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## Memory Museums in Chile: Connecting the Past with the Voices of the Present

### Keywords / Palabras clave

Reconciliation, Memory, Chile, Latin America, Politican Violence, Museums

# DISSIDEN**CES**

Hispanic Journal of Theory and Criticism

*Memory Museums in Chile,  
Connecting the Past  
with the Voices of the Present*

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## **Abstract**

The military dictatorship was one of the most traumatic and violent periods in Chile's recent history and, from 1998 onwards, led to a large number of different collective memory processes. The building of memorials and, more recently, museums and spaces for memory particularly stand out.

The organizations in charge of these projects today have faced long and difficult struggles to recover these places and be able to use them once again for interesting purposes. However, as opposed to what generally happens with monuments and memorials, the task for these memory entrepreneurs does not end with the building or opening of the museum or space for memory, which is, on the contrary, just the beginning.

In Chile, these spaces are currently being designed and implemented. Therefore, understanding how the groups that have created these projects envision their continuity over time will help us understand the direction the memory process in Chile is taking and its possible effects. Through the “Londres 38, a space for memories” experience, we will try to understand three fundamental aspects of this phenomenon: the narratives that sustain the memory project; the projects’ relationship with the State and the spaces’ preservation and protection. On this basis, we will comment on the space’s relationship with the future.

## **Context**

When the military dictatorship ended in Chile, a transition towards democracy began and the new government had to negotiate certain conditions with the outgoing authorities to ensure both governability and the country’s political stability. Among others things, the constitution used by Pinochet during the dictatorship was accepted, but the military had to give up their political power. This scenario meant that the new authorities could not make significant advances on matters of truth and justice to thus achieve political stability [1].

This political context obviously had repercussions on the process of making amends and that of collective memory. Since advances could not be made on matters of justice, society was still terrified and talking about the past was considered risky by many. In the same way, these processes

concentrated on the relatives of the disappeared and the executed politicians, exiles and those exonerated and not on the symbolic repairing and creation of a memory process for all society.

This situation began to change in 1998 in London with the unexpected arrest of Pinochet on an extradition charge to face trial for crimes against humanity, issued by the Spanish judge Baltazar Garzón [2]. Although this request was revoked, after more than a year under arrest, Pinochet returned to Chile. The fact that the figure of the ex-dictator had been internationally brought into question marked a very significant change to the Chilean political scene. Chile was forced to do an about turn on justice matters and regarding recognition of the events of the past.

From this moment, there was an upsurge of memory projects in Chile. There was finally more freedom of artistic, political and cultural speech, after around ten years of post-dictatorship silence. Today, more than ten years have passed since this important process, which acknowledges and publicly recognizes the recent past occurred, and both State and civilian actions and projects have emerged to contribute to the construction of the military dictatorship's collective memory (1973-1989). The great majority of the initiatives have been carried out by civilians, although a significant number have involved the actions of State institutions.

State actions have been framed within symbolic gestures of making amends through the truth and justice reports (Rettig Report, 1991; Valech Report, 2004) [3]. Support and financing for the building of memorials [4], the protection and recovery of former detention, torture and disappearance centres, and the building of the Memory and Human Rights Museum, inaugurated in January 2010, also stand out.

Civilian actions have been diverse and numerous, with an initial emphasis on demanding truth and justice and reporting and highlighting the places that were used to violate human rights. Afterwards, the focus shifted to the design and building of memorials and the recognition and recovery of

former detention and torture centers, concentrating, in the last few years, on spaces for memory or memory museums.

In the last five years, more than six spaces for memory or museum projects have been developed in Chile, of which five are in Santiago and all – with the exception of the Memory Museum inaugurated by Michelle Bachelet at the beginning of 2010 – have been conceived, administered and implemented by civilian organizations.

These initiatives have a lot in common: they are all on the sites of former underground detention and torture centers; they are all civilian initiatives; for each one, the process has been long and difficult and has included at the very least a struggle to get the place back; they all required a lot of paperwork to get them declared historical patrimony; all struggled to obtain financing and the definition of exactly what they want to showcase, how to do so and to whom the contents should be aimed has been complex. In the same way, State support of some kind was received in every case.

As opposed to monuments or memorials where the memory entrepreneurs' work generally ends with their building or implementation, in the case of spaces for memory or museums, their work is just beginning. Therefore, it is worth asking how memory spaces envisage their continuity in time; how the memory project relates to the future; how necessary State support has been; how important it will carry on being and how they can ensure their preservation and protection over time. To answer some of these questions, the case of “Londres 38, a space for memories” will be briefly described.

### **From Secrecy to the Public Arena**

The Yucatan Headquarters was the name the National Intelligence Board (DINA) gave Londres 38. This center was used between October 1973 and the end of September 1974 as an underground

detention and torture center, during which 96 people were murdered or disappeared. From the mid eighties, commemorative actions (candlelit vigils) were held outside to give visibility to and denounce the military's acts of violence there and around 2000, people and organizations began to request that the place be recovered as a house for memory [5].

