project converting the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones (the post office national headquarters) into a cultural quarter in the context of Argentina's bicentenary commemorations. Taking the building as the object of study, the investigation draws on interviews, archival research and analysis of discourses and images to shed light on the material, institutional and historical configurations of cultural planning from a sociological cultural perspective. The aim is to explore the complex interplay between culture, memory and space through three analytical dimensions concerning the rise, fall and rebirth of the building. First, the thesis considers why culture provides a solution to the deterioration and disuse of the postal palace. Second, the politics of memory of the cultural centre is examined through its engagement with the past, present and future of the building. Third, the type of urban space imagined for the renovated site is discussed in relation to similar projects in the city's central area. The multifaceted analysis shows how the post office headquarters becomes entangled in a network of public discourses, memory struggles, material interests and political confrontations, mediated by the language of culture. The thesis argues that policy-makers invoke culture as a claim to legitimacy that is meant to appeal to those who reject political parties and politicians and that is aimed at wiping out the conflicting social histories of places. The variety of meanings assigned to culture reasserts the contention over the term and demands empirical analyses that, grounded in specific contexts, resist the prevalence of universal cultural regeneration recipes, challenging culture's function as panacea.

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Image: The Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones in Buenos Aires, drawn by Vicente Nadal Nora.
Source: *Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones* (1948)

INTRODUCTION

Unable, as it were, to say one thing without saying anything, culture
says nothing whatsoever, so boundlessly eloquent as to be
speechless.

Terry Eagleton (2000)

Speech is not a passive instrument in the study of social processes,
economic structures and political conflicts. Some categories are so
loaded with opacity and ambiguity that only by placing them in
their historical contexts can we understand what we are actually
talking about beyond what we *believe* we are talking about.

Jesus Martín -Barbero (1993)

Culture has become a panacea in contemporary Buenos Aires, one of those traditional plants meant to heal *all* diseases. The image of the panacea is relevant more in the sense of the function it performs – culture as remedy – than in the vegetal metaphor that identifies culture with a plant (after all, the origin of the term culture is to be found in agricultural harvest). When the former Argentinian Economy Minister, Roberto Lavagna, suggested during a business seminar in 2004 that the national post office headquarters could be transformed into a spectacular cultural centre, he was keenly aware of the remedial capacities of culture in the renewal of cities. He had travelled the world widely, knew places like Bilbao, New York, London and Sidney, and was familiar with the financial and aesthetic benefits brought about by so-called culture-led urban regeneration – when urban and economic development become inextricably bound up with cultural projects. Clearly, Lavagna is not alone in his enchantment with cultural regeneration. Policy-makers, architects and marketing consultants increasingly invoke culture as a magical solution to the city's myriad of social, economic and urban problems. From renovating decayed inner-city areas, boosting the local economy and recreating the city's image, to constructing artistic quarters and sustaining nationalist

claims, culture has become a crucial component of today's policy agendas, not only in the city of tango but elsewhere in the Western world.

Despite – or precisely because of – its much celebrated rise in recent decades, culture's function as a panacea poses a number of problems, which this thesis will explore, in terms of the history, materiality and uses of the places to be regenerated. It also involves questions of value, meaning-making and power as well as culture's complex relationship to politics and policy, upon which I have tried to shed light with my analysis. In the widespread policy adoption of culture-led urban regeneration strategies there tends to be an underlying belief that sees culture ontologically as a multi-purpose tool, as an instrument that can serve particular interests by following standardised recipes. Culture, then, is rendered problematically a means to an end. The ease with which architects', policy-makers' and developers' public discourses mobilise culture and heritage to legitimise urban interventions is a matter of sociological concern, for these do not remain at the rhetorical level. Rather they provide the underlying foundation which sustains the design and implementation of public and private initiatives with their underlying social, political, cultural and economic implications. The proposed conversion of the post office building in Buenos Aires represents one of these widely acclaimed operations.

This is a thesis about the politics of a controversial culture-led urban regeneration project and the ways in which social actors produce, enact and contest meanings of culture, heritage, the city and the nation through their engagement with such a project. In the following pages I seek to unsettle the idea and function of culture as a panacea by examining in-depth a case study in central Buenos Aires. This is the national and

municipal governments' project to recycle and transform the monumental Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones[1] (Post and Telecommunications Palace) into the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (Bicentenary Cultural Centre, aka CCB). The proposed large-scale re-functionalisation of the post office headquarters planned the restoration of the building's facade, the demolition of part of its interior, the glazing of the dome and the construction of a large auditorium, concert halls and exhibition rooms; it would also regenerate the building's urban surroundings in central Buenos Aires by creating a cultural quarter. This redevelopment project was expected to commemorate the two-hundredth anniversary of the first national government in 2010 and become a key site for the celebration of national memory. Aimed at becoming one of the biggest cultural centres worldwide (B4FS, 2006), the official project is underpinned by powerful cultural rhetoric, a language of cultural regeneration and a mobilisation of national and anti-colonial sentiments in the context of the commemoration of Latin American countries' independence. My investigation also offers an understanding of the nature, logic and functioning of official cultural planning in Argentina from a cultural sociological perspective, one which describes and analyses the different interests and disputes surrounding the project and provides a critical approach to prevalent place-making initiatives through cultural resources.

Based on a qualitative approach which uses the study of the postal building in order to explore the interplay between culture, politics, memory and space, the investigation draws on a range of different methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, visual analysis, archival research and critical discourse analysis. The objective is to

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1 This is the building's official name, although this has changed slightly in the course of its history. My interviewees also referred to it as 'Correo Central' (Central Post Office), and in this thesis I also employ 'postal palace', 'the palace', 'the post office building' and 'the postal building', to refer always to the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones.

explore answers to the particular research questions, which are discussed in detail in Chapter 2: Why has culture been invoked to redevelop the post office headquarters in Buenos Aires? What type of culture is being officially planned through the new cultural centre and how is this form of culture-making contested by other existing claims on culture? What is the politics of memory which sustains the conception of the commemorative cultural centre in the former post office palace? What kind of public spaces do these culture-led urban regeneration initiatives seek to make? How is the past, present and future of the post office building negotiated in this urban regeneration project? My approach also emphasises how the building itself emerges as a social actor, embroiled in symbolic and material disputes over its meaning, form, function and use, and shapes broader discussions about culture, heritage and the modernity of the city and the nation.

Figure 1. The Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones with its plaza
Source: Author, 2009

With or without a cultural centre, the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones is a spectacular building. Since its inauguration in 1928 it has been the headquarters of the national postal and telegraphic services. A well-ordered and rationalised industrial site of enormous dimensions and nineteenth-century French Beaux Art architecture [figure 1], this monumental public building rises up magnificently as an impenetrable block of solid materiality. With marble stairs, impressive interior vitraux, an imposing façade and an emblematic dome, the iconic structure evokes power, authority and solemnity. It was built with materials deemed modern and of the best quality at the time, performing an industrial function facilitated by technological machinery. The Correo Central, as the postal palace is familiarly known,

> received the name of 'modern cathedral' and was aimed at one of the noblest and most necessary activities in the life of the nations; in a way it is a *temple* of contemporary dynamism, intended to boost, like a vital sap, commerce, industry, culture and life in the country, so that Argentina could reach the lofty fate to which it is destined (*Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*, 1948:672, author's translation)[2]

Given that architecture is never neutral but always infused with qualities and meanings that influence viewers and users (Etlin, 1994: xviii), it was anticipated that the palace had a key symbolic function to play alongside its practical role as the national post office headquarters. The building acted as a symbol of modernity, epitomised the 1880s' era of order, progress and civilisation, and was put on a level with a 'modern cathedral' in terms of its centrality, authority and monumentality. In this sense, it was a place of public worship of nationhood as a civic religion, a site in which to honour the nation as that not-naturally determined spiritual principle (Renan, [1882] 1990:19). As well as embodying the power of the nation-state, the postal palace configured the urban scene

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2 All quotations taken from Argentinian archival, institutional and newspaper sources in this thesis are my own translation. From this point onwards, I only make my translations explicit in the text when the sources are academic.

of Buenos Aires as a great metropolis and competed through its architectural forms with other cities (De Paula, 1988). Being the hub of the national communications – first with postal correspondence, then with the telegraph and later the telephone – its materiality, above all, contained and expressed patriotic nationalism, technological development and national integration.

As one of my interviewees put it, the Palacio de Correos is like a grandmother's jewel. The building is situated in one of the most expensive lots in downtown Buenos Aires [figure 3], between Puerto Madero (the renovated docks) and the city's financial district, within walking distance to the Casa Rosada (the Government House) and in an inter-jurisdictional area managed by the local and the central governments. An immense architectural object of historical significance and magnificent materiality, the palace stands out in the city's central landscape and it is not by sheer chance that it was declared a National Historical Monument in 1997. Located in an area with much passing traffic,[3] the building's significance can also be found in the city's everyday life, with its name being used on the destination boards of buses as a landmark and its location, as a terminal station on the underground.[4] The building becomes part of a sequential series of landmarks [figure 4] which help people navigate their way through the city, facilitating recognition and memorisation (Lynch 1960). People go to the area for a variety of reasons: to post letters, because they work nearby, to wait for a bus, take the underground, go sightseeing, or attend an event at the Luna Park, the famous venue which sits in front of the postal building. The building's surrounding area often becomes a site of social protests and political demonstrations due to the proximity of

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3 The building occupies a whole block between Sarmiento Street, Leandro N. Alem, Corrientes Avenue and Bouchard Street.
4 'Leandro N. Alem' in the B line and the future 'Correo Central' station currently under construction in the E line.

governmental buildings, something which results in blocked streets and diverted public transport. Considering the palace's high economic, political and cultural value, its present status and future management are contested by an array of competing interests, which my analysis of the recycling operation will make visible.

The Palacio de Correos
1 Luna Park
2 The Casa Rosada
3 The Plaza de Mayo
4 The Customs Office
5 The Cathedral
6 The National Congress
7 The National Court of Justice
8 The Colegio Nacional de Buenos

Figure 2. (top left) The Palacio de Correos' location in Latin America
Figure 3. (top right) Map of Buenos Aires (Capital Federal), showing the Palacio de Correos' location
Figure 4. The Palacio de Correos and neighbouring landmark buildings
Source: Author's composition based on a city map from 'Mapa Interactivo de Buenos Aires' website

While the Palacio de Correos has been a government building since its inception (the postal institution had been attached to political structures of institutional power since colonial times), in the course of its history it has equally constituted a workers' palace and the flagship of the postal services. Housing the country's oldest public company, it represented a lively site of work, training, active production of artefacts, medical treatment and recreation facilities for employees. The provision of social rights and benefits for workers and their families accompanied the workers' typically long-term contracts, as was the case with my grandfather who spent his entire life in the postal palace working for the state in the correspondence business.[5] A milestone in the social life of the building is the establishment of Eva Perón's office (Argentina's former First Lady) on the fourth floor in 1946, which some still recall with great national pride. The on-going redevelopment project to transform the building into a cultural centre, then, is enmeshed in Argentina's history and located at the intersection between public culture, urban redevelopment and national memory.

The case study presented in this thesis represents both an example of global trends of post-industrial urbanism and a unique case characterised by particular local features (Chapter 2 discusses its relevance in further detail). In the last two decades culture and the arts have gained great prominence as indispensable tools for urban and economic development, used by policy-makers, urban planners and practitioners to convert industrial sites such as factories, railway stations and power stations into cultural venues, regenerating inner-city and waterfront areas in decline. As part of this urban

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5 First he worked as an errand boy for the post office and then was promoted several times until finally he was appointed manager of the night shift where he was responsible for the delivery of all correspondence in Buenos Aires. On retirement, he received a commemorative medal, plaque and diploma in gratitude for his dedication. He was always very proud of his job and grateful to the post, which ensured his family's welfare until his retirement. As my grandfather passed away more than a decade ago, it is not possible to retrieve his memories of the building more directly.

regeneration trend post office buildings in countries as different as the United States, Bahrain, Costa Rica, Germany,[6] Malawi, Brazil, Spain, the United Kingdom,[7] Guatemala, Italy, Canada and Paraguay, to mention just a few, have been or are also in the process of being renovated and transformed into offices, retail spaces, hotels or cultural facilities – performing arts centres, galleries, cultural centres and museums. These initiatives, most often led by local governments in partnership with private organisations and at times triggered by community groups, are part of broader urban strategies of revitalising historical centres, revalorising cultural heritage and creating new resources for tourism and business investment.

This global phenomenon acquires a peculiar form in Argentina, one which underscores the political function of culture, apart from its economic potential, and is better understood in light of the country's recent history. For almost seventy years, the Palacio de Correos functioned as the national post office headquarters, despite unstable cycles of growth, deterioration and corruption practices in the postal and telecommunications business, especially in the aftermath of the 1970's dictatorship. The wave of neoliberal reforms carried out by Carlos Menem's government during the 1990s privatised the postal services in the face of much controversy. This privatisation was one of many state reform policies aimed at cutting public spending and shrinking the state. This worsened the functioning of the postal services, resulted in accusations of corruption and fraud against public functionaries, lack of investment, dismissal of employees, and the

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6 A paradigmatic case of this trend is the use of the former imperial post office building in Berlin as an exhibition space for visual arts. The fantastic listed building housed the internationally-renowned C/O Berlin photography gallery for five years until an eviction note was sent following the recent sale of the building to an Israeli investment group. The new plan is to build a hotel and a shopping mall in the premises. For more information see: Nippard (2010) on the impact of Berlin's gentrification on alternative cultural centres, and the C/O's website.
7 For more information see the database produced by Osley (2011) examining the current state of British post office buildings, many of which have been converted into pubs, nightclubs, restaurants, banks and office accommodation.

deepening of the existing physical deterioration of the postal palace. The function of culture as a panacea comes to erase such a history that equated the state's management of public services with failure through the re-nationalisation of the postal services under Nestor Kirchner's administration in 2003. However, only three years later the plan to redevelop the post office headquarters into a cultural quarter was announced, spurring resistance from postal workers who were subsequently re-located to the city outskirts.

In addition, Argentina's present circumstances are marked by the official desire to strengthen national independence in the face of foreign economic and political pressures, safeguard democratic values against the ghost of an authoritarian past and revive faith in institutional politics through a 'national-popular' perspective rooted in *peronismo*.[8] This country finds itself in a moment of recovery after the severe crises of 2001, defined by uneven economic growth, the re-nationalisation of public services, payment of the foreign debt, broad popular support, wide provision of social benefits and continuous efforts to repair historical injustices concerning the violation of human rights. However, these features coexist uncomfortably with less celebrated issues such as the high inflation rate, social deprivation, violent crime and the precarious provision of public services, which exacerbate the hostile ideological confrontations between the capital city's conservative administration and the national government.

In the story that this thesis narrates the protagonists are architects, policy-makers at various levels, such as the Argentine President and the Mayor of Buenos Aires, architectural competitions' jury members and participants, heritage custodians, museum

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8 *Peronismo* is a national-popular political movement which originated in Argentina with Colonel Juan Domingo Perón during the mid 1940s and had also institutional representation with the Peronist Party. For a classical sociological study of the origins of *peronismo* see Murmis and Portantiero (1971).

staff, journalists, postal workers and urban developers. They all deploy the language of culture to celebrate, remember, forget, legitimise or contest redevelopment initiatives in Buenos Aires, as well as important events in the history of the nation. At stake are a number of disputes over the practical function of the postal building (e.g. whether it should be converted into a five star hotel, a shopping mall, government offices, a museum, a cultural centre); its meaning and symbolic function; the relocation of postal workers and services; and political power and prestige. Furthermore, there are related matters of contention concerning control over the postal services; the content and management of the projected cultural centre; and the feasibility of the planned urban regeneration works for the building's surrounding. The post office building provides these actors with a familiar space in which to talk about culture and heritage, imagine the future cultural centre and dream of a new modernity for the city and the nation. The identified tensions, in turn, render a material object like a building an object of sociological investigation.

1.2. Framing the culture panacea: concepts, ideas and arguments

This thesis is situated within cultural sociology. As the subjects of culture, national heritage and place-making cut across different disciplines and epistemological traditions, however, it also engages with issues of urban studies, historical sociology, material culture and political sociology. There are three things which I have not tried to develop in this thesis. First, I have not sought to write a work of theory per se, although evidently my research deals with theoretical problems involving the question of culture in its intertwining with processes of heritage-building, nation and modernity, memory and commemoration, urban change and city branding. Second, although I engage (in Chapter 5) with the question of assembling the past, commemorating the history of the

nation and monumentalising the present from the perspective of an emblematic building, it was not my intention to write a piece of memory studies. Finally, while I have not attempted to develop an Actor Network Theory project (this is further discussed below), the postal building emerges powerfully as an actor in my analysis, playing a central role in the story that this thesis narrates. Instead of choosing a priori an explicit theoretical framework with a battery of categories to apply to and test in my case study, I chose to develop my interest in certain theoretical questions through my engagement with my empirical research. Drawing on the work of authors such as Raymond Williams, Paul Connerton, Sharon Zukin, Stuart Hall, Ana Wortman, Alejandro Grimson and David Harvey, among others, has enabled me to shed light on the explored problems from multiple perspectives and analyse them in relation to existing theoretical debates. Choosing one theory over the other would have imposed artificial boundaries to the mutable and complex realities of the case study. In what follows, I describe the main conceptual elements that make up the analytical framework of this thesis: culture and hegemony, the idea of modernity, the notion of culture as a resource, and the building as entanglement.

Culture and hegemony

A key concept I employ in this thesis is 'culture'. I do not use it so much to refer to the provision of elite and popular cultural activities in the city, the formation of art worlds or the production and consumption of cultural goods, but rather to focus on the various meanings and functions of culture from an empirical perspective. Questions of meaning are important as they inform our understanding of the social world in which we live, shaping our practices and contributing to the social reproduction of everyday life. Pervading all aspects of human activities, these processes of signification are comprised

of shared meanings and values which are particular to a way of life (Williams, 1981, 1989), are rooted in history and are entangled with relations of power (Storey, 2010:3-5). Meanings, then, are not fixed but ever-changing and culture embraces this diversity of fluctuating senses: it becomes a fluid arena concerning the ways specific social actors appropriate, re-signify and contest meanings. Encapsulating contending views, culture inexorably gives way to political controversy with its 'skirmishes', if not wars (Benhabib, 2002:1), for the process of contestation is concerned with the power to define concepts, including the meaning of culture itself (Wright, 1998:13). In this sense, this thesis is particularly concerned with the function of culture as an arena of struggle – the ways it promotes, inhibits, enables and constraints social actors, interests and processes through its intricate relationship to governmental power.

I look at culture at a particular moment of contemporary Argentina, focusing on the debates over the redevelopment of material heritage, the social imagination of the future of the nation and the use of a cultural rhetoric for urban regeneration in Buenos Aires. The term culture is therefore employed here in a twofold way: as that which refers to the space of contingency over signification and interpretation (the way *I* see culture), and as the open-ended category differently used and conceived by social actors in particular situations (culture as my object of study). Here I follow Bourdieu and Wacquant's (1992:245) description of this problem, what they term the 'question of the definition' for the sociologist, who must problematise the natural pre-constructions commonly used in society to designate one's object of study. Through a methodological operation the concept in question is taken as the object of study itself, since its definition – mainly in official representations – is at stake within the object. This is why culture here has been both deployed as a concept and analysed as an object of study,

that is, in its material-institutional configuration as a variously understood term through which to explore the existing claims and disputes over the meaning of the word as well as the practices which each specific meaning gives rise to (this is discussed particularly in Chapter 4).

In examining questions of culture and matters of politics, the thesis aligns itself to some extent with cultural studies as 'an academic practice concerned to think culture politically' (Storey, 2010: x). The complexity and apparent ambivalence surrounding the term culture derive not only from the different intellectual histories and disciplines which have appropriated the word, but also the diverse social and geographical contexts in which its usage has become widespread. Yet it is precisely in its active history and vast range and overlap of meanings that the term becomes significant (Williams, 1976), for this contestability reinforces the character of culture as political – as a site of conflicts and struggles. Central to my inquiry is a conception of culture as intimately related to, and therefore inevitably inseparable from, politics. This seemingly obvious relationship between the cultural and the political tends to be absent from policy-oriented examinations of culture-led urban regeneration and this is one of the reasons why it constitutes a main focus in this thesis. By the political I understand the ability to question the established order in society and the possibility to obtain legitimately a portion of power.

Consequently, alongside Raymond Williams' social definition of culture, I adopt Gramsci's (1971) concept of 'hegemony' in relation to the central *role* that culture plays in the reproduction of the interests of the ruling classes, political leadership and the production of consent. The question of hegemony refers to the consensus achieved in

society not by means of physical coercion or exploitation but mainly through cultural elements. In other words, hegemony alludes to the general acceptance of dominant ideas as 'normal reality' or 'common sense' by those who are in positions of subordination in relation to a ruling class (Williams, 1976:145). The concept of hegemony is particularly useful in my analysis of how the postal services and the postal building came to be seen as outdated, a threat to modernity, devalued and almost useless, especially when compared to cultural activities which are perceived as of higher status and of a positive, desirable impact. These ideas are taken for granted by some of my interviewees, and the conversion of the postal building into a cultural centre is, therefore, seen by many as inevitable. The way I look at the building through the different claims made about its current state and future uses emphasises the competing interests at stake in the redevelopment operations. Culture, then, becomes crucial in establishing a form of neoliberal hegemony which paves the way for the removal of postal activities and enables the material transformation of an important and highly valued object of national heritage.

By analysing the rise, fall and revival of the post office building, the thesis shows that concepts of culture have the peculiarity of condensing a wide range of meanings, negotiating central social issues such as citizenship, nationhood, modernity and heritage, and articulating vested interests and practices. In the case examined in this thesis, social actors deploy culture in a variety of ways in relation to the redevelopment of the post office building: culture as linked to patriotic nationalism; culture as material and intangible heritage; culture as an economic tool valuable for the exploitation of tourism; culture as conventional elite art forms; and culture as an antidote to neoliberalism. I show that speaking of culture is a way for these actors to discuss other issues of interest

and concern. The meanings of culture I identify in my analysis emerge from and symbolise Argentina's difficult and incessant political and economic struggles to establish and safeguard a democratic order and an inclusive social stability. The meaning of Argentine public culture, then, becomes entangled with discussions about memory, publicness, nationalism, modernity, social and territorial inequality, economic development and mainly democracy. Within cultural policy debates, these discussions are accompanied by legislation issues, such as the need to compile information on culture nationally, design strategic national plans, unify the funding and organisation of cultural activities, orient cultural programmes towards social inclusion, and strengthen democracy and regional integration.

Argentina's modernity: from European to vernacular forms

Another key concept in this thesis is 'modernity' (discussed especially in Chapter 3). Throughout the history of Argentina the idea runs that the country was once a modern nation, perhaps the most modern of Latin America. How to move upwards in the modernity hierarchy, defined by how close the local cultural, economic and technological productions were to those of the European cities, was a constant preoccupation of the elites in the Southern cone. While Europe was perceived as representing the future, the Latin continent was lamented as embodying the past, that colonial era which was to be forgotten through an official management of memory. Public buildings, such as the Palacio de Correos, played an instrumental role in nourishing the social imagination and the official efforts to render the capital city the locus of Argentinian modernity in order to overcome a past of alleged economic, cultural, material and technological 'backwardness'. This explains, in part, why the public buildings of the time are preserved as national heritage today, not only in view of

their architectural value, but mainly because of their symbolic role in historical and political terms (the meaning and function of heritage and national memory are discussed in Chapters 3, 5 and 6).

Discussions of modernity in Argentina have been centred around whether there is a particular type of modernity peculiar to Latin America, that is, one which is different from European forms of modernity (see Chapter 3). There is a recurrent idea according to which Argentinian modernity is interpreted as sui generis, by being heterogeneous or incomplete (Follari, 1990:146), hybrid-culturally containing both traditional and modern elements (Canclini, 1995), peripheral and of cultural mixing (Sarlo, 1988) or subaltern and contradictory (Brunner, 1994). This signals a complex process of incorporation of novel forms and of amalgamation with older elements, conceived as authentically local (or traditional), yet never pure or discrete. Brunner's (1994:144) description of modernity in Latin America is illustrative of its kaleidoscopic nature:

> Modernity, then, is peripheral, subaltern in relation to the more dynamic centres, precarious in its structures of production, with exclusionary aspects and tremendous obstacles to integrating its population, culturally heterogeneous, intersected by violent eruptions within hegemonic situations which have not managed to stabilise the conditions for a peaceful life (author's translation)

An important feature of these discussions has been the distinction between modernity and modernisation. The former refers, in Berman's sense (1982), to a qualitative *experience* of that which is new in a particular local context alongside a rupture with previous formations, often referred to as traditional; the latter, by contrast, concerns a process of innovation, secularisation and rationalisation, in other words, *transformations* in the political, technological and socioeconomic spheres. In Latin America the key question has been how to propel cultural modernity when socioeconomic

modernisation is so unequal (Canclini, 1995:43). The redevelopment of the post office headquarters in Buenos Aires responds in part to this process of modernisation by which industrial buildings, which came to be underused in light of changing economic and political forces and the development of new technologies, provide local authorities with spaces and opportunities whereby to build new cultural assets.

Through modernisation, Argentina can 'enter and leave modernity'. In other words, it can be both traditional and 'modern' at the same time, for in Latin America 'traditions have not yet disappeared and modernity has not completely arrived' (Canclini, 1995:1). There is a mixture of European modern elements and *rioplatense* diversity, traditionalism and renovation, vanguard and *criollismo* (Sarlo, 1988). I employ the concept of modernity, then, not to refer to the ontological existence of something which can be clearly located historically or geographically (Canclini's critique of European metropolitan views of the South is illustrative in this regard), but rather, to analyse the term in a similar fashion to my approach to 'culture', that is, in terms of the way social actors speak of modernity and fill the category with particular meaning. In this regard, Rosaldo (1995) reminds us of the importance of critically assessing the folk meanings of 'modernity' before it can be employed as a category for social analysis. While the focus here will be on this indigenous modernity, it is not possible, however, to establish a fixed and singular meaning of vernacular modernity in Argentina, as the latter also changes in time and according to different historical and political contexts. We will examine (in Chapter 3) this transient trajectory by analysing how the post office building went from representing a symbol of progress and modern civilisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth-century, to becoming more recently a 'reminder' of the alleged backwardness of the nation for having a postal building in central Buenos Aires, to once

again arising with a renovated materiality as a symbol of what is seen as 'modern culture'.

The thesis will also discuss how this form of indigenous modernity has acquired a particular political configuration by incorporating national-popular elements in recent times with the arrival of *kirchnerismo*[9] in the federal government in 2003. The appeal to a national culture and the resort to historical events, especially in the context of the 2010 commemoration of the Bicentenary of the first national government, produce a new form of modernity. This is based on political independence, economic autonomy and the revaluation of everything national, from public services, media management and oil exploitation, to territorial sovereignty, music and art productions, and local currency. This re-signification of the modern is vital to understanding the place assigned to cultural activities in the local political rhetoric and to highlight the changing meaning of modernity in Argentina. Culture, in the form of the cultural quarter or the iconic museum, is at the heart of a new modernity of cities and the best commodity with which to feed urban marketing campaigns.

Culture as resource

Without doubt, the most recurrent cultural policy strategy in the last two decades has been the use of cultural activities for the regeneration of inner-city areas. This is exemplified in the growing consensus among policy-makers, consultants and scholars about the effectiveness of culture-led urban regeneration as a globally acclaimed strategy to improve the physical features of decayed urban areas, boost the local economy and

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9 By *kirchnerismo* I refer to the political movement, inspired by *peronismo*, which began with the arrival of Nestor Kirchner in the Presidency in Argentina in 2003 and which has continued with the national administration of his wife, Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner, since 2007.

enhance the aesthetics and branding of places (Landry, Greene and Matarasso, 1996). In these redevelopment operations the influence of the new cultural economy is evident in what seems to be an emphasis on consumption at the expense of production. Sharon Zukin's (1995) concept of the symbolic economy, however, shows that there is a different type of production at play in urban regeneration operations, namely, the production of symbols and spaces, which since the 1970s has been replacing the production of commodities following the decline of industrial manufacturing economies, first in American cities and then in Western Europe. Bianchini and Parkinson (1993:1-2) argue that four key trends have shaped culture-led urban regeneration in Western Europe. These are, first, a shift from social and political goals to economic development and urban regeneration objectives during 1970s-80s; second, the increase in leisure expenditure on the part of both individuals and governments; third, the revitalisation of provincial cities following decentralisation policies in general terms, grassroots cultural demands and economic restructuring; and fourth, the growth of economic sectors such as tourism and the cultural industries to tackle job loss and improve social cohesion. In Argentina and other Latin American countries, the cultural policy context in such a period was rather different, shaped by great social inequality, incipient industrialisation based on agricultural export economies, financial instability (with high inflation rates and foreign debt) and political democratic transitions (Chapter 4 situates cultural policy in the larger trajectory of culture in Argentina, and Chapter 6 examines cases of culture-led urban renewal projects in Buenos Aires). Culture-led urban regeneration, then, although widespread and informing the economy and policy agendas of many cities across the world, is heterogeneous and contingent to national contexts.

It can nonetheless be argued that culture has become the cornerstone of 'a new orthodoxy by which cities seek to enhance their competitive position' (Miles and Paddison, 2005:833). While in Argentina the impact of such orthodoxy is visible in policy discourses and documents which underpin urban renewal projects like the CCB, the number of publications on local culture-led urban regeneration is very limited.[10] This is a common, if paradoxical, situation in Latin American countries: the rhetorical importance given to cultural policy discourses has not been accompanied by systematic academic approaches which analyse these policies (Rubim and Bayardo, 2008). Because of this knowledge gap,[11] this thesis has been informed by the vast academic research on culture-led urban regeneration published in the rest of the world, particularly the UK, USA and across Europe. In particular, there are loosely two main strands which I have found relevant for my research: the policy-oriented strand and the critical approach.

First, what I call the 'policy-oriented' strand is exemplified by the emerging field of culture consultancies and marketing companies which provide expert advice to local authorities and private agencies, publishing research on cultural matters. Such research includes the strategic exploitation of cultural resources, conditions for success and investment models, innovation and creativity, cultural mapping and catalysts for urban change, brand identity, economic and urban impact of culture, partnerships, audience

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10 Examples include the work of the Cultural Studies team at the Gino Germani Research Institute (IIGG), coordinated by Ana Wortman (1997, 2009). Their emphasis, however, is on cultural intermediaries, middle classes cultural consumption and transformations of the cultural field in Argentina. The Urban Studies research team at IIGG has also produced some research on urban regeneration, although with a focus on housing policies and movements (under research projects such as 'Renewal and change in the South of the Buenos Aires' and 'Globalisation, territory and change') and tourism (Almiron, Bertoncello and Troncoso, 2006; Gomez Schettinni, 2009; Gomez Schettini and Zunino Singh, 2009).
11 Some initiatives, such as the 'Towards an Emergent Geography of Gentrification in the Global South' seminar, organised by Kings' College London, the London School of Economics and Political Science, the University of Chile and the University of Buenos Aires, represent a recent attempt to tackle such a knowledge gap by discussing gentrification from a comparative, post-colonial framework which challenges dominant literatures.

research, and how to obtain funding from international organisations. This body of work – exemplified in Ghilardi (2003), Montgomery (2003, 2004), García (2004) and Evans (2009) – can be characterised by the following features: a) a celebration of the power of culture for urban regeneration and economic development, b) an emphasis on the provision of best practice guidelines and tools for policy-making, and c) inattention to the social history of the places to be regenerated and the politics underpinning regeneration policies. These studies tend to adopt a technical approach oriented towards both measuring the economic impact generated by the new cultural quarters and putting forward recommendations to maximise the effectiveness of such processes.

While much of this literature has shed light on the ways culture is being deployed by local authorities and developers for urban renewal, it is overly concerned with assessing the success of those initiatives in terms of the city's reputation and economic performance. As a result, these studies offer ready-for-sale urban development packages, driven by a desire to formulate 'one-size-fits-all' toolkits. In their attempts to establish success factors for cultural quarters, they frequently fail to acknowledge the historical particularities and the political complexities of the areas to be regenerated. Running through this strand of research is a view of culture as a tangible resource. This emphasises the instrumental nature of the culture-led urban regeneration process, showing how governmental officers, consultants and marketing gurus *use* culture to achieve specific urban and economic goals. Culture becomes a means rather than an end in itself.

Cognizant of these developments, this thesis has adopted a different view. While ideas of culture can be mobilised to facilitate and legitimise political projects and urban-

material interventions, culture itself is produced in these processes. If culture refers to the realm of signification – the world of shared meanings, beliefs, social norms, traditions and values that guide the visions and practices of particular social groups –, then meanings and values are enacted, produced and contested through these operations in tandem with the particular geopolitical configuration of these processes. This takes us to consider what I call the 'critical approach' towards culture-led urban regeneration. This second strand of research can be defined by the critical stance it adopts towards these urban processes and its explicit concern with the politics of culture and cultural policies. This approach stresses the tensions surrounding the transformation of space through a cultural rhetoric, shows the need to question the claimed universality of such processes and reveals the social implications and the political economy of urban renewal. Examples of this approach include Bianchini and Parkinson (1993), Zukin (1995), Yúdice (2003), Bailey, Miles and Stark (2004), Keith (2009) and Pratt (2009), among others.

In this thesis I outline an approach to culture which captures its contending, changing and complex nature in light of the views of different social actors and in relation to historical events, institutional processes, material transformations, and particular socio-economic and political circumstances. My analysis builds upon the two strands identified above, especially the second approach, to argue that culture has become a panacea in contemporary Argentina. I draw, in particular, on the concept of culture-as-resource (Yúdice, 2003): embedded in the cultural and creative economy, this notion refers to the changing role of culture and the arts in times of accelerated globalisation and their expansion as resources for socio-political and economic amelioration (with their relating returns) in order to 'enhance education, salve racial strife, help reverse

urban blight through cultural tourism, create jobs, reduce crime, and perhaps even make a profit' (Yúdice, 2003:12). Despite referring to similar processes, my view of culture-as-panacea differs from the notion of culture-as-resource in my emphasis on the *remedial* capacities of culture – which include but go beyond the economic – and its desired and allegedly universal nature, that is, culture generally conceived of as something which is always 'good', regardless of its content or context, a true panacea with magic-like capacities.

My fundamental point is that culture, conceived as a universal remedy thanks to the powerful widespread assumption which sees it as 'innocent' and as I shall argue 'apolitical', actually fails to cure existing problems. By disregarding or deferring them, it contributes to not remedying such problems, if not to exacerbating them. Although resorting to cultural activities to tackle social, economic and urban problems seems to have acquired universal prominence, the effectiveness of cultural regeneration is contingent on particular historical and geopolitical contexts. Rather than assess culture's impact as an economic catalyst, it seems to me from a sociological perspective, more interesting to explore the *conflicts* that such a global, recurrent cultural strategy, uncritically invoked as a universal solution, creates. I shall argue that it is precisely the notion of culture as a panacea which has become the new ill in the contemporary city. In order to 'cure' it, we need to de-sacralise the power attached to culture as a universal remedy, as a general form which is 'politically correct' and always welcomed regardless of its content and specific circumstances.

If we take culture as a panacea, there are at least five 'diseases' it is intended to cure in twenty-first century Argentina. First, the abandonment and neglect in which the post

office building was left after the neoliberal privatisation of the postal services in the 1990s. In this case we shall see how culture brings a dead building back to life. Second, in the aftermath of the profound political, economic and social crises in 2001, culture reinvigorates democracy and restores the faith in institutional politics. In the context of the 2010 Argentinian Bicentenary commemoration, culture also articulates the imagination of a national community and the 'remembering' of the origin of the nation. Third, the urban problems of central Buenos Aires. In view of poor infrastructure, excessive traffic, noise and air pollution and the existence of physical barriers and obstacles for pedestrians, culture is placed at the centre of current urban regeneration plans for the downtown area through the creation of a cultural quarter, new public parks and squares. Fourth, the neglect of heritage sites in the city. The invocation of culture mediates the recycling and redevelopment of the listed post office building but also other heritage sites in central Buenos Aires, something which will be explored in Chapter 6. Finally, culture provides the local authorities with the material with which to construct their dreams of modernity, and in doing so, overcome the historical frustrations of not being able to maintain Argentina as part of a selected group of 'first world' countries, seen as the embodiment of progress and civilisation. The remedial properties of culture, then, encompass both symbolic (democratic reinvigoration, national remembering, regaining of visibility and interest, acquisition of a modern status) and material elements (architectural renewal, urban revitalisation, economic development), which are entangled in an emblematic building.

The building as entanglement

How to grasp the mutable, fluid and contending meanings produced by different social actors around culture, urban heritage, and national memory, especially when these

connect past, present and future imaginations? In this thesis I anchor the study of culture to specific practices such as institutional initiatives, and the concreteness of things such as buildings, which facilitates this primary task. The materiality of buildings offers an invaluable practical means, however unusual in sociology, through which to investigate how culture is produced through social actors' views and in a specific context. Yet there is no single way to study buildings. Such material structures have been examined from multiple and plural perspectives, including Marxist, structuralist, semiotic, phenomenological, archaeological and anthropological traditions (Tilley, 2006), each of which employing a different theoretical focus and methodological approach to things, history, power and social action.

This thesis adopts the idea of entanglement as a way of looking into the problem of culture. By 'entanglement' I refer to the entwining of various elements in a complicated situation which is displayed in the physical fabric of the post office building and its planned redevelopment. The post office headquarters becomes entangled in a network of public discourses, memory struggles, material interests and political confrontations. In order to disentangle it, I use multiple methods of research to explore culture as a site of conflicts in which a variety of actors, institutions and practices are enmeshed. The transformations in the social life (Appadurai, 1986) or biography (Hoskins, 2006) of this iconic building, in turn, express analogous changes in social views, practices, and contexts, of which the building is both a product and, to different extents, a producer.

No doubt buildings can be very powerful, especially in political terms. They have the potential to be carriers of meanings, containers of memories, and triggers of commemoration. As meaningful architectural works of art, they alter our environment

physically and inform and reorganise our experience through their various avenues of meaning (Goodman 1985:652). Building on Hayden's (1995) notion of the power of place, understood as the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizens' public memory, the power of buildings could be said to be mnemonic (Connerton, 1989, 2009) in being representational. In the power to represent, the control over that representation is usually at stake in the battle over the creation, preservation, uses and transformation of buildings. Buildings have historical significance and can inevitably be appropriated through their perceived cultural heritage status in order to strengthen certain political identities (Steward and Strathern, 2003). 'Buildings, as much as people, "hold" memories, conjuring up and housing spectres' (Bell and Di Paolantonio, 2009:155). Being intersected with different memories, place identities and public meanings, these material structures can be very important in reinforcing political communities and therefore become the subjects of conflicts and struggles – over what to remember and forget, what to preserve and destroy. This contestability over the relationship between the architectural-material and the social-symbolic arises from the clash of different interests with respect to buildings and is precisely what makes them a relevant site for sociological inquiry.

Buildings are also central to the study of cities and urban life. They can be conceived of as urban (and cultural) artefacts that are constitutive of the architecture of the city which, at the same time, implies the construction of the city over time (Rossi, 1982). Rossi's notion of urban artefacts is significant in highlighting the importance of the singularity and individuality of these parts or moments in the understanding of the city as a whole. Like the inescapable circulation of users, the uses of buildings are transformed in their history: they are recycled, preserved, squatted, demolished, rebuilt,

abandoned. A city itself can be defined as the persistent change of function of buildings (González, 2006:24), which in different historical periods shape the city's aesthetics in diverse ways. The redevelopment of the post office building into a spectacular cultural centre is a clear example of the broader changes taking place at the level of city-making.

A combination of an imposing physical structure, a strategic location, and a central economic and political role in national history situates the postal palace within a landscape of iconic buildings in the city. The iconicity of the building is defined by the official past and present desire to render Argentina a 'modern' nation, a symbol of the country's glorious past and a demotic reminder in the history of democratic communication and national belonging. The economy of iconic buildings is symbolic, political and material: they become important bearers of social meanings, objects of power and prestige, and the physical space which provides a context for social reproduction but also an active element in the production of social practices. It is not the practical function of the post office building per se, but rather its role as a symbol, that has the power to condense a myriad of dissimilar elements. The concept of symbolic space (Etlin, 1994) is useful here in illustrating the role a building can play beyond its functional purposes and in terms of the experience of its users, how social codes shape spatial organisation, and the multiplicity of meanings which a particular place can be endowed with.

If the building is a symbol, then it is undoubtedly also an artefact of material culture. Yet unlike traditional ethnographic approaches to material objects which focus on the

detailed observation of the interaction between people and objects,[12] this thesis adopts a somewhat different approach. This is determined by the nature of the postal building (an enormous piece of institutional architecture), its closure during refurbishment works (which restricted ordinary social interaction with it), the lack of a resident population in the downtown area, and my particular interest in examining how the building was enmeshed in policy-making, representations, meanings and material transformations. I follow the post office palace in time, combining a study of historical representations of the object and the very materials with which it was built, with an analysis of contemporary transformations in its material structure, social actors' interpretations of the meaning and metamorphosis of the object, and the institutional dimension which places it as the target of national and municipal policy.

My analysis of the Palacio de Correos has been influenced by my reading of a variety of different works. These include White's (1980) study of the Rothschild Buildings in East London, in which he conducts an incredibly detailed analysis of the area in which the building was embedded together with the life of the community which inhabited it; Barthes' (1979) examination of national symbols, meaning, consumption and modernity through his study of the Eiffel Tower and its users in Paris; and Yalouri's (2001) research into the Acropolis site as a mobile and multiple situated monument which allows for an analysis of the negotiation of national identity and power and the local and international meanings shaped by the site. These works represent different approaches to the study of significant material forms and, based on the analysis of one single object,

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12 A detailed discussion on the agency of objects goes beyond the aim and scope of this thesis. While the analysis does look at the lifecycle of a particular building, the focus is placed mostly on questions of meaning, representation and material transformations, rather than how the object makes people do things with an active intentionality. For a discussion of the latter, see the anthropological works of Appadurai (1986), Kuchler (2002), Miller (1998), and Latour (1988), among many others in Science and Technology Studies (STS) who offer an analysis of non-human agency.

develop knowledge that goes beyond the materiality of these artefacts to encompass broader questions of national identity, uses of heritage in the city, the social history of places, and various meaning-making practices. In my study of the postal building, I follow a similar path. My approach brings material elements, institutional aspects and historical events, together with an analysis of the uses of the past in the present, architectural practices, archival representations and social imaginations.

1.3. Building an argument, examining the building: chapter outline

The thesis is organised around the past, present and future of the iconic Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones in Buenos Aires. It does not follow a strict chronological order, though; historical and present time references blend together in the various chapters. What can be termed the 'symbolic materiality' of the postal palace, that is, the layers of social meanings attached to the material elements of the building, is the thread that runs through the thesis. These layers express the interplay between the symbolic and the material, the functional and the representational, the real and the imagined, and refer to symbolisation; namely, how architectural works 'mean' by representing, exemplifying or expressing certain properties (Goodman, 1985). The building, in turn, functions as an anchor that provides the reader with a firm place on which to stand, read and think about the volatile intricacies of culture, politics, memory and urban space in Argentina. The title of the thesis engages directly with my claim that culture has become a panacea in contemporary cities and that we should question it by examining critically the politics of cultural planning, national heritage and urban regeneration, with which culture is entangled. Seven chapters, including the introduction and the conclusion, have been employed as the bricks that construct the argument of this thesis.

The methodological aspects of the research are outlined in Chapter 2, while explaining the selection criteria for the case study, the research questions and the design used in this investigation. As the research concerned interviewing, among other people, members of the political elites, the difficulties in accessing them and the ethical issues involved are also considered. The chapter ends with a reflection on the practical challenges posed by researching the building's social history, on-going transformations and projected future as well as the implications of my approach to researching culture through an iconic building.

The analysis then moves to the historical context of the case study, which sets the scene for the following chapters. Drawing on historical literature and archival material, Chapter 3 analyses the role played by the postal institution in consolidating the image of the Argentine nation-state and nourishing the national project. Considering pre-colonial, colonial and post-colonial postal developments, the linkages between postal services and power structures are highlighted, while showing how postal services were instrumental for the ruling elites in their creation of a modern techno-state. The materiality of modernity is then analysed by looking at the different postal buildings in the city and the construction of a magnificent palace to house the national postal services and to represent the country's dream of modernity. After looking at the representational aspects of the building, the chapter proceeds to examine closely its functional dimensions as well as the nature and value of postal work. The chapter shows how the postal institution, and therefore the post office building, was endowed historically with a patriotic character, a civilising mission and a central function in the integration of the nation, both symbolically and geographically.

The meaning of modernity, though, is not fixed, but malleable and changing, diversely perceived in different historical and geopolitical contexts. Chapter 4 will show how the social meaning of the post office building, which in its origins represented a symbol of progress and civilisation, changed in recent times to become a symbol of backwardness, only to be later redeveloped in the name of culture with the aim of having a cultural venue 'of international level', seen now as a 'symbol of modernity'. I analyse why culture has been invoked as the solution to the regeneration of both the postal building and the central area of Buenos Aires. The re-signification of material heritage is discussed in light of the discursive operation by which the building is rendered useless and abandoned and then considered to be in need of intervention. I argue that culture is invoked as a neutral, ideology-free tool inspired by global trends in a manoeuvre which values not its content but mainly its format: the cultural quarter. Yet culture also acquires a particular, local meaning given by the aftermath of the 2001 crisis in Argentina.

The political, social and economic context of recovery which followed the crisis welcomed the arrival of the national bicentenary commemorations in 2010, of which the post office building was an important part. Chapter 5 focuses on the commemorative aspects of the planned creation of the Bicentenary Cultural Centre (CCB) in the former post office headquarters. The chapter seeks to position this cultural project in relation to the broader politics of the national commemorations and examine the official management of memory in terms of what is remembered and forgotten. In addressing the question of what it means to commemorate a national bicentenary in the context of contemporary Argentina, the 'who, what, where, when and why' of the celebrations are analysed: who the key actors were, what commemorations were involved, where and

when they took place, and what their underlying logic was. Issues of heritage, memory and national identity are discussed in light of the redevelopment of the post office building and the attempts to monumentalise an already existing national historical monument. Like Chapter 3, this chapter connects past and present (of the post office building and the nation) by looking at the official endeavours to establish a national project by negotiating the tensions between the capital city and the rest of the provinces, and to achieve cultural modernity through architectural and urban developments in the metropolis.

Chapter 6 takes up the themes of commemoration, culture, heritage and space outlined in the previous chapters so as to examine their interplay in three redevelopment cases. These were contemporary to the transformation of the post office building and also took place in the central area of Buenos Aires. These projects were characterised by features which were both similar and different to those of the main case study examined in this thesis. By looking at these projects the chapter sheds light on the ways in which culture-led urban regeneration projects have taken place in Buenos Aires, the broader cultural rhetoric used in the transformation of urban space, the planned content of the CCB cultural centre, the erasure of material memories, and the implications for place-making. Taken together, these initiatives involving the uses of public space in the city show how culture becomes a device of legitimisation: its invocation for spatial regeneration purposes is shaped by the 'need' to erase previous conflicts and ease existing tensions surrounding the uses of those particular spaces in the city.

The thesis concludes by revisiting the question of why culture has become so prevalent in processes of urban regeneration and the redevelopment of industrial heritage in

contemporary cities. My argument is that the official invocation of culture for urban regeneration in Buenos Aires acquires a local configuration given by the need to assign a stamp of legitimacy to political projects, especially when these are of controversial nature. This is so particularly in the aftermath of the neoliberal administrations of the 1990s and the crises of 2001 when generalised social discontent and a sense of distrust in institutional politics and politicians prevailed. In a context where politics is generally seen as a suspicious arena identified with corruption and inefficiency, policy-makers' resort to culture capitalises on the assumption that culture is innocent and ideologically neutral in order to gain legitimacy for their policies. However, we will see how *kirchnerismo* has attempted to challenge such a conception. In the conclusion I also outline what I consider to be the main contributions of the thesis in relation to: ontological claims about culture and heritage, the study of cultural planning, the role of culture in urban regeneration, and the value of public architecture from a methodological perspective. I conclude by pointing out how culture can indeed legitimate material transformations which go against the preservation of the social history of places and intangible forms of heritage.

This thesis is the result of original and much needed research on culture-led urban regeneration in Argentina. It represents a unique endeavour to investigate in-depth and critically into the local policy arena from a sociological, empirical approach which reconstructs the behind-the-scenes of a controversial redevelopment intervention. My creative use of the building as the object of investigation constitutes an innovative approach in sociology, combining the material history of the building with the political sociology of heritage and national commemoration, as well as an urban sociology of place-making and regeneration. In light of the absence of research on culture-led urban

regeneration in Argentina, this thesis contributes to filling the identified knowledge gap

by engaging critically with the ways heritage shapes place-making initiatives, the role

culture and history play in urban regeneration projects, and the dynamics and design of

urban cultural policies in Buenos Aires. Equally, it should be noted that my research has

been limited to the in-depth study of one specific building and its transformation into a

cultural centre through an official initiative, contextualised in relation to other on-going

redevelopment projects. Although the focus of this thesis is mainly on the design and

contestation of a top-down initiative, grassroots projects for the creation of cultural

centres also need detailed investigation.[13]

In the pages that follow, Eagleton's claim that culture has been rendered speechless –

with which this introduction was preceded – will be noticeable in view of the ambiguity,

abstractness and multiple meanings that characterise the term culture. However,

following Martín-Barbero, I believe that we need to place such loaded categories as

culture in their historical context, before we can speak of their uselessness or advocate

their disappearance. A focus on the term culture will allow us to trace the social

meanings surrounding it and analyse what is actually being done with it at the present

time; in other words, an engagement with its performative aspects will suggest culture's

productivity rather than speechlessness. It is in this sense that culture as a panacea

should be examined and questioned on the grounds of the instrumental nature of

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13 The *empresas recuperadas* phenomemon, by which factories are recovered and taken over by workers, often performing cultural and educational functions, represents an example of alternative culture-led regeneration and constitute an interesting case for sociological research. Examples of recovered factories are IMPA La Fabrica Ciudad Cultural, Grisinopoli, Imprenta Chilavert, and Hotel Bauen in Buenos Aires, which became informal spaces of performances and art, trade and education workshops (see the work by Ana Worthman's research team at the IIGG in Buenos Aires). Another paradigmatic initiative – official but grounded in social movements' claims – is the transformation of ESMA, the emblematic 1970's dictatorship's torture and extermination centre, into a cultural site (Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti). Implemented in 2008, the initiative, which managed to resignify a space of death into a space of memory, artistic expression and the promotion of human rights, represents an important site for the investigation of memory, politics and culture in contemporary Argentina.

cultural regeneration operations, the assumption of the ontological existence of culture as a bounded entity, and the erasure of the social history of places where these operations take place. Otherwise, what is left for the inherently rich character of culture beyond the pre-meditated effectiveness of a technical tool? Hopefully this thesis will be read along the lines of the fundamental task I have envisioned for it: that of examining the logic of cultural planning and unsettling cultural regeneration projects, with the hope of imagining alternative senses that could place culture at the heart of progressive social transformation, and at the service of nothing but itself.

CHAPTER 2

Researching culture through public architecture

Methodological considerations

After finishing my research on the interplay between culture and space for an MSc course at the LSE in 2007, I acquired a good sense of how important the idea of culture was for place-making, in particular for city branding campaigns. Through my research it became clear that culture plays a crucial role in the selling of places as it provides the symbolic content for the construction of the city's image, which is used by civil servants and consultants for marketing purposes. The use of 'soft' factors, such as experiences, feelings and images associated with certain places, constitutes a recurrent trend in urban planning and one which equally informs culture policy-making. I became interested in the articulation between culture, space and power as it takes place in the public domain when I investigated how a cultural rhetoric shaped the process of official city branding in Buenos Aires, and how non-mainstream cultural groups, institutionalised in the form of community cultural centres, conceived of culture and imagined the future of the city in different ways. I travelled to my home city, conducted fieldwork and examined the complex intermingling between culture, urban planning and politics (Dinardi, 2007).

In order to investigate further the political economy of culture, I decided to explore what form the interplay between culture and space, past and present, the material and

the symbolic, take in official[14] culture-led urban regeneration processes. As described in the introduction, my concern is with meaning-making practices and the social uses of culture and heritage in the contemporary city. In particular, I am interested in studying the nature and logic of culture-driven urban renewal projects; which interests are bound up in the life and survival of the sites to be intervened; how the representations produced by a building change over time; and why a language of culture is prevalent in enabling the transformation of places and the recycling of industrial heritage.

In what follows, I describe and analyse the methodological and practical aspects of this investigation, or the craft of researching an iconic building – its past, present and future. The building is located both in the central area of Buenos Aires and at the centre of the national political imagination. First, I outline the research design, the specific research questions and the selection criteria of the case study. Then I provide the reasons for using each of these research methods and describe the corpus of data. In the last part of the chapter, I discuss data analysis and other issues that arose during the research, and I narrate the tactics deployed for gaining access to the field. Finally, I consider the ethical aspects underlying this research and other conceptual and practical challenges that came up when researching the question of culture through a building.

2.1. Research design

As I was interested in understanding how the intermingling of culture, politics and space was articulated and translated into the making of public policies, I decided to use a case

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14 My main focus here is on an official project, since my interest concerns issues of power and policy-making – the ways in which hegemonic views produce meaning and how culture is made productive by social actors. However, I equally account for processes of contestation over culture and aim to give visibility to less visible, alternative views surrounding the redevelopment of the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones in Buenos Aires.

study that would allow for the analysis of these issues. I soon remembered a project in Buenos Aires, my home town, involving the creation of a cultural centre as a means of improving the physical conditions of the city centre. I conducted an internet search and found out that the case study in question was not only a current project, but in fact the target of a new intervention. The magnificent Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones was said to have become too large for the functions it used to perform as a post office and therefore was assigned a new use.

As a Buenos Aires resident, I only remembered there had been an architectural competition to recycle the building sometime in 2006. But as my research developed, I discovered that since 2004 there had been two other competitions involving its renovation. The palace was finally allocated a 'cultural' use to host a cultural centre to celebrate the bicentenary of the Argentine Nation to take place in 2010. After reading the brief for the latest competition, I realised how large the intervention was going to be: it would involve the transformation of not only the iconic building, but also all its surroundings, including the integration with the nearby government house and the trendy waterfront developments. By conducting a basic search into this public intervention, some of its key features came to the fore: it was a project in which a wide range of different social agents with their own interests were involved; it dealt with issues of heritage conservation and architectural transformation, involving a great deal of contestation; it was the subject of three different competitions, which reflected both its importance and the degree of debate about it; it was being explicitly and publicly used as a means to regenerate the city centre; and it concerned official commemorative activity. All these reasons confirmed the significance of this case study and led me to make it the object of my sociological investigation.

The case study, then, is located at the intersection of culture, space and memory, these being the three key axes of analysis. Consequently, I employed three sets of research questions as the compass that has guided my investigation:

- Why is the idea of culture being invoked for the redevelopment of the postal palace (Chapter 4)? What type of 'culture' is being officially planned through the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB) project (Chapters 4 and 6)? How is this form of culture-making contested by other existing claims on culture (Chapter 4)?

- What is the politics of memory that underpins the development of the CCB project (Chapter 5)? How are the past, present and future of the postal palace negotiated in the redevelopment of the building (Chapters 3 and 5)?

- What kind of public spaces do these culture-led urban regeneration initiatives seek to make, and in so doing, what type of urban futures are imagined? What sort of place-making operations are enabled by a cultural rhetoric? What gets to be destroyed in the process of urban renewal (Chapter 6)?

The first set of questions enabled me to problematise the very concept of culture on which culture-led urban regeneration initiatives are founded. I explored my interviewees' hopes, desires, views and plans for culture while trying to unveil how culture was understood in the CCB project and why it was being invoked for the physical renewal of the building and the commemoration of the national bicentenary. In addition, I wanted to examine how this official version of culture was being contested by other claims on it, for instance, those of the postal workers, heritage protectors and postal museum staff.

Intimately related to the different meanings ascribed to culture is the question of how heritage was defined in the CCB project, as this informed the redevelopment plans in a particular way, i.e. the decision over what to demolish and what to preserve in the interior of the building.

With the second set of questions I analysed the reasons why the postal palace was deemed the flagship project for the commemoration of the bicentenary anniversary of the first national government. How would this particular building remember the nation in a context of contemporary political conflicts? What kind of national memories would be recollected and forgotten in the process? With the aim of assessing the power of buildings to commemorate historical events and brush up collective memory, I unsettle the meaning of heritage while examining the temporality of the CCB project and the rituals of the official commemoration.

Finally, I used the third set of questions to explore issues of place-making and the uses of public space and heritage. I examined these issues in light of not only the redevelopment of the postal palace but also three other urban projects in Buenos Aires' central area that claimed to have a commemorative character. These questions enabled me to explore the kind of material interests that accompany the use of a cultural rhetoric and the larger political economy of culture and heritage in the contemporary city.

How does one study the meanings attributed to culture and the ways culture is made productive through an on-going policy intervention about which there is no specific research? Adopting an *exploratory research design* serves the purpose of finding out the main issues at stake, the key social actors in the story and the various interests

surrounding the official project. By taking such an approach I was able to use methods flexibly so as to include unexpected aspects that came up during my empirical investigation. The commemorative dimension, for instance, was not initially part of my inquiry but was incorporated at a later stage, after I found out about its significance for the CCB project. Similarly, examining the private urban development initiatives was not part of my initial research plan, but I included these during my fieldwork after realising that they were contemporary to the case of the post office palace, they shared a similar location and they had a commemorative character.

Given the nature of the problems dealing with social actors' understandings, values and beliefs in relation to culture, memory, the city and the nation, alongside the construction of meanings and discourses, I adopted a *qualitative research strategy*. This decision was supported by the flexibility that qualitative research methods offer, along with the need to produce rich descriptions of the social world that facilitate an understanding and interpretation of the complex issues involved in the case study. Quantitative inquiry hardly offers such a detailed and contextualised level of analysis of the complexity of social representations, power relations and cultural and political struggles. While my investigation has many of the features of ethnographic research, my thesis is not an urban ethnography strictly speaking – in any case it would be an ethnography of a building.[15] A number of reasons played a part in this methodological choice: actors were dispersed and not visible; my focus was not the everyday world of a group of people but

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15 And not of a group of people, for instance, policy-makers. Conducting an ethnography would have certainly been a fascinating option, if I had been working in the civil service at that time and had disguised my identity. In the context of Argentina's government, to engage in direct observation of policy behaviour or other social practices in a public office would require consent from the members of the group under study, which most likely would not be feasible in view of both the lack of transparent strategies and the complex power relations in which the world of governmental politics is embedded. In such a situation, covert research could be an option, if it were not for the ethical problems attached to this research practice.

rather the intricacies of an immense object of material culture and its past, present and future; the impossibilities of engaging bodily with the site itself (the building has been fenced for over two years and access has been restricted to staff members); and the relatively short period of time it took to complete my fieldwork (six months and a few subsequent visits).

The particularities of this research have led me to adopt different methods to produce the necessary corpus of data. I intentionally use the word 'produce' here to highlight the constructive character of this process, while differentiating it from the methodological notion of data 'collection', which assumes there are data 'out there' that exist on their own and need to be collected 'objectively' by the researcher. Even though the origins of sociology as a scientific discipline are intimately related to these positivist developments, my position is that all data must be produced by the researcher, and therefore, are the result of a socially constructed process shaped by one's subjective background. In my case, my penchant for cultural sociology, my recent engagement with cultural geography and my concern with Buenos Aires' political economy have led me choose this particular project in this specific city.

There are a number of reasons, though, for which the project for the redevelopment of the postal palace is a significant case for a sociological investigation:

- It is a current public initiative that receives the support of different social actors at both local and national levels, representing one of those exceptional cases in which the governing bodies of the city and the nation *seem* to be harmonically unified.

- It is a mega-scale development of significance in transforming the city centre, restoring a historical building and re-configuring the urban order in its connection with two centres of economic and political power: Casa Rosada, the government house, and the new exclusive neighbourhood of Puerto Madero, the docks district.

- Its importance is reflected in the project's ambitious goals to embody the future of the city and the nation, envisaging 'the cultural growth and development path for the future generations' (B4FS, 2006).

- It concerns the material transformation of an iconic listed building, which is intimately related to the establishment of the Argentine nation during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. It is currently being re-appropriated by the federal government in a revival of nationalistic sentiments and the commemoration of the past of the nation.

- It is a very timely project, which can be framed within a Latin American regional context in which several countries, such as Chile, Mexico, Ecuador, Bolivia and Colombia, among others, have just celebrated or are celebrating their national bicentenaries within the next few years.

Locally, the case acquires a nuanced significance. It involves a public initiative whereby a much disputed listed building will be redeveloped. Since it ceased functioning as the central post office headquarters, the building has been the subject of numerous debates about how to use its immense 'under-utilised' spaces, illustrating broader debates over uses of heritage in the city. Being the flagship project of the national bicentenary celebrations, the case also provides an opportunity to study current struggles over issues of national identity and memory. It illustrates institutional ways of dealing with the past

of the nation, heritage protection and conservation and culture-making, but also more general disputes over the uses of public space, land values, cultural development and national imagination. From a global viewpoint, this case constitutes an example of the widespread invocation of culture in urban regeneration strategies. In this sense, the research brings to the fore the experience of a Latin American city which has not been widely studied, in a context where cases of American and European cultural regeneration dominate the academic literature.

Having described the significance of the case examined in my thesis, it is worth remembering that 'a case study is not a methodological choice but a choice of what is to be studied' (Stake, 2000:435). 'Embedded in local contexts, shaped by local interests, and coloured by local perceptions' (Rosaldo, 1993:21), the case study offers an invaluable way into the examination of the contemporary city and the larger social processes and global forces operating at the local level. After confirming that this particular case would allow me to explore a whole range of issues concerning culture, heritage, memory, space and local and national politics, it was time to decide on the type of methods that would help me explore the building and gather the relevant data.

So I decided to place the building at the centre of my investigation. The approach adopted in my thesis can then be called *a building-mediated approach to the question of culture in the city*. It has allowed me to bring together multiple levels of analysis, temporal dimensions, spatial scales and avenues of enquiry. My undertaking of this research has endeavoured to contribute to fill the gap of 'materially innovative methods', as identified by Law (2004). I have proposed a building-mediated approach to disentangle the question of culture, which is entangled in a building that becomes caught up in policy

interventions, material transformations, urban renewal and the reinvigoration of the national imagination. The following table synthesises the key features of my approach. While the different dimensions are interwoven in reality in complex ways (i.e. there is contestation about memory; practices and discourses run through all of these dimensions; memory can be part of symbolic work), they are presented here separately for the purposes of examination only:

Materiality	Construction plans and materials, interior space design, preservation and decay, demolition and ruins, material transformation and creation of a new cultural institution, and the aesthetic elements of the monument, among others, can be studied through the redevelopment of the building.
Symbolic work	As an object of material culture, what does a building symbolise? The building as a national historical monument plays a fundamental role in the realm of meaning, collective remembering and national imagination.
Contestation	Issues of contestation over the future of the building, its current uses, the preservation and transformation of its materiality, ownership and management, uses of heritage and culture, national representation, the city's image, and recollection of memories can all be studied through the building. These specific issues in turn speak to larger questions, i.e. the meaning of culture and heritage; the political life of the nation; cultural planning, etc.
Memory	The building functions as an anchor to the moving and dark waters of political, social and national memory: it condenses history and innumerable stories, it can trigger remembering and give visibility to forgetting.
Discourses	Policy at various levels, as well as architects, users, journalists and residents, all produce, are shaped by and are objects of discourses surrounding the past, present and future of the building.
Practices	The building enables a myriad of practices, such as architecture, production and consumption, conservation, storytelling and policy-making.
Multiple actors	Architects, policy-makers, postal workers, competition organisers, jury members and participants, real estate companies, developers, journalists, and heritage protectors, all have a stake in the building.

