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## **Place is memory: a framework for placemaking in the case of the human rights memorials in Buenos Aires**

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# Place is memory: a framework for placemaking in the case of the human rights memorials in Buenos Aires

## Summary

As a long tradition in urban studies made clear, the production of urban space is twofold: users continuously reshape what a contentious political process produces at first. The struggle around conflictual memories invests cities increasingly by marking spots or reshaping places to reconstruct or re-signify past events.

The politics of memory deploy a combination of argumentative, emotional and ordinary arguments. The intent is neither preserving nor deleting but re-writing memories. However, places interfere with the political and argumentative strategies making room for ordinary uses that question the stability of meanings, although not providing political answers to the issues of power and domination.

The paper introduces sense-making to suggest that places reinforce the social processes that build collective memories. The relationship between memory and place is not unidirectional. Briefly, a social process infuses place and this latter ‘hits back’. This statement leads to the apparent odd conclusion that, in the long term, place-making is as essential as the reframing of memory.

A few initiatives involving institutions, human rights movements and bottom-up initiatives in Buenos Aires are investigated: a clandestine detention centre, a memorial garden, an ordinary urban square, aiming at developing an analytical framework that highlights the details of the sense-making mechanism linking memories and places.

Keywords: *Placemaking; identity; collective memory; sense-making; human rights*

This paper interrogates how memory projects affect placemaking and, therefore, their place in the making of urban space. The politics of memory is at the heart of several global movements and local bottom-up initiatives. Memories are about the present and the past: preserving the past is instrumental in overcoming it. While reconstructing memories serves higher political needs of justice, recognition, and reconciliation, they influence common space and uses. More significantly, for the aims of this paper, the ordinary uses of constituting places may interfere with the construction of memories. All events involve material places that are collectively designed, built and managed.

As Nora's work helped to clarify, the politics and debate on collective memories address places. History changes places and memories build a narrative. However, scholars and militants have not adequately addressed whether place influences the construction of memories. I will focus on the role of places analysing how sense-making influences placemaking and vice-versa, concentrate on this process of change and exchange between the material, the discursive and the emotional. The goal is to develop a unified framework to jointly analyse the making of place and the reframing of collective memories.

When people start challenging and tentatively reframing collective meanings and established memories, urban space is torn between a violent erasure or everyday resistance (Schindel and Colombo 2014). New practices invest places, and their status becomes questionable. To illustrate this point, I will use the case of the human rights movement in Buenos Aires, Argentina. After the military dictatorship (1976-81), they invested in several urban places and reclaimed former detention centres as museums and memorials. Rather than preservation and heritage, the human rights discourse fosters retrieving memories and re-writing collective history (Denissen 2008).

The first section summarises scholars' arguments linking social identities and collective memory. The central argument is that a dual process of remembering and forgetting invests space. A political, often tricky, process involves diverse and not equally empowered actors that select and frame a prevalent narrative, a crucial passage that this paper does not address directly. The focus here is on the supportive role of space and the diversity of narrative. Recently, social researchers have questioned the uniqueness of narratives, pointing to the contrary to the polyphony of cultures. Cities call for broader and multiple interpretations rather than for expert and authentic interpretations. Thus, we concentrate on these preliminary elements: the recursive relation between place and memory; and the double “spin” that can activate this relation in two ways.

The second section addresses the reuse of a few sites or urban spaces in Buenos Aires, Argentina, which experienced one of the bloodiest dictatorships in Latin America. After the return to democracy, lengthy

56 discussion unfolded around the most appropriate uses for some places. This case is interesting for several  
57 reasons. First, we are not dealing with heritage, i.e. traditional artefacts or buildings invested with cultural  
58 meanings, but with the material traces of a collective, conflicted history. Second, the discussion criticised the  
59 risk of monumentalising individual memories reflected in the standard design of museums and promoted a  
60 critical reconstruction of history.

61 The third section describes three very different sites, focusing upon the frictions these new activities  
62 caused upon everyday activities: a museal institution, a memorial park, a central square. The three places  
63 provide information, stimulate emotions or just unsettle common practices in different combinations and to a  
64 different extent. Though radically different, these actions are equally important, each one building upon the  
65 effect of the others.

66 The fourth section applies a social-constructivist perspective to memories and places and specifies how  
67 sense-making may overturn established meaning. In line with the previous analysis, the research framework  
68 examines how a process of readjustment of contentious memories can address conflictive places and deploys  
69 these two conceptual tenets – the recursive elements and the double spin – to interpret urban spaces in Buenos  
70 Aires. To do so, we reconstructed the recursive interactions that enable the generalisation of new meanings in  
71 a few case studies to understand how placemaking recursively relates to sense-making in the process of  
72 remembering and forgetting. History does not always translate into shared senses, while places do.

73 How to combine memories and places? The conclusions attempt to answer by arguing that re-writing  
74 memories is a continuous process, where not everything has to be either preserved or deleted. Placemaking  
75 does not provide a political answer to the construction of memories; like space in general, a place is just a  
76 mechanism that reinforces social processes, albeit a powerful one. However, some tenets of placemaking –  
77 mix, openness, and flexibility of activities– sustain sense-making activities that fill the gaps caused by the  
78 intentional disruptions of conventional narratives. Place openness gives a “spin” towards either readjusting  
79 memories or altering space.

