

A Space for Dialogue a proposal from Memoria Abierta

INTRODUCTION

In this text Patricia Valdez, executive director of Memoria Abierta, carries out an exhaustive exploration of the debates and events linked to the search for Truth and Justice and the construction of social memory on State terrorism in Argentina.

TEXT

On March 24 this year (2004), in an enormously symbolic move, the Argentine government under President Néstor Kirchner ratified an act that had been proposed just a month earlier: the conversion of the ESMA buildings, symbol of the horrors perpetrated during the period of state terrorism, into a place of memory.

Days before the ceremony, the President visited the precinct, exploring the main buildings alongside a group of survivors who had been held in ESMA.

This signing of an agreement between the State and the government of the City of Buenos Aires to work together to convert ESMA into a 'Space for Memory and for the Promotion and Defence of Human Rights', represents the initial step in a process that aims to transform a space currently utilised by the Armada's educational institutions into an entity that records and remembers the events of the period of State terrorism.

This is the challenge that has been set, and the work of the project is much more expansive and comprehensive than merely this first act. We have already seen numerous articles and pieces by intellectuals, journalists, and prominent figures from the time that have reflected on the best ways to advance, advertised the dangers and difficulties, and put forward paths that might be taken in order to achieve a message that is plural in its significance.

The road, however, has yet to be travelled. For many years human rights bodies such as ourselves have been calling for the creation of a museum with the capacity both to represent that which occurred in our country during those years and to explore its causes and consequences. We have studied similar experiences in other countries, visited museums and thought hard about the use of a historical location in the creation of a space with these characteristics. With this in mind, therefore, we would like to foreground several central issues.

1. The reparative character of the new destiny

In 1924 a site was assigned to the Ministry of the Marines for the purpose of the creation of educational institutions for its members. The property was misused. For that reason, the decision to give to this site a different purpose is not merely a message to those who separate

themselves from the law and norms of society, but a healing message for society in its entirety.

So, why a museum in ESMA? Is this the only space with the capacity to represent those horrors that were extended throughout the nation? The reasons converge within the walls of ESMA itself, and give the building a powerful symbolic resonance: the birth of children who were later taken from their parents and whose identities were changed; the significant number of people who not only survived their internment in ESMA, but who then gave testimony to their experience; the evidence, in this place, of the systematic policy of repression and extermination of political opposition and armed resistance.

2. What should visitors to ESMA experience?

This place, where around 5 thousand people were detained, never to return, is already a symbol of the methodology of the State Terrorism. The State and Argentine society thus have before them the challenge of creating a space for public use which complies with one primary objective: the facilitation of education and the promotion of reflection on the events that occurred within its walls.

It is the task of ESMA to communicate the events that occurred there, to take ownership of our historical and cultural heritage and in doing so to encourage social and political behaviour supportive of life, liberty and respect for the law.

The format and the final aesthetic of ESMA raises a number of interesting questions. Does the act of looking at and moving through those spaces and buildings where events occurred have in itself a narrative capacity superior to other mediums that aim to relate the past? Does the act of walking through a vacant building have the eloquence sufficient to narrate that which occurred there? While recognising the narrative capacity inherent in the space itself, we believe that it is nonetheless necessary to unfold a 'scene' that will provoke in the viewer the necessity to know, to understand and not to repeat.

3. The Language of a Museum

ESMA is essentially a space for the exercise of memory in dialogue with others. The multiplicity of voices to be heard there can provide a space for dialogue between generations in their search to make sense of the past.

The narrative instruments and historical sources that can be used in order to ensure that this space functions as an effective educative tool are numerous: the wounds of a traumatic past are present not only in documents, photographs, or oral and written testimonies but also in personal and social experiences, perhaps experiences yet untold. When the building of the former prison once again opens its doors, this time as a museum, while it will perhaps not exorcise all its ghosts, it will nonetheless undoubtedly function to promote knowledge, comprehension and debate about one period in history that cannot avoid complexity and ambiguity, but that does point to those limits that a society should not transgress.

ESMA is the museum that Argentine society owes to itself. Two laws expressing this have already been passed, and the political will of the current government should act to convert the building, representative of the hundreds of sinister enclosures that marked the Argentine territory during the dictatorship, into an institution with the capacity to outlast this and other mandates, and which will endure as an instrument of State politics which validates and preserves the memory and the cultural patrimony of the Argentine people.

Culture is a constitutive part of national identity. To create cultural entities such as this museum is precisely to designate permanent and sustained resources to its functioning, a statement that may be far from grandiose aspirations, but far also from designating to it an ephemeral and transitory existence.

A precondition to the inclusion of this museum in the State political vision is the guarantee of the incorporation of civil society into government organs, and the designation, in fully transparent proceedings, of a team of suitable professionals committed to the cause of liberty and human rights.

Knowledge of the past can help us to imagine a future of freedom. We would hope that every inhabitant of Buenos Aires, and everyone who visits, will go through this process, and will come out more firmly appreciative of pluralism, open and democratic debate and the promotion of a just society with respect for the rights of all.

This museum is for all: for those who we don't know and to whom we are not linked, to those who 'know' and those who have never heard of the dictatorship, for students and those who work, for children and for adults, for the already convinced and those who still doubt... It will be a space that works through its aesthetic and educative capacity to affirm life. In this it is not a space that merely recollects a horror, but that signals clearly those limits that a society cannot transgress at risk of its own survival.