

# Why a Museum for Human Rights?: Memory

By Gonzalo Conte

## INTRODUCTION

Exhibition of the Architect Gonzalo Conte (Coordinator of the Topography of Memory Program- Memoria Abierta) during the International Seminar *"A Museum en Villa Grimaldi: A Space for Memory and the Education of Human Rights"*.

## TEXT

Memoria Abierta wants to thank the participation of Corporación Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi, the Disappeared's relatives, Municipalidad de Pañalolen, Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales and all those who made this seminar possible.

We also want to take this opportunity to welcome Corporación Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi and Museo de Rosario as new members of the International Coalition of Historic Site Museums of Conscience. These new incorporations, along with others, will channel, in the future, the regional contributions to the promotion and transmission of humanitarian and democratic values.

During the military dictatorship (1976-1983), Argentina was subdued by the State terrorism which had started some years before. Aiming at "ending subversion" and with all the power of the State, the Armed Forces established a methodology of clandestine repression based on people disappearances. These people were abducted by "task groups" and taken to clandestine centres of detention and torture in order to extract information from them. Subsequently, these people were killed and their bodies were hidden to prevent their identification.

The aim of the regime established in 1976 was to suppress previous years' initiatives of mobilization and paralyse society. It was necessary to eliminate resistance centres and social solidarity bonds that threatened the possibility of implementing the economic model of exploitation that was finally established and which nowadays, Argentina endures. The military imposed terror to hand over the state patrimony to private hands, dismantle the productive system and subordinate the national economy to foreign capital.

"To create a museum that shows the acts of state terrorism constitutes an old desire of Human Rights defenders and of those who have joined them in their struggles". This was the introduction of the first interdisciplinary debate conference on institutional organization and contents of the future Museum of Memory organized by Memoria Abierta in the year 2000.

The Argentinean experience with respect to the creation of a Museum of Memory in the main clandestine centre of detention, Escuela Mecánica de la Armada (Navy Mechanics School) changed drastically on March 24th, 2004 when President Kirchner decided to restore it to the government of the city of Buenos Aires.

This political decision, clearly aimed at stimulating social debate, has had an impact on all involved sectors. One of these sectors is the government itself, which is willing to build fast its own structure, and contents as regards the

fundamental human rights, in a state that has been historically absent on the subject. Then, the decision of planning state public policies for memory too.

Another sector involved is the Human Rights movement, main protagonist of this conquest, which today faces "a scenario of transition and revision of its practices and goals, where its members take part from an unquestionable legitimacy based on the fact that they suffered the terror they are trying to fix and remember.

It is also worth mentioning that in some of the three hundred clandestine centres of detention officially recognized in Argentina and spread all over the country, different preservation processes are under way. The participants of these experiences are survivors, relatives, neighbourhood associations, human rights organizations as well as the state itself. With great difficulties and needs they try to favour debate and build the memory of these places. Memoria Abierta participates and assists some of them.

Finally, the society itself and its contribution to "a place for multiple looks".

In any case, it can be considered as a space in which the ups and downs of a long and continuous process will converge. This space will be intended to settle the unresolved scores of the past. This is the testimony of the different experiences which have tried to convey, worldwide, at a greater or smaller degree of effectiveness, the construction of the memory, always through long and worked times.

At the same time, this debate has some issues that should be highlighted. To begin with, the need for a deep discussion that should not fall on only on the human rights movement. This opening to society, which should be promoted by the organizations themselves and guaranteed by the government, constitutes the mechanism capable of reinforcing a greater participation in the development of the museum.

This decision of building a museum should turn into a collective need which must go beyond the current government by arduously seeking the consensus of the different established versions.

It is also a matter of creating efficient tools that go with these paths contributing to the rapprochement of the "irreconcilable memories", trying to cause an impact on the different sectors of society and their own memories, helping to transmit what happened in Argentina.

Then, who does the museum address? Could it aspire to address the people who are not convinced? Will it be capable of conveying its message to a large part of the middle class or to the groups that supported dictatorship? In any case, it should produce a report which shows how obvious the implemented

system was and how not obvious it was for the society, which atomized by terror, was trying to protect itself.

The museum could be a place for learning and reflection, being loyal to the historical account of the political projects of the time and basically, generating a great deal of knowledge.

It should help to unravel the deepest mechanisms of the state and the society which caused the disappearance of people, the emergence of clandestine centers of detention, the appropriation of minors born in captivity, all ways of abuses and authoritarianism which must be understood beyond the emotional memory.

The participation of the society will also guarantee the dynamic dialogue among social actors, stimulating the collective memory, recreating the willingness of change and generating warning signs towards all the aforementioned kinds of violations of fundamental rights.

In that sense, sociologists Alejandra Oberti and Roberto Pittaluga point out that "all memory is a construction of memory: what is remembered, what is forgotten and what sense is given to the memories, is not something implicit in the course of events but something that obeys a selection with ethical and political implications".

With regard to this construction, Lila Pastoriza quotes Pilar Calveiro, (they are both ESMA survivors). In her book "Power and Disappearance", Calveiro poses the following question in allusion to our recent past: How to construct the necessarily multiple collective memories of this history? Quoting Walter Benjamín, she answers: "It is the present, or, more appropriately, the dangers of the present of our current societies that call for memory.

In this sense it could be said that the memory does not come from the '70s, but starts from our present reality and goes back in time to bring the past back, as a fleeting lightning, as a flash, at the time of current danger".

In this direction, the construction of a collective commitment demands a deep debate about memory that allows us to understand the responsibilities.

Historian Federico Lorenz points out that "the responsibility of the guerrillas in violent events must be explained and exposed as well as the state terrorism but not in such a way that allows equivalence between one and another form of violence which are fundamentally different".

The visitors of the museum will be the ones to assess the failure, the success, the inequality of the forces and of the answers to avoid any explanation that

tends to compare the kind of violence of the State with the one exercised by the armed groups.

With some degree of lethargy, a time for analysis has begun. This analysis will be profound and will define the history that the museum will tell, assuming the great difficulty of understanding the recent history, that system of extermination and terror. Justice and truth will be implacable witnesses of this construction.

Memoria Abierta celebrates this step, Villa Grimaldi's decision that wants to reaffirm the intention of a space for memory and also for the education of human rights. We hope to be close and to help in this journey.

Thank you.