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Unsettling the role of culture as panacea: The politics of culture-led urban regeneration in Buenos Aires

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ABSTRACT

In recent years the rise of culture as a universal cure to a myriad of urban, social and economic 'diseases' has been celebrated without precedent, both in policy and academic accounts. Unlike these celebratory discourses, this paper provides a critique of the politics underpinning culture-led urban regeneration in order to unsettle the role of culture as panacea. Drawing on a case study – the on-going redevelopment of the post office palace into a commemorative cultural centre in Buenos Aires, Argentina – the analysis offers an in-depth account of the policy process by which industrial heritage is redeveloped through a cultural rhetoric. The analysis reveals how the recycling of the post office building enabled multiple meanings of culture to emerge and circulate within a range of policy, architectural, urban regeneration, real estate and media discourses. These, in turn, express existing disputes over the making of cultural policies, the uses of heritage, the image of the capital city and the value of the post office. In the redevelopment of the postal building, the paper argues, policy invocations of culture were aimed at de-politicising cultural activities in post-2001/2002 crisis Argentina, when politics had become a synonym of corruption and mismanagement. The paper concludes by drawing attention to the urgent need to adopt a critical perspective to the study of culture-led urban regeneration in Latin America, one which situates the analysis in historical and political terms and acknowledges the contending circumstances out of which these urban strategies often emerge.

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Introduction

When the former Argentinean Economy Minister, Roberto Lavagna, suggested during a business meeting in 2004 that the national post office headquarters could be transformed into a spectacular cultural centre, he was keenly aware of the remedial capacities of culture in the renewal of cities. He knew places like Bilbao, Barcelona, London and Sydney and was familiar with the financial and aesthetic benefits brought about by culture-led urban regeneration – when urban and economic development become inextricably bound up with cultural projects. Clearly, Lavagna is not alone in his enchantment with cultural regeneration. Policy-makers, architects and marketing consultants increasingly invoke culture as a magical solution to the city's myriad of social, economic and urban problems (Pratt, 2009). From renovating inner-city areas and recreating the city's image, to constructing artistic quarters and sustaining nationalist claims (Bianchini & Parkinson, 1993; Landry, Greene, & Matarasso, 1996), culture constitutes a crucial component of today's urban policy agendas, not only in the city of tango but elsewhere in the Western world.

This paper aims to examine the politics of culture-led urban regeneration in order to unsettle the role of culture as a panacea, that is, as one of those traditional plants meant to heal *all* diseases. Despite – or precisely because of – its much celebrated rise in recent decades, culture's function as a panacea poses a number of problems, which this paper is rather concerned with, in terms of the history, materiality and uses of the places to be regenerated. While there is sufficient evidence that culture has become 'a new orthodoxy by which cities seek to enhance their competitive position' (Miles & Paddison, 2005, p. 833), the reasons *why* culture is

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invoked in particular local contexts and by specific social actors are less clear, and tend to be subsumed under a policy rationale purely preoccupied by economic development and the aesthetisation of the city's landscape. Three main questions are explored: Why is culture invoked as a solution to the city's various problems? How are official meanings of culture contested by alternative claims? What is at stake in redeveloping an industrial site through cultural use?

To answer these questions, the paper analyses a case study in depth: the transformation of the Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones – the national post office headquarters – into a commemorative cultural centre (the Bicentenary Cultural Centre, CCB, recently renamed Centro Cultural Kirchner), and the planned regeneration of its surroundings. The building is located in one of the most expensive lots in downtown Buenos Aires, between the renovated docks, the city's financial district and the Government House. It underwent metamorphosis: from representing a symbol of progress and civilisation in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, to becoming neglected as a site of state bureaucracy in the 1990s, and more recently it has been projected as the emblem of spectacular modern culture, only to be lately re-appropriated as a symbol of the national-popular in the context of the country's bicentenary celebrations in 2010.

This case study represents an example of global trends of post-industrial urbanism and a unique case characterised by local features. As part of widely adopted urban regeneration strategies, post office buildings in countries as different as the United States, Costa Rica, Germany, Malawi, Brazil, Spain, the United Kingdom, and Guatemala, to mention just a few, have been renovated and transformed into offices, retail spaces, hotels or cultural facilities. These initiatives are aimed at the revitalisation of historical centres, revalorisation of cultural heritage and creation of new resources for tourism and business investment. In Argentina, this global phenomenon acquires a peculiar form, one that underscores the political function of culture, as we will later see.

