

Valerie Bondura
Historical Archaeology of Latin America
F. Gaitan-Amman
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**The Archaeology of Preferential Memory at
Punta Carretas, Montevideo, Uruguay**

*“What kind of memories are we supposed to preserve?
Make all of Uruguay a memorial?”
-Tabaré Rivero Cedres, former prisoner of Punta Carretas*

Introduction

We certainly cannot make all of Uruguay a memorial, but sometimes it may feel as though the horrors of the dictatorial era would need a plaque the size of a country to properly commemorate them. It is ironic then, that very few memorials exist to remind citizens of the events of the 1970s and 1980s. The historic prison-turned-shopping mall, Punta Carretas, is not officially recognized as a historic building or landmark nor is there any textual reference to the building's past anywhere on the property (Ruetalo 2008: 54). This intentional forgetting through omission is emblematic of Uruguayan official rhetoric about the dictatorial era as a whole. In 1985, the Uruguayan legislature declared two important laws that were a part of the political transition from a dictatorial to a democratic government. They were the *Ley de Caducidad de la Pretensión Punitiva*, “Law Eliminating the Punishment of State Crimes”, and the *Ley de Amnistía*, “Law of Amnesty” (Gallinal 2009). The first barred any state actor from being prosecuted for crimes committed during the dictatorship and the second pardoned all political prisoners who had been held by the fascist government (Bruner 2011). These laws “allowed the country to continue

advancing throughout this time [the transitional period]¹ (Gallinal 2009). The recent overturning of the *Ley de Caducidad* in 2011 by the Inter-American Court of Human Rights² makes this an auspicious time to carry out a historical archaeology project at the site of a former political prison in Montevideo. Uruguay's legal obligations to international court systems are forcing the government to acknowledge their recent past and edit the historical narrative they have imposed on the country.

This theoretical research project attempts to investigate the choices related to memory that have been made in Uruguay since the end of the dictatorship through the lens of the site of Punta Carretas. The project is characterized by three main foci of research and planned knowledge production. First, the project will attempt to locate any artifacts related to the prison that have thus far been invisible in the material record. This does not include the architectural façade of the prison, which has remained largely intact through the building's transition to a shopping mall, but rather artifacts such as objects made by prisoners, weapons employed against them, and tools of subjugation such as bolts and locks. Second, the project will combine the original architectural plans for the prison and the plans for the shopping mall with descriptions and maps given by former

¹ Author's own translation. Original quote, in its entirety, reads "La transición que comenzó en 1985 se basó en tres grandes leyes que permitieron al país ir avanzando durante todo ese tiempo." The three laws referenced include the two mentioned in the text as well as a third, less controversial law that provided reparations for public-sector employees dismissed under the dictatorial government.

² *Gelman v. Uruguay*. Inter-American Court of Human Rights, Judgment of February 24th, 2011 (Merits and Reparations). See official English-language translation of court documents provided by the Inter-American Court, http://www.corteidh.or.cr/docs/casos/articulos/seriec_221_ing.pdf

prisoners in order to synthesize the spatial experience of the building over time into a holistic narrative that includes state, corporate, and individual experiences. Third, the project will bring all of this information together in a final report discussing the implications of preferential memory in a developing democratic society and offer prescriptions for further work in the fields of historical archaeology, cultural heritage, and memory in Uruguay.

Background and History of Punta Carretas

Construction of Punta Carretas was finished in 1910 and the prison was heralded as the epitome of early 20th century ideology, modeled after respected prisons in France that were known for their relatively humane conditions (Ruetalo 2008: 48). It incorporated the latest prison surveillance techniques that were reminiscent of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon design. The prison was organized in long rows of single occupant cells with a watchtower in the middle of the hallway. Cells were plated with infrared glass, which made it impossible for inmates to see much outside of their cells but for those outside of cells, the glass appeared transparent (Ruetalo 2008: 48, 49). Thus, inmates were psychologically controlled in a classically panoptical structure, constantly made to feel exposed, isolated, and vulnerable. During the 1950s, the prison saw an upsurge in the amount of ideological or political prisoners it housed and became a symbol of elitism and oppressive modernity, a characterization that would hold true until the closing of the prison in the late 1980s (Ruetalo 2008: 50). The prison was originally located outside of the nucleus of Montevideo but as the city expanded, it gradually became folded into the urban fabric. By the time the

