Struggling with the past: the human rights movement and the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina (1983-2006)
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4. ‘El Olimpo for the neighbourhood’: local involvement in the construction of memory

On 4 October 2004, an agreement was signed that transferred the control over the former secret detention centre *El Olimpo* from the Ministry of Interior to the City of Buenos Aires. The agreement ordered the relocation of the Federal Police occupying the plot, and determined that the place would become a ‘site of recovery of the historical memory of the crimes committed by state terrorism and for the promotion of human rights and democratic values’. El Olimpo was located at the heart of the middle-class neighbourhood of Floresta, in the western part of the city of Buenos Aires. From the mid-1990s onwards, several neighbourhood and human rights organizations, accompanied by survivors of El Olimpo and relatives of victims of that detention centre, mobilized to pressure national authorities to relocate the police and transform the place into a memory site. The active participation of neighbours in the struggle to expel the police, several of whom had lived near the building during the dictatorship, constituted a distinguishing element in this struggle. Another feature was the fact that all activities took place in the neighbourhood of Floresta instead of on the traditional location of the human rights organizations, the Plaza de Mayo.

Both the involvement of community members and the localized character of the struggle to recover a former secret detention centre were important new phenomena in Buenos Aires, starting in the mid-1990s. In several neighbourhoods of the city and some municipalities of the province of Buenos Aires, committed neighbours, accompanied by members of human rights organizations, developed initiatives to recover the memory of state terrorism in their localities. Experiences ranged from the recollection of information on the disappeared of the neighbourhood to the organization of commemorative activities for the victims. In the neighbourhoods and municipalities where secret detention centres had functioned during the military dictatorship, activities focused on denouncing their presence and searching for means to convert them into memory sites. These initiatives to recover secret detention centres were part of a broader phenomenon that was not limited to Buenos Aires but was also visible in other parts of the country. Several of the local groups that emerged in the neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires were also influenced by the events of 19 and 20 December 2001, when citizens took to the streets *en masse* and new forms of collective action developed that had a strong territorial and anti-institutional character.

The growing diversity of actors in the struggle for truth, justice and memory deepened the debates over the past but also enhanced the potential for conflict. In this chapter, I will describe how different local groups initiated a struggle for memory in constantly shifting relations with institutional politics, and often in conflict with each other. I will explore this through a detailed analysis of the process that converted El Olimpo from a ‘site of impunity’ into a memory site. The case gives insights into the construction of memory at

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137 Convenio N° 27/GCABA/SC/04, Boletín Oficial de la Ciudad Autónoma de Buenos Aires, 18 October 2004 (núm. 2047)
the local level, shows the impact of official policies and national developments on local politics, and sheds light on the dilemmas that arise when trying to construct memory with a multiplicity of actors. The first part of the chapter shows that the initiatives in the neighbourhood of Floresta were part of a broader phenomenon of ‘decentralization’ of memory to the neighbourhoods. The second part focuses more specifically on El Olimpo, and analyses the different initiatives that arose to re-signify El Olimpo when the police was still occupying the building. Finally, the official decision to relocate the police initiated a new phase in the debate, which will be discussed in the last part of the chapter. Examples from other experiences of converting former detention centres into memory sites show that the dilemmas that arise in this context are not exclusive for the Olimpo case.

From the plaza de mayo to the neighbourhoods

The local memory commissions and initiatives that emerged from the mid-1990s onwards were part of a broader transformation in the struggle for truth, justice and memory. As we saw in chapter three, an important part of the human rights movement became increasingly oriented towards remembering the disappeared as individuals rather than as a collective of victims. A parallel development was the growing interest of this sector in ‘materializing’ memory through monuments and other memory marks. The phenomena of ‘individualization’ of the disappeared and of ‘materialization’ of memory through the establishment of markers of memory became visible through the multiple commemorations that were organized in the context of the twentieth anniversary of the military coup. These tributes centred on a particular group of disappeared, such as for example students or hospital employees, and were often accompanied by the placing of a plaque or another commemorative sign. Furthermore, the initiative was often not taken by the human rights organizations, but by former colleagues or study companions of these disappeared persons, many of whom had not been previously active in the struggle for truth, justice and memory.

The local memory commissions that arose within the neighbourhoods were one more expression of this growing diversity of actors and forms of remembering. At the same time, these commissions generally wanted to do more than just organize one single commemoration. They also aimed at reconstructing the memory of the neighbourhood and creating awareness about the crimes that had been committed during the military dictatorship. They had a small-scale and territorial approach but with an explicit agenda of social change. In this sense, they were also inscribed in the broader process of ‘decentralization’ of collective action that was set in motion in the 1990s in response to a growing disillusion with traditional politics. In this section I will show how the emergence of local memory commissions was one of a number of broader developments both in the struggle for truth, justice and memory and in the field of collective action, and I will discuss the ways in which these commissions contributed to the construction of a collective memory of the dictatorship.

New voices and new places for truth, justice and memory

In November 1994, the Faculty of Architecture of the city of La Plata organized a homage to Carlos de la Riva, ‘Fabiolo’, victim of the Triple A and the first of a long list of disappeared and assassinated students and professors of the faculty. This activity initiated a ‘boom of commemorations’ (Da Silva Catela 2001: 183-6). What characterized these commemorations
was that they clearly delineated ‘symbolic frontiers and group membership’, as Da Silva Catela (2001: 173) formulates it. She writes that: ‘If, in a general way, people talk about “the disappeared”, these tributes make explicit which disappeared one wants to talk about and remember through them’. The necessity to regroup the disappeared according to their activity at the moment of their disappearance constituted ‘an important and innovative difference within the field of collective expressions that seek to, among other things, give back their identity to these individuals…’ Thus, whereas in the 1980s actions were oriented towards denouncing the disappearances as a collective drama, these new commemorations were about remembering the disappeared for who they had been, reconstructing them as individuals with determinate social and political identities (Diáz 2002: 39).

Many of these initiatives were also intended to create a collective consciousness about the repression and to denounce the consequences of impunity. Therefore, they frequently resulted in the erection of monuments and the placing of plaques, the planting of trees or the painting of murals, which both rendered a tribute to the disappeared while denouncing their absence. The commemoration in the Faculty of Architecture in La Plata resulted in the creation of a monument. In other faculties of both La Plata and Buenos Aires and in several secondary schools, plaques were placed with the names of the victims of these institutions. Other markers of memory have been murals, as in the Faculty of Veterinary Sciences, or photographs as in the Faculty of Natural Sciences, both in La Plata (Da Silva Catela 2001: 194). ‘Urban marks’ (Díaz 2002: 35) to remember the victims of repression, repudiate the facts or denounce places in public space also multiplied from 1996 onwards. In the city of La Plata, a municipal decision was adopted in 1996 that ordered the signposting of all the places that had been used as secret detention centres. The plaques were collocated three years later on two police buildings (Da Silva Catela 2001: 208–9). In the city of Buenos Aires, in March 1996, a small square in the neighbourhood of San Telmo was renamed ‘Plaza Rodolfo Walsh’, after the disappeared journalist and Montonero Rodolfo Walsh. That same year, on the anniversary of the Madres de Plaza de Mayo on 30 April 1996, a street in the fancy area of Puerto Madero was renamed Azucena de Villaflor as a tribute to the first president of the Madres disappeared in December 1977 (Feitlowitz 1998: 191).138

The neighbourhood commissions were part of these new expressions of memory. Among their members were also persons who did not have a previous history of militancy in human rights organizations, although these initiatives rarely came from persons who had not personally known a story of repression. As Pablo, member of one of the first groups working on memory explains:

We started […]. Afterwards, people of the neighbourhood who did not have anything to do with us or with this story saw us work and people started to join us. But the initiative, the impulse always comes from somebody who has to do with this story, who was politically active or…in the case of Vecinos de San Cristóbal, something similar occurs, I know three who have a recognized activism in the Association of Ex Detained Disappeared, the other one is now in Familiares […] and [another person], who has always been there and was a lawyer for political prisoners, and then neighbours have joined. (Interview PL 22.10.2004)

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138 The renaming of the street after Azucena de Villaflor was part of a broader initiative of renaming the streets of Puerto Madero with names of well-known Argentine women. See also: Página/12, 09.03.1996.
Pablo himself was once a member of the Marxist PRT-ERP and a political prisoner. In another of these pioneer commissions, four Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo were among the initiators as well as several other relatives, brothers and sisters and former companions of militancy of the disappeared.