Such an approach can be seen as a descriptive or a method assemblage (Savage, 2009; Law, 2004) of the case study – the ways in which researching the question of culture through a building makes possible description, alongside a complicated condensation and arrangement of 'presences and absences' in its analysis of memory, practices, discourses, contestation, multiple actors, materiality and symbolic work, and demands the use of a variety of research methods.

2.2. Exploring the building: research methods

In light of the three structuring dimensions of this investigation, or 'the underpinning foundations of the building', I have undertaken multiple streams of research to construct the corpus of data needed to address the research questions. Clearly, there are different ways of accessing the field, different possibilities of 'entering the building'. I used the 'main entrance' to the building to conduct a number of in-depth interviews with policy-makers and architects, who were the most visible actors in the project. Although the main entrance cannot be avoided, especially when it comes to visiting public buildings, the 'back door' is typically optional and available only to those who know of its existence. I decided to use this 'back door' to walk through the building's different spaces, to look at it from other angles and to incorporate other voices different from those being portrayed in the mass media. So I contacted postal workers, postal museum staff, cleaners, vendors and security guards, who may be seen as secondary, less visible, actors in the context of the CCB project. Despite my efforts to identify multiple viewpoints, the absence of any community consultation regarding the planned transformation of building uses and the fact that it is not in a residential area made my endeavour somewhat difficult. The Director of the Museo Postal y Telegráfico, Museo de Telecomunicaciones (Postal and Telegraph Museum, Telecommunications Museum) gave me a guided tour of the building, from the main entrance to the back door, during which I took detailed notes and photographs. I also filmed the site and recorded its sounds to have a more lively record of the area.

Opening different 'windows' of the building enabled me to see its interior, history, uses and users. The windows I opened were those of institutional materials, public speeches and visual archives. Finally, I looked at the building from outside by making some on-

site observations; attended seven events that enabled me to contact people and gather institutional information; and examined newspaper articles, a TV broadcast and an online blog discussing the redevelopment of the postal building.

Main entrance and back door: interviews

After formulating my provisional research questions, I had to decide how I should access the world of social meanings of the different actors involved in my case study. I was primarily concerned with understanding why culture was being invoked in a project that at first glance did not appear to be wholly 'cultural'. But I was also interested in understanding the ways in which the CCB project was intertwined with commemorative functions. One of my key concerns was to find out whether it was the need to celebrate the bicentenary that had informed the development of the project, or whether it was the mega-scale project itself that offered a good opportunity for planning commemorations. When discussing urban regeneration, I was interested in understanding the alleged reasons that justified the need for spatial intervention – the grounds on which the need to regenerate a space is formulated. Hence, as issues of meaning were crucial to my investigation, I decided to conduct in-depth interviews to delve into the actors' beliefs, values, understandings and viewpoints on the CCB project in particular, and on culture, the city and the nation in general.

Interviews constitute an effective way of producing rich and detailed data in a relatively short period of time. They provide an accessible tool that can help develop a deep understanding of the interviewees' ways of seeing the world, their feelings and their attitudes. The major drawback of this method of analysis is that through interviews we can only access what the interviewee says that she does, believes or feels, but not what

she *really* does, believes or feels. This disadvantage may be seen as particularly relevant when dealing with public figures, such as policy-makers, given their need to give 'politically correct' replies to questions, especially if they are being recorded. However, an implicit concern with pursuing 'truth' seems to underpin such a position. Contrary to this, I used interviews to discover the different stories that existed around my case study and to explore how my interviewees constructed meaning and made sense of the key issues of this investigation.

Having decided I would conduct interviews, the next step was to identify my research participants. Drawing a map of the actors that I knew were involved in the different aspects of the project allowed me to locate the individuals and organisations that I wanted to contact. I completed this initial map as my project progressed, especially after I realised that the actors I had originally identified were undoubtedly 'too official'. As my case study encompasses the transformation of an iconic listed building and its surroundings in a politically and economically significant area of the city, and because this was taking place in the context of national commemorations, I expected to find some degree of contestation over the project. I intended to unravel the views of the different interest groups related to the building. In attempting to decipher the narratives underpinning the redevelopment proposals, I identified and contacted all of the key social actors that were involved, to different extents, in the CCB project. As a way of illustration, Figure 5 shows how I grouped my interviewees into different practical categories, depending on their relationship with the building: those involved with the re-functionalisation of the building, the physical regeneration of the area, the bicentenary commemorations, cultural planning and heritage protection and other actors, such as those working in the building.

Competitions to re-functionalise the building

- Organisers
- Jury
- Winners

Culture and heritage

- National Commission
- National Under Ministry
- NGO
- Postal Museum
- Creative Industries Observatory

Workers

- Vendors
- Postal workers
- Cleaners
- Security guards

Urban regeneration

- Municipal office
- Urban expert
- Journalist

Bicentenary commemorations

- National Organising Committee
- Municipal Organising Committee
- Bicentenary House
- Two private sector initiatives linked to culture and space

Figure 5. Map of research participants

I selected research participants according to their involvement in the project. I interviewed[16] 30 people (see further details in Appendix I) between late August 2008 and early February 2009 about each of the different aspects of the building I had identified. With regards to the first national competition to recycle the building in 2005, I interviewed the organisers (former National Economy Minister and his Technical and Legal Secretary) and the architect who won the first prize. In relation to the 2006 international architectural competition, I interviewed the organisers (Director of the

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16 Most interviews took place in the interviewee's workplace. Generally, this was a public office; one of them took place in the Casa Rosada and another in the city of La Plata, for which I had to travel 65km. Four interviews were conducted in cafés and two in the participant's house. Two of the interviews took the form of group conversations, as this was requested by the participants.

Architects' Central Society and representative of the Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services), the winning architects, the architects awarded the third prize, an architect awarded an honorary mention and two members of the jury. Concerning issues of heritage, I interviewed the Director of the Historical Sites, Monuments and Museums National Commission, and the Director of an NGO that had been campaigning in support of heritage protection and against illegal demolition in the city. I also interviewed an architect expert in urban renewal in the city's central and docks areas, the municipal Under Secretary of Urbanism, Architecture and Infrastructure Projects, and a journalist specialist in urban transformations. I also spoke with the National Under Secretary of Cultural Management, the former municipal Cultural Minister and the Director of the Creative Industries Observatory. I interviewed the directors of the municipal and national bicentenary commemorations organising committees, asking them about the official preparations for the commemorations. In addition, I interviewed representatives from two important real estate corporations that were organising urban/cultural projects for the bicentenary celebrations in the city. I contacted the Director and a guide from the Museo Postal y Telegráfico, Museo de Telecomunicaciones, along with two postal workers, and I had informal conversations[17] with cleaners, security guards and vendors working in the surrounding area to ask them about the building itself.

As I had some sense of the kind of intellectual knot I wanted to untie, I was able to prepare a list of key topics to guide my conversation with interviewees in order not to forget any important issues. Accumulating 'puzzlements' and sorting them into clusters

17 My criterion for contacting people was established by their involvement with the redevelopment of the post office building. These particular actors did not feel that they had any relation with it or knew much about it. Therefore, they preferred to give their opinions in the context of an informal group conversation, rather than arranging particular interviews.

(Lofland and Lofland, 2006) enabled me to think of specific topical questions, mostly organised under the broad categories of 'CCB project', 'culture', 'urban regeneration' and 'bicentenary commemorations'. Before meeting interviewees, I researched the work done by their organisations and their backgrounds, and thought of particularly relevant questions to pose. These interview guides helped to open up the conversation, which then developed into a wide range of unexpected avenues. Usually I started by briefly reminding my interviewees what my project was about and I gave them some background information. I did this for two reasons: first, to show them I was not an architect, but a sociologist researching architecture-related issues, which reinforced my position as a 'student who had just arrived in Buenos Aires after living abroad for three years'. Second, by exposing myself to the judgement of the interviewees, I provided them with a space to pose their own questions.

I presented myself as ignorant of the most 'technical' aspects of the project – those dealing with the building's transformation or the structural urban problems in the city centre, but knowledgeable about other aspects, such as who was involved in the project, who were the competition winners and organisers, what the timescale was and so on. This was a useful strategy to make interviewees feel safe and trust me, as I would not pose any 'difficult' questions the way a journalist would do. My intention was not to make them feel guilty or blameworthy, as I was not there to judge, but to listen to what they had to say. Most of the interviewees were high-status public servants who were being interviewed by an unknown PhD student. They agreed to be involved in my research *because* they thought I would neither put them in an awkward situation nor break their trust. Moreover, being in some way linked to a project based at an English university carried with it prestige and formality. As one interviewee put it while

commenting on the letter I had sent to him: 'It is really well written, it inspires respect'. Inspired by Erving Goffman, I attempted to manage the impression of my self-presentation – smart clothes, polite gestures and formal treatment would make me look like one of them. Their decision to agree to be part of my research might have been influenced by their implicit willingness to disclose certain information. In a sense, being interviewed by a researcher offered them a platform to make information public 'so that the truth would be unveiled', as some of my interviewees claimed.

After asking for permission to record our conversation, I usually asked interviewees to explain what their work consisted of within the organisation in which they worked. This type of straightforward question functioned as a good ice-breaker, and by showing them my interest in their work, I was slowly able to build some rapport. Most of the time I remained silent after asking short, open-ended questions and my interviewees would talk for extended periods of time. I frequently had to make an effort not to interrupt them, and this technique proved useful in the end, as I would then follow up specific topics by asking further probing questions. One of the most difficult things was to use silence as a way of encouraging the interviewees to add further details about what they had just said. Typically I nodded, laughed and smiled to show them my understanding and to build up a sort of relationship of complicity. On average interviews lasted between one and two hours, although some lasted more than two hours. I transcribed them all and sent transcriptions to my interviewees for their approval. None of the few who responded suggested any changes should be made.

First window: public speeches and institutional materials

In order to complement the information gathered in the interviews, I decided to select a number of public speeches on the bicentenary in general, and the CCB project in particular, and analyse them in detail through critical discourse analysis (speeches) and thematic coding (institutional materials). I did this to detect and reconstruct the sort of problems the social actors involved had found to justify their view of the need to transform the postal building and renew the city's centre. I deconstructed the idea that a cultural centre would solve the identified problems by analysing a selection of the following:

- President's speeches (located through the Casa Rosada's website and the Presidential Word website that contains all current President's speeches).
- Mayor's speeches (located through the media).
- Official institutional documents (the brief of the CCB competition, maps and plans of the building and the site, images, promotional material of the bicentenary celebrations and of the government's current urban renewal proposals).
- Newspaper articles on the CCB project.

I chose this set of texts because I was interested in uncovering the type of reality that was being constructed in relation to the redevelopment of the postal palace. Discourses are powerful because they are productive: they produce the world as they understand it (Rose, 2001), and in doing so they can support institutions and help reproduce power relations (Parker, 1992). In this regard, discourse analysis proved to be a useful technique in taking a critical approach towards language, facilitating the analysis of

issues of power, the production of meaning and knowledge and the ways in which discourses shape social identities, create subjects and objects and support institutions. My main concern while undertaking discourse analysis was not so much with 'getting at the truth of an underlying social reality through discourse, but with examining the ways language is used to present different pictures of reality' (Tonkiss, 1998:249). Although some consider that this method of analysis lacks 'formal rules', as it is messy and it refuses to ascribe causality (Rose, 2001), I found it useful to detect how the problems explored throughout my thesis were expressed and reproduced discursively.

Second window: historical documentation

In dealing with questions of culture and national heritage, this research is concerned to some extent with memory in its particular examination of the past contained in the materiality of a building, the meaning and uses of heritage and the official commemoration of a historical event. Memory and history are intertwined in the process of representation, narration and remembrance of past events. Memory speaks to the 'happened' and the 'imagined' in its imbrication with lived historical experiences and cultural narratives (Radstone, 2000). Since the beginning of its construction in 1888, the postal building has condensed over a century of history – of the nation-state, the city and the postal institution, for example – and embodied the various memories of those who built it during the forty years of its construction, who used it to post a letter or send a telegram and who worked in their offices and workshops at different historical periods.

During my fieldwork I gathered different historical materials by visiting archives and libraries with the aim of contextualising the case study within a temporal framework and

particular local context. I also used these documents to retrieve the building's social history, which was somewhat overlooked in the official accounts of the CCB project. The issue of how to re-construct the 'memory of the building' posed practical challenges of locating, accessing and analysing the relevant material. Although my initial interest in the building concerned its current status and the projected transformations for its future, researching into its past proved to be fundamental to understanding the functional and symbolic roles played by postal services – as represented by the postal palace – in the nineteenth century and their importance for community integration and educational development.

The first obvious place to begin my search for archives was the postal museum located at the postal palace. The Museo Postal y Telegráfico, Museo de Telecomunicaciones provided me with valuable visual material on the construction of the building, the area where it was built, its interior and its early years as a post office. I was able to gather around 300 images from the museum collection. As the museum was closed to the public pending new developments in the building, all the textual material was packed in closed boxes. Unfortunately, this meant that I had no access either to other archives about the history of the post office or to its institutional documents and manuals. Nonetheless, thanks to my first visit to this museum, I met the staff and arranged interviews with one of the guides and the Director, and I took a guided visit, even though these had been suspended because of the refurbishment works.

The second obvious place to look for archives was the Archivo General de la Nación (National General Archive), which contained over 150 large boxes[18] of dusty archives[19] on a wide range of different aspects of postal services in Argentina between 1875 and 1955. The enormous amount of available archives on the postal palace illustrates the importance assigned to the building since its conception in 1888, functioning as 'monuments of the past' that have been transformed into documents (Foucault 1989:7, quoted in May, 2001). The photographs of the building clearly exemplify how the Public Works Ministry, which carefully and proudly produced most of them, intended to record the construction process showing the building's splendour.

The lack of personnel and adequate infrastructure in this archive makes it difficult to access, and the building has an unfriendly atmosphere; I had to spend long periods of time there looking for information manually, as the archival heritage has not yet been digitalised. Within the archives, there were different types of documents, including ministry memoirs, official bulletins, annual bulletins, postal magazines, legislative regulations and other materials about communications, postcodes and postal rates, among others. Topics covered by the archives ranged from stamps, the creation of post offices across the country and the transportation of correspondence, to regulations of the services, contracts, information about the telegraph and the telephone and training of staff, among many others. In view of the vast amount of data available, it was not easy to identify the information that was strictly relevant for my research, as I felt

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18 Each of the boxes contains several folders, each of which in turn comprises several files. The boxes are only classified by keyword, e.g. 'land', 'statistics', 'donations' and so on. For instance, when looking for archives on the 'building', the catalogue said there were over 50 heavy boxes with a few of their many files containing 'some' information about the 'building'. And each box had to be requested by filling in a form and the staff would bring them one by one from the basement.
19 The descriptive catalogue of the material was 552 pages long, which is not surprising if one considers that the postal service existed in Argentina before the country obtained its political independence from Spain, and later on constituted the main public service offered by the state.

overwhelmed and at the same time keen to retrieve *all* of it. Yet of course this was not practically possible or actually desirable, so I had to focus only on what interested me: the plan, construction and functioning of the postal palace; the history of the postal services; the organisation of the postal workers; and the heritage aspects of the building.

I found a large number of newspaper articles on different aspects of the postal building in the Hemeroteca del Congreso (Parliament's Newspaper Library). As I was interested in locating any information available on the building's origins, and as catalogues were digitalised only from the early 1990s, I had to search by keyword in card indexes and then check newspapers manually one by one. Most Argentine newspapers offer online options to search for previous editions, so my visit to this particular library was to find those which were not available on newspapers' websites.

I visited the small Mediateca de Patrimonio Cultural (Cultural Heritage Media Library) several times during my fieldwork after the former Minister of Culture suggested it would be a good place to search for material on the cultural policies implemented during her administration (2006-2007). As I gained admission to the library following her recommendation, I was treated with special attention and given access to books that I otherwise would not have been allowed to borrow. There I found a number of documents regarding previous cultural policies in the city, cultural statistics, information about the budget and funding and literature on both the city's heritage and various neighbourhoods' histories.

During another visit to Buenos Aires, I learned that the library of the Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (National Communications Commission) had begun to

receive material from the postal museum, which it would house until refurbishment works were completed. This opened up my field again as I had the opportunity to explore what else was available and complement the data I already had. In this archive I gathered many more images of the building's interior spaces in its early days, postal magazines, books on the history of postal services and further information about the construction of the building. When I visited the office, the staff was in the process of organising the vast amount of information they had recently received from the postal museum, so finding the data was complicated and I could not browse in the stacks, but had to request specifically what I was looking for.

The politics of these archives became clear after looking for information in their catalogues: documenting the life of the post office in Argentina was a national matter in light of the central importance of the postal institution for the state. However, in recent times, as such importance began to decrease and as the country went from one economic crisis to another, the national archivists' daily struggle to work with no financial or infrastructural resources threatens the survival of the memories contained in the dusty and disorganised files. While these archives and libraries[20] contain information produced or commissioned by the state, they also include workers' magazines and materials,[21] some of which can also be found in some of the post office federations' venues.

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20 Other libraries also provided me with valuable information on architectural competitions in the city, urban regeneration and cultural policy-making in Buenos Aires. These included: the Biblioteca SCA (Central Architects' Society Library), the Biblioteca de la Facultad de Ciencias Sociales (Social Sciences School Library) of the University of Buenos Aires and the Centro de Documentación e Información sobre Administración Pública (Centre for Documentation and Information on Public Administration).

21 In an effort to find non-official historical materials, during another trip to Buenos Aires I made a visit to Centro de Documentación e Investigación de la Cultura de Izquierdas en Argentinas, CEDINCI (Documentation and Research Centre of the Left's Culture in Argentina). However, my visit did not prove as fruitful as expected, as I found very few items of relevance for my thesis, i.e. a postal union's leaflet and magazine, which were also available in the previously visited archives.

2.3. Dealing with the material

After speaking to a wide range of different actors and having found relevant documents and archives, images and texts, my fieldwork was coming to an end. This was not an easy decision to make – further data could have been included, new avenues of research could have been explored. The arbitrariness with which the gathering of materials is declared completed was underpinned by my own sense of having enough data to proceed and the fact that I had to come back to London. This, however, did not prevent me from searching more materials every time I visited Buenos Aires afterwards (i.e. visiting the site, taking more photographs, finding new literature, etc.). As a result, my thesis is based on a comprehensive corpus of data comprised of:

- Interview transcripts (30) (see details in Appendix I).
- Fieldwork notes about the site and events.
- Archival documents (AGN, CIT and CEDINCI).
- President's speeches and parliamentary debates during 2008.
- Historical and contemporary photographs of the building and area.
- Newspaper articles on the building, the CCB and the bicentenary commemoration (past and current news).
- Online blog on the building's redevelopment.
- Institutional material (cultural policy statistics; Culture Ministry CD with policy reports; BAPIN report on the impact of the CCB on the area; competition guidelines; documents containing the bicentenary official missions; private initiatives' redevelopment catalogues).
- Inauguration video of the refurbished Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones in May 2010.

Given the different sources and types of materials gathered, I analysed each of them and then brought all registers together, reflecting on how each of them spoke to the others. This multi-layered approach enabled me to consider the various levels of analysis in which I was interested: the institutional, the representational, the visual, the textual and the oral. What is certainly missing here is the insight of those who will actually use the new cultural centre; the fact that the latter does not yet exist explains why it has not been included in my thesis.

I analysed the personal narratives of the interviews not as a reflection of the actual practices of my informants, but as data that needed to be critically interpreted in light of the particular circumstances in which they were produced. I treated these narratives as second degree discourses, as resources that allowed me to research events outside the interview situation (Seale, 1998:215), yet not as an underlying truth about them. In particular, I looked at the inconsistencies, contradictions and silences surrounding them. Then I combined different materials and methods to complement interview accounts with other external data not produced in the context of the interview in order to find richer and comprehensive depictions of the same phenomenon. It is worth noting that the interpretation of data is also a subjective account constructed 'from and for a particular interpretative context' and, thus, my discourses are no less constructed, occasioned and action-oriented than those I study (Gill, 2000).

After I fully transcribed the interviews and identified themes and categories, I used thematic coding to analyse them. When dealing with in-depth interviews quality indicators are established by the way in which the interviewer formulates her questions, uses probes and verifies her interpretation, along with the spontaneous, rich, specific

and relevant answers obtained from the interviewees (Kvale, 1996). Considering this, I formulated open-ended and jargon-free questions, used probes to follow up specific issues, asked for clarifications and examples and tended to speak just for a few seconds, allowing my interviewees to express themselves without much interruption.

In order to analyse the speeches through discourse analysis I selected the most relevant texts according to the aims of the research. Discourses should be seen as events in which the speakers, those listening, the words used, the language and the location of the subjects have effects on the discursive and material contexts, affecting the experience of others (Alcoff, 1995). Therefore, a problematisation of these aspects and a reflection of my own assumptions and interpretations added to the validity (internal and external) and reliability of my analysis of discourses.

Finally, I used thematic coding to make sense of the institutional documents and newspaper articles that I gathered, and visual analysis to deal with the photographs I took and the visual archives that I found. These visual data illustrated the case study and complemented my analysis of the interior and exterior spaces of the building, its materiality, the site where it is located and its representational aspects.

Apart from opening 'doors' and 'windows' in the building, I was alert to any other related information or event that would be useful for my thesis. During my fieldwork I also attended seven events (see a list of them in Appendix II) with the hope of identifying research participants, getting a sense of current discussions on urban cultural transformations and immersing myself in the field from a different perspective. These events provided me with a degree of familiarisation with the local context of my case

study and helped me identify potential interviewees. The fact that I had declared my fieldwork complete and flew back to London did not imply the end of my gathering of information. In 2010, the partial opening of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario in the former postal building was broadcast live, and this represented an excellent opportunity to incorporate new data – I analysed the TV broadcast of the inauguration in detail using a media events approach (Chapter 5). Along with this, I found a heated online discussion about the redevelopment of the postal building in a blog about architecture in the city and analysed it as material by using content analysis (Chapter 5).

Taken as a whole, the analysis of the corpus of data enabled me to identify a type of 'reality' that was being created by these different media and social actors in a complex intertextual relationship between texts, images, interview accounts and events. An understanding of such intertextuality involving 'a dense network of cross-referencing, and shared textual formats' that create a 'powerful version of social reality' (Atkinson and Coffey, 2004:74) required not only a critical and thorough analysis of the materials themselves in terms of their construction, nature and function, but also a reflexive consideration of my own positionality in the field.

2.4. Gaining access to the field

One of the most complicated issues in my fieldwork was gaining access to the 'field', as I was mostly dealing with high-status workers. Yet my primary interest was not to interview what for the purposes of this discussion can be called 'elites',[22] but rather to identify the key actors involved in the CCB project, most of whom turned out to be

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22 I use the term 'elite' here to refer to the social group made up of those in positions of power that benefit from their privileged access to resources.

members of local elites. Locating influential people proved difficult and time-consuming and I had to negotiate access using different strategies. Crucial here was self-presentation and the way I introduced my research project, as I described above. My affiliation to LSE opened up a number of doors that would probably have remained closed to a local researcher. Sending letters from London to policy-makers helped differentiate my interview request from the typical correspondence these people receive – having worked in the municipal government for two years, I have learned this is an efficient way to get the attention of those in public office. I had to follow up letters with countless phone calls over a period of five months. In some cases I had to contact the personal assistant of the personal assistant of the person in question every week or so, and in doing so, I would remind them that I was calling regarding the 'letters sent from London'. A reference to this global city certainly awakened curiosity, if not postcolonial admiration of Europe, and acted as the magic key that opened most doors.

The letters I used to contact interviewees (an example of these is included in Appendix III) included a brief introduction of who I am and an explanation of my research project. I asked if I could record interviews and invited interviewees to edit the transcript afterwards and I explained that all data was confidential and that they could remain anonymous. Even though my offer of confidentiality was guaranteed to all of them, as I would not share the data with anybody and would keep it safely stored, I could not offer all interviewees the option of remaining anonymous. This was because some participants could be identifiable by virtue of their position. At the beginning of the interview I discussed with each interviewee the use of the recorder, their right not to respond to specific questions, the issue of the confidentiality of the data and the possibility of having an anonymous interview. Although none of them made an explicit

request for anonymity, as the majority mentioned they had 'nothing to hide', two of them were unsure and said they might opt for anonymity.

Sometimes things turned out to be as planned, but more often the unexpected reigned. Originally I had contacted more people than those whom I ended up interviewing. Some declined to be interviewed because they felt they had no direct connection with my research topic; in other cases, I decided not to interview potential interviewees after spending an incredible amount of time trying to reach them; other people referred my interview request to their colleagues; and a few could not fit me in to their extremely tight schedules. None of those whom I approached ignored my request, and two public servants requested interview questions by email, but never sent their responses back. A combination of busyness, bureaucratic structures of government and unwillingness to be held accountable for their opinions about a particular public policy shaped the outcome of my interview requests.

The following story illustrates a common research experience during my fieldwork.

> A week after sending out letters from Buenos Aires, I received a phone call from the personal assistant of the municipal Urban Development Minister. She said he was very interested in meeting me and wanted to arrange a meeting in three weeks' time. I happily agreed and put the date in my diary. Closer to the day, I received another phone call to postpone our meeting. After changing the day three times, it seemed it would finally take place. I was waiting in his office, when the Minister's advisor invited me to follow him. We sat down, and he said: 'You came here to interview the Minister. Would you like to interview him?' 'Yes, of course, if he is available,' I replied with some surprise. To which he offered me two options: 'You can either wait now and he will be able to see you for ten minutes, as he needs to run to a meeting; or we can reschedule a meeting for tomorrow when he will have more time.' Faced with the dilemma of 'better half a loaf than no bread', I opted to come back the following day. Of course I regretted having naively taken the wrong decision when I received another phone call to cancel the interview. Finally, I was referred to one of the Minister's colleagues, and had further difficulty in arranging an interview with him.

Arranging interviews with high-status people can certainly be challenging and tedious. Having to deal with the 'myriad organisational gatekeepers' (Hertz and Imber, 1993) of a public office compels one to convey trustworthiness, persuade policy-makers to take interest and deal with individuals who live in a constant hurry. This type of situation did not seem to arise through the other party's lack of interest, but resulted instead from the policy-makers' very tight schedules, in which evidently there was no room for an unknown researcher. Asymmetrical relations of power taught me endless patience when dealing with these issues: I felt I had no right to complain, although these policy-makers were obviously wasting my time.

But my problems of gaining access to interviewees were not limited to the public bureaucrats. Over several weeks I would call two postal workers' unions repeatedly to arrange an interview with a representative. I would stress the importance of their participation in my research in light of their stakes in the redevelopment of the postal building and the absence of their views in the official version presented by the media. Only once was I able to speak with the individuals in question (innumerable meetings apparently had prevented them from answering my phone calls), who suggested that I contact them again another day to schedule an interview, which never took place. Some of these unions work in private houses, have no permanent staff or administrative structure and therefore are not within easy reach. Suspicion over who I was and why I was calling also impacted on the outcome of my interview request – in this case coming from London probably rendered me more distrustful. After several attempts to speak to different postal federations in Buenos Aires, I ended up accepting the offer of the Postal Museum staff to put me in contact with union leaders and post office employees – this is how I managed to interview them in the end. It is worth mentioning here that the

redevelopment of the postal building was differently received by post office workers and tensions both within and between these federations certainly led some workers to be reluctant to voice their opinions (this is further discussed in Chapter 4).

In some cases following up letters with phone calls was not sufficient and I had to resort to other tactics. As an example, I thought that interviewing the National Culture Minister would be of enormous importance, as it would help me to understand the Ministry's involvement in the CCB project and grasp his views and beliefs in cultural planning. He is a sociologist and political scientist of the university I graduated from, a respected and well-known person with an excellent professional career. I thought that coming from the same disciplinary affiliation and institution would be enough to make him understand the value of this research and accept being interviewed. I made countless phone calls to follow up the letter I had sent from London, with no response, even after resorting to the help of an acquaintance who was working in his office. The Ministry organised a national congress on culture in Tucumán, a province in the north of Argentina, and this represented a chance to meet, although briefly, with the National Culture Minister.

> So I travelled 18 hours by bus to attend the congress. It was taking place in different venues. I was on my own but had met other conference attendees at a hostel. I was listening to a talk when I received a phone call from one of them, informing me that the Minister was in another venue and that I should run to meet him. So I did. And there he was, eating a canapé and being photographed by the press. I approached him, quickly mentioned my letter, my innumerable phone calls and my research, all in one sentence. He smiled at me, said 'how interesting', patted me on the shoulder, and disappeared. I was left only with disappointment and frustration.

In cases such as the one described above, how can one access the views of these busy policy-makers other than through their published institutional documents or their public speeches? In the Argentinian context, it seems that having a bit of luck, some stake in

the particular research and a good contact establish whether a researcher will cross the bridge between not belonging to the world of local politics and being in it, although temporarily and at odds with it.

Out of place

In *Culture & Truth*, Renato Rosaldo (1993) advocates the use of emotions and personal experience as analytical categories that can illuminate social analysis. My fieldwork into the redevelopment of the postal building was accompanied by antagonistic emotional states that shaped the outcome of my research: joy, enthusiasm, perseverance, rage and tiredness. I found that my patience in locating research informants was inversely proportional to the time I spent trying to interview them. I found myself in situations where I felt out of place.

> While I was researching one of the private initiatives for the commemoration of the bicentenary, I was invited to the award ceremony event of the biggest real estate corporation of Argentina, which had organised an international competition to design a new architectural icon for 'the city and the nation'. After several unsuccessful attempts to contact the Director of the company, I was invited by his personal assistant to attend the event, but was given no further information. As soon as I arrived at the venue, I realised that I was inadequately dressed for the event, and my sense of feeling out of place began to increase. It was an exclusive ceremony for VIPs, there was high-quality food served by tidy waiters, excellent champagne, chill-out music, trendy sofas and the immense space was stylishly decorated. It smelled of power – political and economic power. I had been in a conference all day and had to rush to the place carrying books and documents, so there I was: sweaty, improperly dressed and alone. I began to identify 'famous' people: all of the city government officials and also the Argentine President and the Buenos Aires' Mayor were there, drinking, talking and laughing in groups, so I found it difficult to approach them. I managed to find the person who invited me to the event. He told me the Director of the company would never agree to be interviewed but offered me 'a unique opportunity' to ask him the question that 'keeps you awake' in one minute. In front of a circle made up of the crème de la crème of Argentine politicians, I asked him a question, he briefly replied, and I was 'taken away' from the group.

I left the event feeling somewhat miserable but at the same time pleased to have recorded the speeches of the President and the Mayor. Attending this event reminded me of how deeply interconnected politics and business are in Argentina, and even so, it highlighted the importance of the bicentenary private initiative, which managed to bring the President and the Buenos Aires' Mayor to the same table, despite their increasing confrontation and avoidance of each other at public events.

Following policy-makers at events proved useful in only two cases; more often I felt humiliated at having to chase people and beg them for an interview. Esterberg (2002) argues that emotions provide important clues to what is actually happening in the field, as these emotions often open up new 'sensibilities, passions, intuitions, fears and betrayals' that can be accessed through embodiment (Law, 2004:3). Feeling out of place was just an expression of the social, cultural, economic and political differences that separate me from the elite groups I was trying to access. Elites are difficult to penetrate and gaining their trust is no easier. But issues of trust are not exclusive to elite interviewing. The following story describes how I was kicked out of a meeting with an NGO.

> When I arranged an interview with the Director of a heritage NGO, he suggested meeting in an elegant café in the north of the city. We met and talked for more than an hour, during which he was called every twenty minutes or so regarding an imminent illegal demolition that was about to happen somewhere in the city. Suddenly he stopped the interview, explaining that he was late for a meeting with two other members of the group to discuss some 'important stuff'. I was happily surprised when he invited me to join him, so we hopped in a cab and quickly arrived at the meeting in a flat that looked like a member's house, but was probably a sort of organisation barracks. My interviewee introduced me to the other people there and we began to have a nice and polite conversation about general matters, my investigation, their work and so on. They were ready to begin their important meeting, but before it began they asked me whom I had interviewed so far. I mentioned just a few names, careful not to breach privacy. After mentioning I had met the Under Secretary of Urbanism,

> Architecture and Infrastructure Projects, I realised I had foolishly dug my own grave. He was one of the people the NGO was fighting against, so they began to anxiously ask me what he told me in the interview. I gave them a very vague response, and told them that I could not disclose what he had told me as our discussion had been confidential. This was enough for them to doubt my political affiliation and I was asked to leave the room. My 'gatekeeper' remained silent as he walked me to the door.

Accessing social actors involves effort, patience and much work to familiarise oneself with the group's codes and behaviours and to generate trust. Trust is very fragile, 'any faux pas by the researcher may destroy' it (Fontana and Frey, 2000:655). A gatekeeper might help you enter the group, but if the trust is broken, he will abandon you.

2.5. What a mess! Conceptual, practical and ethical challenges

In *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*, John Law (2004) examined the difficulties faced by social researchers in dealing with the messy, complex and diffuse nature of social reality. A reflection on the type of challenges involved in my pursuit of information and efforts in contacting individuals reasserted that I was dealing with mess. Conducting a sociological analysis through the materiality of a building was an unusual method in social sciences to explore issues of culture, heritage, place-making and national imaginations. In particular, I struggled with how to write a piece of sociological research on a specific cultural policy without doing a policy analysis, as this was not my aim; how to keep up my perseverance after endless attempts to obtain interviews with busy people; how to look at memory aspects of the building but not situate my thesis within the larger field of memory studies; how to look at cultural regeneration from a non-geographical perspective; and how to keep up-to-date with the latest news about the case study once the fieldwork was over and I was far from the site. To make matters more complicated, I was also looking at different geographical scales of analysis (the city and the nation-state), engaging with nonlinear temporal dimensions and gathering

different types and sources of data, all a part of my laborious aim to take the object and dissect the various processes, elements and subjects at stake. These were some of the dilemmas I had to face and resolve, hopefully in the best possible way, as part of my engagement with this particular case study.

Camouflage: a practical solution to the complexities of self-presentation

How to present myself, how to gain my interviewees' trust and how to maintain a critical attitude towards the production of knowledge? Where do the boundaries lie between breaching the ethical contract a researcher implicitly signs with her academic community, on the one hand, and having a degree of flexibility with self-presentation, on the other? Access had to be negotiated and so had my own identity as a researcher. The question of how to get access to elites but to not surrender to their agendas in doing so (Cochrane, 1998) was the most significant ethical dilemma I had to face during my research.

When I was dealing with groups that are difficult to access, I found it useful to resort to 'camouflage' as a strategy to resolve self-presentation dilemmas. 'Camouflage' is the action of hiding something with the aim of giving it a different appearance. There is a fundamental difference between this and covert research, in the form of the consent given by the person who is being studied. I had obtained informed consent from all of the research participants, offering that they could remain anonymous, edit or approve the transcript of the interview before I used it, and decline to answer any questions if they wished to. I opted to use some sort of 'camouflage' when presenting my research project in the letters I sent. For instance, I did not stress issues of heritage when contacting the architects responsible for the new developments of the building, who do

not seem to be concerned with the protection of its heritage. When interviewing the former Economy Minister I acknowledged his 'great idea' of creating a mega-scale cultural centre in a listed building despite not fully agreeing with it. Or when contacting the two big redevelopment corporations I did not refer to their questionable observance of urban planning regulations in the areas where they work. Adjusting the presentation of my research by stressing some aspects and not others enabled me to gain the trust of all the interviewees despite being positioned, in a way, 'in the middle' of their conflict of interests.

Not only did the way I presented my research vary according to the participant, but I also had to adapt my performance during the interviews. As an example, during my conversation with the Under Secretary of Urbanism, Architecture and Infrastructure Projects, the issue of his controversial proposals to renew the historic neighbourhood of San Telmo – where I used to live – arose. Groups of neighbours had presented lawsuits against the municipal government regarding the illegal character of such proposals in view of the protected nature of large areas of the neighbourhood. So when asking him about this issue and the local people's opinion of the lawsuits I did not mention I was myself a local who has lived in San Telmo almost all her life. Similarly, when attending the public assembly organised by the government to, in their words, 'listen to what the neighbours had to say', I tried not to be seen there by him, nor to clap enthusiastically after local people's presentations, most of which were highly critical of the government. Doing so would have disclosed my sympathy for these protests and therefore my antipathy towards his policies, which would have probably resulted in him refusing to take part in my research.

Returning favours

What to give back to the interviewees in gratitude for their time and voices? How to make reciprocal a relationship between the researcher and the researched? It is often said in qualitative research debates that offering something in return that may be of interest or value for the participant can help in accessing the field. As I mentioned above, the prestige arising from being associated with an English university seemed to have played a role in my interviewees' willingness to participate, alongside the request to stay in contact and provide them with access to my contacts. After each conversation, I thanked my interviewees for their time and asked whether they would recommend me anyone to speak to.

But in some cases, a simple 'thanks' was not enough. Staff at the postal museum, for example, asked me to take promotional material of their museum to the London postal museum 'so they know we exist'. During a second visit to the office of the Under-Secretariat of Urbanism, Architecture and Infrastructure Projects to collect some material, I was introduced to a competition that was being prepared by the government to design a 'technological district' in a deprived inner city area. I was then asked to review the brief of the competition and I subsequently sent them some comments and recommendations. This did not constitute an ethical dilemma for me as I did it in a critical way, pointing out the weaknesses and strengths of the document and suggesting ways of conducting a more democratic consultation process with the residents of the area. On the other hand, after a couple of months of interviewing the heritage NGO Director, I received a phone call from Argentina regarding an application his organisation was submitting to an international body to secure further support for heritage protection in the city. Their request was clear: 'We want you to sign a letter in

support of our application using LSE headed paper.' Unsure how to proceed, I consulted the Department of Sociology and was advised not to do it. Instead of the powerless situation in which I usually found myself in relation to the elites, I was now in a powerful relationship with a small NGO. I agreed to support their presentation, but without institutional support.

Being close but far: writing in the distance

When to stop gathering data? How to declare the fieldwork complete? These are practical and conceptual questions that resist universal answers and request an assessment of one's own particular research conditions. Most of the time, the contemporary character of the case I was exploring made it difficult to establish the boundaries of my investigation, as increasingly a large number of public initiatives had been launched in the name of the 'bicentenary' – the CCB project was described as a bicentenary commemorative artefact – so I found it necessary to incorporate a great deal of new data as it came up in the media. If the world is never fixed but always changing in complex ways, then this made grasping the object of my study even more difficult: I was dealing with an ongoing project, therefore subjected to constant transformation, and I was writing in the distance – far from the field, far from my country and in a foreign language. I was writing from far, but about the near: Buenos Aires, my home city; and the post office headquarters, a familiar building. Writing was a way of dealing with my homesickness; it was simultaneously the reason why I was abroad feeling homesick. Curiously, the term telegraphy in Greek means 'writing at a distance'. And I was looking at the social life of the structure that housed the telegraph in Argentina and writing about it from London.

My situation was not alien to new patterns of mobility and global processes of dis-location and re-location: I was studying abroad to take full advantage of postgraduate education in an internationally renowned academic institution and this would help me obtain a better job in the local academic market. Distance became the lens through which I saw my research in a twofold way: zooming in and zooming out. In Buenos Aires, I had to zoom in on the particular features of a local policy intervention in the city, shortening distance and becoming a participant in the events I was describing; in London, I had to zoom out to reflect on the process, write this chapter and examine the data I had gathered, enlarging distance and becoming an observer and social analyst. The there and here, the observation and the analysis, certainly became mixed up in the process later on. Distance can then be understood as a device, rather than a practical obstacle, and as Back (2005) suggested, it can inform the search for remarkable things that constitute the materials to imagine forms of global sociological knowledge.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discussed the methodological aspects, ethical dilemmas and practical challenges that arose during my investigation while following a building in time and focusing on its current redevelopment. Being flexible and open to what emerged while I carried out my research proved to be an effective strategy to inform my research questions and the corpus of data that my research produced. Gaining access to the field was tiresome and time-consuming: it nonetheless turned out to be highly fruitful though unpredictable. The unpredictability and messy nature of what I defined as my object of study, resulting in particular from its on-going, controversial and boundary-crossing nature (being in an inter-jurisdictional domain), led me to choose a multiplicity of

research methods to explore a variety of dimensions: the representational, institutional, historical, material and imaginary aspects of a policy intervention.

The main challenges I had to face were related to being close but far from my field, that is, living abroad but being a local to my research. This presented both an opportunity and a problem: it facilitated access (through the prestige of the institution I was coming from) but also restricted it (not being there perhaps meant that I missed information that I would otherwise have captured with my physical presence in the city, i.e. media discussions, vernacular stories, rumours, friends' opinions, etc.). Researching the memory of the building posed a dilemma as well, as it was not my intention to take a 'life history' approach. My main concern was not to embark on a historical documentation of postal services and the postal building, but to analyse features of their past that allowed me to understand fully the current situation of the postal palace. A related practical difficulty was to be able to locate key themes in the vast amount of historical material without feeling overwhelmed and lost in the archives. Conducting research about an on-going project poses additional challenges, including how to deal with the enormous amount of new data coming out in the media about the case study or related issues. On the one hand, I could not extend the stage of data gathering endlessly, and on the other hand, I could not ignore what was taking place in the city concerning the bicentenary celebrations, for instance. I resolved this dilemma by deciding only to incorporate new information if I considered it strictly relevant to the CCB project and by reading Argentine digital newspapers from London.

Handling power dynamics and asymmetric relations was part of my investigation as it was a reflection of my own feelings of being out of place in penetrating elite spaces. The

unpredictability, disorder, confusion, elusiveness and permanent change of the social reality (Law, 2004) that I experienced through my fieldwork made visible the particular messiness of the contemporary city which transcends neat divisions and typologies (Keith, 2005:11). The success of my fieldwork, then, depended not only on my efforts and patience, but also on luck and chance, connections, networks and the particular circumstances (McDowell, 1998) of the case I was examining. My interpretation and written account of the redevelopment of the post office building present a certain version of the reality of the CCB project in particular, but my thesis also describes local politics, architectural practices and the national imagination more generally.

Law's notion of method assemblage invites us to consider what the methods we use silence in the research process. The case examined in my thesis cannot be but a selection of voices and stories around the redevelopment of the postal palace, the condemnation of certain policy decisions and the celebration of others, the examination of some historical moments and the inattention to others, the analytical freezing of a building in a particular time and the practical impossibility of tracking its permanent changes. Although the object of my study is certainly in dialogue with global processes that may invite a reading of it beyond the specificities of the local, it resists with its contingencies the ahistorical universalisation and uncritical celebration of culture-led urban regeneration. In the midst of having to integrate different voices, materials and temporal dimensions, I managed to produce a significant corpus of data which enabled me to advance sociological knowledge concerning not only the contemporary life of an iconic building in the capital city, but also its past and memory: the role it plays in the official national imagination, the meaning of postal work and the stories condensed in its materiality, to which the analysis now turns.

CHAPTER 3

Building Latin American modernity

A historical enquiry into the symbolic materiality of the Palacio de Correos

How could we analyse a current operation of cultural regeneration in Buenos Aires, the redevelopment of an emblematic piece of national heritage into a spectacular cultural centre, without considering the building's previous function and use? This chapter examines the construction process (1888-1928) and the early years of the Palacio de Correos in order to reconstruct from a historical and critical perspective the ways the building was conceived, built and perceived as an object of modernity. With the aim of analysing the processes which led to the construction of the postal palace and its significance, the chapter also looks at the history of the postal system in Argentina since colonial times. A consideration of the past of the building is crucial, not so much to writing a history of its past, but rather to a history of its present (Foucault, 1979). The present of the built urban space contains material traces of the historical past which reveal the past in the present (Huyssen, 2003:1), especially in the case of emblematic buildings like the postal palace. I identify a number of historical elements which continue to permeate the building's present: the question of modernity, the value of postal work, the importance of durability and materiality, and the political economy of the building, that is, the ways in which it was imbricated with the power of the nation-state and the political national imagination. Inscribed in the memory of the Palacio de Correos, these elements are still alive and shape contemporary discussions about the state of the material structure, its heritage value, the character of the commemorative redevelopment project and the imagined future of the nation.

The redevelopment proposals for the postal palace claim that the building has become out-of-date and in need of modernisation.[23] This raises important questions concerning the history of the building and this chapter explores them by drawing on archival material and historical literature: How are the building's representational and functional aspects articulated? How is the politics of the nation-state represented in urban artefacts? What is the relationship between the postal service and the geopolitical configuration of the nation-state? What meaning has modernity acquired in early twentieth-century Argentina? Exploring these questions will enable light to be shed – here and in later chapters – on the ways the past and the present of the emblematic postal building are negotiated in the current redevelopment project.

Based on interrelated themes that emerged out of the data, the analysis is organised in four sections covering the institutional, architectural and labour dimensions of the post. First, in examining theoretical debates I outline the features of modernity in Argentina while stressing its mutable and contradictory nature. In the second section I look at the role played by the postal services in the constitution of the emerging nation-state during the struggles between Buenos Aires and the rest of the provinces, emphasising their fundamental importance for the creation of a postal 'techno-state' (Joyce, 2008). Equally I suggest that its origins and role have been intimately bound up with power structures and political interests. In section three I then examine the 'materiality of modernity' as expressed in the public architecture of the time, by looking at the construction process of the Palacio de Correos. I unravel its underlying rationale – the site on which it was built, the materials used in its construction, and the architectural style adopted, all show the official desires to build 'modernity'. Finally, I consider the work-related dimensions

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23 Chapter 4 discusses this in detail.

of the postal palace with the aim of reconstructing a different layer of meaning nurtured by the class solidarity that is equally but indiscernibly inscribed in the materiality of the building.

The chapter shows that, as an object of public architecture, the Palacio de Correos was the result of official desires to represent the Argentine nation-state in a *modern* and technological way, to intervene in the city's aesthetics so as to produce an embellished landscape and to improve the state's provision of a public service. I argue that the building was planned, built and perceived as an object of modernity, a site in which to represent the country's technological development, economic growth, national integration and cultural progress. This was informed by the meaning attached to the postal institution and the postal services, a series of social representations and cultural values which then came to be embodied in the post office building. In the design of the headquarters for the post and telegraph office between 1888 and 1928, we can also see the fragmentary, discontinuous and contradictory aspects of a form of Latin American modernity. This is a modernity defined by constant interruptions, funding problems, political disputes and changes in the original plan, which characterised the building's intricate construction process.

3.1 A peculiar form of modernity

The question of modernity has had a powerful presence in the dreams of the ruling classes in Argentina since the nineteenth-century and has recurred in a discontinuous way since then. The idea that Argentina has shown an incomplete or belated modernity is formulated in comparison and in relation to the ways in which modernity has been conceived of and experienced in Europe. In this regard, the centre-periphery dynamic

has been reclaimed as the most adequate analytical framework with which to provide a global and relational account of modernity, one which decolonises knowledge and de-centres the centre (Pratt, 2002). This dynamic positioned Europe at the centre and Latin America (together with other regions) at the periphery, or in Pratt's words, 'outside' or 'behind' modernity. In line with this, being modern in Argentina has too often been imagined in terms of being 'closer' to Europe or the United States, striving to follow their development paths, and adopting 'sophisticated' cultural manners and practices. Argentina's 'peripheral modernity' contained elements of both: refined cultural trends inspired by Europe and accentuations in inequalities and differences (Sarlo, 2001). This is what García Canclini (1995) would call 'Latin American hybrid cultures', a mixture between the traditional and the modern.[24]

Whether Argentina has ever been a modern nation has been widely debated, especially in terms of modernisation processes that refer not so much to how a new epoch is experienced but rather to the economic, political and cultural transformations towards rationalisation. These debates about modernisation can be summarised in the assertion that Latin America has had an 'exuberant modernism[25] with a deficient modernisation' (Canclini, 1995:41). In such a continent, the notion of modernisation has signalled different elements and processes in time:

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24 The distinction between the modern and the traditional is never clear cut, though. Rosaldo (1995: xv) summarises this issue clearly in the following quotation: 'both social forces operate in the present and that both are empirically difficult to separate… To what extent are notions of the modern based on innovations in technology? Is an asphalt road modern? If a traditional peddler is walking on a modern road, does the road become more traditional or the peddler more modern? Both, either, neither?'

25 The term modernism, unlike modernity and modernisation, refers to a broader aesthetic process of cultural innovation in the arts, the vast and contradictory multiple movements during late nineteenth-century and beginning of the twentieth defined by a vanguard rupture with canonical and traditional forms and the implementation of a logic of autonomy (Follari, 1990:22). In García Canclini's words, modernisation alludes to 'the means by which the elites take charge of the intersection of different historical temporalities and try to elaborate a global project with them' (1995:46).

at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth, it was driven by the progressive oligarchy, alphabetization, and Europeanised intellectuals; between the 1920s and 1930s by the expansion of capitalism, the democratizing ascent of the middle classes and liberalism, the contribution of immigrants, and the massive spread of schools, the press, and radio; since the 1940s by industrialisation, urban growth, greater access to intermediate and higher education, and the new cultural industries (García Canclini, 1995:41)

The degree of modernisation achieved at each historical period informed the peculiar character of Argentinian modernity. This in turn led many authors to speak about its incomplete, heterogeneous, hybrid and contradictory nature, something which may suggest a form of 'pseudo-modernity'.

In considering this claim, Brunner (1994:134) argues that the key institutional factors of modern societies, although of European origin, have been present in Latin America. These include the school, the capitalist market, hegemonic forms of power mediated through consensus and corporative interests, and mass culture. Modern societies in this continent have been defined by:

a complex and differentiated construction process of the institutional framework of modernity, undertaken from the peculiar conditions of each society, with their own traditions, forms of organisation, power distribution and cultural evolution, including the absences – of a religious reform, political revolution and critical tradition – that have led some to think that modernity would not be possible in Latin America, or that it would be so only in the masked form of inauthenticity and falsehood of a pseudomodernity (Brunner, 1994:136, author's translation).

The 'peculiar conditions of each society' are most often interpreted in terms of the existence of profound contradictions and inequalities which are seen as the defining components of forms of Latin American modernity. According to Brunner (1994:137), these result from the complex and varied ways in which modern elements have been incorporated into each society's own configuration of power, national traditions,

manifold histories, and institutional networks, giving way to multiple points of entry to modernity, multiple pathways and multiple destinations. In García Canclini's (1995) view, the contradictions derive from the existence of multiple historical temporalities (the modern and the pre-modern), the lack of correspondence between a cultural modernism and a social modernisation, the hybrid co-existence of both traditions and innovations, and the cultured and the popular.

For Sarlo (1988:15) Buenos Aires became, between 1920 and 1930, a site of modernity and modernisation and developed as the great Latin American scene of a *cultura de mezcla* (mixing culture), combining European modernity and vanguard art forms with *rioplatense* traditions which rendered the city's modernity peripheral. Some of these contradictions are reluctantly expressed in the visible socioeconomic inequalities between the capital city and the rest of country, in the intricate co-existence of shanty-towns and gated communities in Buenos Aires, and in a myriad of other fragments of social reality which insinuate both the desire for an improved quality of life and the difficulties in overcoming a past of structural inequalities, poverty and social exclusion. Latin American modernity can, then, be defined as a condition characterised by an uncertainty that condenses the existing contradictions between modernism and modernisation, that is, between forms of cultural innovation and artistic expression and socio-economic and technical development (García Canclini, 1995:265).

These contradictions, then, expressed themselves in the transformation of the urban environment. Following Sarlo (1988), Buenos Aires' peripheral modernity crystallised in the profound material and subjective transformations brought about by massive immigration, urban growth, new urban infrastructure and forms of communication (i.e.

lighting, transport and an expanding literary market). The incorporation of new technologies into everyday life and the modernisation of traditions and habits showed a society deeply transformed by capitalism and technologies. In the case that concerns us here, the experience of living in the city and being able to write a letter and take it to a post box undoubtedly contributed to creating a sense of individual freedom in modern society. This was a type of modernity shaped by freedom of communication and circulation of people, objects and information in the city.

If modernity in Argentina has been understood as peripheral or incomplete, it has been so because there was a centre in relation to which it could be peripheral. This centre was the ideal completion of modernity symbolised by Europe. Modernity has been defined in the Northern hemisphere as a mode of experience that found itself 'at home' in a new environment which offered both the transformation of the self and the world, and the threat of its destruction (Berman, 1982:15). In other words, it was a subjective way of perceiving and being in a society that was undergoing profound changes and forecasting an uncertain future. Likewise, Frisby (1985) argued that the key contributors to a social theory of modernity – Simmel, Baudelaire, Kracauer and Benjamin – were all concerned with the forms of perceiving and experiencing the transformations of social and historical circumstances produced by the upheaval of capitalism. These included the relations of individuals with the social life and built environment of the metropolis. Theories of modernity can be distinguished by the ways in which they analyse the contrast between the structuring, rationalising dimensions of modernity on the one hand, and the discontinuity and destruction of modern life on the other (Frisby, 2004).

Forms of inner experience analysed by classic sociological works were accompanied, or rather triggered, by material transformations which constituted the process of modernisation and found in the metropolitan city the ideal locus for their expression, as discussed in the case of Buenos Aires. Together with the explosive growth of cities, other factors are often taken as indicative of modern life. These include, for example, the emergence of the nation-state, the industrial factory as the main workspace, the industrial division of labour, the transformation of our spatial and temporal dimensions, the expansion of the capitalist market, and the emergence of a democratic sphere of political participation and individual freedom.

There is wide disagreement as to the chronological origins of modernity. Did it start in the sixteenth, the seventeenth, the eighteenth or the nineteenth-century? Is it to be equated with the development of industrial capitalism or the emergence of French Enlightenment? With both of them or neither of them? It has even been argued that the term 'modern' has appeared regularly in Europe every time the consciousness of a new epoch was formed through a renewed relationship to the ancients (Habermas, 1983). Far from attempting to resolve these issues here, we will note that these varying narratives of origin displayed in accounts of modernity (Pratt, 2002) have paved the way for a conception of modernity as a qualitative rather than a historical phenomenon. Such a conception gives more room to the differentiated modes of experiencing and of resisting the modern (Frisby, 2004). Most likely, the origin of modernity – and equally its content and forms – is to be located differently both temporally and spatially depending on the particular and distinctive geographical, socio-political and economic context under consideration. This, in fact, provides visibility to the 'variations and discontinuities in the modern experience' and the 'inescapably plural nature of modern

subjectivity and identity' (Gilroy, 1993:46). The geographical location and the relation between different loci, then, become fundamental features that can guide the quest into the meaning of modernity.

Of particular interest for our analysis of the Palacio de Correos is the idea of modernity as project (Habermas, 1983). This project, generally equated to that of the eighteenth-century French Enlightenment, was motivated by the search for progress and civilisation through the pursuit of scientific knowledge and technical reason. The development of technology contributed to the objectification of society and the undermining of previous belief systems structured around the existence of 'non-scientific' certainties. The final goal of this project was to develop objective science, universal morality, law and autonomous art – the rational organisation of everyday social life (Habermas, 1983:9). With regard to the role played by the idea of civilisation on narratives of modernity, Gilroy's work (1993) is undoubtedly paramount in denouncing the absence of a concern with race, ethnicity and the African diaspora in most Eurocentric writings on modernity, and demanding an understanding of racial slavery as *integral* to the Western civilisation project. In Argentina, the manslaughter and oppression of indigenous peoples illustrate how the discourse of modernity, profoundly linked to that of civilisation, has articulated the political national project of the ruling elites since 1850 and notably 1880s. The national organisation was consolidated through a conservative model which saw the indigenous peoples as taking the country 'backwards'; the binary choice was between being civilised or being barbaric (Swampa, 1994) and this was largely discussed during the nineteenth century. The construction of the Palacio de Correos, as we shall see in the next section, nurtured the imagination of

modernity as taking the country 'forward' through its embodiment of technological progress, economic growth and freedom of communication.

3.2. From the colonial postal system to the postal nation-state

Conducting a history of the present of the Palacio de Correos requires a consideration of the historical processes that have shaped its current form, the political context out of which its construction emerged, and the role it was meant to play in the imagination of those in charge of its administration. As we shall see in Chapters 4 and 5, the post office palace was designated a national historical monument in the late 1990s. This responded not only to the observation of a heritage legislation that monitors the preservation of the building's facade, but more importantly, to the need to keep the symbol denoted by the post office alive in public memory. To decipher the content of such a symbol a brief journey through the importance of the postal institution and the political history of Argentina is provided.

The postal institution: a product of political power and territorial control

The postal history of Argentina was largely influenced by the Spanish empire's postal institution which in turn was based upon the postal system of the Incas: 'to tell the story of the post office in America is to recount the events that followed the conquest and colonisation of our continent' (Correo Oficial de la República Argentina, n/d). The Incas established the structure of what was later adopted and further developed by the Spanish colonisers in America: a relay system of young couriers called *chasquis* (in Quechua) who delivered oral messages and a variety of objects, running at a great speed from one post to the other until being replaced by others at short distances. Such system not only enabled communication but also served administration, transport and

trade purposes, alongside military functions.[26] Principles ruling the system, such as the confidentiality of the messages, the prestige of the couriers, and the extraordinary speed of service, have been key predecessors for the subsequent development of the modern postal service (Castro Esteves, 1934). Although the subjects – and later consumers – of postal services had originally been constituted by an exclusive elite, the issue of confidentiality, in particular, can be seen as a modern feature in pre-modern times, concerning freedom and right of individuals to privacy.

The origin of postal communication in Argentina was intimately bound up with economic and political goals under Spanish rule.[27] The conquest of the American territory was driven by the crown's ambitions for maritime expansion, territorial hegemony and the search for precious metals. It was founded on the conviction of the legitimacy of the conquest, the illegal appropriation of lands, the theft of rich resources, and the oppression and religious conversion of indigenous peoples (Romero, 1956). The economic exploitation of these lands and the subsequent trade monopoly that Spain rigorously established with its colonies were structured around the mining and export of silver, of which Mexico and Peru were the focal points.[28] With the foundation[29] of

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26 As Prescott (2007:45) clearly put it in the case of pre-Columbian Peru: 'Not an insurrectionary movement could occur, not an invasion on the remotest frontier, before the tidings were conveyed to the capital, and the imperial armies were on their march across the magnificent roads of the country to suppress it'.

27 No forms of postal organisation seem to have been developed by local indigenous populations during pre-Columbian times. However they used distant communication based on fire and sound. Castro Esteves (1934) argues that the absence of postal organisation may be a result of the fact that the Incas had had little or no influence in this part of the continent, as their roads extended only as far as the north of the Argentine territory.

28 At the end of the sixteenth century, the South American territory was organised into three administrative districts – Cuyo, the Governorate of Tucuman, and the Governorate of Rio de la Plata – which were under the political rule of the Viceroyalty of Peru.

29 Two attempts preceded this foundation. First, in 1516 with the arrival of Juan Diaz de Solis who was rapidly killed by the local indigenous population. Second, in 1536 when Pedro de Mendoza arrived in the area and founded the first settlement, which was then destroyed five years later. It is contentious, however, whether this was a foundation strictly speaking or only a precarious and provisional settlement, destroyed by local indigenous populations or by the Spanish themselves.

Buenos Aires in 1580 by Juan de Garay, the city had its first council, square, church, fortress, 25 blocks, and lots distributed for agriculture and cattle farming, as established by the Indias Laws (a set of legislations to regulate social, political, religious and economic life in the conquered lands). The city was then designed following a traditional grid system around its Plaza Mayor. This is the so-called Spanish checkerboard which the writers of Buenos Aires at the advent of the twentieth century found despicable not only for not being 'more European' but also for being 'too modern' in the North American sense (Gorelik, 2009:66,81). Buenos Aires, located far in the South of the American continent, had a marginal position in the economic system managed by the Spanish Crown at the end of the seventeenth century. However, the existence of a strategic port enabled the city to be incorporated into the commercial routes with Europe and the American region, through the export of silver, cattle, mules, horses, textiles, yerba mate, iron and leather, but also African slaves. The port of Buenos Aires was a key part of the inter-regional, inter-colonial and ultra-maritime trade, both legal and clandestine, with Brazil and other Portuguese colonies (Milletich, 2000). In this context of increasing commercial development, regular communication with the vast colonial territories became vital so as to enable Spain to control[30] economic activities and monitor political insurgences.

In terms of postal infrastructure, it was difficult for the Spanish to adopt the postal system of posts and *chasquis,* particularly the existing postal roads in Mexico and Peru, because of their ignorance of the system. In Argentina the immensity and physical diversity of the continental lands made matters more complicated: Spain's eagerness to

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30 Administrative reforms to protect the colonies from foreign invasions and fight contraband included the creation of two new viceroyalties: Nueva Granada in 1739 and Rio de la Plata in 1776, of which Buenos Aires was the capital on account of its ever-growing port activities and strategic location.

civilise the country was impeded by the natural characteristics of the land (Castro Esteves, 1934:137), which obstructed its devastating action. The vastness of the territory together with the deficient means of communication available at the time, the high cost of travelling long distances and the need to foster commerce, led Spanish businessman Domingo de Basavilbaso to suggest the development of postal services in Argentina (Cárcano, 1893). By 1748 a permanent service of postal communication had been established[31] and the post became the main centre of all of the administrative business (*Discurso*, 1878:20). Buenos Aires had its first postmen in 1771,[32] when the Major Courier attempted to improve the communications service to the King (Castro Esteves, 1934) in order to avoid delays in the distribution of letters. By 1788 Argentina had six maritime couriers and the administration of postal services was subjected to official royal decrees. In spite of the poor conditions of the roads in the Rio de la Plata area, the postal system was fast and efficient, and working for it was a prestigious occupation – postmen were exempt from military service and the seizure of their horses (Bose and Saenz, 1994).

The initial monopoly of postal communication was key to colonial territorial control, allowing Spain to be kept informed of political and economic events in its colonies. In the aftermath of colonisation, the heart of the postal institution was to be found deeply linked to royal power[33] and colonial dominance. Having outlined the colonial postal

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31 It functioned under the administration of Lieutenant Juan Vicente de Vetolaza y Luna, designated by the Major Courier in Lima. In 1769 Basavilbaso was appointed the first Major Courier of the Governorate of Buenos Aires by the Spanish court.

