

## CHAPTER 7

# Memory Sites and Reenacting State Terrorism

## *The Museum at Argentina's Naval Mechanics School*

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### Introduction

The politics of memory have become a sine qua non of the agendas of Western governments. Transitional justice, symbolic reparations, and memory transmission are some of the concepts that accompany these new trends in remembrance. In this process, the sites of traumatic events affecting the community—events necessary to remember—have gained particular prominence. Often referred to as places or sites of memory, they represent a novel combination of memory and space not seen in the past. Public policies have traditionally commemorated and emphasized sites associated with victory, not defeat. It was not until post–World War II that the places where atrocities took place began to emerge from the past as a way to take stock of the present. What can be done with an extermination camp after the fact? How can a battlefield be incorporated into a community's historic landscape? This transformation can be achieved by resignifying these sites—for example, by turning them into spaces of memory, museums, study centers, cultural institutions, or social organizations where history can be reenacted, to list just a few examples. There appears to be a need, generally voiced by survivors and by the organizations that represent them, to not simply let bygones be bygones, to not allow these sites to be destroyed, and to preserve them as powerful documents but at the same time invalidate them as monuments. Those who promote this type of remembrance seem to suggest that, although we cannot

change what happened at such sites, we can incorporate sites into our experiences and tell their stories to the generations to come in a different way.

There are many possible types of resignification, myriad ways to transform places of horror into places of memory; one of these types of resignification, in my opinion, merits particular attention. I am referring to museums, to the new museums located at the sites of former atrocities whose purpose is not to display a community's heritage but to evoke historical memory—and reenact collective memory—through the chosen space. These new museums have appeared in Europe, the Americas, and on the African continent. They include exhibitions that show the inner workings of Europe's concentration camps; permanent expositions that recreate the prisons that existed during South African apartheid; materials on exhibit that reveal the suffering of Africans kidnapped for slavery and held on the island of Gorée, Senegal; and the museum located in what was once the Naval Mechanics School (ESMA) in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In all cases, these are referred to as museums, evoking an old institution with a history of its own.

Similarly, what distinguishes these institutions is the fact that they are located in the same material space—a space not created but re-created—where the acts they intend to evoke and reenact occurred. Not only will stories be told on these sites, not only will attempts be made to render a traumatic past intelligible, but also that material, symbolic space will be the showpiece. Books can provide a more detailed history of these places and the misadventures of those who once inhabited them, but these places of memory have another aim as well. A sort of phenomenology of space supports these museums that appeals to the senses, to that skin-deep memory so characteristic of our species. The aim is to convey the feeling of oppression within enclosed spaces, spaces where people were locked away; to get visitors to put their body on the line in order to reach an understanding beyond words; to transmit the heaviness in the air, the narrowness of the cots, the constant darkness, the feeling of being kidnapped and locked up. It is an experience that alters and agitates one's own subjectivity, stripping the visitor of any sense of well-being for the duration of the visit. A sort of reenactment is thus initiated as a strategy for teaching history that places modern individuals in a simulation of past situations (Cook 2004, 487). In the words of one of the most prominent

researchers on reenactments, Vanessa Agnew, this historical representation “both takes affect as its object and attempts to elicit affect” (Agnew 2007, 301; see also Agnew, this volume), and this is one of the explicit and deliberate purposes of these historical simulations (Cook 2004). When transformed into museums, memory sites allow visitors to experience state terrorism in the flesh, building an atmosphere that relays a sense of the victims’ suffering. Reenactments, representations that demand emotional identification with the suffering of the victims reflect the affective turn that history has taken in recent decades (Agnew 2007). The objective is to give a voice and provide symbolic reparations to those directly affected while successfully passing down memory, warning the new generations of the dangers of the past and future.

In Latin America, Argentina is the country that has come the farthest in the resignification of its places of memory. More than five hundred spaces of different sorts now bear markers, though there is one in particular that has become emblematic of this reconversion. This site, the ESMA, is the topic of this chapter. Since 2015, when it was converted into a memory museum, ESMA has hosted a permanent exhibition in the main building of one of Argentina’s largest clandestine centers for detention, torture, and extermination. The site’s resignification, which continues to be a source of strife even today, aims to provide the public with an understanding of state terrorism. One of its explicit aims is to convey how average Argentines experienced the *modus operandi* of repression under military rule (1976–83), using emotional experiences and focusing on testimonies about daily life. The idea is to build the understanding of the past into an emancipatory force in the present. All of these features are present in the permanent ESMA exhibit.

