

Generating Memory: In Situ Theatre Productions Conceived Based on the Former Penitentiary, Today's Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí

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Abstract

The Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí (CEART) is located in a former penitentiary, designed following the architectural model of the panopticon. It was subject to a restoration process that sought to find a balance between the preservation of heritage and the reconversion of the building to house multiple artistic events.

Since it opened, the CEART has been the setting for several theatre productions within the fora conceived for this purpose. However, theatre devices related to architecture have also emerged related to the architecture and memory of the site. A synergy has been created in which the performing arts, architecture and the city feed into each other, and where borders are beginning to blur, encouraging reflection in each of these fields.

Keywords: Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí, theatre space, reuse of spaces, non-theatre space, in situ theatre, memory

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From a Former Penitentiary to an Arts Centre

The architectonic site that houses the Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí (CEART) in Mexico [Figure 1] was originally conceived as a penitentiary in the late 19th century (1884). At that time, it embodied the materialisation of the liberal ideas that had been established since the writing of the Mexican Constitution in 1857. This was the first that “backed and legally defended the rights of human beings in Mexico” (Leija Parra, 2012: 45) in keeping with what was happening in Westernised societies, in which “punishment had ceased to be centred on torture as a technique of pain; it assumed as its principal object loss of wealth or rights” (Foucault, 1995: 15). This easing of intensity, cruelty and pain in punishment was complemented by a sometimes unclear objective: to make the *soul* the object of punishment rather than the body. “The expiation that once rained down upon the body must be replaced by a punishment that acts in depth on the heart, the thoughts, the will, the inclinations” (Foucault, 1995: 16). According to this conception, the body is fragile, inflexible and perishable; in contrast, the *soul* is malleable and prone to change; therefore, the criminal could be rehabilitated.

To achieve this goal, an appropriate penal system had to be established, in which one of the main tools would be the architectural constructions designed in keeping with “a programme that would organise the daily life [of the inmates], the functionality of the building and the application of the principles of the prison after their release” (Cruz, 1999: 31). In other words, a place in which the objective was not only to keep inmates in captivity but also to prepare them for their reinsertion into society.

In San Luis Potosí, the initiative for the construction of the new penitentiary was taken to Congress in 1882 and, by 1883, the plans had already been approved. According to local newspapers from the period, these were based on the penitentiary models adopted in the prisons of Buenos Aires and New York. (Leija Parra, 2012: 55). The model was that of the panopticon.



Figure 1. Aerial view of the Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí (CEART) today. Photograph: Building team of the Leonora Carrington Museum

The model of the panopticon prison was conceived by the British philosopher Jeremy Bentham between 1786 and 1788 based on his brother's ideas about the need for continuous surveillance of workers [Figure 2]. With the principles of economy and efficiency in mind, Bentham conceived a device through which only one guard was needed to run the prison: this guard would be posted in a central tower from which he could watch over the building without being seen. The key was the psychological aspect in architecture, which until then had not been considered and that Foucault analyses in *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*: "Hence the major effect of the Panopticon: (is) to induce in the inmate a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power [...] for what matters is that he knows himself to be observed [although] he has no need in fact of being so" but, he insists, "he must be sure that he may always be so." This architectural apparatus is "a machine for creating and sustaining a power relation independent of the person who exercises it. [...] The inmates should be caught up in a power situation of which they are themselves the bearers" (1995: 201). In it the "observing/being observed" is dissociated, which, it is worth noting, is also dissociated when Wagner turns out the lights of the theatre hall for the first time, but the other way round: in the theatre the audience observes without being observed, while, in the panopticon, one is observed without being able to observe.

One of the most famous correctional facilities of its time was the Eastern State Penitentiary, considered the first real penitentiary, and was based on the panopticon model. It was completed in 1829, in the state of Philadelphia.