32 The Sevilean Bruno Ramirez was appointed the first postmen on 14th September 1771. Later on, that date was chosen as the official 'Postmen's Day'.

33 As an example, to implement a system of sea and land communications the position of 'Major Courier of the Indias and firm Lands of the Ocean Sea, discovered and to be discovered' (Royal Decree, cited by Castro Esteves, 1934:78) had been created in 1514 as the most hierarchical postal designation. Sea mail administrators for the ports of Spain's overseas colonies were appointed, and this was the beginning of the monopoly of postal communication to and from America.

history, I now consider the role postal and telegraphic services played in the configuration of the independent nation-state in Argentina.

The post and the telegraph, carriers of national 'progress'

Argentina's national history is characterised by prolonged political struggles. The 1810 May Revolution initiated the process towards political independence from Spain, but did not represent the end of local civil struggles and international wars. Buenos Aires' central position during colonial times was challenged by the rest of the Argentinian provinces after 1810 and this divided the country into two main political groups, *unitarios* and *federales*. The former sought to maintain the privileges and hegemony of Buenos Aires which arose from its exploitation of the port profits and its high investment in infrastructure; the latter fought to reduce its central power and to gain the political autonomy of the provinces. After more than three decades of violent confrontations, the 1852 Caseros battle put an end to Rosas' long authoritarian *federal* government of Buenos Aires. However, a coup d'état in defence of the city's centrality revived the confrontations and made the political fragmentation of Argentina last for another ten years. These accentuated the widening differences in wealth that positioned Buenos Aires as a rapidly growing centre of cattle and wool exports on one side, and the largely stagnant interior on the other (Rock, 2002). After the 1861 Battle of Pavón, Buenos Aires would remain the 'head'[34] of Argentina; the country was reorganised under its hegemony. This internal fragmentation and persistent confrontation complicate the temporal location of Argentina's nationhood, for it could be dated anywhere between 1810 and 1880 depending on which foundational myth is taken: the beginning of the

34 The metaphor of the national territory as a human body is passionately described by Ezequiel Martínez Estrada (1940) in *La Cabeza de Goliat. Microscopía de Buenos Aires*, in which Buenos Aires is considered the metropolitan and cosmopolitan urban, political and economic centre of Argentina, the head of the country, a monstrous city that unbalances the territory.

first autonomous government in 1810, the declaration of independence in 1816, the constitutions of 1819 and 1826, the first national constitution of 1853, or the federalisation of Buenos Aires in 1880 (Scobie, 1964:88).

The postal institution played a significant role in the configuration of the Argentine nation-state through three key *interrelated* elements: territorial control, technological communications and economic development. The development of technological communications was one of the key pillars underpinning the creation of the new nation-state, nurturing the imagination of modernity. Although the origins of the postal system date from 1748, postal services were greatly developed and improved from the second half of the nineteenth century. With the railway and the electric telegraph Argentina inaugurated in 1857 (two decades after Morse invented the telegraph) an unprecedented period of communications. Between 1860 and 1880 governmental initiatives were aimed at fostering immigration to populate the country, developing the communications and transport systems, and supporting education as a way of integrating the immigrant communities, or rather, as an endeavour to 'civilise' the local population by means of promoting European waves of immigration. Central here were Domingo F. Sarmiento's presidential years (1868-1874), during which all means of communication were greatly encouraged, for they were seen as complementary to his wider educational development project.

The first telegraph line was set up from Buenos Aires to Montevideo by The River Plate Telegraph Company, and by the 1870s telegraphic communication had been established with other countries in the region as well as with Europe. From 1907 the state requested railway companies to install telegraphic lines alongside their railway lines so as to extend

the national network. However, the initial enthusiasm with the telegraph (and the first railway) faded because of the lack of resources and the need to maintain the lines regularly as a result of natural deterioration. The arrival of the telephone joined in the imagination of Argentina as a modern nation, initiated by the development of the railway and the postal and telegraphic services. The local history of the telephone began in 1878 with a trial to establish communication; in 1881 the first line was installed in the house of the Exterior Affairs Minister, the second in President General Roca's house, and the third in the house of the, by then President of the municipal administration, Marcelo T. de Alvear (the first telephone communication had taken place in the United States in 1876). Originally three foreign companies operated in Buenos Aires: the English Gower-Bell, the Belgian Société du Pantéléphone L. de Locht et Cie, and the American The River Plate Telephone Company (Reggini, 1996). Later, the Belgian and American companies merged, creating the London-based United River Plate Telephone Company, which acquired Gower-Bell too. As demand grew rapidly, the new company supplied telephone services for over forty years (until it was purchased by American capitals in 1929). The telephone system was housed in different buildings and operated from different locations from those of the postal network. Its management was in the hands of private companies, and then the state until it was privatised again.[35]

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35 Telephone services were provided by private companies, which had to act according to government regulations until 1946, when the service was nationalised under Juan Domingo Perón's administration and a state-owned company was established. Like that of the postal system, state management ended in 1990 when telephone services were privatised during Menem's neoliberal government.

Postal and telegraph services, then, were crucial to the integration of the national territory, as illustrated by the Argentine map made of postal stamps.[36] Historically war over territory has been the incentive or lure that led conquerors to make use of postal services as a vital need (Castro Esteves, 1934:67), and we could add, the telegraph enhanced such enterprises of control later on. The telegraph was indispensable for the genocide carried out through the so-called *Conquista del Desierto* (Desert Conquest) organised by General Roca in 1879,[37] who sent 6,000 soldiers to 'clean up' the Southern lands from indigenous populations. They killed thousands of indigenous people, made another 14,000 prisoners, and appropriated 15,000 square leagues of land (Pigna, 2002-2012). Instant communication between the Southern area of Argentina and its political head, Buenos Aires, was facilitated by the telegraph which made informed territorial control possible. The display of the power and authority of the state was seen as fundamentally constitutive of being a modern nation. The creation of an Argentine army, the development of the railway and the telegraph, and the population of the now 'deserted' lands all contributed to national unity and made it possible (Halperín Donghi, 2005). As the railway and the telegraph 'go, so to speak, hand in hand on the fatherland roads' (Fundación Standard Electric Argentina, 1979:59), they became instrumental in facilitating the integration of the vast territory.

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36 Promotional material of the Postal Saving National Account. Source: *Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*, 1947.

37 This military operation followed previous explorations undertaken in 1833 by Rosas and was allegedly claimed to be against cattle theft by indigenous people; later on it had the explicit goal of conquering the lands inhabited by indigenous peoples, by extending the telegraph lines, creating new towns and fostering a white population.

The postal system enabled extraordinary economic growth through the revenue arising from the services on offer. These included simple and certified delivery of letters and packages, the circulation of cards, newspapers and books, and the exchange of millions of examples of printed materials and commercial samples. Since 1891 there had been an increase in the output of the postal and telegraph industry, and growth had been continuous even in the times of intense economic depression in Argentina and abroad (*Revista de Correos y Telégrafos*, 1938:35). The postal network enabled trade operations and was the basis for the organisation of a national economy,[38] not only exerting great influence on daily economic life, but also playing a key mediating role in enabling a market to be established (Galván Moreno, 1938). Management of the postal system by the politically independent state enabled the emergence of a wider audience – literate and illiterate citizens. The introduction of the postal service was celebrated because of its potential to overcome the barriers of the vast geographical territory, the scarce means of transport and the lack of access to it by the greater part of the population. Postal communication was not restricted to national borders: international services were provided by sea and later by plane.

Technology was certainly a decisive factor for postal communication, enabling it to be measured and controlled, standardised and organised in a mechanical fashion, both spatially and temporally. There was a willingness to make the Argentine postal service an industrial organisation, based on 'enthusiasm and an excellent organisation which would deliver its services safely and quickly' (*Revista de Correos y Telégrafos*, 1938:95). The mechanisation and standardisation of postal services as well as their regulation in

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38 By 1937 the national postal service had 4,084 offices, 24,361 employees, a telegraph line of 47,381 km, and its history has been summarised by institutional materials in two words: constant growth (Revista de Correos y Telégrafos, 1938).

accordance with international legislations to which Argentina subscribed, such as the Universal Postal Union (founded between 1863 and 1874) and the South American Postal Union (since 1911), contributed to the creation of what social historian Patrick Joyce (2008) has called the 'techno-state'. This concept concerns the technological aspects of state formation, the ways in which the state became technical thanks to the management of postal services from the nineteenth-century. This concept is extremely useful in bringing together the (material) power of the state with its communications systems and particular notions of society and nation. Central to the state and its government of things and people was the conveying of durability to material things which facilitated their functioning in regular, uniform and standard ways (Joyce, 2008:8). This notion of the durability of the material world could range from small material things, such as the postage stamp created by Rowling Hill, to larger ones exemplified in public official architecture. Joyce explains that this came to provide the state with techno-social solutions to political questions. In our case, we are concerned with the questions of the boundaries, character and legitimate members of the Argentine nation.

Bound up with national territorial control was the 'patriotic' character assigned to the post office. It is said to have played an important role in major historical events, such as the English invasions of 1806 and 1807, the May Revolution of 1810, and Independence from Spain in 1816. It served 'an indispensable role in the birth of nationhood, taking First Assembly reports and orders, disseminating notices with the ideas of the May (Revolution)' (Dirección General de Correos y Telégrafos, 1938b:38). The 'revolutionary seed' is said to have travelled in the leather bags of the colonial postmen who carried French books, which supported the formulation and development of the emancipatory ideas latent in the creoles' spirit (Dirección General de Correos y Telégrafos, 1938b:38).

For instance, during the Open Council of the May Revolution, blue and white rosettes were distributed as patriotic symbols among the crowd by postmen; and one of the first postmen of the country, Domingo French, who was a postman and assistant from 1794 to 1811, was a leading agitator in the revolution. During the wars for independence the post office played a decisive role in facilitating communications for the organisation of the armies that were to fight against the royalists. The national hero, San Martín, and his army are said to have rested in postal shelters (in San Lorenzo, Yataso and Sinsacate) in preparation for his devotion to the national struggle (Villafañe, 1988:17). The post has been called forth to meet that 'noble patriotic aim' and must therefore be 'unconditionally at its disposal, since it is in view of great distances that postmen are of utmost need' (*Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*, 1948, n.p.), as shown by the patriotic *chasquis* running across the immensity of the territory. In tandem with these events, the post office can be seen as 'a modest and sometimes unsuspected protagonist of patriotic history' (Bose and Saenz, 1994:73).

Territorial control, technological development and transport infrastructure were key measurement units deployed to assess the degree of 'progress' of the Argentine nation. The term 'progress' is used here in relation to the ways in which postal services came about to facilitate the technological development of the nation-state and the education and 'civilisation' of its population. Considered 'the most cosmopolitan, modern president in the hemisphere at the time' (Pratt, 2002:36), Sarmiento was said to have propelled progress and, *therefore*, the telegraph (Fundación Standard Electric Argentina, 1979). In his important historical-interpretative sociological book *Facundo: Civilización y Barbarie*, written in 1845, Sarmiento proposed the binomial 'civilisation or barbarism' so as to interpret the confrontations between *unitarios* and *federales*. The main character,

Facundo Quiroga, was a *federal caudillo* from La Rioja and one of Rosas's men. He was seen as the incarnation of the primitive barbarism, a status of under-development that could ideally be developed through education, urban life and under a *unitario* government, into a civilised and modern nation. In this social evolutionary perspective, the barbarian is the un-civilised, ignorant, inhabitant of rural and deserted areas. Not only the *caudillos*, but also the *gauchos* suffered the isolation and the inhospitality of the rural lands and represented the country's barbarism, yet they could evolve into civilised men. Indigenous peoples, by contrast, were seen directly as savages and were subsequently excluded from the Argentine nation. These 'peripheral' subjects represented, in Sarmiento's view, the backwardness of Argentina. Their elimination was a condition for the development of national modern being, for bringing the country closer to the 'civilised' nations he had observed during his trips to the United States and Western Europe. The idea of progress is a powerful trope that appears endlessly in nineteenth and early twentieth-century accounts of Argentina.

Postal services have been described as having 'great influence in the development of Argentinian progress' (Castro Esteves, 1934:17). They were directly linked to 'the constant progress of the city' (Secretaría de Comunicaciones, 1978:26), and had an 'eagerness to keep their increasing popularity and quick progress resulting from their equipment and efficacy of methods' (Dirección General de Correos y Telégrafos, 1938:95), as well as 'the desire to keep the fame acquired by the Argentine post through intense educative work of progress and patriotism' (Dirección General de Correos y Telégrafos, 1938:96). As the notion of civilisation needed that of barbarism in order to become meaningful, the Argentine nation resorted to other loci of comparison in order to measure its degree of development and define what the national project would be.

Like Sarmiento's models, France, England and Germany were said to have continued the 'pathway of progress and made it perfect by working with the exactness and regularity of a chronometer, the one which helped the sailor to orient himself in the middle of the sea' (*Discurso*, 1878:5). In short, the postal services were crucial to the construction of the imagination of Argentina as a modern nation by nurturing the idea that through the development of national technological communications the country could become closer to European nations.

3.3. Urban transformation and the architecture of modernity

I have already discussed the ways in which modernity functioned as a linguistic trope which became equated with the ideas of progress and civilisation through the achievement of technological communication developments. In a clear correlation between modernity and enlightenment (Frisby, 2004), technological development and scientific reason were seen as fundamental to moving up the 'ladder of progress' and were in turn meant to be expressed in the public architecture of the time. The material landscape of the city and its modernisation functioned as the space *par excellence* in which to display buildings and spaces that were conceived of as modern. A political economy of the infrastructure, which comprised the widening of streets, the creation of public open spaces, public buildings, sewers and pipes, set up the condition of possibility in which freedom was expected to be exercised (Joyce, 2003:11). The postal system and its buildings embodied this liberal value of the freedom of communication and of the circulation of information and products across the capital city, throughout the country and beyond its national borders. Through the transformation of the urban realm 'civility' was meant to grow in the soul of the citizens. Architecture, then, played an instrumental role in reinforcing ideas of the modern liberal citizen. It did so by offering

the background against which modernity could be advanced as well as by developing into the means by which the modern project could be manifested (Hvattum and Hermansen, 2004).

Postal buildings: early development in Buenos Aires

The growing importance assigned to the postal services in Argentina is clearly visible from a material perspective, if we look at the different buildings that accommodated them throughout history. Evidently, the architectural variety of postal buildings in Argentina went in tandem with the socio-political and economic context of the time, when the state and its institutions began to develop and settle. The first post offices were located in Buenos Aires, but it was not until 1888 that the construction of the enormous postal palace began, after five other buildings had been used. At first, the postal service occupied the private mansions of the Administrators of Postal Services. The two-storey residence of the Major Courier Domingo de Basavilbaso on Peru street [figure 6] accommodated the first post office until 1822, performing a social function assisted by the work of two black people who had been bought as slaves (Fundación Standard Electric Argentina, 1979; Castro Esteves, 1934:216). The house proved a shelter for the exhausted postmen who arrived after facing hard working conditions due to the bad weather and the criminal offences of which they were often victims (Fundación Standard Electric Argentina, 1979). With its tower, the house was visible and became 'a vital locus that already had announced the strength of the city which would later receive the name of the great capital of the South' (*Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*, 1948). Yet that location offered insufficient space for hosting the growing postal activities; consequently the service had to move to a modest colonial

building on Bolivar street [figure 7] and worked from that location between 1822 and 1878.
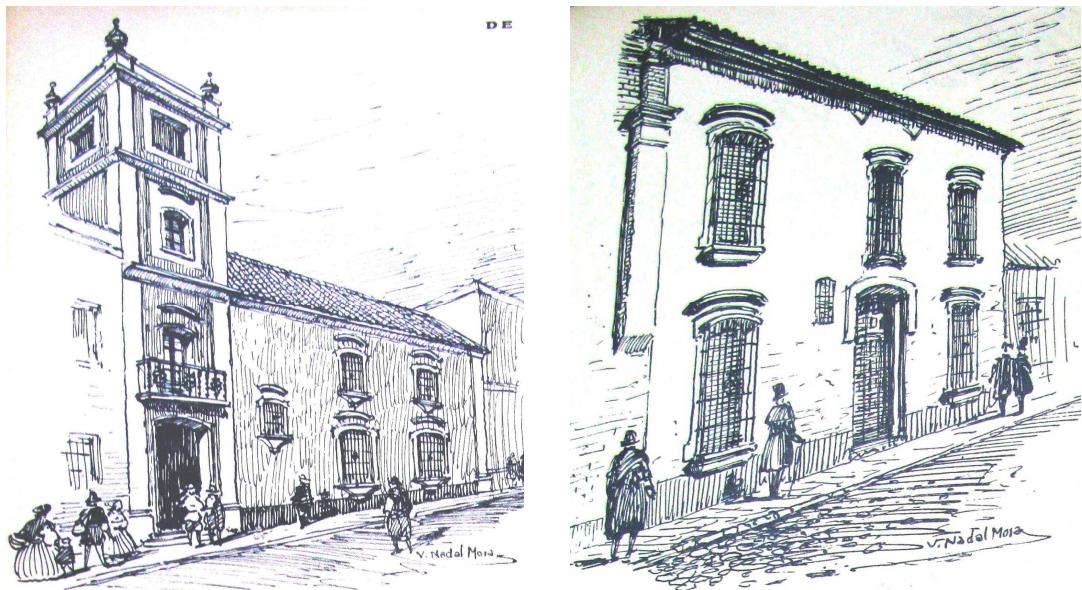
Figure 6. First postal house at Basavilbaso's residence, drawn by Vicente Nadal Mora.
Figure 7. Second postal house on Bolivar Street, drawn by Vicente Nadal Mora.
Source: *Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones* (1948)

At that point in time Buenos Aires was experiencing profound urban transformations. The lack of infrastructure and the incipient institutional development had led Baron Ponsonby of Imokilly from Great Britain to be horrified at what he described in his visit to the city in 1826 as 'the most repulsive place I have ever seen... I am certain that I would hang myself from a tree if it were that this miserable land had adequate trees' (quoted in Pigna, 2002-2012, author's translation). During the administration of Rivadavia (1826-1827), the first president of Argentina, Buenos Aires underwent a series of political reforms and major urban developments, most of which were funded with English capital and remained in place until recently. Buenos Aires was the target of a process of physical renovation and spatial regulation, by which a number of colonial buildings were knocked down and others re-converted. This was the period in which

avenues, streets and parks were created, and a large number of public works were commissioned by the state. It was also a time when a group of French technicians – mainly architects and engineers – arrived in Buenos Aires to participate in the management of the city, which by then had earned the name of '*La Atenas del Plata*' (The Athens of the River Plate) (Liernur and Aliata, 2004:191), by reference to its degree of intellectual and urban development in comparison with other cities in the region. It was the usual practice of the Argentine elites to travel to Europe to receive training and liaise with intellectuals and artists, as was the case of Rivadavia. This process of urban 'beautification', which started during his administration, was later re-implemented after the designation of Buenos Aires as the capital city of Argentina in 1880.

The increasing growth of postal services led the government to erect a building specifically designed for the post. The Casa de Correos was designed and built by Swedish architects Carlos Kihlberg and Enrique Aberg. European architects were commonly commissioned for the construction of public works, as there was no school of architecture in Argentina and local elites identified with cultural trends from Italy and France and technical discoveries from England and United States (Silvestri, 2007). After a series of interruptions, the house was inaugurated in 1873 by President Sarmiento in a wing of the existing government house in the old fort. In line with the government's desire to abolish colonial structures, the solid building featured classic renaissance architecture with a French-style mansard roof and was considered 'the most modern and important of the time' (Secretaría de Comunicaciones, 1978:25) and the first public building of Argentina to have centralised gas lighting (Schávelzon, 1987). Postal services functioned from that location between 1878 and 1886, and the building lasted only eight years before becoming the target of intervention, partial destruction and redevelopment.
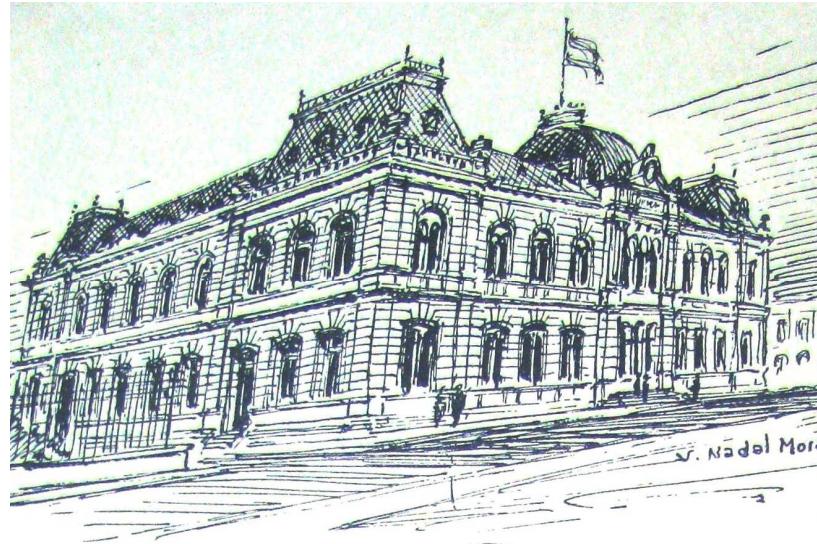
Figure 8. The Casa de Correos, drawn by Vicente Nadal Mora
Source: *Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones* (1948)

The Casa de Correos was a paradigmatic building which acted as a model to inspire the construction of similar structures, and in doing so, consolidated formal and functional typologies (Schávelzon, 1987). This is illustrated by President Roca's request for the construction of a new building for the government house, which was meant to be symmetrical to the postal building and located in the opposite corner, for the postal building overshadowed the government house, which was in a decaying and dilapidated state (*Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones*, 1948). The great architectural value of this postal building is demonstrated by the fact that it soon came to be incorporated into the new government house, the Casa Rosada, through a monumental arch created by the Italian-Argentine architect Francisco Tamburini in 1885. While the function of the postal building was central to embodying national communications, its architecture was far more significant: what had once been a postal building later became the most important political site in the country. Buenos Aires was a metropolis in permanent change and renovation, a disorganised 'ephemeral city' with many transient constructions that remain unregistered (Liernur, 1992).
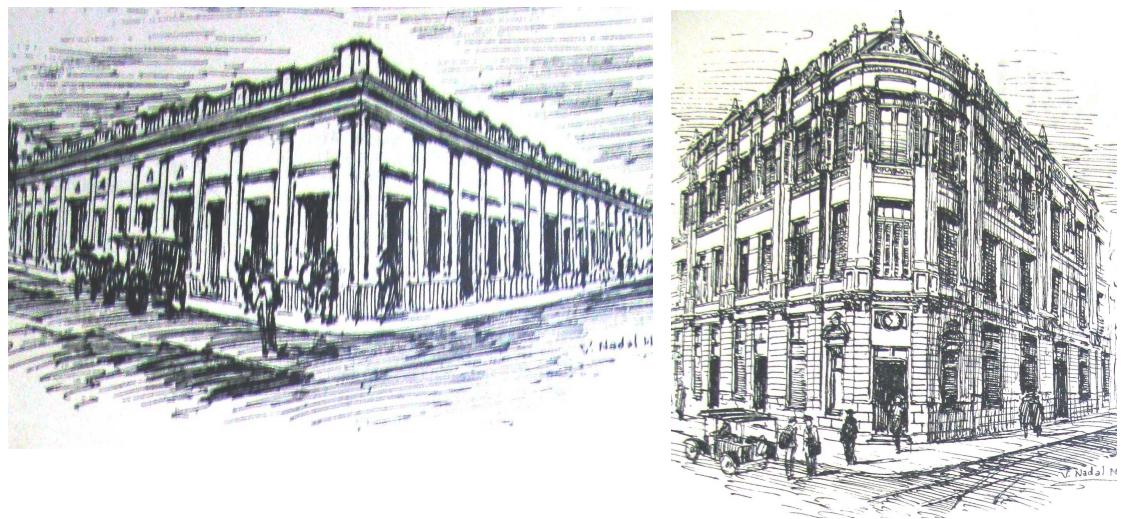
Figure 9. Juan Manuel de Rosas' mansion
Figure 10. Corrientes Avenue's building. Both figures drawn by Vicente Nadal Mora
Source: *Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones* (1948)

In line with this process of constant transformation, in 1886 postal services were transferred once again to the enormous Caserón de Rosas, the magnificent residence of former Governor of Buenos Aires, Juan Manuel de Rosas in Palermo (in the North of the city) for approximately twenty years. After a fire, the Post and Telegraph General Direction moved to a new rented site located on Corrientes Avenue, an eclectic building of classical, baroque and gothic details, which trembled with the passage of the tram, and whose interior was imbued with the constant smell of detergent (Nadal Mora, 1948:513). Postal activities were coordinated from that building between 1901 and 1928, despite the lack of space and overcrowding.

A French palace for the post office

The incessant growth of the postal and telegraph activities led the General Director of the Post and Telegraph, Dr Ramon Cárcano, in 1888 to insist on the urgent need 'for a big building that would satisfy the constant progress of the city and even the one to

come in the future' (Secretaría de Comunicaciones, 1978:26). The construction of the Palacio de Correos began during the national organisation period of the *Generacion del Ochenta*, when the oligarchic elites endeavoured to impose an economically liberal and politically conservative system structured around the primacy of Buenos Aires and the restriction of political participation. The consolidation of the agro-export model was its economic basis – it was a projection of the nation shaped by 'cows and grains'[39]. In political terms, '*Paz y Administración'* (Peace and Administration) was the slogan used to organise the territory politically, socially and geographically. A fraudulent electoral system, by which the majority of the population was excluded from formal political participation, enabled the regime to remain in power. The construction of the postal palace took forty years and was carried out by twelve different national administrations[40], continuity in time which, despite several interruptions, indicates the enduring official desires of completing the material project for the post office headquarters.

The imagination of a great Palacio de Correos was equally shaped by the great modernisation of the capital city implemented in the 1880s. This period implied the construction of a new urban landscape, that of a bourgeois city, which would be crowned by the arrival of Argentina's Centenary celebration in 1910 (Liernur and Aliata, 2004). During the administration of the first Mayor of Buenos Aires, Torcuato de Alvear (1883-1887), avenues and streets were widened, parks, squares and boulevards were created, the centrality of the historical/traditional city was reinforced, and Buenos

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39 Cows and grains refer here to the country's agro-export model (1880-1930) based on agricultural production and cattle farming and symbolised by the Pampas region.
40 Miguel Juárez Celman (1886-1890), Carlos Pellegrini (1890-1892), Luis Sáenz Peña (1892-1895), José Evaristo Uriburu (1895-1898), Julio A. Roca (1898-1904), Manuel Quintana (1904-1906), José Figueroa Alcorta (1906-1910), Roque Sáenz Peña (1910-1914), Victorino de la Plaza (1914-1916), Hipólito Yrigoyen (1916-1922), and Marcelo T. De Alvear (1922-1928).

Aires was in general physically 'embellished'[41]. The opening of the Avenida de Mayo, connecting the Parliament building and Casa Rosada, and the creation of the government square (the Plaza de Mayo) and the Palacio de Tribunales (the Courts of Justice) were emblems of this period. Central here was the role played by Italian architect Juan Antonio Buschiazzo, who was responsible for the construction of a large number of public buildings, such as cemeteries, hospitals, markets, churches and houses, which revealed the process of modernisation in which the city was embedded (Shmidt, 1995).

Two contrasting images sum up the profound urban transformation of Buenos Aires: one the one hand, the Gran Aldea (Great Village) with its whitewashed low-roof houses with patios, along with the city's churches, its council, country estates, fort and river; on the other, the city of the Centenary, with luxurious French-style mansions, the wide and pompous Avenida de Mayo, tenements, the Colon lyric theatre, streetlamps, the port, and cobbled streets (Liernur, 1992:103). This urban transformation was also reflected in the social uses of space, featuring rapid changes in:

> the life style and use of the city, at stake was the resignification of its symbolic spaces; it was inconceivable that fish would continue to be sold, that people would cook outdoors, that oxen would rest among their excrement, and that *negros, pardos* and *mulatos* would dance and sing at night; that was the Great Village (Gran Aldea), not the Paris of America (Schavelzon, 2008:81)

An interesting reconstruction of the genealogy of this myth has been undertaken by Gorelick (2004). He explains that the portrayal of the city as having a 'European

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41 While these urban transformations were indeed inspired by French trends, Gorelick (2004:80) warns us of the risks of attributing too much weight to the Haussmannisation of Paris as an easy explanation for the renewal of Buenos Aires between the late nineteenth century and the 1930s. Rather, he insists, the Argentine capital was redeveloped because of the strong local public desire to make modern cities born out of their ruins everywhere, and not purely as a result of the influence of Haussmann in the pampas area.

character' is as old as the 1810 May Revolution, developed clearly during the 1910 Argentine Centenary celebrations and was consolidated during 1930s, 1940s and 1950s with the modernisation of the city, following a period of great economic growth and the development of urban infrastructure[42]. In this context, colossal public architecture was perceived as instrumental to erasing the Hispanic-colonial legacy, which was simultaneously being demolished, and to represent the power of the new state.

Having embarked on the project of building a monumental postal headquarters, the local authorities had then to decide where it would be located. Lands for the construction of the building were chosen in a strategic area demarcated by the port, the Northern rail terminal station and the government house. These lands[43] had been recovered[44] from the *Río de la Plata* by the *Sociedad de las Catalinas*, a public limited company, which donated them to the government. At that time city lands were clearly uneven. The French architect Norbert Maillard[45] was commissioned to design a project for the post office in 1888, following the rejection of Italian architect Tamburini. After studying postal buildings in New York, London and Paris, Maillard conceived a neoclassic building model for Buenos Aires, which was rapidly endorsed by President Miguel Juarez Celman.

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42 However, Gorelik points out that the myth began to dissolve in the 1970s with the Latin-Americanisation of the city resulting from an anti-European feeling, and in the 1990s with the city's contemporary problems: poverty, insecurity, extinction of public space.

43 Minister Dr Eduardo Wilde offered Dr Cárcano two possible sites for the construction of the postal palace: the one currently occupied by the Justice Palace, and the one which was finally used in view of its proximity to the port, the railway station and the nearby shops and banks (Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones, 1948).

44 The nature of these lands is frequently considered to be the main reason why it is difficult to restore the building today, as there is water underneath.

45 The architect Norbert Maillard was one of the representative figures of French academicism, exemplified in Argentina's official architecture with his design of the Palacio de Correos y Telégrafos in 1888, the Courts of Justice in 1904 and Buenos Aires National School in 1906. In particular, he worked within the Beaux-Art tradition, which had been employed to construct official buildings in France since the seventeenth century.
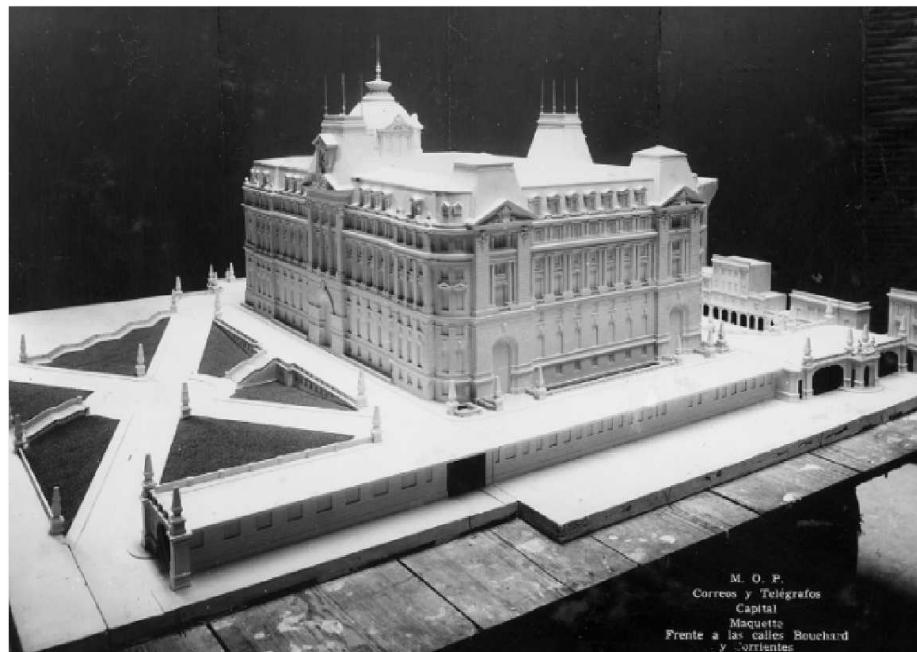
Figure 11. Construction site of the Palacio de Correos y Telégrafos
Figure 12. Maillard's model for the building
Source: Photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.), 1912
Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation: CeDIAP
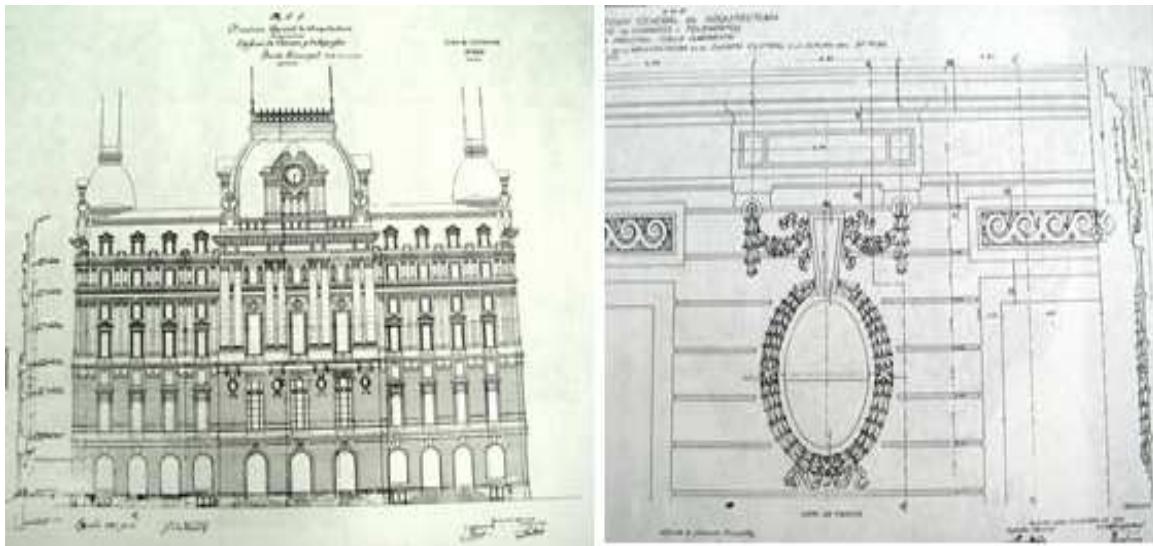
Figure 13. Construction plan No. 133, building's main facade on Sarmiento street
Figure 14. Detail of ornamentation, 3rd floor of main façade
Source: *El Arquitecto Constructor* (1929) No. 415, Centro de Información Técnica (CIT),
Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (CNC)

However, despite the speed with which the project for the post office building was drawn up and approved, national and international economic and political circumstances brought about a series of constant interruptions in its construction. By 1890 only the foundations had been built before works were disrupted as a consequence of the severe local financial crisis resulting from the country's complete economic dependency on England, high unemployment levels and the various political conflicts which arose from widespread corruption and constant demonstrations. These led to a civic-military insurrection (*Revolución del Parque*) which provoked the fall of the government in 1890.
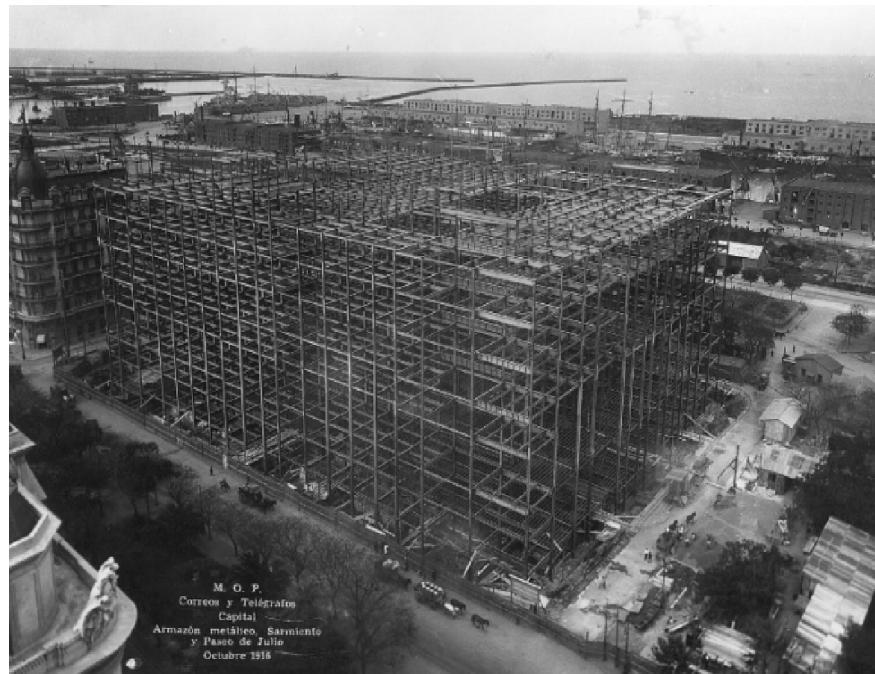
Figure 15. Building foundations
Source: Photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.), 1916.
Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation: CeDIAP.

After fifteen years of interruption, the original project was found to be outdated, something which led the architect Maillard to design a new one, at a higher cost, in 1908. This included the construction of bridges and roads in the surrounding area. Despite the approval of the project by President Jose Figueroa Alcorta a year later, disagreements prompted Maillard's resignation, and a new plan was drawn up by the Russian architect Spolsky, who proposed a smaller scale project (without bridges). Work commenced in 1911, but the unfavourable economic situation and lack of construction materials because of the First World War led to further interruptions, and then to a new restructuring of the project design. Finally, after forty years, the Palacio de Correos y Telégrafos[46] was inaugurated in 1928, act which was described in detail in the *Historia de las Comunicaciones Argentinas* (Fundación Standard Electric Argentina, 1979:50):

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46 This is the building's original name before it was changed to the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones. See footnote 72 for further details.

Those were times of a crazy economic boom and things were planned in style; after the 1890s economic crisis, it was necessary to wait until the new and splendid factory could be inaugurated: forty years, exactly. The brand new venue, with its seven levels (without counting the dome and the lower ground floor), is placed upon a surface of 83.050 square metres, whose total cost was 17.025.138 pesos with 88 cents, of a strong and healthy currency, and was solemnly inaugurated by President Marcelo Torcuato de Alvear, on 28 September 1928, being Dr Arturo Goyeneche the General Director of Post and Telegraph.

This new building, placed on land of 12.500 square metres and having a height of 50 metres and a dome, facilitated with its great space the development of the postal services and enabled the improvement of the 'almost perfect communications services'. It thus became 'a national pride in being one of the most modern and complete buildings of its type in South America' (*El Arquitecto Constructor*, 1929). The modest two-storey buildings of colonial times had become a monumental, ten-storey building, a white mass of imposing height, classic French proportions and Palladian attics and intercolumniation (Nadal Mora, 1948:513). No effort or care was spared in the construction of the building: 'the best quality materials were available for each piece' (*Contrato*, art. 4, 1873). From the curtains and the tiles to the heating and the doors, the Architecture General Direction commissioned different companies specialised in each of the areas to provide materials of the *best* quality. This is a fundamental principle of the Beaux-Arts architectural tradition as we shall see later in the section. For instance, the construction contract specified that the bricks to be used had to be 33cm long, 16cm wide and 6cm high. They had to be made of good materials, strong, uniform, well fired and with no fissures or holes. Each brick had to be submerged under water before being mixed (art. 11).

Likewise, it was indicated that the sand to be used had to be 'the best clean sand of Montevideo' (art.12), that the vault and the arches were to be built 'with the best class

bricks' (art. 16), and that the floor of the main courtyard and pavements had to be of English stone, of 'the best quality found in the market' (art. 27). Furthermore, the Public Works Ministry (1909) specified that only running water could be used for all of the works; all skirting boards for the courtyards, corridors and bathrooms were of polished stone and white marble which came from Villard and Echaillen; floor tiles had to be of French origin; and all of the ornaments had to be placed with extreme care and great solidity. Floors were made of different materials, depending on their use and hierarchy: concrete for the basement; *Gres ceramic* and American, English, French and Italian mosaics for the great halls and galleries; pavement from Trinidad or wooden cobble for carriage areas; and oak and pine wood for all of the offices, except for the Director's, which contained luxurious parquet. The doors were carefully designed, the handrails featured artistic ironwork with bronze details, and the lighting objects were made of artistic bronze. The very detailed and precise instructions provided in the contract reveal the great significance assigned to the postal palace and the excessive care to be taken with every aspect of its construction. The intention was to create a great building exemplifying the highest architectural standards, which at the time were determined not only by the prestige of the architect and the style employed, but also by the materials used and their durability.

Figure 16. The Palacio de Correos y Telégrafos
Source: Photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.), 1929.
Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation: CeDIAP.

The interior of the palace was divided into two main sectors: the so-called 'noble sector' and the operational area The 'noble sector' lay in the northern wing, comprising sumptuous halls – *Salón de los Escudos*, *Salón Eva Perón*, *Salón de Honor* and *Salón de los Buzones*. These halls have high ceilings and French furniture, including three impressive *vitraux* on the fourth floor. All frames are of aluminium and wood, with woodwork made of cedar with iron fittings (Dirección Nacional de Arquitectura, 2006). The dome is 13 metres high and decorated with an emblematic clock. In contrast, the operational area in the Southern wing is characterised for its simplicity, and used to house all of the machinery for the automatic and manual classification and distribution of correspondence as well as the workshop space and store rooms.

Figure 17. Hall de Extranjeros, 2nd floor, the Palacio de Correos y Telégrafos.
Source: Centro de Información Técnica (CIT), Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (CNC)
Figure 18. Director's office..
Source: Photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.), 1929.
Museo Postal y Telegráfico.Digitalisation: CeDIAP.

The Palace is a distinctly solid and imposing building which conveys a sense of order and power through its classic monumental aspect. It expresses the traditional forms of the Beaux-Arts tradition in French academic architecture and modern technological features (Silvestri, 2007). Enabling a temporal connection with the past and the future, the Palace 'lies unharmed, arrogant, insensitive, as if it were a mute witness of iron, stone and marble' (Secretaría de Comunicaciones, 1978:27). French academicism encompassed a range of different architectural styles, among which was L'Ecole Nationale Supéricure des Beaux-Arts.[47] The Beaux-Arts tradition emphasised formal design and composition, had beauty and good taste – abstractly and universally defined – as its ultimate aims, and conveyed classic monumentality to public buildings (Egbert, 1980). Inspired by the classical design canons of Antiquity and Italian Renaissance, the tradition was founded on abstract ideas and the principles of calculation, proportion, harmony, and the use of decorative ornaments. Materials employed in this tradition

47 Founded in 1819 under the name Ecole Royale des Beaux-Arts.

were considered 'monumental' and forms were characterised by their solidity; noble and utilitarian spaces were thus created. The design of the Palacio de Correos evidently followed this principle, having both noble and industrial areas. Underpinning the quest for 'the best' was an aristocratic approach towards art, which emphasised the nobility of spaces in the Beaux-Arts tradition (Egbert, 1980). In Argentina, this architectural style adopted certain elements of an eclectic classicism mixed with some Art Nouveau characteristics, and was used by the Ministry of Public Works (MOP) for the production of official public architecture (Grementieri, 1995). The work of the architect Maillard, in particular the postal palace, functioned as a model[48] for Argentine public architects to imitate over the years, because of its simplicity, the rationality of its linguistic strategy and its representative quality (Silvestri, 2007:12).

As we have seen, the adoption of a Beaux-Arts academic style for the design of the Palacio de Correos was indicative of the official desire to embellish the capital city by constructing grand, colossal and hierarchical institutional architecture. The training of the academic architect differed from the craftsman-builder, the civil-engineer or other technological experts in the emphasis given by the latter to utilitarian and structural ends (Egbert, 1980:3). Beaux-Arts practitioners, by contrast, sought the beautification of the world through careful formal design and employed the classical principles of order, harmony and symmetry. These principles are of fundamental importance for our understanding of the postal palace as a building which, although imbued with a monumental character, performed an industrial role by efficiently organising and accommodating the expanding postal services and their telecommunications machinery.

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48 The Beaux-Arts method and style for building institutional architecture had been used throughout Europe and the United States in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Etlin, 1994).

The issue of 'character' is a central component in Beaux-Arts architecture. It refers to the content of a piece of architecture, the expressive, symbolic or metaphoric realm that suits a building type and shapes the perception of the viewer (Etlin, 1994:49). Buildings, then, can have a *general* character (pertaining to principles of form), a *type* character (relating to the type of building) and a *specific* character (particular to the specific building) (Egbert, 1980:122). The design of the palace clearly managed to conceal its industrial character[49] by displaying a palatial and majestic façade. We can argue, then, that the building featured a monumental (general) character in line with the public architecture in the Argentina of the 1880s, a post office/factory (type) character in terms of function, and a modern (specific)[50] character, epitomised by the image of an efficient postal machine. This brings us to an important point that goes beyond issues of desired representation, namely, the utilitarian function of the building.

3.4. A workers' palace

We have so far offered an analysis of the relationship between progress, technology, communications, architecture and urban infrastructure. In doing so we have seen that the Palacio de Correos was meant to be not only a 'symbolic expression of modernity' but also a substantial production hub, a site of technological development and rational organisation of postal services and industrial efficiency. Between 1880 and 1928 a capitalist system developed in Argentina, dependent on the growth of an external sector

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49 In this regard, Egbert (1980:135 footnote 1) stated that 'a factory that is architecture and not just a building may suggest something of the architect's interpretation of the dignity of labour in relation to the nature of the particular industry'. In our case, the fact that the Palace does not look like a factory may suggest both the desire to conceal its industrial nature, but also the prestige associated to postal work which earned it a French palace for its services.

50 Following Egbert (1980:123), the specific character of a building can be defined as 'the expression of elements and forms directly determined by the particular site, the climate, materials and methods of construction, utilitarian requirements, genius and originality of the architect, and so on, and which are thus peculiar to, and expressive of, the individual building at hand as a unique entity'.

driven by increasing international demand of food products propelled by foreign investment, the massive import of a transatlantic labour force and the incorporation of lands into the productive system (Pianetto, 1984). Only two years after the palace was inaugurated, the so-called *Década Infame* (Infamous Decade) began with a coup d'état led by generals Uriburu and Justo, which expelled President Yrigoyen and reintroduced electoral fraud, corruption and social repression.

In the international context of the Great Depression, Argentina signed the Roca-Runciman agreement with England, which regulated the exchange of meat exports for English capital investment in the development of public transport and meat processing plants. This gave legal status to the already evident financial dependency with England. The Argentine government had adopted an immigration policy that clearly favoured the arrival of European workers of rural origin, especially from Italy and Spain, through their inclusion in the agricultural wage-earning labour force. The construction of public works, many of which were commissioned by the Public Works Ministry (MOP) and organised through competitions and tendering processes, offered an alternative labour market to that of agriculture. Hundreds of builders worked in the construction of the postal palace for over forty interrupted years. Many of them were male immigrants who had arrived in a country which had promised them economic prosperity and a shelter from the aftermath of the First World War.

Figure 19. Pillar construction for the Palacio de Correos (1913)
Figure 20. Sculpture workshop at the Palacio de Correos (1921)
Source: Photographs by M.O.P. Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation CEDIAP

The consolidation of the conservative national model of the 1880s, ruled by electoral

fraud and the exclusion of most of the population from political participation paved the

way for the emergence of popular discontent. This was organised into unions, the first of which dates from 1878, with the formation of the first typographers' union. Demonstrations for better salaries and a reduction in the length of the working day were frequent, as was their repression by the government. The electoral reform of 1912 established 'universal, secret and mandatory' suffrage; however, women would be included in this universe only thirty-five years later. Popular insurrections, such as the *Semana Trágica* in 1919 and the *Patagonia Rebelde* in 1920, which were brutally repressed by the police and resulted in hundreds of workers being killed, continued to demonstrate large social discontent. Socialism and anarchism were very popular among European immigrants, who soon found strong support among locals.

In this context of political activism and class struggle, postal work offered individuals an opportunity to be included in the labour market and be part of the allegedly 'civilising' project. In the early years of the Palacio de Correos, postal work is described in the archival material as a noble activity which carried with it an essential significance relating to universal, communitarian and educational values. Hence, postal activities are defined as having a universal human value for the development of the man in society, being 'a vital piece of human need' (Fundación Standard Electric Argentina, 1979). They are deemed to perform a 'civilising' role 'through a human confraternal act that linked the diverse peoples of the planet' (Castro Esteves, 1934:16). Postal communication was also meant to perform 'important spiritual and social functions', some of which were said to have 'unthinkable implications for the culture and economy of the peoples' (Galván Moreno, 1937:20), while fostering the 'strengthening of moral bonds, favouring individuals and peoples relationships, and in doing so, fulfilling a noble mission of human dignity' (Canalle, 1948:27). Similarly, the value of the post was expressed in relation to the community: by enabling communication 'it constituted a symbol of

community relations' (Secretaría de Comunicaciones, 1978, 384:27). For example, the post offered special services for the delivery of newspapers of general interest as well as Braille materials for the blind, 'who also had in the post a valuable aid that enabled them to mitigate the distress of their misfortune' (Galván Moreno, 1937:18).

Furthermore, there is a clear link between education and postal work, which appears recurrently in relation to the need to teach the public how to use the postal services, for instance by advising users on the best times to dispatch correspondence:

> The result of this propagandistic action has been that the public convinced itself that they could entrust their letters to the post; that these would arrive to destiny early and safely; that they could address them to different recipients, to places of excursions, summer or winter resorts, in the beaches or in the mountains (*Revista de Correos y Telégrafos*, 1938:95)

By the same token, the postal service had a wider educational task, that of being an actual tool for the circulation of information – and potentially knowledge – in the form of books and newspapers. This way, postal communication served as the main vehicle for disseminating human thought 'by arriving at populated cities, crossing seas, spreading across palaces and shacks, wherever there is a human being in need of the post to nurture his brain or spirit' (Galván Moreno, 1937:18). It is worth remembering that this educational mission had been portrayed as having its roots in the revolutionary movement of the early nineteenth century, as discussed earlier in this chapter.

In line with the educational mission of the postal system, the role of the postal worker was clearly and morally defined as a subject carrying out work for the state. There was a need to discipline their bodies, minds and public conduct through the circulation of supporting materials for meditation, regular and vigilant medical control, the use of

uniforms, and the offer of different forms of technical training. The state's endeavour to shape the social behaviour of postal workers can be framed within the multiple ways of controlling the conduct of subjects, something which was enacted both spatially (prisons, clinics, school rooms, factories, offices, etc.) and administratively (programmes, strategies, tactics, devices, etc.) (Rose, 1999). These ways of governing conduct, Rose explains, include the state as only one player in multiple circuits of governmental power, exercising its power through the freedom it gives to its subjects. Liberal values enable workers to participate politically through unions, to communicate freely through confidential postal services, to establish a free market, to participate in the public sphere, and to circulate freely in the city. But individuals were provided with a type of moral agency, which resulted from attempts to construct 'well regulated liberty through creating practices of normality, rationality and sensibility' (Rose, 1999: 72).

Figure 21. X Ray room, 6th floor
Figure 22. Dental practice at the Palacio de Correos y Telégrafos
Figure 23. Women's hairdresser, 7th floor
Source: Centro de Información Técnica (CIT),
Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (CNC)

These liberal moral values rendered the civilisation project one of self-discipline. In an official publication entitled '*El factor amabilidad en el servicio público*' (The politeness factor in public service) (Camerini, 1938), the *responsibilities* of postal workers were characterised thus: being correct and polite, friendly and indulgent; in other words, '*hacerse el simpático'*, which means acting as if they were friendly. It further explains that this art of 'being friendly' was widely practised in France and was responsible for the attraction of large number of tourists to that country. Likewise, another pamphlet (*Para pensar y ejecutar*, 1938) provides employees with spiritual phrases and encourages them and their families to meditate and reflect on them so as to achieve happiness and wellbeing. Similarly, '*Nuestro servicio médico*' (Our medical service) (Varela, 1938) warned employees of the illnesses associated with postal work, such as heart disease and premature ageing, highlighting the need to take part in health care campaigns, and for postmen to rotate their tasks because of their 'intense, discontinuous, hard work which required full, dynamic attention which was also tiring' (1938:18). The postal Health Service Direction is described as being particularly concerned with the cramp experienced by the telegraphers and the flat feet of the postmen, and proudly stated that after the constant checkups and awareness campaigns, 'the staff had been disciplined; it had self-created the obligation of physical care' (1938:21). Finally, it indicates that workers 'had to keep a social discipline: by creating for themselves the obligation of being useful and thus contributing to the progress of so noble principles and institutions' (1938:21). Distanced from this rhetorical disciplining, postal and telegraph employees will later engage politically in combative action to improve their working conditions, especially during Juan D. Perón's presidential administrations.

Figure 24. Postmen wearing uniform.
Source: *Revista de Correos y Telecomunicaciones* (N:121-132, page 27),
Centro de Información Técnica (CIT), Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (CNC)

The disciplining of postal employees is also visible in the use of uniforms (figure 24), the history of which dates back to colonial times; postal directors had made successive attempts to introduce them. The need to create a recognisable outfit for postmen was compared to the use of military uniforms, which helped 'inspire respect and trust in the general public' (Arenas Luque, 1948). Uniforms were seen as the means to ensure hygiene and good appearance; as a matter of fact, the need to use them had been established 'by the most cultured nations of the world which had their postmen groups uniformed' (Cárcano, General Director of the Post and the Telegraph, quoted by Arenas Luque, 1948:19).

Figure 25. Package classification office, basement
Figure 26. Office of postmen of certified letters, 4th floor
Figure 27. Telephonegram office, 5th floor
Source: Centro de Información Técnica (CIT), Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (CNC)

Undoubtedly this disciplinary regulation of postmen and other postal workers was in tandem with the institutional consolidation of the postal system in early twentieth-century Argentina. Later on, the growth of state bureaucracy[51] would be visible in the

51 Argentine writer Ezequiel Martínez Estrada experienced the state bureaucracy directly during his work as an administrative employee at the Palacio de Correos for over 30 years (1916-1964). In 1956 he published *Sábado de Gloria* in which he describes the intricacies of a public institution and the wide range of problems an employee faces when attempting to take his annual leave. He also wrote his much celebrated book *Radiografía de la Pampa* (1968) on post office letter headed writing paper (Wilson, 1999:138).

postal palace, following the standardisation of industrial production. The immensity of the postal palace enabled improved spatial organisation and regulation of the services provided. This illustrated both manual and mechanical forms of correspondence classification and implemented a Taylorist system to maximise performance and efficacy (Silvestri, 2007:14). The internal design of the large palace, then, proved instrumental in facilitating the regulation of the flows of people, shaping the relations of perception and vision and producing 'modes of public deportment that throw a web of visibilities and norms over public conduct' (Osborne and Rose, 1998:8).

Figures 28, 29 and 30 show some of the latest and expensive machines the national post office had acquired to improve postal work. The social problems arising from the incorporation of machinery have been summarised in Ezequiel Martínez Estrada's observation:

> two machines were installed in the Correo for the mechanical management of correspondence, like ones which exist only in two other world countries. Their placement occupied four of the seven floors of the palace; their working capacity was over a hundred times superior to that which was needed. Therefore, when the machinery was put into practice, correspondence disappeared into their pipes and conveyor belts, and the employees did not have anything to do other than contemplate that vertiginous voracity with which the letter and the print were dispatched. It was necessary to dismiss half a million men, or to stop that machinery which cost two million pesos. They opted to stop the machinery… There, a struggle between the artefact and the worker was also unleashed (Martínez Estrada, [1986] 1991:232, author's translation)
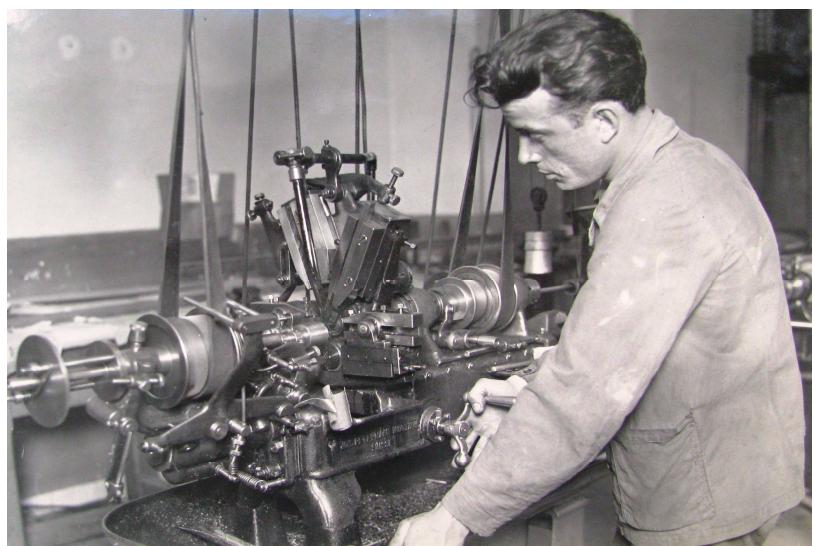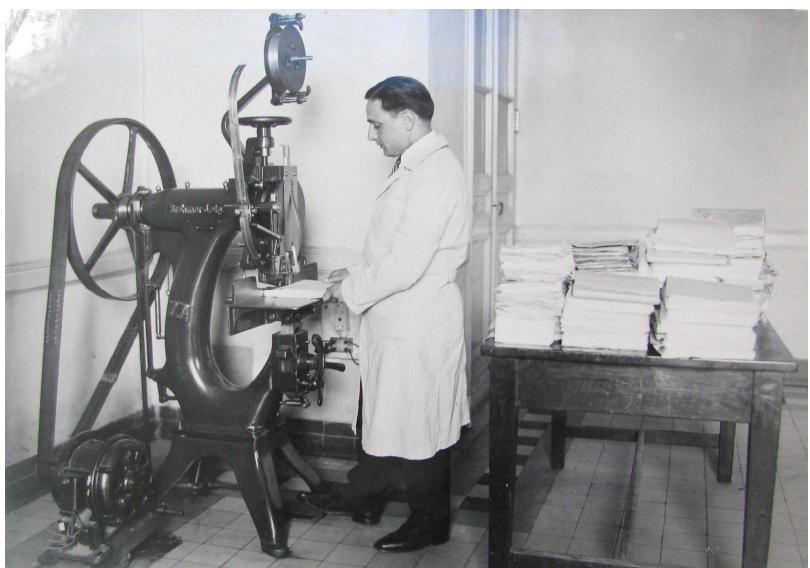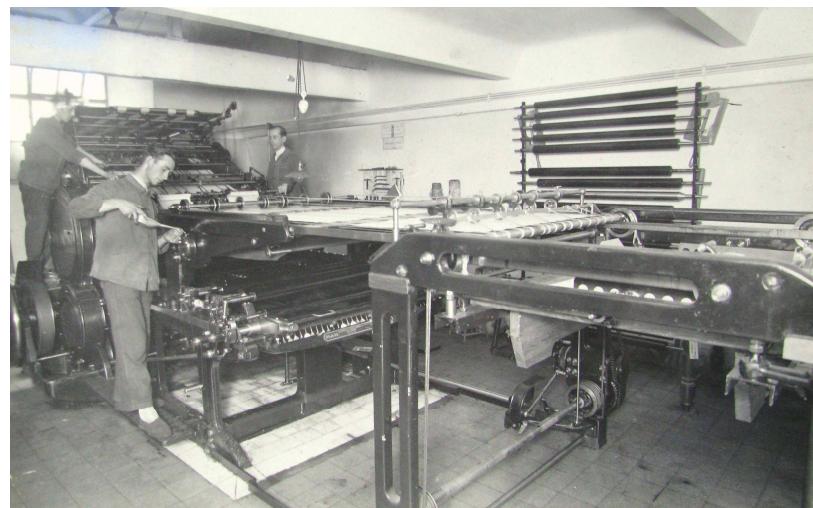
Figure 28. Double revolution printing machine
Figure 29. File sewing machine
Figure 30. Lathe demonstration at a mechanic workshop, basement.
Source: Centro de Información Técnica (CIT), Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones (CNC)

In order to tackle these tensions between men and machinery, the Palacio de Correos facilitated the creation of training spaces to educate the labour force, such as a Morse system and telegraphy school, and sculpture and crafted basket workshops; all these tasks could be executed in the building. Additionally, a number of social services for postal employees were on offer. These included: a health centre with different medical specialities, a medical chemistry laboratory and an X-ray room (figure 21), schools, a kindergarten, hairdressers (figure 23), a cinema, a 10,000-book library with reading rooms, and a restaurant that used to serve 3,000 people daily. These facilities were based on the different floors of the building and available to all postal and telegraph workers.

The palace was a production centre, not only because it was a communications hub where all correspondence was organised, managed and distributed, but also by virtue of the services provided which allowed workers to acquire a wide range of skills, which were then applied to the materiality of the building and the functioning of the telecommunications system. To work in the palace was not a temporary job but a position for life. Employees' learning, experiences and stories have been materialised in the fabric of the building: the very pillars that sustain it, the sculptures that adorn it, were all locally produced. The post office was more than just a state-owned company; indeed, it was an institution that aimed to represent federalism, decentralisation from Buenos Aires. Despite being located in the capital city, it served every province of the country equally,[52] and enabled people to communicate, thus overcoming distance. Workers were part of the state's socio-technical organisation of national

52 Recently, a post office union leader is said to have been brought face to face with the authorities in an argument on postal rates for Las Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands). While there is a widely accepted general belief among Argentinians that Malvinas are indeed Argentine, items sent to the islands by post were charged at international rates. After a heated argument with the post office's authorities, postal rates were changed and deliveries to Las Malvinas are now charged as national. (Personal interview with a post office employee and union leader, February 2009).

communications. Being the embodiment of a welfare institution, the building represented the successful delivery of a key public service by the state as well as the interest of the latter in educating the labour force and protecting workers' social rights.

While the analysis conducted in this chapter has focused mainly on the period 1880-1928, it is worth pointing here to a few developments that took place following the inauguration of the building. By 1929 the 'English Saturday' benefit, by which employees were released from working on Saturdays, had been granted to postal and telegraph workers; and by 1937 a Society of Mutual Aid between Telegraph Distribution Employees had been created and had its own hospital to tackle tuberculosis. The representation of the postal and telegraph workers took place later in the twentieth century with the creation of four main federations,[53] which in turn concentrated a large number of unions corresponding to each of the Argentine provinces. These federations were created following the administrations of Perón (1946-1952 and 1952-1955) when governmental support and Evita's social work were fundamental to the consolidation of numerous workers' movements that fought for the improvement of labour conditions, the recognition of labour and social rights, and the need to unite through class solidarity. Embedded in this political context, the postal building was not only instrumental in representing the techno-modern soul of the nation, but above all emerged through its material majesty and operative efficiency as the workers' palace.

