

The day Londres 38 opened its doors: a milestone in chilean reconciliation¹



Marivic Wyndham²

University of Technology Sydney³, Australia
Marivic.Wyndham@uts.edu.au

Peter J. Read⁴

University of Sydney⁵, Australia
peter.read@sydney.edu.au

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²PhD Australian National University, Canberra.

³Senior Lecturer, Latin American Studies. Faculty of Arts & Social Sciences.

⁴PhD Australian National University, Canberra.

⁵Professor Department of History.

The day Londres 38 opened its doors: a milestone in Chilean reconciliation

Abstract

Occasionally a week, an afternoon, a single moment may crystallise a traumatic event which has carried explosive potential for decades. At such still points shifting polarities may stabilise, if briefly. Old foes may unite, old friendships fracture. By the end of such a day, though, it will be apparent that something momentous has occurred from which there can be no retreat. This paper considers such an event, which should remain here occurred in Santiago de Chile, on December 10, 2007. That day, the infamous torture and extermination centre known as Londres 38 was for the first time opened to the public. But by the end of that day, much more had been exposed than the echoing and empty rooms.

Keywords: reconciliation, Cold War; memory, state violence, trauma.

El día que Londres 38 abrió sus puertas: momento clave de la reconciliación chilena

Resumen

De cuando en cuando una semana, una tarde, un solo momento puede cristalizar un evento traumático que por décadas ha contenido un potencial explosivo. En tales instantes decisivos, las polaridades variables pueden estabilizarse, aun cuando brevemente. Los antiguos enemigos pueden unirse, las viejas amistades fracturarse. Para el final de ese día, sin embargo, será evidente que algo trascendental ha ocurrido, algo que ya no puede tener reversa.

Este artículo considera un evento de esa categoría, que ocurrió en Santiago de Chile, el 10 de diciembre de 2007. Ese día, el infame centro de tortura y exterminio conocido como Londres 38 se abrió por primera vez al público. Para el final de ese día, se había expuesto mucho más que las salas vacías llenas de ecos.

Palabras Claves: Reconciliación, Guerra Fría, memoria, violencia estatal, trauma.

O dia em que Londres 38 abriu suas portas: momento chave da reconciliação chilena

Resumo

De vez em quando uma semana, uma tarde, um único momento pode cristalizar um evento traumático que por décadas tem contido um potencial explosivo. Em tais instantes decisivos, as polaridades variáveis podem se estabilizar, ainda que brevemente. Os antigos inimigos podem unir-se, as velhas amizades podem fraturar-se. Contudo, no final desse dia, será evidente que algo transcendental ocorreu algo que já não tem marcha ré.

Este artigo considera um evento dessa categoria, que ocorreu em Santiago do Chile, no dia 10 de dezembro de 2007. Nesse dia, o infame centro de tortura e extermínio conhecido como Londres 38 foi aberto por primeira vez ao público. No final desse dia, havia sido exposto muito mais que salas vazias e cheias de ecos.

Palavras chave: Reconciliação, Guerra Fria, memória, violência estatal, trauma.

Ariel Dorfman is a Chilean Allende supporter who was forced into exile following Pinochet's coup in 1973. His 1991 play *Death and the Maiden* depicted the post-dictatorship conflict between a pro-justice lawyer, his wife, a torture victim, and a doctor who was present at her torture. Commenting on the play, he asked:

How can those who tortured and those who were tortured coexist in the same land? How to heal a country that has been traumatized by repression if the fear to speak out is still omnipresent everywhere? And how do you reach the truth if lying has become a habit? How do we keep the past alive without becoming its prisoner? How do we forget it without becoming its prisoner? Is it legitimate to sacrifice truth to insure peace? And what are the consequences of suppressing that past and the truth it is whispering or howling to us? Are people free to search for justice and equality if the threat of a military intervention haunts them?... And perhaps the greatest dilemma of them all: how to confront these issues without destroying the national consensus, which creates democratic stability. (Dorfman, 1991:73)

Following an unfavourable referendum, Pinochet stepped down as the Commander-in-Chief of the Army in 1989; yet apprehension remained. In 1990 the incoming moderate Aylwin government did not dare allow its National Commission on Truth and Reconciliation to name any of the perpetrators who had so terrorised the Chilean Left for the past seventeen years.⁶ Nor, indeed, did the armed forces concede that anything or anybody needed investigation. The National Security Council put it pointedly to Aylwin:

The army certainly sees no reason to seek pardon for having taken part in a patriotic labour. ... The Army of Chile solemnly declares that it will not accept being placed in the dock of the accused for having saved the freedom and sovereignty of the fatherland. (Ensalaco, 2000:217)

Terror and trauma continued to corrode Chilean public life. It was considered in bad taste to discuss the Pinochet terror; economic reconciliation was preferred to social understanding, and personal testimonies seemed to be presented only by those who wanted to spoil the party (Valdés, 1996:4). The names and locations of most former centres of detention and torture vanished from much of Chilean society. Nearly twenty years later these issues are by no means resolved. But now other questions beside Dorfman's, sometimes of equal urgency,

⁶ For a comprehensive analysis of the Commission's Report, see Comisión Chilena de Derechos Humanos (1999).

