

## ARGENTINA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

The situation of Argentine immovable cultural property, an important part of the country's cultural resources, must be considered as the worst in Latin America. In some ways, the situation reminds one of violations to human rights or the degradation of the natural environment and presents the need for international commitment and assistance. It must be said that part of this seriously threatened Argentine Heritage is also important at an international level.

The most valuable buildings and sites of the country, especially in Buenos Aires, are at a high risk of losing their integrity and authenticity due to several causes:

- The lack of proper appreciation of historic and aesthetic values due to the scarce and fragmentary development of architectural and art history research and education.
- Aesthetic and ethical preconceptions affecting mostly the heritage of the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, which is misunderstood, for it is described as a mere “pastiche” or a reflection of “cultural imperialism”.
- The extensive spread of bad conservation theory and practice that includes extensive adaptive reuse and demolition.
- Intensive lobbying by professional trade unions to evade conservation practices, to communicate erroneous preservation policies, and to impose uncontrolled and extensive renovation and adaptive reuse practices.
- The establishment of conservation awards that sanction bad conservation projects that are usually linked to commercial projects.
- The extensive spread of adaptive reuse projects, based on the transformation of the country's best architectural heritage items.
- A lack of awareness of the need of architectural conservation policies and practices.

- Ineffective, non-professional, politicised, non-transparent management of heritage by national agencies, such as the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites or the Buenos Aires City Planning Commission.
- The limited possibility to oppose the state on the issue of proper conservation activity.
- The ineffective and weak presence of the very few NGOs involved in historic conservation.

### Some facts:

The National List of Monuments and Sites includes less than 400 entries. Most of them are colonial and pre-Columbian landmarks. Some of them are battlefields or tombs linked to important events in the history of the country.

The National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites, created in 1940 by the basic conservation law of the country, does not work as it should. The Commission has enormous difficulties in recognising the architectural and artistic significance of the most important architectural works of the country, hardly controls restoration or renovation works on listed buildings and, in a perverse way, includes buildings officially in the National List only after they are seriously altered or partially demolished.

In the case of the city of Buenos Aires, all historic conservation policies and management is the exclusive responsibility of the City Planning Secretary, where a tiny office of three people does all the work. There is no historic conservation legislation apart from some few articles in the Urban Planning Code. There are only two legally defined historic districts and fewer than 200 buildings are officially listed. Most monumental structures are

Bunge & Born Grain Elevator, Buenos Aires, 1904 (photo July 1998)



Abasto Market, Buenos Aires, 1929–32. Interior after renovation



not listed. In most cases, projects developed by the City Planning Secretary and other city agencies, both on their own properties or on public space, do not consider the impact of new works on historic structures or on the environment.

Transparency is not practised, for there are no public hearings at any level to discuss or approve renovation or restoration projects, and there is almost no response to citizens'/residents' demands for information about the approval procedures and decisions.

In the very recent past (1997-2000), there have been several outrageous cases, the most representative being:

### Recent destruction:

#### Bunge & Born Grain Elevator (1904, City of Buenos Aires)

The most important grain silo of Latin America (for its historic, aesthetic, built and structural values), published by Gropius and Le Corbusier, was demolished by the city authorities (City Planning Commission) to make way for a real estate development at the old harbour.

#### Spanish Bank Central Headquarters (1905, City of Buenos Aires)

A Beaux Arts bank prototype, a decisive element of the "collection" of bank types and styles of the Buenos Aires financial district, and a fundamental component of the cityscape and inseparable complement to two adjacent national monuments, it was completely demolished, only two fragments of the façade being kept, to make way for a high-rise building for the Banco de Ga-

licia headquarters. The project was approved by the City Planning Secretary which stated that the preservation of the fragments contributed to the renewal and conservation of the area.

### Recent partial demolitions and abusive adaptive reuse:

#### Mercado de Abasto (1929-32, City of Buenos Aires)

The building is composed of two extraordinary structures: the city's most important market built of metal and the world's most remarkable market built in reinforced concrete. The first was demolished and the second was infilled with several floors to install a shopping centre, obliterating the magnificent space. No controls were applied except building codes. Only when all renovation works were finished did the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites decide to list it, awarding the owner (IRSA) an exemption on all taxes.