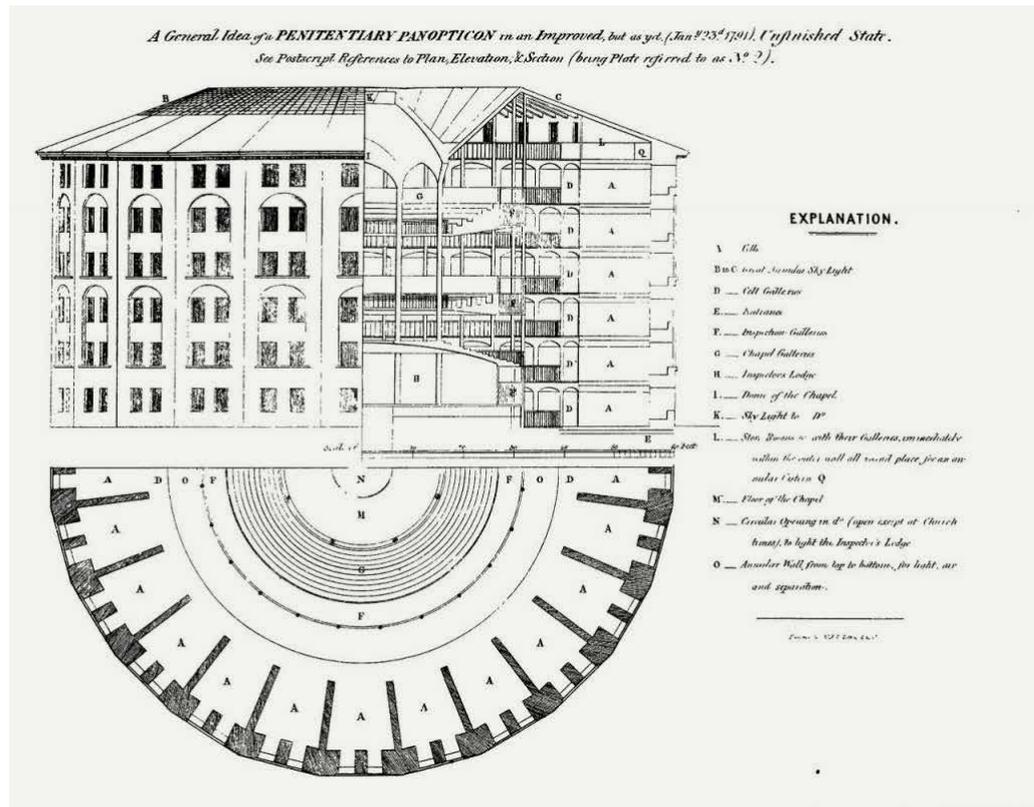


Figure 2. Plans of the panopticon prison by Jeremy Bentham drawn by Willey Reveley in 1791.

Analysing its ground floor [Figure 3] and inner spaces, we can speculate that, in fact, the Penitenciaría de San Luis Potosí was based on this architectonic site and not on the New York prison (Sing Sing Correctional Facility), as the local newspapers mentioned, as it is a radically different architecture and prison system.

