**WRITING CITIES**

**Writing Urban Stories from the Walls of a Building:**

The Case of the Post and Telecommunications Palace in Buenos Aires

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How should one go about writing a city like Buenos Aires? Stereotypical portraits of the city in promotional materials frequently focus upon its resemblance to Paris, its cosmopolitan and sophisticated character, its great culinary variety, and its vibrant culture. European architecture, marvellous wine and unbeatable steaks are brought together with diverse cultural activities to depict and sell a particular image of Buenos Aires.

One interesting way of exploring the urban is focusing on the city’s material culture, the whole series of diverse objects that have been created by human work and whose existence shapes and mediates human behaviour. Traditionally, urban archaeology has been concerned with deciphering the past of cities through its engagement with material remains with the aim of analysing objects in relation to society. Material culture not only includes small artefacts of ordinary consumption,



**Figure 1.** Correo Central with its plaza as it is today. (Dinardi 2009)

such as clothes, media, and food, but also encompasses larger objects, such as buildings and entire cultural landscapes. In the process of writing about cities, buildings become significant sites whereby to explore particular aspects of the city, its history and daily life. At a physical level, they perform practical functions, contributing to the daily reproduction of social life. At a symbolic level, their materiality embodies meaning: as the objectification of architects’ and builders’ work, as well as the result of planning regulations and sometimes policy proposals, buildings possess great power to represent, and in doing so, they shape social interactions and local landscapes.

This paper offers a methodological exercise in relation to the study and writing of cities: by approaching Buenos Aires through the examination of one of its iconic buildings, the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones (Post and Telecommunications Palace). Located in the city’s downtown, it is Argentina’s national post and telecommunications office. This Beaux Arts style structure has been listed as a “National Historical Monument”, and is thus protected by national law and safeguarded by a heritage custodian. Familiarly known as Correo Central (hereafter, I shall use this name to refer to the building), it is famous for hosting Evita’s office during former president Peron’s first administration (1946-1955). However, the building’s significance at the level of the city’s everyday life goes beyond this particular historical fact: its landmark status makes it appear on bus and underground signs, for its location functions as a terminal station. Its feature as a singular physical object, as an easily identifiable point of reference, makes it one of those buildings which a local rarely does not know.

Correo Central is located in San Nicolas neighbourhood, in front of the government house (Casa Rosada) and its square (Plaza de Mayo), next to a sports and cultural stadium (Luna Park) and adjacent to the trendy waterfront developments (Puerto Madero). The building has become part of a sequential series of landmarks that help people travel through the city, facilitating recognition and memorisation (Lynch 1960).





**Figure 2.** Map of Buenos Aires’ central area showing Correo Central and its neighbouring landmark buildings. Coloured lines represent the under- ground. Author’s composition upon a city map from Mapa de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires. (http://mapa.buenosaires.gov.ar)

The aim of this paper is to explore what this particular building might tell usabout the city inwhichitisembedded, byundertaking a journey through different historical periods, departing from its origins, stopping in its present, and arriving at its projected future – that designed by new redevelopment proposals. In doing so, I reflect upon the process of writing cities, while narrating two stories about the building, stories that in fact encompass the city, and to some extent, the nation as a whole. These are stories that, although presented in a chronological order, are not meant to cover whole historical periods1 but rather, are informed by some of the transformations experienced by the building throughout two periods in its history. Even though an account of the city’s history from the nineteenth century onwards would allow for a deeper contextualisation of the topics explored here, it is beyond the scope of this paper.

##### Why a building?

Studying a city from “the walls of a building” may appear fragmentary, if not methodologically reductionist to the sociologist. But the strength of this methodological exercise lies, not in its geographical scope, but rather, in the encounter of urban stories that are facilitated by the materiality of the building. Like the inescapable circulation of users, the uses of buildings are transformed in their history: they are recycled, preserved, squatted, demolished, rebuilt, abandoned. Therefore, a city itself can be defined as the persistent change of function of buildings (González 2006, p. 24) that at different historical periods shape the city’s aesthetics in diverse ways. The materiality of the city, as expressed in its urban objects such as streets, buildings, squares, and bridges, reveals the traces left by previous urban planning regulations alongside belief systems and social practices that have configured the particularities of its architecture. These physical structures are the result of collective practices that were historically and politically located, contributing also to their reproduction. Buildings can be conceived of as urban artefacts that are constitutive of the architecture of the city which, at the same time, implies the construction of the city over time (Rossi 1982). Rossi’s notion of urban artefacts is significant in highlighting the importance of the singularity and individuality of these parts or moments to the understanding of the city’s whole: The difficulty in analysing and defining them lies in the ambiguity of language and the existence of a plurality of experiences and standpoints of those who “live” differently the same artefact (Rossi 1982, p. 33). Indeed, the examination of these particular urban objects, framed within the context in which they were born, received, and transformed, enables the study of a number of political, socio-economic and cultural questions concerning the wider city space.

