

An “oriental screen” in front of the Palacio de Correos: an analysis of ideological discourses (Buenos Aires, 1979)¹

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ABSTRACT: This article analyzes the controversy aroused in 1979 by the project for the construction of a building of the Bank of Tokyo in front of the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones in Buenos Aires, Argentina. From a communicational perspective, the analysis of this case -which has not been studied until now- seeks to account for the ideological-discursive elements present in this debate to help characterize the urban circumstances during the last dictatorship in the country (1976-1983). The presentation of results is divided into four: the implications of “Progress” as the dominant temporality; the “values” that appear as affected by the architectural project; the ambivalences in the forms of identification of the national and the urban, and the marks of interdiscursivity as revealing symptoms of the time. Finally, it is argued that this conflict cannot be considered “patrimonial”, since the predominant discourse is monumental.

KEYWORDS: Urban conflict; Speech; Ideologies; Monuments; Heritage.

Un “biombo oriental” frente al Palacio de Correos: un análisis de discursos ideológicos (Buenos Aires, 1979)

RESUMEN: Este artículo analiza la polémica suscitada en 1979 por el proyecto de construcción de un edificio del Banco de Tokyo frente al Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones en Buenos Aires, Argentina. Desde una perspectiva comunicacional, el análisis de este caso hasta ahora no estudiado busca dar cuenta de los elementos ideológico-discursivos presentes en este debate para contribuir a caracterizar la coyuntura urbana durante la última dictadura en el país (1976-1983). Los resultados se dividieron en cuatro: las implicancias del “progreso” como temporalidad dominante; los “valores”, que aparecen como afectados por el proyecto arquitectónico; las ambivalencias en las formas de identificación de lo nacional y de lo ciudadano, y las marcas de interdiscursividad como síntomas reveladores de la coyuntura. Finalmente, se argumenta que este conflicto no puede ser considerado “patrimonial”, dado que el discurso predominante es monumentalista

PALABRAS CLAVE: Conflicto urbano; discurso; ideología; monumento; patrimonio.

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HOW TO QUOTE

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Introduction and case presentation

At the beginning of 1979 the project for the building of the Bank of Tokyo headquarters on the plot of avenue Leandro N. Alem between Sarmiento and Cangallo (currently Juan Domingo Perón. City of Buenos Aires, Argentina)². In front of the Palace of Post and Telecommunications, which at the time housed the National Telecommunications Department, sparked a controversy that concluded in the same year with the return of the banking project to the site at Corrientes and Reconquista, originally owned by the entity. The main objection of the project was that the new bank would obstruct the palace's view.

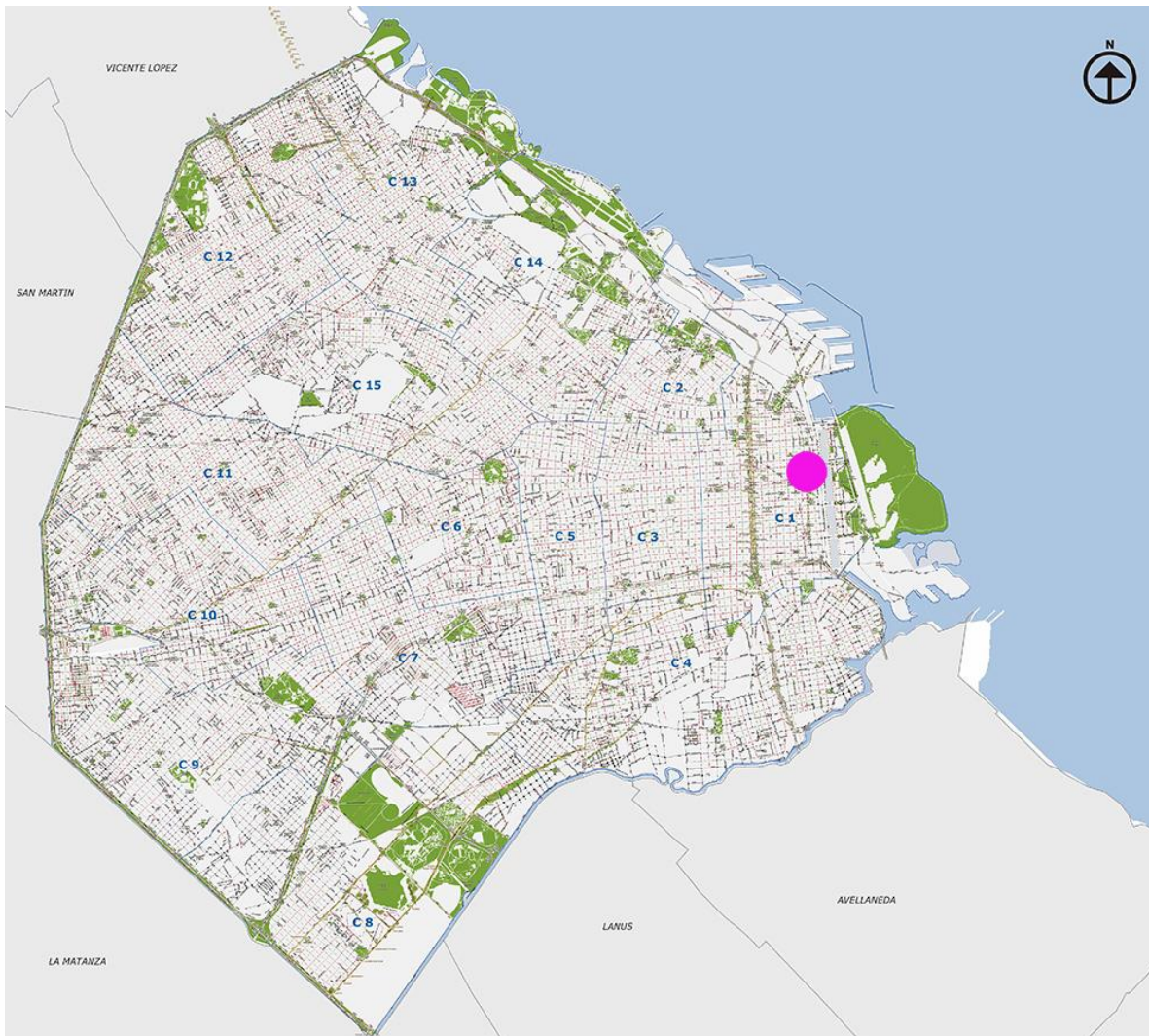
The project of the palace of post had been entrusted to the french architect Norbert-Auguste Maillard in 1888 during the presidency of Miguel Juárez Celman, eight years after the establishment of Buenos Aires as the capital of the country and one year after the determination of the city's final geographical boundaries, inaugurated in 1928 (See figures 1 and 2 for details on the location of the Palace of the Post Office in the city of Buenos Aires). Today, it may come as a surprise that it was only declared a national monument in 1997.³

Without going into the circumstances of that statement, it reveals that, by 1979, the legislative and judicial avenues did not carry the weight they would later acquire in the processes of preserving buildings and their surrounding landscapes, or, in other words, in addressing the disputes concerning the relationship between the city and time. None of the complaints related to the bank project did not even hint at the possibility of obtaining a legislative declaration of protected property or of taking the conflict to court in order to achieve a victory in their claim.