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53 These are in their original Spanish names: Asociación Argentina de Trabajadores de las Comunicaciones (AATRAC), since 1945; Federación de Personal Jerárquico y Profesional de la Secretaría de Estado de Comunicaciones y ENCOTESA (FEJEPROC) for managerial staff, since 1969; Federación de Obreros y Empleados del Correo Oficial y Privados (FOECOP), with legal union status since 1995; and Federación de Obreros y Empleados de Correos y Telecomunicaciones (FOECYT) since 1947).

Conclusion

The institutional, architectural and labour dimensions of the Argentine post showed an underlying preoccupation with the growth and development of the nation towards ideas of progress, civilisation and modernity. The postal service has been linked from its origins to the political history of independence, being inscribed with a patriotic character. I have shown the convenience of the communications system for the emerging nation-state's territorial integration, economic growth, technological development and mainly techno-modern imagination.

The value of the postal system rested on its educational potential, both in universal and communitarian terms, and the perception that it was a vehicle of progress and therefore, modernity. The architects and the political elites endeavoured to position new national architectural symbols imaginatively within a European framework of modernity, constructing colossal official buildings to overshadow and replace the nation's Hispanic-colonial legacy. Public municipal architecture, then, was central to this official endeavour to build modernity: its materiality acted symbolically as a code for technological development and civilisation. In the case of the Palacio de Correos this was expressed through the nature and origin of the construction materials together with the architects who participated in its design and construction.

The postal palace had a fundamental role to play symbolically by reminding citizens of their rights to enact a liberal political culture with freedom of communication. Furthermore, along with the official narrative of the post office building were also class solidarity and postal and telegraph workers' activism, which crystallised in the consolidation of unions and their struggle to improve working conditions and rights.

This liberal political culture would be later endorsed by the power of a welfare state (especially during Perón's years) which provided workers with social rights and the pride of being part of such an unprecedented enterprise of economic wellbeing. Functionally, the postal palace also represented the triumph of the standardised organisation of production through the incorporation of technology and the regulation of postal work in an ordered and monitored workspace.

The examination of an urban artefact like the postal palace facilitated the discussion over the desired transformation of the city's aesthetics, the characteristics of the emerging nation-state, and the shaping of the postal workers. The Palacio de Correos, then, became a vehicle for thinking about the modernity of the Argentine nation as a whole, and of Buenos Aires in particular. Ultimately, it was a form of Latin American modernity, nurtured by contradictions, interruptions, and political and economic problems. These features challenged the official efforts to build modernity, that is, first, to be part of the new emerging world as it was shown by and mainly associated with European nations (particularly Paris and London); second, to be integrated through the development of new modes of communication; third, to be recognised as the locus of a beautiful, modern space through developing new urban forms in the capital city; and fourth, to become a visible member of the international division of labour through the export of primary goods and the import of manufactured products.

Berman (1982:289) argues that certain type of buildings in a city can function as 'symbolic expressions of modernity' that make one feel as if in a 'Baudelarian forest of symbols'. Undoubtedly, the postal palace in Buenos Aires can be considered one of them, for it inspired citizens to imagine the much acclaimed 'European character' of the

nation with its French architectural features and splendour, the golden epoch of economic prosperity. Alternatively, one could also locate the building in a temporal parallel with the manslaughter of indigenous peoples in the south of Argentina, which took place nine years before the construction of the postal palace began. As we have seen, both events pertain to the 1880s generation. This inevitably reminds us of the dreadful conservative, anti-democratic ideologies and xenophobic practices of the late nineteenth-century, whilst suggesting a connection between the question of modernity and the genocide[54] of indigenous peoples.

Yet a further question arises regarding what is actually modern about the postal palace and whether its modernity can be re-interpreted beyond Western hegemonic discussions over this term. Marie Louise Pratt (2002) has encouraged us to imagine a type of Latin American modernity which takes its meaning not from the normativity of 'the centre' but from a different, relational framework which stems from 'the periphery'. The organisation of the postal workers into politically active unions and federations based on solidarity, especially during Perón's years, can be indicative of their desire to resist the rationalistic individualisation brought about by Western European modernity. At the same time, workers were undoubtedly a constituent part of the 'modern' socio-technical project whereby the postal-techno state was created and through which not only freedom of communication was enacted, but also freedom of interaction and organisation in unions.

While official discourses of nineteenth and early twentieth-century Argentina equated modernity with the European Enlightenment project, the very meaning of the term for

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54 While of obvious differences with the case examined here, the link between modernity and genocide has been examined in detail by Bauman (1989).

the local political community changed over time too, as we will see in the following chapter on the neoliberal privatisation of the postal services and the project of redeveloping the postal building. Not surprisingly, as we shall see in Chapter 4, this seeks to redevelop it in the name, once again, of the powerful trope of modernity.

CHAPTER 4

From a production hub to a cultural centre

The fall and revival of an emblematic building

As we have already seen, the Palacio de Correos was planned and built as an object of modernity which linked the ideas of progress and civilisation with postal and telegraphic communication. Now in the twenty-first century, the institution of the post in Argentina and elsewhere is clearly no longer perceived as a symbol of national modernity. Nor are post office buildings kept 'alive' or preserved as such, since doing so may be allegedly seen as indicative of a country's backwardness. But what should be done with an immense postal palace which has been rendered useless and left abandoned in the city? In the wake of the devaluation of the postal institution, culture was invoked as the panacea that would bring Argentina's most emblematic postal building back to life. This chapter explores why culture provided the solution to the regeneration of the postal building, which forms culture took in this context and how the official culture-led urban regeneration operation was contested by alternative claims. To do so, the analysis focuses on the on-going transformation of the Palacio de Correos into a commemorative cultural centre.[55] I analyse the production and circulation of meanings about culture and the enactment of heritage in the context of the redevelopment operations. That is, how the recycling of the postal palace enabled multiple meanings of culture to emerge and circulate within a range of policy, architectural, urban

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[55] While this chapter focuses on the cultural regeneration operation, the content of the projected cultural centre is discussed in detail in Chapter 6. The commemorative aspects of the project are examined in Chapter 5.

regeneration, real estate[56] and media discourses, which in turn articulate vested interests championed by different social actors.

In this chapter I show how the different redevelopment alternatives which aim to repair the fissures in the building's body express existing disputes over the making of cultural policies, the uses of heritage, the image of the capital city, the value of the post office, and the meaning of culture. For instance, when the former Economy Minister publicly announced that the Palacio de Correos would be converted into a cultural centre, it became evident that the value of culture was perceived as taking precedence over that of the post office. As will become clear in the course of this chapter, the value of the post office has come to be seen as evaporating in light of new technological forms of communication and the rise of neoliberal capitalism. We will see how the official redevelopment operation, facilitated by a cultural rhetoric, was largely aimed at *dissipating the struggle* over the future management, urban impact, cultural meaning and social uses of the postal building. Such contestation dissolves the idea that the post office headquarters was abandoned or of no use, showing that there was an underlying story going round – that the building was a symbol of prestige over which power struggles ensued within the government but also in relation to non-governmental actors. Underpinning the postal building redevelopment were political motives.

The chapter is divided into four main sections. The first looks at the concept of culture in relation to the historical processes which have shaped contemporary meanings of the word. I then look at the grounds on which the postal palace was converted for cultural use. That is, I look at how these reasons were constructed, how they became hegemonic

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56 This is particularly analysed in Chapter 6.

and then proved fundamental in legitimising intervention into the building. The second section focuses on the aftermath of the privatisation of the postal services as the main stated cause of the deterioration traced in the analysis, which then gave way, in particular, to the circulation of the idea of culture as remedy. The third section examines how culture was conceived of by the particular social actors of the case study. I identify divergent views on culture which were found to be at stake in the redevelopment of the building. Finally, the great dispute over the redevelopment operations is examined in the fourth section where the analysis challenges the project's official version that the building was of no use or interest. I explore the tensions surrounding the management of the building, the organisation and results of the redevelopment competitions, and the relation established between culture and politics in light of changing political circumstances. In short, my argument is that the very ambiguity of the concept of culture is what encourages different social actors to use the word, assign it a particular meaning and make it serve their own interests. Culture arises as a mediator, a place of resolution, a panacea that makes social actors believe in its remedial capacities. I suggest that the resort to *culture as a panacea, however, represents a political position, one which seeks to evade the solution of problems of other sorts*. Entangled in social and ideological struggles, culture can never have a neutral or impartial basis (Swingewood, 1998:178). Culture, then, becomes a site of conflicts, a problem that is signalled by its very invocation as a universal solution.

4.1. Culture, a complicated term: local trajectories and hegemonic views

The intricate ways in which the concept of culture circulates in contemporary Argentina are rooted in history, in long-standing views which bring ideas of culture together with

notions of national identity, modernity, progress, civilisation and barbarism. As a result, before embarking on the analysis of how my interviewees made sense of the cultural redevelopment project, a brief consideration of the historical entanglements of culture in Argentina, and especially in Buenos Aires, will help us understand the role of the imagined cultural centre and the origin of the different senses conferred to culture locally. Historically, the fluctuating trajectories of this concept have encapsulated some of the material and symbolic disputes that fiercely erupted in the nineteenth century, such as the constant struggles between Buenos Aires and the Argentine provinces over power and economic resources, discussed in Chapter 3. This confrontation undoubtedly shaped understandings of culture linked to the 'centrism' of the capital city, both in political and cultural terms, and the alleged 'backwardness' of other territorial areas: 'culture' was to be located solely in the metropolitan capital city. Giving rise to a spatial definition of culture, this form of geographical determinism was represented by the local interpretative traditions. The most notable of these was Sarmiento's (1845) *Facundo: Civilización o Barbarie*, which read the map of the territory as a symbolic metaphor of the body of the nation during the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries (Gorelik, 2004). At the centre of this tradition of critical essays were concerns such as the relation between the rural and the urban, tradition versus modernity, questions of the national and the continental, and issues of memory and identity which have heavily influenced Latin American cultural studies (Rios, 2004: 15). A concern with culture was intersected by all of these relating preoccupations.

The spatial definition of culture was equally informed by the dichotomy civilisation or barbarism, epitomised by *Facundo*. As was discussed in Chapter 3, by writing a biographical account of the *caudillo* Facundo Quiroga from La Rioja, Sarmiento (1845)

provided a detailed sociological study of 'barbarism', incarnated in the body of the provincial leader and placed within the portrayal of the national territory, its history and its population. In this perspective, caudillos and gauchos were considered barbarians who could allegedly evolve into 'civilised' men. The indigenous peoples, however, were directly seen as savage and were subsequently excluded from the imagined nation. Military confrontations with the indigenous peoples in the Pampas took place already under Rosas' government in the 1830s. As we have seen, the systematic annihilation of these peoples in the Southern region of Argentina (during the 'Conquest of the 'Desert' in 1880) came to reinforce a particular connotation of the word culture, whose echo can still be heard in present times: culture was to be found only in the cultivated activities of the 'civilised' people from the metropolises. The residues of these disputes, together with those concerning the urban representation of the capital city, the admiration for fluctuating periods of European 'modernity', and the denial of Latin American indigeneity, have persistently shaped contemporary understandings of culture in Argentina.

Binomial thinking continues to nurture the national political culture. Maristella Svampa (1994) persuasively argues that the classical dichotomy between civilisation and barbarism exalted by Sarmiento condenses the various oppositions that have signalled Argentina's national history – between *unitarios* and *federales*, the capital city and the rest of the country, *peronismo* and *anti-peronismo*, the people and the oligarchy, patria and imperialism. It is important to highlight here that the different political traditions in Argentina have re-appropriated this image and made it work in their interests so as to discredit political adversaries. Hence, this image constitutes, Svampa argues, the founding antinomy that encapsulates every dichotomy and as such has persistently

appeared in the political and cultural field with different meanings. It has functioned as the hermeneutical matrix with which these everlasting struggles can be understood. Indeed, these different, long-standing oppositions come to be re-activated in contemporary times through the concept of culture. Speaking of culture, then, can act as a code which reveals historical traces, unresolved disputes, and contemporary concerns, both symbolically (i.e. the constitution of the national identity) and materially (i.e. the control of the national revenue).

More recent historical developments, such as the *peronista* movement or the dreadful extermination of those considered political adversaries during the 1970s' dictatorship, have given culture a peculiar character through its imbrications with politics. The intimate link between culture and politics or the over-determination of the former by the latter became visible in the fact that at the time there was no sphere of social life autonomous from a revolutionary discourse (Wortman, 2001). Culture then became equated to politics. As Sarlo (2004:255) argues, politics functioned as 'the criterion of truth', providing the underpinning foundation for all public practices; it was the surrender of the intellectual logic to the political logic. In the 1980s culture acquired a different political character – one which celebrated democratic participation in public space, the defence of human rights and the legal punishment of the perpetrators of state terror. The transition to democracy showed that people were willing to exert their freedom of expression and re-appropriate public space, which had previously been censored and violently controlled by the armed forces. The emergence of public demonstrations and social organisations demanding justice for the disappeared (of whom there were 30,000) carried the flag of democracy, human rights, *Nunca Más* (never again) and *Ni olvido ni perdón* (neither oblivion nor mercy). This revival in public

culture was accompanied at the neighbourhood level by a municipally organised network of cultural centres (Programa Cultura en los Barrios) aimed at 'taking culture everywhere' by offering a variety of lessons to citizens for free, ranging from traditional forms of dance, music, cooking, knitting, ceramics and football, to crafts, clown, drama and painting, among many others.

By the 1990s, the political content of culture began to evaporate with the implementation of neoliberal policies (supported by international organisations such as the International Monetary Fund [IMF]), whose seed was sown during the state terror years. This era of wild neoliberalism brought about a deepening of social inequality with growing levels of unemployment, poverty and insecurity alongside widespread social unrest and public funding cuts. A combination of bureaucracy, with the corrupt relation between the state and the economic power groups, indifference towards social issues and loss of credibility in politics led to a process of increasing de-politicisation of society (Wortman, 2009:12). The denigration of politics produced by the Menem's era characterised by corruption, media spectacles and scandals, and rampant consumerism, led to the erasure of the political component of cultural activities and its replacement by an emphasis on the economic, commercial value of culture, with an orientation towards quantification and the mass culture market. Previously created community cultural centres were closed down in 1993 as part of Menem's capitalist cultural policy oriented towards spectacular mass culture in the form of the cultural industries and the proliferation of the shopping mall (Wortman, 1997). Argentina's complicated financial entanglement with the IMF triggered the government's appropriation of individual savings in banks, which in turn led to these policies' most visible impact: the economic, social and institutional crises of 2001. Although in the aftermath of these crises public

funding was generally axed and cultural activities were particularly hit, the revival of political participation in the public realm – exemplified by public assemblies and *clubs del trueque* (barter clubs) based on solidarity and mutual cooperation – was accompanied by the re-emergence of non-commercial, voluntary and self-managed[57] cultural initiatives, following its previous relegation.

The fractures in Argentine history between the national-popular and the foreign-elitist or those between democratic participation and authoritarian repression, so clearly expressed during the *peronismo* years and re-enacted more recently by *kirchnerismo*, continue to inform the ways culture is understood locally and in relation to a Latin American perspective. We have seen that the various struggles within the national territory gave the concept of culture a particular local configuration with changing links to political and economic processes. If the relationship between culture and politics was eroded during the 1990s *vis a vis* a neoliberal emphasis on the economic potential of culture, the last decade has witnessed the revival of the idea of a national culture, the need to develop and support 'our culture' framed by an idea of national identity, an identification with a regional political community and a preoccupation with the social. The use of a populist discourse in the *kirchnerista* national rhetoric (see Chapter 5 for an examination of official speeches) revives the political ideologies and rivalries of the 1970s. It exalts the need to question the devastating hegemonic neoliberal logic by implementing a national-popular model for Argentina, one which counteracts international political and economic pressures, encourages the strengthening of a national market and promotes patriotic nationalism. The *kirchnerista* model, obediently

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57 For more information about the emergence and functioning of self-managed cultural groups and spaces in Argentina, see Wortman (2009).

following a populist logic, rejects categorically opposing ideologies by simplifying the political space through imprecise dichotomies (Laclau, 2005:18). These dichotomies, however, nurture the construction of national imaginaries which are exclusionary, essentialist, hostile and at odds with more nuanced, heterogeneous accounts of the political and the cultural.

The realm of official cultural planning in Argentina is wide, highly diverse and extremely bureaucratic, comprising a whole range of agents, institutions and legislations at different governmental levels.[58] Beyond the sphere of state policies there are obviously innumerable traditional and non-traditional cultural activities and emerging spaces run by the private sector and civil society. In *Extensionismo y Basismo: Dos Estilos de Política Cultural* Rubinich (1993) suggests that traditionally there have been two main strands organising official cultural action: an *extensionista* (expansionist) model determined by the provision of a traditional (elite) cultural offer to different social sectors, and a *basista* (grass roots) model defined by the incorporation and revitalisation of popular experiences. While the first model considers high cultural forms the only legitimate objects of policy, the second interacts with them creatively through its incorporation of popular culture as its main content. Today a number of nuances clearly challenge this clear-cut distinction by articulating local social movements' demands with global trends,

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58 These are the national, the municipal and the provincial. The National Culture Ministry has under its orbit two Under-Secretariats (Cultural Management and Sociocultural Policies) and five main Boards (Heritage and Museums, Arts, National Policy and International Cooperation, Cultural Industries, and Federal Action), through which diverse cultural initiatives are implemented. In addition, there is a wide range of national institutes, museums, libraries and many other decentralised institutions (in the areas of cinema, theatre, arts and libraries) which are also under the cultural national jurisdiction. The Government of the City of Buenos Aires' Culture Ministry comprises three Under-Secretariats (Cultural Heritage, Cultural Management and Tourism) and ten General Boards covering areas such as museums, libraries, music, artistic education, cultural centres and festivals, among others. At the provincial level there is a whole range of institutions, under-ministries, boards and agencies depending on each province which deal with cultural affairs. For more information see: http://www.cultura.gob.ar/ and http://www.buenosaires.gov.ar/areas/cultura/

cultural and creative industries with traditional heritage protection and museums activities, elite culture with popular art forms, and public funding with private sponsoring. While the state has for a long time focused its cultural programmes only on attempting to protect material heritage and to offer elite cultural activities for free, the rise of the cultural and creative industries in the last two decades has had an impact on the planning realm in institutional, financial and legislative terms. In what follows, the analysis looks at one particular policy operation that brings together the elements discussed in this section, whilst enacting the relationship between culture and politics in a peculiar way.

Cultural use

I have now quickly introduced the historical context of political changes within which the invocation of culture as a panacea needs to be interpreted. Social actors with a stake in the Palacio de Correos conjured up this history by discussing issues of value, cultural provision, modernity, and national identity in their interpretations of why the building had been converted for cultural use. My interviewees dwelled largely on two main reasons to explain the redevelopment of the building: first, to fulfil the city's need for a symphonic music venue and, second, to give value to a devalued listed building. It was said that Buenos Aires needed a cultural venue of 'international quality'. Concurrently, the Palacio de Correos was perceived as abandoned and decayed. In what follows I explore these reasons in detail.

'To fulfil the city's need for a symphonic music venue'

As the Buenos Aires Symphonic Orchestra had no official venue for rehearsals, the idea that the postal building could provide it with a headquarters arose following the first competition organised for the recycling of the postal palace. The winning proposal in this competition established the creation of a performing arts cultural centre, including music activities, and this was then used to inform[59] the writing of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB) regulations for the second competition. Since then, the idea that the city needed a music venue was clearly stated:

> The origin of the cultural centre initiative is not so much the museums but the auditoriums which Buenos Aires' music scenes have been demanding. In fact, there was a competition in 1960s which never came to fruition…. Since then this need has existed, all the time the city demanded a music venue like that of the world's most important cities. And Buenos Aires doesn't have one; it only has the Teatro Colón which is an opera theatre (Architect, CCB competition participant)

> We knew that Buenos Aires lacked something important with regard to music. Because for ballet there is the Teatro Colón, but we saw that there was something missing in terms of music. So we thought that the central element of this new place had to be music. But it also needed to have things like painting or sculpture which could have not too large permanent exhibitions. This is how we conceived it, because we said that's what is lacking (National Economy Ministry, Legal and Technical Secretary)

For these informants music would be the central component of the newly conceived cultural centre and this is justified by the city's long-standing need of a music venue 'like that of the world's most important cities'. Indeed, a letter sent by members of the National Symphonic Orchestra dated 22/03/2004 to the by then National Culture Ministry (Torcuato Di Tella) confirms their need for a national auditorium in the city. They claimed that such an auditorium 'would represent the nation's pride in its musical

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59 This is, however, still contested by those who participated in the organisation of the CCB competition. See Section 4.4.

culture' [http://culturasinfonica.blogspot.co.uk], bringing benefits in terms of both local music production and tourism, and demanded their involvement in the project.

The allusion to the Teatro Colón, which is perceived as the main, if not the only, cultural venue in Argentina of international renown, appeared repeatedly in interviews, sometimes to refer to the need for a more informal music venue so that this theatre can preserve its elitist status:

> I don't like seeing the Teatro Colón sometimes used for activities which aren't close to what was the original intention of the Colón, so it would be good if the city had a large auditorium (Former National Economy Minister)

Argentina, and especially Buenos Aires, has traditionally prided itself on having the magnificent and monumental Teatro Colón, a world-renowned opera theatre located in the Tribunales area of the capital city. As interviewees stated, this is a lyric theatre, not a symphonic hall, and it already houses the National Philharmonic Orchestra.[60] The Teatro Colón has recently been at the centre of cultural management and political disputes in light of the over-three-year-closure of the building during refurbishment works, as well as major long-standing union conflicts. The building re-opened in May 2010 in commemoration of the national bicentenary. In 2011 and in preceding numerous performance suspensions,[61] workers called a strike in protest at policies of staff reduction supported both by the theatre management and the municipal government, the relocation of both production workshops and the National Philharmonic Orchestra, and the serious deterioration of the theatre's physical

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60 Not for much longer though, as it is expected that the orchestra will be relocated in the newly conceived government project 'Usina de la Música' in La Boca, the city's Southern area.
61 In 1997 there were already union conflicts with the Teatro Colón and other national theatres for late payment of wages and worsening of the artists' labour conditions. See, for example, Rapall (1998) on the 'turmoil' in the Teatro Colón, or *La Nación* (1997) on the theatre's union conflict.

conditions. The strike, which attracted much public attention and was accompanied by performances in other venues, prevented prestigious international and national musicians[62] from performing in the theatre, leading to intense media criticism which became indignant at the thought of the likely worldwide embarrassment this would entail for Argentina. A number of workers were dismissed after the strike. Union conflicts are still unresolved and were recently revived with the dismissal of eight permanent employees in 2011. The foregoing problems with Teatro Colón added to the anxiety over the likely problems that the new headquarters of the symphonic hall – the CCB – could face in the future. Nonetheless, it was expected that the CCB would repair the alleged damage done to Argentina's international prestige and good reputation in the cultural field by the long-running union disputes concerning the Teatro Colón. In this example, we can see the struggle between workers and local authorities, the ways the media have intervened in the conflict against the power of the unions, and the theatre's funding and infrastructure problems; in short, we see here the complex intermingling between culture and politics outlined earlier in this chapter.

While the fact that Buenos Aires had no appropriate music venue in which the Symphonic Orchestra could rehearse or play was not in question, what some of my interviewees disputed was the very need to build such venue in The Palacio de Correos

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62 Artists such as Plácido Domingo and Martha Argerich, among many others, were not allowed to perform in the theatre. The former ended up singing in a public show in the street accompanied by the theatre orchestra to express his solidarity with the workers; he even volunteered to mediate between them and the government to resolve the conflict.

and not elsewhere.[63] The inevitable character of the cultural initiative in the postal headquarters began to be challenged.

'To give value to a devalued listed building'

The issue of value is of complicated nature not only due to its undeniably subjective character, but also because of the discursive operation of 'devaluation' that is required to legitimise the subsequent need for 'revalorisation'. If the postal building was 'abandoned' then giving value to it was certainly the way forward to rescue it. In this logic, creating a cultural centre would re-value the postal palace and convert it into a tourist site which with its regenerated surroundings would then become a cultural hub. The public value of culture – when 'culture' is understood as conventional cultural institutions such as a classical music venue – was considered higher than that of an under-used factory (as consumption is to production nowadays); this has been repeatedly shown by innumerable studies on cultural regeneration in post-industrial cities. More generally, the predominance of consumption over production in recent decades has characterised what Rubens Bayardo (2008) calls the 'third generation of cultural policies', that is, policies which equate culture with development and in doing so

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63 This was clearly stated by a member of the heritage NGO Basta de Demoler (B!D) in our interview. He emphasised the government's complicity in the destruction of heritage: 'For instance the office area could continue being offices but for the cultural realm, and the industrial part (4 or 5 metres tall) for exhibition space. And that sector can then be used for open art studios. But they want to show off, if you consider similar interventions, such as the Palais de Tokyo in Paris, interventions are minimal in a listed building….. That same building you can have it anywhere else. It isn't necessary to do it in a building which is a heritage site, it is not necessary to knock down a listed building to have a great contemporary work. The great contemporary work can be built next to the listed building. So it's like a false dichotomy that always presents itself between heritage and new works, if you want to construct new structures, construct new structure, and what is heritage, remains heritage'.

gradually adopt an instrumental perspective that subjects culture to a market logic of efficiency, efficacy and profitability.[64]

This instrumental logic increasingly informs cultural planning around the globe, with local authorities celebrating the spectacular or the purely aesthetic on the grounds of its economic potential, and thus compromising the value of culture for active citizenship, educational purposes, place-memory, and social integration. While both understandings of culture are instrumental, the difference is whose interests these sets of values serve. As Touraine (1984, cited in Grimson and Semán, 2005) put it, it would not be so much a question of understanding what each of these values is, but rather, of examining the constant struggles over their constitution as hegemonic. As stated in the Introduction to this thesis, the question of hegemony is central to an understanding of culture as imbricated with politics through its enabling of the production of consent and the crafting and acceptance of common sense.

The importance of hegemony for the analysis of the case presented here is twofold. On the one hand, hegemony signals the predominance of the public value of culture over the importance of the post office as a symbol of production and communication. On the other, it indicates the prevalence of a certain view of culture over alternative notions of culture. The view of culture as spectacular, as of economic value for tourism, or as an urban marketing tool predominates over that of culture as a way of life, as a practice, as social inclusion, as popular culture. The hegemonic discourse around the redevelopment of the postal palace shows how a form of consensus was achieved publicly around the

64 Recently this has been exemplified by policy discussions on funding for the arts in the United Kindgom. The main issue has been whether cultural organisations should resort to statistical measures to justify the government's spending in the sector and whether culture should be defended on the grounds of its non-monetary value. See, for example, Holden (2004) and Selwood (2002).

idea that the building had become 'abandoned', alongside the belief that a spectacular cultural centre was the best remedy to revive a dying building. These discourses were neither 'objective' reflections of reality nor politically naïve: public opinion is intimately connected to political hegemony as it is where civil society and political society intersect (Gramsci, 1975, Seventh Notebook 83, p. 213). The case of the Teatro Colón described above constitutes another example of the hegemonic role played by the media in constructing reality. Another idea that was publicly mobilised to nurture that hegemonic discourse was the international experience of cultural regeneration which illustrates thriving (and unsuccessful) stories of decayed urban areas being revitalised through the invocation of 'culture'. In this context its meaning ranges from museums, arts complexes, and 'café culture', to cultural centres, 'cultural cities' and other forms of gentrified spaces. The CCB, then, was expected to provide the city and the nation with a cultural venue of 'international reputation'; in being housed at the postal palace it would also endorse the lack of interest in the provision of postal services as a *devalued* institution.

In a similar fashion, certain beliefs held by some government officials were expected to be shared as 'normal' or 'common sense' by those outside the government who were directly affected by the redevelopment of the postal building. This became apparent when the national government decided to erect a new building for the post office headquarters elsewhere in the capital city, claiming that this would be in the best interest of the postal workers. While an interviewed postal worker pointed to the uncertainty over this new project explaining that 'until it is confirmed, is something that…. It's politics, politics is unpredictable', a representative of the Planning Ministry denied the conflictive nature of the initiative by exclaiming that 'the postal workers have moved

without problems, they have understood'. More important, he made it clear that 'it is not that they were displaced', on the contrary, he argued, postal workers were 'the greatest beneficiaries' and therefore 'must be happier than ever' with the new building.[65] As we shall see later, some of the postal workers' federations opposed the CCB project publicly through letters sent to national newspapers and a request for a meeting with the national authorities. Clearly, the workers did not voluntarily opt to leave the Palacio de Correos. They were not even consulted regarding the redevelopment plans, but had to leave the building as a result of a top-town initiative undertaken in the name of culture. The cynicism of the government's statement, then, is more than evident and so is the pretension that the same set of values would be shared by the postal workers.

After the privatisation of the postal services, discussed in the next section, the postal palace became a national government *office* building. This office use reinforced the idea that the building was devalued as it was not performing the functions it was meant to perform in view of its palatial status. An architect and CCB competition advisor explains it clearly:

> The Palace wasn't used for postal functions any longer, it was in a state of advanced decay, it was used as an office for the Housing [department], for the Planning Ministry… which is nonsense; the building has really good places. Probably the best is the ground floor hall, it's marvellous, and everybody speaks of the Salon de los Escudos. The building is as if it were two different buildings in one: it's like a wonderful little package of Maillard's facades, and then inside, the half facing Sarmiento street is like a palace, and the half facing Corrientes Avenue is like a factory (…). It is a building that was falling down because nobody looked after it, it was wrongly used, it had been given to Macri with the privatisation of the post office and he needed to vacate the building. Then the post office went back to the government… It was like somewhat empty, badly used.

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65 A new building was promised to the postal workers in a nearby area in Retiro. Its design is analysed in Chapter 6.

The notion of the value of culture was interwoven with that of access. This was mentioned in several cases to justify the need for redevelopment: 'Let's open the palace to everybody' was something which was often exclaimed by interviewees who pointed out that the current use of the building as an office does not enable 'people' to make use of it, except for the public servants working in the building. Equally there was a sense that the postal palace, as the material expression of the postal institution, was a site of bureaucracy, an archive of public documentation which, in the words of the Economy Minister Advisor, 'contained everything and nothing'. Staff at the Postal Museum referred to the lack of budget for maintenance, 'not even for a light bulb'; and a postal employee pointed out the disappearance of valuable objects which were stolen during the change of political administration. The key problems with the postal palace, were to do with: its large dimensions, expensive maintenance costs (i.e. lighting, heating, cleaning, security), and the fact that the building was not working at its full capacity. This context prepared the terrain for the emergence of the need to recycle the postal palace on the grounds of its under use and abandonment. Yet I will argue that the situation of conflict in which the building was placed and the need to eliminate all tensions – between workers and the private administrator, between workers' federations, and between the federations and the government – were the fundamental reasons for deciding to make the building serve a cultural function.

The idea of the devaluation of the building also went hand in hand with the assumed decreasing importance of the postal services in context of the development of new communications technologies. As the Chief Advisor of the National Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services Ministry stated:

> The building symbolised a golden age in Argentina. The truth is that it was an emblem which has changed its use. Even though the post office continues to be important, well there are other media that have replaced it and relegated it to a secondary place. It was a wonderful emblem, a Maillard project, French, amazing. And I think that in view of the new media technologies, by giving it a new use, a new role, it will be very attractive to the community.

Despite the expected reduction in the volume of postal communication due to the undeniable widespread use of email, postal correspondence is still greatly used, especially the delivery of packages, the means of communication of those with no internet access, and the compulsory use of resignation telegrams in Argentina. The value of the postal institution as a public service was overlooked by most of my interviewees. However, an interviewed postal worker questioned the claim that the post office is of no longer use and defended its *intrinsic* value:

> In 2004 the company was renationalised, but it did not become what it used to be. Because here, unfortunately, the post office is considered a business, unlike England, the central countries, or most of the countries in the world where the post office is considered a service. And here lies the source of all mistakes. Why? Because the universal service is lost, that is, the universal postal service which establishes that every single spot in the country must be reached at affordable rates (…). With the issue of the cultural centre I totally disagree, because an institution shouldn't be attacked or taken for dead, since we are not dead, that is, the post office exists, telecommunications in the country exist, the Communications Ministry exists.

Having been a union leader for a large number of years, he was absolutely certain of the state's responsibility for protecting the postal institution as a public service for all, rather than letting it become another profitable niche area for private companies, especially after the liberalisation of the postal market which took away the state's right to a monopoly over these services. In his view, this is the main reason for the failure of the universal postal service (UPS) provision, which is an obligation established by the

Universal Postal Union[66] (UPU), of which Argentina is a member. The question then was whether to conceive of the post office as a public service or as a private business.

All in all, the claim that the Palacio de Correos became 'abandoned' was recurrent within media discourses, policy documents and interviewees' accounts. The abandonment was said to be a result of the state's neglect of both the post office headquarters and the postal institution. Yet the abandonment was believed to be mainly a direct consequence of the privatisation of the postal services. This was unanimously seen as the central element contributing to the deterioration of the postal palace and the services it provided.

4.2. The aftermath of privatisation

The following scene took place in July 1999, two years after postal management had been privatised with great opposition:

> Gregorio Plotnicki was astonished, as he watched a post box being removed from its position by a determined officer. Giving no explanation, the officer took the post box away from the legendary Pompeya neighbourhood in the southern area of Buenos Aires. The corner in which it had been for several years seemed to have lost something characteristic, some of its unique features. This was in any case a special corner: it housed a tango museum of which Gregorio was the director. The surprise and discomfort he experienced at the removal of the post box led him to write a letter of complaint about the unexpected episode, which he later sent to the main national newspapers. In the letter he begged for the return of the post box, despite its lack of use, because of its importance in the history of the neighbourhood: it had been a meeting point for lovers and friends, and

66 The UPU is the second oldest international organisation, established in 1874 to promote cooperation in the postal sector, and since 1948 has been a United Nations' Specialised Agency. With an 'advisory, mediating and liaison role', it established the World Post Day, organises workshops, forums and conferences, provides technical advice, and publishes a number of post related reports and acts. It advocates the value of the postal sector, highlighting that, as the largest distribution network in the world, it 'is an essential infrastructure of the global economy' and is key to the information society. For more information see Universal Postal Union (2010).

the once widely used means of communication with his European relatives, many of whom had been killed in the war; Gregorio's family in Argentina had been notified of their deaths by post. The post represented for him the umbilical cord with the world, if no longer through its communicative functions, at least through its mnemonic power.[67]

Local residents like Gregorio had become accustomed to seeing red post boxes in the corners of the streets, for these objects have stood in the same position for several decades. Their colour aimed to imitate that of the British post boxes, despite the fact that the city also had them in blue and then in black and yellow – the colour of the local cabs, which once sued the post office for using their flagship colours. The passage of time and neglect were noticeable in the body of the old post box: peeling paint, dirt remainders of stickers and chewing gum, and graffiti. Post boxes are usually the targets of vandalism in Argentina, and whether because of lack of trust or through lack of need for them, people do not use them as frequently as in the past. Nonetheless, these objects are part of the urban landscape and for this reason have inspired popular cultural forms, including poems, novels and tango songs. They may remind us of our own personal stories travelling through letters, and more generally they also symbolise the survival of a public communication service. Gregorio was angry about, but above all nostalgic for, the disappearance of a very familiar piece of street furniture. He later found out that the post box had been removed by Correo Argentino S. A. It was the company which took over postal management from the state and which finally returned the post box to its original location, following the media repercussions of his letter. The removal of the post box from the neighbourhood, then, signals a larger story: that of the re-functioning of the postal service in light of new forms of communication technologies, economic restructuring and behavioural changes.

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67 Story narrated from my own reading of Gregorio's letter and website (Museo Manoblanca).

The postal institution in Argentina has been characterised by instability, corruption, administrative changes and disputes over its management.[68] An examination of the privatisation of this state-owned company requires us to consider, although very briefly, the main trends in its contemporary development. According to Castellani's (2009) detailed study of the organisational and institutional aspects of the Argentine postal system, the instability of this institution began after the 1950s with the administrative changes operated in the sector by the different civic and military governments. In 1972 the first state-owned company was created to manage postal and telegraphic services (Empresa Nacional de Correos y Telégrafos, ENCOTEL), but soon the lack of transparency and corrupt practices in both the private and public postal sectors led to the deterioration of the company, especially after the opening of the postal market to private companies during the 1970's military dictatorship. The company's crisis reached its peak in late 1980s, as a result of the lack of a flexible operative structure and investment, precarious labour conditions, intense competition with private postal providers, widespread corruption, and numerous strikes. Finally, the 1990s saw the deepening of the neoliberal policies implemented during the dictatorship years with the complete deregulation of the postal market, the creation of both a new official postal company (Empresa Nacional de Correos y Telégrafos S.A., ENCOTESA) and a public regulatory agency (Comisión Nacional de Comunicaciones, CNC), the destruction of around 24,000 jobs (Azpiazu, Basualdo and Manzanelli, 2009) and the privatisation of the postal services.

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68 Postal services have been under state administration since 1826 when they were nationalised by President Rivadavia, thus gaining autonomy from Spain, as we have seen in Chapter 3. Between 1853 and 1856 the services were under the control of the Treasury Ministry, then the Ministry of the Interior until 1944 when the government gave them autarchy by creating the Postal and Telecommunications Services General Direction. In 1949 the Direction was turned into a State's Secretary, then into a Ministry, later into the State's Secretary of Communications, and finally, in 1972, it took the form of a State's company called Empresa Nacional de Correos y Telégrafos (ENCOTEL). ENCOTEL functioned until 1992 when it was transformed into the Empresa Nacional de Correos y Telégrafos S.A. (ENCOTESA) before it was finally privatised in 1997. See: Correo Official de la República Argentina (2012).

When the postal services were privatised[69] in 1997 under the neoliberal government of former President Carlos Menem, the die was cast for the Palacio de Correos: it would soon cease to perform its legendary postal functions in view of its lack of convenience for the capitalist economy. By then the services were under the control of the Economy Minister (Domingo Cavallo) until they were transferred to the Presidential office. The political confrontations between the Economy Minister and the President were enmeshed with the fraud and embezzlement cases linked to an important businessman (Alfredo Yabrán) who operated in the areas of security, transport, bank transactions and postal services. Cavallo had accused Yabrán of being the mafia leader of clandestine businesses (Ventura, 1996), especially in the postal sector, and President Menem, of protecting him. Yabrán was later involved in the infamous case of the murder of a press journalist and photographer (Jose Luis Cabezas), who was investigating corruption allegations against him. Before the court could arrest him, Yabrán apparently[70] committed suicide. In this context of great political tensions and criminal allegations, the restructuring of the postal services was under way.

The government established the deregulation of the postal market and the privatisation of the postal services through a national and international tendering process so as to assign by concession the postal, monetary and telegraphic services in view of the alleged need to modernise, improve and reduce the price of the services (Decree 265/1997). By

69 The story of the privatisation of the postal services in Argentina is particularly embedded in complex alliances, corruption and scam accusations, details of which will not be provided here, for these go beyond the main focus of this research.
70 The details of his death remain uncertain, and innumerable rumours, including journalistic investigations and DNA examinations, claim that he might be still alive.

doing so, Argentina joined those countries[71] which have privatised or liberalised their official post offices: Nigeria, Burundi (Azpiazu and Schorr, 2003), Austria, Germany, Japan, Belgium, Britain, Denmark, Finland, the Netherlands, and Sweden. In Argentina the privatisation should be understood within the state reform policies undertaken by Menem's government and promoted by the Washington Consensus,[72] which was aimed at the shrinking of the state through the reduction of public spending. It was also entwined with a series of complex issues such as the nature and potential profits of the services to be privatised, an obscure tendering process, corruption surrounding the postal sector, union bureaucracy and pressures, and a lack of state control over the transfer of the service (*La Nación*, 1997b). The outcome of the tendering process featured the granting of a long-term concession (thirty years) to the company Correo Argentino S.A. (CASA) to manage the services, alongside fraud accusations against public functionaries. CASA was a consortium linked to the SOCMA holding which was owned by businessman Franco Macri, father of the current Mayor of Buenos Aires (Mauricio Macri).

The post office renationalised

After six years of private management, the provision of postal services proved to be more inefficient than when under state control. This was not peculiar to Argentina; on the contrary, the liberalisation of the postal markets in most cases has led to increases in prizes, competition pressures and reduction of postal staff, leading to the wholesale

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71 In places like the US, the official post office is said to have been going through a 'piecemeal privatisation' through the marketization and precariousness of the services. See, Hutkins' (2012) Save the Post Office website.
72 The Washington Consensus represents a series of economic measures encouraged by international financial organisations (IMF, World Bank) for the Latin American countries – and others in the so-called 'developing' world – in order to achieve economic growth, including privatisation, reorientation of public spending, liberalisation of the local markets and fiscal discipline, amongst other things.

reorganisation of the postal systems with complex new regulations and general disadvantages for consumers (Brandt, 2007). Similarly, in Argentina CASA brought about not only a considerable reduction of the postal labour force through 'voluntary retirements' (7,000 workers left the company) but also a financial deficit and a reduced participation in the postal market. In fact, CASA's failure to make technological investments in the postal sector was justified shamelessly by claiming investment was made in paying staff to leave the company. Following breach of contract (failure to pay the commission to the state, having a debt of over 200 million pesos/dollars) together with the rise of the universal basic postal service fares and other irregularities in the services provided by CASA, the state terminated the concession in 2003. It soon regained control over the postal system. In 2004 the company Correo Oficial de la República Argentina (CORASA) was created, constituting the first public company to be renationalised under former President Nestor Kirchner's administration. Since the postal institution had been the first public service to be regulated by the state in Argentina, this was a powerful move symbolically and a clear political gesture towards the central role the state would play in the *kirchnerista* administration.

The new national postal administration (CORASA) featured an official postal system with inherited institutional instability, low institutional quality and precarious game rules. However, there have been some recent improvements in the provision of the universal basic postal services, and in the company's image and its participation in the postal market (Grimson, Castellani and Roig, 2010). CORASA managed to increase its productivity and profits, guarantee the provision of the universal basic postal service and obtain positive outcomes in all its balances. According to Castellani (2009), these improvements have led CORASA to be among the most prestigious companies of

Argentina in terms of the quality of its services and products. Nevertheless, the government has not yet established a firm commitment to keep the official postal system as a state-controlled public service – the threat of a new privatisation arose again during Kirchner's administration, but so far the tendering process has been postponed several times (*La Nación*, 2006) and the postal management remains under state control.

The building's uncertain future

Despite the state's interest in regaining control over the postal services, the Palacio de Correos was not to survive for much longer. Only two years after the re-nationalisation of the postal system, the plan for recycling the iconic building and converting it into a cultural centre was up and running. As we have seen earlier in this chapter, the idea that the building was in a state of abandonment circulated among my interviewees and public media. Clearly this claim acquires particular strength given the aftermath of privatisation, which had brought about the closure of post office branches, the dismissal of employees, the dismantling of the postal communication system and the resulting decay of the post office headquarters. However, this was not solely the responsibility of CASA, the private company which managed postal services for six years, but also result of the state's neglect. As expressed by a postal unionist in a letter to Parliament (FOECOP, 2002), for the last three decades postal services have been suffering from:

> 'a pandemonium of decrees and resolutions which, with the backing of the political party of the day and with an absolutely permissive behaviour, submerged the postal system of the Argentine Republic in a chaotic and anarchic situation with absolutely awful consequences for its employees and the society as a whole (…) The abrupt and irrational deregulation of the postal market and the lack of a regulatory framework for the activity that could guarantee clear game rules gave way to the emergence of over 800 clandestine post offices, which impinge upon a public service with constitutional rank and put in danger the very existence of Correo Argentino, a company owned by the national state'.

The 'untouchable' power of the unions also contributed to the bad public image of the state-owned company. Post office workers are represented by four union federations, each of which has a provincial branch, accounting in total for 80 unions across the country. This facilitated not only the emergence of bureaucratic practices and internal disagreements, but also corruption and political alliances. For example, during the privatised administration, one of the federations (FOECyT) backed the dismissal of employees in the form of 'voluntary retirements' and this gained it the opposition of the other federations (Castellani, 2009). Disagreements between these federations and the private company, CASA, were also recurrent. The fragmented representation of the workers through the vast number of unions did not enable a unified and strong defence of their rights and facilitated the establishment of unfavourable agreements with the private company which led to the worsening of the labour conditions and the weakening of the sector (Azpiazu, Basualdo, and Manzanelli, 2009).

After the post office was renationalised, further disagreements occurred in relation to the displacement of the workers from the postal headquarters in view of the cultural redevelopment plans for the building. While one of the federations (FEJEPROC) formally and firmly opposed the project, others permissively settled for a new postal building in the area. The following extract from an interview with a postal worker who has long been a member of one of the federations, expresses it clearly:

> CD: Did all the federations oppose the creation of a cultural centre in the postal palace?

> No, because everything is entwined with politics. Only one of the federations [did]. The post office vice-president was the general secretary [of one of the federations], and he was very involved with the President of Argentina [Kirchner]. The post office second vice-president was the general secretary of FOECOP federation. When

> Kirchner takes over [as President], FOECOP general secretary resigns and takes over as the post office Vice-president. So there is a conflict of interests.

Another postal worker also spoke of the degree of 'conformism' by most of the federations which 'gave in' to the government's cultural initiative and did not stand up publicly to defend the rights of the postal sector. In tandem with the conflicting administrative situation of the post office, then, were the tense relationships among the workers' federations, between them and CASA, and with the current government. This indicates that the building was a valuable object of great controversy, which an invocation of culture was aimed to dissipate.

4.3. Whose culture?

We have already considered the reasons given by my interviewees as to why the postal building was converted for cultural use. A further reason, which challenges the reasons I discussed so far, is examined here: the powerful decision of a single government official to turn the building into a cultural centre. It is worth noting that at stake in the recycling of the postal building was primarily the function it would perform, that is, what use would the building have – whether it would become a luxurious hotel, a shopping mall, a set of government offices, a museum, or a cultural centre. The relocation of postal workers, postal activities and the postal and telecommunications museum was also at stake, as was control over the symbolic image of the building (for instance, whether it would continue to be a postal workers' building, a site of the national-popular in line with the *kirchnerista* government, or a cultural quarter that would enhance city marketing, tourism and investment to be celebrated by the local government). Other issues of contention included: who would organise the competitions for the recycling of the building; what the role of the state would be in relation to the management of the postal

institution; the cultural content of the imagined cultural centre; the feasibility of the projected urban transformation in the surrounding area; the actual refurbishment operations due to the technical complexity and high cost of the project; the timetable planned for the works (originally the cultural centre would be inaugurated in 2010 to commemorate the national bicentenary); the management and sustainability of the cultural centre; and the credit for the project (whether this would go to the winning architects, the President, or the Planning Ministry). In light of these competing interests, it was clear that the building's new function would be in the interest of some but not of others.

The idea of convenience circulated in most interview accounts when making sense of the reasons why the postal palace would be converted for cultural use. References were made to the prestige often associated with conventional forms of cultural activities and the expected positive impact of culture in social, economic and urban terms. This idea, which Yúdice (2003:38) describes as the expediency of culture given by the existence of an end which renders it a resource with the subsequent struggles over its control, is summarised by one of the architects who acted as advisor in the CCB competition of 2006:

> [Culture] It has a good press, it is politically correct. If they had said 'we are going to build a shopping mall in the postal building', the media would have destroyed them. If they say 'let's recycle rubbish there', the media would destroy them. If they say 'let's build offices', the media would destroy them. *But if they say 'we are going to build the biggest cultural centre in the city', everybody applauds.*

In this logic the particular content or the function of a 'cultural centre' does not seem to matter; the shell above all is what counts. In his imagining of hypothetical scenarios for the future of the emblematic the Palacio de Correos in Argentina's capital city, this

architect identifies what the likely outcome of the different alternatives would be: a tacit social reprobation expressed through media condemnation. According to him only one of these options – the creation of a large cultural centre – would receive enthusiastic social endorsement. The different redevelopment possibilities he identifies and dismisses crystallise in disparate elements such as a shopping mall, a recycling centre and an office block, each of which in turn could evoke different senses of the concept of culture, for instance based upon consumption and entertainment, social awareness about environmental issues,[73] or a particular work organisation and ethic, respectively.

Culture, then, enabled the redevelopment of the palatial post office headquarters in the city centre. We have seen how the idea that the palace was abandoned circulated among policy-makers and the media. Chapter 5 will also show that the arrival of the bicentenary anniversary provided the national government with the opportunity to develop one of its flagship projects in the postal palace. Yet the commemorative function of the cultural centre had not been envisioned by those who initially came up with the idea of redeveloping the building:

> We never imagined the cultural centre as something for the bicentenary. We said: the building needs to be converted into a cultural centre that integrates all of the peripheral area; and also the idea to integrate it with Puerto Madero came up. That was the central idea (National Economy Ministry, Legal and Technical Secretary)

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73 Taking one of the examples mentioned in the quotation above, claims could have also been made about the critical importance and currency of transforming the postal building into a recycling factory in light of the economic value of this activity, the informal character of the recycling market in Argentina, and the strategic location of the building in downtown where *cartoneros* congregate every evening after the hassle and bustle of the city (not to mention how well the past of the postal building as a *production* hub would have connected with such a use today). The *cartoneros* are the growing number of cardboard collectors who, in response to the severe economic crisis of 2001, found a source of income in street rubbish by searching for recyclable materials to exchange for money. Indeed, a view of culture based upon environmental awareness, work inclusion and social justice could have arisen, yet it was not remotely considered by this competition advisor as a viable option and, therefore, was discursively excluded from 'culture'.

The decision to convert the postal palace for cultural use was above all the result of the will of a high-ranking government official. Only a few were aware that it was the former National Economy Minister's idea which led to the creation of the CCB. In 2004 he had announced at a business symposium[74] that the Palacio de Correos would be transformed into a cultural centre in view of two 'verifications'. In his words:

> First, in using the presidential heliport which is right there, one frequently sees a deplorable area in urban terms, located in an absolutely central place in Buenos Aires, that is, with an heliport, a dump of busses, frankly, a horrible thing. Second, when the post office was renationalised with the near bankruptcy of the private company, the post office building was taken over. Immediately after, we took over it, because it pertained to the Economy Ministry as it has all the shares, or it had, I think a few things changed afterwards, it had all the shares and the management of all state's assets, immediately people ran at top speed and tried to get settled in the building.

Speaking about the former Economy Minister's decision, former Buenos Aires Vice-Mayor (Jorge Telerman) stated that:

> Lavagna presented it [the redevelopment project] as a symbol of the re-establishment of Argentina, country which doesn't want to receive the world's compassion any longer, but become an object of interest. It would be one of the largest Latin American cultural centres (*La Nación*, 2004)

When asked about how the decision to recycle the palace was taken and whether it was the result of a consensus, he explained:

> Yes, but that depends on the functionary's will and if the functionary has power. I had decided that it would be like that and while I was there, it was like that.

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74 This was the IDEA Symposium in Mar del Plata. The IDEA network [www.ideared.org/] describes its symposium as a summit meeting for the reflection on the greatest issues of national relevance and it claims to be the most important business event of the year, bringing together businessmen and public sector officials.

This statement is indicative not only of a blatant enactment of national politics in the 'first person' based upon the power of a single man, but also of the weakness of institutional democracy in Argentina where one government official's will in the economic realm decides the fate of an important, emblematic listed building in the cultural field. Far from being an exception, this form of personalised politics,[75] based upon the individual power of a public servant, responds to a pattern of policy-making which has been common in Argentina since the late 1990s' in the absence of long-term national, integral and detailed plans for culture, which paved the way for discontinuous, personalised policies (Bayardo, 2008).

The Economy Minister Legal and Technical Secretary was also responsible for the postal palace, as the building was within the orbit of that Ministry. He was a man who had travelled the world widely, lives in one of the most expensive areas of Buenos Aires, and prides himself of being an admirer of conventional elite cultural expressions, such as fine arts and classical music. He explained how terrible it was for him when staff at the National Culture Ministry suggested having a floor in the postal building for each province to use as exhibition spaces, like the nations' fair. This, he said, would then bring in '*empanadas*,[76] wine and barbecue', a clearly more popular scene which in his view would have been harmful to the cultural development of Argentina. Similarly, the Economy Minister had warned of the 'awful' idea of having provincial cultural expressions in the palace as this would render it 'a place for people to sell *mates*[77] or things like that' which could be detrimental to having 'a grand building'. Implicit in

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75 The personalisation of politics refers to the central role of a mass-mediatised leader which came to express the crisis of political parties and replace party politics. The role of current president Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner is a clear example of this charismatic leadership. See, for example, Novaro (1994).
76 A traditional Argentine pastry.
77 A traditional infused drink in Argentina.

these views was also the idea that Buenos Aires' culture was at the forefront of global developments, and that of the provinces lagged behind, for the 'culture' embodied in the capital city was seen as one linked to the cultural and creative industries, and therefore, of an unquestionably trendy character.

These views are sustained by an idea of 'Culture' defined by opposition to that of 'cultures'. While 'Culture' encompasses conventional artistic forms, such as classical music, ballet and fine arts, 'cultures' are those forms and expressions which are not included in the former category. Reviving an old distinction between elite/popular, high/low culture, these government officials dreamed of a Cultural Palace as an embodiment of the Great Culture in which the foreseen grandiosity of Buenos Aires was to be expressed. They rejected provincial expressions, for these were seen as too popular or uncivilised and naïvely misrepresented provincial cultures as reduced to the consumption of certain gastronomic goods. This way of seeing culture represents a conventional perspective in the making of cultural policies by the state which was so characteristic in the first half of the twentieth century and which restricts its field of action to the fine arts and humanities.

The relationship between forms of elite and popular culture was addressed differently by some of the winning architects of the CCB Competition Third Prize. In their proposal for the recycling of the postal palace, they envisioned an open plaza outside the building to house popular cultural expressions which, as they explain, sit more comfortably in outdoor, more informal spaces than in the seriousness of a grand auditorium:

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> Contemporary music increasingly takes public space as its workspace. Music perhaps doesn't 'explode' so much in the auditorium, in the consecrated space, as in the urban public space. In fact, when we were planning our competition submission, there was a festival in the Teatro Colón, and we went there with our team to see a play taking place in the street; the festival opened up with that very action of being in the public space.

The central government's view on the postal palace – for example, that of the Ministry of Federal Planning or the Presidency office – highlighted the role of the building in national history and stated that the creation of the CCB would imply a continuation of the sense of federalism and national integration once represented by the post office headquarters (this is discussed in further detail in Chapter 5). In this sense, the palace is conceived of as being of high social value, 'the focus of national, political and cultural sentiments, awakening a sense of belonging, attachment and pride in citizens' (Ministerio de Planificación Federal, 2003-2011). The link between culture, social cohesion and national identity is clear from this view, which seeks to legitimate the transformation of the postal building in the name of an existing national culture and in reference to regional elements of cultural belonging. Culture is understood here as the expression of the national-popular and as that which would materialise in the (federal and popular) programme of the future cultural centre.

A different sense of culture was expressed by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA). The Macri administration has recurrently stated the value of culture for the exploitation of tourism through urban marketing and the importance of attracting the private sector to the cultural field. His decision[78] to reduce the budget of the

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78 This triggered public opposition, political mobilisations and even the denunciation of discrimination and persecution by the GCBA of some of these cultural centres. For more information see: Redes de Centros Culturales (Cultural Centres Networks) (2011) or MECA's (Artistic and Cultural Spaces Movement) bill on non-official cultural centres.

network of community cultural centres, accompanied by eviction orders and the closure of many of these popular cultural venues, was a clear example of the GCBA's intention to apply a profitability logic to cultural planning. When interviewed about the CCB redevelopment, the Undersecretary of Urbanism Projects of the City[79] explained that their idea for the building had been to convert it into a museum hub and that culture, and in particular the recycling of an emblematic building, were central to urban development in transforming the character of the area.

Finally, another view of culture was represented by the postal workers and the heritage NGO *Basta de Demoler*, who interpreted it in connection with local history, spiritual development, education and learning, and defined it as a constituent part of heritage and identity. In this view, the postal palace was a unique example that the government should protect on the grounds of its value for the preservation of urban and cultural landscapes, the remembering of a particular époque in Argentina and the identity of local places. Culture here is intimately related to an idea of vernacular heritage, one which highlights the role of architecture in condensing the past of the nation and its ability to act as aide memoire.

In tandem with these different ways of understanding culture, alternative redevelopment ideas for the postal palace were put forward by some of my respondents who were angry at the supposed inevitability of the government's intervention in the building and its lack of respect for heritage. Some of these ideas included building a new spectacular cultural centre in the waterfront, 'like the Sydney Opera House', and keeping the post

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79 Being a national initiative, the CCB involved the participation of the municipal government only with regard to the urban transformation of the building's surroundings, an area which is within the orbit of the GCBA.

office headquarters 'as it is'. Others suggested the creation of a fine arts museum in the postal palace which would require no demolition but rather would integrate the existing dispersed art collections, and in doing so, would help museums resolve their problem of the lack of space. The creation of a cultural centre was also suggested, but one which could assign great visibility and space to the post office activities, including the postal museum. Others proposed the use of the existing city government's project 'La Usina de la Música' (The Music Factory) to house the Symphonic Orchestra in the South of Buenos Aires.

Controversy was also present in an online forum on architectural issues (Skyscrapercity.com), illustrating current debates surrounding the redevelopment of the Palacio de Correos, but also recurrent wider disputes over the uses of listed buildings in Argentina, the current state of cultural institutions, and the global aspirations of new architectural projects in the capital city. One single thread on the redevelopment of the postal palace triggered over 2,400 replies (compiled in 123 pages) running between 2004 and 2011. While most of these blog narratives – the majority of which seem to have been produced by students of architecture – have welcomed enthusiastically[80] the B4FS winning proposal, disputes erupted over the glazing of the dome. On the one hand, some comments celebrated it as being a good imitation of the Reichstag's dome in Berlin; on the other, a large number of users believed the intervention in the dome was shameless, destructive, hypocrital and 'an appalling *crime'* in light of the officially claimed protection of the building's heritage. These comments were followed by the idea of organising a campaign, including a picket, against what was called 'the decapitation of

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80 As one user ('Paradise. City Lights') emphatically expressed it in relation to the new project for the building: 'Awesome!!! That's the best!!! Not even in the most critical state of drunkenness would I have imagined something like that!! That glass dome is so Foster's! I love it'. Original in Spanish, see SkyscraperCity (2000-2012).

the dome'. The debate became very heated when a user suggested recycling the postal building into a shopping mall so as to impede the future cultural centre from becoming a white elephant, abandoned by the National Culture Ministry. Concerns about the sustainability of the mega cultural centre also arose in reference to the problems that other cultural institutions currently face. Far from constituting a representative sample, these online public opinions nonetheless restate the contested character of the CCB initiative and the currency of debates about the modes in which culture and heritage intermingle in urban space and in relation to the planning field.

Conceiving the postal palace as a site of disputes allowed for the examination of the different senses that my interviewees attributed to culture, senses which then informed their imaginings of the future cultural centre. In short, these can be described as:

- culture expressing distinction and the fine arts: the building as a modern and spectacular 'Culture Palace', as illustrated by the Economy Ministry representatives
- culture encompassing both elite and popular culture: the building as an inclusive cultural centre, as exemplified in the view of the architects responsible for one of the CCB Third Prize winning proposals
- culture as social bonds, constitutive of the national identity: the building as embodiment of Argentineness, as represented in the central government's views
- culture as an abstract notion crucial for tourism promotion and economic and urban development: the building as a multi-purpose tool, as epitomised in the local authorities' view

- culture as heritage: the palace as a listed building and part of one's history, as voiced by the NGO *Basta de Demoler!* (Stop Demolishing) and the postal workers

- culture as remedy: the converted palace as a symbol of the failure and decadence of neoliberal privatisation and its recovery through culture, as implicitly indicated by the cultural redevelopment of the postal building

The ambiguity surrounding the term culture did not impede different social actors from appropriating it and considering it meaningful; on the contrary, it is the very ambiguity of the word, its malleable capacity to condense different meanings that encourages them to imagine what this term may mean. Culture mediates the redevelopment operations; these in turn enable social actors to imagine, produce or enact meanings of culture and heritage. Ideas of culture become productive in the discussions over the future of the iconic postal building. The various connotations of the concept of culture found in my analysis reassert the complexity and contestability of the term and certainly represent a very small proportion of the over a hundred definitions that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) have found in anthropological discourses. The struggle over the uses of the postal building was finally defined by the power of a bureaucrat who decided to turn it into a cultural centre. The disputes over the cultural content of the CCB are not yet resolved, as the cultural centre is only under construction and its actual cultural programme is still uncertain, despite the already formally assigned cultural use. This contested process of meaning making (Wright, 1998) – what meaning of culture underpins the cultural centre and how the cultural centre will be like – has characterised the conception phase of the CCB. Most likely it will equally shape the implementation and future development of this project in terms of its content and users.

Despite the variety of the senses of culture that emerged in relation to the recycling of the iconic postal palace, there was a shared understanding that cultural use would come to rescue a mistreated iconic building. What was at stake was the type of culture that the forthcoming cultural centre would contain and promote. Most importantly, the notion of culture as remedy seemed to shape most of the views on culture identified above; it is a response to the global model widely adopted by European and American cities to tackle post-industrial urban decay. Yet in the case examined in this thesis, culture acquired a peculiar form: it helped dissipate existing tensions and disputes about the building which put into question the claim that the building was abandoned or of no interest.

4.4. Too much contention for an 'abandoned' building

So far I have considered the series of decisions leading to the transformation of the Palacio de Correos for cultural use alongside the complicated situation of the building and the different conceptions of culture at stake in the redevelopment project. Now the analysis turns to the organisational aspects and the disputes, especially the political tensions, out of which the redevelopment plans emerged. Analysing these tensions will shed light on the complexity of cultural planning. More importantly it will reinforce one of the theses of this thesis: that the CCB project was underpinned by a political logic which sought to dissipate existing conflicts and make hegemonic claims over the value of the post office and the role of culture both within an urban regeneration context and also through the revival of patriotic nationalism (this is examined in Chapter 5). Moreover, this will make it possible to understand the changing configuration of the relationship between culture and politics in contemporary Argentina.

Far from being a clear-cut top-down cultural initiative, the process of agreeing redevelopment plans took over two years and involved three different organisational stages. This is indicative of the building's considerable importance to the stakeholders, but also of the dispute about its future. After the former Economy Ministry came up with the idea of developing a cultural centre in the postal palace, conversations started between him and the former Buenos Aires Vice Mayor in 2003[81] with the aim of approaching Chien Chung Pei (the son of the worldwide renowned Chinese-American architect, Ieoh Ming Pei),[82] to commission the works in the palace. The prestige associated with the name of this architect and the possibility of contacting him through an acquaintance[83] based in the US were the alleged reasons for the direct allocation of the refurbishment works.