80 The research for this paper is the outcome of a long-standing interest in cultural policies and policies on  
81 culture (XXX 2013; XXX *et al.* 2021); the paper combines information and arguments from different  
82 secondary resources. Fieldwork and documentary research spanned over these years, mainly focusing on  
83 public debates, newspapers and academic contributions. Newspaper articles, blogs and public reports provided  
84 some preliminary data, later verified with experts and researchers. The case studies originated from regular  
85 participant observation and site visits, and interactions with visitors and users<sup>1</sup>.

86

### 87 **1. Reframing memories**

88 Historians and architecture scholars have tried to extricate memories and explain their relationship to  
89 space. Especially in the past few decades, several authors have addressed the construction of space through  
90 memories by embracing a broad social constructivist perspective. This paper suggests confronting these  
91 theoretical approaches with the practice of place-making and the notion of sense-making,  
92 Space and place have a long history in design and sociology (Creswell, 2015). The abstract properties of *space*,  
93 size, shape and disposition of objects in space contrast with the matter and culture of *places*. The relational  
94 notion of position implies that all objects are defined by their proximity or distance to other objects.  
95 Phenomenological research dealt, instead, with places as cultural objects: squares, buildings, battlefields etc.

96 These objects can be understood as spaces in the positional sense: they can be either close or distant,  
97 occupied or not. At the same time, they are places, cultural objects that provide support to shared social  
98 meanings: the actions of people and the material dimension are the two crucial tenets of the constitution of  
99 places. As in the notion of landscape and heritage, materiality is the vehicle for social meanings, allowing for  
100 a double constitution, both material and discursive; and for a political dimension, since these meanings are  
101 never unanimous and are heavily affected by power relations on disposition and culture. Disposition, matter  
102 and meanings are weaved together by the cultural process of sense-making (XXX *et al.* 2021).

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<sup>1</sup> A total of 15 hours of observation among different visits in various moments in the first half of 2012, and approximately the same amount in November 2017 and May 2018. However, only a few users were interviewed, this study focusing mainly on practices and non-intentional uses. This research was initially submitted to a seminar at ISA Yokohama in July 2014, a seminar held at the University of Rome Tre in 2015 and one at the Unsam, Buenos Aires in November 2017, benefitting from the comments by several discussants. The author would like to thank all the participants and this journal’s anonymous referees for their valuable and understanding remarks. All responsibilities, however, are mine.

103 Places and cultures are related (Alderman and Hoelscher 2004), but the relationship between memory  
104 and place is not unidirectional, a topic that both historians and geographers have worked out (Hobsbawm and  
105 Ranger 1983; Roca, Claval and Agnew, 2011). Thus, the collective re-imaging of space is not something  
106 new *per se*. Places are constellations of objects that help shape the representation of public narratives: users  
107 can build up different narratives activating the ‘script’ that objects include (Akrich 1987). The discovery and  
108 activation of scripts allow users to change the meaning of time radically over time (XXX 2021). Such changes  
109 are rarely the quiet results of symbolic projects; however, they often spring from counterintuitive processes,  
110 where contentious actions try to impose alternative hegemonic projects.

111 Of late, researchers denounced a ‘memory boom’ (Huysen 2003, 101) that parallel the critique to the  
112 commodification of urban space and the rising of a bourgeois ideology on the uses of public space (Arabindoo  
113 2011). Even success can eventually “degrade the word memory” (Valenzuela’s foreword in Bilbija and Payne  
114 2011). In particular, they question whether misuse, museification and marketisation lead to corruption of  
115 meanings. Researchers are also wary of the “increasing politicisation and spatialisation of collective memory”  
116 (Guglielmucci 2019). Available ethnographic accounts question the emptying effects of the process of  
117 commodification, pointing at far more nuanced conclusions (Draper 2011; Gates-Madsen 2011; Guglielmucci,  
118 Scaraffuni, Ribeiro 2016).

119 Sensemaking (Salvatore 2018) does not deny the asymmetric positions of actors and the power  
120 relationships they are embedded in. Power, however, does not mean complete domination but rather a profound  
121 political process where asymmetric positions collide. Sensemaking insists that the construction of shared  
122 meanings is always an incomplete process since it can only result from struggles, friction and confrontations.  
123 Consequently, the preservation of monuments and placemaking is an eminently political process that  
124 recurrently invests both spatial dimensions, both space and place: first, it spatialises particular memories  
125 locating them in spatial relation; and second, it constructs representations and meanings, where placemaking  
126 is at stake.

127 When it comes to specific cases, the discourse and power relations that frame places are  
128 indistinguishable. Identifying historical divides with particular spaces is not rare, and it is crucial to the subject  
129 of cosmopolitan memories. For instance, heritage and scientific preservation capitalise on the monumental  
130 features of space.