² On said parcel of land designed originally as a plaza by Carlos Thays, operated as a parking lot in 1979. was reopened as a green area by the Department of Public Walkways of the Municipality in 1983, in the context of the World Telecommunications Year declared by the UN.

³ In 2002, it ceased functioning as the central post office. In 2015, after a five year refunctionalization, it was reinaugurated as Kirchner Cultural Center.

Figure 1. Location of the Palace of Post in the city of Buenos Aires



Source: Map of the Government of the city of Buenos Aires.

Figure 2. Detail of the location of the Palace of the Post Office and other sites mentioned in the article.



Source: Intervention and marking on a satellite map (Google Maps).

One of the few current reviews of that episode mentions that “The popular voices spoke up, claiming that it would harm the aesthetics and the harmony between the Palace of Communications and the neighboring Government House” (“Corrientes y Reconquista...”, 01/15/2021). The documents of the time, on the other hand, show that this was far from being a widespread or popular outcry. However, some entities such as the Argentine Center of Landscape Architects, the National Academy of Fine Arts, and the Argentine-Asian Chamber of Commerce publicly spoke out against it. And, in particular, voices emerged at the editorial and in letters from readers of the newspaper *La Nación*, where figures attended such as Isaac Rojas – former de facto vice president during the 1955-1958 dictatorship and frequent writer of letters to the editor on city-related issues at the time – or the visual artist Horacio Butler.

Figure 3. Palace of post and telecommunications. City of Buenos Aires, Argentina.



Source: Albano Azarian (2007). <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=21786275>

The conflict took place between February and June of 1979. The military dictatorship in charge of a meeting commanded by Jorge Rafael Videla had been in power for three years, with a program of deathly suppression of political activity, and the implementation of an economic program centered on liberalization and financing of the economy. In the city of Buenos Aires the administration headed by Brigadier Osvaldo Cacciatore was implementing a set of policies that lead to a rapid transformation of the city's social and urban profile, such as the liberalization of the rental market, the eradication of "villas miseria" (shantytown), the relocation of factories outside the city, and the Urban Highway Plan. Some of these policies faced more resistance than others, but as a whole, they tended to benefit property-owning residents while dispossessing the working-class sectors (Oszlak, 2017).

During the first half of 1979 other themes associated with the city of Buenos Aires and its surroundings featured in the print media: some complain from tenant groups, the dirty streets, the eradication of 'villas miseria' (shantytowns), or the demolition of certain buildings "under the pickaxe of progress" (progress at the expense of heritage). The only topic that managed to reach the front page and persist over time was the criticism of the Urban Highway Plan, which had been underway since 1977. Such was the controversy that it triggered Cacciatore to perform a press conference in mid-April which made it to the front pages of the newspapers, and a few days later, on the monthly luncheon at the Bar Association, the Municipal Secretary of Public Works, Guillermo Laura, gave a special lecture on the matter.

This research regarding the bank of Tokyo project in front of the palace of post and telecommunications is part of a broader investigation which proposes to analyze the first years of democracy (1983-1989), The characteristics of the heritage as a discursive device for the objectification of memory in its historical determination and its specific impact on the urban context of the city of Buenos Aires. This means to investigate discursive conditions that made the possibility and consolidation of said device, addressing the breaking points and continuity of the pre-existing or coexisting discourses, where time/city relationships are also established. In the context of this general matter, I will analyze a nearly unknown case in this work.

Why focus on this ephemeral episode? Its value does not reside in the story, nor in acquiring the character of a civic epic. Instead, it is revealing in several ways. First, at a time of political debate's closure and repression, it shows that certain issues related to the city sparked strong controversies. Although the explanation of this conflict requires an analysis which exceed the objectives of this article, it can be assumed that, besides the aesthetic or technical arguments that may appear unrelated to politics in the strict sense, and the specific actors who opposed the project—some of whom were not exactly opponents of the dictatorship—the municipal sphere was historically shaped as a non-political and rather administrative space, in contrast to the national sphere, the quintessential center of politics and the formation of citizenship (Landau, 2018).

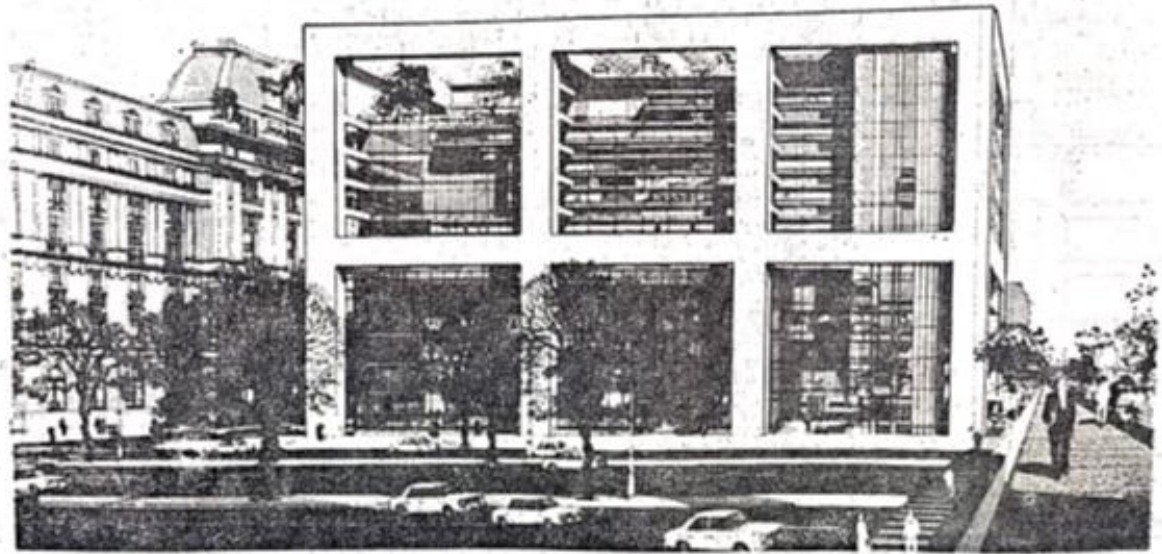
The fact that this case has not been previously addressed in scientific works, allows for a positive analysis of discursive manifestations of ideological formations that shaped time/city relationships and the imagined configurations of a porteño identity.⁴ And negatively, it points out the heterogeneity, the discrepancies in the ways of ideologically handling these relationships: since, at the same time, some initiatives were being set in motion in alignment with international heritage guidelines that were already permeating debates in certain areas of the field of architecture (Méndez, in press; Schavelzon, 2008). For example, the declaration of the center of San Isidro as an historic center in April and the urban planning code at the end of May for the creation of the district U-24 in San Telmo-Montserrat as a historic preservation zone.⁵ None of these processes are simultaneous to the conflict of our interest here left interdiscursive marks on the claims against the Bank's project, on the mayor's responses, or on the intervention of specialized voices.