jostle to be heard. To what extent should today's senior army officers accommodate the desires of the victims, state officials or even those of their own ranks, towards former particularly notorious Pinochetistas?⁷ Another issue is that of the future of the political left, much fractured during the Allende years, somewhat more united in the years of repression, now again disunited and fractured.⁸ In practical terms, the polarities of these dilemmas are very wide: should the remaining centres of torture, disappearance and execution be allowed to be destroyed for a larger contemporary public purpose like a housing estate.⁹ Should a former torture and extermination centre privilege the experiences of one particular group of victims?¹⁰ Great controversy attended the removal of the names of certain victims on the enormous 'Roll of Honour' in the Santiago General Cemetery who were later judged —by some— to be unworthy of a place.¹¹ From the perspective of the left, the critical question is: should those dedicated to improving the lot of the working classes throw their best efforts into current problems of housing, education and unemployment, or into the researching, revealing, memorializing and compensating the iniquities done to them two and three decades ago?¹²

Memorialising the centres

Today, most of the former torture centres of Santiago, all infamous in their different ways, have their individual band of devotees composed of victims, their families, survivors, and others, who are united, or divided or perplexed, as to their future.¹³ The centre Tres Alamos¹⁴, for example, has become a juvenile prison admitting no access to victim families or researchers, but a monument to its victims stands outside, and its high walls are used by graffitiists protesting all manner of contemporary ills. La Venda Sexy is a private house whose owners oppose any kind of memorialisation. The families of the victims of the centre Simón Bolívar, revealed as an extermination centre only in 2007 because it had no known survivors, are still discussing its future. Probably a few more former centres remain, whose presence is still not publicly known at all.

⁷ For example, it appears that some officers prefer not to interfere making public denunciations of known assassins and torturers, if it is tacitly understood they will not subsequently been put to trial.

⁸ A full account of the history of the Left since 1968 may be found in Katherine Hite (2000).

⁹ Such a division exists in the Colectivo Pobladores Renacer, in the former CNI torture centre in Loyola/Neptuno Streets, Santiago.

¹⁰ For example, see the 'Las Rosas de Villa Grimaldi' project to particularly memorialise the suffering of women at Santiago's best known torture centre; see also 'Una rosa por cada víctima de la dictadura', *Sociedad*, September 28, 2007.

¹¹ Interview with Viviana Díaz, Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Group of disappeared prisoners' relatives), January, 2007.

¹² For an engrossing encounter between the two camps, see Carmen Castillo's documentary *Calle Santa Fe*, Agnes B Productions, France, 2007.

¹³ For a wider discussion of these issues, see Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, 'Putting Site back into Trauma Studies: A Study of Five Detention Centres in Santiago, Chile', in: 'Trauma in the Twenty-First Century, Special Issue of *Life Writing*, 5/1 (Ap 2008), 79-96.

¹⁴ For a set of personal testimonials of life in this torture centre, see Colectivo de Derechos Humanos, Comité Raúl Silva Henríquez (2007).

Sites of recent but very great trauma, then, are in Chile variously open to the public, privatized, or destroyed, levelled and forgotten, or unknown. Each may carry no interpretation, minimal interpretation or one detailed and multifaceted. A very few, by contrast, are in the process of being preserved, conserved, reconstructed and memorialized. Every trauma site may be made brutal, or serene, or both; but each one holds the potential for deep conflict between its historical stakeholders. Sites of wickedness may become, for some, poetic and metaphysical terrains, but they also remain, for others, concrete and material, where the «visible and the invisible, past and present, physical and metaphysical come to exist and share a common space». (Turmarkin, 2005:233)

The long processes of if, and how, the sites of state violence should be remembered began soon after Pinochet relinquished some of his authority by allowing free elections in 1990. Thus, agitation to prevent the gracious site of the demolished Villa Grimaldi being sold as condominiums began in 1994. It took nearly three years after that before the Corporation for the Villa Grimaldi Park of Peace was established, while the controversial construction of new buildings and internal monuments and plaques on the site continues till present (Corporación Parque por la Paz Villa Grimaldi, 1997:36). The debate about what to do with the changing rooms and passageways of the National Stadium, where fourteen thousand people had been temporarily held, tortured or executed in the early months after the coup, began at about the same time, but it was only in 2006 that plans were finally drawn up by heritage professionals as to how the rusting, decrepit and in some cases bullet-holed facilities might be conserved. The process of actually conserving them is yet to begin.¹⁵ Indeed, the whole stadium itself is under threat. The city is said to need a new one. What government would be prepared to preserve the old one as a decaying and expensive wreck in a desirable urban location?

Since Pinochet's departure, some survivors and families of the dead and disappeared began to write about, publicise and memorialize the hateful history of the individual sites. In the case of the National Stadium, an essential public utility, victims and families could only visit, take part in judicial enquiries and plan memorials.¹⁶ It was only in 2007 that local residents and other interested parties were able to freely enter the abandoned airforce maintenance camp in Loyola/ Neptuno Street, to hold a day of commemoration. Some of those present wanted to explore, excavate and conserve the underground cells, others expressed themselves perfectly content to erase the remaining evidence —whatever it might be— and erect on the site a low cost housing precinct.¹⁷ A third centre, José Domingo Cañas

¹⁵ Ministerio de Educación, Consejo de Monumentos Nacionales, 'Masterplan', October 17, 2007, xerox in authors' possession.