131 Since Halbwachs’ (1950) first distinction between history and memory as two opposed approaches to  
132 the past, historians acknowledge the decisive contribution of symbolic places to the construction of collective  
133 memories. While history is a selection based on rational and discursive criteria, memory builds on (and is  
134 imbued with) communal experience that nurtures collective identities. Again, memory evokes loss, particularly  
135 the loss of ‘organic communities’ that were supposed to preserve memory and live in close continuity with  
136 their pasts. Anchoring memories in place, as suggested by Nora’s (1989) “*lieux de memoire*” (places of  
137 memories), illustrates how different groups and sensibilities struggle to find ways to constitute memory  
138 spatially: dominant and subaltern groups attach competing meanings to various sites. Historical processes of  
139 intentional symbolisation thoroughly reconstruct places.

140 Although this paper does not deal with architecture and the specific role of the architectural  
141 “monumentalization” of memories, it is worth noting that even architects moved away from monuments,  
142 reconceptualizing urban space instead (Crimson 2005)

143 This interaction leads to a cumulative mechanism that transforms sense and place simultaneously and  
144 eventually wraps them in a new universal ‘meaning and ethos’ (Nora's 'distorting mirrors': 1989 p.15). Such  
145 cosmopolitanism is a provisional and negotiated arrangement – the outcome of an ongoing transformation  
146 rather than a coherent doctrine.

147 Of late, more and more sociological researchers have shown renewed interest in the construction of  
148 shared identities while emphasising the importance of multiple meanings and agencies (Blokland 2001).  
149 Massey (1995) made the point that time and space articulate the relations that lead to places, in the sense that  
150 time sediments both space and memories; and that the present re-writes the past, selecting what is to preserve  
151 and what to jettison. Eventually, it boils down to a recursive relation: the relations between memories and  
152 space are mutually supportive (Gieryn 2000).

153 The literature review in the field proves the wide acceptance of the relation between memories and  
154 places. At the same time, the relative volatility of the past, or the conflicts around a divided memory, leads to  
155 a renewed concern with places. However, the notion of place is not adequately conceptualised. The imbrication  
156 of space and place have been at the core of critical urban theory for a while (Lefebvre [1970] 2003), and a  
157 recent stream of research (Brenner and Schmid 2015) interrogated the process of rescaling globally. However,

158 local processes are less aware of the practical implications and fall easily into the scalar trap, leading to  
159 fragmented and contradictory approaches to place and memories (Violante 2020).

160 The politics of memory seems to underestimate the collective nature of the placemaking process. By  
161 definition, placemaking is a plural, conjectural and negotiated process. Placemaking focuses on community  
162 needs and coproduction though the balance between communitarian concerns and institutional approach can  
163 vary.

164 I suggest approaching the coproduction of urban places through a sense-making perspective.  
165 Sensemaking is a collective adjustment process that blurs the lines between hegemonic project and passive  
166 resistance (de Certeau, Mayol 1998), a process of sedimentation that never completely erases the past but  
167 continuously illuminates it through the lens of the present. As stated by Weick (1969: 243): “When people act,  
168 they unrandomised variables, insert vestiges of orderliness, and create their constraints”. Because of the  
169 fundamental need to make all experiences meaningful, sense-making is a central element of all social  
170 interaction and is inherently social and local.

171 This turn to sense-making is promising in its focus on a constructive, progressive adjustment among a  
172 plurality of sense makers. A common framework is a shared construct and result from the actors’ interaction.  
173 Intentional projects, like a monument, may start a process, but they cannot control its reception because desire  
174 rather than cognition guides all sense-making activities (Salvatore *et al.*, 2017).

175 As a significant contribution, this approach insists that shared frameworks result from recursive  
176 interactions. Though they do not address the fundamental question of what we want to remember and forget  
177 (Bosco 2006), common places become a kind of collective compensation for losing a shared past. Like every  
178 day, places ‘stabilise’ a conflictual process between adverse claims, permitting people to come to terms with  
179 the past and present.

180

## 181 **2. Reshaping places**

182 Three cases in Buenos Aires problematize the link between memories and places effectively. In  
183 Argentina, the military dictatorship (1976-83) executed massive extermination of political opponents hiding  
184 these illegal operations behind a smokescreen. Prisoners were not granted a process; the junta extensively  
185 adopted torture; a brutal form of execution allowed for disposing of the bodies and all sorts of evidence  
186 throwing them into the sea. Such history has still to be fully retrieved (Grigera, Zorzoli 2019; Stern *et al.* 2013;  
187 Gates-Madsen 2016), but the conflict about memory crosscuts all layers of society.

188 After the dictatorships, the new president Menem emanated laws and pardons, initially legitimating the  
189 impunity and a broader refusal to remember. However, a robust political discussion on collective memory and  
190 the recent past accompanied democracy-building in the ‘90s (Jelin 1994), displaying significant differences  
191 among social organisations over the way to commemorate victims (Bosco 2004). The government and local  
192 organisations mapped and rehabilitated a heterogeneous set of places: spaces of detention, resistance, or  
193 commemoration (Salerno and Zarankin 2015). The complex topography of terror emerged, revealing the  
194 military’s use of many spots and buildings where thousands were tortured and eliminated. In 2002, the  
195 establishment of an *Instituto Espacios para la Memoria* converted several former clandestine centres of torture  
196 into places of memory.