This place was made visible, claimed and recovered by relatives' group and human rights organizations so that it could be used as a space for memory, returning it to the public. These kinds of projects are championed by civilian organizations dedicated to the search for justice and truth, specifically groups made up of the victims' relatives and survivors. Three groups participated in the Londres 38 recovery process: the "Colectivo Londres 38", the "Colectivo de Familiares y Amigos de los 119" and the "Colectivo Memoria 119" [6].

This house, located in the heart of Santiago, was handed over by the Ministry of National Assets in 2010 to the organizations that participated in its recovery to be transformed into a space for memory. The museum's layout is currently being drawn up in a participative process and there is agreement on it being a space that allows citizen dialogue.

The organizations in charge of these projects see them as an opportunity to begin and facilitate social dialogue regarding the facts of the past, orientating them towards the creation of a more just and democratic present and future and putting these at their center. Thus, for example, Londres 38 has worked with citizen movements of students and workers, which promote reforms for the future and the type of changes that those who were murdered at Londres 38 also fought for.

However, how can this impetus be maintained once the phase of designing and building the project has ended? The participants – in general, relatives of the dictatorship's victims, as well as survivors and former political militants – must cling to the momentum of the initial stages, which is associated to the identity processes that decide who makes up these organizations and establishes these places.

Giving continuity to these spaces for memory and carrying on without destroying part of the identity of those who fought for so long to denounce and recover certain spaces presents great challenges.

It seems inevitable that the organizations that began these processes - the memory entrepreneurs—must renounce their claim to these spaces so that others can take over their maintenance and continuity, since the task of opening a space for society to remember is very different to the struggle to erect a monument. In the case of building and implementing spaces for memory, a new struggle begins. This should at least consider the alternative of building and organizing both with and including others and accepting or being open to new ways of administering, managing and financing them.

The debate on using a professional team for these projects would have meant hiring a team of specialists or professionals to dedicate themselves full time to the job of managing certain legal, financial, architectural and domestic matters and to be in charge of the project's day-to-day running, being paid for the task of keeping the space alive. Another option involved organization's own members as administrators; however, in this case, certain decisions would have had to be made, for example, what the role of the survivors of the military dictatorship and of the victims' relatives would be. This is probably the most important question for continuity, since the biggest challenge is to understand these spaces beyond their links to identity, as public spaces open to all society.

### **State (in)dependence**

Another aspect to analyze the continuity of these museums is the relationship with government institutions and authorities. Organizations in charge of these places face a permanent paradox, which is to work with or without the state. Both alternatives represent pros and cons related to the future of museums. But it seems unavoidable to take a decision.

Londres 38 is a good example of what this paradox means. To develop “Londres 38, a space for memories”, the organizations in charge had to coordinate various actions with State institutions. This was very difficult at the beginning because the historical distrust of government institutions, aggravated by their continuous denial and omission of the organizations requests for recover the house, had to be overcome. Most of the memory organizations have experienced these problems because former detention and torture centers for which they have struggled have been systematically ignored by official institutions. Thus, in other words, coordinating actions with state authorities is more a symbolic requirement than a practical one. Nevertheless, the economic support and the recognition from the state has been indispensable in maintaining and protecting these places, and lately, to construct projects and museums of memory.

These organizations, on the other hand, have distrusted of state interventions in museums of memory. They claim autonomy from the official authorities to organize themselves and to create their own projects. They see government authorities as a threat to the independence of their ideas, but this tension is unavoidable if they want to get support and funding from the state. It could be a risk to their autonomy but in some cases it seems to be essential.

The relationship among government bodies and the memory organizations has been very different in each case and lacks standards and protocols. Since there is no specific law to regulate the construction and development of museums of memory, it appears that any support received is related to the feelings of those in charge of the participating institutions. We are faced with the absence of a regulating public memory policy that dictates the guidelines to be followed in these cases, which means that coordination between the organizations and institutions is arbitrary, depending on the authorities in charge. Some authorities could be more inclined toward the work of these museums of memory and let them be independents by deciding its contents. But, when the

political arena changes, this autonomy orientation could also change, putting in danger the development of these memory projects. Therefore, memory organizations should be aware of political changes

Despite this lack of protocol, there is an aspect which has been the most constant providing protection and maintenance support, which is, the heritage declaration. Once a place becomes part of the country's heritage, the organizations related to it gain in legitimacy and are respected more. For a memory place, an appointment as national heritage works as a form of protection for all spaces. Also, it comprises symbolic recognition of the official omission during the dictatorship. For instance, Londres 38 was declared part of Chile's historic patrimony thanks to the actions of one of the organizations that participated in the house's recovery (the Colectivo Londres 38). This declaration makes dealing with state institutions easier, and provides a sort of symbolic protection to think about the future of these places more independently.

Finally, any kind of relationship with state institutions generates a new threat to the autonomy of these places. Museums typically have been spaces to show dominant and hegemonic narratives [7]. However, these museums of memory challenge this perspective, demanding spaces to develop local and autonomous discourses. These memory projects represent the opportunity to see how they maintain their positions and are able to connect its independent perspectives to Chilean society.

