

Through the support of the Tinker Foundation, I advanced my research on mediating human rights in the Global South. This summer, I focused on comparative approaches between two very different sites in Buenos Aires, Argentina: La Parque de la Memoria and the Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, Ex Centro Clandestino de Detención, Tortura y Exterminio. My research was motivated by the desire to situate my theoretical questions around the ethics of display, the aesthetics of state institutions, and the production of collective memory in Buenos Aires.

My main site visits were to La Parque de la Memoria and the Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, Ex Centro Clandestino de Detención, Tortura y Exterminio, and my secondary site visits included former secret detention centers (centro clandestine de detención, or CCDs) El Olimpo, Club Atlético, and Automotores Orletti. My visits included guided tours, interviews with museum workers, and media and spatial analysis. In visiting these sites multiple times, I also wanted to consider these spaces in their communal and urban context—how are they integrated into city life, and who is their targeted audience? How do these spaces foster an ongoing relationship to the past? Both of these sites act as memorial spaces to Argentina’s “lost generation,” the estimated 30,000 victims of the 1974-1983 civic-military dictatorship, yet they mobilize practices of memory in very different ways.

La Parque de la Memoria offers artistic renderings of trauma, mourning, fragmentation, and injustice, celebrating the open space of interpretation for visitors to contemplate sculptures in a meditative yet charged setting. The waterfront park was designed with its site-specificity in mind: many victims were thrown to their deaths into the Rio de la Plata in the infamous “death flights.” Without conclusive knowledge of their loved ones, the memorial park serves as a kind of burial ground to visit. During one of my site visits, a group of Abuelas de la Plaza de Mayo gathered alongside family members and activists to celebrate the life of one of the Abuelas, Cecilia Fernández de Viñas. Before passing away, de Viñas wished to have her family spread her ashes into the river at the memorial park, continuing her legacy of advocating for the disappeared.

The memorial park elicits an active call to ‘recovering’ the disappeared through remembering them—large steles bear the names of all currently known victims and the age they disappeared. Amidst the open layout of the park, the zig-zag path of the steles offer a guided path, materially immersing the visitor in the vastness of the loss. The last stele in the series is closest to the river and bears blank plaques, which represent the unknown deaths and disappearances yet to be discovered. The sculptural works of art in the park elicit specific figurations of the disappeared, while simultaneously gesturing towards the enormity of the lost generation. For example, Nicolás Guagnini’s contribution depicts a portrait of his father who disappeared in 1977, yet its title 30,000 and its form suggest a broader searching and mourning than his personal connection. The sculpture is comprised of

thin white columns set on a square grid, and the portrait is painted in fragments so that the image is complete from only one viewpoint. The sculpture necessitates movement from the viewer in order to 'resolve' the image, perhaps suggesting how the continued struggle for remembrance and justice requires active participation and a motivating desire to see the disappeared more fully.

The Museo Sitio de Memoria ESMA, Ex Centro Clandestino de Detención, Tortura y Exterminio is one of fifteen main buildings on a campus lining Avenida del Libertador, which skirts the northern periphery of the city. During the dictatorship, the estate served as a key clandestine detention and torture center. From the 500 detention centers dotting the country at the time, ESMA trafficked a proportionally higher number of detainees and served as a training and command center for the government's lethal anti-oppositional directives. ESMA is both a historical site of state-sponsored violence and a symbolic space provoking debates about how to responsibly frame sites and stories about state violence.

In 2004, this campus officially transitioned from the relic of the Escuela de Mecánica de la Armada (ESMA) to the Espacio Memoria y Derechos Humanos Ex-ESMA. In addition to the museum, the repurposed campus buildings now include cultural centers, archives, research labs, and memorial spaces. The museum was formerly the Officer's Hall, which housed both officers' living quarters and detainees' torture and detention. Inside the museum, visitors climb the same stairwells as blindfolded prisoners of the past, step into closet-sized 'maternity' rooms where kidnapped women gave birth, and among other sights, regard etchings scrawled or punctured into walls. For some, the preservation of such a macabre space might seem perverse, yet the mission of the museum seeks to honor the experience of the disappeared and survivors, as well as make visible the violence that was denied and hidden from the public for so long.

The museum layers a memorial and pedagogical structure onto the former clandestine torture and detention center that disappeared more than five thousand people during the dictatorship. The conversion of the space into a museum unleashed debates about how to properly commemorate the disappeared and contextualize the space. For example, survivors, cultural critics, academics, politicians, and family members of the disappeared disagreed on the extent that the state's sponsorship bolstered or compromised the museum's critical vantage point; they differed on whether or not art could exist in such a haunting space; they debated the merits of demolishing the building altogether. Decisions about how to frame the museum experience shifted between differing notions of a target audience—was the museum for survivors, younger Argentine generations, tourists, or a mix? While some advocated for minimal austerity, others argued for major interventions in the space. The stakes of repurposing the space into a museum transcended aesthetic perspectives. Would a museum about the operations of

disappearing victims of the dictatorship leave enough ambiguity and interpretation available to keep the memories and struggles for justice alive, or would the museal gesture seal the events into the past? My research at ex-ESMA explored the politics of what to remember as well as how to stage remembering.

I am a PhD candidate in the Film and Media department, yet my interdisciplinary research spans across film, photography, architecture, museum studies, and memory studies. Rather than reading between the lines of scholars in disparate fields, I needed to visit these sites for myself and see how and where different methodologies would be most useful. As a film scholar, I am used to analyzing inherently mobile objects, yet my interest in situated, in-context mediations of human rights necessitated site visits to study how museums and memorials shape the emotional tone of the visit, make use of immersive media, or how stringently they guide the paths of visitors. My scholarship brings acuity into visual culture broadly, and the Tinker Grant allowed me to apply my skills in a new setting.