In Buenos Aires one of the first commissions that started to work on memory in their neighbourhoods was the Comisión por la Memoria, la Verdad y la Justicia de Liniers, Villa Luro y Mataderos. These three neighbourhoods are located in the southwestern part of the city of Buenos Aires and constitute one voting district. It started as an initiative of inhabitants of Liniers and Mataderos, particularly of persons who carried out militant activities in these neighbourhoods in the 1970s, and four Madres de Plaza de Mayo living there. The commission was created after the commemoration of the twentieth anniversary of the coup. After the massive demonstration on the Plaza de Mayo, they felt the need to transpose memory activities from the Plaza de Mayo to their neighbourhoods, ‘because’, as Teresa, one of the founding members of the commission and a militant in the 1970s, explains:

Here they walked, here they thought, because here they dreamt, because here they went to school, because here they worked. Plaza de Mayo is something of the government, but this is theirs. They were here, like we are here. This is our territory. So the homage has to be here, so that this neighbourhood will know that there were people who thought, who wanted something else, and for wanting and thinking differently, they are not here anymore. (Interview TB 20.11.2006)

They realized their first public activity on 24 November 1996. It consisted of planting trees for the disappeared of the neighbourhood on a central square of Liniers, and placing a commemorating plaque and a monument. They have repeated this activity every year, published a book with the stories of the disappeared in 2004, organized commemorations in front of the houses of the victims, painted a mural and have recently also initiated educational workshops in the schools of the three neighbourhoods.139

Another neighbourhood commission that initiated activities related to the military dictatorship in 1996 was the commission Encuentro por la Memoria, working in the neighbourhoods of San Telmo, La Boca and Barracas in the south of Buenos Aires. The group was composed of about ten persons, several of whom had been militants in the 1970s, and who were performing social and political activities in the neighbourhood La Boca. In the mid-1990s the group decided to work on memory in the neighbourhoods of San Telmo, La Boca and Barracas. Their first public activities concentrated on denouncing the presence of a former secret detention centre in San Telmo, Club Atlético. Club Atlético was once a huge old building located along Paseo Colón, a central avenue in the southeast of the city. Between February 1976 and December 1977, approximately 1,500 persons were held captive in the cellars of the building. In 1977, the military government destroyed it to construct a highway passing above Paseo Colón. Survivors of Club Atlético had been claiming for years that a secret detention centre had functioned under the highway, and had been working on a historical reconstruction of the centre. In 1996 Encuentro por la Memoria gave visibility to these denunciations by organizing activities under the highway together with the survivors of Club Atlético, relatives of the victims and human rights organizations. In order to mark

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139 Comisión por la Memoria, la Verdad y la Justicia de Liniers, Mataderos y Villa Luro, Por la Memoria (Buenos Aires, 2004); Interview EC 09.11.2006; Interview TB 20.11.2006.
the place where Club Atlético had once existed, they constructed a totem, which they placed on one of the columns of the highway. The totem was destroyed several times but they replaced it and later also organized other artistic expressions on that location. The group has also carried out a thorough investigation on the disappeared of the three neighbourhoods, reconstructing not only lists of names but also life stories, and organized commemorative activities in front of the houses where they disappeared.  

The third commission that was created in this period was the commission Vecinos de San Cristóbal contra la Impunidad, working in the neighbourhood of San Cristóbal in the southeast of the city. In 1997, a group of neighbours gathered to participate in an escrache against Héctor Vergéz, a man who had been one of the torturers in the La Perla concentration camp in Córdoba. On the day of the escrache, Vergéz left the neighbourhood and the group dissolved. According to Silvina, who participated in this first escrache, they didn't think it was necessary to create a new organization working on human rights if several already existed. However, in 2001 H.I.J.O.S. invited them to participate in another escrache against an ex-commissioner living in the neighbourhood and who had been a member of the para-police group Triple A in the 1970s. After the escrache, which took place in September 2001, the neighbours remained organized as Vecinos de San Cristóbal contra la Impunidad. Like the commission of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro and the group Encuentro por la Memoria, they proposed to work on the memory of the neighbourhood. They denounced the presence of a former detention centre in their neighbourhood and carried out research on the disappeared of the neighbourhood of San Cristóbal. This resulted in a commemorative activity on 20 March 2004, during which they marched along the main avenue of San Juan from the street of Virrey Cevallos to Boedo, and planted seventy trees on both sides of the avenue. Each tree represents a disappeared or assassinated person of the neighbourhood. At the foot of each tree a plaque gives information about the disappeared person.

The decentralization of memory and collective action

The different local initiatives to reconstruct memory in the neighbourhoods were clearly inscribed in the broader struggle for truth, justice and memory, and its initiators identified with the aims of the historical human rights organizations. At the same time, however, what did differentiate these neighbourhood initiatives from the approach of the historical human rights organizations was their decentralized character. They focussed on territories and on groups that were not necessarily within the reach of the historical human rights organizations, which traditionally used to mobilize on the Plaza de Mayo and make political claims on the state. The neighbourhood commissions wanted to take the subject of the recent past to an environment where people had been marked by the military dictatorship and the repression but were not accustomed to speaking about it. Thus Pablo, member of Encuentro por la Memoria explains:

...we did not propose big things, we proposed something concrete, our point of departure was the major lack of information and the need for society at large to take over these claims [of the human rights movement]; that it would not be the human rights organizations anymore, but the whole society who, through its organizations, its different expressions, would take over the subject of the disappeared, of memory. So we thought that it was a qualitative change: it is not only family members of the disappeared, the intention was to try to put the subject in a concrete social environment that the disappeared activists had passed through. (Interview PL 22.10.2004)

These objectives were very similar to those of the organization H.I.J.O.S. when they introduced the escraches. Like the neighbourhood initiatives, H.I.J.O.S. wanted to generate a different consciousness among 'common' citizens. They wanted to reach sectors of society that were not necessarily informed or concerned about the recent past and who chose to go to the neighbourhoods instead of to the Plaza de Mayo. In this context, it is important to notice that the escraches went through important transformations over the years, one of which was the revalorization of the work in the neighbourhoods, especially in Buenos Aires. The escraches originated in this city, rather spontaneously and in joint collaboration with neighbours, especially with the group Encuentro por la Memoria. However, H.I.J.O.S. soon received widespread media coverage, which led them to increasingly prioritize actions that would guarantee media attention above their work in the neighbourhoods. In 2001, after a number of badly-organized activities which resulted in poorly-attended events, the branch in Buenos Aires seriously revised this conception of the escraches and decided to 'go back to the neighbourhood, carry out militant actions from door to door, talk with the neighbours, not depend on the media and many other things'. This resulted in pre-escrache activities, extended over a period of three months, and which were meant to inform the neighbourhood and stimulate the participation of community members in the organization of the escrache. H.I.J.O.S.-Capital also revived the slumbering Mesa de Escrache Popular, which used to be a support group of the commission of escraches of H.I.J.O.S., and

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142 Encuentro por la Memoria was among the first groups to organize its own escraches in 1997, at a time when the escraches of H.I.J.O.S. had not yet acquired visibility. In these first escraches, Encuentro por la Memoria attempted to favour the work in the neighbourhood above the act of repudiation itself. However, they stopped organizing escraches when this political practice became increasingly mediatised through its association with H.I.J.O.S. (Interview PL interview 22.10.2004).

143 'Documento de la Comisión de escrache de H.I.J.O.S., Noviembre de 2001' in: Colectivo Situaciones, Genocida en el barrio. Mesa de Escrache Popular (Buenos Aires 2002). The decision to revise the escraches was also part of a more general process of revision of H.I.J.O.S.-Capital after an internal crisis. It also resulted in the decision to accept the participation of persons who were not of the so-called 'four origins' (children of disappeared, assassinated, former political prisoners and exiles). In practice, since the beginning of H.I.J.O.S., young persons had been participating in the activities of the organization, but they were not allowed to participate in the weekly assemblies where all the decisions were taken. They constituted a so-called frente de apoyo. From 2001, this support group became an integral part of the organization, its members being allowed to participate in the decision-making process. This was called Población abierta. In some regional sections of H.I.J.O.S. Población abierta had been accepted from the start, as was the case in Córdoba and in Rosario (Bonaldi 2006: 174-6; Interview ET 26.05.2003).

144 Several activities were organized during these three months. The activities started with informing the neighbourhood through posters, folders and talks with the neighbours. Later, activities to inform people about the history of the dictatorship were organized. These could be conferences, an open radio programme in the neighbourhood, a series of movies, Teatro por la Identidad, different artistic groups with a well-known support for the human rights movement and their cause, etc. (Fieldnotes, 20.11.2004; Interview RI 22.11.2004; Interview LL 08.12.2004).
transformed it into an independent entity unifying all neighbourhoods, social and political organizations that were interested in participating in the organization of an escrache. In this new concept, H.I.J.O.S. would become only one of many organizing actors. Indeed, the Mesa de Escrache Popular generally had thirty to forty participants working on the organization of an escrache, whose membership included only up to ten from H.I.J.O.S. The mesa grew increasingly independent over time, and from 2004 onwards H.I.J.O.S. was no longer even participating.145

Both the Mesa de Escrache Popular and the commissions working on memory in their neighbourhoods chose for a small-scale approach, and set themselves concrete and feasible objectives. Reflecting on the territorial character of their commission, Eliana, member of the commission of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro explains: ‘…the neighbourhood aspect, I think it has to do with the fact that beyond remembering this people in their natural places, I think it makes it more dynamic to be able to work at the level of the neighbourhood, it gives it a more realistic scale, more accessible […]. It is a bit like the politics of decentralization that is used today, to be able to work with a smaller unit, more operational’ (Interview EC 09.11.2006). Instead of trying to acquire power through ‘taking the state’ or ‘transforming the institutions’, the goals were more modest, as is expressed in the following quote from a member of the Mesa de Escrache Popular. In her evaluation of an escrache organized against a priest in 2004, she stated that she hoped that the escrache had contributed to:


Picture 8 and 9. Pre-escrache activities for the escrache to the priest Hugo Mario Bellavigna in the neighbourhood of La Paternal, 20 November 2004.
To a great extent, this transformation of the landscape of social protest in Argentina was a consequence of the crisis of representative democracy. Traditional political parties failed to contain political aspirations and were often considered corrupt, inoperative and grandiloquent. Political parties were also seen as sources of division and fragmentation, especially the leftist parties that participated in different forms of social protest and collective organization. On the subject of leftist political parties Teresa, member of the commission of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro stated: ‘The issue here is the political parties of the left, they are very extremist, but not operational. They always see a problem everywhere (le ven la quinta pata al gato), you see, and I am not into this anymore. Everything is bad, they never see the good side’ (Interview TB 20.11.2006). Political parties in general also failed to connect to the daily reality of common citizens. Referring to the political parties that were active in the Law Faculty where he was studying, Manuel, a member of an independent student group explained: ‘…they do not emerge from daily reality, these folders (of the political parties), these slogans, rather they come from a general programme that was created outside the faculty and that is imposed on the student population. So you are talking about things that do not respond to your concrete needs. And this makes you look like as if you’re from another planet’ (Interview MB 25.10.2003).

