

## THE VILLA SAN LUIS: A CONFLICT OF VALUES

In a session held on June 28, 2017, the Chilean Council of National Monuments declared the Villa San Luis as a Historical Monument. This happened a few days after the land-owners began the demolition of the last blocks of social housing that remained on the site, as remnants of the original project developed by the CORMU (Urban Improvement Corporation) in 1972 during the Government of President Salvador Allende.

## Villa Ministro Carlos Cortés: *presente!*

### GONZALO CÁCERES

Profesor, Instituto de Estudios Urbanos y Territoriales  
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile.

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Excuse me if, before answering the three questions ARQ fired us, I shift the focus towards a trio of complementary issues. By mentioning them, I make my interests clear: the politics of space without neglecting the space of politics. Deductively placed: how should past injustices be remembered within the city, especially those carried out by State agents and resulting in crimes of all kinds? Given the case that collective remembrance is lodged in the space of conscience, is it necessary to ensure it a certain spatial location in order to anesthetize denial? Finally, is Santiago's upper neighborhood immune to the public will to convert a building, ruin or property into a historic monument that, together with fostering citizenship's reflection, modifies building conditions?

For over two decades we have been talking about places of conscience. Places whose preservation is promoted because they convey a message that posterity must get. Like witnesses, they are authentic and called in Chile – thanks to the purpose of the Londres 38 project – 'spaces of memory.'

Almost all local sites are related to human rights violations perpetrated under the dictatorship (1973-1990). From Villa Grimaldi to Tejas Verdes, to Londres 38 and Hornos de Lonquén. Together they configure – if I'm allowed the exaltation – a kind of '*nunca más*' [never again] heritage. Spatialized through Santiago they outline a geography – others will call it topography or cartography – that follows socio-spatial patterns such as those studied by Francisco Sabatini, and which Carolina Aguilera has analyzed linking social geography with political violence symbolizations.

To date, the Chilean Council of National Monuments (CMN) has conferred more than a dozen decrees to places of memory within the Chilean capital. That is, as Andrés Keller

This decree not only paralyzed the demolition but also ignited a debate on the value criteria implicit in presenting a patrimonial declaration. This question becomes more relevant when considering that the Villa San Luis is located in one of the most expensive areas of Santiago, being both the last remaining plot available for development by the real estate market in the area and the last vestige of a different social and urban project. That is to say, the half-demolished blocks became the protagonists of a dispute between land value and heritage value.

In this context, we ask: does the Villa San Luis deserve the title of heritage? What is its value? Does this patrimonial value matter more than the value of the land? What criteria should prevail in this conflict of values?

#### **Keywords**

*Heritage  
Monument  
Memory  
Land  
Demolition*

## Land values

### **EMILIO DE LA CERDA**

Director, Escuela de Arquitectura  
Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile

What is contested at Villa San Luis is not a set of ruined buildings but a land.

It is a conflict connected to the value system that operates on that specific urban plot stressed by the exchange value, the historical value and the social value assigned to it by different groups and members of society.

The clarity of this fact is deduced from the way in which Decree N° 135/2017 – the one that declares it a Historical Monument – is drafted, which explicitly protects “the space corresponding to the plot 18-A1 of Villa Ministro Carlos Cortés,” defined as material “vestige,” “expression” and “testimony,” carefully not mentioning the ruins, structures, and buildings that remain there.

Is this omission an error? Of course not. Rather, it clearly reflects what is at the heart of this heritage declaration process and what is at stake in it, since by protecting the land corresponding to plot 18-A1 it is exposed as a battlefield for two conceptions of the city’s history and its development.

This observation could be misinterpreted as a way to relativize the importance of the surviving ruins and buildings of the original built project or as a way to open future scenarios of speculation that can dispense the buildings and thus restore the plot’s commercial value. But the argument is about the exact opposite.

Nonalignment between land value and the value of a building is a central topic for architectural and urban heritage, but it has generally defined that the permanence of a building may take primacy over the financial value of the plot on which it is located. This point is early rose by John Ruskin in *The Seven Lamps of Architecture* when he states: “A fair building is necessarily worth the ground it stands upon, and

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indicates, the State has turned them into monuments despite the absence of architectural excellence. The most recent one corresponds to the decree N° 135/2017 issued by the Ministry of Education that declared the Villa Ministro Carlos Cortés as a Historical Monument. According to the resolution, it comprises two concrete five-story buildings raised circa 1971. Although the plot where the complex was originally located was measured in hectares, the declaration states that both buildings are located in a protected polygon of 4,329 m<sup>2</sup>.