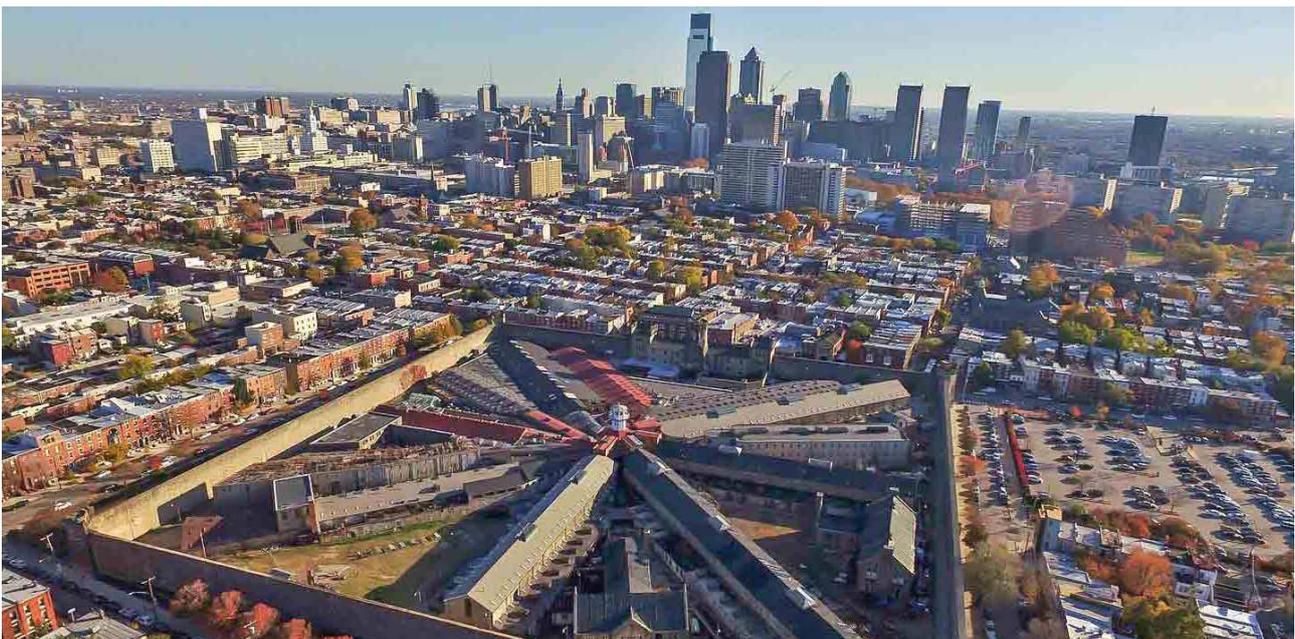


Figure 3. The State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania. Photograph: Darryl Moran, courtesy of the Eastern State Penitentiary Historic Site

Moreover, the Argentinean prison mentioned in the San Luis newspapers is the Penitenciaría Nacional de Buenos Aires, built in 1877, just a few years before the Potosí prison. The panopticon prison model was still used half a century later. However, in this case its ground floor has a half circle arrangement [Figure 4].

From the architectonic and social point of view, it would be interesting to further explore the comparative model of the Penitenciaría de San Luis Potosí with other similar models like those mentioned in the press of the time. For the purposes of this article, it is worth looking at how they were finally used as prisons and compare them with the case of San Luis Potosí: the Penitenciaría Nacional was completely demolished, erasing any trace of its tangible memory. The Eastern State Penitentiary was abandoned in 1971 and was not recovered until 1996, when it was listed as a National Historical Landmark. At present, it is an *experiential site* offering different virtual and guided tours.

The Penitenciaría de San Luis Potosí had another destiny. In 1999, the set of buildings was vacated and abandoned. For some years, different uses were considered for the site, such as transforming it into a convention centre, a hotel (*El Sol*, 2001: 1-4) or a historical archive (*La Jornada*, 2000: 7). However, none of these ideas came to fruition. Finally, in 2004 it was transformed into a venue for artistic education and creation where different forms of



Figure 4. Aerial view of the Penitenciaría Nacional de Buenos Aires, 1903. Photograph: Journal *La Ingeniería* no. 772 (February 1939).

expression would come together. The project formed part of the Red de Centros de las Artes,

a programme that articulates diverse strategies with the main objective of laying the foundations for the emergence and sustainable management of a cultural and artistic development platform in Mexico with high levels of excellence. It is the result of the collaboration between the Department of Culture, through the Centro Nacional de las Artes (CENART), and the Governments of the States (Centro Nacional de las Artes, n. d. (a)).

From its opening, the Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí (CEART) offered academic programmes for an introduction to and professionalisation in the disciplines of folk art, visual arts, new technologies, performing arts (divided into dance, music and theatre) and interdisciplinary arts. Also among its objectives were teacher refresher courses and research (Centro Nacional de las Artes, n. d. (b)).

As can be seen, the performing arts were an important branch of the CEART from the outset. In May 2016 the Teatro Polivalente was opened: “A dynamic venue, located in the Centro de las Artes de San Luis Potosí, which provides for the meeting, promotion and linking of the performing arts with its different formats, events and styles” (Teatro Polivalente, n. d.). At first, it was conceived as a place for the training of theatre technicians although its initial aim never saw the light and it became another theatre in San Luis Potosí, but with an interesting programme.