197 The same year, for instance, excavation started at the Club Atletico; initially, an archaeological recovery  
198 task and later a project focused on creating a memory site. In 2003, the parliament revoked Menem’s impunity  
199 laws. The ESMA, the School of Mechanics of the Navy, was inaugurated as a museum and a cultural centre in  
200 2004 by President Nestor Kirchner; other emblematic places followed, such as the Garage Olimpo, Virrey  
201 Cevallos, and Automotores Orletti, among many others.

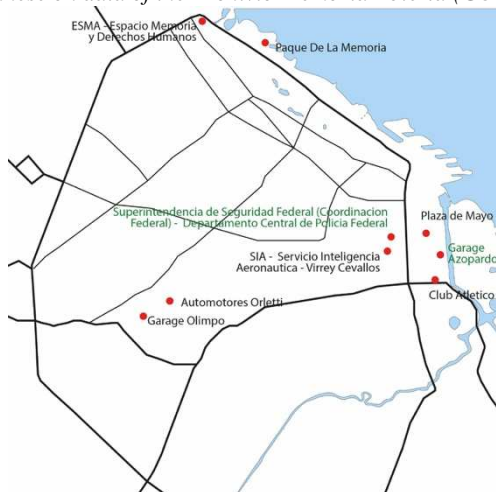
202 In Buenos Aires, an urban development issue turned into a political assessment of the national past; the  
203 notion of global human rights made it operational both in law and in public awareness. The politics of memory  
204 aimed to reshape these places and reframe collective memories, the sense of a shared past, and the perception  
205 of global values.

206 The process of readjusting contentious memories in Buenos Aires is still open. The National  
207 Commission on the Disappearance of Persons (Conadep) counted around 156 clandestine detention centres in  
208 1984. Victims or their relatives provided testimonies to the Human Rights Secretariat. The vast majority of  
209 these centres were located inside police stations or military facilities.

210 Archival work allowed for creating maps of clandestine detention centres across the country (see fig. 1)  
211 that show at least hundreds of centres: the latest survey indicates 488 places used for the kidnapping of victims  
212 of state terrorism.

213 In Buenos Aires, the largest reclaimed site was the School of Mechanics of the Navy (ESMA), one of  
214 the biggest illegal detention centres during state terrorism. A few more sites were successfully reclaimed, such  
215 as the *Garage Olimpo*, the *Club Atlético* (Tahir 2015), and the memorial *Parque de la Memoria* (Tandeciarz  
216 2007; Lerer 2013). The government of Buenos Aires maintains an interactive online map identifying all these  
217 sites as well as related public spaces that became part of a network of memory centres  
218

219 *fig. 1*  
220 *Buenos Aires: state terrorism main centres (scale 1:100.000)*  
221 *F. Albanese on data of the Archivo Memoria Abierta (Conte 2015)*



222  
223  
224 The discourse on human rights in Argentina has gradually emerged as an influential political reference  
225 through long struggles and the massive engagement of people and organisations. The movement devised a  
226 variety of spatial dispositives that - all combined- reinforced its political actions. This tactic took many  
227 different forms: occupying central ceremonial places, mapping centres and chambers of terror, tagging  
228 executioners' homes, etc. Starting in 1997, the organisation 'Hijos' (Denissen 2008, p. 153) tagged buildings  
229 and neighbourhoods inhabited by police or military officers responsible for murders through signs, graffiti  
230 and gatherings. The practice of the '*escrache*' directly thematised the banalising effect of everyday life.  
231

### 232 3. Three cases

233 However, a broad debate on the institutionalisation of memories followed these initiatives (Andermann  
234 2012), pointing to the limits of the museification of recent, traumatic events. Beyond the political cleavage of  
235 remembering and forgetting, the question concerns how people collectively remember and for what purposes.  
236 Through many different orientations, human rights movements also refused to convert the past dictatorship's  
237 illegal detention locations into a generic museum:

238 'Regardless of their trajectory, all of these sites are officially connected with the goal of re-writing  
239 history (taking distance from previous master narratives), commemorating the victims of the latest military  
240 regime, creating awareness on the dangers inherent to all dictatorships, promoting the defence of fundamental  
241 rights'" (Salerno and Zarankin 2015).  
242

243 The case of Buenos Aires shows a variety of sites and places seeking to preserve memories with  
244 pedagogical, commemorative and celebratory objectives. The three examples show a mix of aims and spaces  
245 ranging from the pedagogical museum, the emotional memorial, the common public space.