After a presentation regarding the theoretical basis and methodological strategies, the results presentation its divided in four: the implications of the process as a dominant temporality; the "value" that appear as affected by the architectural project; the ambivalences in the form of identification between the national and the urban, and the marks of interdiscursivity as revealing symptoms of the context. Finally, it is discussed whether this conflict can be considered 'heritage-related' or not."

⁴ The members of the "porteño" community abide by the city of Buenos Aires.

⁵ Specialized actors, absent from the debate around the Palace of Post, participated in the creation of the U-24 district, such as Ramón Gutiérrez and José María Peña, director of the City Museum.

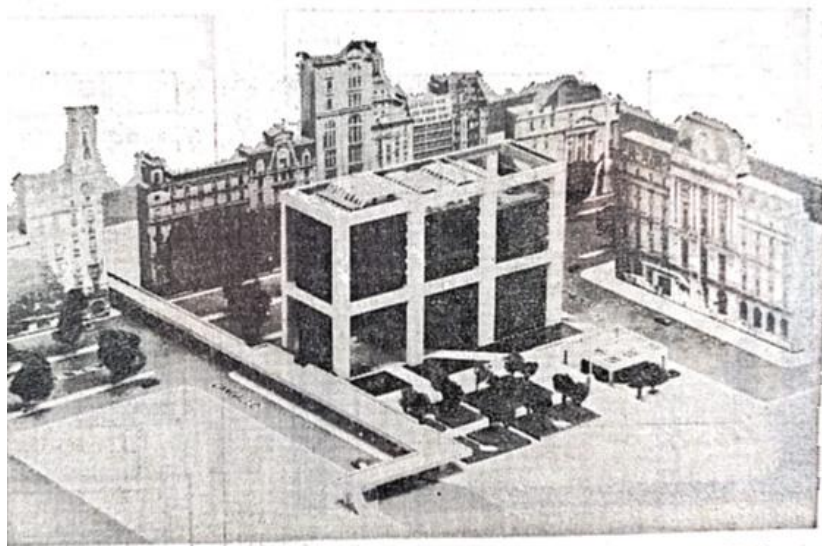
Figure 4. Tokyo Bank project in front of the Palace of Post and Telecommunications.



Perspectiva del nuevo edificio del Banco de Tokyo desde la avenida Leandro N. Alem y pasarela elevada, proyecto de los arquitectos Raña Veloso, Alvarez y Forster.

Source: 'El Banco de Tokyo erige...' (02/21/1979).

Figura 5. Bank of Tokyo project in front of the Palace of Posts and Telecommunications



Perspectiva general (fotografía de maqueta) vista desde la avenida Madero

Source: "El Banco de Tokyo erige..." (02/21/1979).

Theoretical-methodological elements

This investigation is situated in the communications field, focused on “The way the interpretations change according to the code combinations are placed in different historical and social contexts and in each particular situation” (Caletti, 2019, p. 45). Departing from the materialistic theory of the ideology and the discourse, discursive traces are analyzed on ideological processes, functioning of ideologies and forms of subjective identification.

The ideology –a concept that, despite having been subject to criticism and simplifications (Sosa, 2015), has been revived in recent decades by social theory–. It does not refer to a false consciousness, neither to a consciously subscribed political creed, or to a stable and cohesive worldview, but rather to a constitutive aspect of social life, composed of systems of representations with a practical-social function, historically situated, socially hierarchized, and permeated by class struggle (Althusser, 2004; 2015). It takes the form of particular ideological formations that are entangled, hierarchized and materialized in discursive practices, that forms to a whole contradictory and unified complex (Romé et al., 2021b).

For this reason, in the analysis, ideological elements can be identified in the statements of actors who held very different positions regarding the dictatorship and its urban policy. Political-partisan and the actors opinions are not the main the purpose of this study, but rather the efficiency and the limits of the dominant ideology understood as “A a dominant tendency to unification, management or disciplining of the heterogeneity of thought practices” and “a process of consolidation of that which is resilient, exceeds it, or creates a void within it” (Romé, 202, p. XII) which favors the reproduction of dominant social relations.

The ideology itself constitutes a device of subjectivation/subjectification: through Ideological interpellation, individuals are constituted as subjects and establish imaginary relationships with their environment, with others, and with their historical time. The ideological effect is twofold: misrecognition (of the determinations that constitute the subject) and recognition (of the ‘self’ as the master of its thinking and speaking, situated in

a world of 'self-evident truths') (Althusser, 2015; Pêcheux, 2016). Complementarily, a branch of critical social theory recover Lacanian contributions centered on the affective dimension (Stavrakakis, 2010; Žižek, 2003), to explain the relevant processes of subjective identification, not only the enunciation positions, but also the configurations of national and city identity in this case. Based on a psychoanalytic conception of identity as structured around a lack, this perspective accounts for the libidinal energy that fuels symbolic and imaginary identification processes and helps explain the persistence of certain ideological attachments.

Regarding the speech, the materialist premise affirms that words do not have a meaning of its own and that they do not have a subjective approach meaning neither for their referential relationship with what they claim to represent, instead, the same expression can take on different meanings when situated within different discursive formations, and different expressions can acquire the same meaning within a single discursive formation. A discursive formation is 'that which, within a given ideological formation (...) determines what can and must be said' (Pêcheux, 2016, p. 42), a system of rules for reproduction of discursive sequence that permit certain synonyms, paraphrases, rephrasing, but not others, and that limits the order of what can be said and understood in a specific context.