dictatorship took power through a military coup in 1973 (Achugar 2009: 202), the prison was surrounded by an upper-class residential neighborhood. The prison was reserved specifically for political prisoners under the dictatorial regime, especially members of the anti-government guerilla group, the Tupamaros (Ruetalo 2008: 49, 50). These political prisoners were detained, tortured, and disappeared right in the middle of the city, in front of well-kept houses and manicured parks. The location of violence at Punta Carretas was so overt that it was easily hidden in plain sight. Punta Carretas exemplifies the belief that “the best way to keep something secret is to expose it to the eyes of all” (Olivier 2009: viii).

Punta Carretas is not as well known as its Argentine counterparts. Ernesto Sábato ruefully claimed that Argentinians invented the word “desaparecido”, a disappeared person, alluding to the distinctly Argentine connotation of the term (Bellelli and Tobin 1996). Disappearances were undoubtedly a tool used by dictatorial governments in Argentina, but it must be acknowledged that the experience of mass disappearance was not limited to a single country, nor was it the only means of enacting widespread, state-sponsored terror. About 14% of the total Uruguayan population was forced into exile abroad and those remaining lived in a nation with the dubious distinction of having the highest per-capita imprisonment rate (Levey 2010: 370). *Los desaparecidos*, by definition, were never meant to leave an archaeological signature, but detention centers were surely never meant to be galleries of empty cells. Prisons often stand as the only remaining evidence of people otherwise erased.

The prison is a space that should be expected to figure prominently into Uruguayan cultural memory. However, its democratically elected governments have proven enormously successful at promoting a modernity-centric national narrative that denies by omission the spatial and experiential realities of the 1970s and 80s. The aforementioned *Ley de Caducidad* effectively blanketed over the years of violence, creating a bridge over the oppressive era and perpetuating the myth of continuous Uruguayan stability and democracy. Uruguay has sought to distinguish itself from its other Latin American counterparts and establish a service-based economy in a modern and politically mature nation (Achugar 2009: 200). This image of long-standing Uruguayan modernity is radically disrupted by the incorporation of the historical narrative of the inhumane governments that controlled the country just 25 years ago. Prisons dating to this unmentionable era and the objects associated with them have been disappeared just as citizens used to be: quietly, and in plain sight.



Modern façade of Punta Carretas, including the original gate to the prison

In 1991, the property on which Punta Carretas sits was sold to an urban development firm, Alian S.A., for about 7 million US dollars (Allier Montaño 2008). The Uruguayan government held a competition of sorts, with a variety of groups proposing uses for the former prison space. Alian S.A. entered a design for an upscale shopping center and the proposal eventually beat out others that included a community center and a museum (Hayman 2009). There was debate over the transformation of the space, but anything that reminded the nation of the past was firmly rejected during the transition period of the late 1980s and early 1990s. A shopping mall was forward-looking, the epitome of capitalism and thus, modernity.

Alian S.A. gutted the interior of the prison but maintained the majority of its structural elements, including its immediately recognizable façade. Theories have been developed about the similarities between prison spaces and spaces of extreme capitalism, such as malls. The idea of the panopticon prison seeped into architectural approaches to malls, with security cameras and masses of anonymous shoppers replacing the central control tower. Alian S.A. consciously preserved many elements of the prison, such as the corridors surrounding a central atrium. Whether they would have termed their approach “panoptical” or not, they were certainly aware of how the space functioned as a prison and were interested in taking advantage of some of these functions. The principle architect on the project, Juan Carlos López, has said that he was inspired to create a mall based on his visit to Punta Carretas when it was a prison because the building seemed well suited to facilitating shopping (Hayman 2009). Estela Poreda, an assistant architect on the project, makes it clear that the firm was interested in

preserving “the spirit” of the space (Hayman 2009). But for all this talk of preservation, there is not a single plaque at Punta Carretas referencing its painful history. The architects’ statements are not nostalgic, nor concerned with the memorial integrity of Punta Carretas. Rather, a seamless transition from prison to shopping mall was the embodiment of the national Uruguayan narrative that recognizes no major rift between the democratic governments of the early 20th century and the dictatorships of later years. It allowed for an imposed break in public memory rather than acknowledging a violent lapse in Uruguayan modernity (Achugar 2009: 200, 201)