#### 246 *ESMA, inhabiting the terror's headquarters*

247 The ESMA is a large complex of building and open space located on a broad avenue in Buenos Aires,  
248 on the north-eastern side of the city. Between 1976 and 1983, the complex hosted one of the largest clandestine  
249 detention and torture centres while continuously operating as a school and naval offices. According to  
250 historians' estimations, the Navy's militia arrested, tortured, and killed 5,000 prisoners, thrown sedated  
251 into the sea in most cases. The clandestine prison operated in one of the buildings, the Officers' Casino, while the  
252 Navy occupied the rest of the premises. Far from being remote and concealed, this estate was a visible centre  
253 of military power. ESMA was also the place of the abduction of several newborns whose mothers were  
254 eventually brought to the flight death (Brodsky 2005).

255 Because of its apparent significance, the government transformed ESMA into a Museum of Memory.  
256 Then-President Kirchner publicly apologised in 2004 (on the 24 March, the anniversary of the military coup  
257 of 1976) for the crimes state agents committed while inaugurating the memorial. As an intentionally dramatic  
258 and public gesture, he watched over the head of the armed forces removing the pictures of former leaders of  
259 the military junta from the School's hall.

260 The state opened a call to reuse the 17 ha space, and human rights agencies and civil society actors  
261 submitted proposals that rose a heathen debate. The cultural options focused on the testimonial, the museal,  
262 and the performative (Andermann 2012: 85). The site of ESMA includes now exhibition, workshop spaces,  
263 research and documentation centres assigned to institutions and human rights agencies while only guided visits  
264 can access the Casino: 'Nuestros Hijos' and Haroldo Conti, an Activists' House in the former military gym,  
265 the government institution National Archive of Memory, the National Office of Human Rights, a music school,  
266 a UNESCO postgraduate programme in Human Rights Studies etc.

267 A specific controversy repeatedly addressed the use of reclaimed spaces. Some activists expected the  
268 detention places to operate as an active network promoting research and memory on State Terrorism  
269 (Tandeciarz 2007); others insisted upon injecting everyday activities to contest the death message of the site.  
270 Such an "enactment" of a new discursive approach profoundly altered both the place and narrative and physical  
271 and emotional surroundings. A new sense emerged without resorting to either censure or oblivion (Sosa 2016).  
272

273 In the Unesco statement, "ESMA is a symbol of the coordinated criminal repression perpetrated by the  
274 dictatorships in the region since 1975 under what the Armed Forces called Operation Condor". The ESMA put  
275 together "the tangible (building), the intangible (struggle of the human rights movement), and the action of  
276 inscribing history where events took place (Site Museum)". This assemblage of material, memory, and site by  
277 an institution builds up a collective memory.

278 In this sense, the ratio is the web of coordinated research behind the single institutions. Lorenz and Winn  
279 insist on the interconnectedness of all the place of memories "ESMA may have been the most important... but  
280 he was not alone". Since then, activists marked many former clandestine centres with signs as evidence of the  
281 repression. In 2007, the state established a Federal Network of Memorials.

282 To support this effort, a logic of archaeological reconstruction target material spaces and traces to  
283 reconstruct the link between space, identity, and memory. Archaeologists fight against an erased past and try  
284 to "patch up materials that have been torn and incorporate them into an account: they give materiality to a  
285 memory: they turn the clandestine detention centre into heritage, no less" (Schindel 2014, p. 182).

286 For example, one political demonstration in ESMA ended with a barbeque (the ritual Argentinian  
287 *asado*), triggering a heated debate over whether this place should be considered a "sacred site". A private party  
288 held by an ESMA office worker caused even greater public outrage. Understandably, recreational activities  
289 appear as inappropriate and incompatible with most of the detention centres. An alternative position claims  
290 instead that museification normalises and somehow perpetuates the atrocity of state terrorism. Instead of  
291 preserving traces of horror, these should be "filled with life". This latter echoes the tenets of radical human  
292 rights activists. For instance, one of the associations of the Mothers insisted that "inhabiting a place could be  
293 a way of transforming it" because it generates an alternative form of conviviality (Sosa 2016), a sort of broader  
294 concern with the production of 'vitality' in spaces that become "affective architectures".

295 Beyond the need for respect and an understandable need to reserve places for either grief or cultural  
296 development, this controversy rightly illustrates a fundamental divide between narratives based on cogitation  
297 and narratives rooted in action. Museums, memorials, and all kinds of 'sacred' and ceremonial spaces require  
298 an intentional and reflexive approach, bound to produce new meanings of a sort that everyday uses do not  
299 necessarily entail.

300 *fig. 2*  
301 *ESMA, the main façade* © Wiki commons





302  
303

304 *Parque de la Memoria: making room for remembering in an open space*

305 Under the government of Carlos Menem, human rights organisations promoted a Memory Park in  
306 Buenos Aires, whose government approved the construction in 1998. Although not a historical site in itself,  
307 the park is located along with the Río de la Plata, covering 14 hectares on North Costanera Avenue, near  
308 Buenos Aires, a stronghold of resistance. It is also close to the military airport, so close that the noise is easily  
309 heard, where the "flights of death" took off during the dictatorship.