After the Minister announced his idea for this megaproject in 2004 and showed the drawings prepared by Pei's son, several complaints arose from the architectural field over the lack of a public competition for the work allocation. A series of meetings followed between the national government and the Directors of the Architects' Central Society (SCA), the Urbanism and Architecture Professional Council (CPAU), and the Architecture and Urbanism Faculty (FADU). These organisations firmly demanded a public, open and transparent architectural competition to recycle the postal palace as this was 'a question of heritage, a question of a monument, an issue of public interest

81 Already in 2003, the recently elected President Nestor Kirchner encouraged Buenos Aires' Mayor Aníbal Ibarra to start working as soon as possible on the organisation of an international competition to recycle the Palacio de Correos into an advanced cultural centre (*Clarín*, 2003).
82 He is especially famous for his construction of the Pyramid of Louvre in Paris.
83 Apparently the Argentine painter Carmona.

and one in which the national authority was involved'.[84] This is explained by a well-known architect and advisor to the government:

> We went to see Mr Perez (the Economy Ministry Legal and Administrative Secretary) and told him: 'it was a fantastic idea to recycle the building, it's a wonderful building, but you are crazy if you think you could allocate the works directly. There are hundreds of worldwide first level architects here [in Argentina]. The Buenos Aires School of Architecture is one of the best architecture schools in the world, and you will commission the works to an architect because he is the son of a famous architect?' And Perez told us: 'look, if there is something we know about it is politics, we won't do an architecture project in order to be confronted by the architecture institutions you represent'; he was being featured in the newspapers with SCA, FADU, etc. everybody against him, so [he said] 'you tell me how to do it'. So I told him that it would be through the SCA, which has been organising competitions for over sixty years.

In view of this demand, the by then Economy Ministry and the Culture Minister organised a competition of 'popular ideas' on their own, challenging the SCA once again by ignoring its traditional role as the official organiser of architectural competitions[85] in Argentina. These competitions are, in the architects' view, the 'only way to guarantee transparency in the allocation of a project' (SCA, 2008). The SCA was finally offered an advisory role which the architects rejected following their exclusion from the organisation of the competition. The former Economy Minister explains that the offered role was advisory because:

> There were clearly economic interests there, such as the allocation of works which was inevitable. We have decided that they [the SCA] could participate of the selection committee too, but not have control of it, because we felt that it was going to be the classical argentineada,[86] the attempt to appropriate a project. This was the feeling we had in the two

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84 Interview with a SCA representative.

85 In Argentina the first public architectural competition of which there is documentation took place in 1825 for the building of two prisons and a port in Buenos Aires. For a detailed history of all public architectural competitions, see the thick compilation by Schere (2008).

86 *Argentineada* is a slang word which indicates the typical action of an Argentinian; in this context, it refers to the act of taking advantage of a situation for the sake of one's own personal interests. It has a negative connotation which denotes informality and disobedience to rules.

or three meetings held; as a result, we decided they could be represented but not control the project.

For him, these requests were indeed to allocate the works to an Argentine architect:[87]

> The SCA then questioned us saying that this was exclusively for Argentine architects. During my administration I said that this was totally unacceptable, that we should be open-minded and that worldwide examples show that high level architects are recruited; well, we also have them, or in Uruguay, etc, and they could also participate, but only Argentinians, no way.

On the other hand, the SCA stated that they would not support the competition, but in any case would 'stand up in the opposite front'[88] in view of its non-architectural nature, the lack of transparency with which it was organised, including the formation of the jury, and the fact that they were not commissioned to organise it. A representative of the SCA referred to the former Economy Minister as someone 'who was projecting himself politically for something else' and who wanted to show that he 'not only deals with economic matters but also with Argentina's culture'.[89]

Despite these tensions, the competition finally took place in 2005 and 150 proposals were submitted. The particularity of this competition was that, apart from sidelining the SCA, it was not an architectural competition but was open to any lay citizen. Five prizes and six honorary mentions were awarded; the first was conceded to architect Rosa Diego's proposal to create a 'cultural centre for scenic arts, dance, music, exhibitions and other activities', and the second, to painter Fernando Cánovas together with the by then Buenos Aires Vice Mayor (Jorge Telerman) whose proposal for a 'Buenos Aires'

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87 It is interesting to compare this situation with that of the end of the nineteenth century when European architects were commissioned directly to design public works in Buenos Aires. An exemplary case is the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones, designed by French architect Norbert Maillard, as we have seen in Chapter 3.
88 Interview with a SCA representative.
89 Interview with a SCA representative.

international cultural centre' was in fact that of the son of architect Pei! Unusually, and

not without triggering suspicions of corruption, the former Economy Minister had

announced that an association between the first two prizes would be established to

create the cultural centre in the postal palace (*La Nación*, 2005).

Suspicion of institutional corruption was not to be accepted so openly. The publication

of the competition results led the SCA and CPAU to write new letters of complaint.

According to the former Economy Minister, these complaints were merely due to a

power struggle and the SCA's ambitions to control the competition; for the SCA, the

competition was pointless and the result of the minister's political manipulation:

> Above all a demagogic manipulation of calling people in respect of
> something which is a state's policy: cultural affairs. If there is a Culture
> Minister and a number of directors and advisors, why do they have to
> call for a popular referendum to find out what to do with a building?
> And also it's a debate over whether it should all be concentrated in
> Buenos Aires. Isn't it better to democratise the territory and transfer
> cultural events to the rest of the country and not concentrate them in a
> hyper head that is Buenos Aires, hyper saturated with museums and
> more?

The SCA was actually questioning the competition of 'popular ideas', claiming that in

being a non-architecture competition it was worthless. The words of the SCA

representative are in fact illustrative of some of the key issues surrounding cultural

planning in cities, that is, tensions between advocates and opponents of the idea of

public consultation and its role in informing the making of policies. Indeed, this

expresses a question of legitimacy in democratic societies: Who holds the legitimate

authority to plan for culture in the city? To what extent does a public referendum

constitute a demagogic strategy to legitimate political power? The quote also shows that

the tensions between the capital city and the rest of the provinces are still of great

importance, especially when it comes to planning for culture and allocating public

funding. Contrary to the SCA's viewpoint, the first competition winning architect explained:

> When I talked to the SCA Director, he underestimated the competition as not being architectural. I think this entails underestimating people's brains, because writers and sociologists submitted proposals, each of whom used their own tools, knowledge and experience. Thank God everybody can participate and voice their opinion, because it is also important to hear what Doña Rosa[90] thinks. It was a competition of ideas, anonymous, and in the end was won by an architect. Evidently, a professional has a clearer idea of what to do with a building, which is logical, but this should not mean that anybody else could not submit a proposal.

Disputes between the Economy Minister and the local architectural world contributed to the weakening of the institutional apparatus of the competition by leading to the cancellation of the awards ceremony of what had been a public competition organised by the national government. The winner of the first prize, Rosa Diego, is an architect and university lecturer, married to an orchestra director and a lover of classical music. Her winning proposal divides the postal building into two sectors. The first includes an auditorium for symphonic music, a rehearsal room and parking areas. The second encompasses a post office museum and a history museum of the city, a bookshop, a radio station, exhibition halls and storage. In addition, it would comprise cafeterias, a nursery, an audio-visual department, halls for official events, conference rooms, a viewpoint, and offices for the cultural centre direction and heritage. In spite of the fact that she was awarded the first prize, the awarding ceremony was cancelled due to political tensions, hence she regrets that there has been no official public recognition of her work:

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90 *Doña Rosa* is a slang form that refers to 'the people'. As it is of female gender, it is usually represented in the figure of the housewife.

> When I began to notice that the competition had not ended as it should
> in terms of the prize awards ceremony, I realised there was a problem.
> The first thing that came up to my mind was that it was a political
> problem… of conflicting interests which I am not aware of.

At the same time, given the complicated economic situation of Argentina and a series of cabinet changes and political differences, President Kirchner asked for the resignation of the Economy Minister who almost immediately left his position. With this resignation, the building was then under the orbit of the National Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services Ministry. In 2005 it finally commissioned the organisation of 'an international architectural preliminary proposals competition for the Palacio de Correos to the SCA. The competition was binding for the building and non-binding for the urban surroundings, as the commissioner – the national government – has no authority over the area, for it is under the jurisdiction of the city government.

Far from being just another architecture competition, the CCB competition was in all senses highly 'political'. The SCA explained its crucial importance for the Presidency and the number of 'decisions of political nature' that had to be taken within the competition structure in view of the previous conflicts with the Economy Minister. An advisors' committee was set up[91] alongside an international jury.[92] The process of the creation of the programme was long and time-consuming and encompassed a large number of meetings, heated discussions of complex matters between advisors, technical assessments, and the preparation of over a thousand building plans in a few months.

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91 Competition advisors were: Enrique García Espil, Marcelo Grosman, José X. Martini, Jorge R Prieto, Juan Pablo Schiavi and Daniel Silberfaden.
92 The jury was led by Spanish architect Ramón Sanabria Boix and was comprised by architects: Carlos Berdichevsk (representing the participants); Mario Línder (representing the SCA); Mederico Faivre (representing the National Culture Ministry); José Ignacio Miguens (representing the Argentine Federation of Architecture and Urbanism, FADEA); Javier Fernández Castro (representing the Government of the City of Buenos Aires); María Teresa Egozcue and Edgardo Minond (representing the National Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services).

The SCA explained that the key issue was how to come up with a cultural programme for an immense listed building of over 80,000 sq metres of which only 14,000 could be used, the rest remaining 'empty'. In their view, this was 'a huge weakness, there was no programme, too much space and little programme'. They had to come up with rules, terms and regulations for an international competition to recycle an important building located in the most strategic area of the city centre, yet they were given no programme concerning what to put inside the postal palace. This reinforces the instrumental character and the political nature of the initiative: the aim was not to create a cultural centre for the sake of cultural planning but to invoke culture as a tool for political prestige, urban regeneration, the commemoration of the Argentine nation, and the dissolution of existing conflicts.

Finally, in 2006 the CCB competition had received over 600 registrations, 92 final submissions of national and international architecture practices and 40 shortlisted proposals (Silberfaden, 2006). Competition results[93] featured a first prize, a second prize (which was declared deserted), a third prize whose value was increased with the money of the second and which was divided between two architectural practices, and five honorary mentions (the winning proposal is analysed in detail in Chapter 6). The second prize was not awarded so as to symbolise the difference in the quality of the proposals:

> The comment that could synthesise what I'm telling you and could summarise in a sense all of the jury's internal discussions – and some were very tough – was something like 'thank God that this project

93 The first prize ($234,000 pesos) was awarded to B4FS Studio (Enrique Barés, Federico Barés, Nicolás Barés, Daniel Becker, Claudio Ferrari and Florencia Schnack). The third prize was divided into two ($60,000 pesos for each) and was awarded to: Juan José Vicario and Juan Ignacio Meoz, on the one hand, and Luis Ibarlucía, César Jaimes and Antonio Díaz del Bó, on the other. Three mentions (of $12,000 each) were awarded to: Tom Payne, Carlos Ventin, Chris Hall and Peter Berton; the second to Flora Manteola, Javier Sánchez Gómez, Josefa Santos, Justo Solsona, Carlos Sallaberry and Damián Vinson; and the third to Alberto Varas and Julián Varas. Another two honorary mentions were given to: Pablo Rozenwasser and Valeria Migueles; and Rolando Schere and Jorge Moscato.

existed'. Because there was such a pressure on the jury's shoulders that the [first] prize couldn't remain deserted. The prize had to be awarded to someone, although you didn't like it. It wasn't the case with this one, that is, it was clear this was the winning of the first prize (Competition advisor)

It's difficult for a jury to reach such a consensus over a first prize and in such a compelling manner; [this was] a clearly winning proposal, so clearly winning (Competition organiser)

Overall, it was perceived as the 'most important competition in Argentina of the last few decades'[94] in view of the culturally and historically meaningful object of redevelopment; its strategic urban location which would imply the regeneration of the city centre; the public, official nature of the competition involving both the national and the municipal governments, especially the Presidency; and the political context in which it took place – the commemoration of the national bicentenary anniversary (this is discussed in Chapter 5).

Whose building?

The Palacio de Correos represents a site of power, a place of prestige and dominance. While it was within the orbit of the Economy Minister Roberto Lavagna, he prided himself of having it under his administration and spoke about how the building was contested by other governmental offices who wanted to settle in the palace. When the redevelopment proposals were announced, the postal palace housed the Secretariat of Communications, the Under-Secretariat of Housing and Urban Development and a branch of SIDE, the national intelligence agency. In Lavagna's words:

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94 This was repeatedly stated by many interviewees. These words belong to an architect responsible for one of the third prize winning proposals.

It has its attraction so everybody wants to show off with it. It's a question of prestige, purely prestige, because there was no need for governmental offices to move to that building.

In his view, those who wanted to 'show off' were other government officials:

There was the area of the Planning Ministry together with the Culture Ministry which wanted to set up storage rooms. In the case of the Planning Ministry, with all its dependencies, they wanted to put their offices there. So I gave the instructions to the administrative and legal secretary of the Ministry [of Economy], Eduardo Perez. I told him "Eduardo, wall in that building if necessary", because the worst that can happen is that they all settle down with their countless offices, panels, cubicles, boxes everywhere, so I said no! Because now they are also settled elsewhere, so no way, I blocked the entry because once they are inside, it's difficult to evict them.

Similarly, his administrative and legal secretary added:

There was the Secretariat of Communications, which is part of the Ministry of Infrastructure, alongside a thousand of small offices which for a reason remained inside that beehive because it had parking lots. Appalling!

To speak of eviction in reference to fellow government officials sounds, if not criminalising, at least odd, especially if it comes from the National Economy Minister. The main struggle over the building was not then between displaced postal workers and the government or between the national and the municipal governments, although these tensions also existed. Particularly at stake was a power dispute within the national administration itself, a dispute which a current high-ranking official at the Planning Minister plays down:

There were some tensions in bureaucratic terms, that is, the administration [of the building] which is complicated, but there was no in-fighting.

However, a SCA representative reaffirms it:

> We didn't know that the building was like a symbol, not of culture or the post, but of the struggle that had unfolded between two powerful ministries, that is, the Economy Minister and the Planning Minister, De Vido. One occupied it and the other one managed it, so there was a whole very difficult story, politically difficult. Suddenly everything was mixed up, there were people from Economy, people from Planning, from the SIDE, from the Housing Institute, who all worked from there…. Well, in the end, we had put our finger on a place which proved to be another thing; it wasn't what we were seeing.

After the resignation of the Economy Minister and the arrival of a new official, tensions seemed to have eased:

> Today there is no dispute. Today it is clear that this [building] is managed by the Ministry of Planning. There is no doubt; both successes and failures are theirs. Everything is theirs, nobody interferes, nobody has the ability to interfere or finance, only they have the power. Whether it is good or bad, it is their merit (Economy Ministry, Legal and Administrative Secretary)

This quote highlights the competitive relationship and the power struggle that had been established between both ministries and the attenuation of conflicts with the removal of Roberto Lavagna from his post as Economy Minister. It also signals the twofold role of bureaucracy in shaping the CCB project. On the one hand, the cultural planning apparatus enabled the organisation of three competition, the constitution of juries, the participation of the SCA, that is, the design of a particular cultural policy. On the other, it contributed to the illness which the redevelopment was meant to cure through a cultural rhetoric. As Lavagna explained, converting the postal palace into a cultural centre would render the building public and would therefore displace the array of public offices, civil servants, files and stored paperwork, that is, the domination of Weber's iron cage of administrative and technical power and its occupation of the postal building.

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Contesting the competitions

Culture is a site of disputes. In the case that concerns us here, we have seen that the conflicting nature of the first competition to recycle the postal palace through cultural use resulted from the exclusion of SCA as the organiser, suspicions over the lack of transparency in the allocation of prizes, and finally the cancellation of the awards ceremony. Despite these issues, architect Rosa Diego believes she won the competition in good faith and deserves public recognition for her intellectual property. She claims that her proposal informed the organisation and terms and conditions of the second competition:

> They are saying that the competition is not binding, that they will do another one and that winning proposals will not be necessarily considered. Later, not only did they take everything one put forward, but also all precautions are taken so that one doesn't complain. It's incomprehensible.

> They are trying to make people see the second competition as if it came out of nothing. They say it was conceived from scratch but this isn't true, because if you compare my project with the one which is now under construction you will see the similarities. Not in the formal aspects, obviously they have given it a form, shape, materials, structure, calculations, like in any project, but the origin is this [my project].

Diego claims that the idea to create a cultural centre which would provide a venue for the Symphonic Orchestra was hers and that the winning project of the CCB competition is based upon her proposal, even the content and the spatial disposition. She also claims that her ideas[95] were used in the writing of the terms and conditions of that second competition with no public recognition of her intellectual work. This is something which the SCA – the official competition organiser – denies. On top of that,

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95 Her winning proposal for a performing arts cultural centre included, among others, the creation of a radio station in the building, a big auditorium in the industrial sector, exhibitions in the 'noble' area, a postal museum, and a symphonic music venue as the heart of the project. As she rightly points out, many of these elements, if not all, also appeared in the programme of the second competition.

she has doubts about the fact that a large number of architectural practices (508) dropped out of the competition at a later stage and wonders why this happened given the likely number of 'international practices capable of developing a decent project'. In her view, this might be due to the untidiness and other irregularities of the competition which participants may have noticed.

Being an architect, Diego resorted to the SCA for help and advice, following the cancellation of the official awards ceremony and what she felt was a lack of recognition of her winning proposal. Yet the SCA did not provide support apart from listening to her demands, since according to her they claimed they have not supported the competition and that she, an architect, was not affiliated to the organisation (SCA). Diego contests this, as she found out about the competition through the CPAU newsletter, one of the official associations of architects which together with SCA expressed public opposition against that very competition. While she celebrates the fact that postal employees congratulated her in their newsletter and were proud of having an Argentinian winning proposal to redevelop the building, she is very disappointed with SCA and CPAU, the architects' professional organisations which did not defend her and led her to rightly exclaim: 'then, who does represent me when the competition is organised by the Presidency of a country?!'[96]

The complex planning of the new cultural centre featured stories of corruption, disagreements between architects and government officials, and public complaints which unfolded in the name of prestige and transparency, alongside disputes over

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96 Interview with Rosa Diego. What she means here is who can one resort to for help when the very government who organised the competition is overlooking the competition results. She also explained that she tried to contact the Economy Minister, but he had resigned, and wrote letters to the National Culture Ministry with no response.

intellectual property based upon alleged plagiarism, and more recently, tensions between architects and policy makers over the control of the refurbishment works. Interestingly, the history of the construction of the Palacio de Correos was itself entangled with similar conflicts. For example, the competition envisioned in 1905 for the drawing of plans and preparation of budget for a post and telegraph headquarters was cancelled, and works were finally commissioned directly to French architect Norbert Maillart, who designed a building whose construction process proved to be among the longest in Argentina's history (Schere, 2008).

Away from the official cultural planning discourse, the CCB was questioned by different voices – journalists, architects, policy-makers, postal workers – on various grounds. These included the technical complexity of the architectural intervention, the considerably high cost of the project, the erasure of postal traces, the making of an elite culture, substantial delays in the redevelopment process, concentration of cultural activities in the capital city, disrespect for heritage, the absence of a planned cultural programme; uncertain management, and doubtful sustainability. The postal palace was at the centre of power disputes and vested interests which in fact rendered it too important an issue for a simple 'abandoned' building.

Culture and politics: divorce and reunion

The analysis of the cultural regeneration operation suggests an underlying political rationale. If creating a commemorative monument for the bicentenary did not trigger the redevelopment plans for the Palacio de Correos, what did? We have seen that the devaluation of the postal services and the abandonment of the building was more the result of to a political decision than an inevitable fact. We have also seen that a classical

music venue was needed in Argentina, but at the same time creating it in the Palacio de Correos was not inevitable, and other artistic venues and museums had been suffering from abandonment and lack of public funding. This would put in question the need to assign such a large budget to the recycling of an immense postal building. In light of these reasons, I argue that the redevelopment of the postal building was triggered by political reasons, that is, disputes over power and prestige crystallised in the management and redevelopment of the postal building. Culture was then invoked as an *impartial* strategy aimed at defusing existing tensions. This way,

> Projects with a cultural aura have a good press, they are politically correct, I think that for any functionary or politician it is good to put them forward. On the other hand, when residents want to do something somewhere, they ask for a cultural centre, like this, a generic one. They don't even know what it may have inside, but they think it is prestigious for their neighbourhood to have a cultural centre (Architect and CCB Competition Advisor)

The supposed political correctness and convenience of cultural projects are located in a context in which politics had come to be seen as a synonym of corruption, mismanagement and distrust. The contestation of the whole government on these grounds and its subsequent rejection has characterised the general feeling towards politics of vast sectors of the Argentine population during the last few decades, especially in the aftermath of former President Carlos Menem's mediatisation, spectacularisation and denigration of politics, as we have already seen. This feeling of discontent reached its peak in 2001 and exploded with the institutional, social, economic and political crises of Argentina when the collective slogan *'Que se vayan todos'* (Out with them all) called out for bringing down all politicians. In the wake of this distrust of politicians, *official culture was presented in the aftermath of the crisis as de-politicised, as ideology-free, and therefore not stained with the dirty image that politics had.* In this logic, an idea of culture which is apolitical acquires prestige and mobilises the support of those who reject

traditional politics and politicians. The role of culture as an hegemony tool, convenient for those in positions of power, has been already discussed. The political rationale of the CCB is clear in the following quotations that responded to why a cultural centre was to be built in the postal building:

> Good question. Because I think it was the neutral terrain. On the one hand, because *it was a neutral issue*, on the other hand, because it is an issue that is *always well received,* is always appreciated. Because I think there is a huge orphanhood with regards to what to do with the city or what to do in the city… by then there was a huge tension between the former Ibarra's city and the Nestor Kirchner's city... (SCA Architect)

In this quotation culture is given two main connotations – it is convenient for politicians for it has 'good press' and it is 'neutral', that is, apolitical. They make possible the operation I was describing earlier: the invocation of culture by politicians on the grounds of its assumed apolitical character. This way of conceiving culture as distanced from politics and values represents a dissociation from the political in relation to its emancipatory discourse, the construction of citizenship and the possibility to tackle cultural inequalities (Wortman, 1997:80-81). Of course this bestows a *mythical[97] character* on culture as there can be no cultural planning outside politics, since all cultural practices are political in their ability to encapsulate different meanings, make hegemonic representations of the world, and condense power relations and unequal distribution of resources. If we understand culture as the multiple ways in which systems of meaning, structures of power and institutions intermingle to produce traditions, beliefs and rituals (Donald and Rattansi, 1992), these symbolic forms are in constant transformation and are not exempt from ideology or power relations. They are, in fact, constituent part of processes of domination (Ortner, 2005). Alluding to the confrontation, alliances and

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97 The idea of culture as myth is not new. Roland Barthes (1993), amongst others, has shown through his semiological analysis how culture can appear as depoliticised discourse, yet as a myth it masks bourgeois ideology and contributes to reproducing structures of power and domination.

negotiation between social actors, culture is inescapably constituted by disputes, agency and power, history and change (Grimson and Seman, 2005:20).

Similarly, the following quotation reinforces the idea of culture as a convenient resource:

> In general these projects are done by people who are not from the cultural field. Similar projects come to my mind (…) You go there and there only exists a great hall which only fits a visual material exhibition, but you can't have a concert, there is no adequate lighting, no budget to undertake a good adaptation, so it's a cultural centre which is only an exhibition room. *In general when nobody knows what to do with a building, well, let's make it a cultural centre.* And…evidently for some political reason where there is a project and the destiny of the original building is a secondary matter (B!D Heritage NGO Director)

Here culture becomes a means rather than an end. Culture as remedy, as a shell, comes to erase the past, no matter what the content of the cultural centre would be. Implicit in the words of the NGO Director is a sense of reprobation of the instrumental character of the government's institutional practices. Uncertainty and lack of commitment were other characteristics associated with official politics, generally speaking, and were present in the narratives of my interviewees. As a staff member of the Postal Museum expressed it:

> Given the current circumstances, it is above all a political centre…. Political in the sense that one never knows what could come out of it (…) I hope it is not political, as I said, but so far, this building is very political, each administration, each new government is a whole new way of administering it.

However, this uncertainty over the future of the *political* cultural centre was not seen as detrimental to the representation of the CCB as a *governmental* project, on the contrary, it was perceived as a tool to acquire prestige:

> My opinion is that it was an absolutely important building at its time. It was closed, without use, it was necessary to give it a re-use, and a good

re-use was that it would be *a symbol of the government's intervention in culture.*
I mean, something was needed; probably the building was abandoned,
well, not abandoned but closed to the public, a wonderful building…
(CNMMyLH, Director)

So culture, emptied of its ideological content, is rendered politics-free and by being politics-free, it can be 'safely' invoked by policy-makers as a 'blessing' (Clifford, 1997). Yet culture can never be neutral, as I have already stated. It enables a range of different interpretations and opposing interests to intersect. Its function is twofold: on the one hand, it offers social actors the possibility of filling in the category with a convenient content; on the other, it has the power to mobilise consent and achieve legitimacy. The invocation of culture in the context of our case study, then, turns out to be an invocation of legitimacy; this, however, has been contested by some social actors and celebrated by others.

This way culture becomes the path to the recovery of a denigrated political class which in the last few years, especially with Nestor Kirchner's administration and the massive participation in the bicentenary events, managed to gain some credibility, in particular amongst the youngest sectors of society. Svampa (2006) argues that a new political paradigm has emerged in Argentina during the last decade, giving rise to collective forms of political participation based on direct action and social solidarities which challenge the traditional model of representative democracy sustained and promoted by the old political parties. At the time of writing, this credibility seems to have risen at a fast speed, with growing political participation from the youngest sectors of society and a bill being currently discussed in Parliament to lower the mandatory voting age to 16 years old.

Hence the cultural meaning of the CCB project today seems to have distanced itself from that which gave it birth in 2004. In other words, culture which was conceived of as apolitical is now re-politicised in the context of a national-popular project assembled by *kirchnerism*. Culture becomes instrumental in recomposing the legitimacy of politics and proves fundamental for the emergence of a 'national, popular culture', as we will see in the context of the bicentenary commemorations examined in the next chapter. This, however, is not a novel process: the very emergence of the field of cultural policies in the second half of the twentieth century was aimed at consolidating and legitimating the power of the nation-states within national territories (Bayardo, 2008).

In particular, this is apparent in the mobilisation of discourses of the existence of a 'national culture' and the relating categorisation of elements, subjects, histories and practices on the ground of their (in) eligibility to be constituent part of 'culture' or 'the national', giving way to 'the fatal junction of the concept of nationality with the concept of culture' (Gilroy, 1993:2) (Chapter 5 explores this further). In a sense, culture shares with nationalism the capability to be 'inflected to very different political positions' (Hall, 1993:355) and to be rendered productive in serving even the most contrasting purposes. Stuart Hall (1993) argues that nationalism is locked in a double helix which makes the concept not necessarily reactionary or progressive in political terms, but rather, its character is defined by the practices and the context in which it is mobilised. Laclau (2005) speaks of populism in a similar way: the apparent vagueness of the concept, the difficulties of defining it, the multiplicity of elements that fall under the label, and its ideological emptiness, all allude to the existence of performative acts which give meaning to the concept. That is, the *role* that the concept plays in a particular social and ideological context rather than the meaning inherent in it. For the meaning of the object

in itself is of less interest than understanding the frames in which it operates (Grimson and Seman, 2005:16). Similarly, culture becomes the product of the disputes unleashed over its meaning and function. The making of culture involves a dialogue between the living elements of the past and the newness of the present (Swingewood, 1998:179), one which implies constant change, uncertainty, multiple social actors, political convenience, economic speculation and shortermism, all of which inform cultural planning in Argentina.

Conclusion

This chapter has sought to examine the reasons why a cultural rhetoric was used to justify the redevelopment of the Palacio de Correos and its surroundings. The culture panacea was invoked as the *inevitable* solution to the various problems underlying the redevelopment of the emblematic postal building. Before the remedy could be found, we have seen that it was necessary for public authorities and other stakeholders to establish the ill: the building was abandoned and in a state of deterioration. This logic of abandonment and deterioration became naturalised as if it were that nobody held responsibility over that abandonment or deterioration. It was settled publicly through policy and experts' discourses which paved the way for the emergence of culture as the solution to a range of problems which my interviewees persistently claimed: the underuse of a national historical monument; the urban deterioration of the city's centre; the lack of a symphonic music venue in the capital city; the absence of great architectural projects to honour the national bicentenary; and the lack of an international high-quality cultural institution that could position the city in the global cultural map. The idea that 'culture' was of higher value than the post office became hegemonic and served to legitimise the continued dismantling of the postal institution

through the displacement of the postal employees and the conversion of the postal palace into a cultural centre.

Through this operation, the social life of the postal building entered a new phase in its incessant metamorphosis. What had once been perceived as the proud embodiment of Argentina's 'golden age' (as discussed in Chapter 3), later came to be seen as the dramatic symbol of neoliberal privatisation. Later on the building was neglected as a site of state bureaucracy, and more recently, it has been projected as the desired emblem of spectacular modern culture (as we will see in Chapter 6), only to be lately re-appropriated as a symbol of the national-popular in the context of the national bicentenary celebrations (as the next chapter will show).

We have seen that the CCB project was primarily underpinned by a political rationale, one which expressed no interest in debating the cultural content of the project, in engaging with potential users of the cultural centre, or in consulting current stakeholders. The invocation of culture as a tool, I have argued, was aimed at emptying its ideological content and rendering it an apolitical instrument to obtain legitimacy over a government's project. It presented itself as a practical solution to the existing tensions over the uses of heritage and the management of an emblematic listed building. In the process, power struggles have taken place between different governmental offices, between experts and bureaucrats, between workers and policy-makers, between different postal union federations, and between heritage protectors and architects. Needless to say, the existing power struggles have informed the making and contestation of this cultural/political project. Most likely, they will also inform its future development and sustainability.

In exploring the intricate relation between culture and politics, the analysis has shown that the former can never exist outside the later. However, policy invocations of culture in the context of our case study were aimed at de-politicising cultural activities. This occurred in a particular historical moment in Argentina when politics had become a synonym of corruption and mismanagement. It was expected that the cultural initiatives implemented would come to legitimise the political projects, otherwise of a suspicious or reprehensible nature. In doing so, its link with politics, its political nature, became unquestionable. Under the *kirchnerista* administrations the re-politicisation of culture became apparent with its invocation of the national-popular, which enacted understandings of culture linked to ideas of national identity, embedded in the national political history.

Culture mediated the redevelopment operations and brought the postal palace back to life. Discussions over the refurbishment plans allowed social actors to imagine senses of culture and to represent them through their desired redevelopment ideas for the building. Talking about 'culture' encoded meanings relating to the value of the post office, the image of the city, the modernity of the nation, the national identity and the political autonomy. Similarly, speaking of the 'post office' condensed a certain image of the state based on the quality of its provision of public services. Through these imaginaries, different understandings of culture, ways of defining the word, were produced. Here two specific meanings of culture were found to be at play. The first meaning sees culture as something which is struggled over (through the various senses displayed by the different social actors). The second sees it as something which takes a peculiar form under the specific historical, social and political local circumstances of

contemporary Argentina (its authoritarian past, its changing relationship with politics, its economic and social crises, its social inequality, its struggles for democracy).

Through its perplexing ambiguity and abstraction, the concept of culture offered social actors the possibility to appropriate the term and fill it in according to their own interests. The attraction exerted by the term lies in the ease with which the word seems to lend itself to encapsulate complex views and to confer legitimacy to a wide range of practices, as we have seen in this chapter. Williams (1976) explained that this characteristic was not particular to the nature of the word itself; rather, it was a result of the different trajectories the word had undertaken in political, intellectual and social terms as well as in diverse geographical contexts. The problems originated by the variety of uses of the term, then, signal 'alternative views of the activities, relationships and processes' indicated by the term (Williams, 1976:92). The traces left by the different routes travelled by the concept of culture in Argentina have resonated with current uses of the term and shaped the struggles which the word, with its deceptive innocence, condenses.

Overall, the chapter has shown how culture became an arena of struggle, a site of contending forces. Neoliberal forms of governance, both during the dictatorship years and the Menem's era, were seen as shameful events that needed to be eroded from the national memory. Culture then proved to be instrumental as a remedy, as an antidote to the ills caused by the neoliberal past of Argentina, which destroyed heritage, the faith in transparent politics, and the public services provided by the state. We will see in the next chapters though, that the destruction of heritage continues to be present under the progressive *kirchnerista* government. Yet we will also discuss how heritage comes alive

through the redevelopment operations, in particular, the remembering of *peronismo* contained in the materiality of the building. The analysis now turns to the disputes surrounding the commemorative functions of the CCB and the management of heritage in the context of the bicentenary commemorations in Argentina.

CHAPTER 5

Commemorations

Assembling the past, monumentalising the present

In *The past is a foreign country* David Lowenthal (1985) suggests that nostalgia has become a modern malaise in times when the past is ever-present. Despite its omnipresence, the past is a foreign country, he argues, an unknown territory, an artefact which the present needs to produce in order to render it meaningful. If 'nostalgia is memory with the pain removed' and 'the pain is today' (Lowenthal, 1985:8), the use of the past to suit the needs of the present then proves alluring, as we will see in this chapter, not only in light of the likely pains of the present but in relation to the uncertainties of the future. So far this thesis has discussed aspects of Argentina's past through research into the history of the case study. Chapter 3 has demonstrated that there was an underlying preoccupation with the growth and development of the nation towards an idea of progress, civilisation and modernity. Chapter 4 discussed how an invocation of culture came to erase the tragic neoliberal past of the postal services and the postal building, and in so doing, suggested a reconfiguration of the intricate relation between culture and politics. This chapter approaches the past too, but in this case from a contemporary perspective: it explores the politics of memory underpinning the creation of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB) in the former postal palace. The aim is to examine how the past, present and future of the building are negotiated in the context of the national commemorative activities organised by both the federal and the municipal governments during 2010.

In May 2010 more than two million people took to the streets of Buenos Aires during five rainy days. The rain provided the perfect setting for the remembering of the 1810 May Revolution in which people, arguably with their umbrellas, gathered in the city's main square to call for the resignation of the Spanish Viceroy and the urgent establishment of a national government. That was the beginning of a series of events leading to Argentina's formal declaration of independence from Spain in 1816. In 2010, the commemorations of the two hundredth anniversary of the first national government included a spectacular parade of performances, open fairs with regional food and displays, the opening of a Bicentenary House, music shows and an official dinner with the Latin American Presidents, part of which was broadcast live. Prior to 2010, the creation of the CCB in the Palacio de Correos was one of the flagship public initiatives of the commemoration. However, the building was only partially opened in May 2010 as it had not yet been completed. The events were a success in terms of public participation, and the media did not hesitate to describe them as a true people's celebration. The massive attendance produced intense euphoria among the organisers – the national government – and certainly came as a surprise for the opposition parties and anti-government media due to the negative image of the President and her husband[98] at the time.

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98 Néstor Kirchner was the husband of the current Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner and the first Secretary General of the Union of South American Nations (UNASUR). He was the President of Argentina between 2003 and 2007 and a likely candidate for the upcoming 2011 national elections. He suddenly died in October 2010 after suffering a heart attack, causing a dreadful shock to society and much uncertainty in the political arena.

The national bicentenary commemorations unfolded as a spectacular celebration of popular participation. Alternative counter-celebration [99] also arose as a way of commemorating the patriotic date but in clear contestation to the official events. All in all, the bicentenary celebrations, both official and non-official, were welcomed by a wide range of individuals and groups who participated in the various events in different ways, times and locations, highlighting the prospects of this kind of celebration for the expression of a democratic public culture, one which allows both for consensus and social conflicts.

Particularly relevant for this chapter is the significant role that heritage plays in constructing the narrative of the nation; that is, how a piece of architecture becomes meaningful by representing ideas of nationhood, and the ways in which heritage is constructed as such by resorting to historical grounds. The bicentenary commemoration is worth analysing also because it defines the political and historical context of our case study. In addition, the arrival of the bicentenary date provided some of the alleged justifications of the redevelopment of the postal palace. Understanding the workings of the bicentenary, therefore, is crucial to deconstructing and underscoring the political rationale behind the CCB project.

The analysis is divided into three sections. The first part focuses on the construction of public meaning in the bicentenary commemorations by looking at the narratives of

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99 'El Otro Bicentenario' (The Other Bicentenary) was meant to be the 'people's bicentenary' and involved a series of debates, artistic activities and a protest camp against 'wild capitalism', the 'genocide of the nation-state' and the 'official festivities and manipulations', while promoting the rights of marginalised social groups and a call not to celebrate but rather 'reflect about the colonial policies of the past and the present'. This event was supported by a number of social, cultural, student-led, academic, and environmental organisations and movements.

those in charge of the preparation of the official celebrations prior to the arrival of 2010. I examine how the nation and the city are imagined by concrete social actors. The second section provides a discourse and media analysis of the inauguration ceremony of the CCB in the former postal building with the aim of understanding how the building was officially integrated into the broader politics of national memory. In the third section, the Palacio de Correos is brought centre-stage in order to examine how social actors make sense of its role in commemorating the birth of the Argentine nation.

In short, the chapter shows that the creation of the CCB as a commemorative object in the postal building was the result of a modern need to honour what I call the 'power of the calendar' – which imposes the veneration of historical milestones – and to attain the national government's goal of reinvigorating democracy and widening its popular support by resorting to patriotic nationalism. Yet far from representing a mnemonic device through which national memories can be revived, the CCB project is indicative of an instrumental use of the past and the oblivion of history. The analysis demonstrates how a nostalgic imagination – at times melancholic in certain postcolonial national claims – shaped the need to exalt the value of the Palacio de Correos under the sign of heritage. It did so through a complicated threefold operation, namely, the preservation of the building on the grounds of: a) its symbolising of *peronista* heritage, b) its embodiment of Argentina's golden age, when the country managed to become a world power (before being corroded by financial, political, social and institutional crises), and c) its economic potential through city branding and tourism promotion (the building converted into an architectural icon and a cultural quarter).

5.1. The official management of memory

National commemorations have been studied within the vast literature on nationalism, national identity and nostalgia, collective memory and storytelling, the holocaust and other traumatic memories, and the construction of public memorials. While a detailed review of these studies is not provided as this would go beyond the aim of the chapter, the profound interconnection between historical commemorations and the question of national identity, nation-building and heritage is clear from the literature. Paul Connerton (1989) has shown us how commemorative ceremonies, being performative rites of repetition, play a crucial role in re-enacting the past, representing a master narrative of the nation, conveying social memory and reminding citizens of their membership of the 'imagined community' (Anderson, [1983] 2006). As social products, commemorations are inscribed with meaning and plurality of opinions: they deal with issues such as memory and identity which 'are not fixed things, but representations or constructions of reality, subjective rather than objective phenomena' (Gillis, 1994:3). Complex questions such as when the foundational moment of the Argentine nation took place or how 'Argentineness' is defined bear testimony to that subjectivity. Official commemorative work is therefore contested and political by definition, for it offers one particular stance in the interpretation of history, the recollection of memories, and the nature of the celebrations. Most importantly, it is a repository of power – the power to make official interpretations and represent 'us', 'the nation', 'the past', while disguising its *constructed* nature. Understanding the bicentenary commemoration as a 'construction' (Gutman, 2005) then enables us to reflect critically about the elements it highlights and silences and the interests it serves.

Discussions of memory in Argentina are deep-rooted in the long-standing struggle over the recent traumatic past of political violence, state terrorism and authoritarianism. Whether to do justice by opening abandoned judicial cases and criminal archives to judge perpetrators, or to simply forget the past and look forward constitutes one of the main dividing lines that fragment Argentine society, one which does not permit border-crossing. This is not only a question of legal justice but also a struggle over the future of democracy: Can Argentina honour democratic values when past injustices have not yet been healed? Should national reconciliation and forgetfulness ever be a solution to come to terms with traumatic pasts? How to unify a society when sectors such as the church and civil society were accomplices, through both their silence and backing, to the violation of human rights by the institution which was meant to protect them? Does the building of memorials (i.e. the ESMA museum, Memory Park, Memory Day) contribute to active reflection and action in the present, or rather, to bury traumatic events in history by rendering them monuments of the past? In light of these pressing issues, memory studies in Argentina constitutes a growing field which has predominantly focused on the analysis of the military dictatorship, its impact on the present, human rights violation, social memory, the management of traumatic memories, state repression, the work of Madres de Plaza de Mayo and the institutional memory of the armed forces, among others (i.e. Schmucler 1999, 2000; Jelin, 2002b, 2003; Carnovale, Lorenz and Pittaluga, 2006; Jelin and Kaufman, 2006; Salvi, 2009; Crenzel, 2010; Lessa and Druliolle, 2011). While this thesis will not focus on these terrible traumatic events in the life of the nation,[100] undoubtedly they are active memories, present pasts (Huyssen,

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100 The focus is not on the memory of the 1970s dictatorship but rather, the issue of memory in the context of the national bicentenary commemorations and the enactment of heritage through the preservation and destruction of the materiality of the emblematic Palacio de Correos. Instead of representing a disadvantage for this thesis, this is one of its key contributions, I believe, in view of the absence of this type of research.

2003; Crenzel, 2011), like nightmares, ghosts or specters of the past which are impossible to control or predict (Bell and Di Paolantonio, 2009:151). They have left open wounds that continue to shape Argentina's difficult transition to democracy,[101]not without controversies and conflicts of interest.

During the build-up to the 2010 bicentenary commemorations, however, these traumatic memories were put temporarily aside with the organisation of a large number of public debates, publications and activities[102] to honour the anniversary of the first national government. The months preceding the bicentenary commemorations were frantic for those in positions of power. There were too many expectations on the part of society as to how the big day would be celebrated, too little time to develop large-scale projects, and too much pressure to do 'something' on time that could have a profound impact in light of the upcoming 2011 presidential elections. Clearly, long-term planning in Argentina is one of those utopian dreams which dissolve with the advent of the new political, economic or social conflict of the day. The particular political context in which Argentina was immersed in 2008-2009 featured a federal government in deep confrontation with the municipal authorities due to ideological differences and a lack of dialogue between both parties which could have resolved conflicts of inter-jurisdictional nature. To add complexity to the matter, the so-called *'conflicto del campo'* (agricultural conflict) emerged in 2008 when the federal government's bill to increase tax deductions on agricultural exports, allegedly designed for wealth distribution purposes, encountered

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101 This is apparent in the ensuing central place that the three *kirchnerista* administrations have given, both in terms of discourses and practices, to the defence of human rights, identity struggles and the prosecution of military officers.
102 For instance, Debates de Mayo, Foros del Bicentenario, Congreso Revolución, Emancipación, Democracia e Igualdad, Café Cultura, Proyecto Umbral, among many others. Despite the large number of forums for discussion and publications to honour the bicentenary, investigations based on empirical research were much scarcer.

fierce opposition from the affected sectors (farming groups), an opposition which was then extended to other areas of society. The conflict seemed to have produced an irreconcilable crack in Argentina: those supporting the government and those aligned with *'el campo'*. The latter is a collective sector of heterogeneous social composition which brought together different agricultural groups, ranging from small producers and livestock farmers to big businessmen, anti-government media and upper and middle classes. After several months of heated media confrontations, *cacerolazos* (pot-banging demonstrations), *piquetes* (roadblocks), and strikes provoking food shortages in the local markets, the conflict formally ended when the Vice-President (Julio Cobos) voted against the bill. This in turn generated a new fissure, but now within the national government itself. Alongside this conflict, the passing of a new media law[103] (26.522) in 2009 to regulate the audio-visual communication services in the national territory brought about a storm of heated public discussions between opponents and supporters. *Grupo Clarín* (the biggest and most powerful media corporation in Argentina) was the main media group affected by the new regulations and therefore, its main adversary.

That was the unwelcoming context in which the bicentenary anniversary of the first national government was approaching. Nevertheless, nobody doubted its great potential, which was something not to be missed by local and national authorities. The notion of 'opportunity' emerged, in my analysis of various interview transcripts, in newspaper articles and institutional materials, as the crucial concept whereby to understand the unfolding of the bicentenary events. This is not surprising if one considers that the Argentine society is always embedded in the temporal framework of

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103 According to the text of the law, it is aimed at the 'promotion, decentralisation and fostering of competition with the purposes of price reduction, democratisation and universal use of new information and communication technologies'. The full text is available at InfoLEG (the Legislative Information website) (2005).

the 'short term' (Jelin, 2002) and it is in this kind of framework that opportunities often arise. The notion of the bicentenary as 'unique opportunity' circulated continually to legitimise the development of a whole series of activities and events during 2010. We can take the idea of opportunity as a combination of favourable circumstances which facilitate the chances to perform certain action. If the bicentenary was a 'window of opportunity', then the circumstances that enabled its existence as such included: the need to revive public and political participation after the 2001 crises; the government's need to recover from recent political disputes (i.e. conflict with *el campo*, the new media law); the upcoming 2011 presidential elections; the economic potential of the commemorative events (i.e. through tourism, sponsorship, broadcasting, corporate social responsibility); the increasing rivalry between the governments of the city and of the nation; and the pressing need to 'repair' past injustices, if these can be *at all* repaired. (These injustices include: the violations of human rights by the dictatorship; the impunity that allowed the perpetrators of terror to be let out of prison; the exclusion of vast sectors of society from employment; gender, class and racial discrimination; the marginalisation of indigenous peoples and non-compliance with their ancestral rights to lands; the lack of social housing and benefits; the underfunding of public hospitals and educational institutions; and the list could go on).

In what follows I analyse the construction of public meanings about the bicentenary commemoration by examining the narratives of those in charge of the official bicentenary festivities at both the national and municipal governments: the *Unidad de Proyectos Especiales Puertas del Bicentenario* (dependent on the Vice-Mayor's Office of the Government of the City of Buenos Aires) and the *Comisión Ejecutiva del Bicentenario* (dependent on the General Under-Secretary of the National Presidency). The key

themes out of which these meanings were constructed include: the aforementioned notion of 'opportunity'; the role played by other milestones, i.e. the 1910 Centenary; the need to honour the motherland; the desire to plan the national project towards the future; the political and cultural identity of Argentinians; and the need for national integration.

De-constructing the meaning of the bicentenary

The bicentenary commemoration provided a space in which old political rivalries were revived, as well as a site through which to examine the ways local and national memories relate to each other. Even though the current opposition between the municipal and the national government deepened due to the particular ideological affiliation of *Kirchnerismo* (at the national level since 2003) and *Macrismo* (in the Government of the City of Buenos Aires since 2007), the socio-economic inequalities between the capital city and the other provinces have a history that precedes the recent decades. As Chapter 3 explained, this long-standing rivalry began early in the nineteenth century when Buenos Aires became the richest province thanks to its economic gains from the port revenues and the concentration of services, population, investment, infrastructure and businesses. This position was then consolidated especially after 1880 when it was designated the capital of Argentina although this designation was meant to put an end to the political confrontations and make Argentina a federal republic. With this in mind, it will be interesting to compare the ways in which the municipal and the national governments have constructed the meaning of the bicentenary commemorations so as to understand the different projects imagined for the city and the nation, respectively.

Carlos Ares is a journalist who describes himself as having nothing to do with politics. Yet his friendship with the Vice-Mayor led him to be given charge of the official municipal commemoration, coordinating all of the various ministries' activities taking place in Buenos Aires. As the Director of the Bicentenary Project Unit, he envisioned the way the bicentenary would be commemorated in the city:

> The slogan I established is 'Meeting Point Buenos Aires Bicentenary'. A meeting point that has to do with the past and the future, that is a present's meeting point, in which we won't do a revision of the past, we will only do a reading of the past and in relation to the future, to see if during the time of the bicentenary we could make what I call 'a jump towards modernity', at least making things happen during that year that could allow people to get in contact with the new ideas, with what's going on in the big cities of the world. And to get in contact with Buenos Aires' own development problems.

'Reading' the past is certainly a pragmatic strategy to adopt in bicentenary times. Yet this epistemological operation carries an apparent naivety which is underpinned by an awareness of the uncritical approach taken and a lack of reference to whose versions of the past are to inform the city's politics of 'history reading'. He also explains later in our interview that the way to approach historical facts is by reading them to see which useful elements can be taken from history 'but not as a revision, not to suddenly say that Moreno [national hero] hasn't been actually killed'. This suggested reading of history sits comfortably only in the seat of the taken-for-granted, leaving no room for contestation, a plurality of voices, or attention to past injustices.

On the other hand, it is clear in Ares' account that Buenos Aires is not considered a modern city and that modernity is something which comes from abroad. In his view, the city and its citizens could move closer to modernity through contact with 'cooks, designers, characters who are interesting' whom the government was trying to invite to Buenos Aires through negotiations with the different embassies. This yearned-for

'transmission' of modernity, in Ares' words, would take place through 'the value added of emotion, knowledge, or the contact with the new' that would 'give opportunities also to those who never travel' and enable people to 'improve in some way their ability to understand, their intellect, their emotion'. Central here seem to be people's emotions and feelings, which appeared sustained by a paternalistic logic that positions them in a place of ignorance and snobbism, eager to absorb 'the new' that comes from abroad. This is a very common understanding of modernity, rooted in Argentina's cultural and political history, which sees Europe and the United States as the loci of the modern being. As Chapter 3 showed, this vision was embedded in the narratives of progress and civilisation championed by the so-called 1880's Generation, whose dreadful legacies strongly resist the passage of time and can still be found in the present.

Gustavo Lopez is another journalist. His role as the Under Secretary of the National Presidency led him to be in charge of the Bicentenary Executive Commission, aimed at implementing the ideas and projects delineated by the Bicentenary Planning Commission.[104] With a highly articulated discourse that speaks on behalf of the federal government, he explained that:

> The idea behind the bicentenary is initially that it is a moment for reflection, for introspection, to think about long-term policies; it is an ideal moment not only to review the history of a very young country, but also to think about the future: how we will think about the next fifty years of our country; what international integration, economic development, and integral development there will be in all areas. So the bicentenary is an opportunity the government does not want to miss to have a dialogue with all sectors of society, with all the political actors of this society, to imagine a country's future together, taking into account what we have done in these 200 years. And it is also a celebration, a commemoration and a celebration, and in terms of the celebration, it is

104 Created in 2005, the Bicentenary Planning Commission was integrated by the Cabinet Chief (Alberto Fernandez), the Interior Minister (Anibal Fernandez) and the National Culture Minister (Jose Nun).

also an opportunity to do things with a federal sense of integration, of inclusion.

The bicentenary is understood here as having a great potential for reflection and introspection (the next section discusses this in detail). Lopez distinguishes between 'celebration' and 'commemoration' and, in contrast with Ares, believes that the bicentenary could be used to revise the ways history has been written. But this look towards the past is related to planning in the present and the future. In this sense, 'bicentenary' is equated with 'national project'; it *becomes* the national project by including elements, such as long-term planning, a review of history, an analysis of national identity, consensus-building, social inclusion, and a discussion about economic development, regional and national integration. What are the implications, then, for commemorating a national historical milestone as if it were the national project? Would this reduce the latter to a form of event; or would it simply highlight the self-congratulatory nature of the national government's bicentenary commemorations? No doubt there was a particular interest in obtaining symbolic capital following the events that could be capitalised politically; indeed, most political analysts agreed that the massive participation in the bicentenary events dramatically changed Cristina Kirchner's reputation and that this could enable her to be re-elected as President in 2011.[105] The idea of the bicentenary as consensus in which 'all the political actors' can dialogue with

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105 Indeed, she was re-elected in 2011. At the time of writing, rumours of a possible re-re-election in 2015, for which a change in the constitution would be needed, have triggered public complaints by the anti-government media (i.e. Clarín, La Nación) and nurtured the massive social protests by the middle and upper sectors which took to the streets on 13th September 2012. These cacerolazos (pot-banging protests) were attended by hundreds of people across the country, calling for bringing down the government – what they called a '*kirchnerista* dictatorship', which was equated with 'that of Cuba or Venezuela' – in the name of: individual freedom to buy dollars in order to travel and keep personal savings in the foreign currency (which is currently restricted), security, transparency (and not corruption), and criticisms of the assignation of social benefits to the poor – who were referred to as lazy and only interested in procreating in order to receive further benefits. However, it would be inaccurate to depict all of those who attended the demonstrations as falling under this description, for categories such as 'middle classes' or 'upper classes' condense evident heterogeneity within and no empirical research has been conducted about the social composition of the protests.

each other also circulated recurrently; yet these words did not imply an actual transformation of the political culture of *kirchnerismo* which seems to be underpinned by the identification and subsequent targeting of party foes, in lieu of consensus-building, plurality of opinions and democratic discussion with those who think differently.

The arrival of the bicentenary seemed to contain an implicit 'right to commemorate'. In the dispute over who is entitled to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the first national government was expressed the tension between local and national memory. Carlos Ares explains that he resolved his 'inner contradiction' in reference to why Buenos Aires should celebrate a *national* anniversary, as follows:

> What the City celebrates is the 25th May 1810, the beginning of the Revolution that started here and it is the duty of Buenos Aires to commemorate it, no doubt. The story of that revolution which ends in the declaration of independence is indeed a problem concerning the whole country. I don't think that in 2016 Buenos Aires will particularly celebrate the Declaration of Independence, it would adhere to the national celebration, but I don't think Buenos Aires should celebrate again the Bicentenary.

> In the National Culture Congress in Tucuman they were saying that Buenos Aires is appropriating the Bicentenary… Yes, but I think that the May Revolution is perhaps the only fact that is truly porteño [someone who lives in Buenos Aires], and that isn't bad, if I were tucumano [someone who lives in the province of Tucuman] I wouldn't be jealous of this.

Similarly, Gustavo Lopez explains:

> Why does Buenos Aires take 2010? Because the revolution took place here. Why does Tucuman emphasise that [the process] started in 2010 and finished in 2016? Because the independence was declared in Tucuman. So each province tries to participate in the commemoration through its own identity.

In both views there is an articulation between modes of remembering and modes of being, between the politics of commemoration and a place-bound local, provincial identity. A study about national, regional and local identity in different cities (Cordoba, Rosario, Buenos Aires and Tucuman), conducted by the National Culture Ministry in 2007, revealed that participants identified different foundational moments of the nation according to their own identity, and that local identity had a considerable greater weight than national belonging. Yet the attempts of the federal government to construct a type of national identity that is, above all, nurtured by a regional belonging, were apparent in Gustavo Lopez' words:

> The policies are to: think about the future's country, think about the great Bicentenary agreements, re-think Argentina, and re-think it with an approach towards Latin America, in contrast to what 1910 was. Because Latin America is going through a special time, I always say so, an exceptional time, which we should seek to make sure that it won't be exceptional but ordinary: there are democracies across Latin America, mainly in the whole of South America, there is a common identity, a rescue of the values of 1810, let's say, a longing for freedom so common in the nineteenth century.

We will see later on that the resort to Latin America to depict a form of political identity is always present in the President's public speeches. Anderson's ([1983] 2006) association between official nationalism and the uses of history is significant here in showing how *kirchnerismo* has defined its national project by positioning it in dialogue with previous political events. These include, first, the 1970's dictatorship, in relation to which the aim is to punish its perpetrators, recover the memories of the disappeared and defend human rights as a state policy; second, *peronismo*, with the aim of reasserting its political roots and identifying with the cause of the masses; and, finally, in relation to the Menem era of the 1990s to fight neo-liberalism and regain state management of companies and services. A key underpinning element of contemporary political culture is the influential presence of the past, understood as a social construction shaped by the

interests and views of the present which reconstruct, recollect, distort, and reproduce it (Halbwachs, [1941; 1952] 1992). The past of the Argentine nation is assembled in official narratives through both a nostalgic attitude towards past events, which are considered glorious and thus revived and celebrated (i.e. Perón's populist administration and Evita's social enterprise), and an avenging outlook towards the dark years of Argentine history (the 1970's bloody dictatorship or Menem's administration). These two forms of assembling the past intersect in the current national political agenda to reaffirm the national government's ideological affiliation.

The resort to past tragedies also serves as a powerful unifying element in the present which materialises through the identification of both external and internal *others,* who in turn enable by differentiation the composition of the national political community. External others include the Spanish colonisers, the English imperialist ventures and the United States' neoliberal pressures, which have come to be categorised as enemies of the Argentine people; internal others are incarnated in the bodies of all those who do not support *kirchnerismo* alongside historical foes such as *Menemismo* and the 1970's dictatorship and its supporters. We will see later in the discourse analysis of the President's speech that invocations of 'the past' are recurrent and these function as a legitimising force of the present; however, references to the past do not come accompanied by a resort to heritage, but rather, to an allusion to 'History' and the subsequent need to make 'our own history'.

 In this regard, historian Federico Lorenz (2009) explains that while the '25th May 1810' foundational myth of the Argentine nation has been transmitted through generations and shared by all political streams, the official patriotic history collides with the '24th

March 1976' when the civic-military *coup d'état* overthrew the government in the name of fatherland, order and traditional national values. This brings about a fracture in the national historical narrative, for the armed forces were traditionally conceived as custodians of the essential values of Argentine identity, yet in power they made abusive use of patriotic symbology and implemented terror and repression against its citizens. He then questions the possibility of rethinking a national history from the perspective of a concept of a nation embedded in history, since certain historical dates coexist as fragments, as if they were in parallel worlds: in the same school children can both draw a white headscarf (in reference to the Mothers of the Disappeared) and a town council (symbolising the first national government) without thinking about the bridges between these two anniversaries (Lorenz, 2009:34). Indeed this fragmented character of official history is indicative of the constructed nature of 'the past' which, especially in times of national commemorations, is assembled and integrated into a coherent narrative.

The construction of narratives about 'the past' not only included references to recent historical facts but also the 1910 Centenary celebrations. The need to commemorate the two hundredth anniversary of the first national government was reinstated by this precedent, and most interviewees gave meaning to the bicentenary by resorting to the centenary, both positively and negatively. This allowed them to depict the political nature of the 2010 commemorations. On the one hand, they could regret with a nostalgic tone that the current celebrations would not be as good as the centenary's. As Carlos Ares expressed it:

> Well, let's think that we won't have great works, there won't be monumental works like in the centenary, there are no resources for this, there are basic needs which are unsatisfied and still need to be met.

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Or, on the other hand, they could rejoice over the evidently more democratic character of the bicentenary when compared to that of the early twentieth-century conservative Argentina. In the words of Gustavo Lopez:

> The difference between the centenary and the bicentenary: the centenary looked at Europe, was centred on Buenos Aires, organised by the exclusionary national state, and addressed towards the elites of the agro-export model. The bicentenary integrates into Latin America, is federal, its implementation is decentralised, participatory, diverse and inclusive, and addresses itself to knowledge, science and technology. It is federal, plural, participatory.

The first anniversary of the national government in 1910 was characterised by the display of power and squandering of money by the aristocratic and conservative ruling elites, the celebration of the economic prosperity of the country, the exclusion of the majority of the population, and the violent repression of the working class. Indeed, the celebrations took place under siege in the face of the massive protests and general strikes organised by the workers' movements which ended in the State's destruction of workers' publishing houses, social repression and the imprisonment of anarchists. Its impact was in fact felt in the official centenary celebrations: the lightening was sabotaged, the triumphal arch burned, and the exhibitions opening late (Godio, 1987). Celebrations included the visit of international political figures, scientific conferences, international exhibitions, parades, sports events, community festivals, and diverse patriotic manifestations (Gutman, 2005). The aesthetic interest of the official celebrations crystallised in a programme of urban transformation which was deemed necessary to construct the image of a great national capital, and which in fact 'did not construct a country but a city as nice and elegant as a French small palace or a perfume' (Feinmann, 2005:182, author's translation). Buenos Aires was then adorned by the construction of magnificent buildings, such as the *Teatro Colón* (which a month later was the target of a bomb explosion), the National Parliament, the National Justice Palace,

monuments such as the Spaniards' Monument and the English Tower, commemorative plazas, and the widening of avenues and streets.

The political instability and magnificent monuments that characterised the centenary celebrations constituted a precedent that informed the organisation of the bicentenary events. In relation to the exclusionary nature of the centenary, the bicentenary celebrations were explicitly addressed to all sectors of society – indeed, the multiplicity of non-official activities confirmed the celebration's plural and democratic character. And the question of the bicentenary legacy was also a matter of concern. Carlos Ares explained that he would like the bicentenary to leave its residents with a sense that they own the city, alongside

> the possibility of… given the very cosmopolitan character of Buenos Aires, because of the culture that Buenos Aires has, its potential, its strength, its contrasts, its attractiveness, I think Buenos Aires should also be… enter into contact with the modernity of cities which are similar in potential, in energy…. To exchange hand in hand with Berlin, London, New York… as if they could encounter, merge in a sense.

Again, the notion of modernity as embodied in the cities of the North plays a key role in the municipal version of the commemorations. It seeks to retrieve a lost sense of national identity whose development claims positioned the capital city as Argentina's face to the world, one which portrayed it as the most European city in the South. In contrast, Gustavo Lopez spoke of 'important works which mark the bicentenary but which not only are in Buenos Aires', but most importantly, works

> that could help us as a society to re-think ourselves. This would be fundamental. Our history isn't one of consensus. From 1810 onwards, it has never been… I think in the last twenty five years since 10th December 1983, with all our faults, that is, with a history of no consensus, democracy has had reflexes so as not to fall into authoritarianisms.

In making reference to 'our' history and 'our' faults, the existence of 'we, the Argentinians' is reinstated as a group whose members are tied to each other to constitute the national community, as described by Benedict Anderson (this is further explored in the next section). In line with this statement, the main political struggle in bicentenary Argentina seems to be one over the future of democracy. Because when the series of crises arose in 2001, public discontent erupted in the streets and Argentina had five different presidents in one week, the feeling of institutional fragility and the ghosts of authoritarianism reappeared. The same occurred during the protests triggered by the conflict with the agricultural sector, and in fact, this is what led *Carta Abierta*, a group of intellectuals and cultural critics who then became closely related to the federal government, to coin the phrase 'climate of dismissal' in view of right-wing bearers' indirect call for a *coup' d'état*.[106]

Certainly the arrival of dates considered significant to national history facilitates negotiations over the character of the nation and the workings of its political culture. But how do these dates acquire their cultural and political function? What is in a date that renders it meaningful? The analysis now turns to explore the answers to these questions.

The power of the calendar

It is evident that there is a cultural norm, reinforced by systematic repetition, narratives of historians, and the influence of mass media, by which certain dates are presented as being as worthy of great attention, veneration and respect, as well as material offerings. These dates possess a somewhat magic, symbolic power which make individuals feel

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106 The same can be said about the recent anti-government cacerolazos.

their daily routines should cease in order to think, reflect, and pay tributes to these milestones. National anniversaries are undoubtedly one of these dates. In spite of the possibility of acts of desecration, they clearly belong to the realm of the sacred: discourses and practices are adapted to the special circumstances, ceremonies are performed, worship is offered, and the general feeling is one of communion. In fact, as Benedict Anderson ([1983] 2006) has pointed out, nationalism should be understood more in relation to kinship or religion rather than to political ideologies, due to the imaginary nature of the communion. Feeding the invention of the nation, historical commemorations hence also have a sacred status. Calendrical time imposes the arrival of cycles of rituals and public ceremonies, while ensuring the regularity of the rhythm of collective activities (Durkheim, [1912] 2001:12). After all, a shared temporal reference framework constitutes one of the fundamentals of social life and social organisation (Zerubavel, 1977). Unlike individual anniversary celebrations, which one may opt to ignore, it would be unusual for a nation-state to miss the opportunity to honour a historical milestone. The national bicentenary commemoration unfolded with an obligatory nature relating to the arrival of round dates due to the irresistible passage of time, and the mandatory duty to commemorate them; as some of my interviewees put it:

> That date is taken because…well, there is a calendar year that is like one's birthday, suddenly one looks backwards and forward (Bicentenary National House Director).