This paper contributes to urban cultural policy debates about the instrumental uses of culture and its role in urban regeneration, taking the discussion to an important but less explored area – the politics sustaining the policy decision to convert industrial infrastructure for cultural use, embedded in historically situated local configurations and the subsequent contestations over the meaning and uses of material culture. Studies on culture-led urban regeneration have largely focused on its effectiveness to improve the physical features of decayed areas, boost the local economy and enhance the branding of places, mostly in European and American cities. Research has broadly oscillated between celebration and critique. On the one hand, a policy-oriented body of work has focused on measuring the evidence of the power of culture to renew, reinvent and regenerate cities and on providing best practice guidelines (Evans, 2009; García, 2004; Ghilardi, 2003; Montgomery, 2003, 2004). On the other, another strand of research has stressed the tensions surrounding the transformation of space through a cultural rhetoric, questioning the claimed universality of such processes and revealing their social and political implications (Bailey, Miles, & Stark, 2004; Keith, 2009; Pratt, 2009; Shin & Stevens, 2013; Yúdice, 2003; Zukin, 1995).

Specifically this paper will add a critical perspective to projects for urban regeneration through culture in Buenos Aires, a city largely overlooked in the international academic debates, with some exceptions (Arrese, 2003; Carman, 2006; Dinardi, 2012; Kanai & Ortega-Alcázar, 2009; Lacarrieu and Alvarez, 2008; Welch, 2005; Zunino Singh, 2007). In Latin America, the rhetorical importance given to cultural policy discourses for urban development has not been accompanied by systematic academic approaches that analyse these policies (Rubim & Bayardo, 2008). In this sense, the analysis demonstrates how the different redevelopment alternatives aimed at repairing the fissures in the body of the emblematic building express existing disputes over the making of cultural policies, the uses of heritage, the image of the capital city, the value of the post office, and the meaning of culture. The paper has three main sections. The first analyses the decision to convert the post office palace for cultural use; the second explores contention over multiple meanings of culture related to the meaning and new function of the building; and the third examines the complex relationship between culture and politics in light of the problem of hegemony. In emphasising the contending political dimension through an innovative methodological approach, this paper shifts the predominant focus on economic development and urban impact of studies of culture-led urban regeneration.

Methodology

This article is part of a larger investigation conducted over a five-year period between 2007 and 2012, involving several fieldtrips to Buenos Aires. Adopting a qualitative approach and an exploratory research strategy, I drew on a range of methods, including in-depth semi-structured interviews, visual analysis, archival research and critical discourse analysis. Thirty in-depth interviews were conducted with policy-makers at the municipal and national levels, architects, postal workers, postal museum staff, journalists, real estate developers, cleaners, and vendors. The selection criteria responded to participants' involvement in the redevelopment project. I also looked at the building from outside by making on-site observations, undertook a guided visit to the building, and attended seven relevant events that enabled me to contact new

participants. The large corpus of data was further completed with archival documents (such as those from the National General Archive, the Communications National Commission and the Postal Museum), President's speeches, historical and contemporary photographs of the site, newspaper articles, an online blog on the building's redevelopment, and a variety of institutional materials.

This paper is situated within cultural sociology. As the subjects of culture, national heritage and place-making cut across different disciplines and epistemological traditions, however, the analysis also engages with issues of urban studies, historical sociology, material culture and political sociology. The materiality of buildings offers an invaluable practical means, however unusual in sociology, through which to investigate how culture is produced through social actors' views and practices. Buildings can be very powerful. They have the potential to be carriers of meanings, containers of memories, and triggers of commemoration. They alter our environment physically and inform and reorganise our experience through their various avenues of meaning (Goodman, 1985, p. 652). In the power to represent, the control over that representation is usually at stake in the battle over the creation, preservation, uses and transformation of buildings.