¹⁶ The memorial at the National Stadium is planned to be erected in an area outside the weight training room and velodrome, where many prisoners were executed.

¹⁷ Interview with Julieta Varas, December 2007.

1367 (1367 José Domingo Cañas Street), was destroyed and laid waste. In the late 1990s, victim families drawn mainly from the MIR, Socialist and Communist Parties formed two *colectivos*, collectives, to memorialize the site. In a gesture of solidarity, they invited members of the poorest suburbs —particularly hard hit by the Pinochetistas— to paint powerful slogans and murals on the walls which divide the site from its neighbours. In 2000 the collectives succeeded in having the site declared a Historic Monument (Corporación José Domingo Cañas 1367, 2003:18-19). In 2008, the José Domingo Cañas 1367 Corporation obtained a government grant to erect a memorial, offices and a library.¹⁸ The supporters of Villa Grimaldi had already by then reconstructed a torture chamber, established a Memory Room, and built an open air theatre amidst rolling lawns and serene gardens. These developments were, of course, not without controversy. A clash of visions among the stakeholders of how these former torture centers should be memorialized typically accompanied every stage of re-development of these sites. One critic of the re-constructed Villa Grimaldi exclaimed, «They fill it with plaques and objects rather than tell the story of what happened there. Now they're having a rock concert there!»¹⁹

Occasionally a week, an afternoon, a single moment, may crystallise events which have carried explosive potential for decades. At such a still point, shifting polarities may stabilise, if briefly. Old foes may unite, old friendships fracture. By the end of such a day, though, it will be apparent that something momentous has occurred from which there can be no retreat. Indeed, the polarities working themselves out on such occasions may not be those customarily depicted in Chile between memory and suppression, human rights and national interest, reparations and contemporary economic ills, amnesty and forgiveness, restorative justice and expedience, reconciliation and political stability. They may be between those who customarily think of themselves to be on the same side.²⁰

Such an occasion occurred on 10 December 2007 when for the first time, the earliest of all Pinochet's torture centres was opened to the public. On that day the elegant up-town mansion known as 38 London St, Londres 38, changed its status from symbolic to real, strange to familiar and imagined to physical.

Londres 38 is a graceful, nineteenth century three-storey mansion in one of the most graceful areas of the CBD of Santiago, Chile. During the Allende years of the early 1970s it was the headquarters of the Chilean Socialist Party. Possibly out of a sense of irony, more probably because

¹⁸ Personal communication, Denni Traubman, May 2008.

¹⁹ Interview with Roberto D'Orival Briceño, December 2007.

²⁰ For engaging discussions of these issues in Chile and elsewhere, see *Radical History* 97 (Winter 2007).

it was a building that could be seized quickly to house and interrogate prisoners, the building was occupied by Pinochet's secret police two months after the coup.

Here the best known, and to Pinochet's forces, the most dangerous counter-revolutionaries of the left, were taken by summary arrest. In particular they included the members of the elite MIR (Movimiento Izquierdista Revolucionario), the armed Revolutionary Left. Perhaps by the beginning of November 1973, the security services were setting up Londres 38 as the first of its interrogation, torture, detention and execution centres.²¹ The building functioned for ten months as one of hundreds of secret sites of torture, execution and disappearance practised by the Pinochet government. Eighty four people are known to have died within the building during this period. Others of the more than the 1,000 Chileans who were 'disappeared' during the Pinochet years may have been killed there too.²²

Within a few months the techniques of the secret police —known colloquially as the DINA— would grow more sophisticated: rather than carrying out an arrest at home, which involved witnesses and disturbance, wanted suspects walking in the streets were identified secretly by spies and collaborators in a passing car, bundled into another car and 'disappeared'.²³ Prisoners thereafter were kept separate from each other, the torture centres secret. But in these very early days of the coup, the DINA had not yet established its procedures. Although the government continued to deny its existence until 1979, Londres 38 was always known about. Standing close to the well known church of St Francisco, blindfolded prisoners could hear the sound of the bells; others recognised, by peering below their blindfolds, the distinctive black and white marble tiling of the entrance hall, and whispered to teach other their location. Several times a day was roll-call, so every prisoner knew who had arrived, or left, or died. Therefore, partly because of its central position in one of the most elegant areas of the CBD, partly because its location was an open secret, Londres 38 began its infamous career as a notorious, internationally-known icon of Chilean state terrorism. Patricio Rivas, a leading MIR official held in Londres 38 for seventy-two hours in late December 1973 recalls his arrival at the torture centre.

Somewhat like an infernal choir filled the place. I heard screams of different tones, from different mouths, which blended with the summons of the agents. They were screams of horror that bit the

²¹ Places like the National Stadium and Stadium Chile —later renamed Stadium Víctor Jara— functioned more like concentration camps.

²² For basic information, see http://www.memoriaviva.com/Centros/00Metropolitana/londres_38.htm.