Aspirations for social change became increasingly channelled through alternative forms of collective action that organized outside traditional political party structures, had a territorial character, and stated concrete demands. Their internal organizational structure was generally horizontal and decision-making was based on consensus. This ‘organizational and expressive format’ (Svampa 2005: 232) would also become common within the broader movement of unemployed that emerged in the mid-1990s and gained strength and visibility in the context of the economic and institutional crisis of 2001-2002. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the military coup in March 2001 was strongly marked by the context of economic recession. Social and political organizations spoke of ‘economic genocide’ and demands for a change in economic policies were central in the commemoration. At the main event on the Plaza de Mayo the Madres LF stated that ‘the struggle of our children is our struggle’, an assertion that re-affirmed the revolutionary ideals of the generation of the disappeared. The ceremony culminated with the words of the leader of the Zapatistas, Subcomandante Marcos, which inscribed the struggle for truth, justice and memory in a broader Latin American search for alternatives to neoliberalism and representative democracy. Multiple commemorative activities were organized both at the local level of Buenos Aires and throughout the country, thus, in Lorenz’s (2002: 96) words, ‘repeating the phenomenon of 1996’.

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146 See also chapter three.
147 See also chapter three.
This state of mobilization continued throughout 2001, and reached a climax at the end of the year, when on 19 and 20 December 2001 people took to the streets. The protests were a direct response to a discourse pronounced by former President De la Rúa in which he declared a state of siege after acts of plundering in cities of the interior and in the suburbs of Buenos Aires. Argentines responded with huge protests everywhere, the famous caceralozos – people banging on pots and pans – that started in the neighbourhoods and ended on the Plaza de Mayo. These protests were heavily repressed, but also led to the fall of President Fernando De la Rúa and his government. The following year was characterized throughout by the emergence of all kinds of social and political organizations whose binding slogan was: Que se vayan todos (Let them all leave), asking for all the politicians to leave the scenery. Among them were the movements of unemployed, the different experiences of fábricas recuperadas, factories broken and abandoned by their owners in the context of the crisis and that were taken over by their workers, and numerous cultural groups and alternative media.

One of the major forms of protest that emerged in the wake of the December days were the asambleas barriales, or popular assemblies that were constituted in all the neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires and in some of the localities of the urban periphery. They were generally composed of middle- to lower class inhabitants of the neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires and appealed to heterogeneous groups with varied aspirations, but bound by a generalized rejection of representative democracy (Dinerstein 2003: 187-200; Svampa 2005: 264-6; Talpin 2007: 205-10).

The popular assemblies participated actively in the anniversary of the military coup on 24 March 2002, and their presence contrasted with the absence of signs and members of the traditional political parties (Svampa 2005: 23). In the neighbourhoods, these assemblies became the main form of collective organization in 2002. This influenced the work of the existing memory commissions in different ways. Silvina, member of Vecinos de San Cristóbal, recalls that some people left the group to participate in the popular assemblies (Interview SB 12.11.2004). Encuentro por la Memoria decided to get involved in the popular assembly of Plaza Dorrego of the neighbourhood of San Telmo and influence the process from within. Besides promoting social projects for the neighbourhood, they also tried to stimulate an interest for the recent past. They organized special events on 24 March and stimulated the assembly to become a participant in the project to recover Club Atlético (Interview PL 22.10.2004). In general terms, the events of 2001 had a profound impact on public space. In the words of Rafael, member of the Mesa de Escrache Popular, after 2001 ‘the street has never been the same again’. Whereas in previous periods people had often been reluctant to take the streets, they were now constantly organizing all kinds of public activities, the escraches being one of the favourite forms of protest (Interview RI 22.11.2004). The high levels of mobilization and sensibility made it easier for the commissions working on memory to introduce their subject in the neighbourhoods.

Reconstructing the memory of the neighbourhood

The neighbourhood commissions have contributed in different ways to the construction of memory. In the first place, they have importantly contributed to the elaboration of the history of the repression through the compilation of lists of the disappeared and the reconstruction of their life stories. For the commissions that have taken the job, it has implied a great

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148 For a detailed analysis of the plundering in Buenos Aires, see: Auyero 2007.
investigatory effort. The groups Encuentro por la Memoria and Vecinos de San Cristóbal completed the painstaking job of looking through the files of the truth commission. It took both commissions at least a year to go through all the files, because the disappeared had not been denounced per neighbourhood or locality. The disappeared of the capital city were all archived in one big file, and so the commissions had to check the postal codes of these files one by one to see whether they coincided with the postal codes of their neighbourhoods. Other sources of information were the newspapers of the period, searching for references of enfrentamientos (armed confrontations) in the neighbourhoods (Interview PL 22.10.2004; Interview SB 12.11.2004). Spreading information about the undertaking on the local radio was another means to recollect information on disappearances in the neighbourhoods. Furthermore, the commemorative activities organized in the neighbourhoods also led to more information and new names (Interview TB 20.11.2006).

Secondly, the neighbourhood commissions contributed to breaking silences within the families of the disappeared. An important part of their work consisted of contacting the families to corroborate information and inform them about their activities. In this context, the members of the commissions received a wide range of reactions. Pablo recalls that when they contacted the families, they found persons ready to talk but others who would rather shut the door (Interview PL 22.10.2004). Similarly, in San Cristóbal, many relatives were reluctant to participate. Silvina recalls that they met siblings who refused to talk because members of the commission had already come three times, a father who asked them how much he should pay, and one elderly man who even threatened to prosecute them if they used the name of his daughter. A threat to which Silvina responded that in that case he would have to do the same to ‘the CONADEP, the Inter American Commission, the Secretary of Human Rights, all those who have names. Because the name of your daughter is in the Nunca más’. But, the opposite also happened, as siblings came all the way from Mendoza, Bahía Blanca or the province of Buenos Aires to assist during the ceremony of planting trees for the disappeared (Interview SB 12.11.2004).

For many of these families, it was not common at all to speak openly about their personal experience of loss and suffering. In this sense, the activities of the commissions could have a disruptive effect, as Eliana, member of the commission of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro, explains:

We have had companions who have written their story and later got sick. We have had one case that was really a psychiatric case. His own problems added to this, yes, yes, it has provoked personal crises, family crises, some mother who fell ill after planting the tree, it has been very mobilizing […]. It is painful, for the elderly people it is very difficult, for the brothers and sisters as well. For the brothers and sisters as well, because besides the fact that it generates things that one sometimes… they seem so simple, but there are issues of guilt, pains, resentments, you see… (Interview EC 09.11.2006)

However, it could also be healing, as it was for S., companion of a disappeared. S. had never told her daughter anything about her father until she was invited to write down her story. After knowing the truth, her daughter could do the necessary genetic exams and adopt the name of her disappeared father (Interview EC 09.11.2006). Conscious of the delicate situation of many relatives, the commission of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro has always paid special attention to giving them sufficient emotional support, and has been
keen on stimulating their participation in the process of reconstruction of the memory of the neighborhood. The book that they have published on the disappeared of the neighborhood is a compilation of the memories of these relatives. In order to help those who had difficulty in writing down their stories, they organized workshops. For some of the relatives, it was the first time that they spoke openly about their experience.

Neighborhood commissions also played a role in reviving the memories of the dictatorship among residents who were not personally affected by the repression through the organization of activities. In order to inform and confront the neighbourhoods of San Telmo, La Boca and Barracas with the absence of several of their former residents, the group Encuentro por la Memoria made posters containing basic information on each disappeared (who he was, whether he had children, what his relation was to the neighbourhood, etc.), and spread them all across the three neighbourhoods. The posters preferably also included a picture so as to 'humanize the disappeared', as Pablo formulates it. They also identified the houses where these persons had been living, and asked the neighbours whether they knew that this or that person had disappeared and how this had occurred. These activities culminated in a march, the ‘march of the torches’, on 25 March 2001, which has been repeated every year since then. The point of departure of the march was the house of one of the disappeared of the neighbourhood. From there the column of people marched through the neighbourhood, stopping at all the houses where someone had disappeared. On the pavement in front of each house, they painted the silhouette of the disappeared on the ground, and wrote down his name. The march ended at Club Atlético. The marking of the houses showed similarities with the ritual of the escraches, where people also wrote slogans on the pavement. The intentions were also similar, in the sense that the marking of the houses of the disappeared was a means to confront the neighbours with their own denial, as Pablo explains: ‘After this, nobody could say that he did not know that in this house there had been a disappeared’ (Interview PL 22.10.2004).149