Central to my enquiry is a conception of culture as intimately related to, and therefore inevitably inseparable from, politics. I look at culture at a particular moment of contemporary Argentina, focusing on the debates over the redevelopment of material heritage, the social imagination of the future of the nation and the use of a cultural rhetoric for urban regeneration in Buenos Aires. The term culture is therefore employed here in a twofold way: as that which refers to the space of contingency over signification and interpretation, and as the open-ended category differently used and conceived by social actors in particular situations. The complexity and apparent ambivalence surrounding the term culture derive not only from the different intellectual histories and disciplines that have appropriated the word, ranging from geography, economy, literature, anthropology and sociology, but also the diverse social and geographical contexts in which its usage has become widespread, particularly beyond Western conceptions. Yet it is precisely in its active history and vast range and overlap of meanings that the term becomes significant (Williams, 1976), for this contestability reinforces the character of culture as political – as a site of conflicts and struggles.

From postal hub to cultural centre

One of the taken-for-granted aspects of culture-led urban regeneration is the unquestioned consensus over the convenience of culture to re-functionalise and re-signify a specific building or area, particularly over other redevelopment alternatives. In this section I explore how the deployment of culture for the transformation of the emblematic Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones emerged as a result of a combination of political, economic and material processes, embedded both on the city and the national levels with reference to an international context.

What to do with a large, monumental and historic industrial building (Fig. 1) that has been rendered useless and left abandoned in one of the most expensive central areas of the city? This is the question the Argentinean Economy Ministry faced over the future of the postal palace following the aftermath of the privatisation of the national postal services, which were assigned by concession to a private company in 1997 with great contention and as part of a series of state reform policies aimed at the reduction of public spending. After six years of private management, the provision of postal services proved to be more inefficient than when under state control. In 2004 the postal services were the first public company to be re-nationalised under former President Néstor Kirchner's administration. This way, the Palacio de Correos, a monumental palatial building of French Beaux-Arts architecture inaugurated in 1928 after over forty years of construction, was to be preserved. Yet the building's original function as the national postal headquarters would not survive for longer: plans to convert it for cultural use were announced shortly after the re-nationalisation of the post office.[1]

From the perspectives of the social actors involved, two main reasons were given to explain why the building was assigned a new cultural use: first, to fulfil the city's need for a symphonic music venue and, second, to give value to a 'devalued' listed building. It was said that Buenos Aires needed a cultural venue of 'international quality'. Concurrently, the Palacio de Correos was perceived as abandoned and decayed. The issue of value is of complicated nature not only due to its undeniably subjective character, but also because of the discursive operation of 'devaluation' that is required to legitimise the subsequent need for 'revalorisation'. If the postal building was 'abandoned' then giving value to it was certainly the way forward to rescue it. In this logic, creating a cultural centre would re-value the postal palace and convert it into a tourist site which with its regenerated surroundings would then become a cultural hub. The public value of culture – when 'culture' is understood as conventional cultural institutions such as a

[1] For a detailed analysis of the construction of the building, its uses, privatisation, re-nationalisation and architectural competitions organised to re-imagine it as a cultural centre, see Dinardi (2012).

Fig. 1. The Palacio de Correos y Telecomunicaciones, prior to refurbishment.

classical music venue – was considered higher than that of an under-used factory.

At stake in the recycling of such building was primarily the function it would perform – a luxurious hotel, a shopping mall, government offices, a museum, or a cultural centre. The relocation of postal workers, postal activities and the postal and telecommunications museum was also at stake, as was control over the symbolic image of the building. Other issues of contention included: who would organise the competitions for the recycling of the building; what the role of the state would be in relation to the management of the postal institution; the cultural content of the imagined cultural centre; the feasibility of the projected urban transformation; the actual refurbishment operations due to the technical complexity and high cost of the project; the timetable planned for the works (the cultural centre failed to be inaugurated in 2010, as planned, to commemorate the national bicentenary); the management and sustainability of the new cultural venue; and the credit for the project. In light of these contending views, the building's new function would be in the interest of some but not of others.