310 The Parque contains the Monument to Victims of State Terrorism, a ramped path in the shape of a  
311 gigantic wound with the names of the murdered that looks upon the river where the militaries dropped their  
312 victims. Several commemorative sculptures punctuate the grass, some of an intense emotional impact. For  
313 instance, the figure of the missing teenager Pablo Míguez by Claudia Fontes, turning his back to the mainland  
314 and visitors, seemingly floats in the muddy water.

315 The Parque was the object of extended discussion, with some human rights organisations denouncing  
316 the implicit victimisation and denying its legitimacy even to list the fell names. Besides, the collection of art  
317 and memorials is heterogeneous though these tensions and inconclusiveness –the sense of a wasteland–  
318 contribute to the experience (Tandeciarz 2017).

319 However, though some critics disqualify it as a theme park, the Parque is not a monument; it is instead  
320 a public space of a rather peculiar nature. For instance, cemeteries are public spaces, sometimes-monumental  
321 spaces. As a public space, the park is manifold: a memorial, a virtual cemetery (the names inscribed in stone),  
322 an emotional dispositive finalised to the collective elaboration of the trauma, and a narrative of some sort,  
323 connecting pieces to foster a deeper awareness of the past. Often the destination of school trips, the Parque is  
324 also a traditional green area where mundane activities such as strolling or sunbathing occur at the risk of  
325 marketisation (Gates-Madsen 2011).

326 Such a park is intentionally left open, compatible with different uses and practices, though it is meant  
327 as "... a place for families and survivors to gather, collect their thoughts and remember the desaparecidos"  
328 (Sion 2015: 27). This view is explicitly contested: one of the associations of the mothers of the *desaparecidos*  
329 disagrees with all sorts of plaques and monuments because they individualise a memory that should be kept  
330 collective and disregard the political reasons that led to the conflict and the repression.

331 Monuments and memorials confront the issue of building narratives when tragic memories and crimes  
332 cannot be narrated or are overexposed; both events occurring in the Argentinian case since 2000 (Violi 2014).  
333 The Parque, however, is not a celebration piece: according to curators, this park operates as a "counter"  
334 monument: not an object, the counter monuments are "places". While "the former celebrates deeds and  
335 successes, the latter takes distance, presenting the facts in silence and showing what cannot be told"  
336 (Maestripieri 2010).

337 However, the divide between places and monument is less stark than often imagined. Old and new  
338 narratives are rooted in action as well as in reflexive projects. At the same time, individuals must participate  
339 actively in the visit, at least walking and looking through, which implies sights, encounters and exchanges like  
340 all urban spaces. Likewise, personal behaviour is neither sanctioned nor restricted: a schoolteacher can invite  
341 pupils to concentrate during the visit while a street seller cries 'ice creams'. In this sense, the memorial of the  
342 Shoah in Berlin and the Parque de la Memoria in Buenos Aires are often quoted as examples of open 'oeuvres'  
343 (Sion 2015, Stevens 2012).

344

345  
346

fig. 3 Parque de la Memoria, the main façade © Titi Nicola Wiki Commons



347

348 *Plaza de Mayo: rallying at the hub of the political scene*

349 These memorial places are far from promoting ordinary practices (though sometimes they encounter  
350 this criticism): on the contrary, they are highly emotional, intimate, and ceremonial places. However, they  
351 impinge upon ordinary actions like walking and guiding and let people activate their reflexive processes when  
352 making sense of a ‘strangely familiar’ place. The link between sense-making and placemaking grows on  
353 traditional lines, with the anxiety of fixing memories almost deactivating places. As in a conventional museum,  
354 ordinary activities unsettle visitors and remain incompatible.

355 On the contrary, Plaza de Mayo is the heart of the city, the centre of the capital, and the political venue  
356 of the nation, one of the most notable public spaces in the country’s political life. The Plaza is highly significant  
357 in the struggle for memory. The ‘mothers of May’ marched weekly in front of the presidential palace during  
358 the dictatorship. Though noteworthy and dramatic of some sort, these material elements (white handkerchief,  
359 rhythm and walking in a circle) born rather randomly. They were not parts of a deliberative strategy of the  
360 Mothers, rather the results of adapting to the rigid constraints of a political context that “had its origin in the  
361 military's refusal to receive them” (Schindel 2009). It is a ruse of adaptation, a practice of resistance *à la*  
362 Certeau, that later became a symbol. In a sense, marching was already a political statement since the  
363 dictatorship banned all forms of gathering.

364 It is also apparent that the choice of a central place and visible presence correspond to the political claims  
365 of transparency and truth. The strength of the Mothers appropriating Plaza de Mayo under the dictatorship  
366 resides precisely in the seemingly ordinary action of marching while placing this humble movement at the  
367 heart of the political scene.

368 The struggle around memories is far from being settled, and a broad range of feelings about recent  
369 history often inflame the political debate (Goñi 2016). For instance, the late rearrangement of Plaza de Mayo  
370 raised concerns about the fate of the circle of white signs in the shape of a headscarf marking the circle the  
371 mothers walked as a form of protest to claim attention on the son and relatives that were disappeared. The  
372 leaders of the main political parties discussed such a hot topic in 2019 in the first meeting after the elections.