In addition, the discursive formations are not homogeneous, closed units: every discourse implies the removal of the presence of the interdiscourse, understood as the discursive field which constitutes a whole dominant complex of the discursive formations, where relations of inequality, contradiction, and subordination are established among formations (Pêcheux, 2016; Romé et al., 2021a). The interdiscourse, as the condition of possibility for the intradiscourse—that is, for any formulation or enunciative sequence—'operates as an instance of meaning formation, statements, relations, and articulations' (Glozman, 2020, p. 126). To give priority to the intradiscourse allows an efficient reading of silences, omissions, and that which, within what is said, points to an absent causality—a formative process intertwined with ideological processes that operate behind the backs of subjects, but only through them.

The discursive marks of ideologemes can also be found on: semiotic-ideological micro-systems discourses that, at given moment, shows a greater recurrence than other signs and condense in a diffusely and contradictory way, the categories and values of the dominant ideology (Romé et al., 2021a). Finally, I have previously used the term 'discursive device of memory objectification' to refer to heritage or monumentalist discourse.

This implies considering them as historical formations, as strategic and overdetermined networks on connection between heterogeneous elements, that distribute what's visible or invisible, what can be said and what can not, which involve struggle and power, and produce material effects such as the emergence of objects, meanings, and aspects of subjectivity (Deleuze, 1990; Foucault, 1978) regarding the time/city relationship. Is a broader research hypothesis more than a heritage, as a discursive device for the objectification of memory, that slowly took shape over the course of the 20th century, establishing itself as the hegemonic way of classifying, managing, and contesting the relationships between social groups and their collective memory from the 1960s and 1970s at an international level and, in the Argentine case, since the 1980s subordinating the monumental, whose traces prevail in the case I analyze here.

The analysis I present below is based on 14 articles (including editorials and letters to the editor) published in the newspaper *La Nación* between February and June of 1979, drawn from a wider documentary base. This base surrounds more than 700 documents from print media, legislative material, Argentine books and magazines, as well as documents from international organizations, dated between 1976 and 1989, where discursive processes of time/city relationships are detected. The selection of these 14 pieces represents a pre-archival moment, and consequently, this article presents findings that will, in turn, serve as hypotheses for the creation of a proper archive.⁶

In this work each document is separated in two values: as a source to reconstruct a chronology of the case, given that no other secondary sources have been found, and as

⁶ The creation of an archive involves a negative task of denaturalizing ideological forms of discursive grouping that appear evident (such as authorship, theme, referent, discipline, etc.) and a positive task of montage, which is not a preliminary stage to analysis, but rather the analysis itself in its development, or even its endpoint (Glozman, 2020).

discursive material whose analysis, is based on the scheme of Ideological Discourse Materialist Analysis (Romé *et al.*, 2021a), involves two stages: first, a cataloging of each piece where ideological-discursive elements are recorded, and second, a transversal grid that seeks relationships not between the pieces, but between the findings from the first phase. In other words, the unit of analysis is not the news articles or the positions or opinions of the actors, but the discursive units that account for ideological processes.

The "Progress" as the Dominant Temporality

In the articles, the transformation of the city of Buenos Aires is marked by the imperative of 'Modernization' and is structured according to a linear, cumulative temporality expressed in the ideologeme 'Progress.' In some documents not included in this work but contemporaneous and also related to the time/city relationship, there is a resigned subjective stance in the face of the evidence of 'Progress,'⁷ condensed in the ideologeme 'the pickaxe.' In these cases, the question of the causes of urban transformation is erased. For example, in an article about the 'changing face' of Avenida de Mayo, the captions for the photographs read: "A large construction will replace the old, disappeared building. *La Razón*, the building of the afternoon newspaper also falls under the pickaxe" and "Contrast between the old buildings and the modern apartment houses. Building progress does not stop" ("Avenida de Mayo...", 4/23/1979).

⁷ Current studies indicate a shift towards presentism in the regime of historicity, which, emerging in the last two decades of the 20th century, is centered on a 'culture of transience and immediacy marked by the collapse of the future, a world of individuals blocked and disoriented by the absence of temporality to the point of canceling their own alternatives' (Hartog, in Galliano, 2020, p. 51). Presentism would signal the end of a temporality that dominated various particular ideologies throughout the 20th century, condensed in figures like Progress or Revolution (Traverso, 2019). This progressive, unilinear, homogeneous temporality tied to the dominant ideology of Modernity has been critiqued. An emblematic case is that of Walter Benjamin, who warns about the abstraction, homogenization, and emptying of temporality implied by the idealist philosophy that underpins the concept of Progress (Benjamin, 2008; Gerzovich, 2009). Furthermore, the simplification of temporality as an ideological operation has been the subject of criticism and analysis from materialist frameworks derived not only from Frankfurt School reasoning but also from Althusserian thought, as discussed above. Here, the main category is that of complex temporality, closely linked to the concept of overdetermination: a social formation is understood as a contradictory combination of temporalities (Althusser, 2004, 2015; Romé, 2021).

In the articles related to the case of the Palace of Post, marks of this temporality are observed in a different sense. "Progress" generally appears as desirable, associated with the modern and the new, as seen in the presentation of the bank project:

In the last two decades, a profound change has taken place in the banking architecture in Argentina, explained by the structural modifications of institutions that have had to respond to the need for expansion and adaptation to the new requirements of the economic market. consequently, the architectural characteristics of the modern bank begin to take shape [...]" ("El Banco de Tokyo erige..., 2/21/1979).

However, even those who object to the project recognize the same temporality: what they question is what constitutes true progress, but not progress as a desirable goal: '(...) the city must modernize, but without destroying the urban landscape (...). We all want the city's progress, but ultimately, it's about choosing the right means and not confusing the aim (National Academy of Fine Arts in 'Object Aspects...', 4/19/1979).

[...] often progress in one sense implies a setback in another. How many times in the name of progress are things of cultural value destroyed. [...] But when something of value is destroyed in the name of progress, it is not progress (Argentine Center of Landscape Architects in 'An Entity Comments...', 4/25/1979).

There is a predominant identification with an accumulative temporality, with variations in terms of what can be considered progress and what is not, but without questioning the validity or legitimacy of that homogeneous and linear time.