The idea that a cultural use was convenient circulated in most interview accounts. References were made to the international experience of cultural regeneration and the prestige often associated with conventional cultural activities and the expected positive impact of culture in social, economic and urban terms. This idea, which Yúdice (2003, p. 38) describes as the expediency of culture given by the existence of an end which renders it a resource with the subsequent struggles over its control, is summarised by one of the architects who acted as advisor in the architectural competition to design a cultural centre in 2006:

> [Culture] It has a good press, it is politically correct. If they had said 'we are going to build a shopping mall in the postal building', the media would have destroyed them. If they say 'let's recycle rubbish there', the media would destroy them. If they say 'let's build offices', the media would destroy them. *But if they say 'we are going to build the biggest cultural centre in the city', everybody applauds.*

In this logic the particular content or the function of a 'cultural centre' does not seem to matter; the shell above all is what counts. In his imagining of hypothetical scenarios for the future of the Palacio de Correos, this architect identifies what the likely outcome of the different alternatives would be: a tacit social reprobation expressed through media condemnation.

According to him only one of these options – the creation of a large cultural centre – would receive enthusiastic social endorsement. The different redevelopment possibilities he identifies and dismisses crystallise in disparate elements such as a shopping mall, a recycling centre and an office block, each of which in turn could evoke different senses of the concept of culture, for instance based upon consumption and entertainment, social awareness about environmental issues, or a particular work organisation and ethic, respectively.

The decision to convert the postal palace for cultural use was above all the result of the will of a high-ranking government official in the Economy Ministry. It resulted from what he defined as 'a deplorable area in urban terms, in an absolutely central place in Buenos Aires, with an heliport, a dump of busses, frankly, a horrible thing', and the fact that 'the post office building was taken over' after privatisation by other public servants who tried to get settled in the building. When asked about how the decision to recycle the palace was taken, he explained that 'it depends on the functionary's will and if the functionary has power. I had decided that it would be like that and while I was there, it was like that'. This statement is indicative not only of a blatant enactment of national politics in the 'first person' based upon the power of a single man, but also of the weakness of institutional democracy in Argentina where one government official's will in the economic realm decides the fate of a national historical monument, an emblematic building in the cultural field. Far from being an exception, this form of personalised politics responds to a pattern of policy-making which has been common in Argentina since the late 1990s in the absence of long-term national, integral and detailed plans for culture, which paved the way for discontinuous, personalised policies (Bayardo, 2008).

Whose culture?

Culture is never fixed or pre-given, but a category that social actors contest and fill in according to their own interests. In this section, I examine the multiple meanings of culture that emerged during discussions about the heritage redevelopment project. I will show how culture mediates the redevelopment operations, and in turn how these operations enable social actors to imagine, produce or enact meanings of culture and heritage. This contested process of meaning making (Wright, 1998) has characterised the conception phase of the new cultural centre in the postal building. Most likely, it will equally shape the implementation and future development of this public project in terms of its content and users.

The intricate ways in which the concept of culture circulates in contemporary Argentina are rooted in history, in long-standing views that bring ideas of culture together with notions of national identity, modernity, progress, civilisation and barbarism. Historically, the fluctuating trajectories of the concept of culture have encapsulated some of the material and symbolic disputes that fiercely erupted in the nineteenth century, such as the constant struggles between Buenos Aires and the Argentine provinces over power and economic resources. This confrontation undoubtedly shaped understandings of culture linked to the 'centrism' of the capital city, both in political and cultural terms, and the alleged 'backwardness' of other territorial areas: 'culture' was to be located solely in the metropolitan capital city. When talking about the new cultural use of the Palacio de Correos, interviewees conjure up different senses, images and histories of the term culture, rooted in national histories.

For example, another high-ranking official responsible for, who was also responsible for the postal palace, explained how terrible it was for him when staff at the National Culture Ministry suggested having a floor in the postal building for each province to use as exhibition spaces, like the nations' fair. Similarly, the senior colleagues had warned of the 'awful' idea of having provincial cultural expressions in the palace, which could be detrimental to having 'a grand building'. Implicit in these views was also the idea that Buenos Aires' culture was at the forefront of global developments, and that of the provinces lagged behind, for the 'culture' embodied in the capital city was seen as one linked to the cultural and creative industries, and therefore of an unquestionably trendy and global character.