For this reason, I am interested in describing and analyzing this process of transforming a clandestine detention center, ESMA, into a museum; this transformation would lead to resignification of the space—or, more precisely, the spaces—on the school grounds that were later converted into a death camp. Through a visit and examination of this recreation, it is possible to examine how the narrative structure reflects the aims of the reenactment—in other words, symbolic reparation for victims and the intergenerational transmission of traumatic memory. Finally, I will attempt to address the principal question associated with transforming these spaces

of horror: What needs to be shown at a place such as this? And what can a reenactment like this contribute to its teaching aims?

### **Naval Mechanics School: From Military School to Concentration Camp to Memory Site**

Argentina's ESMA was founded in the 1920s to train navy cadets. It is located on a large, fenced-in property spanning seventeen hectares with more than thirty buildings in a busy area near the Buenos Aires city limit. Following the military coup of 1976, part of ESMA began to operate as a concentration camp. It is the last place where nearly five thousand of the detained or disappeared were seen alive. Approximately two hundred of those held at this detention center survived. The Officers' Hall was the site where detainees were taken after being kidnapped and the point of departure for the airport, where countless victims were loaded onto planes for the so-called death flights, a euphemism for assassination. This building also served as the headquarters for the kidnapping, torture, and murder at ESMA. Soon after democracy was reinstated in 1983, a debate began on what should be done with these facilities, which had served not only as a military academy but also as a concentration camp. A series of presidential decrees were passed in an attempt to define how the space would be used. Proposals in the broad and bitter debate on what to do with ESMA ranged from demolition to an educational center and symbolic reparation.

In 2004 the entire property was declared a space for memory and for the promotion and defense of human rights, and the naval school was moved to the General Belgrano Naval Base. The Argentine navy, however, did not vacate the premise until November 20, 2007. Between 2000 and 2007 human rights organizations involved in the discussion on the future of the site organized several conferences. One of these conferences entitled "Memoria Abierta, or the Museum We Want," included presentations, work groups and discussions on what could be done there. Participants at the conferences laid out a series of questions that continue to be relevant to the Memory Museum today. The issues addressed in these early meetings can be organized according to the type of institution (e.g., museum, memory site, cultural center, agency), the aim/s of any memory-related exhibit (e.g., reparation, memory transmission, citizen building), the subjects represented there (i.e., who is given a voice, whether experts or victims), the contents

(i.e., what should be shown, whether suffering, resistance, or the modus operandi of state terrorism), strategies (i.e., how to show the contents, whether through objects, testimonies, narrative histories, or traditional and nontraditional exhibit devices that replicate the experience of detainment), and the target audiences of the space (i.e., who the museum is designed for, whether youths, victims, or citizens). Although the proposals varied greatly, all participants agreed on the key points that define historical reenactments: the need to make the disappeared and their stories visible as part of restorative justice and the intention to build an emancipatory link between past and present for new generations (Agnew 2021).

The Memory Site Museum opened in May 2015. The exhibit design was based on the always fragile and temporary consensuses between survivors, human rights organizations, and scholars from different disciplines. The controversy around the museum continues even today, since Argentina's supreme court has agreed to hear the lawsuit brought by Carlos Lordkipanidse and the Association of Former Detainees-Disappeared against the opening of the site as a museum.

### **The Museum and Its Narrative: An Overview**

The permanent exhibition at the museum was inaugurated on May 19, 2015, in accordance with Decree 1133 issued by President Cristina Kirchner. The decree, in turn, came two years after an agreement was signed by Argentina's executive branch, the Human Rights Department at the Ministry of Justice, and the University of San Martín. According to said agreement, the state would allocate 500,000 Argentine pesos for the development of a museum in the facilities of the former ESMA. There would be no public bidding for the project, which contained a confidentiality clause. An additional obstacle to the plan related to the jurisdiction of the site would soon be resolved with the dissolution of the Instituto Espacio para la Memoria (Memory Space Institute), a bipartite agency overseen by both the municipal authorities and national government. Under a new agreement between the government and the opposition, jurisdiction of the site falls to the national government. The inauguration of the exhibit was also polemical.