Before the existence of the Teatro Polivalente, the CEART departments of Performing Arts and Dance focused their efforts on creating education and theoretical updating programmes. These put a major emphasis on contemporary theatre practices. An example of this was the first and second edition of the Seminario Teatralidades y Ciudadanía, held between October 2013 and May 2015, bringing together speakers such as Rubén Ortiz (who was also the coordinator of this event), Héctor Bourges, Rodolfo Obregón, Óscar Cornago, Helena Chávez MacGregor, Ileana Diéguez and José A. Sánchez, among others.

Meanwhile, initiatives by local artists began to emerge, whose productions focused heavily on interdisciplinary processes, as well as reflecting on the venue where they were working. Through these theatre devices *other spaces*¹ were *occupied* and *inhabited*² outside and inside the venue. These devices were related to the architecture and memory of the place, creating a synergy in which the performing arts, architecture and city came together, and where the blurring of the borders between disciplines encouraged reflection in each of these fields of action.

1. Foucault uses this concept to define spaces where processes that seek to create a distance from society are developed, in which time gradually leaves layers through different uses and where it is possible to juxtapose in the same place different spaces that exclude each other.

2. The concepts *occupy* and *inhabit* have been borrowed from the work developed by Óscar Cornago in the book *Tiempos de habitar. Prácticas artísticas y mundos posibles*.

Next, we will describe two initiatives that we believe have these characteristics. The first was carried out in the area of the outbuilding, which had not yet been restored and was in ruins.³ This is *À travers la pared*, which can be read as an example of *occupation* of the space. The second and most recent intervention, *Julián*, took place in the neighbourhood adjacent to the CEART, the Colonia Julián Carrillo, and also within the centre. This can read as an intervention aimed at *inhabiting* the environment.

Through these two examples, whose origin is a single urban-architectonic space, we seek to set out some tactics carried out to appropriate, albeit temporarily, a space that is mainly institutional — and often distanced from the context in which it is framed — and the use of the memory deposited in the place, which is still open to produce events and experiences.

Occupying the Ruin: *À travers la pared*⁴

This was a joint work between the dance company Les soeurs Schmutt from Quebec and the local company Zonabierta. It was a production that combined different languages: dance, theatre, video and music. Work on the project began in 2012 but was not completed until 2014.

In the words of the company, *À travers la pared* is

a powerful experience that encourages the involvement of the audience, submerging them into the intimate and moving worlds of six individuals in search of freedom. *À travers la pared* clings to these inner walls that are under continuous construction and deconstruction. Enclosure and insanity are explored in both a poetic and cathartic way, hence the piece is defined as a fine reflection on the concept of freedom, human limitations and the fragility of the being (Zonabierta, n.d.).

It is worth noting the central role of the space of the former penitentiary within the piece, as it emerges precisely from it: the starting point of the production was a series of theatre laboratories held in different parts of the premises, both in the already restored courtyards and in the work classrooms.

At first we only drew on what the space, any space, awoke in us. Almost all of us coincided on memories of our childhood or our lives... This was the main motivation of the piece, memories... A key word was reminiscence (Rocha, 2020).⁵

What are the features of the space that fuelled reminiscence in the performers? Were they related to the original use of the space or to its recent restoration?

At present, the CEART has eight courtyards and themed gardens, in which through different tectonic elements — translucent roofs, areas at different levels, planters and walls at different heights built reusing the stone

3. Today, the venue has been restored and at present it houses the Leonora Carrington Museum.

4. The trailer for the theatre intervention is available here: <<https://vimeo.com/87921875>>.

5. Jesús Rocha was one of the performers who developed the production.



Figure 5. Courtyard. Photograph: © Alejandro Sánchez



Figure 6. Garden of the fences. Photograph: © Alejandro Sánchez



Figure 7. Courtyard. Photograph: © Alejandro Sánchez



Figure 8. Garden of the palm trees. Photograph: © Alejandro Sánchez

of the demolished parts [Figures 5, 6, 7 and 8] — the architects divided the space to create squares and gardens which do indeed have an entertaining character.

However, due to the geometry of the original ground floor of the building, full of acute angles, *corners* without any clear function were also created — we could even say they are superfluous — but that evoke a great feeling of intimacy. Interstices that invite us to do nothing, to remain still, to be *motionless*. “Motionlessness irradiates, an imaginary room is built around our body which believes it is well concealed when we take refuge in a corner [...] because it is necessary to designate the space of motionlessness turning it into the space of the being” (Bachelard, 2010: 62).