These views are sustained by an idea of 'Culture' defined by opposition to that of 'cultures'. While 'Culture' encompasses conventional artistic forms, such as classical music, ballet and fine arts, 'cultures' are those forms and expressions that are not included in the former category. Reviving an old distinction between elite/popular, high/low culture, these government officials dreamed of a Cultural Palace as an embodiment of the Great Culture in which the foreseen grandiosity of Buenos Aires was to be expressed. They rejected provincial expressions, for these were seen as too popular or uncivilised and naïvely misrepresented provincial cultures as reduced to the consumption of certain gastronomic goods. This way of seeing culture represents a conventional perspective in the making of cultural policies by the state which was so characteristic in the first half of the twentieth century and which restricts its field of action to the fine arts and humanities.

Binomial thinking continues to nurture the national political culture. Svampa (1994) persuasively

argues that the classical dichotomy between civilisation and barbarism condenses the various oppositions that have signalled Argentina's national history – between *unitarios* and *federales*, the capital city and the rest of the country, *peronismo*[2] and *anti-peronismo*, the people and the oligarchy, patria and imperialism. It is important to highlight here that the different political traditions in Argentina have re-appropriated this image and made it work in their interests so as to discredit political adversaries. Indeed, these different, long-standing oppositions come to be re-activated in contemporary times through the concept of culture. Speaking of culture, then, can act as a code that reveals historical traces, unresolved disputes, and contemporary concerns, both symbolically and materially.

The relationship between forms of elite and popular culture was addressed differently by some of the winning architects of the third competition.[3] In their proposal for the recycling of the postal palace, they envisioned an open plaza outside the building to house popular cultural expressions which, as they explain, sit more comfortably in outdoor, more informal spaces than in the seriousness of a grand auditorium.

The central government's view on the postal palace – for example, that of the Ministry of Federal Planning or the Presidency office – highlighted the role of the building in national history and stated that the creation of the CCB would imply a continuation of the sense of federalism and national integration once represented by the post office headquarters. 'The building symbolised a golden age in Argentina….It was a wonderful emblem', stated the Chief Advisor of the Ministry of Federal Planning. In this sense, the palace is conceived of as being of high social value, 'the focus of national, political and cultural sentiments, awakening a sense of belonging, attachment and pride in citizens' (Ministerio de Planificación Federal, Inversión Pública y Servicios, 2003–2011).

Argentina's President Cristina Kirchner expressed similar views at the temporary inauguration of the postal palace during the 2010 national commemorations, referring to it in her speech as 'the beginning of the fulfilment of a long cherished dream which was one of giving Buenos Aires, the capital of all Argentinians, and therefore, our country, a great Cultural Centre, the great Cultural Centre that brings together and expresses all cultures' (author's translation). In the official commemorative performance,[4] she also remembered that Eva Peron's Foundation office was located in the building, reviving the need to imagine the national community (Anderson, 2006 [1983]) through a project rooted in *peronismo*. Culture is understood here as the expression of the national-popular in post-2001 crisis Argentina and as that which would materialise in the (federal and popular) programme of the future cultural centre.

A different sense of culture was expressed by the Government of the City of Buenos Aires (GCBA). The Macri municipal administration (since 2007) has recurrently stated the value of culture for the exploitation of tourism through urban marketing and the importance of attracting the private sector to the cultural field. The decision to reduce the budget of the network of community cultural centres, accompanied by eviction orders and the closure of many of these popular cultural venues, was a clear example of the GCBA's intention to apply a profitability logic to cultural planning.

Finally, another view of culture was represented by the postal workers and the heritage NGO Basta de Demoler! (Stop Demolishing!), who interpreted it in connection with local history, spiritual development, education and learning, and defined it as a constituent part of heritage and identity. In this view, the postal palace was a unique example that the government should protect on the grounds of its value for the preservation of urban and cultural landscapes, the remembering of a particular époque in Argentina and the identity of local places. Culture here is intimately related to an idea of vernacular heritage, one that highlights the role of architecture in condensing the past of the nation and its ability to act as aide memoire.