A Harm to the Beautiful and the Historical

The offended voices show the predominance of two main values that would be affected by the construction of the Tokyo Bank: the aesthetic and the historical, both in a restricted and conservative sense. The aesthetic is reduced to the Fine Arts; the historical, to the Nation's epic embodied in the liberal State's achievements. Both also imply a passive subject position, one that observes and learns.

The Aesthetic Value

The potential harm to the building's aesthetic value, a central element of the complaints, is not isolated: at a time of high conflict surrounding the Urban Highways Plan, the damage of the city appeared as one of the main objections directed at the Municipality. 'The Tokyo Bank does not need to be located in a place where it detracts from the artistic value of the ensemble, unfavorably altering its appearance (...)' (Rojas, 3/12/1979); 'The Argentine Center of Landscape Architects called for reflection by municipal authorities, Tokyo Bank authorities, and those who, in one way or another, must watch over the aesthetic values of the Federal Capital' ('An Entity Comments...', 04/25/1979).

However, this is a beauty that consecrates a criterion of good taste, associated with an identity recognized as cultured and Francophile, in contrast with an ugliness associated with poor taste, ignorance, and the new.

Admiral [Rojas, on 3/12/79] claims that the new building will mean gifting our city another 'monstrosity,'⁸ criticizing the lack of discernment and poor taste of municipal authorities who have decided to place, in front of the frontage of an imposing public building, a project like the bank (...). Then the ceramic gnomes will arrive in public squares, and the strawberry-colored waters of exquisite poor taste that invade us will multiply (Martínez Estrada, 4/4/1979).

At the same time, the aesthetic argument is almost the only one acknowledged by the de facto mayor, Cacciatore, in his responses during a press conference, published on the front page:

The mayor affirmed that the Municipality set certain design and project conditions with the purpose that the bank building would not destroy the harmony of the area [...]. He emphasized that aesthetic reasons were carefully considered when the project's foundations were laid ('The Mayor Spoke...', 4/12/1979).

⁸ The term 'monstrosity' is still used today in aesthetic rejection of new constructions: 'In front of the retreating Tiro Federal (...) stands an urban monstrosity in the French style called Chateau Libertador' (Veiga, 2021).

The city as an aesthetic object implies a subjective position towards the building and, consequently, towards the city: the contemplation of a passive observer from the outside, ecstatic by the beauty:

[...] I insist that the chosen location represents a true attack against building aesthetics, as it severely affects several perspectives dear to the feelings of porteños. Perhaps not to the Japanese – they would have no reason to feel affected, as they are not Argentine – nor to the official authorities who authorized such a work in this historic area of the Argentine capital, *nor to the inhabitants of this city who only see it as a place to work, eat, and sleep. A city is more than a workshop or a massive digester. It is, above all, an expression of the soul of its people.* Therefore, its buildings, avenues, and monuments are a reflection of many national and popular characteristics, whose artistic values we have an obligation to preserve and enhance (Rojas, 4/10/1979, italics are mine).

This quote, which I will return to, reveals an idealistic conception of the city, a rejection of popular presence in the city, and an erasure of the role of capitalist urbanization in terms of a place for social production and reproduction. The city as an object of aesthetic enjoyment places the urban experience outside the discussion of the needs of those who live in and move through it.

Finally, there is an ideologeme that connects aesthetic value with historical value: 'grandeur,' as seen in the previous quote ('the magnificent building of Maillard'), holds a dual valence, a pivot function: on one hand, its large size—which reinforces the monumental character from an aesthetic point of view—and, on the other hand, its spiritual grandeur, which links the building's stature to the period of national history from which it appears as representative, in which the construction of large public buildings served as a way to convey the consolidation of the modern State in the country. '[We will have] the bank in the square that provided the necessary perspective to Maillard's magnificent building, serving as an oriental screen for our cultural heritage' (Martínez Estrada, 4/4/1979). And:

The massive structure of the Central Post Office building, in French style, will lose much of its imposing and stately appearance by having, practically in front of it, a modern-lined

building that will interfere with its perspective [...] we feel proud of its grand beauty [...]' (Rojas, 3/12/1979).

The Historical Value

Given the date it was designed, the Palace of Post allows for an evocation of national history centered around the so-called 'Conservative Republic' (1880-1916), based on an oligarchic model of restricted citizenship in politics and liberal agro-export in economics. At first glance, it might seem paradoxical that in 1979, criticisms of the municipal—and, by extension, national—administration were made in the name of a period that the de facto government also upheld, as seen in the official celebrations of the centenary of the so-called 'Conquest of the Desert' and its updated re-edition in the Impenetrable Chaco under the name 'Conquest of the West' (Salamanca and Colombo, 2019).

However, while the municipal administration under Cacciatore took from the 'Generation of the 80s' the ideal of 'modernization' through an accelerated and radical transformation of the city 'that would strip it of inadequate colonial traits' (Oszlak, 2017, p. 264) in response to the needs of capital (ideologically expressed through the consecration of individual freedom over any form of social justice), the criticisms that certain aspects of his plan sparked—often selective, as they overlooked social issues⁹—took up other aspects:

[...] the building whose frontage will be literally covered by the bank building of the Japanese company is a living testament to the liberal architecture of the country, of that Argentina which, in just a few years, erected buildings like the National Congress or the Palace of Justice—works that today are repeatedly shown on television through a short film by the Argentine Army, emphasizing that they are 'part of our national heritage' [...] (Martínez Estrada, 4/4/1979).