Reconstructing a Transformed Space: Materiality and Testimony

No large-scale archaeological excavations were carried out at Punta Carretas before the renovation of the structure began in 1991. This research proposes to rectify this historic mistake by retroactively recovering as much of the material culture of the prison as possible. Archaeologists that have taken interest in the site have focused on some of the most extreme events in the history of Punta Carretas: jailbreaks. Three major jailbreaks, one in 1931, one in 1971, and the last in 1972, all utilized tunnels dug by prisoners and thus have archaeologically expressed signatures (López Mazz 2009: 38). Prison-break archaeology is an intriguing branch of historical archaeology and contributes to our understanding of historic repression/rebellion relationships, but prisoner responses to physical and psychological control are manifested in a myriad of ways, not just in radical ones. Focusing on such flash-in-the-pan moments at a

site adds little to an understanding of daily life and the lived experience of the majority of those detained at the site.

Because no excavations were carried out at Punta Carretas, it must be assumed that most materials related to the prison have been lost. Documentation of the physical realities of the prison was never an official priority, especially under totalitarian governments who aimed to shroud the prison in as much secrecy and metaphysical darkness as possible. The original plans from when Punta Carretas was first built are available, but it is known that the ways in which the prison was used changed vastly over the course of its history (Ruetalo 2008: 49, 50). Besides these century-old plans, little else is available in the way of archival documents. This means that knowledge of the function of particular spaces within the prison has been obscured, a fact compounded by the modern usage of former cells and rooms as shops and restaurants.

Moreover, the lack of archaeological survey pre-renovation led to the complete erasure of prison graffiti from the historic record. Graffiti is easily studied archaeologically and provides insight into the mental and emotional lives of prisoners, as well as nuancing a space, pushing understanding of it beyond the mere location of architectural features. Archaeologists have successfully documented graffiti in other spaces of confinement, such as at Cuartel San Carlos in Caracas, Venezuela (Sánchez and López 2009: 105), and such methodical documentation allows for future scholars to analyze the subversive power of graffiti or make connections between graffiti drawn in prisons and larger relationships or systems. Images of graffiti in Punta Carretas, as well as documents concerning the prison written or drawn by authorities during the

dictatorship, would be invaluable to archaeologists studying repression in Latin America. But the Uruguayan government has been slow to release any information or documents from the dictatorial era, even in light of the rulings of international courts and the advice of human rights organizations. If any official documents still exist concerning the interior of the prison from 1950 until its closure in the late 1980s, they are currently impossible to access (Hampsten 2002).

The paucity of official documentation of Punta Carretas does not mean that the historic materiality of the prison and its associated objects are completely lost. If anything, historical archaeology is meant to give voice to those whose histories have not been heard and uncover past realities that have been forcibly forgotten or ignored. As such, it is uniquely poised to shed new light on the history of Punta Carretas. This proposed research would take a distinctively post-processual archaeological approach to the study of Punta Carretas, focusing on materiality, or the relationships between objects and people, rather than simply the objects themselves. This approach is necessary at a site such as Punta Carretas where the majority of material culture is unrecoverable. The use of testimony and oral history would prove invaluable in this respect, illuminating the secondary characteristics of objects whose primary characteristics can often only be speculated. Testimony has been employed in Argentine contexts to reconstruct prison spaces that are no longer accessible due to modern construction, such as the site of the clandestine detention center Club Atlético in Buenos Aires (Zarankin and Niro 2009: 71). Stories collected from the large

number of former prisoners of Punta Carretas that are still alive could patch up holes in the historic record that excavation alone would be unable to fill.