In tandem with these different ways of understanding culture, alternative redevelopment ideas for the postal palace were put forward by some of my respondents. These included building a new spectacular cultural centre in the waterfront, 'like the Sydney Opera House', and keeping the post office headquarters 'as it is'. Others suggested the creation of a fine arts museum in the postal palace which would require no demolition but rather would integrate the existing dispersed art collections, and in doing so, would help museums resolve their problem of the lack of space. The creation of a cultural centre was also suggested, but one that could assign great visibility and space to the post office activities, including the postal museum. Others proposed the use of the existing city government's initiative 'La Usina de la Música' (The Music Factory) to house the Symphonic Orchestra in the South of Buenos Aires.

Asking 'whose culture?' in Buenos Aires today, as Zukin (1995) has done so eloquently in New York almost two decades ago, allows us to conceive the postal palace as a site of disputes over culture and the city, an artefact of material culture engrained in

[2] *Peronismo* is a national-popular political movement that originated in Argentina with Colonel Juan Domingo Perón during the mid-1940s and had also institutional representation with the Peronist Party. For a classical sociological study of the origins of *peronismo* see Murmis and Portantiero (1971).

[3] For an extensive analysis of the three competitions involving the redevelopment of the Palacio de Correos see Dinardi (2012).

[4] Dinardi (2012), Chapter 5.

the nation's past and the city's current culture-led revitalisation projects and place branding strategies. The different senses interviewees attributed to culture informed their imaginings of the future cultural centre in downtown Buenos Aires. In short, these can be described as:

- culture expressing distinction and the fine arts: the building as a modern and spectacular 'Culture Palace';
- culture encompassing both elite and popular culture: the building as an inclusive cultural centre;
- culture as social bonds, constitutive of the national identity: the building as embodiment of Argentineness;
- culture as an abstract notion crucial for tourism promotion and economic and urban development: the building as a multi-purpose tool, mainly an urban marketing resource;
- culture as heritage: the palace as a listed building and part of one's history; and
- culture as remedy: the converted palace as a symbol of the failure and decadence of neoliberal privatisation and its recovery through culture.

The ambiguity surrounding the term culture did not impede different social actors from appropriating it and considering it meaningful; on the contrary, it is the very ambiguity of the word, its malleable capacity to condense different meanings that encourages them to imagine what this term may mean. The various connotations of the concept of culture found in my analysis reassert the complexity and contestability of the term and certainly represent a very small proportion of the over a hundred definitions that Kroeber and Kluckhohn (1952) have found in anthropological discourses. The struggle over the uses of the postal building was finally defined by the power of a bureaucrat who decided to turn it into a cultural centre. The disputes over the cultural content of the CCB are not yet resolved, as the cultural centre is only under construction and its actual cultural programme is still uncertain.

Culture and politics: divorce and reunion

In this section, I discuss the complex relationship between culture and politics in light of the question of hegemony. This question is central to an understanding of culture as imbricated with politics through its enabling of the production of consent and the crafting and acceptance of common sense. In the case study of this paper, some interview narratives viewed culture as an 'apolitical' resource, one that nonetheless played a key political role: crafting consensus over the convenience of cultural projects.

At the core of the redevelopment of the postal building were political reasons, that is, disputes over power and prestige over the management of the building. Culture was invoked as an *impartial* strategy aimed at defusing the existing tensions. This way,

> Projects with a cultural aura have a good press, they are politically correct, for any functionary or politician it is good to put them forward. On the other hand, when residents want to do something somewhere, they ask for a cultural centre, a generic one. They don't even know what it may have inside, but they think it is prestigious for their neighbourhood to have a cultural centre (Architect and CCB Competition Advisor).

The supposed political correctness and convenience of cultural projects are located in a context in which politics had come to be seen as a synonym of corruption, mismanagement and distrust. The contestation of the whole government on these grounds and its subsequent rejection has characterised the general feeling towards politics of vast sectors of the Argentine population during the last few decades, especially in the aftermath of former President Carlos Menem's mediatisation, spectacularisation and denigration of politics. This feeling of discontent reached its peak in 2001 and exploded with the institutional, social, economic and political crises of Argentina when the collective slogan *'Que se vayan todos'* (Out with them all) called out for bringing down all politicians. In the wake of this distrust of politicians, *official culture was presented in the aftermath of the crisis as depoliticised, as ideology-free, and therefore not stained with the dirty image that politics had*. In this logic, an idea of culture as apolitical acquires prestige and mobilises the support of those who reject traditional politics and politicians. The political rationale of the CCB is clear in the following views on why a cultural centre was to be built in the postal building:

> Because I think it was the *neutral* terrain. On the one hand, because *it was a neutral issue*, on the other hand, because it is an issue that is *always well received,* is always appreciated (Architects' Central Society Member).