373 Plaza de Mayo is a classical urban space that shows an essential feature of all these cases: remaking  
374 space reframes memories because it alters ordinary routines. However, memories are preserved through simple  
375 signs (the white scarves on the ground) that help ‘taking place’ and re-appropriating a place. From a cultural  
376 perspective, contentious processes mark spaces to give them new meanings (Jelin and Langland 2003).

377

378 fig. 4 Plaza de Mayo, the main façade © Wiki Commons

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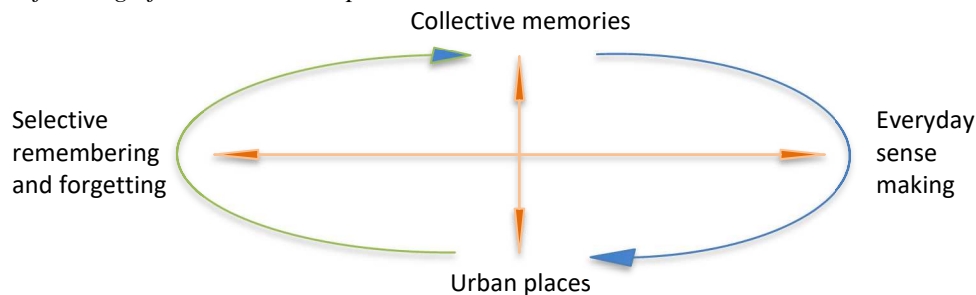
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### 3. Placemaking and sense-making

The three cases show an ambitious project combined with everyday concerns: a collaborative process of sense-making and placemaking is at the stake, reworking memory and place simultaneously. From the perspective of human rights activists, the context requires a significant cultural change even at the cost of a political struggle. However, these initiatives induced relatively modest physical changes in the overall urban space from a place-making perspective.

Drawing on the literature analysed so far, I propose a simplified version of the argument: memories and place are related (the vertical axis in fig. 2), but a cultural process (the horizontal axis) mediates this relation. A place is neither determined by nor determines memories: cognition (on the left side) or sense-making operations (on the right side) act as a filter between them. However, all these elements are part of a circle with no apparent priority: priority depends on the political process that invests both places and memories. This analytical approach was the object of broader research (XXX *et al.*, 2021).

fig. 5 *The framing of memories over places*, © the author



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This perspective also highlights the role of mediating elements: on one side, the human rights activists' awareness; on the other, the recursive interactions and shared construction of meanings. The three cases deployed different strategies: ESMA deployed a load of new information, the Parque looked for emotional experiences and the marking of Plaza de Majo, creating a 'strangely familiar' setting. Such different strategies activate, in fact, other triggers:

- starting from the bottom left, the struggle with contentious memories may eventually lead to a discussion of mainstream narratives and may succeed in reshaping both uses and places. The reuse of ESMA is an excellent example of this process. In this context, pedagogical strategies understandably come to envelop places, limiting and strictly regulating permitted uses. The activists' drive is often the reconstruction of truth, preserving the traces of a hidden but not forgotten history, and moving up towards a complete historical and pedagogical project. Since contentious processes are all but settled, controversies and dilemmas keep reopening and resurfacing. Even today, revisionist efforts resurface, sometimes trying to minimise facts and responsibilities (De Vedia 2016). Sensemaking and the selection of memories operates a *stabilising and reinforcing mechanism* that relates memories and places. Stabilize means here the cultural process of appropriation. Like heritage and museums, they materialise a collective issue; and they open an option of learning just for the fact of being there. Second, they allow new routines to establish, offering common sense with innovative inputs. At ESMA, the combination of different cultural activities also allows various publics to convene and exchange, contributing to disseminating the main content. Finally, a place may help the

424 selective operation of remembering and forgetting; visitors confront a powerful dispositive, lacking detailed  
425 information. Yet, all the common recursive elements involved in shaping places are mobilised to sustain the  
426 link.

427 - starting from the top right, the re-appropriation of space triggers a process of memory readjustment:  
428 the same schemes operates through an opposite 'spin'. Practice and sense-making follow an inverse order than  
429 in the previous case. According to sense-making, it would be wrong to assume a cognitive primacy. On the  
430 contrary, the readjustment action comes first; meaning will eventually follow (Salvatore *et al.*, 2017). The  
431 marking of the white scarves on the floor of Plaza de Mayo creates a surprising disruption altering the  
432 magniloquent signification of the central square. Place affects directly sense-making in a very ordinary yet  
433 robust way, reversing the memory selection process, rehabilitating forgotten aspects, and reframing the place-  
434 making process. Such changes do not require physical alteration: however, these processes effectively turn  
435 places upside down. The reinforcing mechanism between memories and places is more practical, with a  
436 readjustment process on one side and appropriation of space on the other. As aforementioned, action comes  
437 first, and meanings eventually follow. The cultural process is not necessarily characterised by an analytical  
438 approach aimed at identifying legacy, but rather by a process of sense-making sparked by an injection of  
439 everyday uses and ordinary actions;

440 - somehow in between the two cases, the ceremonial but geographically marginal Parque de la Memoria  
441 deploys a mixed strategy, arranging a sequence of testimonial plaques, performative boards and emotional  
442 markers along a landscaped pathway. Dealing with trauma and absence arises concerns with the non-cognitive  
443 dimension, the emotional side of practices. Of late, researchers have started questioning how the placemaking  
444 process shape collective memories beyond political concerns (Shin 2016), even more so when a sophisticated  
445 and contemporary design alters the perceptions of monuments, hybridising places and museums, decentering  
446 places and bodily experiences (Williams 2007: 3). The double strategy spins the two ways, building on  
447 organised information to create a memorial place; and relying on the behavioural readjustment to question the  
448 everyday symbolic order.