²³ For a grim insight into how these arrests were orchestrated and executed, told by one ex-MIR official turned DINA collaborator, Marcia Alejandra Merino, see the documentary by Carmen Castillo, *La Flaca Alejandra* (Chile-Francia, 1993).

air and which, even when they ended, still vibrated in space. They weren't screams of fear, they were of loneliness in the face of the incomprehensible. The voices of those young people remained there forever. (Rivas, 2007: 115)²⁴

Many Chilean survivors of torture have described their experiences in dozens of centres.²⁵ We here cite Raimundo Belarmino's testimony:

In London 38, I was tortured daily —except for Sundays, which in those times were still deemed for compulsory rest—, punched and kicked and applied electrical currents while sitting on a chair, lying on the 'grill' or hanging from a metal bar. The principal method consisted of applying an electrical current on the 'grill', for which I was made to take off all my clothes, they would tie me by the hands and feet to the electric bed, and connect cables to the fingers of my hands and feet and also to the penis and/or testicles and left a 'floating' cable which they applied to the different parts of the body. The 'sessions' were of variable duration, some very prolonged and others very brief; they were generally conducted by Reyes Zapata and Romo Mena, although I remember that once I was interrogated and tortured directly by Moreno Brito and in another occasion I was interrogated, without torture, directly by Krassnoff Martchenko.

The direct 'encounter' with Moreno Brito happened on the third or fourth day after I returned to Londres 38. It consisted mainly of two punching and kicking sessions in the midst of threats and insults, applied in two different occasions, and through which he wanted to show his displeasure with the first two versions of a written statement that he had had me draft in the course of that day. I was able to identify this person not only because of his characteristic and distinctive hoarse voice but also for his physical appearance, since in both instances I was writing the statement above mentioned in one of the small 'cells' located on the ground floor, and was, therefore, without blindfold.

The direct 'encounter' with Krassnoff Martchenko happened on the eve of my second departure from Londres 38 and consisted basically of a prolonged interrogation, based on the third version of the statement which I had written for Moreno Brito, which —by the way— was identical to the two earlier versions, and on the grounds of which, I have always believed, my fate was decided; this individual —who presumed to be the 'intelligent' one of the group

²⁴ Una especie de coro infernal llenaba el recinto. Oía gritos en distintos tonos, desde distintas bocas, que se mezclaban con las órdenes de los agentes. Eran gritos de espanto que mordían el aire y que al terminar seguían vibrando en el espacio. No eran gritos de miedo, eran de soledad frente a lo incomprendible. Las voces de esos jóvenes quedaron ahí para siempre.

²⁵ For Londres 38, see Patricio Rivas (2007: 115-143).

and sought to distance himself from Moreno Brito's brutality— I could see him through the blindfold which covered my eyes, that had not been well fastened —thanks to that I was able to identify him, in photographs, much later, after I recovered my freedom.²⁶

Londres 38, though, remained distinct. Thanks again to its high visibility, physical elegance and prime location, half a kilometre from the centre of government, Londres 38 was not levelled by Pinochet partisans. Rather, in 1978 the building was given by Pinochet to the politically reactionary organisation known as the O'Higgins Institute.²⁷ The Institute's membership contained a significant number of former Army officers who could still summon deference to each of the left-centre governments elected since Pinochet's departure. Its members objected strongly to any reference to the brief but terrifying role of their Headquarters as the first of Pinochet's torture centres. They denied knowledge to any enquiry and changed the number of the building from 38 to 40. For a decade the state itself, probably in deference to the potential of the Institute to influence the current leadership of the armed forces, also resisted any attempt at an official recognition of the building's past.²⁸

²⁶ «En Londres 38 fui torturado diariamente, con excepción del domingo que en aquella época era todavía descanso obligatorio, mediante golpes de puños y pies y aplicación de corriente eléctrica sentado en una silla, acostado en la "parrilla" o colgado de una barra metálica. El método principal consistió en la aplicación de corriente eléctrica en la "parrilla", para lo cual era obligado a desnudarme, me ataban de manos y pies al catre metálico, me conectaban cables a los dedos de las manos y de los pies y también al pene y/o testículos y dejaban un cable "volante" que aplicaban en diferentes partes del cuerpo. Las "sesiones" tuvieron duración variable, algunas muy prolongadas y otras muy breves, y generalmente eran conducidas por Reyes Zapata y Romo Mena, aunque recuerdo que en una ocasión fui interrogado y torturado directamente por Moreno Brito y en otra ocasión fui interrogado, sin tortura, directamente por Krassnoff Martchenko.

«El "encuentro" directo con Moreno Brito ocurrió el tercer o cuarto día después de mi regreso a Londres 38 y consistió principalmente de dos golpizas de puños y pies en medio de amenazas e insultos, propinadas en dos momentos diferentes, y con las que quiso manifestar su molestia con las dos primeras versiones de una declaración escrita que me exigí redactar en el curso de ese día; a este sujeto lo pude identificar tanto por su característica e inconfundible voz ronca como por su apariencia física, ya que en ambas ocasiones me encontraba escribiendo la declaración, arriba mencionada, en una de las pequeñas "celdas" ubicadas en la planta baja y estaba, por lo tanto, con la vista descubierta. «El "encuentro" directo con Krassnoff Martchenko ocurrió la víspera de mi segunda salida de Londres 38 y consistió básicamente de un prolongado interrogatorio, con base en la tercera versión de la declaración que había escrito para Moreno Brito, que por cierto era idéntica a las dos primeras, y en el cual, siempre he pensado, se decidió mi destino; a este sujeto, que presumía ser el "inteligente" del grupo y buscaba distanciarse de la brutalidad de Moreno Brito, lo pude distinguir a través de la venda que cubría mi vista, la cual no estaba bien colocada, lo que me permitió identificarlo, mediante fotografías, mucho tiempo después, cuando recuperé mi libertad.»