In this quotation culture is given two main connotations – it is convenient for politicians for it has 'good press' and it is 'neutral', that is, apolitical. They make possible the operation I was describing earlier: the invocation of culture by politicians on the grounds of its assumed apolitical character. This way of conceiving culture as distanced from politics and values represents a dissociation from the political in relation to its emancipatory discourse, the construction of citizenship and the possibility to tackle cultural inequalities (Wortman, 1997, pp. 80–81). Of course this bestows

a *mythical*[5] *character* on culture, as there can be no cultural planning outside politics. If we understand culture as the multiple ways in which systems of meaning, structures of power and institutions intermingle to produce traditions, beliefs and rituals (Donald & Rattansi, 1992), these symbolic forms are in constant transformation and are not exempt from ideology or power relations. They are, in fact, constituent parts of processes of domination (Ortner, 2005). Alluding to the confrontation, alliances and negotiation between social actors, culture is inescapably constituted by disputes, agency and power, history and change (Grimson & Semán, 2005, p. 20).

It is important to consider here Gramsci's ([1975] 2007) concept of hegemony in relation to the central *role* that culture plays in the reproduction of the interests of the ruling classes, political leadership and the production of consent. Hegemony alludes to the general acceptance of dominant ideas as 'normal reality' or 'common sense' by those who are in positions of subordination in relation to a ruling class (Williams, 1976, p. 145). Thinking through hegemony is particularly useful to see how the postal services and postal building came to be seen as outdated, a threat to modernity, devalued and almost useless, especially when compared to cultural activities, perceived as of higher status. These ideas were taken for granted by some interviewees; the conversion of the building into a cultural centre was, therefore, seen by many as inevitable.

However, the cultural meaning of the redevelopment project today seems to have distanced itself from that which gave it birth in 2004. Culture, which was conceived of as apolitical, is now re-politicised in the context of the current (national-popular) political administration. In fact, the Bicentenary Cultural Centre (CCB) has now been re-named after former President Néstor Kirchner as the Centro Cultural Néstor Kirchner (CCK). According to the new announcements, a broader conception of culture would sustain the management of the new cultural centre where popular culture would be expressed and given a place to be exhibited in the 'modern' rooms of the renovated postal palace. It is difficult to assert at this point whether the CCK would be capable of challenging neoliberal trends in cultural planning and indeed become an inclusive space for the enactment of public culture, beyond city marketing or nationalist campaigns. The unexpected ways in which policy projects mobilise ideas of culture to re-signify public buildings signal the uncertain future of the new cultural centre in the emblematic post office building.

[5] The idea of culture as myth is not new. Roland Barthes (1993), amongst others, has shown through his semiological analysis how culture can appear as depoliticised discourse, yet as a myth it masks bourgeois ideology and contributes to reproducing structures of power and domination.

Conclusion

The aim of this paper has been to examine the politics underpinning culture-led urban regeneration in Buenos Aires, Argentina. When exploring why culture was invoked as the solution to various problems affecting an emblematic public building in the city centre, the idea of culture as panacea has been employed to draw attention to the policy deployment of culture as the *inevitable* path to the redevelopment of the postal building. Particularly, it was seen as the solution to a range of problems claimed by interviewees: the underuse of a national historical monument; the deterioration of the city's centre; the lack of a symphonic music venue in the capital city; the absence of great architectural projects to honour the national bicentenary; and the lack of an international high-quality cultural institution that could position the city in the global cultural map.

The idea that 'culture' was of higher value than the post office became hegemonic and served to legitimise the continued dismantling of the postal institution through the displacement of the postal employees and the conversion of the postal palace into a cultural centre. This resonates with what Carman (2006, p. 242) found in her study of the shopping-led regeneration of the Abasto neighbourhood in Buenos Aires with its subsequent displacement of migrants residents: 'that which is considered 'Culture', in capital letters, or historical heritage – beyond its antiquity or authenticity – acquires the status of an indisputable and ultimate truth' (author's translation). The value of culture, in urban regeneration policy, was taken for granted, and therefore remained out of question.