Due to its origin, framed within modern thought expressed in the prevalence of functionality over other values and, of course, its typology, the building of the former penitentiary was designed to lack these spaces. It is worth pointing out how these even contradict the conception itself of the panopticon. These corners that were created during the restoration of the building, where you can even hide, produce an ambiguity that enriches the site, a feature that the members of Les soeurs Schmutt and Zonabierta translated into feelings and movement.

Once different explorations in the restored places had been carried out, the team reached the area that had not yet been the subject of an intervention and was not even open to the public: the outbuilding [Figures 9 and 10].

During the performance, the audience moved through a real space,⁶ where the dust had accumulated for years. The performers invited them to take part in the occupation of that hostile place in disuse that, nevertheless, the artistic event had managed to turn into a habitable space for a moment through the translation of theatre language of the memory held between its walls — both the new and the old. This enabled the generation of new experiences and, therefore, construction material for a memory of the present of the place.

Inhabiting the Present: Julián⁷

From 2018, the CEART promoted the creation of projects whose objective was to relate the institution to its closest urban and social context because it has recognised itself outside it despite being part of it. To this end, from time to time a renowned theatre director would be asked to work according to this precept. The second one invited was Alberto Villarreal, who, after meeting with different local creators, encouraged each of them to develop their own project. One of them was Julián. *Reflejo simétrico de casa*, by the theatre company El Gato de Schrödinger.

Julián differed from the other projects in its aim of collective creation. Twenty-two participants aged 15 and above were divided into teams to start a “risky, sensory, documentary, qualitative” (*El Gato de Schrödinger*, n. d.) field research within the Colonia Julián Carrillo, formerly known as La Centenario. They met Juan Arvizu, a resident in the neighbourhood for almost 80 years, who told them about different experiences of his life there, which were recorded in five logbooks and used by five playwrights to later develop diverse texts about longing; this resulted in the publication of *Instrucciones para armar casas en papel*, thus completing the first stage of the project.

It is interesting to look at the guideline for this writing: the playwrights had to use Juan’s memories, find out what awokw in them or which memories of their own lives inspired them, and write about it. This is how the rhizomatic⁸ process emerged, which the company used to continue their research, in which an original story evokes a memory in someone with which they write another story, and so on successively.

In the second stage, participants were divided into seven teams. Each of them worked with residents in the neighbourhood on some of the issues proposed: violence, identity, resignation/acceptance, female viewpoint, physical migration, abandonment and childhood. The objective was to explore the

6. A space that was not representing another; that appears with a strong historical, sign-related and psychological weight prior to the staging.

7. A brief video recording of the production process is available here: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmwlJVkZCfM>>.

8. The concept *rhizome* was developed by Deleuze and Guattari in the book *A Thousand Plateaus* and suggests a way of relating the parts of a whole which is opposed to the organisational structure of a tree: the rhizome is a system that admits multiple categories related to each other without hierarchies or established positions to generate connections in all directions; it has no beginning or end, it is in constant transformation, always expanding and overflowing; if it is interrupted, it begins to reconstruct itself. A rhizomatic system has multiple entries through which it can be accessed. It does not let itself to be reduced to the unity or the multiplicity. No part of a rhizome is more important than another (1987: 14-25).

longing of the residents in the neighbourhood, but the idea was for them to assess their being in the present and their own context.

This research led to seven theatre installations. These were simultaneously activated and invited not only to being in but also to inhabiting the surrounding space, whether the streets of the neighbourhood or the CEART courtyards, because the device was set up in both locations. This was done because they reached the conclusion that the event would be poorly attended by the residents if it was only held within the CEART and therefore, in a moment of inspiration, they decided to bring it closer to them and their everyday living spaces.