So what might a specific building tell us about the city? Clearly, the answer to this question will vary depending on the type of building we are referring to, since different buildings may reveal distinct aspects of the city. Yet establishing the extent to which these aspects would be limited to the city or would unveil features of the society as a whole proves to be a difficult task to undertake. A church, for instance, may express religious beliefs and practices, a cemetery may convey cultural values relating to death as well as hygiene operations, and a mental hospital would express patterns of social order. As Foucault’s work has shown (Foucault 1975; 1979), prisons and mental hospitals become useful sites through which to analyse disciplinary society’s attitudes towards sexuality, madness, and crime, revealing specific politics of health, punishment and social control. Clearly, the study of such material objects refers more to a society demarcated within a historical period than to the geographical space in which they are embedded.

Nevertheless, there are a number of examples in which a specific geographically situated single object can be employed as the point of departure to develop wider sociological insights. In his analysis of the Rothschild Buildings in East London, Whites (1980) offers a relevant example of the use of a single building to conduct an incredibly rich analysis of the area in which the building was embedded alongside the community that inhabited it. In a similar line, a close study of the Eiffel Tower in Paris enables Barthes (1979) to discuss questions of national symbols, meaning and modernity, tourism, and consumption. He points out that the Tower functions as the centre and Paris as its circumference and in this city-object relationship a new category of perception emerges: By offering a panoramic view, the Tower invites visitors to decipher the city by means of producing a mental simulacrum of Paris.Yalouri (2001) also highlights the significance of studying one singular site with the aim of exploring different aspects of the city and the nation: Her examination of the Acropolis historic site as a mobile and multiple situated monument allows for an analysis of the negotiation of national identity and power and the local and international meanings shaped by the site. As these studies show, one single object, one particular building or icon, can become a valuable tool for producing specific knowledge about the city. Drawing on these works, it could be said that buildings might disclose specific aspects about the city when analysing: a) the function they were meant to serve in the context of their birth; b) the uses they actually possessed; c) their architectural style; d) the impact they may have had on a particular social context; e) their current physical state; and f) their representational character or symbolic aspect. An examination of all these different dimensions would enable the identification of larger features of the city’s development and transformation that might be revealed by buildings. Two different urban stories, then, are recounted here, focusing on the aforementioned aspects.

These stories are narrated by me, an Argentine sociologist who has passed by the façade of the building innumerable times over the past years. I have walked the site extensively and recently undertaken a guided-tour to the building’s interior. Usually one would go to the site either to post a letter, wait for a bus or take the underground. However, the close proximity to the government house and the Work Ministry may make one’s journey by car or bus impossible: Innumerable demonstrations by different

piqueter organisations would block streets, divert traffic, and their reasonable demands for justice and better salaries would turn traffic movement into absolute chaos. This site belongs to one of my memorable city landscapes, as it is located near the historic district where I have always lived. Different sorts of materials, such as newspaper articles, interviews and visual material, have informed this writing which intends to express my concern about the city’s politics of heritage in view of the new urban developments planned for the 2010 Bicentenary commemorations.

One of these developments is the proposed re-functionalisation of Correo Central into a cultural centre. The project entails large-scale structural intervention, including the demolition of part of the building’s interior, the glazing of the dome, and the regeneration of the surrounding area. Even though the proposed transformations have been celebrated by policy-makers and some architects, they have found neither enthusiasm nor much support among heritage advocates, workers, and journalists. As this listed building constitutes one of the flagship projects of the official commemorations, its past, present and future are being negotiated, reflecting the contested character of heritage in contemporary cities.