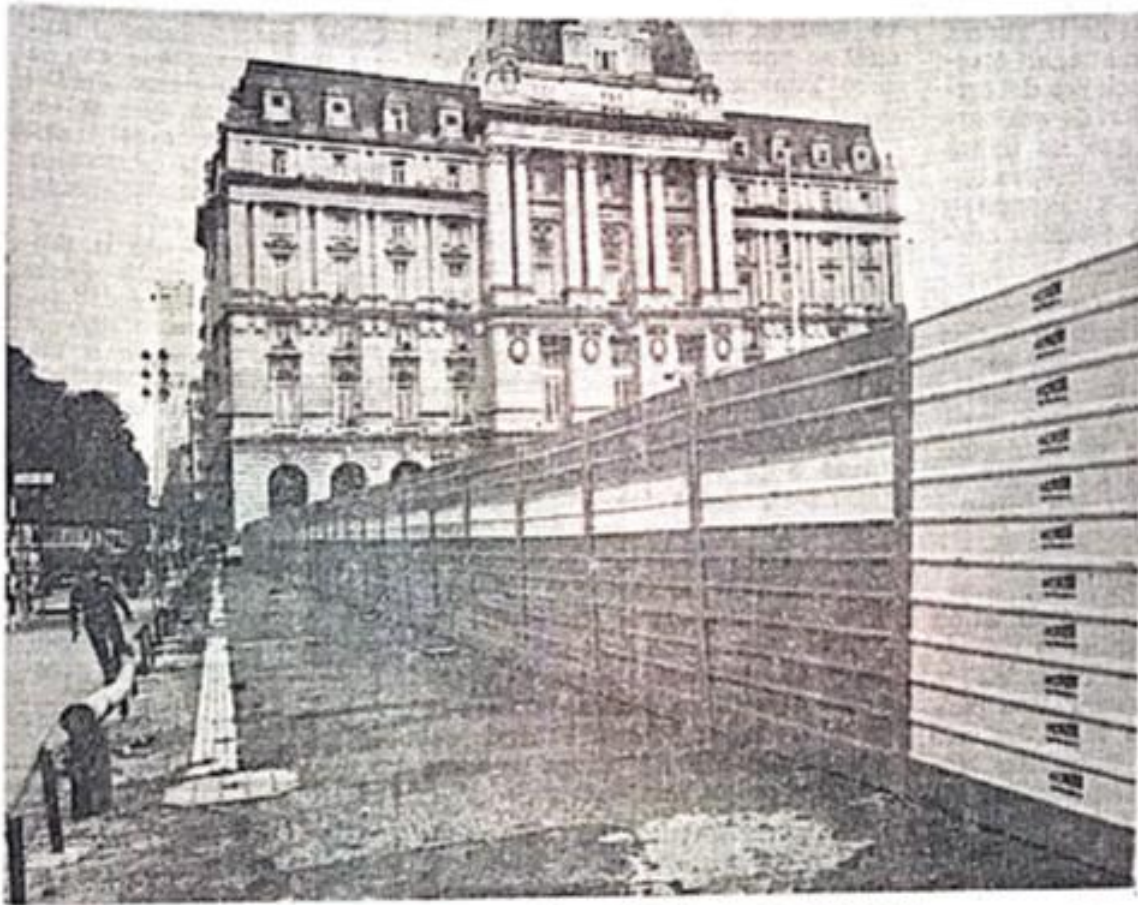
The location of the Tokyo Bank affects several historical perspectives and disfigures a traditional area of Buenos Aires. From certain angles, the beautiful frontage of the Central

⁹ There were exceptions, such as the Central Society of Architects or the Argentine Center of Engineers, which, since 1977, publicly voiced a wide range of criticisms against the Urban Highways Plan.

Post Office will be hidden, as well as that of the Ministry of War, the Monument to Admiral Brown, the monument to Juan de Garay, and, consequently, the Government House. In short, I believe that the urban planning officials of the Municipality have not conducted a thorough study of the placement of the new Japanese bank and have given little value to the great and evocative perspectives that should be carefully preserved, especially when their obstruction impacts significant artistic and historical factors (Rojas, 4/10/1979).

The history evoked through the monuments refers to national foundations and the state apparatus as a principle of social order and as a basis for values and standards of taste. Here, the building is not merely an object of aesthetic enjoyment; its contemplation has a pedagogical function, evoking interdiscursively Ricardo Rojas' 'pedagogy of statues' in *La restauración nacionalista. Informe sobre educación* (1909). The obstruction of that 'perspective' would imply harm to the formation of 'national citizenship,' a matter of concern both for the Generation of the 1880s (in response to the massive arrival of European immigrants and the subsequent expansion of anarchist, socialist, and syndicalist organizations, which led to the Law of Residency of 1906) and for the dictatorship that began in 1976 with its systematic repression justified by slogans such as "war against stateless subversion".

Figure 5. View of the Palace of Post and the fences on the surrounding area.



¿Se perderá la perspectiva del Palacio de Correos?

Source: 'La visión...', 03/25/1979.

Ambivalences of Porteño and Argentine Identity

In the articles, seemingly contradictory identifications appear. Even when expressed through specific spokespersons, the call to preserve the image of the Palace of Post summons figures of an 'us' offended by the project, which are not unique to this case but are here emblematically reactivated.

The origin of the designer allows for the recurring identification of Buenos Aires as a Paris in America:

[Architect Mario Roberto Álvarez] then recalls that 'the masters of the École des Beaux-Arts, who worked and taught among us, left their mark on important buildings that have given Buenos Aires its characteristics; certain neighborhoods in our country could be

neighborhoods of Paris without any diminishment' ('Objections to the Construction...' 4/10/1979).

The Francophile identification necessarily implies an oppositional definition. The defense of an urban embodiment of national identity as a European country in America is defined, first, in opposition to the 'Japanese'—and, metonymically, to a series of nationalities or cultural identities associated with backwardness, ignorance, and poor taste. While those who present the bank project define it as a 'modern bank' ('The Tokyo Bank Rises...', 2/21/1979), those who disparage it speak of the 'Japanese bank': '[the chosen location may not affect the feelings] of the Japanese—they would have no reason to feel affected, as they are not Argentine [...]' (Rojas, 4/10/1979):

Incidentally, Cárcano [director of Post in 1888] could not have foreseen that his public square would be occupied by a Japanese bank. [...] With the same reasoning, tomorrow the mayor will authorize the construction of a bank from an Arab country in Plaza Lavalle, in front of the Courts, or the building of a Swiss credit company in Plaza del Congreso (Martínez Estrada, 4/4/1979).

Then, the myth of the architecturally cohesive modern city, spontaneously identified with the European city (Corboz, 2015; Gorelik, 2019), is reactivated, contrasted with an image of the North American city, characterized by anonymity, lack of identity, and particularly the priority given to the automobile, which is reinforced by the progress of the Urban Highways Plan: 'The image of our city,' says Architect Alvarez, 'is that of a city changing in terms of its appearance. More European than North American, it is slowly transforming its French imprint from the turn of the century' ('Objections to the Construction...', 4/10/1979):

The automobile and its needs are causing severe damage to the aesthetics and character of our city. [...] It is necessary to act before, like in some North American cities, downtown Buenos Aires becomes an island surrounded by vast and unsightly parking lots, cut here and there by cement viaducts ('Aesthetics and Urban Congestion,' 4/10/1979).