Raimundo Belarmino Elgueta Pinto's testimony. DINA's typical treatment modalities in its first stage, a lot of which have remained along time: immediate interrogatories, lack of limits on torture inflicted, permanent hurtful treatment. (Rettig report: 464). Londres 38 was declared a Historic Monument on 12 October 2005.

http://www.memoriaviva.com/testimonios/testimonio_de_raimundo_belarmino_elgueta_pinto.htm see also the 'Valech Report', Informe de la Comisión Nacional de Comisión Prisión Política y Tortura, Santiago, Ministerio de Interior (2005:442).

²⁷ See Wikipedia, http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Londres_38

²⁸ It is hard to find private military opinions. However, a retired colonel was interviewed by Steve Stern in 1997. The colfonel emphasised the necessity of military intervention and, above all, stressed that the issue of human rights and violence left him indifferent (Stern, 2006:90-93).

For these reasons, efforts to memorialise Londres 38 began much later than Villa Grimaldi, which the state had readily acknowledged to have been a scene of state terrorism as early as 1991. Nor, unlike at José Domingo Cañas, could there be any question of allowing graphic paintings on the building's front to depict what had occurred inside. While the Institute remained *in situ*, public commemoration of the building's past had to be relatively restrained. A principal legal means of memorializing a site and its victims was the *velatón*, or vigil. These began in 2005 as small weekly gatherings outside centres like Villa Grimaldi, peaceful and silent. The sorrowing families of each site placed candles on the footpath and read one or two testimonies, while silent demonstrators held up photographs of their disappeared relatives. Such vigils, begun at about the same time outside Londres 38, did not remain silent for long. By 2006 other leftist demonstrators, less closely connected with the actual events within, sought to popularize the vigils. Now, in front of maybe 30 or 40 protesters, there were singers and recitals, jokes and puppet shows. They also sought to politicize the vigils, with amplified denunciations, not just of Pinochet's regime but the perceived shortcomings of the current government without necessarily having much to do with the history of Londres 38 itself.²⁹ The police seemed largely content to let these small scale gatherings proceed so long as they occurred after the Institute had closed the building for the night. One such vigil, for instance, occurred on 3 January 2007. Members of Colectivo 119³⁰ arranged the candles along the footpath, pasted pictures of a dozen of the 384 people known to have been imprisoned inside. A rhetorical roll-call was made to identify the attendance of a variety of past and present leftist organisations, as well as other minority groups:

- The Socialist Party of Chile?
- Present!
- The Communist Party?
- Present!
- MIR?
- Present!
- MAPU?³¹
- Present!

²⁹ Recording by Marivic Wyndham of a *velatón* outside Londres 38 of 28 December 2006 at which the speaker spoke at length of the recent so-called 'Penguin Revolution' organized by the National Students' Association to press the government for current educational reforms.

³⁰ Colectivo 119 borrowed its numeral from the infamous 'Operation Colombo' case. 119 bodies of members of the MIR were falsely claimed by the Pinochet regime to have been found in Brazil and Argentina as a result of intra-party fighting, as a way of countering growing international charges of human rights violations in Chile. For a full exploration of this case, see Lucía Sepúlveda Ruiz (2005).

³¹ Unitary People's Action Movement.

Vocalists accompanied themselves on the guitar, they made speeches, they chatted to each other, they pasted quarto-sized photographs of the disappeared on the walls, they erected the banner:

Londres 38

(ex House of Torture and Murder)

House of Memory

Collective 119

An hour and a half later, as evening fell, the vigilists removed the banner for future use, but the photographs remained, stuck on the wall of the building. Some time during the night, Institute workers covered the photographs with whitewash. Next morning there was little trace of the protest save for a few candle-flame marks on the bottom edge of the building's walls and on the pavement, and a dozen freshly whitewashed, unintelligible quarto-sized pages adhering to the walls, joining the forty or fifty others which here and there flapped in the breeze. The images of the disappeared had themselves disappeared.

Late in 2005, perhaps sensing that the O'Higgins Institute was softening its position and might be prepared to negotiate to move to a new quarters, the government acceded to pressure from a number of sources, and declared the building a Historic Monument with the Institute still within. It was clear now that within the short or mid-term future, the Institute would vacate the premises. So it was in that in 2006 those most closely associated with Londres 38, formed Colectivo 119, to make plans for its future and to persuade, or force, the Institute to vacate.³² Meanwhile the government continued to negotiate with the Institute by offering several attractive sites in exchange for Londres 38, elsewhere in the city.