When reflecting on the presence of community members in the march of the torches, Pablo states that their presence in the march was impressive. Thus he recalls enthusiastically: ‘You could see how, as you were advancing, people you knew from the neighbourhood joined us. People of whom you would say: “I never thought that this person could have some kind of solidarity or some relation to this topic in this sense”’ (Interview PL 22.10.2004). In the neighbourhoods of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro, where the commission has also organized commemorative activities in front of the houses of residents, these commemorative activities have led to new information on the experience of repression in the neighbourhoods. Particularly illustrative of how activities in the neighbourhoods can contribute to the reconstruction of the local history of the repression is the case of San Cristóbal, where the commission was able to identify a former secret detention centre in the neighbourhood, in

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149 The group Encuentro por la Memoria is also one of the main initiators of a new project that has started in the context of the commemoration of the thirtieth anniversary of the military coup in 2006, the baldosas de la memoria (tiles of memory), which are to be placed throughout the city of Buenos Aires. These baldosas de la memoria are colourful tiles with the names of one or several disappeared persons, placed where these persons were disappeared, used to live, study, work or carry out militant actions. A municipal regulation gives the initiative a legal framework. In order to make the work of the neighbourhood commissions more operational in this context, the network Barrios X la Memoria y la Justicia has also been created, uniting the various neighbourhood commissions of the city of Buenos Aires (Interview EC 09.11.2006; Página/12, 02.04.2006).
the street of Virrey Cevallos. A resident living close to a house that was used as a secret detention centre during the dictatorship approached the members of the commission telling them that ‘there was something strange with the place’ (Interview SB 12.11.2004). The commission started to do research and found out that the building had been a secret detention centre during the military dictatorship. They denounced its existence and pressured the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires to expropriate the building.150

The activities to denounce the presence of a former secret detention centre in San Cristóbal have also helped some of the neighbours living close by to speak up about their experiences as witnesses of terror. Silvina recalls the period after the discovery had been made public as follows:

In the beginning, the neighbours wouldn’t say anything. But slowly they started to speak. And there are testimonies that are incredible, how the people…the terror that has made the people keep this to themselves during all these years and then they tell it with such anguish…I would say almost like somebody who makes a declaration of being guilty. […] For instance: in the building where this companion lives (the one who spoke about the secret detention centre), an older woman of seventy years old came down from the building, so a journalist interviewed her, and she said: ‘I have my room stuck to the wall of this house, and I heard the screaming, but I never told

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Picture 11 and 12. Mural made by the popular assembly Plaza Dorrego of the neighbourhood of San Telmo on 24 March 2002. The mural is a typical representation of Argentine history in the post-2001 context. Starting in 1976, it ends in 2001 with the text: ‘do not cover this mural, we are about to change the movie’.
my daughter because I didn’t want her to suffer’. The daughter was there and said to her: ‘mom, you heard?’ And see how many years passed by, twenty-seven years. So she says: ‘as for me, it is the first time, because you, the journalists, are here, that I raise my head to look at this horrible house.’ She said: ‘I am not going to look at it ever again’. (Interview SB 12.11.2004)

Similar accounts are to be found in other neighbourhoods where secret detention centres were located. Several recent experiences of recovery of former secret detention centres show that these kinds of projects can stimulate residents to speak up about their experience. In a number of cases, residents of the neighbourhoods where these former detention centres are located have been either among the initiators of the projects, or have been stimulated to participate. In the case of the secret detention centre of Virrey Cevallos, the commission of Vecinos de San Cristóbal has played a crucial role in achieving the expropriation of the building. In the case of Club Atlético, where an excavation project was started in 2001, the group Encuentro por la Memoria has persistently drawn attention to the presence of this former detention centre. Similarly, in the case of El Olimpo, local groups have played an important role in denouncing the presence of the secret detention centre in the neighbourhood. These local groups show many similarities with the initiatives described in the previous sections. At the same time, secret detention centres have a significance that transcends the neighbourhoods where they are located, and give the local process of memory a particular dynamic that will be discussed in the following sections.

**El Olimpo: from site of impunity to site of memory**

*El Olimpo* functioned as a secret detention centre for six months during the last military dictatorship, from August 1978 until February 1979. It was part of a circuit of several secret detention centres in the city of Buenos Aires: *Garage Azopardo* (1976 until February 1977), *Club Atlético* (February 1976 until December 1977), *El Banco* (December 1977 until August 1978). The link between the centres was that when one of these centres was dismantled, its detainees could be displaced to another recently opened centre.151 El Olimpo was the last one of these centres to be established. According to information from the National Secretary of Human Rights, approximately a thousand persons have passed through El Olimpo, of whom about a hundred persons survived. The name ‘El Olimpo’ was given to the place by the victimizers, who considered themselves to be like the Gods of the Olympus. They had the power to do whatever they wanted with the detainees.152 Eight blocks from the building another secret detention centre was located, *Automotores Orletti*, which functioned prior to the existence of El Olimpo from May until December 1976, according to estimations. It was a crucial instrument in the repression practised in the context of Operation Condor, and was especially used for detainees from the surrounding countries: Uruguayans, Chileans and Bolivians.153

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151 Milva Benítez et.al., ‘De luchas y sobrevivencias’, *Tantas vidas, tantas voces* Año 1, nº2 (March 2001) 9.
In 1984, after the return of democracy, the CONADEP paid a visit to the building of El Olimpo, accompanied by survivors. By the time they visited the place, the part where the detainees had been held had already been destroyed. Nevertheless, compared to other secret detention centres, the information on El Olimpo is quite complete. According to Ana, a former detained-disappeared of El Olimpo and El Banco, the survivors of El Olimpo have been able to reconstruct almost entirely the list of the disappeared of El Olimpo, including their name and surname (Interview AFB2 09.10.2003). After the democratic transition, the building remained in the hands of the Ministry of Internal Affairs. In 1995 it was occupied by the Federal Police, which installed a Planta de Verificación Vehicular on the terrain. This plant was in charge of the technical revision of cars, to check whether they were in good enough condition to be driven. This was an obligatory procedure for anyone owning a car in the city of Buenos Aires.

The former secret detention centre had its impact on the neighbourhood. El Olimpo is located in the heart of the neighbourhood of Floresta, and the building used to be the terminal of a tramway in the 1930s. In those years, it played an important role in the urbanization process of the southwestern part of city, connecting the southwest with the rest of the city of Buenos Aires. From the 1960s onwards, it became the terminal of the bus nº5, a bus line that took people all the way to the centre. Additionally, the building is located on the crossroads of several important streets of the neighbourhood. There are houses located in front of the building, and a primary school is situated fifty metres from it. Gabriela used to live three blocks away from El Olimpo during the military dictatorship and witnessed the transformation from a common building of the neighbourhood into a secret detention centre. She used to go there all the time, until one day she discovered that the bus stop had been removed, in the year 1977. She saw how the buses were re-routed and the building walled in. When she tried to find out why this had happened, she was told that the building would now be used as a garage and was given orders from the police guarding the building not to ask any more questions (Interview GN 09.10.2003).

Gabriela was seventeen years old when this happened. Her testimony shows how the presence of El Olimpo progressively took hold on the direct surroundings and the people living close to the building. She kept returning to it. She did not know what was going on but had the feeling that it was something terrible. Some neighbours had commented that they had seen trucks coming in at night, so she wanted to find out. Typically, when democracy returned and she asked them again, the same neighbours claimed they had not seen anything. According to Gabriela, people knew but were afraid: 'I was not the only one, another companion, [...] also remembers this place perfectly and she knew perfectly well that this was a chosen place. What happened was that you did not have a clue about what happened inside, but you knew that these places were occupied by the police for some reason'. Later in the conversation she returned to the issue and insisted:

But listen, how can it be that you live in front of the place, you see that from one day to another the police is there, they start making constructions inside the building, they start covering everything, how can it not catch your attention? On the corner there was a carpenter in front of El Olimpo, in a place that now is abandoned, the carpenter knew perfectly. Because Mario Villani (a survivor of El Olimpo) told me that they used to whistle at him and ask him things. (Interview GN 09.10.2003)
Several rumours also circulated about El Olimpo, for example that neighbours saw pregnant woman walking in the yard of El Olimpo, that the residents living close to the building saw the trucks coming in and out, but the stories remain confused and contradictory (Interview FM 30.10.2003; Interview AM 30.09.2004). The encounters organized by the different organizations working on the topic of El Olimpo have shown that some neighbours are willing to talk about their personal experiences. Thus in one of the first encounters organized by one of these groups, one resident recalled: ‘I used to pass by El Olimpo at night and heard screaming, and in the beginning I thought it was cats. You couldn’t pass because of the powerful lights on the pavement, or because they wouldn’t let you pass’. Listening to his story, another neighbour recalls: ‘I was studying in the Liceo 2 of Caballito and we used to stop there. They told us it was a madhouse, I was about fifteen, sixteen years old. Ambulances and military cars would go in and out. What we heard gave us a good enough impression of how horrible it was... We stopped going because we thought it was a madhouse and we decided not to go there anymore’. In a video realized in 1996 containing testimonies of persons who lived close to former secret detention centres, among them El Olimpo, many contradictions emerge. Almost all the informants state that they perceived strange movements in and around the building, but when asked directly, they claim that they knew nothing.