> These calendar events serve as an excuse for all of us to look forward towards a positive shared goal. I think that's the idea. After 25th May, 2016, of course this dissolves, the goal gets lost, but it is like a deadline, you have a deadline to meet and you meet it. If it is overdue, you arrive at the wedding with the bride's dress and it's over, you don't get married (B4FS Architect).

> The bicentenary works as a trigger, as a boost, it's like year 2000, you know, those emblematic dates… It is a cultural characteristic of all countries, and particularly, of our country: always look for closed

events, closed dates that could be used as a boost and goal. Saying well, the year 2000 is approaching, 2010 is approaching, it's always the way, the sort of excuse; let's take advantage of them (Bicentenary Project Unit Director).

The need to commemorate the bicentenary was not solely attributed to the significance of the historical date itself, but also to the *type* of date, one which was put on the same level with key religious or sports events:

> It is a question of a rite… religious rites are good, whether or not one believes in the motherland, it is good to call everybody with an objective, a celebration, as was done in Barcelona with the Olympics. It is all about having one big objective, or Beijing, all the city looking at one big objective (B4FS Architect).

> A date that can trigger an economic process is always sought… I was in South Africa and the 2010 World Cup is what is transforming public transport, hotels, and other things that wouldn't be materialised if it weren't for events like this one. These are events, dates that produce transformations (Former Economy Ministry Legal and Technical Secretary).

> The richness of these round dates… these commemorations have an impact somewhere on the unconscious. I don't want to make comparisons because they aren't appropriate, but I'll do them anyway. Christmas for non-religious people is taken as a moment of family reunion, joy, reflection, introspection, it's crazy, even wars stop, bombardments against the other side are suspended, there is a sort of truce for Christmas and New Year; and afterwards, they continue throwing bombs… So this, which is so weird in wartime, for a nation – that is more than a state because it needs the construction of the symbolic – for a nation it is a very important moment because it is good for re-thinking ourselves (Bicentenary National Commission Director).

No doubt once-in-a-lifetime events carry a much disputed great potential. Putting the two-hundredth anniversary of the first national government – commonly equated to 'the birth of the nation' – on the same level than events such as the World Cup or the Olympics highlights their global importance, the convenience for the city in hosting them in view of economic and urban development opportunities, and the usual

spectacular nature of this kind of festive activity. Considering the point that 'even war stops' during Christmas, the low level of crime experienced during the massive celebrations in Buenos Aires then proves unsurprising. The commemoration of the historical milestone was rendered a mega-scale event with its accompanying features: it was broadcast live, attracting mass media coverage, levels of participation were monitored and capitalised, and organising committees were created. The main potential of this kind of ceremony, however, exceeds the related economic or material benefits: they provide an unrivalled opportunity to revive patriotic nationalism.

The bicentenary as 'mirror' of the national identity

The connection between the bicentenary commemoration and the national identity was explicitly established by the National Culture Minister (Jose Nun) prior to 2010, when he pronounced the words that would later constitute the predominant meaning of the commemorative event:

> The Bicentenary offers us Argentinians, the extraordinary opportunity to re-think critically who we are: to reflect about our values, where we come from, where we are going, and to make a change (Secretaría de Cultura, 2008).

The official bicentenary agenda would then be concerned with national identity, a reflection on values, the past and future of the nation, and social transformation. In a previous speech, he explained that the national construction of the bicentenary was to be based on three pillars: first, public works, i.e. schools, theatres, infrastructure; second, the setting of specific goals, i.e. the re-industrialisation of the country, political and judicial reforms; and third, the creation of citizens' awareness of the importance of the bicentenary 'as the shared horizon that gives a unifying sense to the works and goals'. He followed on to say:

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> The biggest goal we could aspire to is that in 2010 someone asks us, "so, where is the national project?", and we could answer: "This day of festivity is a day of celebration of our independence, of all the good things done in the previous century and mainly of the national project that has been developed in the last five years". This is the national project: the schools, the social justice, the economic prosperity, the respect for human rights, the awareness and national identity of all the population, the reduction of inequality, the consolidation of democracy [www.argentina.ar]

With the typical oratory that characterises him as a renowned political and social scientist, Nun established the symbolic content of the bicentenary before resigning to his position in July 2009, following the defeat of the official party in the legislative elections. The reference to 'the last five years' is meant to indicate that the new national project began when Nestor Kirchner took over presidency in 2003. This makes explicit the link between the commemoration and the current governmental administration, and reminds us of the centrality of memory to modern politics and the importance of politics to modern memory (Gillis, 1994). According to Nun, the idea was to create a big festival *al la* Durkheim; that is, not to reduce the bicentenary to a ritual event in 2010, but rather, to make it 'a great moment of collective enthusiasm and effervescence in society which can make it review its values and norms, question that which is taken for granted, de-normalise its every day, and alter the mechanics of its reproduction'[www.argentina.ar]. The bicentenary was seen as a crucial means whereby to break with the innumerable crises which Argentinians have been suffering from; that is why knowing 'who we are, where we come from and where we are going' was deemed essential.

This way, the national commemoration arrived not without excessive and overarching expectations on its shoulders. It expressed a desperate need to think about 'who we are',

to mobilise social representations about the national identity[107] as if the cause of the current problems were to be found in the origin of the nation or the essence of the national identity. Speaking of 'who we are' always implies the symbolic construction of a type of national identity that is underpinned by an idea of oneness, continuity over time, homogeneity and boundedness (Handler, 1994). Far from being a way of defining that essential identity, Handler explains, the discourse about 'who we are' is a communicative process that encompasses not only the speaker but also a diversity of voices and (mis) understandings. In being pronounced, then, that discourse does not simply 'refer' to identity but rather creates and transforms it. Carlos Ares and Gustavo Lopez acknowledged the constructed nature of the 'national identity', using phrases such as the 'guiding fiction', 'construction of Argentineness', 'collective imaginary', and 'the writing of official history'. However, the fact that they aware of the constructed nature of the national identity does not necessarily suggest that they possess no interest in participating of that construction. While at the city level such creation was nurtured by ideas of European modernity oriented towards tourism promotion, the viewpoint of the national government was different. This placed more weight on pluralism, federalism, and diversity as well as the need to undermine the traditional power of Buenos Aires as the producer of the official history and national iconography based on subjects with 'blonde hair and blue eyes', as Lopez argued.

However striking the difference between these national imaginations might be, they are both deeply rooted in Argentine history and are of remarkable currency. As anthropologist Rita Segato points out (2007), the predominant political identities in

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107 Later in the thesis we will see in more detail how many of the problems faced by policy-making and planning were attributed by the interviewees to 'the Argentineness'; in other words, there was a close link established between the failures of public administration and a form of national being described as corrupt, inefficient, and opportunistic, and which would interfere in the implementation of policies.

Argentina derive from an initial basic fracture of society between the capital as the port city and the provinces as the interior. This civilisational line, which informs specific cultural practices and political affiliations, led the nation to be constructed in permanent antagonism with its provincial diversity and to employ institutions such as the school, obligatory military service and the public health service to smooth out existing social and ethnic differences in order to produce what Segato calls 'ethnic neutrality'. This is a product of the Europeanisation and whitening project of the 1880s elites. Similarly, Lacarrieu (2005) argues that Argentina's inclusion of diversity[108] into the official narratives of the nation was driven by a desire for the disciplining and social control of certain groups which resulted in a construction of a national heritage more associated with the patriotic than the popular. That is why, she explains, Buenos Aires's urban society 'was constituted and developed in relation to a supposed non-festive character of the city, pre-concept backed by the civilisational vision of a white, Western city, armed with 'a culture', conceived as 'the city's progress'' (Lacarrieu, 2005:5).

The arrival of national anniversaries triggers the organisation of ritual events and festivities in which the imagined political community is recreated and commemorated through the use of patriotic symbols and representations. This allows for a reaffirmation of the constructed national identity and the reassertion of the existence of social boundaries aimed at including 'us' and excluding 'them'. In this sense, the rituals of the bicentenary commemoration encompassed: performative references to the 'past', 'the national identity' and 'the national unity' in innumerable public speeches; the representation of 'cultural diversity' (i.e. the provinces' food stalls and the immigrant

108 Segato (2007:51) also refers to the centrality of the capital city in establishing a project to manage and eliminate diversity by which: 'the Jewish made fun of the Italian, the Italian of the Spanish, the Spanish of the Jewish, and all of them of the 'cabecita negra', or the mestizo of the Indian, under the imperative of erasing the traces of origin as a condition to access citizenship'. Original in Spanish, author's translation.

communities' parades with their display of traditional costumes); the provision of free folk, tango, local rock and regional music concerts; the use of the national anthem, flags and rosettes; the creation of a 'patriots gallery' in the Casa Rosada; parades of military and national industry antique cars; the spectacular street performance of leading acrobatic theatre company De la Guarda featuring representative scenes from Argentine history; the broadcasting of 'emblematic national films'; and the government's production of a film about the national hero Manuel Belgrano. The current revival of the political struggle for the territorial control of the Islas Malvinas (Falklands Islands), through which the federal government sought to negotiate[109] the political status of the islands with the UK, constitutes another example of the importance of constructing the nation as a spatially bounded geopolitical entity, fundamental to the revitalisation of patriotic nationalism. We can see how the sphere of the ritual constitutes the symbolic material with which to construct an idea of the national because rituals allow people to 'act out their myths about the origin of society, and in doing so they concretely avow the legitimacy of the established order of things' (Barfield, 1997:141). All these ritual events were instrumental in allowing the national government to widen its popular support, revive public participation, and undermine the power of the already fragmented opposition groups.

Taking the bicentenary commemoration as a mirror against which a society can see itself reflected was more of a rhetorical act of narcissism rather than a specific long-term

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109 During the 2010 May week celebrations the government arranged a meeting with the UK ambassador in Argentina to discuss sovereignty issues on the islands. This meeting was announced by Argentine vice chancellor Victorio Taccetti when interviewed by Canal Siete during the inauguration ceremony of the CCB. In 2012, the commemoration of the Malvinas war found the UK and Argentina in the midst of mutual accusations and political tensions surrounding the control over the islands. A census was recently undertaken in order to ask islanders which government they identify the most with – not surprisingly, they said 'none'.

nation-building project for social and cultural inclusion, or an invitation to an open dialogue with sectors of the different ideological spectrum. The metaphorical nature of this reflexive function, however, does not diminish its importance: on the contrary, the most powerful and publicly asserted meaning attributed to the bicentenary was that of being a 'time for reflection' in a twofold way: to be reflected *in* it as a society and to reflect through it *on* our society. Whoever holds the mirror in this metaphor and what can actually be done with the reflected undesirable images are, nonetheless, interesting questions.[110] There was a sense in which the bicentenary anniversary was seen as Argentina's rite of passage into a more 'mature' state of nationhood, a state underpinned by a democratic basis which reasserts popular participation, respect for human rights, enactment of civil rights and political self-determination.

5.2. Ribbon cutting at the postal palace: performing commemorative politics on stage

If official heritage is a discursive practice through which a national collective social memory is constructed (Hall, 2000:5), it is vital then to look at the ways the head of the Argentine State imagines and performs, through her public speeches, the national community, its identity and the role that the postal building was to play in the national commemoration narrative. However, far from suggesting that the national politics of heritage is an exact reflection of or can be reduced to the rhetorical power of words, we shall see that the gap between the official discourse and the actual practices is quite

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110 In this respect, the statement of the Bicentenary National House Director is illustrative in questioning the degree to which the Argentine society might be prepared to face these critical 'reflections': 'There would be much to think about what to celebrate. Precisely, we wanted to pose three questions: why we celebrate, what to celebrate, and when… Later on, we were hesitant about this as I was very willing to see how different people might respond to that, but then I thought well, probably there will be things I wouldn't like to hear being said, and as I don't won't to censor anything… Perhaps we should think how to pose the question very carefully' (Personal Interview, 2009).

apparent. This section examines the inauguration ceremony of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario by conducting a media and discourse analysis of the event and the President's public presentation.

The CCB inauguration ceremony is conceived here as a 'media event'. That is, it is understood as a form of political communication that is performed through one of those events which generally include the live broadcasting of political ceremonies, sports and religious events or other historic occasions,[111] and are mainly characterised by the festive viewing of television, the interruption of routine, displays of unity and reconciliation, hegemonic and scripted content, performance of symbolic acts, and the presence of a selected public despite being addressed to a mass audience (Dayan and Katz, 1992). As a typical media event, the opening ceremony of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario was broadcast live and had a selected on-site public comprised only of representatives of the national authorities, journalists, some artists, and other VIP individuals. The official State channel (Canal Siete) enabled spectators to live the event from home by taking them to the different areas of the refurbished interior of the postal building. I was myself a mediated spectator of the event, although because I was abroad at the time I did not watch by means of television, but rather via a video of the full live TV broadcast posted by Canal Siete on YouTube. In this role I shall seek to give the reader a sense of what was publicly broadcast in order to shed light on the way contemporary 'ceremonial politics' or 'live broadcasting of history' (Dayan and Katz, 1992) works in Argentina:

> Two journalists anticipate the formal inauguration of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario and share their enthusiasm in the TV studio.

111 The live broadcast of the funeral of former President Nestor Kirchner in October 2010 also constitutes a media-event, though of a different type.

They are not alone: the TV reporter is on the site with a cameraman who strives to get the best shots of the interior of the refurbished Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones while in the studio presenters are alert for the arrival of the Argentine President Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner (CFK), an appearance which would hopefully be captured by the other camera located outside the building. A great degree of expectation is transmitted by the journalists while cameras show functionaries outside the palace, and inside, those wearing historic costumes forming in a circle to welcome CFK in the main hall. In the middle of the circle there is a lady wearing a magnificent white dress in honour of that worn by Eva Perón whose office was located in the building. A sudden change of cameras indicates that the President has finally arrived. And here she is: with a shiny violet silk dress and the elegance that characterises her, accompanied by her husband, former President Nestor Kirchner. Like a rock star, CFK greets 'the people' who had been waiting to see her in the outside fence and then enters the building where without much enthusiasm she cuts the ribbon made in the national colours.

The camera zooms in to show her astonishment at the historic costumes which have left her dumbfounded. After closely looking at each dress, greeting the actresses, and clapping in front of the dress honouring Eva Perón, she starts her long visit to the different areas of the building, followed by a large number of functionaries and journalists. Once again, the President's amazement occupies the main scene in her watching of De la Guarda's acrobatic performance based on the building's scaffolding, which was especially prepared for the inauguration. The images shown by the cameras are accompanied by the broadcaster narratives such as 'it is astounding what this cultural centre has to offer', 'this is a building which is part of history', 'the visual and audible impact is amazing', 'the restoration has been done in the best way, so we welcome this new cultural centre', 'a not-to-be-missed place to visit with all the family', and 'everybody will be able to attend for free'….

After saluting each of the artists, CFK goes to see the philatelic exhibition where she proudly finds out that 'Argentina was the first country to issue commemorative stamps, something which was then imitated by other countries in Europe'. This is followed by her posing for photographs next to a gigantic stamp featuring Evita's face and then with the current bicentenary commemorative stamp. Exercising her usual command, she orders the cameramen to show the beautiful roof vitraux, and when interviewed by the Canal Siete reporter, she looks at the camera, speaks to the 'millions of Argentinians', and warns that she would prefer not to speak much as she finds the event very moving. A familiar anecdote is then retold which she would later recount on several occasions: her father-in-law used to work in the palace as a treasurer and loved the building; that is why her husband Nestor 'knows it by heart'. Now we are taken to admire each of the ten portraits of the

revolutionary heroes which form part of one of the painting exhibitions. CFK stops and poses for a photograph at each of them, showing pride and joy. She also greets and receives gifts from the many national artists whose works are exhibited in the building. The narrator explains that the President's public speech is being delayed as 'she wants to immerse herself fully in each of the exhibitions and talk to each of the artists in each corner'. After an hour and a half of live broadcast, CFK enters the main stage where she is received by an audience that stands up and claps vigorously to welcome her.

Spectators are shown the interior of the building and the various activities *through* the President's emotions, that is, the portrayal of the cultural centre is mediated through the live broadcast of her own feelings, friendly behaviour, informal conversations and photography posing with artists. As spectators, we accompany CFK in her discovery of the exhibitions while she looks around the different refurbished areas and we hear Canal Siete's participatory narration. This is not simply broadcasting the event but rather is 'actively involved in the official meaning of the event, busy endorsing and conveying its definition' (Dayan and Katz, 1992: 89). This is of course suggestive of a form of mediatised and individualistic enactment of politics which is centred on the role of a charismatic political leader, but also of the spectacularisation of the bicentenary commemoration and the entertainment-driven live broadcast. We can see that the postal building was turned into a spectacle in which the main elements of its inauguration, highlighted by the media coverage, were the President's emotional walk through space and her encounter with artistic productions, including the historical costumes, stamps and paintings exhibitions. The fact that the building was only open for a week emphasises the spectacular-event character of this inauguration which took place merely to open *symbolically* the incomplete works which were then closed again a week later.

The ritual, commemorative aspects of the postal palace were reduced to the official inauguration ceremony as the building had not yet been completed; therefore, it is not

possible to comment on its actual functioning as such. As illustrated by the broadcast description, the ceremony comprised of the following events: a public speech by the Argentine President, the organisation of a patriotic exhibition featuring paintings from the different provinces, a philatelic, costumes and engravings exhibition, actors and actresses displaying historic costumes, the use of the colours of the Argentine flag to decorate the fence surrounding the building as well as enormous luminous rosettes hanging from the interior walls, and a short acrobatic theatre performance by De la Guarda (before their large-scale spectacular street parade to officially close the bicentenary events the following day). Lacarrieu had argued (2005) that the ritualisation of space is facilitated by festivities which result from diverse political projects which seek to unify social groups at the same time that they negate and institutionalise urban conflicts. Following Lacarrieu we can understand why the contested character of the CCB project was made invisible in the live broadcast. The postal workers and postal museum staff were made invisible too, by not being invited to the event. To give one example, the video shown at the inauguration ceremony briefly explained that the tiles of the dome were removed in order to reuse them in other sectors of the historic layer. As we will see later in the chapter, this was a subtle way of referring to the glazing of the dome, whilst overlooking the relating heritage disputes.

Media events contain ritual aspects through which the political message is crafted and mass-communicated with the aim of achieving social cohesion, integration and political prestige within the national territory. Of course contemporary media events also go beyond the national to encompass globalised media cultures which are trans-local phenomena (Couldry, Hepp and Krotz, 2010). In the case we are analysing here mass media communication is employed to construct and perform an idea of 'the national', to

convey a shared festive feeling in honour of 'the Argentine nation'. Benedict Anderson (2006:46 [1983]) has shown the crucial role that print capitalism and language played in enabling the rise of national consciousness, in creating the 'possibility of a new form of imagined community, which in its basic morphology set the stage for the modern nation'. In a post-modern, post-national or trans-national context, the construction of the 'imagined political community' is facilitated by technological mediation. Amongst these the most important are television and radio – i.e. the mandatory national broadcasting of Presidential speeches – and the internet, as well as other new media technologies. These enable an incredibly rapid and multidirectional circulation of information and the creation of a gigantic community of virtual spectators who, in turn, can actively participate in that imagination, either to reinforce it or to contest it, by producing new content or forwarding, commenting or destroying the existing one. The presence of the Argentine President together with other politicians in Facebook and Twitter only reinforces the central role of these novel forms of media communication in the production of a digital technology-based nationalism. Another example of this is Canal Siete, the State TV channel, which is now the first broadcast TV channel in Argentina to have a digital broadcast format and the government has announced decoding software would be distributed to those receiving social benefits. In addition, this switch to a digital format should be understood within the context of the already mentioned new media law, by which the state becomes the central regulatory agent in the regulation of audio-visual communication services. This way, technology mediates the national political imagination, paving the way for the production and dissemination of the current 'nationalist and popular' *kirchnerista* discourse, to which we now turn.

'The beginning of the fulfilment of a long cherished dream'

With these words the Argentine President marked the symbolic inauguration of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario on 24 May 2010. This public speech represents 'an event within the event', to use the words of Dayan and Katz, for it constituted the main event within the inauguration ceremony media event, which in turn was part of the various bicentenary commemorative events. In this section I conduct a critical discourse analysis[112] of the speech[113] given by CFK with the aim of understanding whether and how the planned cultural centre was integrated into the broader narrative of the official bicentenary commemorations, and what role it was meant to play in the politics of remembering the past of the nation.

The patriotic spirit, ceremonial rules and institutional power rendered the context of the public discourse utterly official. The speech was given in the now restored majestic great hall of the postal palace to a group of selected guests, including ministers, national, provincial and municipal authorities and representatives of unions, and of social and corporate organisations. Framed within the context of the bicentenary celebrations of the May Revolution, the event took place following two days of well-attended commemorative activities organised by the federal government. To infuse the hall with a patriotic atmosphere, the national anthem was sung by three opera singers on stage,

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112 Critical discourse analysis enables the examination of the relationship between discourse and power by studying how text and talk produce and reproduce power and domination (van Dijk, 2001: 363). The use of this research technique has been discussed in Chapter 2.

113 The text was obtained from the Casa Rosada (2010). A translation of the full text into English is provided in the Appendix. The analysis was also informed by an examination of the body language and event features using a video of the event that the Casa Rosada (2010b) – and also Canal Siete – uploaded on Youtube.

who were joined in their singing by the standing public and panellists,[114] including the President who expressed her love and respect for the native land with a hand on her heart.

The President's speech was welcomed by an effusively cheering audience which celebrated her laughter and words. Delivered in a serious and sometimes friendly tone showing emotion, enthusiasm and pride, the discourse represented an invitation to national joy and celebration. An institutional video of the CCB presented a condensed, superficial history of the site. It highlighted the memory of Eva Perón's work in the postal building, 'the symbolic and historical value of the post office that awakens a sense of belonging, attachment and pride in all of us' and the President's choice of selecting the building as a symbol of the national bicentenary anniversary. Equally the video stressed the importance of the 'successful' restoration process which, through the work of over 200 experts and the use of 'singular elements of modernity', have turned 'the old post office into an active, permeable and vibrant space', a space 'which seeks to give life to a nation's historical space'. These words were anchored in images showing the splendour the building had regained with the restoration works and with this, its symbolic and material power as a central political and cultural icon.[115] The closing words of the video narrator are illustrative in showing the centrality of public ceremonies like this one for the revival of the national political imagination:

> With this project we seek to give a boost to diversity, the inclusion of all citizens, to be able to enjoy a developed space for the promotion of and for quality in culture, transforming its initial condition of being a building-object into a building-city. Let's dream *a lo grande* [in style and

114 The stage panel was comprised of the Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, the Minister of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services, Nestor Kirchner, the Governor of the Province of Tierra del Fuego, and the Argentine President.
115 The role of the building as icon is further discussed in Chapter 6.

on a large-scale], Argentina is alive and beats through its [public] works
(Casa Rosada, 2010b).

Such an imagination is nurtured by the use of a collective 'we', legitimising references to social inclusion and diversity, an invitation to dream together of the possibility of successful cultural planning, and the importance of materiality to the expression of the greatness of the nation. Dreaming together becomes a public need in a country which lacks pride, self-esteem and faith in its own capacity to plan large-scale, long-term and complete public works on time. Later in the chapter we shall see that a nostalgic rhetoric shapes official political discourses and public opinion more generally, longing for the past and seeking to return to a golden epoch in which the country was economically thriving.

In eleven minutes CFK provided an abstract vision for the new cultural centre, expressed her immense satisfaction with the restored building's dome, celebrated the bicentenary activities, remembered the post office, and evoked the value of national history. In what follows I explore each of these themes.

The new cultural centre

In her speech CFK depicted the new cultural centre briefly and vaguely by referring to three elements: responsibility for the project, the role CCB would play and its temporality. Implicitly challenging the role of the former Economy Minister in the

recycling of the postal palace, the President proudly stated that *she* had imagined[116] the cultural centre in that building during her years as a senator. She went on to say:

> The truth is that today is the beginning of the fulfilment of a long cherished dream which was one of giving Buenos Aires, the capital of all Argentinians, and therefore, our country, a great Cultural Centre, the great Cultural Centre that brings together and expresses all cultures, the arts… I am sure that this [dream] will be the forthcoming centenary's cultural lighthouse.

Once again the word 'dream' conveys an idea of desire which is reinforced by describing it as 'long cherished'. The absence of the use of the possessive (i.e. 'my' dream) carries uncertainty as to whose dream this is and probably is intentionally used to suggest it is a *shared* aspiration. The clarification that Buenos Aires is 'the capital of *all* Argentinians' is inscribed in the long history of geopolitical confrontations and power struggles between the capital city and the rest of the country (examined in Chapter 3) and the national government's explicit goal of organising a bicentenary 'commemoration and celebration that is participatory, democratic, federal and universal', includes all of the provinces, and is taking place 'with the contribution of all Argentinians'.

The centrality assigned to the CCB, expressed in the use of 'The' great cultural centre, presents inconsistencies in a 'federal' discourse of decentralisation which seeks to undermine the power of the capital city. While CFK refers to the term 'culture', as in the 'cultural lighthouse', she uses the singular form and does not provide further details regarding which culture she is referring to in a move that assumes it is not necessary to be precise since culture is believed to be something that is 'always good'. But as culture is far from being a self-explanatory term or a desirable panacea, it is unclear which

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116 This is at odds with the account presented by the former Economy Minister (personal interview conducted in 2009) who claims it was his own decision to recycle the postal palace, as we have seen in Chapter 4.

spaces/forms/expressions/ways of life she is addressing by using this word. Similarly in referring to 'the arts' she does not specify whether these mean fine arts or a general way of referring to all artistic forms. Details about management, sustainability, timeline and content of this cultural venue remain absolutely unclear[117] and invisible in the speech.

The word 'lighthouse' does a particular job in the speech. It reinforces the centrality assigned to the postal building and the project and demonstrates the President's knowledge of the architects' proposal which repeatedly described the CCB as a 'lighthouse signalling the growth and development path of the future generations' (Silvestri, 2007). It reveals the temporality of the project: it is meant to become a centre for culture in the forthcoming centenary. The CCB is clearly oriented towards the future and sometimes the past (i.e. through references to its previous role or Evita's office in the building), but rarely the present.

The dome

The dome as an architectural element became an object of dispute between heritage protectors, architects and the government in view of the official proposal to glaze it. Both the President and the architects responsible for the refurbishment considered the dome the most emblematic element of the palace, as it was deemed to serve as a stage for 'non-traditional cultural and artistic expressions' (B4FS, 2006:11), but also as 'a symbol of the national civic space' (B4FS, 2005:7). According to the architects, the highest level of the building would comprise a *plaza mirador*, a scenic viewpoint featuring

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117 This was apparent during my fieldwork when trying to contact the National Culture Ministry regarding their involvement with the project. Different representatives of this institution made explicit their lack of participation in the CCB and of knowledge about its future development, which highlights the value of the CCB as a means, rather than an end it itself.

privileged views of the city's central area from above accompanied by leisure and gastronomic activities. The image used to portray this space was that of a tango couple on stage, in spite of the claim that the dome would be aimed at non-traditional artistic expressions. While the dome's need of restoration was out of question (figure 31 shows the poor state in which its interior was, prior to the restoration), whether it could and should be glazed became a matter of contention. Being a national historical monument, the building's façade had to be fully preserved. It was the duty of the Historical Sites, Monuments and Museums National Commission (CNMMyLH) to safeguard its integrity. For this reason the architects' proposal to glaze the dome encountered opposition from the heritage sector (Postal Museum, CNMMyLH, *Basta de Demoler* NGO), since it was clearly in breach of the national heritage law. *Basta de Demoler* sent a letter to the CNMMyLH demanding a response as to how the removal of original tiles had happened given the listed status of the Palacio de Correos. This led to discussions among stakeholders and caused delays in the approval of the project. Later on, the dome was finally glazed without further explanation in an operation celebrated by CFK and endorsed by CNMMyLH, the organisation aimed at preserving the building's heritage and tiles (this is further analysed in Chapter 6).

Figure 31. The interior of the dome in a state of deterioration before being glazed
Source: Author's photograph, 2009

Aware of the context described above, CFK stated in the speech:

> In that *transparent* dome there had to be the colours and lights of the Argentine flag. That is why that dome also has the patriotic emblem, but at the same time, and this was the idea of the Planning Minister, the recreation of all of the flags, all, through a very modern computing system of lights that combines 16 million colours, as it was yesterday expressed by the communities that make up our country and those which are not part of it as well…

As foreseen by the winning architects, the dome would symbolise something larger than its tiles. Following Anderson (2006 [1983]), we have already discussed how the mediation of technology is fundamental in nurturing the idea of an imagined national community. It is clear from the speech that the dome was meant to perform a singular role in contributing to a revival of patriotic nationalism aided by technology and configuring a civic space that would reinforce the already political, institutional character of the city centre. It is interesting to note how the dome comes to play a symbolic role as the most iconic element of the building; it becomes a form of twenty-first century Latin American independence facilitated by 'very modern' technological devices. The tensions surrounding the issue of the dome are one of the key silences in the President's

speech, showing not only that this was not problematic for her administration, but rather, expressing great pride in being responsible for the idea of projecting the luminous Argentine flag on the crystal dome [figure 32].

Figure 32. The Palacio de Correos with crystal dome projecting the Argentine flag
Source: Igualdad Cultural

Removing the original tiles from the building's dome raises the question of authenticity in the preservation of heritage. In the CCB case, the global pressures for cities to stand out with iconic buildings in the urban competition for resources (this is particularly analysed in the next chapter) were stronger than the local norms which emphasised preserving the monumentality of a historic building within the existing heritage legislation. Underlying the video's explicit reference to the new use for the removed tiles was the dispute over the controversial operation. These tensions are condensed in the architects' choice to imagine and project (in the video and in institutional documents) the new crystal dome with a tango couple. This expresses a form of place-making shaped by city branding, tourism promotion and authenticity. Yet this was done not by keeping the original tiles but rather through the invocation of tango as the stereotyped

'authentic' Argentine dance. Evidently, this constitutes a form of authenticity for export, detached from the authentic materials employed in the construction of the building. The longing for authenticity has a clear impulse in times of economic competition between cities: having economic and political power, the fictional qualities of authenticity produce 'a real effect on our imagination of the city, and a real effect on the new cafes, stores, and gentrified places where we like to live and shop' (Zukin, 2011:xiii) and we can add visit a museum.

The post office

> I am very proud to be President of all Argentinians, very proud of my country, very proud of those philatelists who today, here in the Palacio de Correos, showed me their collections proudly and told me…that we were the first country in the world to come up with the idea of printing a commemorative postage stamp. Later on, we were copied and even faked… I didn't know that we came up with this idea here, in this Argentine Postal Service so ingrained in the hearts of the Argentinians…

Although references to the post office did not abound in the speech, CFK set out its meaning as something deeply rooted 'in the heart of the Argentinians' in a nostalgic tone that acknowledges the important place the post has occupied in the history of the nation. We will later see that the speech repeatedly constructs senses of national belonging whilst invoking the national identity. In the quotation above we can see the President's pride in finding out that seemingly Argentina had a pioneering role in the printing of postage stamps, and this fact reasserts CFK's national pride, implicitly claiming that Argentina is not only as good as other (European) countries, but actually better than them. Her personal attachment to the building was disclosed through a familiar story: her father-in-law was the post office treasurer and used to work in the postal palace. After describing him as 'a man of the post office' who 'loved the post',

she took the audience to Nestor Kirchner's childhood when his father, the post treasurer, used to take him to the postal palace instead of 'to the zoo' as the rest of the children 'would normally do'. As the speech was broadcast, we can see the camera showing recurrently a touched Nestor Kirchner. This anecdote proves most productive when CFK explains that her husband, with an even greater attachment to the postal building, asked her about the fate of the post office in light of the refurbishment plans for the postal palace:

> And what about the post? Where will they put it? Because if my father gets up [from the grave] and sees that they are again displacing the post from the building, I think he will kill them.

This interesting quote, which the public celebrates, is particularly revealing of the current contestation surrounding the construction of the new cultural centre. It is functional to the image of the post as a fond memory of earlier times in Argentine history, something that nostalgically belongs to the past where, this speech suggests, it needs to remain.[118] Yet the quote adds an extra layer of complexity in the struggle for the redevelopment of the postal palace, as her husband was pointing out the undesirable displacement of the postal workers and the importance of keeping the postal services in their own building, one which was specifically built to perform that function. It is important to bear in mind that the proposals for the CCB were unwelcome in most of the postal world, despite the fact that they aim to include a small space for the post office in the new refurbished building. To express reassuring calmness, the President said to her husband: 'don't worry, the post will be in a wonderful place and, on the contrary, he [Nestor Kirchner's father] would be proud of this palace'. Her telling of

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118 Postal workers have challenged the widely reproduced diagnosis that the postal palace became over dimensioned for the functions it performed and the likely forthcoming death of the postal institution due to the development of digital technologies.

this anecdote is a way of expressing an existing tension and controlling it within the limits of the very speech.

History

> If there is anything that I am keen on it is the defence and protection of our identity and historical heritage, because I feel that many times our history has been stolen, it has been forged, or we don't even know it because it has been retold to us. I believe that one of the most important things that we must do in this Bicentenary is to know our own history, complete, with the anonymous men and women, and those who weren't so anonymous, who worked to create it.

The way in which the above quotation starts is somewhat self-defensive and reveals the President's knowledge of the disagreements over the glazing of the dome. There is an apparent contradiction between the CFK's great desire to protect historical heritage and her personal endorsement of a redevelopment project that demolishes the workers' workshop spaces and will erase most traces of the post itself. CFK gives a great deal of attention to assembling the meaning and role of history. Her use of that term ('history') suggests the existence of a real history which is different from a history 'which has been retold to us'. Abstract ideas and a lack of precision abound in the speech; she seems to be speaking to an imaginary foe who is represented by the use of an undefined 'they', which may contain a variety of social groups: the middle and upper classes locally, the US government, the Mayor of Buenos Aires, the opposition parties, the critical media, the 1970's dictatorship, the big corporations, the previous Presidents, etc. The identification of an adversary Other helps create a sense of 'us', alongside her use of 'our identity' and 'our history' which brings us, Argentinians, together in the speech, taking for granted the existence of an imagined national community. Through this move, CFK speaks on behalf of the 'Argentine people', contributing to the creation, once again, of a communal sentiment of national belonging.

In the same way, the emphasis on the need for all Argentinians to know their complete history responds to the history of a country which was born out of the Spanish colonisation, the massacre of the indigenous populations, the political pressures exercised by the International Monetary Fund (IMF), and the country's subordinated political alignment to the US, especially during the neoliberal government of Carlos Menem in the 1990s. The term history appears to be equated to Argentine history, a history which is marked by social injustices, economic inequality and authoritarian pasts. Underlying the speech there is the belief that knowing one's history is fundamental to the national identity and to 'changing history'. Patriotic nationalism has a powerful role as a civic religion which 'we' need to venerate and fight for. References to history are often made in positive statements, such as 'the joyful peoples celebrate their history', the postal palace 'is already part of the history of all the Argentinians', and 'it is part and obligation of the good citizen to know the history of their country, honour their heroes and remember them, not with sadness but with joy'. The power of history, as CFK sees it, is its potential for political change and social mobilisation.

Figure 33. Portrait of Eva Perón in the great hall of the Palacio de Correos
Source: Author's photograph, 2009

The national and popular affiliation of the current administration was made clear in CFK's explicit reference to the memories of Eva Perón contained in the building, a reference which was greeted with claps from the audience: 'A true Palace, in which Eva Perón worked'. The palatial status of the building was particularly stressed; its heritage value seemed to increase with the historical reference.

The bicentenary commemorations

CFK's references to the bicentenary commemorations in the speech show her aim of assigning a popular, non-partisan imprint to the celebrations in an attempt to make clear that the commemorations were 'of the people' and not of the official party. This is a response to the media speculations, which appeared soon after the massive attendance to the bicentenary activities, about whether and how the government was going to capitalise on the success of the events for the 2011 presidential elections.

> Let me tell you that I feel very proud to see the provinces parading, yesterday the communities, with a hundred thousand men and women, kids, young people, the elderly throwing themselves into the streets celebrating with joy, I saw Jauretche's quotes, the depressed and sad peoples cannot change anything, the joyful peoples, who celebrate their history, all their complete history, are the peoples that we can continue transforming and changing.

The reference to the parade of provinces and communities discloses a somewhat paternalistic tone, which is later reinforced by saying 'the peoples that we[119] can continue transforming and changing'; the change of the peoples will not occur internally at the individual or community levels, but will be brought about by an 'us', which most likely embodies the President's administration. The place assigned to these nouns in the

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119 The word 'we' does not appear in the Spanish version ('nosotros'), because in this language there is no need to include the subject when the verb ending (– mos) already shows who is performing the action.

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sentence is that of the direct object rather than the active subject. Mentioning the provinces and the communities next to each other shows the inclusion of these particular social groups which, if absent in the speech, might have seemed to have been excluded from the celebrations. Mentioning the provinces was important to highlighting the federal character of the bicentenary events, while differentiating them from a form of Buenos Aires' centrism. Arturo Jauretche was an Argentine political thinker and writer during 1930s-60s, a symbol of the nationalist, popular political movement and historical tradition. The allusion to diversity in the age of those who attended the celebrations depicts a familiar scene. The hundred thousand attendees proved to be in the end over two million, according to the media.

The idea of federalism appears repeatedly throughout the speech and alongside the notion of a Latin American belonging:

> We have just inaugurated an exhibition containing paintings from each one of the provinces with their authors, showing what we envisioned for this space of art, a federal aspect, a popular aspect integrated to society in these 88.000 covered metres – I don't know how they will end up when we finish the work – and which will also have, as everything we have dreamed of for this Bicentenary has had, a strong Latin American component.

The integration of Argentina into the UNASUR union and the fact that former Argentine President Kirchner was its Secretary General, together with the continuous political alignment with and support for presidents in other Latin American countries, such as Brazil, Venezuela, Ecuador and Bolivia, are clearly indicative of the government's regional integration policy. The reference to the uncertainty about the outcome of the redevelopment is associated with the complex nature of the architectonical intervention in the building.

All in all, this is a self-referential speech, in which CFK positions herself as the central subject of the discourse, who in an authoritative and absolutist way ('the truth is...') speaks on behalf of others (the Argentine people). The discourse is aimed at showing the Latin American and plural aspect of the bicentenary events and activities, as well as the government's success in organising them. CFK is telling her narrative of how the cultural centre came to be imagined in the postal palace. In such narrative she locates herself, once again, as the protagonist of the story ('I came up with the idea...') and explains how it should be read ('the dome has the patriotic emblem...'). A number of subjects are constructed through the discourse, for instance: communities are those which make up Argentina's diversity; women, kids, young people and the elderly are represented through their alleged joy in participating of the official commemorative activities; philatelists become a source of national pride; CFK with her sensitivity to heritage is enabling the transformation of the postal palace and giving the workers a new 'wonderful place'; the Argentinians have made the bicentenary events successful through their joyful participation in the streets. A clear silence in the discourse is the lack of reference to the workers' disagreements with the recycling operations and their displacement from the building, or the lack of governmental support for the postal museum during its required relocation.

Equally, the discourse constructs a number of objects: art is defined by its 'national identity' and 'universal character'; the post office is represented as a cherished national memory; history is an object of suspicion and manipulation. CFK makes some clear associations: it is because people need to know their history that a new political art museum has been created; because a good citizen needs to commemorate the history of their country with joy the government has organised the (entertaining) bicentenary

events. The discourse is shaping a solidly integrated Argentina which is aware of its enemies who, in turn, come to strengthen the national unity. The ideological implications of this discourse result in the implicit support expected from the audience in light of the successful material restoration of the postal palace and the massive attendance to the bicentenary events. The deployed strategies, then, come to legitimise the transformation of the building and reinforce the power of the Presidential office.

5.3. The re-monumentalisation of a national historical monument

In the context of the preparations of the bicentenary events, the project for the redevelopment of the postal palace as the CCB arose as the national government's flagship commemorative activity. In the absence of other public preparations, resorting to this project calmed the anxieties preceding the advent of the bicentenary anniversary. Although planned to be inaugurated in 2010, a delay of over two years prevented its completion on time. Because of this the project was soon overshadowed by many other commemorative activities organised by both the municipal and national governments.

Despite the earlier centrality of the CCB project, there was no explicit connection between the postal palace and the commemoration of the national bicentenary. Prior to 2010 I asked my interviewees why they thought that the postal building was chosen as a commemorative site for the bicentenary. Some of them explained:

> From the beginning the idea was 'since we have this', let's make it one of the flagship projects for the Bicentenary (…) I have the feeling that nothing has been finally done apart from talking and creating commissions, I don't see anything under way… in my view this kind of commemoration also needs physical manifestations… I think that there's a need to be able to say 'this' was done during the Bicentenary (former Economy Minister).

> I think it was necessary to do something for the Bicentenary, they saw this building was there, and well, saw the opportunity to do something with a smaller budget than would be required to build a totally new work (heritage protection NGO, Director).

> Because it was the strongest thing they had at hand. If a Bicentenary commission had really been set up that could have thought about these questions in strategic terms and not in terms of value for money and opportunity, that is, 'I've got this and I grab it', if they had thought about it in strategic terms they would have had a vague idea that a building as such would cost many and many millions of dollars. Come on, let's stop the ball guys, let's leave the building to Lavagna; the SIDE remains there; and we, I don't know, we build 37 schools across the country, and this is fantastic, this is my vision (Architects Central Society, Director).

> *Your question would require the existence of a planning intention in Argentina* to know why something gets to be done. I think that it is as contemporary as any other decision; in this case it was right, in other cases, wrong. Don't think there must have been any study of the needs. First, there was no communication between the city and the national governments (Architect, CCB Competition Advisor).

Once again, opportunism explains why the postal palace had been chosen by the government to be one of the national commemorative icons. We have seen that the bicentenary proved to be a unique opportunity to develop a whole series of activities; in turn, the postal palace offered an unmissible opportunity to 'do something' for the bicentenary while also leaving a physical legacy in the capital city. Between late 2008 and early 2009 when I conducted the interviews, there was a general sense that 'nothing would be done' for the bicentenary. This disillusionment resulted from the high level of disorganisation of the commemorative activities, the absence of communication between the different organising committees, and the real lack of time to plan ahead the celebrations.

The cost of the refurbishment of the postal building became a target of criticism of the CCB project. Despite his role as the organiser of the international architectural

competition to redevelop the postal building, the Director of the Architects Central Society (SCA) expressed his disagreement with the official politics of commemoration and doubted the convenience of assigning the building commemorative purposes due to the high cost and likely low impact of the project. Even though in the quotes cited above the NGO Director made reference to the lower cost of reusing an existing building than to constructing a new one, the extremely high cost incurred to refurbish the palace ($ 925,799,107.96, which is equivalent to 225 million dollars) constituted a matter of great concern among interviewees. If we consider the avid interest shown by the current Argentinian President in the redevelopment of the postal building, then the costly budget allocated for this project is understandable. Even so, she was involved in the project before taking over the presidential role, as explained by the architects awarded the Third Prize[120] in the CCB public competition:

> Cristina is very interested [in the CCB project]… she goes there very often… she attends meetings, she asks…. From a political point of view, she will want it [this project]. She wants it to be her reputation, *it is her project*. That was clear from the very moment in which awards were given; it was she who attended [the awards ceremony] and not the President, she was Senator at that time, so she wasn't involved in the organisation of the competition, there was also the Culture Minister there, etc, but clearly is…. She wants it to be her reputation.

The SCA Director also manifested his surprise to see Nestor Kirchner, the then President, and his wife, Cristina Fernandez, unusually interested in an architectural project of this kind. He speaks of 'the strategic importance that this building had considering its positioning as a symbol' when describing how the agreement between

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120 The first prize ($234,000 Argentine Pesos) was allocated to the B4FS Studio (Enrique Bares, Federico Bares, Nicolas Bares, Daniel Becker, Claudio Ferrari and Florencia Schnack); the second prize was not awarded; and the third was shared between two architectural practices ($60,000 for each winning team): Luis Ibarlucia, Cesar Jaimes and Antonio Díaz del Bó, on the one hand; and Juan Jose Vicario and Juan Ignacio Meoz, on the other.

the SCA and the National Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services was established to organise the public competition:

> I remember that after three or four months of them [Nestor and Cristina] being in the administration, very quickly, they were very advanced with the procedures, and I am informed that finally it [the agreement] would be signed, but with the presence of the President of Argentina. An unprecedented fact, I would say, because I consider that this is an almost bureaucratic procedure, an agreement, it wasn't ribbon cutting or panel opening… So issues that reach the figure of the President who wants to be involved in the signing (…) Kirchner was very interested in the topic, in the city, really, I felt him very committed with the project and very informed.

What is more, Nestor and Cristina Kirchner travelled to Spain in 2005 and had a meeting with Prime Minister Zapatero in which they showed him the plans for the CCB project so as to obtain funding for the refurbishment of both the postal building and the Casa Rosada. Notwithstanding some post-meeting celebrations in the media (Bleta, 2005; *La Nación*, 2005b), negotiations did not turn out fruitful. Had they been successful there can be no doubt that it would have been very strange to commemorate national political autonomy from Spain through an architectural monument funded by Spanish capital. Reflecting upon the atypical participation of Cristina Fernandez during a later stage of the CCB project, the SCA Director stated:

> It is not common. I will tell you something, I was going to leave on Wednesday for a trip… finally I had to travel on Thursday because on Wednesday I had a meeting with the President. Because she wants exactly the same as her husband, she wants to be present, like her husband, for the signing of another agreement for the Post Office competition, but now for the postal workers.

Likewise, the political convenience for the national government seems to be the main reason why the postal building was turned into one of the main characters in the commemorative play, as suggested by different interviewees:

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Probably they didn't have another one [building]. It's a cliché… We have nothing to do with the Bicentenary. The Bicentenary won't be ours but theirs. Of course, it is public; everything is very official; coming here, cutting the ribbon and goodbye (Postal and Telecommunications Museum staff member).

My opinion is that it was an absolutely significant building at a time; it was closed, with no use, it was necessary to give it a new use and a good use was that it would become a symbol of a government's intervention in culture (Historical Sites, Monuments and Museums National Commission Director)

I have a very basic opinion: [the building was chosen] because it was empty. Even more basic: because it can been seen from the President's cabinet office [laughs] (CCB Competition Third Prize winning architect)

While the postal palace has been chosen as a commemorative object due to the various opportunities at hand, there is no doubt about the political expediency of appealing to shared past memories with the aim of gaining legitimacy in the present. The invocation of identities and memories in political discourses serves specific interests and ideological positions, as it is inextricably linked to issues of power (Gillis, 1994). Similarly, if we take heritage as 'the material embodiment of the spirit of the nation' (Hall, 2000:4), the particular interest of the national government in nourishing the national soul by redeveloping an important listed building proves more understandable. This is especially so if we take into account the fact that heritage often becomes a bearer of implicit arguments about the content of the nation and the legitimacy of the state (Wright, 1989).

Figure 34. Front view of the Palacio de Correos with a CFK's redevelopment sign
Source: Author's photograph, 2010

It is important to note that the postal building was *already* a constitutive part of the official national heritage. The conditions under which this was made official date from 1997 when the Palacio de Correos was designated a 'national historical monument' by Decree 267/97 issued by the CNMMyLH. This declaration states that the building is part of the urban heritage of the city, and hence, declares it to be a 'monument' on the following grounds: first, it's the association of its image with the history of the post office in Argentina, second, the works of art it contains, which are of 'outstanding aesthetic and historical values', third, its frequently having been the venue for national and international cultural events, and finally, its state of conservation which renders it 'one of the most important testimonies of its type'. This official recognition also acknowledges the existence of 'a museum in which elements that constituted the postal and telegraphic activity are preserved and these are singularly valuable for popular memory'. The inclusion of the postal museum in this declaration is significant in

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shedding light upon the existing contradictions within the redevelopment plans. So far these plans have not taken into account the future of the postal museum. It is still uncertain whether there will be a place for the museum in the CCB after its completion.[121] Neither has the national government supported the move of the museum collection during the refurbishment works, nor have the plans included the know-how of the postal museum staff in the new plans for the building, let aside the exclusion of the postal workers from the whole process of redevelopment of the postal palace.

By declaring the building a 'national historical monument', the CNMMyLH endowed it with a type of heritage value which encompasses both material and symbolic elements, including works of art, history, image, and memory, as well as its function as a cultural venue. This declaration was indicative of the need to protect the building in light of threats of demolition and redevelopment during 1990s, which were said to be a result of former President Carlos Menem's capitalist desires to turn the building into a luxurious mega-hotel, that is, a palace for wealthy tourists. It is important to note, though, that the formal status of 'listed building' did not prevent it from suffering from neglect, as we have seen in the previous chapter. According to staff at the postal museum, the building had never [122] been restored internally or externally, there was no funding for maintenance, the dome was losing its tiles, which had begun to blow off, there were leaks in the roof, the paint was flaking, and the façade was covered with dirt, graffiti and rubbish. This suggests that the protection of heritage needs far more than formal declarations to materialise; it requires citizen awareness, institutional support and management, continuous use and restoration, if it is to endure the passage of time.

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121 Even though the official CCB plans state that the museum would be housed in the redeveloped building, there had been no formal discussions with the postal museum staff in this regard.
122 However, the building was seemingly restored in 1992 (*La Nación,* 2003).

In Argentina, the public value of heritage has traditionally been subject to abandonment by the state, oblivion, lack of funding and often vandalism. The methodical and merciless destruction of what remains of the country's past (Schavelzon, 2008) is not new and can be traced back to the 1880s generation when the destruction of colonial past was a matter of state politics. While official institutions, such as the CNMMyLH, have played an important role in institutionalising the management of heritage, they have not done enough to create public awareness about the importance of heritage preservation (We leave to one side here the role of the CNMMyLH in shamelessly endorsing the glazing of the dome of the Palacio de Correos). In recent years some facades of listed buildings in Buenos Aires' historic district (San Telmo) have been restored with local government subsidies as part of a broader municipal plan for the renewal of the city's central area. Not surprisingly, this district constitutes a key tourist destination and local residents associations maintain a continual watch over the municipal government's attempts to renovate the area in ways which do not respect its heritage. In this context, the notion of heritage as a public field defined by contestations over its meaning has recently arisen in Argentina. In the last decade, the work of community organisations (*asociaciones barriales* and *asambleas vecinales*), NGOs (i.e. *Basta de Demoler*), journalists (e.g. Sergio Kiernan), and some legislators (e.g. MP Teresa Anchorena) contributed to the establishment of heritage as a site of contestation through which struggles over diverse interests, i.e. those of developers, neighbours, shop owners, policy-makers and architects, crystallised, while making apparent the *political* nature of heritage (this is further discussed in Chapter 6).

There was also a sense that the postal building would be a constitutive element of the broader ceremonial circuit of monuments in the city, *once* converted into a cultural

centre, alongside other public buildings also deemed 'important' to the history of the nation. Although the postal building was already a monument, before its formal declaration as such, it was chosen to become the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario also because it was strategically located, that is, adjacent to the Casa Rosada and within this imaginary circuit of 'emblematic' buildings. Yet the iconicity of the building was defined in a variety of different ways: while some believed the building had been chosen due to is built form, others thought it was precisely its structural elements which prevented it from becoming a true icon as its current façade is the same as the one the building had in 1928. This stresses government officials' 'need' to spectacularise heritage so that it becomes a visible icon in the city's tourist map:

> An emblematic work was sought and apparently it is this one [the postal building]. Look, if it is good and is completed, one will be happy. If they can't finish it because there is no enough money, then it ends up being a piece of junk (National Economy Ministry Legal and Administrative Secretary).

> I think there are several things with the bicentenary. There is the Taylor Customs behind the Casa Rosada with a mural we are restoring which is Siqueiros' Mural and which with this Palacio de Correos will constitute a very strong institutional-civic axis. What in 1910 were the gifts from Spain, England with its Englishmen Tower, Spain with its Spaniards Monument, France with its monument in front of the Fine Arts Museum. I think now Argentina, in these hundred years, has been able to grow and show that there are other activities which have to do with this new festivity. We have the expansion of the Fine Arts National Museum, the postal building, the National Library, the completion of the Book Museum, the Taylor Customs… Let's say, emblematic works (National Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services Ministry, Advisors' Chief).

It is widely accepted that the postal palace is an emblematic building; however, what is being commemorated in its transformation into a commemorative cultural centre? Certainly, the importance of the building as a symbol or an icon. There is a clear sense that the building is iconic and worthy of preservation. It possesses a great power of

representation with its considerable large and imposing dimensions, monumental architecture, and strategic location adjacent to the Casa Rosada in the Buenos Aires' financial and administrative district. Yet being an icon is not a self-evident category; this needs to be filled out. We have seen that at the dawn of the twentieth century, the building arose as a bearer of modernity: it represented the power of the nation-sate, the country's economic growth, and the yearned-for 'cultural progress' and increase in the level of 'civilisation' of the population. And this iconic characteristic of the building seems to be what is implicitly valued in the official preservation and restoration of the building.

As both personal and collective memory are selective by definition, there is no remembering without forgetting. Connerton (2009:29) has rightly asserted that 'the threat of forgetting begets memorials and the construction of memorials begets forgetting'. Looking at the collection of memories undertaken in relation to the postal palace, it is apparent that the social history of the building is in fact absent from the official accounts. The change of the building's name to the 'Centro Cultural del Bicentenario' bears testimony to the erasure of the postal traces. Chapter 3 has shown the central importance of the postal services for national integration, employment opportunities, the training of employees, delivery of a universal and basic public service, and the provision of social rights for postal workers. These features were constitutive of the image of the state as concerned with the population's welfare. Even though the current national administration has made signs in the direction of the re-nationalisation of public services (i.e. post office, national airline, pension scheme, and the national exploitation of oil and gas) which had been under private management after Menem's consecutive governments, the removal of the postal activities from its historical

headquarters represents a contradiction. Equally contradictory is the fact that the postal workers were not consulted at any point of the redevelopment initiatives, nor were they incorporated into the official representation of the postal palace in the context of the bicentenary commemoration. Staff members at the postal museum were also excluded from the redevelopment plans, even when their main goal is the preservation of the postal and telecommunications heritage. There were some vague references to the integration and communication that the postal institution had made possible in the country. However its history as shaped by its inclination towards commemorating important events in the life of the nation was understated by most interviewees, with the exception of one who explained:

> The post office always commemorated historical and patriotic dates through philatelic stamps (…) The verses of the national anthem and the preamble to the constitution were in all post office branches in painted signs decorated with blue and white ribbons, so if these verses were not taught at school, people could go and learn them in the post office… Something educational, which shapes the culture of those who do not live near Plaza de Mayo, but 3,000 or 4,000 km from Plaza de Mayo, those little towns which have no access to modern telecommunications media nor can reach them culturally. This is what characterised the post office and is something which has been mostly lost, that is, the cultural penetration, the width and the breadth of the country (Post Office employee and unionist)

Forgetting the social history of the postal building, its functioning as an active production hub, as a workers' palace which represented the universal value of freedom of communication and national integration, while enabling the democratic enactment of the postal community of readers and writers, is not particular to the Argentine postal case, but rather, is a peculiar problem of modernity (Connerton, 2009). The official remembering shows a disconnection from the labour processes and the local functioning of the postal services which reaffirms what Connerton (2009:5) pointed out in relation to modernity. It is 'the human-scale-ness of life, the experience of living and

working in a world of social relationships that are known' which is being forgotten. This official amnesia tears down one of the many layers embracing the building, its democratic imprint. And indeed the government, which prides itself on its alignment with a populist and left-wing political tradition, has missed the opportunity to exploit this aspect to its own benefit as well as the potential of using postal services for a democratic act of commemoration linked to universal communication.

Figure 35. View of the Palacio from above, before and after the partial demolition
Source: Author's photographs, 2010 (left) and 2011 (right).

It should not be surprising that what is being preserved in the postal palace is its façade and its 'noble' sectors (the great halls and saloons of French furniture) and what is being demolished is the industrial area where workers and machines used to be located. The heritage worth preserving then gets to be defined by the inclusion of universal visual forms (architectural elements of French neo-classicism) and the exclusion of local/national political elements (the social history of the first state owned public institution) in Argentina. But of course heritage goes beyond the architectural features to encompass equally the intangible elements. We have seen that the social history of the postal palace has been eroded from the official preservation of heritage, or as Stuart Hall (2000) calls it, 'The Heritage'. This was in turn reflected in the decision to demolish

the industrial areas of the building – the postal employees' and workspace and machinery spaces – while keeping and restoring the most hierarchical halls and offices. Lowenthal (1994:49) argues that heritage differs from history in that it defies empirical analysis for it 'features fantasy, invention, mystery, error'. In this regard, popular among the cleaning workers of the postal palace, for instance, were stories about ghosts in the building:

> There are people who have seen a blond girl with a white dress… She was saying 'come one, let's play' and they got a terrible fright.

> I was cleaning the third floor – I am very fearful – and then I was giving the floor a wipe when I felt someone next to me, he breathes, and I began to scream and then ran away. I always hear…

> In the offices that I used to clean you can hear noises, things running, taps opened, lights switched off, it's something unbelievable, but it's true, I saw it!

As Connerton (2009:50) argues, the histories people tell are central to the identity of place, especially when they refer to the processes of labour. In this sense, another popular story recounts the suicide of a postal employee who after being dismissed jumped from one of the windows of the building's seven floor. A strong sense of work identity probably informed this employee's choice of death in the very building that gave him work and then took it away.

A postal worker – who had been working in the postal palace since the 1960s – expressed his attachment to the building while sharing the following story in our interview:

> Having been in the building for so long enabled me to meet people who were relatives of those who worked on the completion of the Correo Central [the postal palace]. The building had people who were

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> carpenters, craftsmen; it had a very large staff comprised of people who worked in plumbing and carpentry, much of the furniture was made by people from the Post. All this structure was made by the architects…but the completion was done by the Post people. I was able to meet some of the relatives of those people, once I was even in an office that had a jewel case with a flag, a silk Argentine flag in a wooden jewel case, and an 80 year old person came in, asked to be excused, and explained that he had made that jewel case with his hands, and asked me to look after it (Post Office worker)

There is a central paradox given by the monumentalisation of an already existing monument, the symbolic and physical construction of a sort of *meta-monument*, stemming from the gap between a formal designation of a building as monument and its functioning as such. This is certainly a post-modern paradox, characterised by the obsessive need to monumentalise the past and the compulsion to build memorials in light of the threat of cultural amnesia (Connerton, 2009). Although the postal palace was a listed building, a 'national historical monument', its formal status was largely ignored..

The resort to past memories associated with the history of the postal building, despite being almost absent from the official description of the project, went through a selection process of highlighting certain memories and playing down others. This was especially the case during the inauguration ceremony of part of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario, as we have already seen. While the building became a memorial to the bicentenary anniversary of the nation, it memorialised only one past of the building: that of being a symbol of economic and political power, the seed of Argentina's *unexploited* potential as a first world country, and it did so to the detriment of remembering the populist and democratic past of the building incarnated in the postal work. The analysis provided by this Chapter suggests that the inclusion of industrial workspaces as valuable components of national intangible heritage could also contribute to keep alive meaningful social memories.

Global power nostalgia

Looking at the way heritage is managed provides clues to the significance of a highly valued architectural piece when rendered a symbol of national identity. In the case which concerns us here, the Palacio de Correos becomes a reminder of the glorious past of the nation, a site of a sacred nature worth protecting and an element which nurtures national belonging. This association between the building and Argentina's golden epoch is noticeably made by one of the architects who received an Honorary Mention in the CCB competition:

> I don't know what it [the building] represented at that time. I guess it may have represented an icon of development and progress; what it now represents is the project of a country which could not be, right? Or that it was only partially. It had to do with a project in which the state works, it has money, it has a certain pride, and it is in a way noble…. Consider that this is a building which was built by a French architect in a time when there were many resources here.

The so-called glorious past of the nation is stored in the bricks of the postal building, rendering it a source of pride and a relic to be preserved. The longing for an allegedly lost Europeaness is strongly and recurrently present in postcolonial Argentina. The country's massive waves of European immigration, its prosperous economic past, the French style architecture of part of the capital city and its monumental public buildings, the relatively weak presence of the indigenous population, and the mainly racialised official whitening project and the ensuing xenophobic attitudes towards those of darker skin colour, all contributed to nurture that national imagination. There is a somewhat melancholic and overly nostalgic sense in which the Palacio de Correos needs to be preserved on the grounds of what Argentina did not manage to become – a 'developed' nation. Gilroy (2004) has analysed post imperial melancholia in Britain and its difficulties in acknowledging the painful history of the colonial past and the loss of the

empire. Following his analysis, the inability of Argentina to 'jump towards modernity' and become a permanent member of the 'first-world' can be translated these days into the cultural superiority claimed by *porteños* (the capital city residents) over those from the interior provinces, and in turn, by Argentinians in general over the rest of Latin America, for they believe once Buenos Aires was crowned the most European city of the South (this has been discussed in Chapter 3). Argentina's complicated relationship with Europe comes alive in the preservation of the postal building as a mnemonic device of the glorious past of the nation. It reminds Argentinians of the days when Argentina's economic development positioned it among the leading countries as the world's granary, the main agricultural and livestock commodity exporter in the world, and a country with a renowned postal and telegraphic communication system. Keeping the postal building, then, makes it possible to keep those social memories alive. It brings hope for the future – one day Argentina might be able to pay homage to its 'first world' destiny – but also resentment against the failure to fulfil the dream of becoming a world power.