The Officers' Hall is a three-story building, in addition to a basement and an attic, in the shape of a backward letter E with the longest side facing

one of the city's busiest avenues, Avenida Libertador. There are two parking lots behind the building, which has two front entrances: the main entrance with an artistic intervention, and a smaller entrance. The main entrance has been covered by panes of glass imprinted with portraits of young people who, in all probability, were among those detained and disappeared here. The exhibit is divided into stations (glass panels with texts) that are not directly related to the building's features, but rather represent a curatorial choice: Reception; Historical Context; History of ESMA; Central Hall; Officers' Bedrooms; Capucha (Hood); Capuchita (Little Hood); Pregnant Women Room; Lavatories; Storeroom; Pecera (Fishbowl); Los Jorges (the Jorges); the Admiral's House; the Basement; the Transfers; the Golden Room; and Memory, Truth, and Justice Square. Named for the hoods that detainees were forced to wear over their heads at all times, Capucha was the largest area for detainees at the camp. Each detainee was assigned a cot inside a cubicle measuring one meter high, two meters long, and seventy centimeters wide. Capuchita, a smaller, L-shaped space in an attic where the building's water tank was located, was also reserved for detainees. Pregnant women were kept in three tiny rooms until they went into labor. The storage room was used to hold the objects (furniture, home appliances, clothing) stolen from the detainees' home at the time of their kidnapping. Pecera was a glassed-off area where some prisoners were chosen to perform slave labor. The room for the pregnant women, the storage room, and Pecera were on the third floor. Los Jorges were the offices of the task force chiefs. The area was named for the alias, Jorge, that several of the officers used. It was located on the main floor along with the Admiral's House, where the school's director lived. Also on the main floor is the Golden Room, where the closed-circuit TV system was located. This room, where many of the officers had their lockers, was where the kidnappings were planned. Navy officers slept on the first and second floors. The basement was one of the areas of the concentration camp where prisoners were taken in and out. It was a long, rectangular space divided into small rooms that had different uses over the years, including an infirmary, torture chambers, and others.

This is the standard museum visit as outlined in the brochures handed out with the audio guides, the same one used by the museum guides. The curatorial approach treats each area differently. The curators have underscored the difference between the spaces reserved exclusively for the perpetrators (the Admiral's Home, The Jorges, and the rooms where the

officers slept) and the places where the victims—the detainees-disappeared—were held. The texts on the glass panels are much shorter in the spaces reserved for perpetrators than those for detainees-disappeared; they are generally located outside the spaces—in other words, at the entrance to the Admiral’s Home or outside the hallway leading to the officers’ rooms. In contrast, the areas for illegal detention, torture, and slave labor are overrun with panels, audiovisuals, and 3-D representations, making it difficult for the visitor to get a feel for the building structure and the areas where detainees were held. There is simply too much testimonial information for the visitor to absorb. On the richly detailed displays, an evidence-based narrative is crafted, one that draws on the legal proceedings that have been held in Argentina since the emblematic Trial of the Juntas in 1985. Indeed, the entire exhibit comprises evidence such as testimonies and documents about what happened at this site and insight into how state terrorism functioned. By drawing on survivors’ voices, evidence forms the backbone of the narrative and points to one—but only one—of the possible objectives of an exhibit like this one.

Third, the words of the survivors are used to convey the horrific experiences they had here. No one else is asked to engage; there are no other voices. Notably, there is no reference to the political activism of those targeted by the dictatorship, and the testimonies unanimously reflect their role as victims. The exhibit is thus characterized by the overwhelming amount of information at the stations in the case of the spaces reserved for the detained-disappeared; the evidence-based narrative; and, finally, the detained-disappeared who present themselves as victims, and not as political activists. In my opinion, this third and final feature is the most troubling. The figure of the detainee-disappeared is stripped of any context here. There is mention of the Montoneros (left-wing peronist guerrilla organization), but little is said about the political ideals supported by most of the thirty thousand disappeared, or about what kind of society they were fighting to achieve. This oversight, which was probably intentional, is undoubtedly due to fear of reviving the well-known theory of the two demons, which, by equating the violence waged by the state with the revolutionary violence of the 1970s, caused so much controversy in the 1990s. Yet the decision to overlook the political activism that figures importantly in this chapter in history—and the pending discussion on

violence as a legitimate response of the lower classes—diminishes the exhibit’s ability to inform visitors and to tell the story in all its complexity.