These confused memories show how difficult it is to get a grip on what people knew and what they did not know about the repression. This remains one of the most difficult issues when trying to understand the social mechanisms that make possible widespread human rights violations. There are numerous examples of conscious and unconscious denial of, what Cohen (2001: 1) defines as ‘information that is too disturbing, threatening or anomalous to be fully absorbed or openly acknowledged’. Clearly, people use defence mechanisms to avoid knowing. The secrecy of the repression in Argentina made it easier for people to deny what was happening. Still, even witnessing an abduction did not mean that people understood the full meaning of what they saw. Feitlowitz (1998: 151) recalls how one of her informants, Suki, told her about witnessing a kidnap on the streets. Even after having spoken about what she saw, this woman still stated full of doubt: ‘Even now, you have to wonder. Did it happen? Can it be?’ When Feitlowitz reminded her that she saw it with her own eyes, Suki answered: ‘No, we knew nothing. Even now’. Similarly, in a very different context, Bourgois (2005: 111) shows how ‘genocides unfold invisibly in front of ethical witnesses’. While in Auschwitz in 1943 working as a forced labourer, Bourgois’s father did not know about the gas chambers. The extermination of Jews was unfolding before his eyes, yet he did not see it.

At the same time, among the neighbours of Floresta, feelings of shame and guilt for not having been able to do anything regularly emerged in the context of the workshops organized in the neighbourhood. In some cases it was also one of the principal motivations to participate and start initiating activities related to the recent past and particularly El Olimpo. Evangelina for instance, has lived her whole life in the neighbourhood. In 1996, as a director of the primary school located nearby El Olimpo, she initiated a project on memory in her school. She motivates her initiative in the following terms: ‘I was not of those persons who knew what was happening in all its magnitude, and I think that in some way it was a means

154 Vecinos por la Memoria, ‘Registro del Encuentro del 7 de noviembre de 2003’.
to elaborate and appease my lack of participation and presence at that moment’ (Interview EM 20.08.2003). When I asked Gabriela, who has been active in the struggle to give a new meaning to El Olimpo, what this involvement meant to her, she did not want to answer at first. At this point she got very emotional. ‘What I can say…or what I want to say’, she finally continued, ‘is that I took this as an emblem of struggle to repay to a certain extent what I felt as a personal debt. Because when you remain with the heartaches of what you weren’t able to do and the leftovers of all the persons that were taken away you would want to do something, even though it is minimal’ (Interview GN 09.10.2003). For Evangelina, the presence of El Olimpo so close to the school where she was working also had a strong impact: ‘The presence of that building fifty metres from the school was a fundamental motivating source and it still conditions our work. Because it is a permanent presence, with its ghosts, its obscurity, with the fact that it is still occupied by the police, it’s as though every story is revived’ (Interview EM 20.08.2003). Clearly, the presence of El Olimpo has left strong marks on some of the inhabitants of the neighbourhood, which find their expression in silences, confusion, shame, but which have also been a source of activism, as we will see in the following section.

**First initiatives for El Olimpo**

The first activities related to El Olimpo can be traced back to 1994. At that time some neighbours, human rights organizations and political parties started to organize activities in the neighbourhood. However, these were sporadic activities, generally on 24 March, and with very little participation from the neighbourhood. One of the only neighbourhood organizations that participated in these activities was the group Vecinos Solidarios de Floresta, which was created in the early 1990s and consisted mainly of people with some kind of previous political activism record. The first activities were centred on the question of impunity.
With the police occupying the building, it became the symbol of the impunity towards the crimes of the past. Mobilizations in front of El Olimpo had to do with denouncing the presence of the police and making public the fact that it had been a secret detention centre. In 1995, two members of the city council wrote a first law project to transform El Olimpo into a museum of memory (Jelin and Kaufman 2000: 97).

On the twentieth anniversary of the military coup, several activities converged which led to public activity in front of the building, and to what Lorenz (2002: 84-5) calls a controversy between the state and human rights organizations. The two councillors renewed their proposal for a museum of memory in El Olimpo, and together with human rights organizations, victims and neighbours, they invited people to attend a symbolic inauguration of the museum. Furthermore, the primary school located near to El Olimpo had realized an educational project on the military dictatorship for the first time that same year, and proposed to participate in the activity presenting the results of the project. Each class had made a wall-sized painting representing the word ‘Memory’ written with figures of little men. The idea was to put these paintings on the walls of El Olimpo. However, when the group arrived in front of the building, the police had surrounded the block. The presence of police and even of anti-riot armoured trucks created a tense atmosphere and showed the lack of official support for these kinds of initiatives (Jelin and Kaufman 2000: 97).

In general terms, in 1996 there was still little interest among common residents to participate in activities related to El Olimpo. Testimonies of those who participated in those first activities show that the neighbourhood used to look but not to participate. Marta, who participated in some of the activities organized by Vecinos Solidarios de Floresta in 1996, recalls:

We were fifteen souls (gatos locos), the people of the neighbourhood used to look at us very disapprovingly. We did the demonstrations anyway, we used to leave from the side of Orletti and walk to El Olimpo, and the whole way we would make a little bit of noise and the neighbours would get out of their houses making signs at us, insulting us. People only changed their attitude after 2000, or 1999, at least in the part of the neighbourhood where the demonstration used to take place. But until that moment people would ask: ‘What’s their problem?’ (Interview MF 06.10.2004)

Similarly, Evangelina, the director of the primary school, recalls that at that time it was still very difficult to get people to accept her memory proposal. Thus, she explains: ‘I invited eight schools of the neighbourhood to participate in this project in 1996. All of them told me they would consider it but they didn’t even answer the proposal’ (Interview EM 20.08.2004). Evangelina was even denounced to the Secretary of Education by a family who had members working for the Federal Police.

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156 See also: Página/12, 17.09.1995.
157 The accusation did not work out as this family had expected, because it brought the project to the attention of the Secretary of Education of the city of Buenos Aires, who declared it legitimate and part of the curriculum as established by the official authorities. 24 March is now officially included in the curriculum of all primary and secondary schools in the city of Buenos Aires, as the day to remember the military dictatorship (Interview EM 20.08.2004; Lorenz 2004a: 169; Gobierno de la Ciudad de Buenos Aires, 1976-2001. 24 de marzo, día de la memoria (Buenos Aires 2001) 3).
In 1999 a new group was formed that started to work on the topic of El Olimpo from a different perspective. Among its main initiators was Gabriela, who had participated in the activities of El Olimpo from the start. Gabriela was also a member of the Gestión Asociada del Oeste (GAO), a territorial network of research and participatory management, which treated urban issues in the western part of Buenos Aires. The GAO was a creation of the academic institution FLACSO, and was part of a project to implement a methodology of urban planning and management oriented towards increasing citizen’s participation in official policies. Gabriela proposed to include the case of El Olimpo in the GAO network. A group was formed, which is now known as the group Buscando un Destino de Uso Público para el Olimpo (Buscando un Destino), with the purpose of applying the FLACSO methodology on the case of El Olimpo and with the institutional backing of the GAO network. The FLACSO methodology implied the implementation of a decision-making process in which all the actors with an interest in El Olimpo – neighbours, social, political, cultural organizations that might be interested, human rights organizations, professionals, but also official authorities – were invited to participate actively through a number of workshops. These preparatory workshops led to a final workshop where a decision would be made by consensus on what to do with the place. The decision adopted in the final workshop was to be implemented through official measures. As the FLACSO methodology was about urban planning, it implied that El Olimpo would not be treated exclusively as a symbol of state terrorism, but should be considered for what the building represented within the urban context. This meant that, for instance, the fact that the place had previously been a tramway terminal and therefore an important element in the urbanization process of western Buenos Aires, should also be taken into account. Furthermore, because of its location in the city, it should include green space.  

The group of people who started to work on El Olimpo were not all members of GAO. It was a relatively small group in the beginning, mostly composed of people living in the neighbourhoods surrounding Floresta. The group included two students, a teacher, an anthropologist, and an employee of the park of Avellaneda, where an experience of co-governance functioned, involving residents of Floresta and its surroundings and the city government of Buenos Aires. Ages and political affinities varied as well. In 1999 and 2000, the group managed to organize three workshops, inviting the neighbourhood, official institutions, social and political organizations, and human rights organizations. During these workshops, professionals and members of the national and local government were invited to talk about the possibilities of converting the place into a memory site. The participants were also invited to perform several exercises in groups. The exercises were designed to make people reflect collectively on the period of the military dictatorship and often turned into very emotional moments (Interview EC2 23.11.2004; Interview FR 8.10.2004).

Nevertheless, the group encountered a lot of difficulties in gaining acceptance in the neighbourhood. Their initiative was received with hostility and distrust. These difficulties mostly had to do with the institutional aspects of the project. In the first place: GAO was a problem. The network did not have enough legitimacy in the neighbourhood. People did not know the GAO network and looked upon it with distrust. Secondly, the idea of using a methodology was not appreciated. It gave the participants the idea that they were being

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confronted with a project that was already so structured that they had no say in the matter. In the words of Paulina, one of the members of the GAO group: “The people were a bit paralysed when we first used the word “methodology”. They started to become nervous. It was a word that seemed a bad word, we were only proposing a working scheme’ (Interview PB 24.09.2003). Thirdly, the proposal to invite official authorities to discuss the question of El Olimpo was criticized. For many people, including human rights organizations, it was very difficult to accept that a dialogue was possible with official authorities that allowed the impunity for past violations to persist. This criticism grew stronger as the general context of economic, institutional and social crisis also increased. Finally, the human rights organizations also criticized the fact that the GAO project proposed to treat El Olimpo as an urban issue and not exclusively as a symbol of state terrorism. According to them, the fact that the building had previously been a tramway terminal was unimportant in the light of what the building had been used for since.