The resulting installation on the issue “abandonment” is entitled *Cubos de piedra*. It comprised 13 sensory boxes that contained items that could be seen, listened to, touched and even eaten. Through them, the audience could experience the feelings produced by the 55 abandoned houses that were identified during the research project, while listening to the stories that one member of the company, as an actant⁹ and not as an actor, told about them and their inhabitants. This installation is particularly striking because it is a clear example of the possibilities that exist for the production of knowledge through art. It served as a “space that generates new concepts, meaning, dialogues and discussions that, without expecting an explicit functionality and practicality, may open new possibilities in the realm of the social” (Cornago; Rodríguez Prieto, 2019: 9). The previous research and the information contained in these boxes and the daily stories were another alternative for becoming familiar with the neighbourhood and establishing a distance from the narrative laden of prejudices about it, some even held by the residents themselves.

Another installation, *La casa de la abuela*, was made up of pieces of sitting-room furniture that were placed on a small plaza in the open air. Around them were diverse activating objects: albums of photos, a lottery game, even a small bonfire where it was possible to roast s’mores. Everything was simply there at the disposal of whoever wished to sit in the armchairs, to use it and perhaps start conversations. There was no established time to remain in the place, and there was nothing that marked the pace of the activities; it was up to the spectators to remain in the space and their will to reverse the relations and become actants themselves.

This installation was created by the team working on the issue of “identity”; it was where people remained longer and where the older residents really let down their guard. They managed to create a space-time of habitability in an environment that was not perceived in this way, where one “could open up to a level of unexpected relations that involve a sensitive level” and where the “opening, relaxation, albeit temporary, and open relation with the

9. According to the definition by González, J. (2018), it is who or “what unveils the actions and the sign-related nature of the body because there are no hermeneutists, or characters, or actors. There are no hermeneutists because they are a bridge between the play and the audience. They are not characters because they do not exist in the play. They are not actors because there are no roles to be performed.” In this respect, the members of the company were there to activate the exchange processes, but the audience completed them by actively participating with their own experiences and stories. The actants did not exist in the specific universe that was being created and were not performing any character, they were introducing themselves.

environment” (Cornago; Rodríguez Prieto, 2019: 26-27) were possible, although the space itself was not originally conceived for this end.

As Óscar Cornago mentions, “inhabiting means looking after ourselves” (2019: 9). Curiously, all the installations shared the aspect of care¹⁰ towards the other and in some way they used the evocations of the memories of the neighbourhood as a tool to activate the relational process, which as Bourriaud explains, will be developed in the space “for openness that inaugurates all dialogue” (2002: 166). Since the project began, it was clear that the evocation of memories and longing would not simply serve as instruments to raise empathy between actants and spectators and less so to propose a utopian world founded on a nostalgia for a past that was better, but to generate an experience of the specific here and now, which reveals what Bourriaud calls new life possibilities: “Inventing new relations with our neighbours seems to be a matter of much greater urgency than ‘making tomorrows sing’” (2002: 167). In this respect, Julián explored the complicated relationship between the neighbourhood and the former penitentiary. It worked as an agent that enabled micrometings that would have been unthinkable under other circumstances, and showed not just that they are possible but also replicable.

The company plans to repeat the research conducted in different neighbourhoods of the city to respond to the hypothesis that emerges based on this first exercise: “The entire San Luis Potosí is the reflection of the same colony” (Quintero, 2020), hence the subtitle of the production: symmetrical reflection of a house. Thus the aim is not to standardise a local experience but, based on the issues proposed, to start building a space of memories and experiences with which much of the population can identify and, through longing, begin acknowledging the complexity and diversity that exist in the identities of the citizens of San Luis Potosí.

Julián is a device that emerges from the institution but takes root within the neighbourhood, generating a degree of conflict. It speaks of the incapacity to attract the residents to the CEART, and therefore it leaves the physical space of the institution and reaches the public space. It later returns, leaves again and seeks to expand itself into new horizons, always respecting its local origin. In a production that does not in fact emerge from the physical space of the former penitentiary but that, instead, manages to generate a synergy between it — its past and present —, the neighbourhood in which it is located and the city. In this way it broadens the horizon to rethink the relations between these fields in the future but, above all, in the present.

Conclusions

When we speak of memory in the field of architecture there is a tendency to approach it from the historical and static point of view. The transformations that the former San Luis Potosí prison underwent when it was turned into an arts centre prevented this from happening.