This is my principal objection to the narrative of the exhibit. In terms of the other issues mentioned, the excessive amount of information and the focus on evidence (a narrative motivated by the need to prove what occurred there), my objections are not directed at the narrative itself—despite the fact that other narratives, including symbolic and educative ones (Jelin 2013), are clearly possible—but at the relationship between the evidence-heavy narrative and the Officers’ Hall, the core location in the clandestine detention and death camp.

### **Memory and Space: The Effects of Reenacting State Terrorism**

The ESMA Site Museum where this informative, evidence-based, victim narrative unfolds is not a space created after the fact to show and describe the features of government terrorism. Rather, it is the site where repression took place under the dictatorship, the very nerve center of state terrorism. The Officers’ Hall is a monument left by the perpetrators as an old emblem of horror, as well as a document, a piece of evidence, that enables justice for both victims and the community at large. One objective could be to avoid maintaining the space as a monument (like all monuments, it remains active long after the events themselves have passed) while preserving it as a powerful document, a materiality that no longer belongs to the survivors but to society as a whole and to future generations (Lord 2007). It is necessary to ask whether the narrative that currently circulates within this space is pertinent. The question is not about the truth of what is told at the exhibit or the need to recount these events: it is about the narrative’s suitability in this particular space.

As the base of operations of a clandestine detention center and death camp, a site where thousands of citizens were seen for the last time, is the Officers’ Hall the right place for this overwhelmingly informative, evidence-based, victim’s narrative? The curators and other museum staff would answer affirmatively, with arguments to back their answer. In the first place, the permanent exhibition is a form of resignifying this place—that is, giving it new meaning and new uses. The slogan, “Where once there was death, now there is life” is repeated time and again by both government officials and the representatives of human rights organizations with offices



on the ESMA grounds. Second, the open exhibition allows large groups of citizens, students, and tourists to visit the facilities. For an exhaustive look at state terrorism, these visitors can choose from a variety of options such as audio guides, personal guides, group tours, and solo tours. According to the museum's director, Alejandra Naftal, the simulation of the horrific *modus operandi* of state terrorism is the principal objective of the exhibit.

As the backdrop for this new historical, civic, and patriotic approach to education, what better place than the actual site of a great number of the events recounted? The Officers' Hall, it is argued, has a certain mystique, generating (or able to generate) an atmosphere that would not be possible elsewhere (Casey 2000; Griffero and Moretti 2018). Though there is something to be said for these arguments, there are strong counterarguments as well.

As the concept of resignification is frequently used in connection with places of memory, I believe it is useful to provide a brief summary of the origin and uses of the term. To resignify means to give another meaning to a place: in this case, to a site where events occurred that prove traumatic for an entire community—in other words, state repression against political dissidents. This resignification is frequently contextualized, providing some sort of explanation in an attempt to help the community understand aspects of the terror waged by the state and its connections to the historical context and to economic and political interests of those in power. This is one way to prevent the space from being monumental while conserving—not eradicating—its power as a document, its status as witness to what has occurred. Resignifying is, after all, about changing the tale that is told, and about telling a new tale that sheds light on what happened there. In the case of disappearances, this is particularly important.

The ESMA is nearly one of the few material sites that can show and prove how state terrorism operated. It is a building as witness, a building where nearly five thousand detainees-disappeared were seen for the last time. And preserving that materiality is essential. Yet in addition to the material dimension of the space of the intervention in the Officers' Hall—the building as witness—the space has an immaterial dimension, or perhaps a materiality other than that of walls and floors. I am referring to the place's symbolic dimension, which is also essential to preserve. Though the conservation of the building itself is essential, it is not enough to maintain that symbolic dimension. There is nothing on the walls or the floor

indicative of a commemoration here. As a political decision—political in the sense that it corresponds to the public sphere, but not partisan—commemoration is not something the space itself demands. Naturally, it is essential to conserve the site’s materiality, but this alone does not suffice. While the place itself is the *pièce de résistance*—and fundamental for the historical reenactment—the uses given to this space are what constitute this symbolic dimension. In the myriad history of human culture, there are many examples of places that merit respect or veneration, places where only certain behaviors are acceptable and others are harshly condemned. Examples date back to the cave art of the late Stone Age and include places of worship as well as natural spaces that require conservation and protection. This ties in to the great number of visitors to the ESMA Site Museum. While the curatorial staff at the museum clearly sees this as an achievement, it is, at the very least, a disputable one.