Although the group managed to organize three workshops, it was also boycotted by specific groups and was not able to achieve legitimacy in the neighbourhood. Furthermore, in December 2001 the situation exploded in Buenos Aires, and social protests due to the economic and institutional crisis made it impossible to speak about the case of El Olimpo and even less to speak of co-government. Paulina recalls:

> For us, as participants of this project, it was very difficult to come to the assemblies with our topic, at a historical moment in which there was a huge economic crisis, where people didn’t know whether they would get back their savings, where they didn’t know whether they would still have a job, nobody knew who was going to be the president… It was almost crazy to come with this project, it was suicidal, it was like throwing it to them, giving it to them, and then: what were they going to do? (Interview PB 24.09.2003)

This situation coincided with the death of one of the members of the group who had been one of the most active promoters of the project. The last action of the group before their reorganization in 2003 was to promote a law to declare El Olimpo a historical site. Protection was becoming urgent because information had been published in the press on the fact that the building of El Olimpo might be sold to the supermarket chain COTO. On 28 June 2002 the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires approved a law that declared El Olimpo a historical site (Interview GN 09.10.2003).

**The impact of 19 and 20 December 2001**

The crisis of 2001 and the subsequent wave of social protest in the following year also had a great impact on the neighbourhood of Floresta, and introduced the phenomenon of the popular assemblies that proposed different forms of political participation and representation. In general, the popular assemblies that emerged in the different neighbourhoods of Buenos Aires had a series of characteristics in common. In the first place, they brought very different kinds of personalities together, although the main social origins of its members was middle class, with some lower class participants. They started as protest forums attempting to organize social protest and create new forms of practising politics. Consensus and heterogeneity emerged as key concepts to give these ideals consistency (Talpin 2007: 203-18). However, in practice many of these ideas failed to concretize. The groups were generally too heterogeneous and the goals too ambitious. Decisions were often taken by vote instead of
by consensus. Furthermore, many assemblies developed an exclusionary character: either you would conform to the culture of the assemblies, or leave. Another problem was that members of the leftist parties as well as intellectuals participated in these experiences and tried to impose their political ideas. As a consequence, most of the persons who had joined with the idea of transforming the traditional, often authoritarian way of doing politics were driven away from the assemblies. The diversity of personalities and objectives, and later the growing sectarianism, ultimately led to the dissolution of many of these assemblies (Dinerstein 2003: 187-200; Svampa 2005: 40-1).

The neighbourhood of Floresta was no exception in this process. All over the neighbourhood popular assemblies emerged, strongly rejecting official authorities and anybody who had been associated to them. Those residents who had participated in the experience of co-management in the park of Avellaneda could hardly go to the assemblies. They were either repudiated or 'looked at with defiance', as Fabio, participant of the assembly of Avellenada, recalls (Interview FM 30.10.2003). At the same time, there was a generalized interest among the neighbours to participate in any kind of activity. Fabio, who had also participated in the initial actions of Vecinos solidarios de Floresta, recalls: ‘This had never happened to me, to participate in a kind of activity that would generate so much sympathy and not this strange thing that told you, when we did the demonstrations here [in the 1990s], that the people saw you as a strange animal. […] Participation in the assemblies was very active and almost family-oriented, with the kids, with everything’. According to Fabio, ‘the first six months of 2002 were the most intense’ (Interview FM 30.10.2003). He himself participated in the popular assembly of the Park of Avellaneda, which later moved to a building near the park. A canteen was organized, a place where poor families could come to eat daily, and for Fabio the larger ideological purpose of the assembly vanished. Instead of discussing and organizing activities that could contribute to a change in power relations and political practice, everything became centred around the activity of the canteen. Furthermore, one person had taken over the leadership of the assembly and organized matters in an authoritarian way, which ultimately led to most participants leaving.

This led to the creation of a new group in 2003, whose members almost all came from this popular assembly or other popular assemblies in the neighbourhood. What bound them was a participation in the organization of the marches for the anniversary of the coup and other activities related to El Olimpo. They also shared the will to give a new impulse to the ideals of the first period of the popular assemblies, such as constructing politics from the bottom up, outside the institutional channels, and through horizontality and consensus. They decided to call themselves Vecinos por la Memoria and to centre their activities on a concrete question, El Olimpo. They formulated three specific objectives: the police should leave the building; it should become a memory site; and finally: encourage a debate in the neighbourhood on the recent past and the meaning and impact of El Olimpo in the neighbourhood. El Olimpo would be a means to stimulate political activity in the neighbourhood, create awareness about what had happened in the past and its connection with the problems of the present. The ultimate goal was that through increased political participation and awareness based on different principles and values, existing power relations and forms of social organization could be transformed.

In the second half of 2003 and the beginning of 2004, the group organized four encounters with neighbours, to stimulate discussion on the meaning and impact of El Olimpo in the neighbourhood and to start brainstorming about what to do with it. For the first encounter
they invited survivors of El Olimpo to speak about their experience, and confronted their experience from ‘inside’ with that of the neighbours living ‘outside’. The encounters were always organized in the form of a workshop, the participants being divided into groups and given a specific task, like writing a narrative, playing a scene, drawing graffiti. Notes were taken of all the encounters, and the ideas that emerged during these meetings on what to do with El Olimpo were noted down and included in a preliminary project, which was finished in June 2004. Another activity consisted of placing a table several blocks away from El Olimpo, in Lacarra and Rivadavia every Saturday between 11 am and 1 pm. Here members of the group sold yerba mate to sustain their activities financially, and offered a platform for neighbours interested in talking about what they knew about El Olimpo.

According to Adriana, member of Vecinos por la Memoria, information started to circulate in this context on what had happened in the neighbourhood during the dictatorship, although much of it was based on rumours and gossip. People apparently did feel the need to talk:

At the table that we started to put in Lacarra and Rivadavia, which was one of the first activities we organized, appeared this necessity of the people to speak. They would look at us, they knew that the subject was El Olimpo and they started to tell us things, give information. It was like the people had never allowed themselves to talk about the topic, nobody had brought it up and said: ‘well, let’s talk about this’. (Interview AY 21.09.2004)

Besides these encounters with neighbours, Vecinos por la Memoria also regularly denounced the presence of El Olimpo through paintings on the walls of El Olimpo stating: ‘Tortures took place here’, ‘Assassinations took place here’, ‘We will come back for the 30,000 disappeared’. They also organized festivals and activities such as a ‘hug to El Olimpo’, where a big group of participants would hold hands all along the building of El Olimpo to protest against the police presence in the building. These actions gave them visibility in the neighbourhood.

They sought contact with other organizations working on memory in their neighbourhoods, particularly with the group working in the nearby neighbourhoods of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro. But they also had contact with the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Uruguayos en Argentina, whose members were interested in the case of the former secret detention centre Automotores Orletti, where many Uruguayans had disappeared. One of the basic principles of the group was that anybody who was interested could participate, and their weekly gatherings on Saturday were open to everybody. The group started with eight persons, but grew significantly in 2004, and in 2005 the most active members of the group were approximately twenty persons who gathered weekly. Most of its members also took part in political or social activism in other groups. Two members of the AEDD also participated, another person combined Vecinos por la Memoria and the Mesa de Escrache Popular, one woman was also a Madre de Plaza de Mayo and so on. The political practice was horizontal,

161 Yerba mate is a special tea typical from Argentina and Uruguay. Yerba is generally produced by large agricultural producers and sold in the supermarkets. The yerba mate sold by Vecinos por la Memoria comes from small producers in the north of the country.
Picture 14, 15 and 16. The ‘hug to El Olimpo’ organized by Vecinos por la Memoria.
nobody could speak on behalf of others, nor participate on behalf of a political party or group, and decisions were taken by consensus, even if this implied hours of discussion.

**Tensions and new developments**

By the time Vecinos por la Memoria appeared, the group Buscando un Destino de Uso Público para El Olimpo (GAO) had been inactive for a while. It soon became clear that Vecinos por la Memoria was not interested in the experience of the other group. Among the persons that were now members of Vecinos por la Memoria, some had been among the harshest critics of the GAO initiative. During their activities, they never mentioned the existence of the group Buscando un Destino. In a document giving an overview of their activities, they referred to the first activities organized by the now dissolved group of Vecinos Solidarios de Floresta, but did not speak about the previous experience of the other group. Several months after they first initiated their activities, Vecinos por la Memoria still did not know that El Olimpo had been declared a historical site. This lack of recognition caused irritation among the members of the group Buscando un Destino. The tensions that were latently present between these two groups became evident in the course of 2004 as the national context turned more favourable to memory issues.