#### Banco de Londres (1960-66, City of Buenos Aires)

One of the most outstanding items of Brutalist architecture around the world, this masterpiece of Argentine architecture was recently identified by the 20th Century Architecture Exhibition at the Museum of Contemporary Art of Los Angeles as the century's most important work of Latin American architecture. It was recently intrusively renovated and disfigured so as to lose most of its original character. As no NGO, national agency, or press media objected to the project, an international blitz campaign was conducted to warn local and national au-

Banco de Londres, Buenos Aires, 1960-66



Underground lines, Buenos Aires, 1908. Street access





Villa Ocampo, San Isidro, 1891, renovated 1940

Once Railway Station, Buenos Aires, 1880–1910. Interior office block



thorities and to stop the works. The campaign failed, none of the more than twenty high-placed authorities responded. Only when all renovations works were finished, did the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites decide to list the building, and award the owner (IRSA) an exemption on all taxes.

### **Underground Tracks (1908-38, City of Buenos Aires)**

The historic underground system of the city, that includes the first underground line built in Latin America, and extensively decorated with ceramic murals, is suffering an intrusive renovation that does not take its historic and artistic value into consideration. There are no preservation controls at the city level, and the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites listed some parts of the system with lax controls during the renovation project, enabling extensive renewals and modifications, that are altering the unique character of the system's architecture.

### **Recent destructive projects, highly likely to succeed:**

#### **Villa Ocampo (1890-1940, San Isidro, Province of Buenos Aires)**

A UNESCO property since 1973, and donated by Victoria Ocampo – the 20th century's leading figure of Argentine culture – it has extraordinary cultural, aesthetic and historic significance at national, regional and international levels. The house, with collections, library and park, is probably the only intact estate in the world that portrays, in a tangible way, 20<sup>th</sup> century aesthetic development from Historicism to Modernism and the ebb to Post-Modernism. In 1997, a destructive renovation project, launched by the Argentine Government and accepted by UNESCO, threatened the site. A group of citizens managed to stop it, thanks to their tenacity and will. The threat is not over as the National Government and UNESCO have not yet decided the fate of the property. The French Government offered to send a mission of French experts before the end of 2000, to analyse the case and provide recommendations for the building's future use. There is a high risk that the mission could be manipulated to support alternative versions of this destructive project, initiated by the Argentine Government and UNESCO in 1997.

#### **Railroad Terminal Stations (1875-1955 City of Buenos Aires)**

Each of the four terminal railroad stations (six structures) of Buenos Aires are highly significant buildings in themselves, but also form an outstanding overview of 80 years of railroad culture in a single city. Constitucion Station is a unique overlapping of three structures that portray different periods of British architectural tradition. Retiro Station is considered the most re-



Constitucion Railway Station, Buenos Aires, 1880–1930. Main Hall



Retiro Railway Station, Buenos Aires, 1910–16. Entrance Hall

finest and sophisticated station design before World War I, the high point of its building type and the most important Edwardian railroad in the world. In 1999, the Argentine Government called for tenders to renew and administer all railway stations with no conservation guidelines, that has resulted in projects that will impact tremendously on the buildings' integrity and authenticity. The National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites approved these projects without any changes. Those voices calling for proper conservation and changes to the projects are not being heard. Representations to the National Ombudsman were not answered. Demolition, bad restoration work and extensive commercial reuse are about to start.

### Duhau Palace (1932, City of Buenos Aires)

One of the best of the few surviving Beaux Arts mansions and gardens of Buenos Aires' Belle Époque, this estate is in the same form as two neighbouring properties – highly significant turn-of-the-century mansions – and a unique repertoire of the residential styles of the city's Golden Age, and part of the only surviving block that shows the original environmental and urban plan of the city in that period. But it is also an irreplaceable item as the culmination of French influence on Argentine architecture. The renovation project recently submitted to the city authorities for approval, consists of the complete demolition of all the interiors of the mansion and the destruction of the garden, to build a multi-storey shopping centre and a hotel tower. The National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites has officially communicated that it intends to list the building later in the future, so as to allow the works to be completed without conservation controls, then list the property and award the developer extensive tax exemptions.