The ESMA Officers’ Hall is an exceptional place—tragically exceptional—that must be preserved as evidence for the ongoing trials against the perpetrators. However, it is also necessary to preserve the sacred nature of the place—sacred in the civic sense of the word. The fact that it is such a special place means it should be reserved for special uses. It is a special place where atrocities occurred, and the assurance that such atrocities will never again occur depends on Argentina’s citizens. The problem is that it will be enormously difficult to maintain the space’s specialness if the institutional aim is the more, the better, and as it begins to appear on the list of the not-to-be-missed destinations of dark tourism (Lennon and Foley 2000, Sion 2014).

Due to its exceptional, and therefore vulnerable, status, it requires diversified uses and functions. The ESMA Officers’ Hall should not be the place where one goes to seek information on the military repression that occurred during the last dictatorship. If someone wants to learn about state terrorism, there are a range of supports that provide information; in fact, there are more than ever before in human history. Films, books, audiovisuals and 3-D recreations are a few examples, many with a high level of sophistication (Huella Digital 2018). The proposed trade-off of a constant flow of visitors in exchange for greater collective information does not even appear to yield the desired outcome. It is unlikely that the place will change the perspective of its visitors, though it appears very likely that

these visitors will alter the nature—symbolic and material, in that order—of the place itself.

### **Reenacting the Past Through Absence**

Is it possible to find a satisfactory criterion for what to do at a space such as ESMA? In my view, in the case of ESMA, this exceeds the question of what (state terrorism, the experience of victims, the disappearances), whom (survivors, human rights organizations, historians, curators), and even why (reparation, transmission, construction). Rather, the criterion should be based on its exceptional nature. ESMA is not exceptional in the sense of rare—there are many other places across Argentina, and indeed worldwide, that were used as clandestine detention centers and death camps—but it is a place where exceptional events occurred, events we hope will never happen again.

Perhaps the question is not what should be shown at the former ESMA Memory Site Museum but instead what could be offered at this place that cannot be found or replicated elsewhere. What experience can be had there and not anywhere else? A tentative answer is absence. State terrorism introduced a paradigmatic figure, that of the disappeared. It is a figure characterized by the incorporeal, by the absence of a body, by a vanishing act. This is precisely the experience of absence, the experience of one or more people missing that cannot be filled by words or explained. The experience of that absence demands bareness, emptiness, scarcity. It requires the ability to take stock of the building, feel the silence, sense the weight that lingers in the air. It also requires a certain solitude, a retreat within oneself like the retreat that people experience upon entering a sacred place.

When I speak of absence, I am referring to those who are evidently not among us and to the echo of that evidence—in other words, what that absence can mean today. It is the absence of those who are no longer with us and those whose fate remains unknown, but also the absence of rights, protections, and safeguards in a state that violated all human laws and laid siege to the civil population it was expected to protect. In this way, the experience of that emptiness or absence connects past and present—a frequent topic in the discussions and demands of those involved about the resignification of ESMA and a core objective of historical reenactments—

and allows questions to be formulated regarding the continuities of that past.

The experience of absence in both senses, that of past and present, cannot be felt in a book, film, or virtual recreation, or at least not in the same way. It is the space rendered place that enables the “physical and psychological experience,” to borrow Vanessa Agnew’s definition of historical reenactments (Agnew 2021, 330). This is not a space that needs be created as other representations do: its mere presence—as a mute witness of that terrifying past—suffices. Entering the tiny room where the pregnant women were kept, the visitor feels cramped, and when walking beneath the beam in Sector Four, the visitor is forced to stoop to avoid hitting her head on the cement. The bareness of Capuchita is stifling and uncomfortable, generating unease. These are individual experiences that have social meaning. We can have them because we share common corporeal and emotional signifiers. When the signage in Capucha or Pecera is not too distracting, the lack of windows constricts, allowing us to feel the enclosure, the discomfort, the terror.

Yet what theoretical tools are brought to bear here? How should we approach this place whose exceptional status we must guarantee both now and in the future? I believe that, because of its exceptional status, the place—and the uses it is given—should be treated as sacred, though the same need not apply to the narratives that circulate within. A civic sense of the sacred is a human sort of transcendental. If we do not value the ESMA as a place that transcends its own history—almost as possessed by an aura, as described by Walter Benjamin—it will be banalized, transformed into yet another spot on the dark tourism map. And in order to prevent this, it will be necessary to forgo massive numbers of visitors and think again about how to resignify the place from the perspective of emptiness.

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