The main problems between the two groups were concerned with ideological differences. The persons participating in these two groups had very different ideas about how to achieve social and political change. The group Buscando un Destino believed in social change through the implementation of institutional measures, and therefore sought collaboration with the official authorities and institutions that would ultimately have to secure these measures. They evaluated activities in terms of achievements, in terms of the decisions that had been taken, the measures that had been approved. The group Buscando un Destino was composed of several persons who already had experience in co-government in the context of other projects, one person was a representative of the Legislature of the City of Buenos Aires and another member of the group was her assistant. Most of them were also critical of the popular assemblies. Elsa expresses her distrust of the assemblies in the following way:

No, no, I didn't believe in this and didn't participate in any assembly. [...] In the first place, because the thing of the assemblies, this screaming, and many participants raising their hand and expressing their opinion without any argumentation, and that everybody...that what you say remains in the air but that nothing is written down, nothing remains of what has been said, no, no...[...] I don't want to use my energy for that. I believe in the word, the word in the right place, the precise word, not the word because of the word and shouting. No, that is not my nature. (Interview EC2 23.11.2004)

Vecinos por la Memoria on the other hand emerged from the popular assemblies and spoke in enthusiastic terms about the days of social protest of December 2001. They generally interpreted it as a point of departure for something new. Marta expresses this feeling as follows: 'It really changed after 2001, I think that December 2001 changed all of us, at least the ones who are active in this (El Olimpo). We started going to the assemblies, and to look for a way to change this situation' (Interview MF 06.10.2004). Vecinos por la Memoria was seen as an attempt to implement the ideas of a different kind of politics introduced by the

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popular assemblies. As this was their main objective, they evaluated activities in terms very
different to that of the group Buscando un Destino. An activity had been positive if a lot of
people had participated, if the atmosphere was good, if people were enthusiastic, and a long
discussion to achieve a consensus was evaluated as positive because it showed that everybody
was willing to change its way of doing things. Concerning the relation with the government,
most of the participants of Vecinos por la Memoria believed in the *Que se vayan todos* slogan.
They distrusted official authorities and institutions and considered that the only attitude to
adopt towards local and national authorities was one of opposition and demand. Employees
of the government might be nice people, but they were ultimately always functional to the
system. Thus, according to Leonardo: ‘What can the progressive director of a school, fighter
against the system, do? He can do many things but he will have a structural limit. What
can a minister do? A minister will directly have to obey orders. The higher up you go in the
ranking list, the more inflexible the pressures and the directing measures become’ (Interview
LG 06.12.2004). This conception made it impossible to collaborate with official authorities.

Changes in the national policy from 2003 onwards made it seem possible for these
groups to realize some of their goals. In 2003 Kirchner assumed presidency and he made
the demands of truth, justice and memory one of the core issues of his presidency.163 The
consequence of this change was that human rights organizations could achieve some of their long-term demands. At the local level of Buenos Aires, they could already count on a rather favourable policy since the election of Aníbal Ibarra as mayor of the city in 1999. Ibarra created the post of Director of Human rights, which was elevated to Under-Secretariat of Human Rights after his re-election in 2003. The Under-Secretariat of Human Rights enjoyed good relations with most of the human rights organizations. They worked together in the context of the mixed commission of the park of memory created in 1999, and in the context of the excavation project of Club Atlético initiated in 2002. In the commission of Club Atlético, human rights organizations, survivors, neighbourhood organizations and the Under-Secretariat of Human Rights and other official entities had been working together since 2002. Furthermore, in December 2002, law 961 was approved by the Legislature of the City. This law created the *Instituto Espacio para la Memoria* (Institute Space for Memory, IEM). It was elaborated through an intensive collaboration between human rights organizations and legislators, and established the creation of an institution in the city of Buenos Aires, which would supervise all the memory projects of the city. The law stated that all the places that had been detention centres would come under the supervision of this institute. The institute itself would be constituted of representatives of the human rights organizations, representatives of the different political blocks of the Legislature of the City, and important persons in the field of human rights.164

However, the experience of mixed commissions was limited to human rights organizations
and the Under-Secretariat and progressive legislators of the city of Buenos Aires. These
experiences were not well known outside the circle of human rights organizations. Law 961
was unknown to many of the neighbours organizing around El Olimpo. Apparently, there
was a lack of communication between local initiatives and the historical human rights
organizations. Furthermore, despite progressive policies of both the Under-Secretariat of the
city and the National Secretariat of Human Rights, both institutions also lacked transparency

163 Kirchner’s policies will be discussed more extensively in chapter six and seven.
164 This will be discussed more extensively in chapter six.
about their goals and activities. Official authorities had their own agenda, which was not necessarily communicated with the various groups organizing in the neighbourhood. Thus in March 2004, the National Secretary of Human Rights, Eduardo Luis Duhalde, stated in a newspaper interview that they had been working for several months on the subject of El Olimpo, and that members of the National Secretariat of Human Rights had already visited the place with survivors of the secret detention centre. Meanwhile, Vecinos por la Memoria had unsuccessfully been trying for months to make an appointment with Duhalde.

The increased activity of the national authorities on issues related to the recent past, and the perceived lack of transparency on their motivations and goals, led to two different reactions among the persons working on El Olimpo, which were in line with their previous strategies. On the one hand, Buscando un Destino saw the positive attitude of the national government as a reason to re-initiate its activities. They believed that they had to make use of this situation to implement institutional measures that would secure the continuity of El Olimpo as a memory site. It was more than ever the moment to renew contacts with official authorities. For Vecinos por la Memoria on the other hand, the attitude of the government was a reason to redouble the pressure on the authorities and to reaffirm its demands. Thus for different reasons the two groups increased their activism and by doing this entered into a power struggle to impose their ideas on what to do with El Olimpo. The latent tensions between these two groups came to light when the group Buscando un Destino tried to organize an activity on El Olimpo. The group wanted to organize a festival on 16 August, the day that the centre was officially opened in 1978. They contacted the Secretariat of Human Rights, which proposed organizing the festival in the building. As soon as Vecinos por la Memoria found out about the proposal, it declared its opposition and managed to gain the support of members of historical human rights organizations and other political organizations. The festival had to be cancelled after harsh discussions.

What was the problem? Besides the fact that the proposal came from the group Buscando un Destino and the Secretariat of Human Rights, without having consulted Vecinos por la Memoria previously, the members of this group totally disagreed with several aspects of the proposal. They disagreed with the idea of entering the building and engaging in a public activity without having performed a prior technical check of the place to find any juridical evidence. They also disagreed with the idea of organizing a public activity with the police still occupying the building. Leonardo explained the criticisms of his group as followed:

Their proposal was something unimaginable from our point of view, politically and technically it was a disaster. They wanted to organize a festival during which people would walk through the former detention centre, walk through the facilities, they were going to paint where there had once been cells, they were going to paint lines with whitewash where all this had been, without organizing a technical inspection of the place beforehand, without searching for proof that might still be there and which would make the reopening of juridical processes possible. […] It seemed something terrible to us. And besides, it seems terrible to us, this vision of coexistence of officials, human rights organizations and the police on the other side of the spectrum as if nothing had ever happened. (Interview LG 06.12.2004)

165 Página/12, 29.03.2004.
In the process initiated as a consequence of the discussion on the festival proposal of the group Buscando un Destino, more and more actors appeared who were somehow implicated in El Olimpo. Thus contact was finally established between all the actors interested in working on the case. The struggles for El Olimpo acquired more visibility among the human rights organizations, which had until then focussed their attention on other issues. Another consequence was that Vecinos por la Memoria became an actor that could hardly be ignored. Furthermore, the differences between Vecinos por la Memoria and the group Buscando un Destino finally became explicit. Vecinos por la Memoria sent out an electronic communiqué informing that they considered it necessary to distance themselves from the networks of GAO and FLACSO. Explaining their position they wrote: ‘Our differences are political, in terms of content and form; in terms of the point of departure, the methodology and the development, and finally our objectives. Based on concrete events that have taken place, we believe that a joint construction with those who developed this project is not possible. There is a lack of the minimum amount of trust required to sit down and work together’.166

Finally, a group of survivors of El Olimpo who had been participating in the process of either Vecinos por la Memoria or Buscando un Destino, now became an actor in its own right, starting to participate as a group and presenting its own proposal on what to do with El Olimpo.

**Who is in charge of the place?**

What the previous section has shown is that throughout the 1990s several neighbourhood initiatives were founded to deal with the presence of the former detention centre in the neighbourhood. Politicized and conscious neighbours of Floresta and its immediate surroundings were interested in using the presence of El Olimpo as a point of departure to rethink the memories of repression in the neighbourhood. However, the persons involved in the two main initiatives adopted a completely opposite approach to the issue, which resulted in tensions and mutual distrust. The differences between the two groups were also an expression of a more general division in the field of collective action between those who chose for an institutional approach, and those who distrusted the institutions and preferred to operate outside the system. This resulted in a tense situation that ended in an open conflict when official authorities arrived on the scene. Underlying the conflict was a struggle on who would receive the credits for bringing El Olimpo under public attention, and ultimately who would have more ‘rights’ when deciding what to do with the building. As the following section will show, this conflict continued after official authorities decided to expel the police, but acquired a different dynamic with the involvement of survivors and representatives of the human rights organizations. Furthermore, we will see that disputes over who should be in charge were not confined to El Olimpo but also occurred in the context of other projects for the recovery of former secret detention centres for memory.

*Neither police nor government employees, El Olimpo for the Neighbourhood*

In the period after 16 August 2004, Vecinos por la Memoria increased protest actions in the neighbourhood to demand a number of measures. These measures included the relocation of

166 Email communication Vecinos por la Memoria, 20.09.2004.
the police occupying the building and the appointment of a special technical commission to check the building for any juridical proof. They also requested that El Olimpo should become a memory site in the hands of neighbours and human rights organizations. They organized a ‘hug to El Olimpo’ on 25 September 2004 to call public attention to their cause. The activity was well attended and also received some media attention. A few days later, on 4 October, an agreement was signed between the national government and the city government. The agreement sealed the transfer of the building from the national Ministry of Internal Affairs to the city government, the relocation of the police within a term of 180 days, the visit of a special commission to investigate the place, and the assurance that the place would become a memory site, under the supervision of the yet to be concretized IEM. In his discourse, Kirchner referred to Duhalde’s declaration in the newspaper in March of the same year, and explained that the question had suffered delays, but that when he saw images of the ‘hug to El Olimpo’ on television he decided to accelerate the process. This anecdote is recalled by Vecinos por la Memoria to argue the importance of their actions in making the agreement possible.