If the architecturally cohesive city has an ideological function¹⁰, it is not only because it gives consistency to an imaginary way of managing the city's transformation. It also enables both a reduction of 'the city' to its central area—the main stage for liberal architecture and the emblems of political power—and an erasure of the non-central neighborhoods, which were, at the time, undergoing massive expropriations and demolitions for the construction of most of the planned highways and the effects of rental market liberalization policies.

In this sense, it is noteworthy that the debate surrounding the highway plan that appears in the selected articles¹¹ focuses almost exclusively on the project to elevate Avenida 9 de Julio, the only one of the nine planned routes that passed through the central area:

Certain highways proposed by the Buenos Aires municipality have been rightly criticized for going against the prevailing modern trends in urban planning. [...] All of these criticisms apply especially to the planned elevated roadway over the current Avenida 9 de Julio. The vision of a cement ring surrounding the Obelisk and the obstruction of the view of the Congress from Plaza de Mayo by the aforementioned viaduct are particularly unpleasant ('Aesthetics and Urban Congestion,' 4/10/1979).

Finally, the ideologeme 'Buenos Aires as the Paris of America' coexists with a belief that, at first glance, might seem contradictory: that Buenos Aires is a city on the verge of losing its status as a 'great world city,' in line with a broader ideological belief—the recognition/non-recognition that Argentina, as a peripheral country, does not fully integrate into 'the world.' '(...) we must point out that, *among all the major cities in the world*, Buenos Aires is, perhaps, the one that has least preserved its traditional and historical image' (National Academy of Fine Arts in 'Object Aspects...', 4/19/1979, italics are mine). '(...) we regret the destruction carried out on behalf of [the city] without much study,

¹⁰ Here but also nearer and farther, as seen in the historical disdain for the grid or urban 'checkerboard' (Gorelik, 2010), or in recent complaints by 'anti-tower' residents (González, 2013; Hernández, 2019). However, in each context, it is useful to analyze the specific ideological implications and effects of its persistence, as they depend on its unique relationship with the complex whole of ideological formations.

¹¹ This is a limited part of the controversy, though it is worth highlighting here because it is directly related to the Tokyo Bank project.

consultation, or urban planning sense, *as is customary in all the major capitals and cities of the world*" (Rojas, 3/12/1979, italics are mine). "(...) I do not consider the construction of elevated highways within the city to be beneficial for it. (...) Highways should neither be within nor reach the city center. *Experiences from around the world prove this*" (Mario Roberto Álvarez in 'Objections to the Construction...', 4/10/1979, italics are mine).

'The world' appears as spatialized 'Progress': in the same interview, Álvarez points out that other countries—specifically, France—had just banned urban highways. Porteño identity, like national identity, takes on an ambivalent position: Buenos Aires both belongs and does not belong to the group of 'major cities of the world.'¹²

Interdiscursive Traces as Symptoms of a moment

In an urban circumstances where the city increasingly appeared as a space for 'deserving' resident-owner-users and impoverished populations were expelled through evictions and persecution; where the project to demolish much of the city in the name of 'modernization' and 'freedom' for 'the people' was erasing neighborhood life as it had been known until then;¹³ and where economic liberalization and financing shifted housing from a use value to a commodity value; in this context, the discourses actually formulated do not only say what they believe they are saying: they speak in their silences, in their gaps, in their constitutive omissions.

In the analyzed discursive sequences, interdiscursive marks of a medical, biologicistic discourse are observed, where the city is a living whole tending toward equilibrium, "an integrity: an injury to any of its organs impacts the entire body; if the injury affects a vital part, it can cause its death" (Arch. García Vázquez, president of the Central Society of Architects, in 'Proposes to Open a Debate...', 4/16/1979). This discourse extends to an

¹² An ambivalence that persists to this day, although overdetermined by the revitalization in recent decades of forms of disidentification and reidentification linked to a Latin American identity.

¹³ Cacciatore, in defense of the Urban Highways Plan: 'In Buenos Aires, we need to find solutions for traffic that, for reasons of individual freedom and personal interest, we want to respect. People, whether we like it or not, want to come to the center in their own vehicles.' (...) Referring to the highways, [Cacciatore] stated that they allow travel comfortably, without accidents, 'which is the true social cost that concerns us' (...) ('The Mayor Spoke...', 4/12/1979).

urban teratology, where highways are labeled as 'urban aberrations' and 'true monstrosities' ('Proposes to Open a Debate...', 4/16/1979).

Although the medical discourse is neither a new unique to the local context in the ideological creation of urban metaphors (Sennett, 1997), its emergence stands out in close connection with a second discourse: the militaristic one, which contributes a language of political violence in a phase marked by operations legitimizing State terrorism in the so-called 'War against subversion' (Risler, 2018):

[...] I insist that the chosen location represents a true assault against building aesthetics [...] it is striking that the Central Society of Architects [...] and other entities remain silent in the face of this true assault being perpetrated against the artistic and urban heritage of our city. (Rojas, 4/10/1979).

The mention of the project as an assault becomes even more symptomatic when one considers that Rojas—a naval officer who became the de facto vice president of the Nation from 1955 to 1958—had actively participated in the coup that overthrew the constitutional president, Juan Domingo Perón, which had an immediate antecedent in the bombing by the Armed Forces of the civilian population in Plaza de Mayo in June 1955. On the eve of the overthrow in September, Rojas commanded the positioning of 19 warships in front of the YPF oil facilities in the city of Mar del Plata and threatened to bomb them if the president did not resign.

But this discourse extended beyond the military field; it was part of an accessible language: 'Nothing justified that misguided location, which, from my point of view, constitutes one of the most serious assaults on the aesthetics of our beloved and anarchic city' (Butler, 4/16/1979). 'What belongs to the pedestrian citizen, who is the majority, will be lost to the invader, the car, a minority' (Arch. Álvarez in 'Objections to the Construction...', 4/10/1979). The combination of medical and militaristic discourse gives rise to a language in which the city is attacked, that, as a symptomatic reference, evokes

an image of a tortured, tormented body.¹⁴ Then the highways can be 'a true gash in the urban fabric' (Arch. García Vázquez in 'Proposes to Open a Debate...', 4/16/1979). And:

A highway, like a railway line, signifies the dislocation of the city's unity, with the difference that while the former preceded urban expansion, the latter implies the mutilation of a preexisting unity' ('Aesthetics and Urban Congestion,' 4/10/1979).