449 One crucial element of all place-making process concerns the mix of activities and functions on the  
450 same site, and consequently, the range of appropriate behaviour. By definition, a central square is the most  
451 open place, compatible with almost all activities, an openness shared by common parks and open areas.  
452 Memorials and museums instead are well-defined places where behaviour can be directly or indirectly  
453 restricted. The three cases show a decreasing share of specific and educational functions; and the increasing  
454 importance of mundane, everyday activities, particularly in the central square. However, the mix is notably  
455 broad even in the ESMA complex and the Parque, likely justified by the need of driving a comparatively  
456 peripheral site or connecting many scattered pieces in a unitary landscape. Openness and flexibility are typical  
457 place-making mechanisms. The sites are lively because they are urban and *hence* support memory.

458 A second crucial element characterises all sense-making activities: in fact, the three examples share a  
459 concern with established routines. From this point of view, the differences among the sites are less significant  
460 than the similarities. From a sense-maker perspective, all cultural meanings are larger than cognitive rules.  
461 Sense makers continuously re-write the sense of ourselves and our common system of meanings, as an analogy  
462 with language may help clarify. Like all forms of narrative, sense-making is rooted in action and assists arrange  
463 events in time (Salerno and Zarankin 2015).

464 The three cases exemplify the vast degree of flexibility and openness that forcibly characterise all sort  
465 of urban space, which lay at the core of all collective placemaking activities. Vice versa, sense-making insists  
466 on the importance of action and non-cognitive approaches and invest urban spaces, and to a minor extent,  
467 specialised places lie museums and memorials. Both elements are tacitly present in the three cases, yet they  
468 deserve more attention.

469 In short, the mundane and often unpredictable nature of urban space can support the reframing aim of  
470 all pedagogical missions. The places' openness and flexibility help in all these cases to disrupt established  
471 practices. Places strengthen the re-writing of memory, although they do not drive it. We shape our places,  
472 which, in turn, frame our memories. We may venture in paraphrasing MacLuhan, and state that place *is*  
473 memory.

474

#### 475 **4. Conclusions**

476 This paper addresses the mutual adjustment of place and memories impinging on a few different cases  
477 in Buenos Aires to develop a framework for joint analysing. It analyses how places vehicle memory and  
478 indirectly support the struggle for global justice.

479 The three cases, a former detention centre, a park and the central square, encompass many essential  
480 features. In particular, they invest common places; they open a dynamic understanding of places beyond the  
481 notion of heritage; they offer leverage to all politics of memories, rather than relying strictly on a pedagogical  
482 strategy, like monuments and museums, these urban places memories to placemaking and allow ordinary uses  
483 to interfere.

484 An apparent contrast in Buenos Aires is between the clash between the goal of re-writing memories and  
485 the appropriation of places by people. The examples show that everyday activities do not contrast the politics  
486 of memory. On the contrary, memories need to be ‘placed’: if placemaking is taken into account, the  
487 recognition of memories improves. De Certeau’s reminder on resistance suggests that evasion is always  
488 possible, anticipating that a mundanisation process is crucial to all politics of memory.

489 The first conclusion is that places disrupt routines and forced to rearrange the sequence of memories.  
490 They contribute to establishing reactive mechanisms that recursively reinforce the adoption of new practices.  
491 The spatial and visual arrangement of Esma forced to acknowledge that crimes were at the core of the military  
492 regime.

493 The second, place preserve memories even though they do not provide political answers, they just  
494 reinforce social processes. Some tenets of placemaking –mix, openness, and flexibility of activities– sustain  
495 sense-making activities that fill the gaps caused by the intentional disruptions of conventional narratives. The  
496 itinerary through the pieces of art in the park helps to patch together individual feelings.

497 Finally, the openness of place gives a “spin” to this process, towards either readjusting memories or  
498 altering the sense of space. The signs on the square's pavement in front of the presidential palace keep  
499 questioning common sense and political rhetoric.

500 These conclusions support the debate on the ‘globalisation of memory’ (Williams, 2007; Macdonald,  
501 2013), adding that spatial dispositives shed light on the practical effects of the sense-making process. Thus,  
502 scholars and activists will better reframe politics, recognizing that ordinary uses are the vehicles supporting  
503 the ‘immense edifice of memories’. The ways this process “spins” do affect the result. Hopefully, this  
504 analytical framework will help find a better understanding of the most suitable combinations of arguments and  
505 commonplaces.

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