The recognition of the site as a Historic Monument galvanized the several collectives now associated to the site, bringing to a head both local tensions and those pressures which have always been in tension between the Chilean intellectual and the working-class lefts.³³ Fractures dating back to the early months of the coup reappeared. The educated and middle-class left were criticised for entering into direct negotiations with government. Often well-born, well educated and well-connected, they were clearly familiar with how power worked from the inside, and were prepared to use the advantages of their class position to exploit it. Their critics retaliated, asking how much of the

³² An individual Collective takes responsibility for the maintenance of appropriate action at one or more torture sites in Santiago. Collective 119 takes its name from the 119 people falsely named by the government as having escaped to, and been killed in countries like Brazil and Argentina. The majority of these victims had in fact been held in Londres 38. See also Colectivo 119 pamphlet 'Londres 38: Casa de la Memoria', August 2006.

³³ Much of this section is drawn from an extended discussion with several representatives of rival factions, Hotel Presidente, Santiago, July 2007.

elitist membership of the Communist and Socialist parties had suffered from 1973 when the rank and file began to be rounded up? Why did so many abandon their posts and go into safe exile? And why did so many return, they asked, only when it was safe, when it was the workers who suffered the most?³⁴ The educated leftist groups responded that the working-class distrust towards the ‘establishment’ —whatever political colour it was—, inimical by definition to the workers’ interests, was destructive and stupid. The uneducated left, they responded, would be content to destroy the evidence of cells or prisons if they were allowed to build a house on the site. But only peaceful protest and patient negotiations would convince the government that the Institute should be persuaded to leave. Some of the tensions were entangled in the interpretation of the future. Trying to smash in the front door of Londres 38, as some were demanding, would be highly counter-productive. One polarity held that free education and health benefits should be granted not only to the victims of repression, but to their children, and to all working class children. If there was to be a central archive of historical research, then what would its purpose be? Who would control it? In the longest term, the debate centred on the question: would the inevitable vacating of the building by the Institute be a victory for local activism and the local historical struggles of the workers, or a victory for memory, truth, justice set in a context of international human rights?

Unexpectedly, in February 2006 the Institute put the building for sale. The Collective Londres 38 claimed victory for itself, but the more conservative newspaper *La Nación* put it down rather to the efforts of the families of the disappeared and to its survivors who, some held, had distanced themselves from the Collective.³⁵ The government announced that it had become the owner of Londres 38 and intended that it house a yet-to-be-established Institute for Human Rights.

At once an acrimonious debate broke out. Almost everyone, it seemed, opposed the plan. The widening gaps between the leftist factions were temporarily closed. In March 2006 the Collective invited all interested parties to a meeting to decide the preferred purpose. Colectivo 119, which had changed its name to Londres 38 Colectivo, demanded that the building should become a public space dedicated to the history of the Pinochet repression and the memories of those who had suffered within its walls.³⁶ A participatory process should define its uses, after

³⁴ Charismatic MIR leader Miguel Enriquez’ wife, for example, was spirited out of Chile to exile in France; but when she returned in 2003 to invite support to having declared their former home as a historic monument, she was abruptly told by a young student leader: ‘let it alone. That kind of past is all gone now.’

³⁵ *La Nación*, 12 October 2005.

³⁶ The material in this paragraph was drawn from the pamphlet ‘Londres 38. Un Espacio Para La Memoria’, Colectivo Londres 38, 10 December 2007.

which the state should have no role beyond ensuring its management was public, democratic and participatory. The collective outlined a planned memorial on the street itself: 300 black and white granite tiles, imitating the floor inside the building, which victims could glimpse through the bottom of their blindfolds. Further, 96 iron placards would list the names ages and political affiliations of the 85 men and 13 women who were executed in the building. On the façade numeral 38 would be superimposed upon numeral 40.

No sooner had the divisions closed in opposition to the government's plans, than they re-opened again on the alternative future of the building. One end of the spectrum presented a coffee shop selling postcards, souvenirs and publications relating to the repression specifically and generally. At the other end was an empty silent building, just bare, and rooms for silent contemplation. The 'coffee shop' group, maintained its opponents, were no more than propagandists without political theory. All they had was slogans to attract the uneducated and uninformed.

Still almost nobody opposed to the O'Higgins Institute had actually entered the building. Many speculated on what it might contain: doubtless the instruments of torture like the *parilla* would have long been removed, but what traces might have been overlooked? The Institute, as the Pinochetistas had done on vacating other centres, would certainly have whitewashed the walls to erase any scribbled messages; but would they be recoverable, as some had been deciphered elsewhere?

Which form, indeed, should the opening ceremony take? The original group of survivors and families wanted a quiet event. Only those most intimately connected, they demanded, should at first be admitted to exorcise memories, conduct rituals, and prepare the building for whatever was to follow. Tensions aroused again as the Ministry of National Assets announced that, contrary to the wishes of everyone else, it would take charge of the formal opening and present it as a major media event. The collectives debated whether to boycott the event. In the interests of harmony most people decided, while still making their displeasure known to the Ministry, that they would be present on the day. Roberto D'Orival Briceño argued that the whole collectivist movement must rise above local jealousies. 'Let's not ascribe any motivations to anyone, good or bad, we merely assume the right to have a voice. We have responsibility to human rights both national and international.'³⁷

Four o'clock on the afternoon of the tenth of December 2007, marked ironically both as the day of Pinochet's death and International Human Rights Day, was set for the building's opening by the Minister for National Assets. During the morning, though, rumours had spread that the

³⁷ Interview, 10 December 2007.