Testimony should not be limited only to those who experienced the space as prisoners. Ideally, the research project would also involve interviewing former prison employees and government officials in charge of detainment and punishment under the dictatorial regime. Their memories of the prison could be in stark contrast to the memories of prisoners or could be remarkably similar. Either scenario would provide an opportunity to develop critical theory of spatial experience in terms of repressive relationships. Moreover, the more testimonies that can be gathered, particularly from a wide variety of perspectives, would allow for a synthesis of a multiplicity of memories of the physical space which could then be compared with original architectural plans and what little is known of the layout and function of the prison under the dictatorship. However, because of changing laws regarding the prosecution of crimes committed by those associated with the dictatorship (Legrain 2011), it is unlikely that anyone would be willing to discuss their involvement in the confinement and torture of prisoners for fear of retributive justice and public shame. For now, it can only be acknowledged that the memories of those who enacted violence are an equal part of the historic record as those who experienced it, however horrendous the violence they perpetrated was.

But there are more actors involved in the history of Punta Carretas than just those directly associated with the quotidian detention operations of the dictatorial government. This project would seek to include these peripheral actors, including those who lived around the prison at any point in time and the

architects responsible for turning it into a shopping mall. Some historic residents of the Punta Carretas neighborhood have already shared their stories, but these individuals are those who were somehow connected to the aforementioned mass jailbreaks at the prison (Hayman 2009). The area surrounding Punta Carretas has been an upper-class residential neighborhood for decades, including during the time of the dictatorship, and thus there must be hundreds of current and former residents with subjective impressions of the prison whose memories defy the long-standing official policy of secrecy and forced ignorance. The experiences of the architects responsible for the design of the shopping mall and the laborers they employed to reconstruct the place would also be an integral piece to the obscure puzzle of public memory surrounding Punta Carretas. This project would extensively interview these architects, who are known to have examined the space while it was still a prison as evidenced by the principle architect's briefly quoted impression of Punta Carretas during his first visit there (Hayman 2009). These architects had to make choices regarding how to reorganize cells into shops and interrogation rooms into mall offices and thus, they must have had detailed knowledge of the prison as it was at the time of its closure. It could prove more difficult, though not impossible, to locate the construction workers who initiated the transformation of the prison, as they would also have memories of the objects and structures they encountered upon entering the space. These—perhaps unconventional—sources for oral history finally seem possible to tap, with a sharp rise in seminars and public conversations, such as the one initiated at the University of the Republic in Montevideo by Fulbright recipient Elizabeth

Hampsten, that are encouraging Uruguayans to share their memories of the dictatorship (Hampsten 2002).

The actual objects associated with the prison have not ever been available for study nor are the whereabouts of the vast majority of these objects known. Testimony from the architects of the mall and the construction workers could provide clues as to what happened to objects such as locks, furniture, and doors that certainly were still in the space when its transformation began. It is reasonable to assume the government removed some objects either before or during the renovation of the prison, especially those most violent or controversial in nature, such as instruments of torture, restraints, and weapons. These objects are likely unrecoverable, as the government has never acknowledged their existence. The fact that documents related to the dictatorships are also kept largely unavailable by the government further indicates that officials would be unlikely to disclose what happened to the material culture of Punta Carretas pre-transformation. Occasionally, an object such as a lock does appear online, put up for sale by an anonymous individual on an auction website or something similar, but these objects are entirely unprovenanced and thus of little use in archaeological study. Understanding the unique situation of Punta Carretas, it seems the best available sources for information on the prison's material culture would be laborers and architects.

