

2016 Tinker Summer Field Research Report

Center for Latin American Studies, UC Berkeley

Excavating Memory in Santiago and Buenos Aires

1. Abstract

Memorial sites in Santiago de Chile and Buenos Aires serve as different entry points to trace how forensic anthropology and architectural archeology have shaped contemporary representations of violence. My research proposes to understand these excavation practices as ‘archaeologies of violence’. Grouped together under this broader concept, the role these three ways of accessing the buried past have played in post-dictatorial politics of memory, justice, and reparation, can be unfolded. Archaeologies of violence have not only expanded their disciplinary influence through judicial procedures, testimonies, bottom-up citizens’ initiatives, and wide-ranging modes of representation, but have also rendered visible a contested past in the urban landscape of both Argentina and Chile.

2. Summary Report

The Tinker Foundation and CLAS Summer Field Research Grant allowed me to return to two sites of memory I had visited a long time ago: ‘Patio 29’ and ‘Club Atlético’. I was first involved with ‘Patio 29’, in Santiago de Chile, as an architect, back in 2008, when, along with an interdisciplinary team, I designed a memorial for the site. My first encounter with Club Atlético in Buenos Aires was as a tourist, searching for the past of the San Telmo neighborhood. At the time both struck me as sites of physical and political neglect: half-abandoned, dirty, decadent, shapeless and undetermined. My return to ‘Patio 29’ and ‘Club Atlético’ is grounded on my

interest to explore the particular mechanisms of memorialization at play here: instead of new buildings these places work with the old; instead of construction, these places accumulate excavation; instead of hiring architects and designers, these sites employ archeologist and forensic anthropologist. Thus, my research, and particularly my trip to Santiago and Buenos Aires, explored how forensic anthropology and architectural archeology have played a key role in shaping the memorial landscape in these two Latin American cities.

In September 1991 a group of forensic anthropologists started excavating the site known as ‘Patio 29’ [Lot 29] of the General Cemetery in Santiago de Chile. ‘Patio 29’ was chosen to bury the bodies of more than one thousand victims during the first four months of the military dictatorship, from September to December of 1973. More than three hundred of these bodies were concealed under unidentified graves marked as ‘N.N.’ A decade later the military returned to ‘Patio 29’ in a macabre operation called ‘Retiro de Televisores’ [Withdrawal of TVs] to eliminate the evidence of their crimes. The operation was only partially successful, leaving more than one hundred bodies behind to be unearthed under the reparation politics of the transitional democracy of the 90s. When it came to ‘digging up the past’, transitional governments were constrained by wide-ranging political agreements and self-censorship. Human Rights Organizations, on the contrary, multiplied in number after the return to democracy, and intensified their activities to interpellate the state in search of justice, memory, and reparation. In this context, especially after the first Truth Report, the ‘Rettig Report’, was published in February 1991, ‘Patio 29’ emerged for the Human Rights Organizations as a starting point to dig up the past. Despite the military’s attempt to erase it, and the transition’s official politics to silence it by looking towards the future, the brightness of ‘Patio 29’ remained unchanged. Nineteen years after the clandestine burials in the General Cemetery, a court order allowed a

group of anthropologists called ‘GAF- Grupo de Antropología Forense’ [Forensic Anthropology Group], together with medical examiners, lawyers, and victims’ families, to initiate an excavation process in ‘Patio 29’. The excavation lasted two weeks and was conducted under the watchful eye of the national media. My trip to Santiago was fruitful in tracing the original reports and archives of GAF¹, and I located important historical documents concerning ‘Patio 29’ at the archive of the Historical Monuments Council in Santiago. The site itself seemed to be hermetic to its meaning, several observations revealed that the place is visited with relative frequency on weekends and shows very few visitors during the week. Fortunately, I was able to visit ‘Patio 29’ on the National Patrimony Day, on May 29, which allowed me to talk to a few visitors who had wandered off from the usual national monuments to visit ‘Patio 29’ on that rainy winter day.

Memory practices in Chile are deeply entangled with Argentinian processes of memorialization. Both dictatorships collaborated through ‘Operación Condor’, a network of military intelligence and terror. This entanglement between both sides of the Andes has expanded beyond ‘Operación Cóndor’: after the end of military dictatorships, politics of memory –official and grassroots- have overcome the obstacles between both countries. In parallel to Chile’s silencing of memories, Argentina was going through its own ‘politics of forgetting’ during the late 80s and early 90s. Early attempts to identify and prosecute the perpetrators were quickly inhibited by the amnesty legislation of Due Obedience and ‘Punto Final’ (1986).