An examination of the transformations experienced by the building itself can reveal wider processes affecting the city as a whole, and in some cases, the nation-state. The crystallisation of these processes in the materiality of the building offers an interesting site to reflect on the ways we approach cities and portray them in writing. Stemming from Hayden’s (1995) notion of the power of place, understood as the power of ordinary urban landscapes to nurture citizen’s public memory, the power of buildings could be said to be mnemonic in being representational. Buildings have the potential to be carriers of meanings, containers of memories, and triggers of commemoration. As meaningful architectural works of art, they alter our environment physically and inform and reorganise our entire experience through their various avenues of meaning (Goodman 1985). Hence, in the power to represent, the control over that representation is usually at stake in the battle over the creation, preservation, uses, and transformation of buildings. As such, they have historical significance and can inevitably be appropriated through their perceived cultural heritage status in order to strengthen certain political identities (Steward and Strathern 2003)

In Argentina, disputes over building memories and the memories of buildings have been epitomised by the debate over the re- functionalisation of the ESMA, the Navy Petty-Officers School of Mechanics. During the 1976 to 1983 dictatorship the “school” was used as one of the bloodiest detention and torture centres where thousands of people were tortured and killed, especially

pregnant women whose children were then illegally adopted by military families. After much debate over how to re-signify a space of death and terror, the building now functions as a cultural centre aimed at promoting people’s memory and human rights2. Buildings can be very important in reinforcing political communities; they are intersected with different memories, place identities and public meanings, and are therefore the subject of conflicts and struggles. This contestability, arising from the clash of different interests with respect to buildings, is precisely what makes them a relevant site for sociological inquiry, as the following stories will illustrate.

##### First story: The birth of a new nation

To narrate the story of the post office in America is to narrate the events that followed the conquest and colonisation of our continent.3



**Figure 3.** Buenos Aires’ central area. (Museo Postal y Telegráfico.

Digitalisation: CeDIAP)

Buenos Aires, November 1912: Water, bricks, construction materials, fences. A sense of vacuum in the city’s centre, but also of triumph, after having reclaimed these lands to the *De La Plata* river. 1912: the year of the first “universal”, secret and mandatory suffrage in Argentina - although only thirty five years later women would be included in that universe. 1912: one year before the first subway line was inaugurated in the city, and two years after the Argentine Nation’s Centenary commemorations took place.

The illustration taken by the Ministry of Public Works shows the site upon which Correo Central was later built. The function of this building was to host the first central post and telegraph office of Argentina in view of the increasing development of national

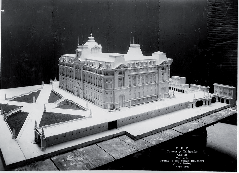
and international communication networks. Given Argentina’s extensive geographical territory, the post office served a crucial role in integrating isolated parts of the region, fostering the development of towns and transport connections around postal routes, and enabling people to communicate across the country and abroad.

At first sight, the post office in Buenos Aires already reveals a distinctive story about the city and the country as a whole: The story of the birth of a new nation, a story where the postal service as an institution played a fundamental role. The existence of the postal service in Argentina can be traced back to colonial times under Spanish rule. The first Major Courier of the Indias was established in Lima in 1514, and the first regulations on postal communication in the region of the Río de la Plata were published in 17154. The city of Buenos Aires was founded twice: in 1536 and 1580. With the first foundation5 the city was a block long, which was then destroyed in 1541. The second foundation gave the city its first council, square, church, fortress, 25 blocks, and lots distributed for agriculture and cattle farming, as established by the Indias Laws, a set of legislations to regulate social, political, religious and economic life in the conquered lands. The city was then organised around its Plaza Mayor.

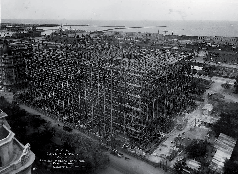
By 1748, Buenos Aires had its first ordinary mail service. To organise a service of sea and land communications between the Court and the colonial governments, Spain appointed sea mail administrators for the ports of its overseas colonies. Originally, a postal service was provided in the capital city in the form of relay posts. Postmen used to go from one relay post to another, using horses which were borrowed from neighbours of the area. With the creation of the Viceroyalty of *De Río La Plata*6 the post office was further developed as an institution. As Buenos Aires’ port was strategic for military control, the city became the viceroyalty capital, serving key political, administrative and commercial functions.

The post office is said to have played an important role in major historical events, such as the English invasions in 1806 and 1807, the May Revolution in 1810, and the Independence from Spain in 1816. It served “an indispensable role in the birth of nationhood, taking First Assembly reports and orders, disseminating notices with the May (Revolution) ideas”7. For instance, during the Open Council of the May Revolution, blue and white rosettes were distributed as patriotic symbols among the crowd by postmen; and one of the first postmen of the country was a leading agitator of the revolution. During the wars for independence the post office played a decisive role in facilitating communications for the organisation of the armies that were to fight against the royalists. It is seen then as “a modest and sometimes unsuspected protagonist of patriotic history” (Bose and Saenz 1994, p. 73).