For any independent observer, it is clear that the CMN has been recognizing the existence of sites with significant experiences whose survival is considered necessary. It has done so by operating on both public and private goods. In almost all cases, the owners of those properties verified as heritage have exerted actions to prevent public accreditation. Although the negative reaction is more widespread than what it seems, the dynamic follows certain trends.

Avoiding, hindering and preventing the establishment of memorials evocative of human rights violations seems to be correlated with social class, but also with socio-spatial structure and even property. It happened in Providencia on the occasion of the design of urban furniture referring, without stridency, to communist militants kidnapped in 1985. Despite the quality of the intervention, the 'neighbocratic drift' attempted to impose a prohibitionist bias which, amplified, reappears at the Villa Ministro Carlos Cortés. Surprising? Quite the opposite. Santiago's east side was the favorite destination for the 'evil CORFO' [Chilean Government Development Corporation] and, at the same time, corresponds to the largest agglomeration of high-income individuals and a place where metropolitan externalities are almost absent.

No one should be surprised by Miguel Lawner's detailed recall of the plunder suffered by most of those assigned to houses listed under the name of Villa Ministro Carlos Cortés or Villa San Luis. Reading his texts, among other necessary actions, forces us to formulate uncomfortable but necessary questions. One of my favorites, despite being counterfactual, besieges the vitriolic statement with which the Cámara Chilena de la Construcción [Chilean Building Association] referred to monumentalization. A little calmer, I wonder: What would have happened if the Cámara Chilena de la Construcción had defended the apartments' legal owners back then? Let's not forget: the recently monumentalized ruins of the Villa Ministro Carlos Cortés correspond less to the exaltation of some modern shape than to the memory of a violence as abusive as classist. **ARQ**

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**Gonzalo Cáceres**  
<gacacere@uc.cl>

Bachelor in History, 1995 and Magister in Urban Development, 2003, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile. Doctorate candidate in Social Sciences, Universidad Nacional de Quilmes. His articles and contributions have been published in *Registros*, *Estudios del Hábitat*, *Araucaria* and *Ciudades sudamericanas* (Siglo XXI Editores, 2016). Infrequent columnist at *El Mostrador*, is currently Associate Professor at the Instituto de Estudios Urbanos y Territoriales UC.

will be so until central Africa and America shall have become as populous as Middlesex” (Ruskin, 1955:185).

Ruskin described what would become one of the maxims within conservation of cultural heritage up to the present, later contained in the Athens Charter (1931) – one of the first instruments of international doctrine on the subject – which in terms of monument protection “enshrines community rights against private interest” (Athens Charter, 1997[1931]). This same definition shapes several countries’ legal frameworks, including the Chilean one.

What is interesting about Villa San Luis is that here two visions on land value meet. The first one sees in plot 18-A1 not only the evidence of an emblematic project but – in the possibility of its non-commercial exploitation – finds a form of radically questioning the kind of urban development that came to replace the once emblematic complex. The second vision, together with relativizing the importance in heritage terms of the ruins and buildings that managed to survive the construction of the so-called Nueva Las Condes business center, sees in the property’s major surplus value an opportunity to maximize investment through the erection of office towers analogous to those in the adjacent lots.

Regarding the latter, it is true that the declaration process rests on an extremely complex history, which has the State as the only responsible for the families’ forced eradication during military dictatorship and the biggest beneficiary of the sale of these lands after the return of democracy. However, this is an issue that does not invalidate the core of the conflict arose from Villa San Luis.

In terms of public debate, what makes it a case of major interest is that it exposes the fact that, today, urban heritage defense is more about two opposing visions regarding land value than about the late discovery of extraordinary heritage value in the architecture of our cities.

The fact that within this process buildings are defended under some category of heritage protection is the remnant of a doctrine built since the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, as well as a tactic to render instrumental one of the most radical forms of political resistance being manifested today in urban and territorial contexts: one that seeks to erode exchange value as the hegemonic way of understanding the relationship between people, their built environment and their own memory. **ARQ**

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**Emilio De la Cerda**  
<emiliodelacerda@uc.cl>

Architect, Magister in Architecture, Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile, 2006. Partner in OWAR Arquitectos, between 2005 and 2016. He served as Executive Secretary for the Chilean National Monuments Council between 2011 and 2014. Currently he is Assistant Professor and Director at the School of Architecture UC.