Returning to Sennett (1997) ideas, this analysis highlights the city symbolized in discourses as a body split between an 'ideal'—one of integrity, wholeness, and coherence, manifested not only in functionality but also in aesthetics—and a 'reality,' characterized by ugliness and disease. The prominence of the bodily metaphor, intertwined with both medical and biologicistic discourse as well as militaristic and political violence discourse, can be interpreted as a symptom: on one hand, relating to the long-term ambivalence surrounding the body in the Western city (often manifesting as a denial of its suffering and desiring nature) and, on the other, connected to the more immediate context marked by the forced disappearance and torture of some bodies, the urban expulsion and eradication of others, but also by the symbolization of 'fear of contact,' stemming from both suspicion of the other and the exaltation of speed and individual movement on highways.

A Heritage Conflict?

The rejection of the Tokyo Bank project in front of the Palace of Post in 1979 shows that interest in the city's past was not exclusively a feature of the heritage wave that would notably unfold in Argentina at the institutional, legal, legislative, and -cultural levels after 1984, with the reinstatement of democracy. Seen from today's perspective, one could even say that we are dealing with a heritage conflict. However, to do so would imply an anachronism, since, although there were already extensive discussions on heritage within certain sectors of the national and regional architectural field and in international

¹⁴ This thesis, which will be strengthened in future analyses, is supported by other documents that I have not included here, one of which is the text "Demolición/Escombros" -in Tenenbaum (1987)-, whose original publication in the graphic press can be assumed to date from the 1970s. There, the demolition of a house is described entirely as a torture session: "For the bare walls, for the smitten masonry, the sentence is unappealable (...)" (p. 130).

organizations like UNESCO (Heinich, 2009; Méndez, forthcoming; Schavelzon, 2008), no technical definition of 'heritage' or legal procedures involving it can be observed in this debate. As we saw, the Argentine Center of Landscape Architects spoke of "things with cultural value", of "something that has value".

The term 'heritage' nevertheless appears in some articles, although used interchangeably with other expressions or qualified in various ways: 'national heritage,' 'cultural heritage' (Martínez Estrada, 4/4/1979), 'the artistic-urban heritage of our city' (Rojas, 4/10/1979). There, it is a superficial category that does not function as a systematic classification criterion for objects and does not refer to cultural discourse—as it will in the following decade—but rather to economic law: property, inheritance, transposed from private ownership to the public domain.

For all these reasons, it is not possible to consider this case as a precursor of how, a few years later, the time/city relationship would be managed. Conversely, it would be necessary to question the idea that the expansion of heritage issues in the 1980s was merely a broadening of criteria for what could be preserved or a democratization of heritage (Carrión, 2000; Prats, 2005; Zunino, 2006). In the case analyzed, a monumental discursive device predominates, heterogeneous compared to the heritage one. It assumes a progressive and cumulative temporality (rather than diverse temporalities associated with different cultural identities), values the unique and the exceptional (rather than the typical, the diverse, the everyday), refers to a supposedly homogeneous national identity (rather than cultural diversity), assigns preserved objects an artistic or historical value (rather than a value of authenticity and antiquity), and places the State in its civilizing role (and its embodiments: the Hero, the Patriot) as the central subject (rather than cultural groups and identities: ordinary people, the residents) (Gorelik, 2009; Heinich, 2009; Hernández, 2021; Márquez, 2019).

Of course, in theoretical-methodological terms, the proposition of this discontinuity does not imply that these discursive devices function in a pure, isolated manner; it is the task of analysis to study the forms of dominance, overdetermination, and hierarchization of one device over another, or of some other way of managing the time/city

relationship. And, although it will be the task of future research to demonstrate this point, it can be conjectured that the shift from monument to heritage—as discursive devices relevant in the forms of objectification and ideological treatment of the relationship between city and time—should be read in conjunction with transformations in the ideological context of the last quarter of the 20th century, where the dominant forms of temporality shift (from Progress to an expanded present).

Conclusions

As a result of the controversy, on June 15, 1979, a municipal ordinance was issued to put an end to the project of building the bank headquarters in front of the Palace of Post. The new Tokyo Bank would be located at its original site on Corrientes and Reconquista, and the Urban Planning Council was called upon to study the new urbanization of the area in front of the Palace.

The controversy surrounding the Tokyo Bank project combines concern for the past with a regime of historicity in which time is an inexorable transformation. In other words, this conflict is marked by an ideological context dominated by Progress as the prevailing temporality, though its dominance was beginning to wane, making way for a regime of historicity with an emphasis on the present, which would profoundly alter the ideological management of the time/city relationship. This process is suggested in this work but will need to be described and analyzed in future studies.

Moreover, the predominant values associated with the Palace of Post and its image were aesthetic and historical in a limited sense, enabling an appreciation of its monumental character expressed through a dual appreciation of its grandeur (the physical stature as a material support for the historical worth of a national-liberal state enterprise) and an idealistic conception of the city as an object of contemplation.

The emphasis on the aesthetic aspect relates to Riegl's (1987) classification of the contemporary values of monuments. Although the Secretariat of Telecommunications operated in the building in 1979, this factor played no role in the terms of the discussion; rather, what was at stake was the need to view the building as a work of art. It was only in

the 1980s that the second contemporary value, its instrumental character, would gain greater relevance—not only in valuing pre-existing uses but, in the imperative, present in international guidelines, of integrating heritage assets into the current needs of urban life as a requirement for their sustainability.

According to the same author, the highlighting of historical value can be linked to a type of commemorative value: it is neither the intentional commemorative value (what those who built it sought to establish as an enduring value) nor the value of age (the most recent of the three, relating to appreciation of the marks of time as signs of age and authenticity). The historical value views the object as a document, as a testament to an era, leading to the desire to preserve it as close to its original state as possible (Riegl, 1987).

The analysis also showed that the prevailing Argentine—and, by synecdoche, porteño—identity carries an ambivalence between a conviction of a destiny of greatness (tied to an imaginary identification with Europe and Paris) and a sense of experiencing failure (revealing a symbolic identification with Argentina as seen from 'the world').

Finally, the study of interdiscursivity revealed the combined presence of a biologist and medical discourse alongside a militaristic one, with references to a context marked by political violence. This finding provides a key for interpreting the discourse on urban issues through its silences and symptomatic manifestations of what resists symbolization but persists. Future analyses that include other cases will allow for the creation of an archive that accounts for these sparsely studied interdiscursive processes. This study will be relevant in shedding light on how, during the ideological circumstances of the last dictatorship and the early years of democracy in Argentina, the relationships between memory, urban space, and public space were intertwined."

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