During its early years, the postal service occupied the private mansions of theAdministrators of MailServices. But the increasing importance that the post was acquiring led the government to commission the Swedish architect Carlos Kihlberg to erect a building for the post. Casa de Correos8 was then inaugurated in 1878 next to the government house. Sixteen years later, President Roca maintained that the building overshadowed the government house, so the former was incorporated into the latter through a central arch created by architect Francisco Tamburini. The need to erect a new building for the head post office was suggested later to the government by Ramon J. Cárcano, Major Courier. He suggested the use of strategic lands demarcated by the port, the train terminal station, and the government house.



**Figure 4.** Model of original building. (Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation CeDIAP, photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.), 1913)



**Figure 5.** Building foundations (Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation: CeDIAP, photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.), 1916)

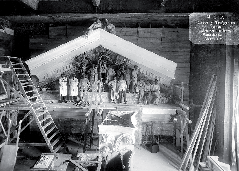
These were lands that had been recovered9 from the De la Plata river by Sociedad de las Catalinas, a public limited company, which donated them to the government. City lands were very uneven, as indicated by the name given to this area: El Bajo (the Low), opposite to “the highs”, the city’s richest area and today’s underprivileged and trendy historic district, San Telmo. The French architect Norbert Maillard10 was commissioned to design a project for the post office in 1888. After studying postal buildings in New York, London and Paris, he conceived a neoclassic building project for Buenos Aires.

This project was approved in 1888, but only the foundations were built before works were interrupted due to the severe financial crisis and the fall of the government. This was the period in which a large number of public works, based on international financial lending, were promoted by the government to embellish the city. After fifteen years of interruption, the project proved to be outdated and architect Maillard designed a new project. Yet disagreements led to his resignation, and a new plan was drawn up by the Russian architect Spolsky, who conceived of a smaller scale project. Work commenced in 1911, but the unfavourable economic situation and the lack of construction materials accentuated by the First World War led to further interruptions, and then to a new restructuring of the project design. Finally, after forty one years, the Palace was inaugurated in 1928. It was built on a 12.500 m² land, and it has a total area of 88.050 m², 60m of height and 9 floors. Its architectural style is founded on calculation and proportion, including “noble” and utilitarian spaces. The building expresses traditional forms of *Beaux- Arts* academic architecture and modern technological aspects (Proyecto CCB 2007).

The consolidation of the new nation-state in 1880s was to be represented in the solidity of monumental public buildings through colossal architecture that could help erase the Hispanic- colonial legacy which was simultaneously being demolished. With the federalisation in 1880, Buenos Aires became the country’s capital, and Argentina’s face to the world as “the Paris of Latin America”: avenues and streets were widened, parks and squares were created, and the city was in general physically embellished. Architecture can be instrumental to reinforce ideas of the modern: by offering the background against which modernity can be grasped as well as by developing into the active means by which the modern project can be manifested (Hvattum and Hermansen 2004). The so-called *Generación del 80* (1880s Generation) was shaped by an elitist bourgeoisie who ambitiously imagined a new national project sustained by their dreams of power that rested on the ideas of “progress” and “civilisation” as the pillars of the construction of “the new Argentina”11. An agro-export model was the economic basis of this project: it was a projection of the nation shaped by “cows and grains”12.

‘Modernity’ in conservative Argentina of the 1880s, then, appeared equated to these ideas through a uni-linear movement towards the future in an evolutionist fashion, and the future turned to be inexorably that of the European nations. In a clear correlation between modernity and enlightenment (Frisby 2004) movement in this ‘progress ladder’ was given by technological development and scientific reason, and was illustrated by the utilisation of French academic architecture aimed at highlighting the ideas of proportion, calculation, and order in the solidity of monumental public buildings. In this context, the construction of Correo Central in Buenos Aires sought to host the power of the nation state, configure the urban scene of a great metropolis, and compete through its architectural forms with other cities (De Paula 1988). It was aimed at embodying prosperous Argentina, as one of a series of buildings designed to represent a particular political and cultural vision, a specific national project. The building then arose as a symbol of political and economic power, as a bearer of ‘modernity’.