10. The company draws this term from the *Teoría de la mujer enferma* by Johanna Hedva.

Although we have not yet explored the individual analysis of the prison facilities mentioned in depth and we don't know the social impact of each of the projects developed in their closest respective contexts and the cities of which they form part, it is possible to draw the following conclusions: in contrast to similar ones, the Penitenciaría Nacional de Buenos Aires — where the tangible memory was almost completely erased — and the State Penitentiary for the Eastern District of Pennsylvania — which, after having become a museum, its possibilities of activity and intervention in its space were delimited —, the CEART and the artistic activity taking place there has enabled not only the preservation of memory but also the construction of new possibilities of spatial and experiential production.

The restoration of the building has also played an extremely important role in these possibilities. The project prioritised the preservation of the original architecture and materials. However, the spaces were not modified so that they could host diverse artistic events with very specific requirements. Some of the areas of cells were demolished to make way to wide dance and theatre rooms; pavilions that were unfinished were completed with elements of contemporary architecture. Nevertheless, as far as possible, the marks of the building's past were retained, one of the most relevant of which was the central tower of the panopticon, which is currently used as a canvas that every now and then is used by a local artist.

It is important to emphasise that, although the building has great value as heritage, the fact of having been turned into an Arts Centre has enabled the desacralisation of the spaces so that they are continuously the object of interventions and resignified in very different ways, including theatre. In its turn, the theatre projects produced at the CEART (whether as a building or as an institution) are greatly influenced by its spatial characteristics. We might think that there is a continuous feedback between the architectural and theatre fields.

A clear example is *À travers la pared*, which, although it was only performed four times in the place where it was conceived, had a major impact on future productions in San Juan Potosí, for which it was a watershed: until then there had not been a production with such technical complexity in a building that was still in ruins. Moreover, these four performances enabled the audience to access an area of the former prison usually closed to the public because of its state of deterioration. Despite its inhospitality, during the performance it became not only habitable but a living space, which could go on producing sensory and significant experiences in the individuals who were occupying it.

À travers la pared was later adapted to go on tour and be staged in conventional theatres outside the country. The action of inhabiting the outbuilding and the marks of memory that it still contained remained imbued in the body of the dancers, who were able to evoke the multiple sensations that this place had stimulated in other extremely different places and contexts. The production and its later adaptation would not have been possible without what was experienced in this space. Meanwhile, the theatre action helped reactivate the memory of this place, which, as a result of this exercise,

continued to house other experimental theatre events until in 2018, when it was turned into a museum.

In the production Julián we can highlight the feedback loop between the performing arts and the architectural space. However, this relationship was taken further and expanded until reaching the urban field. In contrast to *À travers la pared*, which took the spatial experience from the interior of the former prison to the exterior, even going beyond borders, in Julián the opposite happened: the experience in the surrounding neighbourhood was taken inside the venue. However, there are no plans for the dynamic is to end here; rather it will be maintained in different neighbourhoods in the city. The CEART and Julián are closely linked by their fundamental approaches and one could not exist without the other, although this relationship can be extrapolated to other geographies.

In Julián, the search for an identity of the neighbourhood based on diverse events related to memory is palpable. Be they oral, such as the stories of the residents, or tangible, such as the abandoned houses and of course the former prison, that enormous architectural site with which the Colonia Julián Carrillo coexisted for decades. Through the testimonies that emerged during the prior research, as well as during the activation of the theatre installations, fragments could be glimpsed of much of the history of this site that has not been told and whose relationship with the neighbourhood continues to be conflictive. However, Julián enabled a space of mutual understanding between residents and institution which, although brief, was of great importance.

The theatre practices are alternatives to rationalised knowledge. They emerge offering possibilities beyond the standard ones in order to inhabit spaces that resist being inhabited, whether for physical or social reasons. And not only this, but they seek to go beyond the space delimited by their wall in order to explore the multiple relations that exist between it and the city. And, perhaps, to manage to modify them, intentionally, as in Julián, or as a side effect, like the one caused by *À travers la pared*.

The spatial exploration through theatricality highlights the need to invigorate memory, to continuously question the social relations that are awakened in the space, and to act in consequence, whether from the theatre, architectonic, administrative or institutional field.



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