The analysis has demonstrated that culture-led urban regeneration acquired a peculiar form in Argentina. Policy invocations of culture were aimed at *de-politicising* cultural activities in a particular historical moment post-2001/2002 crisis, when politics had become a synonym of corruption and mismanagement. It was expected that the cultural initiatives would come to legitimise political projects, otherwise of a suspicious or reprehensible nature. The function of culture as a panacea came to erase a history of neoliberal privatisation of public services that equated state's management with failure. Under the *kirchnerista* national administrations, however, the re-politicisation of culture became apparent with its invocation of national-popular elements, which enacted understandings of culture associated with ideas of national identity, reminding political adversaries that culture is inevitably political. In turn, this brings back the fundamental role of the state at the centre stage of urban cultural policy in Latin America.

The paper has also explored how official meanings of culture were contested by alternative claims. By tracing the emergence of a cultural use as the

solution to the problems affecting the postal building, I examined the contested circumstances out of which processes of culture-led urban regeneration emerge. Discussions over the refurbishment plans allowed social actors to imagine senses of culture and to represent them through their desired redevelopment ideas for the building. At stake were a number of disputes over the practical and symbolic function of the building. Talking about 'culture' encoded meanings about the value of the post office, the image of the city, the modernity of the nation, national identity and political autonomy. Similarly, speaking of the 'post office' condensed an image of the state based on the quality of its provision of public services. Through these imaginaries, different understandings of culture were produced. Indeed, these represented alternative ways of imagining culture led to urban regeneration strategies.

This contention over urban cultural policy, undoubtedly, illustrates the political nature of culture, for processes of signification are composed of shared meanings and values particular to a way of life (Williams, [1981] 1995, 1989), rooted in history and entangled with relations of power (Storey, 2010, pp. 3–5). Encapsulating contending views, culture inexorably gives way to political controversy with its 'skirmishes', if not wars (Benhabib, 2002, p. 1), for the process of contestation is concerned with the power to define concepts, including the meaning of culture itself (Wright, 1998, p. 13). It is my intention to emphasise the existence of difficulties in replicating policy models based on a cultural rhetoric: culture is not a pre-given, universal category but one that social actors, embedded in local contexts and national histories, imagine, contest and re-signify in their engagement with specific redevelopment projects.

The paper has also examined what was at stake in redeveloping an industrial site through a cultural use. While the process of democratisation in many Latin American cities enabled the development of urban cultural policy for socio-economic and urban regeneration (Kanai & Ortega-Alcázar, 2009), my research revealed that policy-led cultural interventions in this area have equally, and paradoxically, led to the destruction of heritage and the displacement of postal workers. This operation, in turn, was largely questioned by those with stake in the building in financial, material, historical, cultural and political terms. These competing interests showed that the building's new function would be in the interest of some but not of others. The control over what the building would represent, what its new function would be and whose building would it end up being were matters of contention. Clearly culture-led urban regeneration is a process with winners and losers (Dean, Donnellan, & Pratt, 2010; Keating & Frantz, 2004).

Future research into such processes need to acknowledge their contending nature, framed within existing local histories, discussed in light of empirical engagements with stakeholders' views and interests, and questioning the politics of cultural policies. Far from being neutral, the intervention of material culture is always embedded in a local configuration that shapes the building at stake through intricate political processes. This reinforces the inadequacy of 'one-size fits all' models, so acclaimed internationally in the deployment of culture-led urban regeneration strategies. Furthermore, attention needs to be paid to understanding how culture-led initiatives 'from below' also contribute to urban revitalisation in creative ways, for cultural flagship projects have a weak relationship with artists (Comunian & Mould, 2014) in times when promoting creative cities has become the new mantra of urban policy (Pratt, 2010). Investigating how the voices of those with a stake in the sites to be regenerated can best shape official culture-led urban regeneration is equally required, if we are to critically interrogate, rather than simply celebrate, policy invocations of culture as panacea.

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