Minister, hearing of a planned counter-demonstration, had postponed the formal opening until further notice. By three p.m., few in the crowd gathering outside knew what was going to happen, or when. By four, a crowd of a hundred people stood outside awaiting developments, chatting, listening to speeches and performers. The building's windows and door on the bottom floor were wide open, but members of the Londres 38 Collective stood outside barring entry to all but, it seemed, their own. By four thirty the numbers of people being allowed to walk in and out of the main entrance were increasing. Suddenly a spokesperson for the Colectivo announced defiantly that since the Minister had forbidden entry, those present should 'force' their way in. 'We must repudiate the Ministry, compañeros, for [all] government still represents the long repression of the workers. The entry of us urban unionists will be like a vigil, but something more. Treat it with the utmost respect, but move in'. A hundred people surged forward.³⁸

The first to enter passed a man weeping uncontrollably. He was being comforted by a woman while a video photographer held them in close focus. At first his sobs seemed the only sound to disturb the reverent silence. Little by little, as people filed past them and dispersed, different agendas began to emerge. Silences became hushed conversations. In this unique moment each affected family was claiming a space for its own truth while others were exploring or searching for minute evidences of torture. A voice from another room was asking what the room was used for. In twos and threes people were still spreading through the dark upper rooms. In a small chamber on the third floor, perhaps once the bedroom of a domestic servant, a voice asked in the darkness —do you see these marks on the wall where the *parilla* stood? Another man was examining the upper walls of this sinister whitewashed chamber with a torch, looking for painted over messages. At street level, in the marble-tiled entrance hall, a discussion was beginning as to what should happen today and in the future. On the second floor, in a gracious but shuttered room facing Londres street, a woman was weeping as she explained to bystanders that, with her son, a journalist friend had stood on this very spot. The two prisoners could hear their footsteps echoing on the wooden floor. As they faced the light they could dimly perceive the shape of the windows through their blindfolds. The journalist had survived, her son was murdered. His photograph hung from her neck. She turned to the back wall and wept afresh. The debate from the ground floor, where a speaker was inviting the audience to repudiate any actions of the Ministry of National Assets, was growing louder. On the first floor a man was handing out incense sticks to hold as individuals in gathering numbers processed up and down the staircase, into the bathrooms, peered down the stair well, explored the walled courtyard. The man searching above the picture rail in the second floor torture

³⁸ Recording made by Peter Read; For an account of these events by Collective Londres 38, see <http://londres38.cl/Actividades%20a%20mayo%202006.htm>

chamber found what, perhaps, he had been looking for: a tiny pot-pourri of flowers, dated 2005. On the bottom floor a man and woman were earnestly examining the tiny floor tiles of the pantry, evidently searching for something they expected to be there. Outside this tiny space, above the door frame hanging on a nail, someone had found a bunch of keys overlooked by the departing Institute. Down one side of the dining room, in a wooden cupboard, were the empty shelves of the former library. Typewritten pages inside the door listed the military histories indicating that the readings of the Institute's club members were very conservative indeed.

Voices, now louder and more passionate, were echoing up the stairs showing that the privileged role of Colectivo 119, for several years in control of the space outside the building, was under serious challenge. The drama of the afternoon was precipitating a resolution of tensions months or years in the making. Entry into the building, for the first time for most of the crowd, had released long held emotions as to —*who in the end holds the emotional and moral rights to this building?* A speaker from outside the dominant collective demanded to be heard. 'Why do you keep excluding us?' he demanded. 'We are constantly being discredited, but this sort of exclusion and behind-the-hand criticism can go on no longer. We need to combine not only to decide the building's future, but the whole future of the left in Chile.' A woman shouted that her sister had been disappeared in Londres 38, that she would never allow the building to become a coffee shop for tourists. '*Londres 38 must be a house of memory!*' Disturbing though the din was for the mourners upstairs, the released emotions of survivors, families, human rights activists, students and unionists were understandable. Escaping here were not only the emotions of the terror but the years of frustration at the Institute, at the government, at the other collectives, at each other.

Abruptly the focus shifted elsewhere again. Two torture victims of the DINA, Erika Hennings and Jorge Flores, presumably invited by the Ministry, had entered the former dining room on the first floor. People began to gather round them from all over the building in a semi circle of respectful silence. A dozen video and still cameras captured what was to follow.

Both Hennings and Flores, it seemed, had been apprehended in the first weeks of the coup, less for their direct connection with MIR, less out of complicity, more because in these early days the DINA made multiple arrests as an instrument of intimidation.