### Museum of Natural Sciences (1882, City of La Plata, Province of Buenos Aires)

Together with Le Corbusier's Curutchet house – the only works by that French-Swiss master in Latin America – this building is the most significant in the city and Argentina's most significant museum building. Characteristic of a 19<sup>th</sup> century Natural Science Museum, it is one of very few, perhaps unique of its type, to be preserved almost intact (environment, building, collections, equipment and fittings). In 1997, the University of La Plata prepared an intrusive renovation and extension project that would have completely destroyed the integrity and authenticity of this extraordinary testimony to a lost era. Had it not been for green activists, that protested and legally stopped the

Duhau Palace, Buenos Aires, 1934. Entrance Hall





Palace of Justice, Buenos Aires, 1900–30. Covered courtyard

cutting of trees in the original surrounding park, works would have been completed by now. However, the threat has not disappeared, as the University is insisting on the project, and national (the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites), provincial and local authorities have approved the project.

### **Casino, Provincial Hotel and Bristol promenades** (1940-1946, City of Mar del Plata, Province of Buenos Aires)

A monumental urban complex, including two big multi-purpose buildings and terraces along the seashore, built during the Second World War, this place can be considered the culmination of inter-war Academism, an architectural type with no precedents and one of the period's most successful combinations of Modernism and traditional architecture. The inclusion of the complex on the National List of Monuments and Sites was called for by locals and various scholars and celebrities. The National Commission of Monuments and Sites rejected the request for political reasons. In fact, the Government of the Province of Buenos Aires was trying to privatise the whole complex and needed no restrictions to be placed on the future developer.

### **Palace of Justice** (1904-1944, City of Buenos Aires)

The architectural symbol of one of the three powers ruling the nation, this magnificent Beaux Arts building can be considered the final phase of this architectural type, where the academic tradition reached an extreme ratio between functionalism and traditional composition standards. All exterior and interior surfaces are rendered with original simulated stone stucco-work, a unique finishing technique, typical of Argentine architecture. The building can be considered the biggest building of the country finished within this technique, that resulted from the mix of Italian immigrant artisans and French architectural materials and features. The restoration project launched by the Supreme Court of Justice and approved by the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites is full of administrative and technical failings and irregularities, that will seriously affect the integrity and authenticity of this national monument. Some few voices have denounced this major threat and called for a modification of the project. The Supreme Court has not answered. Representation to the National Ombudsman to reverse the situation has not had any effect, and these defective works will start in the near future.

### **Recent defective restoration of public monuments:**

#### **San Martin Palace, Ministry of Foreign Affairs** (1906, City of Buenos Aires)

An extraordinary example of residential Beaux Arts architecture, a composition inspired by the 1866 Prix de Rome project, the building is also one of the most important items of 1900 world architecture that mixed Classicism and Art Nouveau to shape the so-called "Beaux Arts style". In the past five years, the Argentine Government completed a most unsuccessful renovation and restoration project that disfigured the interiors, altered the original finishings and ruined the original exterior aspects of the building. All works were approved by the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites.

#### **Casa Rosada** (1882-1892, City of Buenos Aires)

An architectural symbol of one of the three governing powers of the nation, the Italian Academic palace called "The Pink House" is both the core of the original settlement, the Buenos Aires Historic District, and one of two monuments – the other is the National Congress – pointing to the most important urban axis of the city, Avenida de Mayo. A recent restoration project included the repainting of its most important façade, that facing the historic square, using a sharp pink colour that does not follow any historical or scientific evidence. The work was supervised by the National Commission of Museums, Monuments and Sites, even the colour was "selected" by the Commission among those available in a German firm catalogue. Some very

few voices complained about the result, and only one about the procedures and techniques. The Commission said they followed international conservation recommendations.