Not only did Correo Central become an identifiable icon due to its great architectural style, but its functioning was significant also as embodiment of the Welfare State. It represented the successful delivery of a key public service by the State as well as its interest in educating labour force and protecting workers’ social rights. Together with the provision of the postal service to Argentina’s large territory as the essential communications tool, a number of social services for postal employees were on offer.These included: a health centre with different medical specialties, a medical chemistry laboratory and an X-ray room, schools, a kindergarten, hairdressers, a cinema, a 10,000-book library with reading rooms, and a restaurant that served 3,000 people daily. In the nineteenth



**Figure 6.** Sculpture workshop at the Palace. (Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation CEDIAP, photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.) 1921)



**Figure 7.** Pillar construction (Museo Postal y Telegráfico. Digitalisation:

CEDIAP, photograph by the Ministerio de Obras Públicas (M.O.P.) 1913)

century, the Argentine State promoted migratory waves from Europe to populate the country, and these immigrants became part of the labour force that largely constructed Correo Central. Employees also benefited from various forms of training, such as sculpture and crafted basket workshops and a Morse system and telegraphy school. All of the different tasks of postal service were undertaken in the Palace. These services were based at the different floors of the building and were provided for all post office employees.

This was a story of the birth of a new nation, illustrated by the significance of a building whose heritage value goes beyond its French architectural style: it embodies history, popular culture and social capital. Correo Central was a production centre, not only because it was a communication hub where all correspondence was organised, managed and distributed, but also because the services it provided allowed workers to gain a wide range of skills that were then applied in the building.To work in this Palace meant not temporary employment but a position for life. Employees’ learning, experiences and stories have been materialised in the fabric of the building: the very pillars that sustain it, the sculptures that adorn it, were all locally produced. The post office was more than just a State-owned company, it was an institution that aimed to represent federalism13, decentralisation from Buenos Aires, for despite being located in the capital city it served equally14 all provinces across the country, and enabled people to communicate, overcoming distance. It constituted a symbol of economic prosperity and communication development, and most Argentine families may have had a relative who has worked in the Palace, as my grandfather did15.

##### Second story: neglect, privatisation and the “cultural city”

Buildings are giant humans, patient and hollow. Sometime they will decide to talk.16

Correo Central has sumptuous decoration and four halls that constitute its “noble sector”. It also has an area defined by its operative aspect, workshop space with machinery and store rooms. It was considered the most luxurious building of its time, and since its inauguration, it hosts a postal and telecommunications museum that looks after its architectural heritage.



**Figure 8.** The interior. (Dinardi 2009)

This story considers the current status of the building, and begins with neglect. All previous years of economic prosperity and architectural grandeur associated with the building seem to have vanished in the last few decades. In spite of being a national historical monument – which indicates ‘protection of the totality of the building and preservation of its architectonic features, equipment and furniture, exterior and form’17, it has suffered from lack of care and renovation. Since its inauguration, it has never been restored18. The dome is loosing its tiles that have started to blow off; there are leaks in roofs, paint flaking, and the external walls of the building look dirty, full of graffiti and rubbish. Far from being an exception, this is a clear expression of the general politics of heritage in Argentina, which is the result of decades of lack of funds, insufficient resources, neglect and vandalism. The absence of communication and coordination regarding heritage protection and conservation between the different levels of government only worsens the situation, especially in those cases in which national monuments are physically situated under the jurisdiction of the municipal government, as is the case with Correo Central.



**Figure 9.** Damaged interior of the Palace’s dome. (Dinardi 2009)



**Figure 10.** Graffiti in the exterior walls of the building. (Dinardi 2009)

The methodical and merciless destruction of what remains of the country’s past (Schavelzon 2008) is not new, and can be traced back to the *Generación del 80*, when the destruction of colonial past was a matter of State politics.

This story is also about privatisation. The fact that the Palace is a listed building is indicative of the need for it to be protected in the light of different threats of real estate developments. The designation of the building as a heritage site is said to have been

prompted by the intention of former President Menem to turn it into a shopping mall. The Menem administration (1989 -1999) was characterised by a privatisation fever, in which most State- owned businesses were sold to private corporations. This was the period of wildest neoliberalism in Argentina with the weakening of State ownership, the dollarisation of economy, the cutting down of public budget in all areas, massive sacking, rampant corruption, hyperinflation, and severe recession. In this context, the post office was given as a concession to the Grupo Macri19 in 1997. After the breach of contract by that company, former President Nestor Kirchner re-nationalised the service in 2003.This was part of a larger politics of nationalisation of public services which included the national airline and the pension scheme.