My research on ‘Patio 29’ revealed how influential early Argentinian forensic anthropologists had been for Chilean processes of unearthing the past in the 90’s. But unlike Argentina, in Chile the uses of these mechanisms of memory remained constrained to a handful

¹ It was impossible to interview forensic anthropologist Ivan Cáceres Roque during my stay because he was travelling outside the country.

of sites and to short excavation periods. In order to compare these diverging experiences, my research took me to ‘Club Atlético’, a site of memory that not only pursues justice through excavation, as ‘Patio 29’ does, but also bears the uniqueness of being a never-ending archeological site.

In April 2002, a group of archaeologists employed by the city government of Buenos Aires started digging up a former ‘Centro Clandestino de Detención’ [Clandestine Detention Center] known as ‘Club Atlético’. ‘Club Atlético’ operated as a torture chamber, in the basement of the Department of Supply and Warehouse Division of the Federal Police, located in the neighborhood of San Telmo in the center of Buenos Aires. Approximately 1800 people were held here between February and December 1977. After less than a year of operation it was closed down and demolished in order to build ‘Autopista 25 de Mayo’. Unlike ‘Patio 29’, the main focus of the archeological excavation in ‘Club Atlético’ was not the possibility of finding human remains, but to ‘recover’ the foundations, and later virtually reconstruct the original building.

During my visit to Buenos Aires I was able to interview the two archeologists in charge of ‘Club Atlético’, Laura Duguine and Silvina Durán, as well as Susana Mitre, who runs the pedagogical programs at the memorial. A guided visit through the site provided further information that allowed me to grasp the urban, political, aesthetic and scientific issues at stake at the memorial².

‘Patio 29, and ‘Club Atlético’ share multiple dimensions of violence: they have been material witnesses to the crimes of their military dictatorships, and have been subject to the erasure of criminal evidence by their perpetrators. Both memorial sites illustrate a different knot between space and memory that this project worked to untie: the tensions between the limitations

2 Unlike Patio 29, there are no archives that document ‘Club Atlético’, only the memorial itself.

of forensic sciences, the state, and the victim's families, in the case of 'Patio 29', and the negotiations between testimonial spaces and everyday life in the case of 'Club Atlético'. This is was achieved by combining an analysis of the local practice of archeological memorialization with an on-site observation of the everyday use of these memorials.

In conclusion, 'Patio 29' and 'Club Atlético' are bound by the practice of excavating; what I have called the material practices of archaeologies of violence. The same is true for the material evidence that constitutes them: bones, and architectural rubble are not transparent objects to be discovered, as they cannot speak for themselves. Contrary to the scientific belief in the objectivity of material evidence, this research has been an attempt to show how the producers of material evidence –anthropologists and archeologists - assemble, mold, delimit, and edit the materials they hold in their hands. This is by no means a critique of their disciplinary integrity; on the contrary, it is an acknowledgment of how forensic anthropology, architectural archeology, and forensic architecture have adapted to the very peculiar task of digging into spaces of state terrorism.

The Tinker Foundation and CLAS Summer Field Research Grant allowed me to continue my research project and adjust the approaches and methods I developed during a previous research trip to Berlin, in order to test them in Santiago and Buenos Aires before beginning my dissertation in 2017. The results of this research lay the groundwork for a dissertation on practices of memory, comparing memorial cases in Berlin, Santiago, Buenos Aires, and California.

3. Photographs: (attached to email)

Atletico_2016-01: A view from the plaza in front of the 'Club Atlético' memorial. The memorial is an excavation underneath the structure of a highway,

and it is divided from this semi-public space by a broad avenue. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Atletico_2016-02: The 'Club Atlético' memorial is an archeological excavation site surrounded by elevated walkways. Victims' families have contributed to the memorial with artistic interventions that can be seen on the hill of debris and on the central pillar depicted on the photograph. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Atletico_2016-03: Detail of the central pillar with an artistic intervention by the victims' families. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Atletico_2016-04: Archeologists Silvina Durán and Laura Duguine, and anthropologist Francisca Márquez during our guided visit of the memorial. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Atletico_2016-05: Boxes containing objects unearthed during the excavations are kept at the memorial's storage facility and office a block away from 'Club Atlético'. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Atletico_2016-06: In the exhibition hall on the first floor of the off-site office and storage space of the memorial architectural remains of the original Clandestine Detention Center are displayed to the public. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Patio29_2016-01: Only a few visitors are present at 'Patio 29' during the National Patrimony Day on May 29, 2016. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause

Patio29_2016-02: 'Patio 29' on June 2, 2016. Photograph by Valentina Rozas-Krause