There is one class of objects from Punta Carretas that could feasibly be accessible to scholars. The production of toys and leisure objects in prisons have begun to be studied by archaeologists for they way in which they reflect prisoners' relationships with the world beyond their confinement. These objects are

archaeologically unique in the study of prisons for their “polysemic character, accounting for interpersonal relationships, prisoners’ means of production, and tolerance or *apriete* in jail” (López Mazz 2009: 41). Prison toy production has been preliminarily studied at another Uruguayan prison, the euphemistically named Libertad. Toys were made to occupy a prisoner’s mind, to give to a young relative living outside the prison, or to comfort the producer with their presence. In the case of Punta Carretas, both the production and the reception of toys can be studied. Children who had parents incarcerated in Uruguayan prisons during the dictatorship—some of whom were even incarcerated along with their parents—have formed support groups that lobby for the rights of those affected by imprisonment, torture, disappearance, or execution under the dictatorship. These groups are particularly focused on realizing commemorative and memorial projects (Levey 2010: 369). These groups seem willing and able to assist an archaeologist by providing toys or objects from Punta Carretas and discussing their relationships with these materials. Toys or other prison-made leisure objects may prove the only artifacts related to Punta Carretas that are currently recoverable and as such, this research project will focus on their collection and analysis.

Conclusions

The Uruguayan government has shown time and time again that they are relatively unwilling to allow any scrutiny of the dictatorial period of the nation’s history, presumably out of fear that any close review would contradict or disrupt the continuously performed state narrative of Uruguay as a country characterized

by its stable trajectory of modernization. Modernity in this context denotes a nation with a free market system, a consumerist society, a service-based economy, strong representative democracy, and official secularism. This modernity reaches its paroxysm in the shopping mall, an embodiment of consumer choice, wealth, and surplus production. Alfredo González-Ruibal, referencing French anthropologist Marc Augé, terms places such as malls “non-lieux”, or non-places, whose existence is characterized by its “transitive and largely asocial” nature (González-Ruibal 2008: 247). He later acknowledges that malls are not necessarily asocial, but they do exemplify the “negation of place” through extreme commodification of products intended for globalized markets (González-Ruibal 2008: 247). The Uruguayan government employed this negation through globalized consumerism combined with legal dictates excusing all crimes committed by government officials and members of the military and the non-disclosure of all materials relating to the dictatorship to effectively obliterate Punta Carretas from public memory. It is more difficult, though, to force new memories on those who directly experienced the prison, and it is these individuals that can stand in opposition to a censured history and proclaim their truths through the work of this historical archaeology project.

The Uruguayan government’s actions in terms of the transformation of Punta Carretas from prison to shopping mall are not only extreme expressions of capitalism but are also clearly preferential and politically motivated. Four museums have recently been opened in Montevideo, all with distinct aims that correspond with the government’s portrayal of Uruguayan history. Three of these museums focus on festivals, carnivals, or art showing people being “very happy,

rather than [...] working or [...] in chains” (Luongo 2011). Expected to become tourist attractions, the museums provide a light-hearted experience similar to what visitors would experience at other museums around the world. The fourth, however, is shocking in light of the history of Punta Carretas. It is a museum of contemporary art, the aesthetic epitome of modernity, and is housed in a former prison (Luongo 2011). The prison was closed in the late 19th century and as such, there are no surviving individuals with direct experience of confinement there. This has allowed the prison to become an artifact without a history, a building whose original function has been forgotten and thus can be transformed with little recognizable effect on public memory. But the new Espacio de Arte Contemporáneo proves that the Uruguayan government has absolutely no qualms about using former prison spaces as museums, just as long as these museums do not remind visitors of any unseemly or un-modern periods in the nation’s history.

At this point, the study of preferential memory in terms of Punta Carretas must be focused on the gathering and cataloguing of documents, materials, and testimonies. This primary work must be done before any real secondary analysis can take place. As of right now, the collection of testimonies in Uruguay has been so limited that they generally cannot be utilized in effective ways, either to help victims in their struggle for justice or to give the nation’s citizens a more honest history. It has been argued that for a true democracy to exist, history must also be democratized. In order for people to make choices about their futures, they must also be able to make choices about their pasts. The ability to make these choices depends on public knowledge of minimally mediated histories rather than heavily

edited state narratives. This project represents an archaeological attempt to lay bare the politics of preferential memory so that Uruguay can move beyond forced pasts into a chosen future.

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