The growth of technological communications and the existence of a large number of private postal operators are said to have been responsiblefor the declinein the publicpostal service inArgentina, and are the commonly alleged reasons20 for the need to re- functionalise the ‘over-dimensioned’ post office building. So what should become of an ‘outdated’, massive, listed building?The first competition for recycling Correo Central was organised in 2005. Even though Argentina has a long history of public architectural competitions, this was a very distinctive one, since it originated in a controversy due to odd circumstances (of favouritism). The former Economic Affairs Minister during a businessmen’s seminar came up with the idea of creating a mega cultural centre in the building, ‘similar to the Louvre Museum or the Pompidou’, offering the work to the well-known Chinese-American architect Ieoh Ming Pei. Given the monumental character of the building and its strategic location, the Architects’ Central Society (SCA), together with the Urbanism and Architecture Professional Board (CPAU) firmly opposed the private project and demanded the organisation of an open, public architectural competition. A competition of ‘popular ideas’ was then organised by the Ministry for Economic Affairs, and surprisingly among the three winners was the project presented by the vice Mayor, together with the son of the above mentioned architect and other politicians. A few months later, the Economic Affairs Minister resigned and a new international competition was announced and commissioned by the SCA. What these details show is the significance and contested character of Correo Central, for which a struggle of conflicting interests was unleashed.

A final international competition for recycling the building and transforming it into the Bicentenary Cultural Centre (CCB) was then organised in 2006 through the SCA. The competition also requested proposals for the transformation of the surrounding urban environment as a way of integrating the docks district and the government square. The first prize winning proposal was the outcome of the association of two established architectural studios of Argentina (B4FS Studio), and suggested vanguard

architecture and restoration works, including concert halls, exhibition rooms and auditoriums. The dome of the Palace was seen as the most emblematic point of the new cultural centre that would offer not only cultural activities, but also ‘a symbol of national civic space’. This explains why the original idea was to glaze it, although objections from the heritage protection custodians did not allow it. For the surroundings, the proposal aims to regenerate the area by means of creating a Bicentenary Park, an Art Square and Bicentenary Gardens. According to its descriptive memory, the project intends ‘to use the new



**Figure 11.** Projected CCB with glazed dome. (Courtesy of B4FS Studio)

competitive edge (Zukin 1995). It would not be surprising that the vice Mayor and Economic Affairs Minister knew, when they envisioned a mega cultural centre in Buenos Aires’ downtown a few years ago, how economically powerful cultural activities can be when managed in the form of cultural quarters or clusters. The fact that the original idea of creating a cultural quarter in the city arose from the Economic Affairs Minister -and not from the cultural field- is indicative of this “turn to culture” in the agendas of municipal and federal governments. It is interesting to see how the rhetoric of culture acquires significance in official



**Figure 13.** Projected Bicentenary Park, gardens and squares integrated with the government’s square and Puerto Madero. (Courtesy of B4FS Studio)



**Figure 12.** Projected symphony hall of the CCB. (Courtesy of B4FS Studio)

cultural centre as a central piece to transform the area into a cultural-oriented hub’, and become ‘one of the biggest cultural centres worldwide’, signalling ‘the path of growth and cultural development for future generations’.

Another aspect of this story revealed by the CCB project is the existence of larger cultural and urban trends shaping the city’s policy-making sphere. The widespread call for cultural activities to revitalise downtown areas is associated with the recognition of the power attached to cultural districts as tools for economic, social, and sometimes political revitalisation. Culture is more and more the business of cities and the basis of their

speeches; how it is legitimised insofar as it helps to attain political propaganda, economic development, and urban integration. This instrumentalisation of culture is at the core of the CCB project and reveals some of the ways in which cultural policies are adopted in the city.

This story about a projected cultural city encompasses strategies of political revitalisation in the context of Bicentenary commemorations. Not only does the project expect to bring about a positive impact on the city’s built environment, but it also envisions promoting ‘an extended democratic sociability which enables encounters with the Other’. Thus, the transformation of the urban space is intimately related to an ideal of citizenship contained in the project. Regrettably, by now most public parks and squares in the city have been fenced in, in the name of security in a quick “fence-fever” to combat vandalism, leaving what has been called ‘a fence heritage of 21km’ in the city . Public green spaces are being reduced in the face of increasing real estate development. Such patterns of urban ordering transform the city’s aesthetics and seem to be at odds with the desire to create truly public civic spaces.