This 'mourning for what one has destroyed' is what Rosaldo (1993:69) calls imperialist nostalgia. It refers to the construction of an ideology of 'innocent' emotional yearning to mask brutal colonial domination, defined by a paradox: 'a person kills somebody and then mourns the victim'. In the context which concerns us here, that is, the role the Palacio de Correos plays in the national imagination, and in the recollection of memories of early twentieth-century Argentina's economic wellbeing in particular, the presence of nostalgia is apparent. It is not, however, an imperialist type of nostalgia such as the one described by Rosaldo whose core revolves around domination. It is a politics of nostalgia (Connerton, 2009) given by Argentina's persistent, if not structural, inability

to honour democratic values and institutions, think beyond exclusionary binomial categories which label the other as enemy, recognise the country's Latin American and indigenous roots, overcome economic crises and social inequality, venerate national causes outside authoritarianism, and come to terms with its colonial past, amongst other things. Material heritage, then, is of central importance in assembling the past, performing the nation and imagining its future. As Connerton (2009:27) asserted, 'the desire to memorialise is precipitated by a fear, a threat, of cultural amnesia'. What is at risk of being forgotten is not only Argentina's glorious past of economic growth and equally a *peronista* legacy embodied in the building, but mainly the post office as an institution, which could become obsolete in light of the rise of post-industrial neoliberal capitalism. The commemoration of the bicentenary anniversary, in turn, enables these unresolved issues to come alive and restages the status of Argentina as an independent nation-state.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the politics of memory of the planned Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB). It has focused on questions of whether and how the projected cultural centre was incorporated into the larger commemorative national events and the ways it engaged with the past, present and future of the post office headquarters. The arrival of the bicentenary commemoration was perceived as a unique opportunity to imagine and perform the desired city and the nation while reviving public participation. This took place in a particularly difficult context defined by the recovery from the 2001 crisis, recent confrontations between the central government on the one hand, and the municipal authorities, the media, the agricultural sector and opposition parties on the other, and the need to exalt the independence of a postcolonial nation in the aftermath

of power abuse, state repression and political violence. No doubt the bicentenary commemoration assigned vital currency to the struggles over memory and national identity in Argentina. This was illustrated in the display of cultural and political disputes over what to celebrate, how, when and where. That is to say, how the idea of the nation was constructed and represented officially, what material legacy was to be left in the city, which memories to highlight and which to silence, what the aim of the commemoration was going to be, and how the national identity and future national project were imagined. Issues of memory were proven to not only concern the past but conveniently confer political legitimacy to governmental regimes (Huyssen, 2007).

In examining the inauguration ceremony of the CCB, I showed that the postal building was certainly integrated into the official narrative of the bicentenary commemorations; however, it was by no means the central issue under consideration nor was its past or its potential for commemoration. Rather, the ceremony constituted a sentimental orchestration of national pride, glory and patriotic love in the hands of political elites. The discourse and video analysis demonstrated that the function of Cristina Fernandez de Kirchner's powerful discourse was defined by the government's need to revive patriotic nationalism, restage the independence of the nation-state and widen popular support. The President's expression of her personal feelings, anecdotes and memories shaped the structure of this public discourse which produced a particular reality: first, the CCB and the creation of a spectacular dome were something she had imagined; second, the post office was a warm memory that had to remain as such, that is, in the past; third, the bicentenary represented the coronation of the revival of nationalist Argentina under the *kirchnerista* administration; and fourth, history has been manipulated and needed to change. Interestingly, the discourse made agency both explicit and

implicit. On the one hand this was denied when involving controversial decisions with detrimental consequences (i.e. the displacement of postal services and postal workers from the building and the destruction of material heritage were silenced and no one's responsibility). On the other hand it was celebrated when referring to that which was seen as positive (i.e. the President's decision to project flags, the architect's idea to glaze the dome). In constructing a particular meaning of the CCB and defining its role in the official politics of commemoration, the President's political discourse enacted, reproduced and legitimised the central government's power and domination (van Dijk, 2001:360).

The past, present and future of the post office building were differently articulated through the imagined new cultural centre. References to the building's past came to shape the commemorative activities' present, yet the building's social history was reduced to a celebratory reference to Eva Perón's former office in the palace. The present status of the building was at times celebrated in terms of the restoration, and at times interpreted in a creative way. The displacement of the postal activities and workers was addressed only through an allusion to the 'wonderful place' where they would be relocated; the considerable delays in the completion of the refurbishment works were not mentioned at all. The imagined future of the new cultural centre visually inscribed an image of high-tech nationalist modernity on the materiality of the postal palace. It did so through the projection of flags in its converted dome as well as its projected role as a future generations' cultural lighthouse.

The plasticity of heritage suggests the existence of contending meanings and diverse histories underlying the need to preserve the post office building. I have considered

prevalent (nostalgic) forms of assembling the past of this cultural artefact. These include the building's capacity to simultaneously represent modernity and progress, the country's golden age, the welfare state, *peronismo* and the power of the workers' unions, neoliberalism and decadence, the rise of the cultural quarter, technological modernity and national identity. The postal building is clearly preserved in the name of heritage, namely, the central government's understanding of heritage that is framed within a nationalist and populist tradition yet in tandem with global city marketing trends. I have argued that the preservation of the palace was determined by its monumentality. As the building's current status of national historical monument was perceived as having deteriorated, the redevelopment proposal sought to re-monumentalise and convert it into an icon of cultural modernity, something which would bring both economic and political returns. In the next chapter I take up this issue of architectural monumentality and iconicity so as to examine the planned content for the cultural centre and explore in further depth the role culture and heritage play in shaping place-making initiatives and real estate development in the city's central area. Past, present and future, culture and politics, memory and economic speculation, are all intricately entangled. Lowenthal (1985:4) had already warned us: 'if the past is a foreign country, nostalgia has made it the foreign country with the healthiest tourist trade of all'…

CHAPTER 6

The political economy of heritage

Urban renewal, architectural icons and cultural rhetoric in Buenos Aires

The previous chapter ended with a discussion on the value of heritage and the symbolic function of the Palacio de Correos – how its monumentality and yearned-for iconicity became instrumental in nourishing the imagination of the national community in the present. Continuing with the analysis of the interplay between materiality, history, politics and culture, this chapter considers the projected content of the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB) in the postal palace and the planned transformation of its surroundings. It also examines another three urban redevelopment cases which, being contemporary to the CCB project, were also discussed by my interviewees and were aimed at building commemorative icons in the city's central area. The aim is to shed light on the *logic* of these various culture-led urban operations – their rhetoric, language, vision and goals – in order to explore the type of public places they seek to make and how, in engaging with the past and the present of the sites at stake, they shape their future in competing ways. In examining these cases, I intend to provide a wider local context of urban development in which to interpret the renovation of the Palacio de Correos, as discussed in previous chapters. While these projects share with the latter some key features – the use of culture and heritage narratives, urban regeneration goals and a commemorative character to honour the national bicentenary – the singularity of the postal palace renovation will come to the fore in my analysis, particularly in relation to its heritage value, social history and political function. These cases are sociologically significant in condensing existing tensions and conflicts of interest around the

transformation of the built environment, which has implications for the uses of public space, the city's image and its future. Responding to global economic, social and institutional restructuring processes, the cases I analyse in this chapter express changes in the production and demand of central spaces in the city, shaping the ways in which the state intervenes with urban policies (Cuenya, 2009) and demonstrating global influences on the configuration of local urban aesthetics.

This analysis is presented in four parts. First, I discuss the projected content for the CCB in relation to the physical features of Buenos Aires' downtown and the recent plan to build a new post office headquarters in a nearby area. Second, I consider the case of the city government-led transformation of the former Patronato de la Infancia (PADELAI) orphanage into the Centro Cultural de España en la Ciudad de Buenos Aires (CCEBA), Spain's commemorative cultural centre in the city's historic neighbourhood (San Telmo) adjacent to the city's central area, which partially opened in 2011. Third, I look at the case of a competition to create a new urban icon for the bicentenary commemorations initiated by Inversiones y Representaciones Sociedad Anónima (IRSA), the largest real estate and commercial developer in Argentina, which took place in 2008. Finally, I examine the case of the creation of an arts district in the city's renovated docks area, Puerto Madero, by the real estate developer Alan Faena, who commissioned Norman Foster to build his first architectural project in Latin America.

This chapter draws on Harvey's (2001) notion of 'the art of the monopoly rent', whereby culture is rendered a commodity that captures monopoly rent through the creation of marks of distinction attached to place and relating claims to uniqueness and

authenticity. Central to Harvey's argument is the role of discourse in assembling historical narratives, cultural significations and collective interpretations with the aim of creating those claims of authenticity.

The cases that follow will show the central role these narratives of culture and heritage play in permeating the transformation of the built environment. So-called 'signature' iconic architecture equally performs a fundamental symbolic function in the creation of marks of distinction, constituting a key element of the city's entrepreneurial politics. I argue that apart from the profit-led logic that characterises many urban development projects, as Harvey asserts, the element of contention is at the core of the cases analysed here, shaping both their emergence and outcomes. Contention is based on, in one case, past accusations of money laundering; in another, suspicions of illegal use of city lands; and finally, confrontations with local residents demanding social housing. I ultimately seek to show that, like the case of the postal palace, the urban regeneration projects in question arose out of disputes and were aimed at erasing the intricate conflicts in which they were enmeshed.

6.1. CCB: an imagined icon of spectacular modernity in central Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires' central area[123] represents the hustle and bustle of a metropolitan city whose lively street life, economic ups and downs, cultural heritage and unstable political history combine to produce one of the trendiest South American tourist destinations. Unlike prevailing so-called edge, polycentric or post-metropolitan cities (Soja, 2000),

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123 In this chapter Buenos Aires' central area refers to the urban space delimited between the docks to the East, the historic district to the South, the wide 9 de Julio Avenue to the West and Córdoba avenue to the North. A map of the area is provided in the Introduction of this thesis.

Buenos Aires still possesses one main centre. The centrality of this urban space is defined both by the administrative, political, cultural and economic functions it performs and the role the area has played since the foundation of the city back in the early sixteenth century, as discussed in Chapter 3. Despite the city's indisputable metropolitan growth, its centre still remains where it was more than four hundred years ago. At the core of the central area lies *microcentro* (downtown) with its administrative, financial and commercial functions. Its environment is shaped by the hectic rhythm of the city's everyday life that materialises in the highly-driven tarmac road and the concrete of government offices, corporation headquarters, banks and bureaux de change. This landscape of busyness invests the area with a noisy, disordered and chaotic appearance. *Microcentro* also constitutes a significant area in terms of architectural heritage. Its proximity to the historic district, San Telmo, and the presence of a number of emblematic buildings, among which is the Palacio de Correos, made it earn APH (Historical Protection Area) status. Offices, government buildings, street vendors, tourists, banks, cafés and parking lots intertwine to give *microcentro* a particular character shaped by anonymity and fleeting social encounters.

Despite the historical and central character of this area, it has experienced urban deterioration by a combination of traffic congestion, lack of public space, poor pedestrian infrastructure and environmental pollution (noise and air contamination). A large number of vehicles, including taxis, private cars, motorbikes, bicycles and buses, fight for speed in the overcrowded streets of *microcentro*, rendering it the city's busiest area. The presence of the national government's house as well as other official buildings leads to regular political demonstrations, adding to the heavy traffic congestion. The docks in the adjacent area mark out a physical boundary that divides socio-economic

segments, functioning as a frontier or in-between space that becomes a void (De Certeau, 1984) and separates the city's central area from the newest and richest neighbourhood in Buenos Aires: Puerto Madero – the waterfront that has epitomised the concentration of wealth in the city since its renovation in the 1990s. Like other waterfront regeneration projects with cultural components that have been influenced by American models such as Baltimore, Boston and New York (Bianchini, 1993:5), Puerto Madero combines office use with gastronomic and entertainment facilities (cinema complexes) and leisure activities in public parks.

In view of its deteriorated urban condition, the central area has become the target of regeneration initiatives in recent years, most of which are still underway. These include projects such as: the relocation of the municipal offices from the city centre to the Southern area of Buenos Aires (Barracas); the riverside highway project; the improvement of transport links between the North and the South of the city; *Programa Prioridad Peatón*, aimed at putting pedestrians 'at the centre' by widening streets, improving lighting, pavement and traffic circulation; and the planned regeneration of the surroundings of the Palacio de Correos through the creation of public parks in the area. Regeneration has also reached other parts of the city, such as Palermo, La Boca, Almagro, Barracas and San Telmo. To different extents these neighbourhoods have recently been transformed by the creation of new retail spaces, especially clothing stores, hotels, hostels and tango industry products and services. There are also entertainment facilities that cater particularly to the night-time economy (nightclubs, pubs, 'café culture', non-mainstream arts, performance and music venues) and the so-called creative industries clusters (cinema and TV, design, antiques and crafts). These new spaces boost tourism and promote the city's image as a cultural and trendy hotspot (this is

exemplified in UNESCO's designation of Buenos Aires as a 'City of Design' or the local government's tourist promotion of the capital city as 'The Tango City' or a 'Gay City', in reference to the city's alleged gay-friendly milieu and specialist 'gay services'').

These processes of urban beautification or 'Haussmannisation' crusades to renew the city from the centre to the edge (Davis, 2006) bring about a spatial reconfiguration, often leading to a process of gentrification with its subsequent reproduction of social and urban inequalities (Massey, 2007). Gentrification results from the displacement of resident populations by the arrival of wealthier newcomers, an introduction of new aesthetics in the neighbourhood, change in the nature of the retail offer, property renovation and rent rise. In some occasions, the discourse of urban regeneration becomes an indirect way of promoting gentrification as the cure for all the problems of cities, disguising its negative effects (Lees, 2000). Urban regeneration and gentrification, then, become two sides of the same coin, one which renders culture, as we have already seen, as a panacea that enables the implementation of these at once celebrated and contested urban renewal processes.

In spite of the existence of concrete physical problems that require urban intervention, there has been resistance against these initiatives in Buenos Aires. Architects opposing real estate developers, neighbours' associations resisting government proposals, heritage advocates combating builders, shanty town residents fighting against slum-clearance policies – all remind us that Buenos Aires is a city of inequality. Spatial fragmentation deepens *vis-à-vis* social inequality, making Buenos Aires a city where the public interest is lost in light of a built environment which is continually reshaped in response to private demands (Pírez, 2002). We shall see in this chapter that at stake in Buenos Aires is the

central area itself, a result of the contending interests championed by the diverse social actors acting in this area. In turn, these opposing interests give rise to disputes over uses of space that culture and heritage narratives are were called upon to dissipate.

In this context of urban regeneration, the Palacio de Correos was dreamed of as the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB), a spectacular cultural quarter in the city's central area. As discussed in Chapter 4, the CCB project emerged with an instrumental character in response to a number of claimed needs: the need to shape the future of a contested heritage building; the need to plan with great pomp and fanfare commemorative activities for the advent of the national bicentenary anniversary; the need of a large-scale classical music venue in the capital city; and the need to re-value an 'abandoned' building. My analysis now focuses on the particular features of the CCB from both a symbolic and a policy perspective: the visions, dreams and hopes for its future as well as the current architectural, financial and planning issues.

A display of 'modern culture'

If the nature of B4FS's winning proposal for the CCB could be defined in one word, that word would be spectacular. Spectacular for not only the high-quality technical aspects of its architectural intervention, as celebrated by the competition jury members, but also for the spectacular forms of its content, that is, its intention to put together a *spectacle of culture*, a *display of modernity* through the use of certain architectural forms and materials. Even though the actual content of the CCB's cultural programme is still uncertain at the time of writing, the virtual projection suggests that visitors will be invited to be part of that spectacle through their sensorial experiences. Such experiences constitute *flânerie*, where visitors stroll around the different spaces, admire the theatrical

figures and visual forms, colours, and light and shadow plays, and immerse themselves in an illusionary world, whilst performing what Franz Hessel ([1929] 2004) has called the 'art of taking a walk' inside the building. Projected CCB users – or 'potential consumers' in the words of the official project description – are comprised of businesspeople who add a very formal, corporate style to the virtual project [figure 36]. They would also include both local residents and national and international visitors, who would become *spectators* – the favourite figure of modern *flânerie* – leisurely rejoicing over the idle observation of 'culture'.
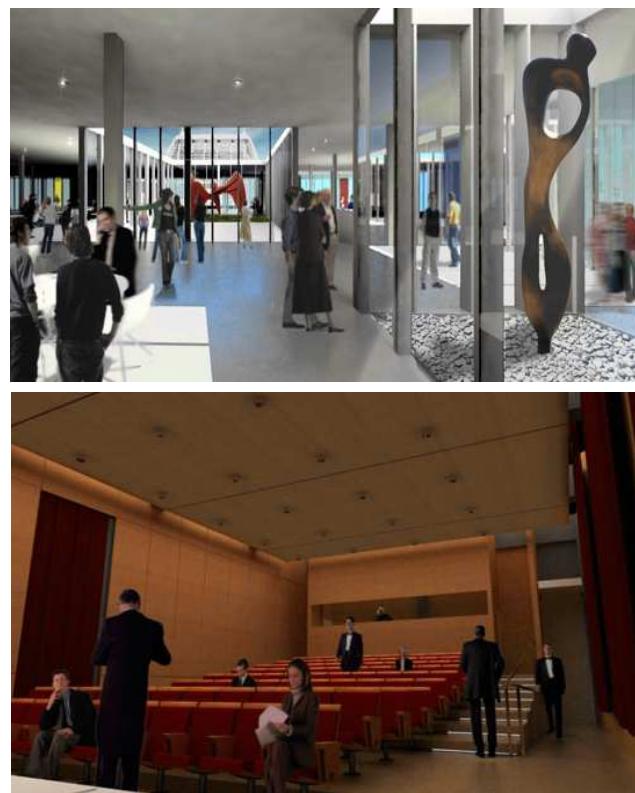
Figure 36. Projected users and interior spaces
Source: Proyecto CCB website

The CCB has been planned as a large-scale multi-arts complex. As we have seen, the Palacio de Correos is divided into two clearly distinctive parts: the palatial area and the industrial sector. The competition guidelines requested the restoration and preservation of the so-called 'noble area' and the intervention of the industrial sector. The architects

have proposed to create a void by demolishing the building's industrial areas – this aspect of the project has already materialised. The aim of this void is to be filled by three singular new elements: La Jaula, El Chandelier and La Ballena Azul [figure 37]. Through a careful, rational and detailed spatial re-configuration of the interior space, the architects have sought to re-signify the palace by replacing the industrial areas with the spectacular theatrical figures. The redevelopment plans would also include: a small cinema (capacity 120), exhibition rooms, a large auditorium for symphonic music (capacity 2,000), a chamber music room (capacity 600), a glazed exhibition hall, a terrace viewpoint offering gastronomic and leisure services, and, seemingly,[124] a space for the postal and telegraphic museum as well as a post office branch. Along with housing the National Symphonic Orchestra, the CCB would accommodate the Argentine Music National Orchestra, the National Polyphonic Choir and the National Folkloric Ballet.
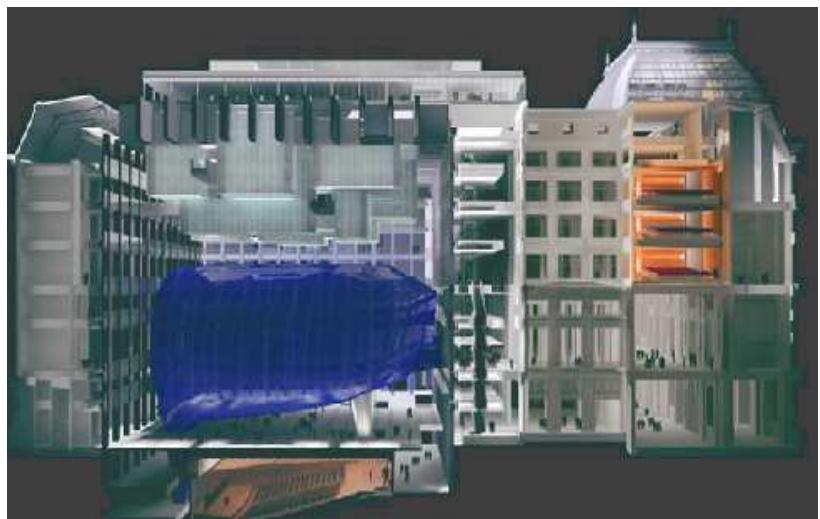
Figure 37. Projected interior of the CCB, with La Jaula, La Ballena Azul and El Chandelier
Source: Proyecto CCB website

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124 Even though the official plans include the postal museum and a post office branch in the building, the government has announced and organised an architectural competition for the construction of a new post office headquarters which is briefly discussed later in this chapter. In addition, staff at the postal museum have not been contacted regarding the redevelopment plans; in fact, they had to find a temporary place for the museum collection and move the materials by themselves with no official material support or guidance. These facts suggest uncertainty over the postal museum and branch returning to the palace once refurbishment has been completed.

La Jaula [Fig. 38] has been designed as a metal column cage to bear witness to 'the transition between past and present'. The combination of materials such as glass, steel and iron with red carpets, trendy furniture design, light and shadow plays and different forms and colours is expected to create 'a fleeting, mutable, and amazing feeling' (DNA, 2006:45) among visitors. La Jaula is designed as a cage that aims to trap individuals in cultural forms of visual spectacularity. In the architects' own words, La Jaula is: 'a virtual box in which volumes float, highlighting the lights, shadows and transparencies plays, producing an illusory, fluid and magic space' (DNA, 2006:45). This way, the CCB would represent the myth of modernity, nurtured by spectacular visual forms and the promise of high-tech aesthetics, aimed at casting a shadow over visitors' minds so as to enchant them with the dream of inhabiting a modern cultural city, if not becoming modern themselves.
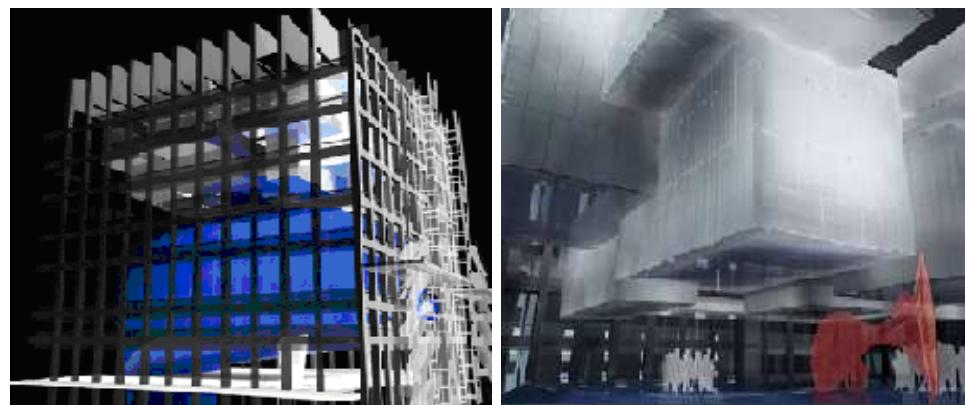
Figure 38. Projected La Jaula (left) and El Chandelier (right).
Source: Proyecto CCB website

Together with the cage, the architectural proposal suggests the construction of El Chandelier [figure 38], an explicit reference to the candelabras hanging from nineteenth-century theatre halls. The structure, to be suspended from the roof showing its three-dimensional form, would house large halls for exhibition purposes. Finally, La Ballena Azul [figure 39] would be an iconic, suspended, gigantic (symphonic) auditorium,

featuring the form of a blue whale, a 'monster with different qualities', according to the B4FS architects. This figure is explicitly aimed at inducing great surprise in visitors and it emerged in homage to the startling effect produced by the Italian gardens with monsters, exemplified by the city of Bomarzo's Park of the Monsters.
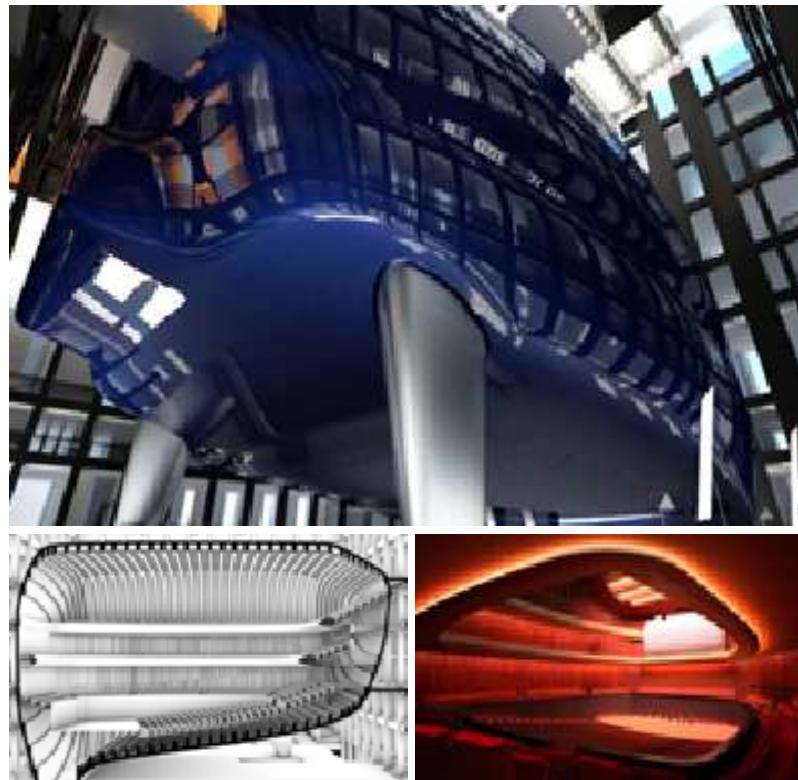
Figure 39. Projected exterior, interior and plan of La Ballena Azul.
Source: Individual images taken from the Proyecto CCB website.

A 'soft', rational and technical logic characterises the official narratives of the CCB. This logic is based upon the use of a particular language that combines rational elements (i.e. the use of market research data on the cultural field showing the existence of an unmet need for a cultural centre of this kind, or the economic contribution and growth of the cultural and creative industries in Argentina, backed with statistical evidence), with technical explanations (i.e. the precise details of the architectural intervention, or the

FODA analysis showing strengths, opportunities, weaknesses and threats)[125] and the dimension of the experiential (i.e. references to feelings, senses and textures).

The computerised theatrical figures for the building's former industrial sector depict a sense of spatial immensity, newness, surprise, technological systems, innovation and capital investment that would transport the public to an imagined space of modernity through a type of *flânerie* that 'embraces surrealistic and impressionistic sensibilities, the intoxication with images as icons of modern mythology, and an increased attention to the light and textures of big city environments' (Gleber, 1999:8). Since the enduring dream of 'modernity' in Argentina may not yet be a reality in the face of social exclusion, violent crime, unemployment and spatial segregation, among other urban and social ills, the building's interior would provide a feeling of comfort and illusion, distanced from the outside world's tough realities.[126] Considering that modernity has been understood as the different modes of experiencing that which is *new* in a certain society (Frisby, 2001), the CCB would be presenting itself as a site where the modern in the cultural field is to be established. That which is new would then be dictated by that which is unusual in the local cultural field: high capital investment in infrastructure; spectacular iconic visual forms; a display of great political commitment with a cultural project; an expected major urban impact through culture; and the large-scale, multi-arts and high-tech nature of the cultural centre.

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125 Curiously, the first threat described by the official document is 'the concentration of economic power in the central countries', for the architects believe this 'allows these countries to impose cultural contents over the developing countries' (DNA, 2006: 36).
126 This statement is inspired by Richard Sennett's (1990:33) analysis of a picture of the Union Club that showed how it stood up from the background of smoke, confusion and noise, demonstrating security against the city's complexity.

The combination of steel (Jaula) and glass (Chandelier), lights and shadows and the whole fantasy and playful scene imagined in the virtual CCB would then effectively induce in visitors a dream state and isolation from the outside world. Yet visitors could be awakened from this surrealist dream of theatre-like reality by evoking history (Buck-Morss, 1991:34). In the same way that Benjamin conceived outdated material objects as the historical survivors from the dawn of industrial culture (Buck-Morss, 1991:4), it can be said that the postal palace arises today as an object that, notwithstanding its palatial magnificence, provides a cue to a forgotten past – a form of successful welfare state incarnated in the postal institution – and a forgotten present – working-class culture and the value of education and training in the workspace – against the dazzling rise of spectacular culture that celebrates conventionally elitist artistic forms.

If the postal palace represented the power of the state in the early twentieth century, as we have seen in Chapter 3, it was not only due to its monumental and sober vastness or its French architectural splendour, but also because of Argentina's economic growth, which was by then facilitated by telecommunication technologies and visible in the building's frantic industrial activities and machinery. Today the space contained in the building's industrial sector represents a vacuum, an abandoned factory. Indeed, the demolition of the industrial sector was deemed inevitable if the redevelopment plans were to impede the empty industrial sector from obscuring the fantasy of the visual spectacle to be displayed. The industrial ruins now lie in wait for the new architectural figures to emerge, and so does the recently projected new post office headquarters, which has been planned but has not yet materialised.

A new urban landmark for the post office?

The removal of the post office from its historical location is indicative of the global trends of economic restructuring, revitalisation of historic districts and cities' central areas and the conversion of industrial production sites into cultural venues. Postal services are to be transferred to a brand new building to be constructed in the current location of the International Postal Centre (CPI) in the Retiro area, whose structure is expected to be demolished soon, following the official redevelopment plans of the Palacio de Correos. In 2009, the national government announced the organisation through the SCA of a national competition (National Competition of Preliminary Projects for the Corporate Branch of the Argentine Republic's Post Office) to build a brand new post office headquarters in Buenos Aires. Surprisingly, the competition guidelines do not refer to the reasons why the post office must leave the postal palace, apart from briefly mentioning that the former 'has lost most of its enchantment' due to the emergence of new digital technologies; has become 'the snails' mail'; and is in need of a 'modern building, technologically up-to-date, with possibilities of flexibility and growth' (Ministerio de Planificación, 2009, n.p.). Despite these somewhat negative connotations, the document stresses the importance of the post office for: the delivery of packages and the facilitation of communication in remote towns and rural areas; the benefits of new technologies for the reorganisation of the postal services; and the continued dependency of online sales on the services of the post office. The new building will then have to express the post office's 'institutional emblematic status and urban character' to the community, highlighting its public nature and resource efficiency. It will contain areas for administrative offices, operative sectors for postal, storage and logistic functions, customer service and customs and loading and unloading. Additional services that used to be provided in the postal palace, such as a nursery and a

movie theatre, will also be included. The aim of this new official headquarters is to concentrate post office services that are currently dispersed across eight different buildings.[127]

Figure 40. Projected new post office corporate headquarters
Source: B4FS Arquitectos website

Curiously, the architecture studio B4FS, the winner of the CCB competition, also won this competition. The winning proposal for the building envisions it as a 'new urban landmark' which will be seen from the distance and will stand out in the local area with its modern architecture (B4FS, 2009). The projected building features a corporate style and aspects of international modern architecture: glass, transparency, interior plazas, nocturnal lightening and a trendy design. These features would differentiate it from the to-be-demolished CPI, a clearly more industrial building constructed in 1975. Through this type of corporate architecture, the post office is expected to show the world that it has modernised and adapted to global economic and technological changes. The newly

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127 These are: the 'Centro de Tratamiento Postal Monte Grande', 'Edificio Columbus', 'Edificio Casa Central', 'Edificio Centro de Distribución Domiciliaria Central', 'Edificio Centro Postal Retiro', Edificio Servicios Especiales', 'Edificio Sucursal Abasto' and 'Edificio Sucursal San Martín'.

conceived structure will stand out from the site in which it will be built, for the latter, being a vehicular, maritime and rail transport hub, has a clearly more industrial and decayed aspect than the former.

Local dreams, global forces

While the CCB plan shows the great centrality, ambition and scale of the cultural project at a local level, it is also indicative of the influence of global cultural and urban trends, particularly the creation of cultural quarters with an emphasis on their public space and the aesthetics of this type of cultural venue. In terms of public space, the main focus of the redevelopment plan is on the role of the future cultural centre as the cornerstone of the spatial re-configuration of the city's central area. The Palacio de Correos is depicted as a 'building-object' to a 'building-city', or an 'active, permeable and vibrant' building fully integrated into the city, especially in relation to nearby cultural venues. More specifically, the proposal intends to create:

> a new urban piece, a civic space with its own value and identity that would change the condition of fragmentation and decay of the area, perhaps the city's most emblematic one, transforming it into an inviting cultural hub, a link between the old quarter and the Puerto Madero area (DNA, 2006:1).

This quote demonstrates the instrumental character of the CCB project, describing it as is apparent, as it is the direct link between culture and urban space, with the potential of the former enhancing the physical conditions of the latter. The question of place identity requires the architects to consider the particular character of the city's central area: while it is described as deteriorated and in need of renewal, its heritage status and historical value are also acknowledged, being 'the city's most emblematic' area. In fact, the problem of preserving heritage but also giving space to urban renewal is captured in

the CCB's projected urban transformation, in which a cultural hub would mediate between the city's past – embodied in the old quarter San Telmo – and the city's present – a *desired* present represented in the well-ordered, clean, safe and wealthy Puerto Madero, the renovated waterfront and new neighbourhood. This would be both a material and a symbolic mediation, that is, the CCB would be situated physically in between San Telmo and Puerto Madero, but it would also become a site where the past and the present co-exist in the building's change of function, materials and image. Central to the spatial re-configuration of the city's centre seems to be Parque del Bicentenario (Bicentenary Park) and Plazas de la Cultura, a set of plazas depicting the various uses of the CCB, including Plaza de los Museos, Plaza de las Artes and Plaza Mirador. Resorting to an ideal of public space, this plaza jargon seeks to infuse the projected renovated areas [figure 41] with a sense of openness, communication and informal social interaction.

Figure 41. Projected CCB with surrounding parks and squares
Source: Proyecto CCB website

The project then expects to positively impact not only on the city's built environment, by re-ordering public transport and vehicle movement through the creation of new green spaces, but also on its social fabric. Consequently, Parque del Bicentenario would play an important twofold role:

> a regeneration role as the central area's lung and a didactic role contributing to civic sociability, the encounter with the other and the contact with recreational, artistic and cultural innovations, generating the city's new attraction pole (B4FS, 2006:7).

We can see in these words that the CCB urban project rests on an ideal of citizenship based on a traditional and romantic conception of public space as that which helps to pacify and mould social difference and urban conflict. Yet this is an abstract conception that rarely finds its counterpart in local urban policies. Massey (2005:152) reminds us that public spaces 'are a product of, and internally dislocated by, heterogeneous and sometimes conflicting social identities/relations'. This is clear if we consider that by now most public parks and squares in Buenos Aires have been fenced in, in the name of security, in a quick 'fence-fever' to combat vandalism, leaving what has been called 'a fence heritage of 21km' in the city (Castro, 2007). In this regard, the idea of public space comes to enforce urban regeneration, although it does so in a contradictory manner. Its efficacy to accomplish architects' goals to build public spaces to foster 'encounters with the other' is challenged by the presence of others in public parks who are seen as a threat – of vandalism, of danger, of uneasiness – and who are often incarnated in the figures of vendors, homeless people and street children, immigrants and other poor residents. Recently, Buenos Aires' Mayor Mauricio Macri has re-launched plans, which had been previously announced and subsequently rejected, to enable private companies to build cafés and restaurants in public parks. Causing great controversy, the plans are contested by neighbours' associations and some politicians and journalists who rightly

see them as local authorities' move towards the privatisation of public spaces with its implied exclusion of 'undesired others'. The logic of this move is one which celebrates the private sector's role in the alleged improvement of these poor-quality spaces, and in doing so, it brings to the fore the inefficient city government's participation in the maintenance and regulation [128] of these spaces. Such patterns of urban ordering transform the city's aesthetics and seem to be at odds with the desire to create truly public civic spaces. While architectural discourses like those underpinning the CCB project exalt the value of public space for socialisation, public spaces in the city are increasingly reduced in the face of uncontrolled real estate development.

In terms of the aesthetics and taste of the new cultural centre, we have seen that a spectacle of high-tech modernity would be created in order to highlight the 'extraordinary quality' of the planned CCB. And the standards of this quality are provided, in the official project description, by existing global cultural icons. Consequently, this description claims that despite the existence of 750 museums in Argentina, *none* are of 'international top quality in terms of facilities, reasonable size and management capacity' (DNA, 2006:39). It also suggests a type of cultural centre that would celebrate iconic forms over content, consumption over production, and visitor numbers over quality of offer, surrendering to market forces. While current local cultural services are despised for not being of international quality and for representing a financial burden to the state, the CCB would consequently strive to offer the city the possibility to inaugurate high-class ambitious exhibitions designed for international

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128 In this regard, Patricio Di Stéfano's (politician from Macri's party) words are illustrative: 'I don't think that the idea is to privatise, but rather to offer another service to those who go to a park, so that they will have cleaner bathrooms and a better and more ordered environment than the one which exists today' (Gutman, 2011). So the concession to private companies is seen as a way to have cleaner facilities which would otherwise be under the GCBA's responsibility.

circulation, improving the city's global reputation. What is more, the CCB official narrative makes it clear that even though some local efforts have been made to that end, these 'did not manage to position Buenos Aires much better than a dozen of shady provincial cities in Europe or North America, and not even to offer the possibility to compete with small provincial cities such as, to cite a well-known case, Bilbao' (DNA, 2006:39). The overall concept, it is explained, is to meet the existing demand represented by the public, the 'external economies' which ask for 'cultural promotion (in terms of creating a more educated, more civilised and more mature society to live in a democracy)' (DNA, 2006:41) and local and international tourism.

The importance assigned to the CCB was also dictated by a matter of size or scale, rendered vital to attract tourism and global reputation. It is expected that the cultural centre would contribute to the capital city's qualities and assets so that it can be 'recognised as a true Cultural Capital' (DNA, 2006:11). The CCB would then put Buenos Aires 'on the map', functioning as an effective 'scaling device' and attracting very high hopes and political commitment, like the to-be-built Niemeyer Cultural Centre in Asturias (Slater and Ariztia-Larrain, 2009). By acknowledging a city branding trend, globally followed and celebrated, the project expects that in the city-to-city competitiveness, Buenos Aires would take on the 'cultural leadership" of Latin America with the aid of such resources as the CCB. The hope is, then, that this new cultural centre would be among the world's greatest cultural venues, which the project identifies as Madrid's Centro de Arte Reina Sofia, New York's Museum of Modern Art, Paris' Pompidou, London's Tate Modern, New York's Lincoln Centre, Barcelona's L'Auditori and Bilbao's Guggenheim Museum. The resemblance to signature architecture is established not so much by the external features of the postal palace, since it still has its

early nineteenth-century appearance, with the exception of its recently redeveloped dome *alla* Reichstag, but by its interior's spectacularity of visual forms and the effect it seeks to produce in both the local urban environment and the global cultural map.

The CCB is a highly ambitious project, one which is symptomatic of the global power nostalgia described in Chapter 3, in showing a sort of inferiority complex in relation to Europe. The architects' and government officials' desires, then, are not only that the CCB be positioned among those renowned, mostly European institutions, but that it *lead* the ranking of some of the largest cultural centres in the world [figure 42]. By having an international scope, the initiative seeks the endorsement and admiration of 'the world's greatest capitals and cities'. Even though the CCB official narratives also make reference to the 'national culture' and the 'historic past' of the Argentine nation through recycling a national historical monument, alongside the "federal' character of the initiative – its capacity to integrate the totality of Argentinians beyond Buenos Aires – its scope is indubitably global. Size, global fame and tourism, then, are seen as the crucial elements for the success of the CCB.
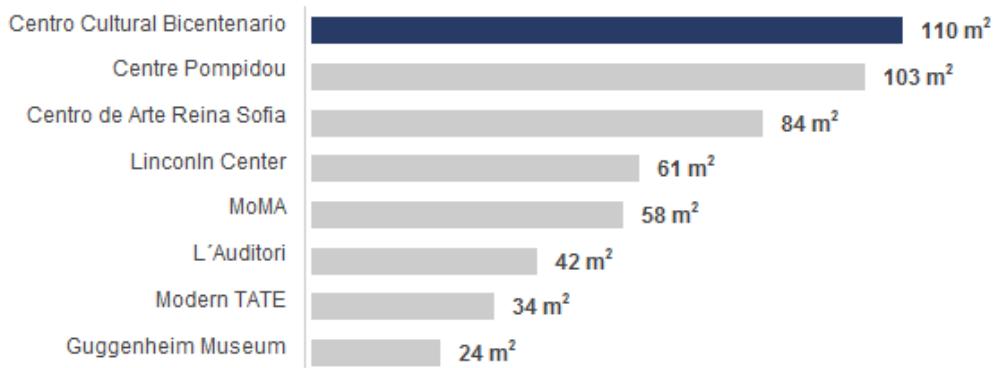

Figure 42. The CCB at the top of the ranking of the world's largest cultural institutions
Source: República Argentina, Ministerio de Planificación Federal,
Inversión Pública y Servicios (2003-2011).

Finally, the language of the cultural and creative industries (CCI) is also present in the CCB, framing the official narratives on the new cultural centre. It is claimed that creative products are vital for the construction of identity in being carriers of values and beliefs and that the cultural centre would help the city to become a hub for creative industries and businesses. In recent decades the celebration of creativity in cities has been the expression of a global trend towards developing, funding, organising and promoting the CCI. The cultural industries have been interpreted as a discursive construction aimed at giving economic weight to a sector traditionally regarded as economically marginal (O'Connor, 2004:38). Similarly, they were defined as a political construct, first deployed by the British Labour government in the late 1990s (Pratt, 2005), and then emerging as buzzwords in academic research and policy agendas around the globe seeking to tackle economic deprivation, foster cultural tourism, enhance educational skills and regenerate inner-city areas. Despite the lack of a generally accepted definition, the creative industries have been frequently understood to be those based on individual skill, creativity and talent with the potential to generate jobs and wealth through the exploitation of their intellectual property [www.culture.gov.uk]. Through its 'Creative Industries Mapping Documents' (DCMS, 1998, 2001), the United Kingdom measured the economic contribution of these industries to the national economy, prompting the proliferation of research on the creative economy.

Nevertheless, these policy enchantments with the cultural and creative industries, which can also be found in Argentina,[129] have not escaped criticism from those pointing out the precarious labour conditions associated with them, such as flexible working patterns, freelancing, unpaid labour, exploitation and gender inequalities (Gill, 2002; McRobbie, 2002, 2004; Oakley, 2004), without which the myth of creativity and innovation in the cultural field would lose its rhetorical power, if not gradually dissolve. In addition, the abundance of research in the area did not entail a consensus over the conceptual definition of the cultural and creative industries, the ways they should be measured empirically and/or compared internationally, nor their implications for traditional cultural policies. The exaggerated use of these globalised creative labels, which appear to have colonised the cultural field in its entirety (Anheier and Raj Isar, 2008:6), poses the risk of subjecting contemporary analyses of culture to a privileged centrality of economic dimensions and market criteria. Overall, this has created a 'creativity dogma' and also a powerful doxa (Bourdieu, 1977) seeking to guard the unquestionable desirability and inevitability of these industries. The local doxa, which establishes an equation between cultural development and the development of CCI, is nurtured by an international discourse on creativity and innovation that is supported by networks of experts and specialised 'creative services'. These services are offered by consultancies and think tanks, academic and policy publications and governmental organisations and research institutes, and they are mostly championed in the UK, USA, Australia and New

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129 Two main cultural and creative industries governmental organisations have been established in the last decade: the Cultural Industries Laboratory (LIC) and the Cultural Industries Observatory (OIC). Created by the National Culture Ministry, LIC, on the one hand, seeks to build a cultural information system and conduct research aimed at informing the design of public policies which could protect cultural economic activities in Argentina. Projects included are the production of cultural statistics, the creation of a cultural map of Argentina, the study of the public management of culture and the construction of a newspapers library about cultural economy. On the other hand, the OIC is aimed at the production of qualitative and quantitative information about the cultural industries in particular, and the cultural sector in general. OIC's promotion programmes concern cinema, television, books, video, radio, advertising, music and newspapers, and other cultural industries-related sectors, such as tourism, crafts and visual arts.

Zealand, among others. As a result, a taken-for-grantedness is produced in relation to the allure of these industries and their positive outcomes for the city's social, urban and economic fabric.

The presence and influence of these cultural and urban global trends are certainly not restricted to the CCB project. The analysis that follows will shed light on how place-making initiatives put forward by other actors (local government, real estate developers) are also powerfully shaped by a cultural rhetoric and ideas of publicness, contributing to reinforce the role of culture as a panacea. In all of these cases, cultural initiatives are intimately entangled with economic goals and municipal politics.

6.2. PADELAI: when culture reigns over social housing needs

Patronato de la Infancia (PADELAI) is a set of buildings designed in 1895 for the social welfare of poor children by prominent Italian architects Juan Antonio and Juan Carlos Buschiazzo. The buildings occupy a large block (5,869 sq. m of land) that constitutes a well-known site in San Telmo,[130] the historic district. The buildings were used for social welfare functions until 1978, when they were given to the municipal government by the dictatorship with the unfulfilled promise that PADELAI would receive new lands. In 1984 the buildings were occupied by homeless families. Far from being an exception, the occupation of buildings during the transition towards democracy constituted a common strategy by working-class groups to implement a city 'return operation' (Carman, 2006:58) in response to the evictions and cleansing practices undertaken by the 1970s dictatorship.

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130 In its origins this neighbourhood concentrated the wealthiest residents of the city. It then became a popular destination for poor immigrant families, especially during the 1980s, and more recently it has come to be a target of gentrification processes.

Figure 43. PADELAI, seen from different angles
Source: El Sol de San Telmo website

Two years after the initial occupation, this group of homeless families created a cooperative association – Cooperativa de Vivienda y Consumo San Telmo Limitada – in response to the eviction trial that the municipal government had initiated against them. Over a hundred families were said to have lived in the buildings. In 1991, during the Carlos Grosso local administration that attempted to solve the long-standing conflict with PADELAI, the cooperative was given 70% building ownership and the rest was divided between retail (25%) and community infrastructure (5%). This exceptional event constituted an important milestone in the urban struggle for social housing in Buenos Aires (Rodriguez, 2009). Plans included self-managed construction of housing by the cooperative in partnership with the University of Buenos Aires' Architecture and Urbanism Faculty. However, these plans never materialise, as the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA) failed to provide the agreed funding (Ferreira and Lujan, 2010). A decade later, the GCBA designed a disorganised and uneven subsidy plan[131] to persuade the families to leave the building, which some accepted and many others contested and rejected, ending up in hotels, boarding houses or on the streets.

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131 For further details see Ferreira and Lujan (2010).

Yet the story does not end here. In 2003 there were sixty families living in PADELAI who were brutally evicted following a judge's order based on the alleged decay of the building and the subsequent risk of collapse. The violent expulsion of families from the premises, which led to seventy five arrests and fourteen injured, constitutes what Carman and Yacovino (2007) call 'an exemplary eviction' in that it received great public attention, employed physical violence including dogs, tear gas and plastic bullets, and impacted on the spatial strategies of other community assemblies. This eviction was not the result of a casual government operation. Rather, it came to strengthen the socio-spatial segregation trend initiated by previous military governments to expel working-class populations from squatted buildings and lands in central areas of Buenos Aires (Marcus, 2011).

The risk of demolition proved to be a scapegoat. While the building was going to be demolished in a manoeuvre that a journalist described as unforgettable for having the very City Mayor on site 'posing for a picture with a helmet and a hand drill, hitting the marble stairs' (*Página 12*, 2008, n.p.), a court order interrupted demolition in view of the heritage status of the building. It was a piece of heritage, therefore, more caution was needed and the claimed 'risk of collapse' had to be re-assessed. The results, as many had expected, showed that there was no such risk. The recourse to the materiality of the building, then, was mobilised in two distinct ways: on the one hand, it enabled the eviction of 'squatters' on the grounds of the risk of collapse; on the other, it rescued the building from being demolished thanks to its heritage status. Heritage, then, provided the justification for the eviction of homeless families. PADELAI had been catalogued as part of the city's heritage in view of its historical value and classified as requiring 'preventive protection' under law 449 of the GCBA Urban Planning Code. Such

classification allows different degrees of intervention in the building, but bans demolition.

It was in this context marked by the demands for social housing and the local government's cleansing operations that culture arose as a panacea that could put an end to the interminable conflicts with PADELAI. During a tango festival, the Spanish ambassador in Argentina and the city's Culture Minister agreed that the buildings would be transformed into Spain's new culture centre (Arteaga, 2010). The GCBA, owner of the buildings since no formal rights were given to the 'squatters', decided to give PADELAI to Spain *for free* as a concession for a period of 30 years. Clearly this would absolve the government from any accountability with regards to the management of the building and any related disputes. Subsequently, the Legislature passed a law allowing for the expropriation of PADELAI in 2009, following an initial cooperation agreement signed between the GCBA and the Spanish government. It was agreed that the GCBA would give the cooperative association financial compensation for the expropriation, which by 2010 had still not taken place, due to the government's lack of recognition of the legal existence of the cooperative.

Evicted families protested the deal on the grounds that the cooperative had become the legal owner of 70% of the building through an agreement with a previous administration. A protest street banner is illustrative of this discontent: 'Coop San Telmo's property misappropriated by Spain's colonising empire in complicity with Mr Macri. Today the owners live on the street" (original in Spanish). But the GCBA denies any property rights to those families, who are seen as squatters, and insists that subsidies were already given as compensation for the eviction.

Notwithstanding the conflict over ownership, the buildings needed to be fully restored due to their physical deterioration. The GCBA had repeatedly stated its intention to call for a public competition to recycle the buildings. The SCA was expected to run the competition given its role as the independent professional association that traditionally organises architectural competitions, as discussed in Chapter 4. Meetings between the SCA and the Spanish Agency took place in 2009 to plan the organisation of an open, anonymous, transparent and international competition (SCA, 2011).[132] However, the Spanish government finally opted for another mode of hiring, skipping the expected public tendering process. The SCA presented a formal complaint against the Spanish Agency based on its failure to comply with the local hiring laws, including anonymity of the submitted proposals, an assessment of the quality of the project and the presence of a participants' representative on the jury. The Agency, in turn, justified its procedure by explaining that the project represented a significant public investment to the Spanish state (of over 7 million Euros) and therefore state technicians were responsible for assessing the projects, rather than private associations like the SCA (Videla, 2011).

In the midst of mutual accusations the buildings opened in 2010, the year of the bicentenary commemoration of the first national government, as the Centro Cultural de España en Buenos Aires (CCEBA) with a graffiti exhibition called Sinverguenza! (Shameless), comprised of young artists' interventions in the interior walls of PADELAI. The CCEBA is a project of the Spanish Agency for International Development Cooperation (AECID) and as such is part of the network of cultural centres in Latin America whose official goal is to combat poverty and promote gender equality and

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132 As stated in the letter of complaint, written by SCA President Architect Enrique García Espil, presented before the Architects Organisations Argentine Federation (FADEA). FADEA, in response to this letter, requested all affiliated organisations to recommend architects not to participate in the competition.

respect for plurality abroad. Even though the exhibition sought to adopt an informal style by working with street graffiti artists so as to reflect some of the local features of the neighbourhood, it made no reference to the conflicting character of the buildings' history or the very entanglement of these structures with the social problem of poverty and access to decent housing. Perhaps the title of the exhibition – Shameless – is a subtle way of referring to the history of disputes between residents, 'squatters' and local government without directly engaging with it, thus failing to provide an acknowledgement of the contending social history of PADELAI. More recently, the evicted families from PADELAI participated in a two-week protest camp in front of the building, demanding social housing.

Despite the invisibility that the CCEBA assigned to the 'squatters', the cooperative under which families are congregated continues to believe they are entitled to at least participate fully in the life of PADELAI, if not to actually live there. As the President of the cooperative, Carlos Vargas, stated in a newspaper interview:

> I am very sad, because these government people have betrayed us. The project that they did with the Spanish was ours; we presented it to the [GCBA Culture] Minister Lombardi. We had a few meetings; he was interested in it and asked us to not let him out. We would not have let him out at all, the only thing we wanted was housing. 'Don't worry negro[133], you will have housing', Lombardi used to tell me. Later on he did not receive us again and we found out about the agreement with the Spanish (cited in Ferreira and Lujan, 2010, n.p.)

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133 The term *negro* (black) is colloquially used to refer to a person of dark skin colour or a person of working-class background. In these senses it tends to be used pejoratively, mainly to downgrade popular cultural forms and those 'others' who are considered inferior. Similar negative terms include *cabecita negra, groncho, villero, grasa* or *merza*. *Negro* can sometimes have a friendly connotation, for instance when used among friends, although this use is also based on skin colour. For a discussion on social discrimination and the uses of these terms, see Margulis et al (1998).

The plan for the transformation of these buildings was interpreted differently by my interviewees. They showed interest in the project as it was being planned at the same time as the cultural centre in the Palacio de Correos, prior to the arrival of the bicentenary commemorations. A combination of celebration, suspicion and uncertainty characterised their views in relation to the future of PADELAI as the Spanish cultural centre. When interviewed in 2008, a representative of the SCA explained that the transformation of PADELAI was based on the government's awareness of how this kind of project can reactivate a decayed area through a positive boom in terms of urban regeneration, like in the case of the planned CCB for the postal building. The Director of the NGO advocating heritage protection spoke of the need of projects like this one to be based on local residents' needs by first assessing whether there is a consensus for the creation of a cultural centre and next determining whether its impact would be positive for those living in the area. In contrast to this idea, one of the architects responsible for the winning proposal of the CCB stated that 'nobody will say no to these things', claiming the universal popularity of these cultural initiatives. Similarly, a representative of the Economy Ministry did not hesitate to express his relief to find out about the involvement of the Spanish Agency because PADELAI, in his view, 'is a cave, a cave. Give it to the Spanish for free if they look after it… To discuss whether we lend PADELAI or not is absurd. That building has no solution'. He went on to explain why he believed so:

> This neighbourhood must have 30% of its houses squatted, do you know what squatting means? They use your light, steal cable television and live there. There is no sense of property, whatever one [the government] makes, they destroy it.

The case of PADELAI is of utmost importance for understanding the role that the idea of culture plays in paving the way for urban regeneration. It condenses a long history of

struggles for social housing and the right to inhabit the central area of the city. The buildings became a symbol of popular resistance after the 20-year occupation by over a hundred homeless families. PADELAI constituted the foundational experience of the tenants' and squatters' social movement (Rodriguez, 2009) in view of its status as the proof of these residents' ability to self-manage and regularise their population experience of housing self-management and regularisation of their status (Diaz Orueta, Loures and Agulles, 2001). Disputes between residents and the local authorities were finally and formally resolved by an appeal to culture, in particular, the creation of a cultural centre. More recently, the buildings epitomised the triumph of a strategic logic in which culture, understood in its institutionalised version, matters more than the need for social housing. An appeal to 'a cultural centre' enabled the government to absolve itself of any responsibility over the future of the building, to present itself as concerned with cultural planning and the commemoration of the bicentenary and to foster diplomatic relations with the Spanish government. However, at the time of writing the CCEBA had announced [www.embajadaenargentina.es] that, in light of Spain's profound economic crisis, it will leave the building. Once again, in 2012, PADELAI has been occupied by homeless families. This fact questions the efficacy of culture's function as a panacea. Whilst it enables and legitimises urban interventions, the underlying conflicts of the areas in question do not completely evaporate, demanding adequate solutions and highlighting the inconvenience of the pursuit of culture as a universal remedy.

This case raises questions about the extent to which current heritage legislation only protects the buildings' skin and in so doing allows for the material destruction of the interior of these structures, encouraging the erasure of memories of previous functions.

Because in the destruction of memories lies the seed of present injustices: no traces of past occupation, no space for current demands. The previous social welfare function of the buildings is replaced by a cultural centre run by the Spanish government – nothing more paradoxical to commemorate the bicentenary anniversary of the Argentine nation in postcolonial times.

6.3. IRSA: the owner of the land

IRSA is the largest real estate developer in Argentina. Created in 1996, the company works in the construction and management of shopping centres, residential properties, luxury hotels and office towers, among other businesses.[134] It prides itself on being 'the only Argentine real estate company whose shares are listed on the Buenos Aires Stock Exchange and whose GDSs appear on the New York Stock Exchange' [www.irsa.com.ar], alongside owning almost 30% of Banco Hipotecario S.A. The Director of IRSA, Eduardo Elsztain, has been considered, despite his low local profile, the most influential Argentine businessman in the world (*La Nación*, 2005c),[135] with a prominent international role as the Chairman (and previously, the Treasurer) of the World Jewish Congress Governing Body. Others, however, have described him as the head of the 'Jewish mafia' in Argentina, who is said to have betrayed his business partner George Soros, who used to have shares in IRSA (Spollansky, 2008). Despite the company's primary interest in the construction of commercial structures – alongside some philanthropic projects in the areas of Jewish education – the wait for the 2010 national bicentenary led Elsztain to imagine the creation of a new urban icon for twenty-first century Argentina. The icon was expected to become a milestone in the

134 Subsidiaries of IRSA include: CRESUD, Apsa Centros Comerciales, brasilagro, fyo.com and Hersha.
135 The title of this section was inspired by the title of *La Nación* newspaper article: 'Eduardo Elsztain: el Dueño de la Tierra'.

national bicentenary and a new symbol of Buenos Aires. Equally, it would trigger a debate on the type of city that is being planned and the need to regain the relationship with the forgotten River Plate. The SCA, the professional architects' organisation, was commissioned to hold a non-binding international competition of ideas, inviting proposals for the creation of this icon in lands owned by IRSA in the docks area (Darsena Norte).

These were not just any private lands, though. The company had purchased them from the state during the 1990s at a very low cost and under suspicious circumstances, when they used to accommodate the shipyard Astilleros Tandanor. Tandanor was a property of the Army until 1991 when it was sold to a consortium comprised of French, Belgian and Argentine corporations. After it went bankrupt, the consortium sold the shipyard two years later to local corporations in an operation involving municipal authorities. In 1992, the City Council discussed a project proposing the re-zoning of the Darsena Norte, where Tandanor is located, in order to authorise the construction of twenty thirty five-story towers. Following back-and-forth negotiations, the Tandanor case ended up in court following the failure of the new company (Indarsa) to pay the adequate sum for the shipyard to the state and the obscure privatisation process which also led to the investigation of government officials.[136] Meanwhile, workers took over the management of the shipyard. In this context, IRSA acquired the lands in 1995, proposing to the local government plans for building a mini financial city with a 500 million dollar investment, leading a national newspaper journalist to express with indignation:

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136 The most scandalous was that of Antonio Erman Gonzalez who at the time was Argentina's Defence Minister and ended up being prosecuted three times for the fraudulent privatisation of Tandenor. He was also investigated in connection to the illegal sale of weapons to Ecuador and Croatia. Like in the case of the postal services, the privatisation of Tandenor took place under Carlos Menem's national administration, which was characterised by corruption and public functionaries' involvement in illegal businesses.

> How does a company manage to win a 60 million tendering process, end up paying only 7 million to the state, and then sell one of its best lands at 18 for a 500 million business? The answer lies in the history of the privatisation of shipyard Tandanor (Santoro, 2000, n.p.).

Amid controversy over the use of the Tandanor lands, IRSA stated that they bought half of the company that used to own those lands 'in a clean operation without knowing of the existence of the legal conflict' (*Clarín*, 2000b, n.p). The problem was that the company from which IRSA bought the lands failed to pay royalties to the state and ended up in bankruptcy. IRSA's proposal to build a mini financial city in the area was described as posing a dilemma for the then-City Mayor Aníbal Ibarra: if he rejected it, he would lose the chance to have a 500 million dollar investment that would reactivate the construction industry in the city; if he accepted it, he would need to confront the related urban and legal issues (*Clarín*, 2000). Today the lands still have a port regulation and therefore only a port use is permitted. IRSA has attempted to engage in commercial ventures in the area on several occasions, each time causing great controversy. This is why suspicions arose when the competition for the new bicentenary icon was announced. A few months preceding the official call for the competition, a group of businessmen[137] had presented a US $1,100 million mega-scale real estate proposal to the Argentine President. The project, called Proyecto Urbano Bicentenario, aimed to build new towers for both office and residential use alongside a new cruise terminal, shops, restaurants and public spaces in an unexploited port area adjacent to Tandanor. In addition, historic buildings such as the Immigrants' Museum and the Naval Station would be restored. Among these businessmen were, of course, IRSA representatives. The proposal received criticism in the media and in the local architectural world for

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137 IRSA, Corporación América, Buquebús, Fernández Prieto and Vizora.

representing a powerful lobby that skipped tendering processes to make profits out of public space.

Figure 44. Dársena Norte, the docks area where the new urban icon would be erected
Source: Sociedad Central de Arquitectos (SCA) website

In this context of illegal privatisation, prosecutions of government officials and financial speculative dreams, the creation of a new urban symbol came to render the competing history of Tandanor a dissipating cloud. Why would a company willing to invest 500 million dollars in a highly strategic and valuable area (or 1,100 million dollars in collaboration with other corporations) with the aim of gaining spectacular profits from commercial/residential ventures now be ready to 'donate' the lands to the city's symbolic milieu by erecting a commemorative monument? This simply contradicts the real estate logic. There is no doubt that real estate and political interests too often intersect, as the case of Tandanor reveals by showing how government officials were involved in illegal operations to transfer public property ownership to businesses. The likely exchange of favours between government and corporations or the involvement of

politicians in 'dirty' businesses is not the primary concern of this analysis, though. Instead, the emphasis is on the ways in which a language of culture and heritage (i.e. the need to create a new iconic symbol for the city and the need to restore historic buildings) is employed by particular social actors to legitimise uses of space in the city; and consequently, how ideas of culture and heritage are produced and enacted through the redevelopment process – particularly when at stake are contested lands that are of high economic value in the city's central area.

References to the past of the nation framed the official narrative of IRSA's competition. The historical past of the surrounding port area of Tandanor was called upon by the real estate company in reference to the Hotel de los Inmigrantes. This emblematic structure comprising a hotel, work offices and a hospital was built by the state and opened in 1911 to accommodate, regulate and provide training to immigrants who had just arrived to Argentina. The Hotel became a national historical monument in 1990 under Carlos Menem's administration, just like the Palacio de Correos. The link between the Hotel de los Inmigrantes and national identity was explicitly addressed by a staff member at IRSA during our interview:

> If you visit that land you become astonished, you can't believe what is in front of you: your grandfathers were there; they stayed there during their first days after a long trip, really exhausted; it's so moving. We should put all this at the service of the public and before the discussion over whether the lands are private or not, whether there are capitals or not. The hotel is there and it's better [to do something about it] than to have it abandoned and closed.

This passage refers to a recurrent popular view of the Hotel as a powerful symbol of national identity, one which is based upon the idea that 'Argentinians descended from ships', in reference to massive European immigration to the country. Now turned into a museum, the Hotel would be part of the site that IRSA seeks to regenerate through the

competition for the creation of a commemorative monument in the port area. The site, in the company's view, embodies 'that glorious country that your grandfathers, my grandfathers, and Eduardo Elsztain's grandfathers dreamed of', as the staff member explained. The invocation to the past of the nation is not peculiar to IRSA's project, but rather, is characteristic of real estate development practices around the world. Those urban projects mobilise meanings, ideas of monumentality, architectural heritage and collective memories in order to extract monopoly rent through discursive claims to uniqueness and authenticity attached to place. In doing so, they reassert the power of history and political identity to transform the city's aesthetics (Harvey, 2001).

Notwithstanding suspicions over the illegality of IRSA's purchase of the lands, the competition received eighty-three proposals to create an icon in the 80,000 sq. m area occupied by the former Tandanor shipyard. The jury – made up of members of SCA and FADEA along with representatives of the participants, the Argentine President of Argentina and the Buenos Aires Mayor – short-listed twelve of these proposals. These works were exhibited at the Abasto Shopping Centre, built by IRSA in 1999 in the former fruits and vegetables market in an operation aimed at regenerating a decayed neighbourhood.[138] This competition was unique in that it involved public participation in the selection of the proposals. The jury selected two; the public, one. Prizes were awarded to: La Puerta del Plata[139] and El Mirador,[140] which were chosen by the public; and Las Agujas,[141] which was chosen by the jury.