Flores, only fifteen or sixteen at the time, began to speak of the authorities and himself.³⁹ Lying handcuffed on the floor, he heard the 'sounds of liberty', the chatter of pedestrians on the pavement in the

³⁹ See also a report in La Nación, featuring Flores' story, www.lanacion.cl/prontus_noticias/site/artic/20051011/pags/20051011200809.html. This summary of the narratives is taken from a recording made by the authors.

street so close. A few prisoners, he recalled, had mattresses to sleep on, most had to use the floor. Since he was young and unaggressive, if the guards ran out of handcuffs or blindfolds when new prisoners arrived, he was left free or sighted. The guards, he recalled, were young and mostly conscripts. Flores was given a number and told he was in 'a military unit'. The prisoners were held on the floor in what he called the 'common room', the room where he stood. Several times he was summoned upstairs for interrogation and torture, and once sent down again because there was no room for him in the chamber. How good it was to be reunited with the prisoners again. The second time he was certain, from the conversations around him, that he was about to be exterminated. The phone rang. His interrogator politely said 'Yes colonel' several times. Next day he was released having known neither the reason for his capture nor release.⁴⁰

Erika Hennings held different and blacker memories. On arrival all the prisoners were given a letter as well as a number. In macabre humour they joked that 'A', for instance, must mean 'to be asphyxiated'. Names were used as well in the roll calls, so she always knew who had been admitted, who had left, or been killed. Several times she was summoned upstairs and tortured. Twice a day prisoners were led to the toilets, turned round rapidly to disorientate them, then ordered to turn right. Those who stumbled or were uncertain of the direction were beaten for demonstrating their evasion of military service.

Hennings had visited the building several times before, most significantly with members of a judicial hearing at which two principal DINA authorities, Moreno and Krasnoff, were brought face-to-face with their accusers in sitio.⁴¹ Nevertheless today's occasion was as traumatic for her as it was moving for her audience. She explained that her teenage daughter, standing white-faced beside her, had never before entered the building. Though psychological torture and beatings took place in the room where she stood, her worst memories was hearing footsteps all day echoing up and down *el caracol*, the wooden staircase, waiting to be called upstairs to what Flores had called 'the extermination room'. *When you were called upstairs, you knew*. Two interrogators worked in the office upstairs adjoining the torture chamber.

Hennings' husband, disappeared some days later from Londres 38, defied orders not to remove his blindfold and crept across the room to see her: *it was an act of love I'll never forget*. Someone had been thrown from —she pointed— that window. Another prisoner had arrived so badly beaten up that he died almost immediately before them.

⁴⁰ It was not until the 1990s that Flores discovered his prison had been Londres 38. During the judicial investigations he had learned that a prisoner in Londres 38 had hidden in the bathroom, been discovered and killed. He recalled that event with terrible clarity and realised that he, too, must have been held here.

⁴¹ Identified in Raimundo Pinto's Testimony as Marcelo Luis Manuel Moreno Brito, Army Officer, and Miguel Krasnoff Martchenko, Army Officer, <http://londres38cl/Testimonios.htm>

Interrogations were made more difficult because of the changing moods of their captors. *It was hard to plan a strategy*. Krasnoff was cold and intellectual, Moreno Brito ‘just a savage’. Prisoners scribbled tiny notes on the wall. Surely, she conjectured, if one scrubbed the layers of paint off and looked carefully, the words might appear again. *They must be there*. Some prisoners had been hanged from the staircase. Hennings glanced up at it briefly, shuddered and murmured, *I can’t go there*. She asked that the room be cleared so that she could be alone for a few minutes with her daughter.

The fate of Londres 38 —as the government proposed to the Institute for Human Rights as a ‘coffee shop’, where images and tales of the trauma suffered are traded for a handful of coins, or as a bare and solemn witness to a tragic past— is still hanging in the balance. What will eventually become should remain here this building become depends both on political pressure applied by the current Right wing forces in power, and on the internal divisions within the Left, torn by class, generational and political party difference-related divisions.

Chile’s political landscape holds few of the old pre-1973 features that framed and defined the struggles of the Right and the Left. Then, Salvador Allende’s vision of a peaceful socialist revolution had both united the conservative elements, including the Armed Forces, in opposition, and forged bonds of comradeship between the intellectual and working classes. Then, the Chilean economy lay in tatters, social chaos reigned in the streets, terrorist acts from para-military groups from both sides tore at the fabric of political life. Through these life-and-death struggles for the soul of Chile, two polarities appeared: some glimpsed the promise of a better, more just society, others of a Marxist hell. There was little room for a soft complacent middle-ground.

Today, Chilean political society of the new millennium, on the other hand, holds none of the utopian or apocalyptic visions of 35 years ago. The recovery of the economy and the restoration of democracy have tempered the old antagonisms. Since the transition to democracy, successive coalition governments of the centre-left have sought to promote a political culture of consensus. Some of the Right have shifted to the Centre, many of the Left have either splintered into cause-specific movements, or been left clinging to the tired slogans and Cold War politics of the old working-class struggles. The events at Londres 38 demonstrated that the chasm between the intellectual and the working-class left has never been greater. For on the collapse of the international left, many intellectuals have found a new home in the international human rights movement – of which the recovery of the torture sites is a prime concern. But for the working-class and industrial left, the social and economic issues – if not the political climate - that prompted Allende’s vision of

a socialist revolution remain. Whatever the outcome, Londres 38 will remain a contested space not only because of the different factions competing for ownership of the personal memories it holds within. Nor simply because of the contesting visions of how torture sites should be memorialized. But because in today's Chile, there are few spaces where the conflicting agendas of the Left still hold both symbolic and material meaning. Struggles for control over Londres 38 both resonate with the unresolved party political tensions of the late Allende years and with the frustrations of the Left which has few real political spaces in which to articulate its many grievances, from within and without.

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