### **Cathedral (1882-1932, City of La Plata, Province of Buenos Aires)**

One of the best late Neo-Gothic cathedrals in the world, the interior was only completed after several decades of construction. The unfinished exterior was part of its powerful character and shaped the city image for more than half a century. A few years ago, the Catholic Church and the Government of the Province of Buenos Aires started a project to complete the exterior works, following in part the original designs and adding the missing towers and decorative elements, such as pinnacles and buttresses. A glib and demagogic justification was developed based on a 19<sup>th</sup> century neo-Medievalism theorist and the citizens' aim to have their church finished.

### **A recent international “fiasco”:**

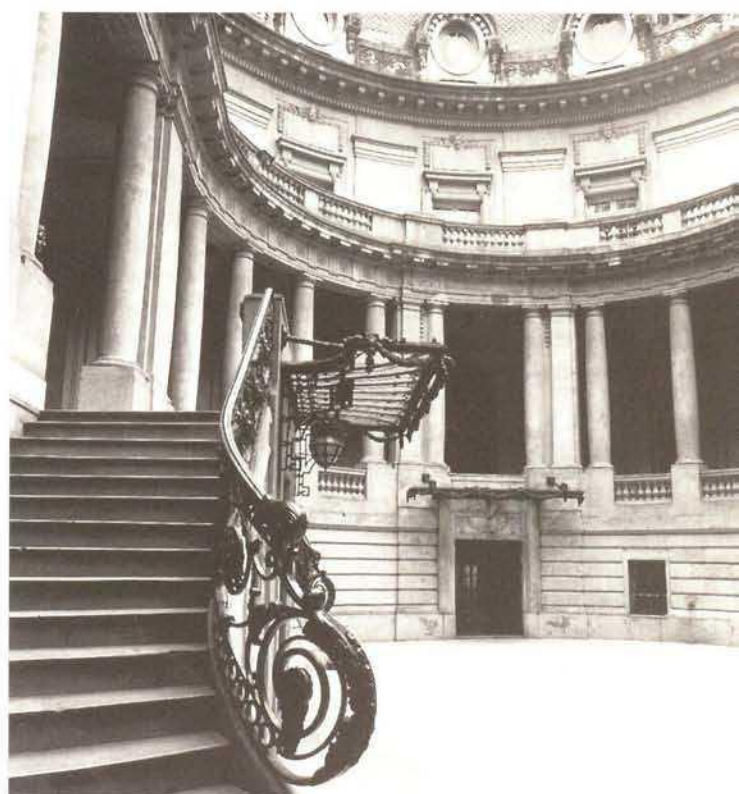
#### **La Plata (1882) nomination to the World Heritage List**

The project for La Plata was an important landmark in the history of Urbanism and 19<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The urban plan and public buildings were completed in a very few years, the urban fabric – private properties - was shaped in different stages. The last 50 years has seen the complete disfigurement of the original cityscape with high-rise buildings scattered everywhere. Also, almost all public buildings have suffered important changes to their authenticity and integrity, such as demolition (the Municipal Theatre), bad restoration (all exteriors and several valuable interiors of public buildings), extensions with modifications to size and spaces (Government House), completion of works violating international conservation charters (the Cathedral). The recent presentation of the La Plata nomination to the World Heritage List is unsustainable from various points of view. The supporters of the project have convinced La Plata citizens and authorities of the reasonability of the nomination provoking great misunderstanding and confusion. If, for some incomprehensible reason, the nomination is accepted, the mismanagement and bad conservation of Argentine heritage will be acclaimed, defective theories and practices will be sanctioned, and there will be little chance to change the accelerating and unstoppable deterioration of Argentine Heritage.

### **Solutions**

- Extensive dissemination about the emergency, threats and risks in Argentina to different national and international levels. Part of this threatened heritage has important regional and international value.
- Energetic international advice to government and non-government organisations about the unsustainable situation through letters from ICOMOS, UNESCO or other international organisations addressed to national and local authorities, as well as the public media in Argentina.
- Recommendations to reverse the situation through the upgrading and renewal of conservation legislation, policies and strategies.
- An expert mission to evaluate the situation with members from an external and independent background. Preparation of recommendations and monitoring procedures.

ICOMOS Argentina



San Martin Palace, Buenos Aires, 1906. Entrance courtyard, Ministry of Foreign Affairs