### **Spaces for Memory for the Future**

In the case of Londres 38, the organizers knew that undertaking this type of project would not necessarily ensure its continuity in time. The three memory groups that participated in the house's recovery process emphasized opening up discussion on the memory space's contents and how it worked to different sectors of society since, as Huyseer says referring to monuments, "Once we focus on the public function of the monument and expand discussion of the object toward the

public discourses of collective memory, the danger of monumental ossification can be avoided” [Huyseer 11].

For this reason, it would seem to be fundamental for the organizations to work hard on creating projects that are sustainable in time and which allow for an open dialogue on memory work related to the present. This is what has been done up to now at Londres 38, where different groups and organizations have gathered together to discuss current and possible topics, such as the ethnic conflicts or education problems.

The tragic past of these places also becomes the starting point for developing another type of activity, for example the discussion of present conflicts. As Liz Sevchenko of the International Coalition of Sites of Conscience indicates, “Heritage is a key terrain on which larger societal conflicts are expressed and addressed. This could seem deeply discouraging if conflict over heritage is seen as a problem to be managed, an obstacle to be overcome. However, if such contestation about the past is viewed instead as an opportunity to facilitate critically needed dialogue on contemporary issues, we could open up new possibilities for heritage sites in civic life” [Sevchenko 1].

This coincides with the emergence of a new, worldwide paradigm in memory processes, where the protagonists create small-scale local memory initiatives in reply to the *State's* attempts to install hegemonic narratives. As Bickford and Sodaro indicate, “a proliferation of new commemorative forms have emerged and spread around the world that are devoted to remembering, explaining and educating about past atrocities, conflicts and trauma in the effort to learn the lessons of the past and apply them to the strengthening of democratic culture in the present and –specially – the future” [Bickford and Sodaro 69].

In this effort to create something that confronts the future, Londres 38 has worked on the idea of developing participative and inclusive processes to create a script or scenario for itself as a

participative space. As Susan Crane reflects, "flexible mirrors whose convex potential for multiple interpretations and participation will continue to make them appropriate venues for active memory work, either "on site" or in the minds of those whose historical consciousness has been activated, nourished, challenged, and revived" [Crane 20].

Without doubt, these spaces have a certain power, since, as soon as they are installed, a discourse that the organizations choose to promote or, rather, a platform for them to be recognized and validated is also installed. None of these places, regardless of where they are, will leave the community surrounding them indifferent [8]. These spaces are also the scenes of meetings and disputes between different actors: the State, civilian society, human rights organizations, victims and killers. There is always the possibility that the different voices may or may not find each other, but these spaces for memory have the virtue of being able to enable these meetings and promote the creation of conflicts. However, in the words of Huyseer, "There is no guarantee that today's monuments, designed and built with great public participation, lively debate and memorial engagement will not one day stand, like their predecessors from the nineteenth century, as figures of forgetting [Huyseer11].

In "Londres 38, a space for memories", this is a very real risk. The potential that a place with these characteristics has for driving narratives and speeches towards other texts and other stories is also clear. Exploring new possibilities for collective memory can contribute to overcoming the risks of these initiatives fading into oblivion. I would like to suggest that this is precisely what these initiatives are looking to achieve, going beyond the collective memory of Chile's recent past and coupling these memories with the facts and conflicts of the present, while always thinking about building a better future.

## Notes

[1] An interesting analysis of this period and its effects on the Chilean society in: Garretón, Manuel Antonio. “Memoria y Proyecto de País”. Revista de Ciencias Políticas. Vol XXIII, N° 2, Chile. (2003): 215-230, Print.

- Lechner, Norbert. Las sombras del mañana. La dimensión subjetiva de la política. Editorial Lom, Santiago. 2002.

[2] See Collins, Cath. Human Rights Trials in Chile during and after the ‘Pinochet Years’. The International Journal of Transitional Justice, 2009, 1–20 doi: 10.1093/ijtj/ijp023

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[3] COMISIÓN NACIONAL DE REPARACIÓN Y RECONCILIACIÓN. Informe de la Comisión Verdad y Reconciliación. Ed. Comisión Nacional de Reparación y Reconciliación, Chile. (1991). En [http://www.ddhh.gov.cl/ddhh\\_rettig.html](http://www.ddhh.gov.cl/ddhh_rettig.html)

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[4] For more details see Flacso Chile. Memoriales de derechos humanos en Chile. Programa de Gobernabilidad. Santiago, Chile. (2008): 36.Print.

[5] The “Colectivo Londres 38” has done an excellent historic compilation work. See its web page [www.londres38.cl](http://www.londres38.cl)

[6] The 119 number refers to the 119 people who were killed and disappeared in the "Operation Colombo", an operation undertaken by the Chilean secret police (DINA) in 1975.

[7] See Ricard Vinyes Ed. El Estado y la Memoria. Memorial Democratic. RBA Libros Barcelona. 2009

[8] For more details on the collective memory and memorialization processes:

Jelin, Elizabeth y Langland, Victoria. Monumentos, Memoriales y Marcas. Siglo XXI. Buenos Aires. (2004): 232. Print.

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Sevcenko, Liz (2010). "Sites of Conscience: new approaches to conflicted memory". Museum International No. 245–246. Vol. 62, No. 1–2. (2010) Unesco.