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138 For a historical and ethnographic analysis of the Abasto area and how bordering migrants were displaced and rendered invisible in the neighbourhood by the regeneration plans, see Carman (2006).
139 Submitted by Miguel Alonso del Val and Rufino Hernández Minguillón.
140 Submitted by Ignacio Dahl Rocha, Bruno Emmer, Bárbara Gacitúa Moyano and Jacques Richter.
141 Submitted by Carlos Campos and Yamila Zÿnda Aiub.
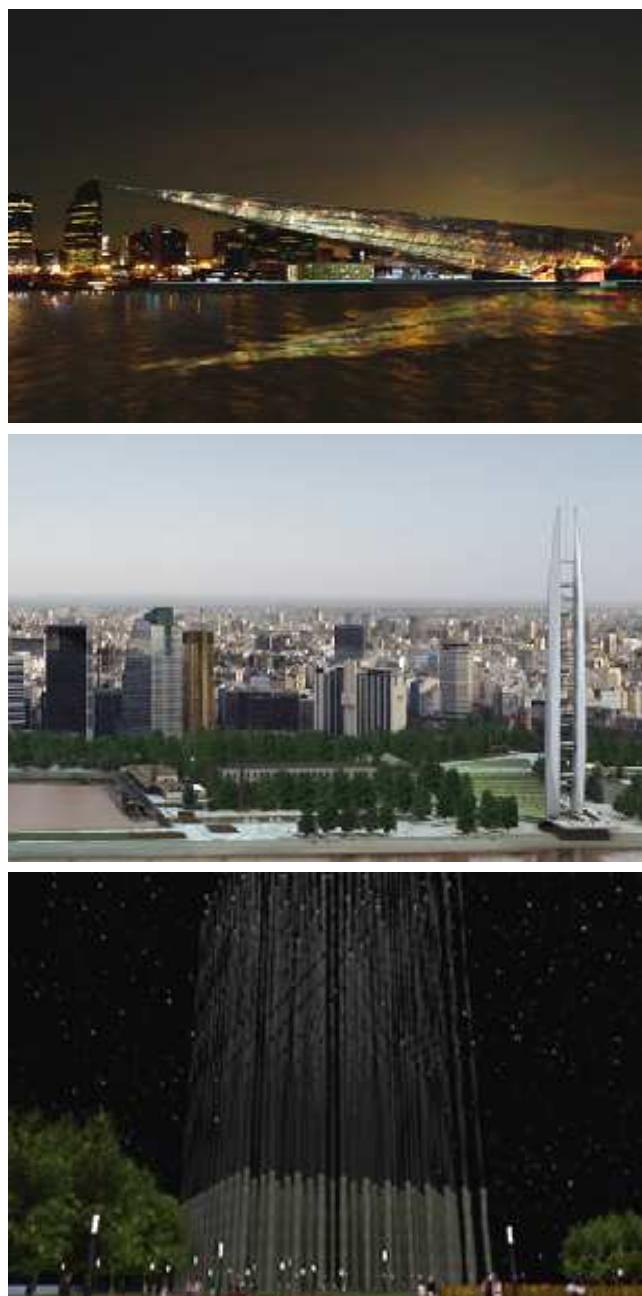
Figure 45. Winning proposals (from the top): La Puerta del Plata, El Mirador, Las Agujas
Source: Sociedad Central de Arquitectos (SCA) website

This commemorative competition presents at least two problems of sociological interest. First, it was initiated by Argentina's largest real estate corporation. This raises questions over the implications of the participation of a construction company in the commemoration of the first national government, and who has the right to commemorate a national historical event. Firstly, as a symbol of economic power,

IRSA's work locates itself in the profit-making realm, land value speculation and millionaire investments – nothing could be further from the symbolic construction of the imagined community and the remembrance of a historical event. Secondly, the invitation to the public to participate in the selection of short-listed works is equally significant. Public participation in an emblematic shopping mall is indeed representative of a common vision that certain social groups, especially the middle- and upper-classes, embrace with regards to the nature of politics in post-2001 crisis Argentina, that is, disenchantment with traditional political institutions, as discussed in Chapter 4. But it is certainly also an effect of post-modern consumer society with its 'commoditisation of life politics' (Bauman, 2007): where would (consumer) citizens go to take part in a simulated space of democracy if not to a shopping centre?

The competition is also significant in revealing contemporary place-making practices. The construction of the material city, aside from its symbolic urban image, is mediated in this case by a shopping mall and the largest real estate corporation in the country. As such, private interests are rendered public: the intervention of citizens in these affairs is entangled with local and national politics, as the active participation in the competition by both the City Mayor and the President suggests. According to IRSA, 60,000 people visited the shopping exhibition during twenty days and 12,000 participated in the selection of works. The company also explained how the exhibition automatically attracted all of the television cameras from the main channels and how the matter became news in the mainstream media. In other words, citizens witnessed how a real estate corporation belonging to the private sector occupied a dominant role in the political public sphere (Habermas, 1974) dealing with matters concerning state activities, such as the national bicentenary commemorations.

At the heart of this competition was, then, an idea of publicness. The competition blurs the traditional distinction between private-public, for it challenges the conception that a social actor such as a real estate company – whose work is underpinned by a market logic and whose private interests drive the construction and sale of private property – is not expected to engage in public matters. If this constitutes a move towards a form of privatisation of political life, then the intimate link between the state and the private sector, visible in both power struggles and partnerships, would undermine the public/private 'great dichotomy' (Bobbio, 1989). Apart from assigning it a public nature by inviting citizens to participate in the selection process, the competition motto claimed it was for 'the public', as an IRSA representative explained during our interview:

> In fact, this emerges from the Director's head. He told his advisors 'what an interesting idea to be able to do something in this land related to the history it contains; how interesting it would be if people can get access and know all this'. Because this today is banned from the public, it's a border people can't access, they don't even know this exists.

By claiming that the creation of the commemorative icon would be a fantastic civic contribution, the company puts its commercial logic aside, performing a self-assigned altruistic role of restoring the nation's heritage and making it accessible to its people. The monument would be, in their view, a gift that the company is willing to give to the city and the country. This raises the important question of whether the state's withdrawal from the role of 'heritage custodian' invites the private sector to serve this kind of function. In this regard, the IRSA staff member proudly stated that 'the company was the first to start talking about the bicentenary, before the national or the municipal government. Naturally, it occupied a place that nobody had occupied until then'.

The company's temporary dominance over public discussions about the national bicentenary anniversary led IRSA to conveniently expect that the phase following the selection of the winning proposals and the awards ceremony would involve a change in the area's land regulation. According to IRSA, the land 'has port norms when it is not a port area anymore, so regulation needs to be adapted so that the icon can be built'. This is indeed likely to happen in view of the great support IRSA has received by both the local and the national government. In IRSA's words:

> Both were really interested in the competition: to give you an idea, Cristina [Kirchner, the President] and Mauricio [Macri, City Mayor] had not shared the same table for 15 years, and for this competition they sat down together, so clearly this is a question that matters to both administrations…Our relationships with the different government sectors are really strong, really enduring. Consider that in the country's interior shopping centres are the most important companies of the province, they generate a great deal of employment, stimulating the area's economy. We pay a level of taxes which provinces retain, so we are very strong. Each of these shopping malls generates a relationship with the visitor which goes beyond the economic…

The attempts to erect a new commemorative icon resulted from the legal impossibility to build office/residential towers in the area. The company's intimate relationships with political power, the illegality of some of its real estate ventures (e.g. construction of towers and shopping malls that ignore existing legislation) and its enactment of an altruistic role in a capitalist society also framed the organisation of the competition of ideas. The competition endeavoured to materialise the remembrance of national history through artistic forms aimed at strengthening the iconicity of the urban landscape. It came to position a real estate company at the centre stage of the bicentenary commemorations prior to 2010, when the by-then-absence of state-organised commemorative celebrations helped to reinforce the company's philanthropic role.

Debates surrounding the erection of the new monument in the docks area have recently decreased in view of the uncertainty over the future use of the lands, and the non-binding character of the competition, which means that the icon may or may not be built. Nevertheless, the case shows how an architectural icon came to overcome the legal barriers imposed on the uses of a public space that was illicitly privatised during Menem's administration. As one important architect put it during our interview in reference to IRSA's competition: 'it has an interest of another sort, it's a mechanism to legitimise something else, I don't buy it'. Overall, the competition symbolised the desire to commemorate the bicentenary of the nation irrespective of the contending recent history of the site where the icon would be erected. More precisely, the competition aimed to intentionally erase the traces of such history by appealing to artistic forms, heritage protection and national remembrance.

6.4. Puerto Madero: the enchanted world of Alan Faena

The Faena Group is a large real estate developer whose work spans the areas of retail, hotels, gastronomy, culture and the arts, and, supposedly, community and wellbeing [www.faena.com]. It was founded by Alan Faena, a young Argentine businessman who became well-known for his fashion designer brand (Via Vai) in the 1990s, his eccentric looks – often dressed in white, wearing cowboy hats – and his liaisons with the worlds of local politics and international finance. In recent years, the Faena Group acquired fame thanks to its extravagant hotel developments in Puerto Madero, where the group bought, restored and converted old commercial buildings (wheat mills) into luxury icons – Los Molinos, Faena Art Centre, La Porteña I, La Porteña II, Faena Hotel + Universe and Aleph Residences, all aimed at making up the Faena's 'art district'. But it also became infamous for its display of wealth and the accusations against it of money

laundering and suspicious links with international tycoons and the 'Russian mafia'.
These accusations were based on the a lack of transparency[142] about who was funding
the multimillion dollar investment that launched Faena's real estate developments in
Puerto Madero.
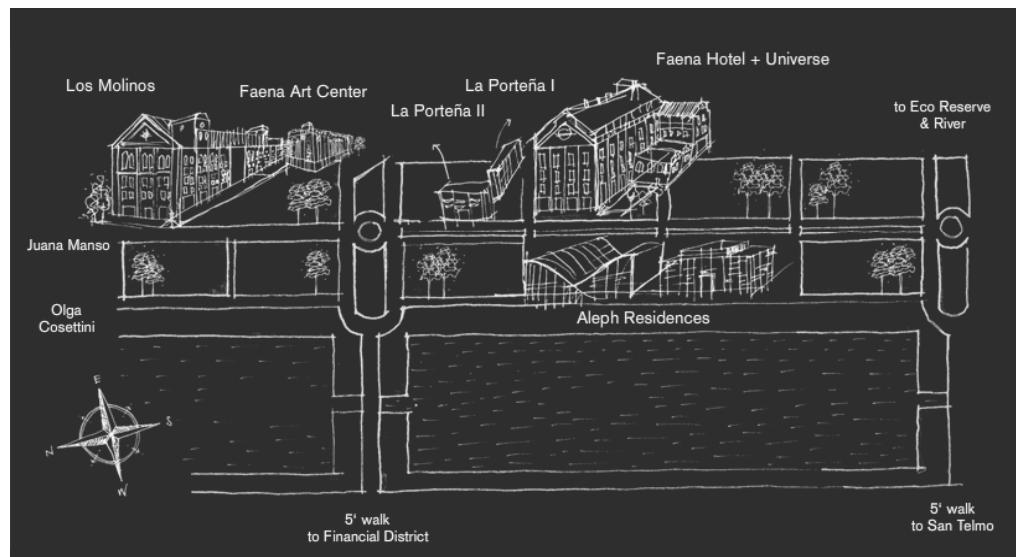
Figure 46. Faena's buildings in Puerto Madero
Source: Faena Art District website

The Faena Group does not consider its projects as mere real estate products, but rather,
it considers them an entire lifestyle. The peculiarity of Faena's buildings, most of which
are located in trendy Puerto Madero, results from the employment of internationally
renowned architects Philippe Starcks and Norman Foster on the design of the buildings.
Faena's buildings are also known for their restoration of derelict factories, their appeal
to culture and the arts and their use of eccentric luxury, all of which contribute to a
landscape of capital and power in the renovated docks – what Faena calls his 'universe'.
At the centre of Faena's developments lies the belief that another Buenos Aires can be

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142 Later on AFIP, the federal tax agency, investigated his investors' flows of capital, among whom were
Austin Hearst, Christopher and Robert Burch and Len Blavatnik (Sainz, 2006; De La Sota, 2006;
Schettini, 2004).

dreamed of, a city with 'spaces of overwhelming beauty' where 'extravagance, creativity and informal luxury reign supreme', a form of magic nurtured by sophisticated food, architecture and history that depicts a conception of culture as a utopia 'that will open our eyes to a new world' [www.faena.com]. Nothing could be further from the daily life of workers in the growing informal economy of the city, including the unemployed, shanty town residents, bordering country immigrants and all those who live in poorer areas of the city, which happens to be the vast majority of the population. A company representative explained during our interview that Faena's slogan, 'redefining happiness', is aimed at exclusive clients with 'a different sensitivity', those who seek a relaxed lifestyle in contact with culture and nature, who tend to be wealthy international clients and global rock stars and celebrities.

Of particular interest for our analysis is the on-going residential development 'El Aleph', in view of its appeal to culture and its apparent commemorative nature in the context of the 2010 national bicentenary. El Aleph, whose name refers to Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges' famous story depicting a point in space containing all points in space, is a block of luxury apartments in a 350,000 sq. m area of Puerto Madero aimed at offering a 'new urban experience' based upon art, technology and architecture. As Norman Foster's first architectural project in Latin America,[143] El Aleph started with a US $200 million investment by the Faena Group. The Faena Group then sold these properties to clients in London at a starting price of US $4,000/sq. m in 2006 (Naishtat, 2006). When asked how such a project would contribute to the commemoration of the national bicentenary, the company representative stated:

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143 At the time of writing, Norman Foster has also won the bid to build the Banco Ciudad branch in the new city government's civic park in the Barracas neighbourhood of Buenos Aires.

> The idea is to contribute this [Foster's] project, opening a new space of
> design in the city by an architect of great renown of whom there are no
> other projects in Latin America; it's like a *gift* to the entire city.

Like in the IRSA case, the Faena Group sees itself as presenting the city with an architectural gift for which 'the public' will benefit. In so doing, it produces an idea of the public. The project mission highlights the fact that new public spaces and an exhibition hall will *also* be created, 'softening the limits between private and public spaces' [www.faena.com]. The company spoke of how the lobby of their luxurious and extravagant five-star hotel is 'public' and for everyone to use. The clarification is not trivial, as the issue of public space has been central to discussions over the uses of the renovated docks and the role they can play in the integration of different social groups so as to overcome the elitist character of the area, currently characterised by costly restaurants, moored ships, order and cleanliness and luxurious apartments.
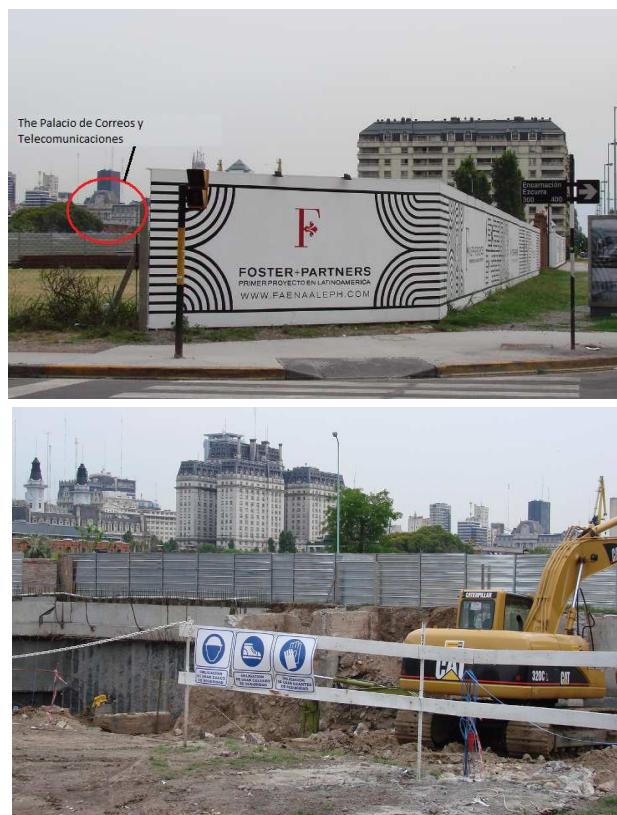

Figure 47. Construction site of El Aleph in Puerto Madero
Source: Author, 2010

Private companies' initiatives to appeal to publicness in Puerto Madero also responds to their need to lobby for new land use regulation in the port area so that they can build structures of varying heights, volumes and sizes. Their promotion of cultural activities similarly informs their agreements with local authorities for the authorisation of commercial projects in the renovated docks area. Despite the existence of the widely used Reserva Ecológica, the natural reserve, the new docks still evoke a sense of privateness, a detachment from the everyday city and the illusion of being in a gated community, if not in a totally different city patrolled by gendarmerie.

The question of heritage is central to the Faena Group's official narrative, as the company representative explained in our interview:

> The most important thing for us is to preserve the history of the place… These were emblematic buildings of an époque in which Argentina used to be the world's granary, was super-powerful, was among the ten biggest world powers, and we sought to bring that belle époque of the 1920s back in 2000 [through a Faena project].

In this manner, a heritage narrative has given rise to the company's self-celebratory accounts of responsible practice, whereby the Group sees itself as performing a heroic task of rescuing abandoned port buildings – otherwise, they believe, these old wheat mills would now be ruins, abandoned by the state. That is why the company claims that it does not work with other businesses in the area as these 'seek above all profitability, but forget about the cultural and heritage aspect'. It is precisely the void left by the state that paves the way for the private sector's profit-led heritage redevelopment. The fact that the company opted for restoring and redeveloping historical buildings is significant, since Faena claims that the restoration of these buildings costs three times more than knocking them down and building new structures. By restoring historic buildings, however, they make millions of dollars in profits with their various residential projects

in the name of heritage. In cases like this, Patrick Wright's advice seems relevant in relation to the use of the term heritage. 'This fatally corrupted piece of nomenclature should be sealed off like a faulty nuclear reactor: enclosed within a concrete sarcophagus, and forgotten for a thousand years' (Wright, 1999:27). There can be no doubt that heritage has become a business, an industry and a symbol of a new urban aesthetic which, in Faena's case, is crafted for the rich and wealthy tourists. In 1998 the first Argentine silos, unprotected by law, were demolished in Puerto Madero as part of the docks redevelopment plans in order to divide the lands for sale. The destruction of these important pieces of architecture, built in 1903 by the Bunge & Born company, was controversial. The demolition was described by some as a crime and a shameless attack towards structures that had both been representative of the splendour of Argentina's golden epoch and that had been admired by architects such as Le Corbusier and Gropius, for they constituted some of the most valuable and largest pieces of their type in Latin America (*Clarín*, 1998; *La Nación*, 1998).

As a result of the state's absence in supporting and protecting heritage sites, real estate developers have free reign to privatise public spaces. Allowing these companies to create a city for the rich leads to the further social exclusion of the poor. This type of urban development project shapes the features of contemporary public culture in a particular way. Public culture constitutes:

> the many social encounters that make up daily life in the streets, shops and parks – the spaces in which we experience public life in cities. The right to be in these spaces, to use them in certain ways, to invest them with a sense of ourselves and our communities… make up a constantly changing public culture. People with economic and political power have the greatest opportunity to shape public culture by controlling the building of the city's public spaces in stone and concrete (Zukin, 1995:11).

As a matter of fact, the City Mayor Mauricio Macri, by inaugurating Faena's projects, endorses and encourages private investment projects in the area, highlighting the intimate relationship between politics and economic corporate power in Argentina. Faena's real estate developments combine a luxurious urban aesthetic, international capital and political lobbying with cultural extravagance, claims of heritage salvation, the creation of art districts and accusations of money laundering. The idea of heritage that Faena so vigorously celebrates – as it feeds into his real estate and urban branding developments – makes visible some of the problems surrounding heritage protection in Argentina and the ways in which culture and heritage narratives constitute effective legitimising devices for the private sector's regeneration practices.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have analysed four on-going culture-led urban regeneration initiatives in central Buenos Aires, in particular, their logic and vision for the renewal of spaces and the ways they engage with the past of the areas in question. The influence of global forces was visible in all these cases, especially in the operation, language and aesthetics used in the projected cultural centre for the postal palace. The CCB emerged as the material expression of the modernity of the city, if not the nation, employing a language of city branding, urban regeneration and cultural and creative industries. The architects imagined it as the ideal locus for the display of spectacular culture, and they imagined its users as *flâneurs* admiring the premeditated spectacle of colours, forms, spatial immensity and lights and immersing themselves in a new world of sensations and surprises. The enduring dream of modernity, discussed in Chapter 3, materialised in the virtual cultural centre by re-signifying its very meaning from being expressed in industrial production

sites to being embodied in spectacular culture, defined by the consumption of images and leisure.

In exploring how long-standing disputes between local authorities and residents over the uses and the future of PADELAI resulted in the creation of a cultural centre on its premises, I have shown how culture came to ease existing tensions and justify a controversial intervention. With regards to Alan Faena's initiatives, he used a culture/heritage rhetoric to give his projects a stamp of legitimacy that glosses over his history of alleged money laundering and of constructing banal paradises of extravagance. This rhetoric also gave him the legitimacy he craved from the public, as he claimed that his real estate projects were not only for the rich but were also 'popular' cultural venues. By considering his self-congratulatory role as a 'heritage hero', I demonstrated how heritage acted as a source of prestige meant to assign an aura of creativity and social responsibility to neoliberal projects of luxurious consumption which create both landscapes of wealth and a geography of exclusion (Davis and Monk, 2007). Similarly, the analysis of IRSA's commemorative competition revealed, once again, how powerful an appeal to culture and heritage can be in a city's neoliberal context – it managed to erase the public traces of the alleged illegality of the company's purchase of the lands.

The appeal to Argentina's 'golden age', discussed in Chapter 5, reappeared in two of the cases analysed in this chapter: on the one hand, IRSA's competition encouraged the use of the port area as a commemorative site that would underscore the role of the port and Hotel de los Inmigrantes in the imagined national identity; on the other hand, Faena's real estate projects redeveloped buildings of heritage value by appealing to the powerful

history embodied in such structures – the nation's glorious past as the world's granary. Contrary to these cases, the discussion on PADELAI showed how the nation's past as a state provider of welfare services – i.e. through the orphanage's protection of and medical care for the poor or through the more recent history of the building as a squatting site for homeless families – was obstinately and deliberately erased.

These urban development initiatives inevitably raise important questions. Faena's case, in particular, brings up the issue of whether the neoliberal management of heritage, embodied in the role of real estate corporations, is the main way in which heritage is being preserved and valued in Argentina. IRSA's case invites us to consider whether tourism and global fame are the hegemonic drivers for the production of space in contemporary cities. PADELAI's contested redevelopment into a Spanish cultural centre underlines the allure of culture for government officials and the desire to aestheticise neighbourhoods at the expense of, or rather aimed at, the displacement of homeless residents. Together, these cases highlight issues for analysis which go beyond the particularities of Buenos Aires to encompass dominant global trends towards the production, preservation and regulation of public space by private interests. No doubt, this phenomenon is not unique to Argentina – in most cities the withdrawal of the public sector has also led to the destruction of public space and its reshaping by private corporations and real estate speculation through the creation of new visual images in fragmented spaces, designed for surveillance and social exclusion, born out of cultural initiatives and resulting in gentrification (Davis, 1990; Zukin, 1995).

While the cases of PADELAI, IRSA and Faena share with the CCB project a number of features, such as the adoption of cultural rhetoric for urban renewal, the contentious

nature of the sites to be transformed and their heritage value, they importantly accentuate the peculiarity of the postal palace renovation. Although the CCB project was certainly shaped by global forces stressing the economic value of cultural quarters, Chapter 5 has shown how this project was co-opted by the *kirchnerista* administration to serve political goals rather than economic ones. The Palacio de Correos, as we have seen, represented an important piece of national heritage which was meant to awaken citizens' sense of civic nationalism, being associated not only with the country's golden epoch, like the other three cases, but mainly with the 'patriotic' postal institution through its intimate link with the birth of the nation, as discussed in Chapter 3.

The complex ways in which capital, historical narratives, uses of space and heritage are brought together by these regeneration projects require an analytical emphasis on the history of the sites that are the target of renewal operations but, most importantly, they require a critical attitude towards recurrent political celebrations of history and the alleged altruistic involvement of real estate corporations in the making of a public culture. My analysis is a testament to how culture 'has in the last decade come to feature as a significant driver of city change in its own right' (Keith, 2005:117). Nevertheless, I have shown that invocations of culture, while powerful enough to trigger urban transformation, become instrumental *particularly* in contexts of contending political and urban histories. This has profound implications not only for the aesthetics and function of the new sites but also for their survival in the future. Because in light of the unstable social structures underlying these buildings, along with the unpredictable, convoluted context of Argentina's public culture, the only certainty is that the future of the city is never written in stone.

CONCLUSION

In this thesis I have sought to question the 'culture panacea', that is, the policy strategy in which culture acquires the form of a universal remedy, by examining the politics of a controversial culture-led urban regeneration project in central Buenos Aires. Understanding culture as an arena of contested meanings, I have shown how social actors have constructed, enacted and contested ideas and values about culture, heritage, the city and the nation through their engagement with a particular redevelopment project. I have carried out an empirical exploration based on an in-depth case study of the construction of the meanings of culture and heritage. In doing so, I have focused on the practices which unfold in their name, such as urban regeneration and real estate development, examined the representations imagined in their usage by different social actors, and explored the institutional operations, such as the organisation of public competitions, which are undertaken so as to manage them. Finally, I have reviewed the disputes which emerge out of these processes, particularly over the social uses of heritage, the future image of the city and the modernity of the nation.

Through my research concerning the rise, fall and rebirth of the iconic Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones, I have examined its symbolic and material transformation from a production hub, in the early twentieth century, into a spectacular mega-cultural centre in the twenty first century. I have demonstrated that this transformation, which was underpinned by the power of the global language of the cultural quarter and the creative industries, responded to a political logic. This logic was aimed at defusing the existing tensions over the current uses and future function of the postal building, reinvigorating patriotic nationalism in the context of Argentina's bicentenary commemorations. Sustained by hegemonic views about the postal

institution's (lack of) value, such logic made use of culture as an antidote to the ills produced by the neoliberal privatisation of the postal services. My focusing on the transformations experienced by a single architectural artefact has enabled me to develop an account of the changing significance of modernity, culture and national identity in relation to the postal services and the very fabric of the postal palace. This perspective was framed within a new historical moment defined by *Kirchnerismo's* politics of the national-popular, aimed at reclaiming the centrality of the state in both the provision of public services and the imagination of a national political culture.

I have also sought to study the political dynamics of cultural planning and in so doing, contribute to filling an existing gap in academic research into culture-led urban regeneration, and cultural policies more generally, in Argentina. Unlike policy-oriented research on cultural regeneration which tends to adopt a celebratory, rather than critical, stance towards these recurrent urban processes, aiming to assess above all their success factors, my sociological approach has hinged upon the contested circumstances out of which such processes emerge and the conflicts they give rise to. I have shown that the postal building was as an object of contention entangled in policy discourses and practices, architects' imagination, heritage conservation and destruction, remembering and forgetting, material interests, and urban deterioration and renewal. A multi-faceted, multi-methods methodology has allowed me to disentangle the iconic building through the construction of a comprehensive corpus of materials, comprising interview transcripts, political speeches, official documents, archives, newspaper articles and images, which taken together are the key to understanding the social life of the building and the existing claims on its future.

In this conclusion, as well as summarising the key findings and contributions of my thesis, I want to underline the problems which arise when culture is invoked as a panacea for urban regeneration and argue for the need to question such an instrumental view. This assumes that culture has a bounded existence, reproduces a one-size-fits-all model which congratulates its own universal value, erases the local history of place, adopts a market logic, and proclaims an a-political version of culture. In the same manner, I want to emphasise the city's 'right to heritage' and the need to include the social history of workers and workplaces as a constituent part of place memory and urban heritage.

The politics of cultural heritage, space and memory: key findings

One of the three main research questions that this thesis has explored (Chapter 5) is why culture offered the solution to the redevelopment problem of a large iconic building, rencognised in the city because of its previous industrial function as the national post office headquarters, its palatial architecture, its strategic location and its heritage status. My research has revealed that the discourse of culture has provided the political elites in charge of the management of the building with a justification both for intervening in the physical structure of the postal palace and changing its traditional function, thus removing postal workers and activities from the building. It also provided them with a tool whereby to plan the regeneration of the building's surroundings in the city centre. I have argued that assigning a cultural function to an allegedly outdated building, which proved to be a key site for the accumulation and reinforcement of political power and prestige, also performed a less evident, but more important role: that of defusing tensions over the uses of the building and its future. This finding is reasserted in light of the other three cases analysed in this thesis (Chapter 6), for the

invocation of culture – abstractly defined or not defined at all – has proven to be aimed at assigning a stamp of legitimacy to controversial urban redevelopment projects, conveniently erasing, if only momentarily, the (conflicting) social history of these places.

In the case of the postal palace the disputes over its management and recycling became visible in the alternative options for its redevelopment envisioned by different stakeholders (Chapter 4). These, in turn, emphasised the intentionality of the project and questioned its *inevitable* character; that is, the devaluation of the postal services responded to a political decision rather than an inescapable fact. The unquestioned need to create a costly spectacular classical music venue took place in parallel to a vast array of under-funded public cultural institutions of precarious infrastructure; heritage-friendly options could have been prioritised in the redevelopment; the bicentenary commemorations did not inform the redevelopment initiatives although they were presented as of commemorative nature. Hence, I have shown that the redevelopment operations were underpinned by pre-existing disputes over political power and prestige together with disagreements over the public nature of the postal services.

My study of the recycling of the postal building has also shed light on the variety of meanings that people assign to culture, and in doing so, has shown how culture-making has been contested by different social actors, which was one of the questions explored by this thesis. The ambiguity of uses, abstraction of content and the malleable capacity of the term culture to condense multiple meanings has encouraged individuals to appropriate the word and put it into practice in accordance to their interests. I have found in actors' engagement with the redevelopment of the postal palace various conceptions of culture. These range from culture as expressing distinction through the

fine arts (a conventional view of elite culture) to representing popular forms of artistic expression, reflecting social bonds and national identity, being a tool for economic development and tourism attraction, and encapsulating heritage and history. Common to all these different views was the implicit idea that culture can act as a remedy, in particular for neoliberalism, according to which the 'abandoned' postal palace would symbolise the failure and decadence of the privatisation of the public services, and culture would arise as the antidote which enables the recovery of the building. These various senses of culture reassert the complexity and contestability of the term and highlight the need to explore culture on the ground and within a particular, situated context which resists universal recipes for culture-led urban regeneration.

Another question I have examined in this thesis (Chapter 6) is the type of culture that the regeneration initiative would produce as a result of the creation of a cultural centre. My analysis has unveiled the official desire to create a spectacle of culture, a display of modernity facilitated by the use of certain architectural forms and construction materials, and reinforced by the projected technologically 'modern' character' of the cultural centre. Even though these desires have not yet materialised completely, they created a space through which I have explored policy makers' and architects' beliefs, values and expectations about culture and the city. I have argued that the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario (CCB) represents the site where the myth of modernity is to be established, conceiving modernity as that which is new and rare in the local cultural field. This entails high capital investment in infrastructure, spectacular iconic visual forms, the display of great political commitment to a cultural project, expectation of major urban impact through culture, and the large scale, multi-arts and high-tech nature of the cultural centre.

Culture, then, was at the heart of the new modernity planned for the postal building. The idea of modernity has run through the different chapters, connecting the disparate pieces of the sociological puzzle that this thesis has set to solve. I have shown (Chapter 3) how this powerful trope was the spinal column of the Palacio de Correos and its functioning, for the postal and telegraphic services acted as key indicators, at the time, of the technological progress of the nation-state. The latter, in turn, was an epitome of modernity and the question of how modern the Argentine nation was constituted an important preoccupation for political elites – its recurrence in twenty-first-century public discourses is striking. Public official architecture provided and continues to provide the state with a powerful visual means with which to represent political messages and cultural values. I showed how the postal building was meant to represent ideas of progress and civilisation, later embodying working-class culture and solidarity, and more recently, symbolising the national government itself. Looking at the past of the iconic postal palace and the history of its construction have provided significant clues to understanding the current ways in which a form of Latin America modernity, public architecture and ideas of the nation are vigorously entangled.

Like culture, the meaning of modernity is not fixed or pre-given but rather permeable and fluctuating. I have shown that the view of the postal services as modern and the postal palace as a bearer of that modernity did not survive the development of new technologies and the destruction of the welfare state by neoliberal capitalism and the primacy of market forces. The privatisation of the national postal services in the 1990s is a key example of former President Menem's policies for the dismantling of public services and restructuring of the state. In this context, the meaning of modernity was no longer linked to postal and telegraphic services but rather, was associated with its

destruction. The existence of the postal palace, then, became detrimental to this re-signified notion of modernity. Nonetheless, I have suggested that the building embodied something considered important, which saved it from being demolished: the memories of the glorious past of Argentina, hence the subsequent listed character of the building. I have explained how the palace was finally re-imagined as a commemorative cultural centre, suggesting that contemporary sources of modernity are found not only in technological development but also in the field of urban cultural provision, for the latter can position cities strategically in the global map, attracting tourism, reputation and financial investment.

This thesis has suggested that speaking of culture has a particular power in Argentina, especially after the 2001 crises, one that is still informed by enduring ideas of national identity, modernity, progress, civilisation and backwardness. I have shown how the various senses attributed to the imagined cultural centre expressed the fluctuating trajectories of the concept of culture, condensing some of the material and symbolic disputes which had erupted fiercely in the nineteenth century between the capital city and the rest of the country. Examining this local configuration has proven crucial for the deconstruction of the politics of culture and the understanding of the changing relationship between culture and politics. I have framed this relation within the neoliberal political economy of the 1990s which had replaced, if not dissolved, the political nature of cultural activities through the economic profitability of culture and its subsequent subordination to a market logic, especially with the rise of the culture and creative industries. By analysing the reasons why ideas of culture were widely celebrated in the Argentine policy arena, I have argued that the answer needs to be understood in relation to the general feeling of discontent towards party politics and government

officials that intensified in the aftermath of Menem's mediatisation, denigration and spectacularisation of politics, and exploited in the 2001 institutional, social and political crises.

When politics comes to be seen as a code for corruption and mismanagement, something the thesis has shown to be the case in Argentina from the mid-1990s, the allure of culture for policy makers lies precisely in the *assumption* that cultural activities are politically neutral and ideologically empty. Cultural planning, then, was expected to be politics-free and consequently, not stained with the negative image which politics had. I have suggested that the legitimising invocation of culture in the cases examined in the thesis was especially addressed to those who rejected traditional political parties and politicians. However, I have argued, *kirchnerismo* has attempted to re-politicise culture in the context of the revival of patriotic nationalism and the appeal to Latin American forms of regional identity during the last decade. In this new historical moment, culture has been given the task of restoring the faith in traditional political institutions in times of democracy, reinstating the central role of the state in protecting the interests of the national economy, confronting foreign policies considered intrusive, and aligning itself with Latin American heads of state, something it has not done without gaining adversaries in the local territory. The decision to build a commemorative cultural centre followed the recycling of the postal palace, rather than preceding it. However, the decision to use the postal building as the main monument with which to honour the national bicentenary signalled the official desire for an enthusiastic revival of the national-popular element of the postal institution. This in turn was embodied in the materiality of the palace despite the fact that in the very demolition of the industrial areas of the building some of those memories were erased.

I have suggested that in the case of the post office redevelopment, culture finds itself in a paradoxical situation. On the one hand, it becomes a panacea for the ills brought about by the privatisation of the postal services, which had rendered the postal building worthless. On the other hand, it is caught up in the ill it was meant to cure. That is to say, it did not withstand the pressure to be turned into another product of a standardised global operation in which culture – in its institutional role as a classical cultural centre – adopts a spectacularised form based on experiences of modern technology and fantastic visual displays. In this sense, my discussion of the concept of hegemony (Chapter 4) has proven useful in two main ways. First, it signals the predominance of the public value of culture over the importance of the post office and second, it reveals the prevalence of a certain type of culture (an urban marketing tool) over alternative forms. This hegemonic interpretation succeeded in crafting a form of consensus around the idea that the postal factory was worthless, abandoned and decayed, and that a spectacular mega-cultural centre would be the best way to rescue it.

At the time of writing, the fate of the postal palace has once again been the target of official concerns: the Argentine President has recently announced that the cultural centre in the former postal palace would open as 'Artepolis' in 2013. This is the bicentenary anniversary of the 1813 General Constitutional Assembly which had questioned Spanish rule and abolished torture and slavery, planting the seeds of the declaration of independence in 1816. 'Artepolis' (Art polis) is expected to be the site in which the Cultural Equality National Plan would be materialised in connection to the recently inaugurated 'Tecnopolis', an innovative science and technology exhibition. Expected to become the Plan's headquarters, the CCB would articulate policies aimed at improving access to information and communications technologies and culture, which

the plan conceives of as fundamental civic rights. According to the new announcements, a broader conception of culture would sustain the management of the new cultural centre where popular culture would be expressed and given a place to be exhibited in the 'modern' rooms of the renovated postal palace. It is difficult to assert at this point whether 'Artepolis' would be capable of challenging neoliberal trends in cultural planning and indeed become an inclusive space for the enactment of public culture.

In addressing the second main research question of this thesis, the politics of memory of the planned cultural centre (Chapter 4), I have examined how the past of the Argentine nation was assembled and how memory was managed officially in the context of the national bicentenary commemorations. I have argued that the commemorative events enabled existing political and cultural disputes to be displayed and revived in the public domain; analysing the bicentenary preparations has enabled me to dissect the various forces at work in the construction of a commemorative monument such as the CCB. I have shown that the planned CCB was the result of the modern need to commemorate a national anniversary in response to two main elements. These are, first, what I have called the 'power of the calendar', which imposes the veneration of historical milestones, and second, the national government's goal to reinvigorate democracy and widen its popular support. The bicentenary, I have shown, constituted a window of opportunity created by a combination of circumstances which shaped the unfolding of the events, such as the need to revive public participation after the crises of 2001 and to recover from recent political disputes, the upcoming 2011 presidential elections, and the pending need to 'repair' past injustices. My analysis of the bicentenary preparations has proven fruitful for exploring existing tensions in society, the uses of

history in the present and the long-standing struggles over memory and national identity in Argentina.

Since there is no remembering without forgetting (Connerton, 2009) the analysis has suggested that far from representing a mnemonic device, the planned CCB was indicative of an instrumental use of the past and the oblivion of history – the social history of the Palacio de Correos and its symbolising of the universal value of freedom of communication and national integration. I have argued that the postal building, being a national historical monument, became 'devoid of history': its history was reduced to the fetishisation of objects (i.e. the stamps exhibition was the main, if not the only, element of the story retold in the inauguration of the postal palace as the CCB). The analysis of the media event showing the partial inauguration of the postal palace has emphasised the pivotal role of these broadcasted moments for the orchestration of patriotic love and national identity in the hands of the Argentine President.

In the same way, my analysis of the CCB has demonstrated that heritage plays a central role in the construction of the narrative of the imagined national community, being a discursive practice through which a national collective social memory is constructed (Hall, 2000:5). The politics of heritage of the planned CCB was organised around the inclusion of universal visual forms and the exclusion of local/national political elements. By analysing the type of value assigned to the Palacio de Correos as a heritage artefact, I have argued that heritage becomes valuable insofar as it is iconic. The need to monumentalise existing buildings or sites which have already been classified as national monuments constitutes a modern paradox, characterised by the obsessive need to monumentalise the past and build memorials to tackle cultural amnesia (Connerton,

2009). As a result, this gives way to what I have called the 'monumentalisation of monuments', that is, the creation of meta-monuments in the city arising from the gap between a formal designation of a building as a monument and its functioning as such. In view of the erosion of social and historical elements in the building's official preservation, I have argued for the need to define heritage beyond architectural aspects and aesthetic forms in order to encompass other equally valuable elements for the history of the city and the identity of place, such as workplaces and workers' memories.

In exploring the type of spaces and urban futures envisioned by culture-led urban regeneration projects (Chapter 6), the third main research question of this thesis, I have shown that an idea of publicness, tourism, global fame and yearned-for iconicity underpinned those projects. My research has revealed that their goals were shaped by the need to soothe the contending circumstances of the sites, and in some of the cases by profit-making too, and were permeated by cultural rhetoric and powerful heritage narratives. These cases have made it evident that the role of culture as remedy proved most productive in situations of competing interests and intricate urban histories. Similarly, I have argued that the state's absence from, if not neglect of, the protection of heritage sites paved the way for real estate action in this area. Taking into consideration the articulation between the local and the global, I have shown how the cases analysed testify to global hegemonic trends towards the production and monitoring of public space in the city by private corporations, bringing about unpromising consequences for the survival of public culture. Hence, I have stressed the analytical importance of retrieving the history of the sites which are the targets of regeneration strategies in order to critically examine policy-makers and developers' exaltation of heritage and, in doing so, uncover the array of interests at stake in such operations.

My study of contemporary culture-led urban redevelopment cases has demonstrated my argument that culture has become a panacea in contemporary Buenos Aires; these cases also suggest an equally important finding which requires further research: the fragility of culture as a panacea in pragmatic terms. Undeniably, in such a role culture has a powerful function in bringing consent to the alleged need for material interventions. But it can also be questioned on the grounds of its apparent failure to sustain those projects in the future. We have seen that the former orphanage PADELAI had been converted into Spain's cultural centre in the context of the national bicentenary commemorations as a way of putting an end to the conflicting social history of the site. Yet I have also shown that the withdrawal of the Spanish agency from the premises, recently announced in light of the new occupation of the building by homeless families and Spain's financial crisis, suggests the fragility of culture-as-panacea. Furthermore, the uncertain future of the other projects under consideration in this thesis (CCB, Faena's El Aleph and IRSA's cultural icon), together with the considerable delays in their completion, point to similar conclusions. These in turn suggest that the power of culture as a panacea is in no sense indisputable, especially in Argentina's intricate and highly unstable socio-political and economic context.

Against the culture panacea: contributions and implications

This thesis has produced innovative research in the field of cultural sociology which contributes valuable knowledge to the analysis and design of cultural policies in Argentina as well as the study of social uses of heritage and public space in Buenos Aires. In doing so, it has taken the first step towards addressing the existing research gap in the field of cultural planning at the local level. My research findings suggest four main interrelated contributions for the investigation of culture-led urban regeneration

projects in contemporary cities, more specifically in regards to: 1) epistemological and ontological concerns related to culture and heritage, 2) the study of cultural planning, 3) the role of culture in urban regeneration, and 4) the value of public architecture.

First, culture and heritage need to be understood as inextricably political in nature and their study ought to be grounded empirically. The meanings of culture and heritage – and we can add modernity here too – are in no way clear-cut or fixed but evolve over time and across space in complex, contending and multiple ways. If culture is concerned with the world of signification of a group of individuals, it is clear that their shared ordinary meanings, values and beliefs will not be stable but in constant transformation. Culture, thus, does not have a bounded, clearly defined existence: it is produced and enacted in each invocation of its very name. We have seen that in the struggles over the meanings and uses of the Palacio de Correos culture became a battlefield, facilitating the display of conflicts over the architectural structure but also signalling wider symbolic and material disputes. These concerned the degree of modernity and national identity of Argentina, political prestige and intellectual ownership, the value of the post office, the uses of central spaces in the capital city, the budget of cultural planning and its concentration of cultural provision in Buenos Aires, heritage preservation and real estate development. Through an engagement with this particular redevelopment project, individuals endorsed, reinforced, resignified and/or contested culture. Examining what culture means in every specific case, conditioned by a local political configuration, situated in a particular historical context and in the eyes of the individuals who make use of the term is, then, of utmost importance for a sociological interpretation of cultural policy-making.

Heritage was also found to be differently conceived and valued by different individuals. In the various cases examined, official heritage mattered purely in a formal way, with no discussion over its actual uses or alternative futures – the need to keep the facades of important buildings was taken for granted and therefore was never questioned. Yet this was shown to be socially dangerous: it can give way to social inequalities and the erasure of the memories of place, as the case of the PADELAI clearly showed. In other words, the choice between progress and memory, i.e. whether to extend underground lines or to preserve the ancient remains discovered during the excavation (García Canclini, 1999:16), is an important feature of the politics of heritage of contemporary societies. However, the questions we need crucially to ask are: progress for whom, at the expense of whom, and under which conditions has it been sought or made? Heritage can also legitimise real estate businesses in the city, reinforcing the absence of the state in the heritage field and its surrender to the forces of the (real estate) market. Like culture, heritage can fulfil different purposes, not always in the service of memory and social justice. Together with García Canclini (1999:33), I argue that the conflicts that accompany heritage are central to their study and promotion; an engagement with these conflicts is required if heritage is to contribute to the strengthening of the nation through relations of solidarity between different social groups.

In this sense, acknowledging the political nature of culture and heritage requires an engagement not only with the conflicts that accompany policies but in particular the contending circumstances out of which these policies often emerge. It would also involve making explicit the ideological views that sustain the design and implementation of these public projects, for this would open up the space for citizen scrutiny and public contestation. Unlike Susan Wright's (1998) view on the politicisation of culture when

this refers to decision-makers' (politicians, academic advisers and officials) uses of culture and the deployment of the concept in various fields of power, I want to argue, instead, for a progressive re-politicisation of culture. This would imply an emphasis on culture's political power for social change and contestation over official representations and meaning-making practices. In other words, it is a question of putting politics back into the heart of cultural policy.

Second, the policy invocations of culture should be critically and publicly questioned and not celebrated *only* by virtue of the fact that there is a cultural programme under way regardless of its logic, conditions of existence, and nature. There exist a number of official cultural institutions in Argentina, and this represents a rather positive and promising sign compared to other countries. At the same time, however, cultural policies need to be monitored in order to interrogate the complex process of their design, content, implementation and targeted audiences. Cultural projects are not often what they seem; this has been illustrated by my analysis of the postal palace where I have shown that the alleged culture-led urban regeneration nature of the redevelopment operations responded, above all, to a political logic invoking culture as a tool for legitimacy and prestige. The making of these policies should be informed by more creative ways of engaging with the question of culture, e.g. consulting the very groups who are expected to benefit from those policies about their preferences and needs in the cultural field. They should also go beyond instrumental views which tend to prioritise consumption over production, elite forms over popular forms, global formats over local alternatives, economic gains over social development, destruction over preservation. Converting old buildings which have ceased to serve their initial function to a new purpose is not necessarily harmful. Nor am I arguing for an orthodox preservation of all

buildings considered to be of heritage value in the city. Rather, I want to advocate a social history-friendly preservation and reuse of heritage in the city, one which engages current and future users of heritage artefacts and acknowledges the previous function of buildings or sites.

Third, studies of culture-led urban regeneration need to interrogate more critically the role ascribed to culture, the logic of these processes, their policy and political dimensions and the history of the places to be regenerated. In many of these studies, culture is conceived as an infallible tool aimed at renewing decayed inner-city areas and its very role is taken for granted as universally positive. My argument makes an important contribution to the understanding of the politics of cultural regeneration projects: that culture is not neutral, but politically and historically constituted, and that it can go against social heritage to serve the interests of those in power. This argument moves away from persistent (and sometimes not empirically grounded) discussions around the economic impact of cultural quarters, the convenience of these projects for private investment and cultural tourism, the need for cities to develop a creative soul through arts festivals and cultural hubs, the making of cultural cities, the pressures to put forward technical policy recommendations, and the yearned-for entrepreneurialism of city authorities to secure a place in city branding and urban marketing. Instead, my research suggests an empirical and critical engagement with the different social groups who have a stake in these projects, a consideration of the history of places and buildings, and an interrogation of understandings of culture which assume its ontological existence as a bounded entity that exists 'out there' and can be easily used for various purposes.

Finally, my thesis also makes a significant methodological contribution. By showing the central importance of heritage buildings for the recollection of national memories and the embodiment of the national past, I draw attention to the valuable role of public architecture in the sociological exploration of the meanings of culture, heritage, memory and commemorations in the context of urban redevelopment operations. The social life of a building is shaped by the articulation between broader sociological processes taking place during its lifespan and the particular practices of those imagining, designing, constructing, contesting, using, reusing and demolishing buildings. Taking these artefacts of material culture as prisms which reflect innumerable events and condense different layers of meanings, as mnemonic devices of the struggles embedded in the bricks of the building, and as portals through which the social and cultural worlds can be examined, has proven to be an effective, innovative tool to conduct empirical sociological research. This carries practical and policy implications for the preservation of buildings and for the social uses of heritage. For example, educational projects focused on history, architecture or communication technologies, could be developed around the postal palace, and more resources allocated to the postal museum, whose work has kept the memories of the historic postal institution and the postal workers alive.

In addition, my methodological approach emphasises the analytical value of examining cultural *projects*, for these provide a unique opportunity to access the fantasies, desires, dreams and imaginations of those involved in planning a policy in a somewhat 'pure', ideal form. While obviously projects sometimes do not materialise in the face of financial or political difficulties, considering only their impact does not allow us to fully access their *desired* outcomes either. This is important as all too often the gap between

the planned and the actual outcome is substantial, and the former gives way to the latter in spite of its ensuing incomplete or inadequate form. As the top-down structure of cultural policy-making in Argentina leaves limited space for substantial citizen involvement in its development, interrogating the planning dimension of the governance of culture will prove crucial if we are to understand how cultural projects are designed, produced and implemented, showing their socially constructed and politically situated nature, which in turn underscores their *evitable* character.

When I began my research, I entered the field of cultural sociology with a set of questions regarding the meanings of culture and heritage and the uses of public space in contemporary Buenos Aires. After writing this thesis, I am left with an understanding of the complexity of these issues, the need to contextualise them historically in order to interpret their present dynamics, and the convenience of using multiple, innovative methods to account for the intricate relationship between the material and the social, the political and the cultural. I have learnt about four things in particular. These are, first, the importance of the narratives of the nation and cultural rhetoric in informing the making of public policies in Argentina; second, the perplexing realm of signification, with its changing and contentious content; third, the enormous value of the Palacio de Correos for the reinforcement of the national political imagination; and, fourth, the usefulness of developing an analytical approach based around the examination of a single urban artefact. I have also been struck by the practical relevance of classical terms such as hegemony, culture, heritage, modernity and nation for the study of contemporary sociological processes.

Clearly I am also left with questions for further investigation. More research is needed into the ways in which cultural policies are perceived and negotiated by different audiences, how cultural planning can go beyond the rhetoric of urban regeneration, the nature and functioning of non-mainstream grassroots cultural offers, and the actual social, economic and political impact of the functioning of projects like the Centro Cultural del Bicentenario. I have identified one particular finding concerning social perceptions of national identity which, although it has not constituted the main object of my research, opens up interesting avenues for future investigation. Repeatedly, my interviewees spoke of Argentina's myriad of current problems in terms of what they conceived of as the 'essence' of the national being. They believed, pessimistically, that because of the ways Argentinians are, think and act, the country is 'where it is and is what it is today'. The origin of these difficulties is claimed to be in the very soul of its inhabitants, namely the *essential* character of Argentinians; this is seen as corrupt, inefficient, disorganised, oriented to the short term, and unable to work collaboratively for the same cause. Such a view is framed in relation to the lack of trust in governmental organisations, the assumption of the dishonest and inefficient nature of the state and the reluctance 'to play by the rules because nobody else does', all of which put the health of Argentina's institutional democracy in danger. On the one hand, this inability to imagine an inclusive political national community, the difficulty in and fear of connecting with patriotic sentiments in the face of manipulation, political violence and atrocities committed in the name of the nation (Goddard, 2000; Grimson, 2007; Bell, 2011), can be explained by reference to the country's traumatic past, which has been pervaded by a history of repression, intolerance, injustice and power abuses. On the other hand, Argentinians need to overcome the historical frustration and what I have called 'the global power nostalgia' of having been unable to maintain the economic development

standards which had placed the country in a leading position worldwide at the end of the nineteenth century and beginning of the twentieth. Further research is needed, then, if we are to unpack this negative essentialised and essentialising construction of the national identity and shed light on its adverse consequences for the enactment of a democratic public culture.

Against what I have called the culture panacea, this thesis has hopefully shown that such a widespread strategy of culture-making becomes a problem, rather than a universal solution. This is because it is detrimental to the subsistence of the city's heritage and national memories, as well as to the development of non-commercial or non-hegemonic cultural forms which struggle to resist a neoliberal market logic, a logic which is gradually distancing culture from one of its central components: politics. And this is precisely what needs to be reclaimed in the hope of imagining alternative forms of cultural planning at the beginning of the twenty first century – the political nature of culture and the social life of otherwise dead iconic buildings in the city.

APPENDIX I: List of interviewees

1. Co-Director, Estudio becker/Ferrari, CCB winning proposal
2. Director, Dirección Nacional de Política Cultural y Cooperación Internacional
3. CCB Third Honorary Mention
4. Director, Sociedad Central de Arquitectos (SCA)
5. CCB Third Prize winning proposal
6. Director, Casa del Bicentenario
7. Former Culture Minister, GCBA
8. Advisor to the Secretaría de Cultura de la Nación
9. Coordinator, Puertas del Bicentenario Unidad Ejecutora, GCBA
10. Former Economy Minister
11. Director, Comisión Nacional de Museos y de Monumentos y Lugares Históricos
12. Under Secretary, Subsecretaría de Proyectos de Urbanismo, Arquitectura e Infraestructura – Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano, GCBA
13. Former Secretary, Secretaría Legal y Técnica, Ministerio de Economía
14. Grupo Faena
15. Press Agent, Grupo Faena
16. Writer of the guidelines of the CCB competition
17. Winning proposal from the first competition of ideas
18. Urbanist
19. General Under-Secretary, Subsecretaría General de la Presidencia
20. Journalist, *Página 12*, M2
21. Book vendor, Plaza del Correo
22. Institutional Relations Manager, IRSA
23. Staff member at Museo Postal y Museo de Telecomunicaciones
24. Director, Museo Postal y Museo de Telecomunicaciones
25. Long-standing post office employee
26. Director, Basta de Demoler (NGO)
27. Cabinet Chief, Ministerio de Planificación Federal, Inversión Pública y Servicios
28. Employee and union leader, Post Office
29. Centro Metropolitano de Diseño
30. Cleaners and security guards in the building (group conversation)

APPENDIX II: Events attended

- *Audiencia Pública en San Telmo*, organised by Buenos Aires' municipal government, September 2008

- *Conferencia Hacia el Bicentenario*, organised by the School of Social Sciences, UBA, October 2008

- *Entrega de Premios 'Concurso Argentina 2010 Bicentenario Argentino'*, organised by IRSA (real estate corporation), October 2008

- *Exhibición por el Bicentenario,* organised by Buenos Aires' municipal government, December 2008

- *Jornadas de Patrimonio Urbano*, organised by the municipal government, October 2008

- *Segundo Congreso Argentino de Cultura*, Tucumán, organised by the National Culture Ministry, October 2008

- *Seminario 'El Otro Urbanismo'*, organised by Architects' Central Society (SCA) and the Engineers and Architects Female Association (AMAI), August 2008

APPENDIX III: Presentation letter sent to interviewees

LSE

Londres, 1 de Agosto de 2008

Señor Ministro
Ministerio de Desarrollo Urbano

De mi mayor consideración:

Tengo el agrado de dirigirme a Usted a los fines de invitarlo a participar de mi investigación doctoral. Mi nombre es Cecilia Dinardi, soy Socióloga (UBA) y actualmente me encuentro realizando mis estudios de Doctorado en la London School of Economics (LSE) en el Reino Unido. Para mi investigación estoy analizando procesos de regeneración urbana a través de proyectos culturales en Sudamérica. Me interesa explorar la relación entre los aspectos culturales, económicos, políticos y espaciales de estos procesos. Como estudio de caso, he seleccionado el proyecto del *"Centro Cultural del Bicentenario"* que planea refuncionalizar el Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones en Retiro a fin de crear un nuevo espacio cultural en la ciudad y celebrar el Bicentenario Argentino.

Como parte de esta investigación, me entrevistaré con políticos, arquitectos, diseñadores urbanos, consultores internacionales, periodistas y artistas. Dada su incumbencia en el mencionado proyecto, quisiera invitarlo a ser parte de mi investigación a través de una entrevista que no durará más de cuarenta minutos – una hora. El objetivo principal de mi estudio es entender la convergencia entre desarrollo cultural y renovación urbana en la ciudad, y en particular, las formas que ésta adquiere en el contexto de conmemoraciones históricas. Teniendo en cuenta que gran parte de los estudios sobre renovación urbana se han concentrado en ciudades europeas y norteamericanas, el análisis del caso argentino resulta crucial, al producir información de gran relevancia para el diseño de políticas culturales y urbanas locales.

Quisiera poder grabar nuestra conversación con el único fin de facilitar su análisis, pero esto sólo lo haré con su consentimiento. La información provista será tratada con confidencialidad y será guardada cuidadosamente. En caso de preferir que su nombre y posición no sean revelados, su anonimidad será respetada en todas las instancias de mi investigación. Una copia de la trascripción de la entrevista le será enviada a fin de que pueda aprobar su contenido antes de ser utilizado en mi análisis.

Su colaboración es fundamental para la realización exitosa de esta prometedora investigación sobre cultura, conmemoración y desarrollo urbano en Buenos Aires. Estaré muy agradecida si por favor puede responder vía mail a: M.C.Dinardi@lse.ac.uk indicando si está de acuerdo con ser entrevistado y su preferencia de fecha. Desde ya le agradezco enormemente por su tiempo y colaboración que hacen posible esta investigación.

 Sin otro particular, y a la espera de una respuesta favorable, saludo muy atentamente.

Lic. Cecilia Dinardi

APPENDIX IV: Translation of the speech analysed in Chapter 5

REMARKS BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE NATION, CRISTINA FERNANDEZ, IN THE OFFICIAL OPENING CEREMONY OF THE FIRST PART OF THE CENTRO CULTURAL DEL BICENTENARIO IN THE PALACIO DE CORREOS IN BUENOS AIRES, MONDAY 24th MAY 2010

Thank you, thank you very much, and good morning to all [male and female]

Mr. Governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, Mrs Governor of Tierra del Fuego, Mr Secretary General of UNASUR: I have just listened to the Planning Minister saying that we had imagined this when I was still a senator and the wife of the former President Kirchner; well, I am no longer senator, but I am still and will always be his life partner (applause).

The truth is that today is the beginning of the fulfilment of a long cherished dream, which was to give Buenos Aires, the capital of all Argentinians, and therefore, our country, a great Cultural Centre, the great Cultural Centre which brings together and expresses all cultures, the arts.

We have just inaugurated an exhibition containing paintings from each one of the provinces with their authors, showing what we envisioned for this space of art, a federal aspect, a popular aspect integrated into society in these 88.000 covered metres – I don't know how they will end up when we finished the works – and which will also have, as everything has had which we have dreamed of for this Bicentenary, a strong Latin American component.

And that dome, which is also emblematic, was designed by the team of architects which won the competition. These were works with a high level of social participation, in which different projects and ideas competed with each other, with juries from the Buenos Aires Society of Architects. Finally these concluded with the winning project which imagined that transparent dome. And I came up with the idea that in that transparent dome there had to be the colours and lights of the Argentine flag. That is why that dome also has the patriotic emblem, but at the same time, and this was the idea of the Planning Minister, the recreation of all of the flags, all of them, through a very modern computerised system of lights which combines 16 million colours, as was yesterday expressed by the communities that make up our country and those that do not form part of it as well. Because art has, above all, a national identity but a scope of universal character.

Today we are opening the first phase of this dream, which I am sure will be, as Julio has just said, the forthcoming centenary's culture lighthouse.

I would like to tell you that, since Friday, when I inaugurated the official celebrations for the Bicentenary at the Bicentenary Walk, which we have all created on the 9 July Avenue, and which is so emblematic for all the Argentinians, I have felt that the goal that we wanted to achieve – the commemoration and celebration of a participatory, democratic, federal, and if you will, universal nature – we are achieving it with the support of every Argentinian.

Let me say that I feel very proud to see the provinces parading, yesterday the communities, with hundred of thousands of men and women, kids, young people, the elderly taking to the streets, celebrating with joy; I saw the quotations of Jauretche: the depressed and sad peoples cannot change anything, the joyful peoples, who celebrate their history, all their complete history, are the peoples that we can continue transforming and changing.

Let me say that I am very proud to be the President of all Argentinians, very proud of my country, very proud of those philatelists who today, here in the Palacio de Correos, showed me their collections proudly and told me – certainly I didn't know this – that we were the first country in the world to come up with the idea of printing a commemorative postage stamp. Later on, we were copied and even faked; I won't say who did it so that no one feels offended. But I didn't know that we came up with this idea here, in this Argentine Postal service so ingrained in the hearts of the Argentinians. And if I may, I would like to share a personal digression, because the father of UNASUR Secretary General [her husband, Nestor Kirchner] was a post office man, he loved the post.

I remember when I met him and we lived, back in 1976, in his parents' house for a year because we didn't have our own house. He used to leave very early in the morning to go to the post, coming back at midday – he was the post office treasurer. He would share lunch with us, leave again and come back home at around 7, 7.30, 8pm.

Nestor told me that every time they came to Buenos Aires, his father would bring him here; normally parents take kids to the zoo, but he wasn't taken to the zoo, he was brought here, to the Post Office. He knows it by heart. The first thing he did, when watching the movie showing what it would be done in the building, was look at me and ask:

And what about the post? Where will they put it? Because if my father gets up [from his grave] and sees that they are again displacing the post from the building, I think he will kill them'. No – I told him -, don't worry that the post will be in a wonderful place, and on the contrary, he would be proud of this Palace. A true Palace, in which Eva Perón worked, who also had her office here, so too her dearest friend Nicolini, who was responsible for the Telecommunications Ministry (applause).

This place is already part of the history of all Argentinians, and if there is anything that I am keen on, it is the defence and protection of our identity and historical heritage, because I feel that many times our history has been stolen, it has been forged, or we don't even know it because it hasn't been told to us.

I believe that one of the most important things that we must do in this Bicentenary is know our own history, complete, with the anonymous men and women, and those who weren't so anonymous, who worked to create it.

That is why I am obsessed with having the national heroes in the Government House; that is why we will open the MAPO, the Museum of Political Art this year, in the Taylor Customs, building which was an empty space, with virtually only a few ruins; literally these were ruins that would have disappeared if we hadn't taken care of them. The museum would allow for the expression of all political currents from an artistic and a national history perspective.

Because I think that it is the role and duty of every good citizen to know the history of their country, honour their heroes, remember them not with sadness but with joy, and also know that they were men and women made of flesh and blood like us, with our small things and also the big things that we are capable of doing. Do not try to tell us that they were men who no longer exist, do not tell us that, in reality, everything which has happened was better and everything that exists today is worthless. It is not like that. And do you know who demonstrates it? The people who, in these two days, have taken massively to the streets to honour their country with joy, to honour their motherland which is, ultimately, a tribute to themselves. Therefore, thank you Argentinians, you are building this Bicentenary, it is yours, for you and on your behalf. Thank you, thank you very much (applause).

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