Finally, the predictable ending of this story reveals set patterns of policy-making in Argentina: general postponement of public works, vast bureaucracy, opportunism, short-termism, and disorganisation. The CCB project is currently more than

a year behind schedule, or five years if one counts the initial idea announced in 2004. The widely proclaimed new cultural centre will not be finished by 2010, since refurbishment works would take more than fifty months, but have just started, due to the endless tendering processes, the lack of communication between the parts involved and the silence from the Government of the City of Buenos Aires regarding the transformation of the urban environment under its jurisdiction. This is detrimental to the crystallisation of the flagship of the bicentenary commemorations, which could be otherwise transformed into a white elephant. What this illustrates, then, is that although the expediency of culture for consumerism and tourism (Yudice 2003) seems to have been re-discovered in recent decades by local governments across the globe, long-term cultural planning in Argentina still remains unattended.

Paradoxically, this case also illustrates how powerful claims of design “in the name of culture” may destroy significant features related to the building’s cultural heritage. The CCB project plans to keep the façade of the building, preserve its halls, and demolish a vast area of its interior, the so-called “operative sector”, where all workshops and machinery used to be located. Despite the attempts to give the building its grandeur back with such an ambitious project, opposition to the future CCB is to be found among vendors, post office employees, heritage protectors, and other workers in the building, such as cleaners, security guards, and postal museum staff. The feeling that the original function of the building will be completely lost, and therefore, its link to the post office as an institution will vanish, is the main stated reason underlying opposition. The proposed new developments are seen as a threat to the architectural heritage of the building and as an explicit annihilation of its social and historical heritage, for it will destroy not the “noblest sector” of the building, but one that belonged to the post office employees: their working world. It is in this sense that the demolition of the building’s interior and its detachment from its original function would contribute to the destruction of its heritage, and therefore, to the erosion of some of the city’s memories in the face of a spectacular mega-cultural centre.

##### Conclusion

By examining distinctive aspects of a particular building, two different stories about the city have been recounted. Firstly, an initial look at the origins of Correo Central revealed a story about the re-invention of Argentina as a new nation at the end of the nineteenth century. Architects, planners, and designers tried to position new national architectural symbols imaginatively within a European framework of progress, civilisation and modernity, constructing colossal official buildings to overshadow

and replace the nation’s Hispanic-colonial legacy. In that context, the post office acquired a crucial role in terms of economic development, national integration and political revitalisation, for it was linked since its origins as an institution to the political history of independence. The second story about the building was, to some extent, representative of the general politics of heritage in Argentina that has been historically characterised by neglect, insufficient resources, and lack of interest from the State. Equally, it was the expression of the privatisation policies that shaped the 1990s when the post office was given to a holding company and then taken over by the State after the failure of private management. Finally, the new plans for the building were examined, while unveiling broader aspects of the city’s cultural and urban policy-making. Not only the city but the nation as a whole was encompassed in this story, which revealed general patterns of policy-making in Argentina. Finally, the risks of destroying the building’s heritage and therefore the city’s memories in the name of “culture” were discussed.

How can Buenos Aires be thought of? What does it mean to write about the city from the perspective of a single building? This exercise may have run the risk of being too fragmentary or inevitably partial. Evidently, the extraordinary complexity of a city can hardly be read through the particularity of a building. Nevertheless, this particular building has illustrated a range of different aspects of the city that interestingly mirrored its past, its present and plans for its future. It has raised questions of urban planning, architectural design, politics of heritage, work and workplace, commemoration, cultural development, regeneration, and national political symbolism. Correo Central then became a vehicle for thinking the city, for bringing together distinct aspects that intersect it with the nation-state and the society as a whole. In this sense, it proved to be a useful methodological device for approaching Buenos Aires; a means that served as an entry point to the city’s incredibly rich and multifaceted character. A building is not a city, we all know that. But the history of the latter can be contained in the materiality of the former. And in this sense, it can facilitate our understanding of the city in embodying its past, reflecting its present and projecting its future.

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##### Endnotes

1 A comprehensive analysis of the building, including its construction, significance, and uses, is included in my doctoral research at the LSE which analyses the interface between cultural development, space and memory in the context of the national Bicentenary commemorations. The transformation of the postal building constitutes the case study of my research project and an example of a culture-led urban regeneration project in Buenos Aires.

