

## **Progress through Erasure: The case of the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno**

Marianela D'Aprile

MS Architecture: History, Theory and Society

The twentieth century for Argentina, as for many of its Latin American counterparts, was a time of self-definition and self-positioning within European and North American contexts. Distanced by more than a century from the colonial presence of Spain, Argentinians sought to define themselves and their country in relationship to its “Old World” and North American counterparts. In these attempts to self-define, the capital city of Buenos Aires came to represent the entirety of the country. As such, attempts to position Argentina within an international context most frequently unfolded against the backdrop of the capital port city, which by the early part of the twentieth century had already developed an identity strongly tied to Europe. Its eclectic-style buildings, marked by their mixture of Beaux Arts and Neoclassical elements, gave Buenos Aires the moniker of “the Paris of South America.”<sup>1</sup> As the identity of the capital city, and in turn of the whole country, crystallized most visibly in its architecture, governments of the twentieth century would seek to shape the image of the country through its buildings.

One such case is that of the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno, a building whose history spans forty years: from 1955, when the lot on which it sits was designated as the future site of a new National Library building, to 1995, when the new building was fully inaugurated. Before its commission, the plot on which the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno presides was occupied by the presidential residence, whose demolition was ordered by Pedro Aramburu, the leader of the dictatorial military regime that followed the Revolución Libertadora of 1955. Commissioned in 1962, the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno was not officially finished until 1995, its construction stalled by the Proceso de Reorganización Nacional and its Brutalist form outdated by

---

<sup>1</sup> The 1900 *Monthly Summary of Commerce and Finance of the United States* published by the Bureau of Statistics of the Treasury Department of the United States states that Buenos Aires “has gained the appellation of ‘the Paris of South America.’”

the time of its inauguration. But despite, or maybe because of, its history's peculiar and complicated ties with the political evolutions of Argentina, the Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno has not become part of the nation's identity. In fact, there is no comprehensive history written about the library's current building.

The story of the library and the motivations behind building it are clearly linked to attempts by the governments of Argentina to assert an image of the country — created directly through the image of Buenos Aires — as a progressive and Modern one. The erasure through demolition of the building that previously sat on the lot by the anti-Peronist leaders of the *Revolución Libertadora* immediately set up the library building as the antithesis to the eclectic-style residential palace it would replace, even before it was commissioned. In 1961, then-president of Argentina Arturo Frondizi placed a call for proposals for a new building for the entire collections of National Library, housed until then in a Beaux Arts building on México Street. The call for proposals came six years after the demolition of the previous building and after a democratic government was reestablished in 1958, creating an apparent narrative of continuity between ruling governments and their assertion of their political philosophies through architecture.

Of the twenty-eight entries to the competition, six were selected as finalists, and the entry by Alicia Cazzaniga, Clorindo Testa and Francisco Bullrich was selected as the winner. Construction began in 1966 but was shortly thereafter interrupted by the military dictatorship that ruled Argentina from 1976 to 1983 and resumed slowly — a partial inauguration took place in 1992 but the building was not fully open for inhabitation until 1995. By this time, the Brutalist form of the building, chosen no doubt to align Argentina with countries in Europe choosing Modernism to represent progress after the second World War, was severely outdated. Further, it contradicted the predominant late-twentieth-century model of representing progress through the built environment, which was to create “modern spaces in historical buildings,” called by Jorge Liernur “simulacra of the First World.”<sup>2</sup>

---

<sup>2</sup> Liernur's essay “Buenos Aires fin de siglo: el desconcierto de la forma” tracks the way in which Buenos Aires has developed itself in relationship to other cities, including Paris, Los Angeles and Montevideo.

While building projects of such a massive scale — and with such symbolic siting — are clearly demonstrative of a nationalist project, it is imperative to see these projects as products of their time and not as necessarily representative of their nation regardless of other influencing factors. The fact that the construction of Biblioteca Nacional Mariano Moreno could be attributed to a number of different governments upsets the typical narratives of the historical period during which it was built. Further, it puts into question normative ideas of progress within a Latin American context. This project is an inquiry into the library's peculiar history — and the ways in which this peculiar history was engaged with various state-building projects and their notions of progress — through a historical account and critical analysis of the building from its conception in legal documents to its full inauguration.