2 Centro Cultural de la Memoria Haroldo Conti. [http://www.](http://www/) derhuman.jus.gov.ar/conti

3 Correo Argentino, “Historia del Correo Oficial de la Republica

Argentina”. [http://www.correoargentino.com.ar](http://www.correoargentino.com.ar/)

4 Historical information on the postal service included in this section is mostly based on Bose, W. B.L. and Saenz, J.C. (1994) *Correo Argentino. Una Historia con Futuro*. Buenos Aires: Manrique Zago ediciones; and Correo Argentino, “Historia del Correo Oficial de la Republica Argentina”, op.cit.

5 It is contentious, however, whether this was a foundation strictly speaking or only a precarious and provisional settlement, destroyed by local indigenous populations or by the Spanish themselves. For more information, see the archaeological project *“Primera Buenos Aires”* . [http://www.primerabuenosaires.com.ar](http://www.primerabuenosaires.com.ar/)

6 The Viceroyalty of the *Río de la Plata* was established in 1776 by the Spanish crown to govern the vast territories of what are today Argentina, Bolivia, Uruguay and Paraguay.

7 Correo Argentino, op. cit.

8 A detailed historical reconstruction of this building is offered by Daniel Shavelzon (1987) in La Casa de Correos de Buenos Aires (1873-1876). *Revista DANA* vol. 23, pps. 45-50.

9 The nature of these lands is seen as the main cause for the difficult intervention of the building today, as there is water underneath.

10 Architect Norbert Maillard was one of the representative figures

of the French academicism that is exemplified in Argentina’s official architecture: not only with his construction of the Correo Central in 1888, but also with the Courts of Justice in 1904, and Buenos Aires National School in 1906. French academicism encompassed a range of different architectural styles, among which was *L’Ecole Nationale Supéricure des Beaux Arts. Beaux Arts* in Argentina took some elements of an ecclectic clasicism with some Art Nouveau aspects. For a more detailed explanation of these variations see Grementieri (1995).

11 *Generación del 80* is also infamous for its slaughter of the indigenous population in what was called the “desert conquest”, the State’s cleansing operation founded on the myth of the emptiness of the lands that were actually inhabited by indigenous groups

12 Cows and grains refer here to the country’s agro-export model (1880-1930) based on agricultural production and cattle farming.

13 This idea of federalismis betterunderstoodwhen contextualised in the history of Argentina from 1820 to 1852, when *unitarios* and *federales* bloodily opposed different political projects for the country. While the former stood for a centralised government with its head in the rich port city of Buenos Aires, the latter supported decentralisation and province autonomy.

14 A post office union leader is said to have been brought face to face with the authorities in an argument on postal rates for Las Islas Malvinas (Falkland Islands). While most Argentineans profoundly know that Malvinas are Argentinean, postal service to the islands was, however, charged as international delivery. After a vivid argument with the post office’s authorities, postal rates were changed and Las Malvinas now benefit from having deliveries which are charged as “national”. (Personal interview with a post office employee, February 2009).

15 He devoted all his life to Correo Central; first worked as an errand boy, had several promotions, and finally was manager in the night shift where he was responsible for the delivery of all correspondence in Buenos Aires. Upon retirement, he received a commemorative medal, plaque and diploma in gratitude for his dedication. My grandfather was very proud of his job and grateful to the post which ensured his family’s welfare until his death.

16 Horacio Gonzalez (2004) “El alma de los edificios” in Gonzalez,

H. 2006. *Escritos en Carbonilla: Figuraciones, Destinos, Retratos*. Buenos Aires: Colihue.

17 As indicated by the Historical Sites, Monuments and Museums National Commission website. http://www.monumentosysitios. gov.ar/

18 Staff at the Postal and Telecommunications Museum stated that according to their memory and archives, no restoration has ever taken place in Correo Central (Interview, January 2009).

19 The Grupo Macri is a holding created by Franco Macri and his son and current Mayor of Buenos Aires, Mauricio Macri. Among its businesses is Correo Argentino, the company which took over the post office.

20 This has been stated repeatedly by several functionaries, from those in the Ministry of Economy and the Ministry of Federal Planning, Public Investment and Services to the Architects’ Central Society and the President.

21’Una de cada cuatro plaza está enrejada’ (2007, April 23) *Diario La Nacion.*