Obviously other factors also played an important role in the government’s decision. Some have pointed to internal disputes between the National Secretariat of Human Rights and the Under-Secretariat of Human Rights of the city government. There were many pressures being exerted from different sides. The children of the school close to El Olimpo had sent the Commission of Human Rights of the Legislature of the City a demand to pass the building from the national government to the city government, and some legislators were considering the case. These external pressures were important to accelerate the process. But the official decision to remove the Federal Police from El Olimpo had already been taken months earlier. A meeting Kirchner had with the children of the disappeared in November 2003 proved a decisive moment. During this meeting, the children of the disappeared mentioned the presence of the *Planta de Verificación Vehicular* in El Olimpo, and one of them explained how hard he found it to have to go to such a place for the obligatory procedure of the technical revision of his car. Kirchner responded that he was unaware of this fact and officially instructed the Secretary of Human Rights and the Minister of Justice to initiate the necessary procedures to modify this situation. This can be considered the starting point for the official involvement in the case of El Olimpo. In the interview with Duhalde in March 2004 mentioned earlier, the Secretary of Human Rights explained that they had been working on El Olimpo for several months and that ‘there is a presidential decision, shared by the Minister of Justice’ concerning the relocation of the Federal Police. He also explained that they had already visited the place accompanied by survivors and had been cleaning it up because ‘the whole area where the secret detention centre had functioned was a nest of different rats and where garbage and junk had accumulated’. He further announced that ‘soon we will enter the phase of debating with the survivors and the neighbourhood assembly, who took on the responsibility of fighting for the preservation of El Olimpo, and discuss with them the future characteristics of these dependencies’.

The agreement that was signed in October 2004 implied a substantial change in the setting around El Olimpo. Officially, El Olimpo would fall under the supervision of the IEM.

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168 *Página/12*, 05.10.2004.
170 *Página/12*, 29.03.2004.
However, at that time the institute had not yet been constituted, and until that was the case the Under-Secretariat of Human Rights of the city government took over the issues that fell under the orbit of the IEM. Therefore, meetings between the different actors involved in El Olimpo took place at the Under-Secretariat of Human Rights of the city government, which also determined the conditions of participation. The format applied was the same as the one used in the context of the excavation project of Club Atlético, in which human rights organizations, neighbours, survivors and family members of the disappeared participated in a mixed commission. According to this format, human rights organizations, and social and political organizations were allowed to send only two representatives to the meetings. Family members of those who had disappeared in El Olimpo and survivors of the centre were not governed by this restriction. The groups that initially participated in these meetings included Vecinos por la Memoria, the group Buscando un Destino, Madres LF, H.I.J.O.S., Abuelas, Familiares, Hermanos, AEDD, the Comisión de Derechos Humanos de Uruguayos en Argentina, the Comisión por la Memoria de Mataderos, Liniers y Villa Luro, and survivors of El Olimpo, as well as employees of the relevant areas of the city government.

In the context of these meetings, different positions clashed with each other, showing how difficult it was to construct memory among a multiplicity of actors. One of the main disputes in the first period was about the role of the official authorities in the management of El Olimpo. Conflicts emerged primarily because the group Vecinos por la Memoria opposed the process of institutionalization set in motion from October onwards. Vecinos por la Memoria was firmly opposed to any involvement of official authorities in the administration of El Olimpo. They wanted the government to provide the financial resources for the project, but wanted ‘the neighbours’ and human rights organizations to administrate the building. For this purpose, they were even trying to gain a legal status. The group of survivors was also suspicious of governmental involvement in the management of the building but did not believe in what they saw as a private enterprise in which ‘the neighbours’ would administrate the building. The group Buscando un Destino on the other hand believed that although civil society should participate in the process, it was the responsibility of official authorities to implement a memory policy and therefore take care of memory sites like El Olimpo. In practice however, despite efforts to reverse this situation, the participation of official authorities was already established through law 961 that stipulated that El Olimpo would ultimately fall under the supervision of the IEM. Furthermore, in the first year until the police left the plot in June 2005, meetings took place in the buildings of the Under-Secretariat of Human Rights under the supervision and coordination of employees of the Under-Secretariat of Human Rights of the city government.

Vecinos por la Memoria resisted the institutionalization of the work in El Olimpo in different ways. They opposed the idea that they should send representatives of their group to the meetings in the Under-Secretariat for Human Rights, because they were against any form of representation. They had to conform, but tried to enhance their presence through sending two representatives of Vecinos por la Memoria, and several other members who would participate as relatives and survivors, who were not subject to any restrictions with regard to participating. They also tried to strengthen their position by arguing that they had

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171 Hermanos was the organization of brothers and sisters of the disappeared and was created in 2003.
172 These were the Under-Secretary of Human Rights, the General Direction Historical Area, the Secretariat of Infrastructure and Planning and of the Centre for Participatory Management nº7 (Folder ‘Proyecto de Recuperación de la memoria del centro clandestino de detención, tortura y exterminio “El Olimpo”’).
been the ones who had expelled the police. They felt that this gave them more rights than others. The Under-Secretariat of Human Rights of the city and the National Secretariat of Human Rights on the other hand recalled that the recovery of El Olimpo for memory could not have been possible without an official decision. Until May 2005, when the police finally left El Olimpo, Vecinos por la Memoria also continued to organize protest activities against the presence of the police, and against the presence of funcionarios, government employees. At the end of December 2004, they organized a ‘Popular festival “El Olimpo for the people”’ with the slogans: ‘For memory, El Olimpo for the neighbourhood’, and ‘Neither police nor government employees. El Olimpo recovered by the neighbours and the human rights organizations’.

The position of Vecinos por la Memoria on the role of the state reflects a profound political crisis and a lack of confidence in governmental institutions, which can be seen as an extension of the institutional crisis that reached a climax in December 2001. The discussion also expresses more general tensions between moderate and critical positions, which ran through the entire movement involved in the struggles for truth, justice and memory and also divided organizations internally. These tensions were also present within the group Vecinos por la Memoria, as Leonardo, explains:

> What we want is that it is the people that should be administrating the plot, reconstructing its memory without employees of the government. The thing is that maybe some companions are not so convinced of the possibility that this will happen, and up to what point one should negotiate if this doesn't happen. Some of us will not accept that on this piece of land employees of the government and fighters (luchadores) live together, under any condition. Others perhaps are not so convinced of this. It is a discussion within the group. (Interview LG 06.12.2004)

According to Leonardo, the different positions depend on the goal one has set oneself: those who have set themselves the goal to enter the building and appropriate it will have to negotiate with the government. Whereas those who have set themselves the goal to change the system and existing power relations, will have no other choice than to refuse institutionalization through participation in co-government.

**Who decides what to do with El Olimpo?**

Behind the dispute over the role of the state in the process of memory construction in El Olimpo was the question concerning who would control the place and, by extension, who would be able to decide what to do. Each group had developed its own project for El Olimpo, and some important differences were evident. Thus for the group Buscando un Destino, it was of great importance that El Olimpo should be treated as a part of a broader vision on urban planning. This meant taking into account its location in the neighbourhood and its history beyond the use the building was given during the military dictatorship. This vision was firmly opposed by Vecinos por la Memoria, who wanted to focus on what the secret detention centre had meant for the neighbourhood, including when it was occupied by the police in times of democracy. As for the survivors, they wanted the place to become a ‘School

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173 Informal conversation with a member of Vecinos por la Memoria, Fieldnotes, 09.11.2006.
for Leaders’ that would provide the formation of union, social, political and community leaders. The organization H.I.J.O.S. in its turn was against the idea of leadership as well as against changing anything on the property, except signposting it. These initial proposals were presented in the first months of 2005, but discussions on what to do with the place interfered with the central debate on the role of official authorities in the process.

The dynamics started to change after the Federal Police left the building in June 2005. A Mesa de Trabajo y Consenso (Committee for Work and Consensus) was created, and started to function on the property. According to Liliana, this change had a positive impact on the participants of the commission, because the discussion now shifted to concrete issues:

> It not only changed the dynamics of the situation, it changed the dynamics of the discussion, that is to say, it was like the first, second time that we gathered, ‘what do we do with this?’, was the theme. Concretely, what do we do with this? It is huge. Meeting in the dining hall of the city government was one thing, and meeting here was something else entirely. Here I am, now what do we do with all this? Are we going to continue here? (Interview LC4 30.11.2006).

Those who had argued that nothing should be changed on the property, like H.I.J.O.S., now realized that this position was unsustainable. Concretely, only one part of the whole property had been used as a secret detention centre, and the remaining section was a huge terrain without anything, just dirty and dark. Actually being in El Olimpo confronted them with the fact that changes to this part of the property had to be more substantial. Thus, as Liliana explains, ‘this thing that, well, “everything was the pozo”, well being here, this fell apart; not everything was the pozo. It seems that this thing of changing the site of our meetings was important, for us it was important’ (Interview LC4 30.11.2006).

The change of location of the meetings also coincided with a decrease in the level of conflict in the commission. According to Gustavo, one of the members of the commission, people got tired of the high levels of conflict and started to rethink their political practice:

> All of us, at first, we wanted to say what had to be done, until soon…. […] I believe that because of the fatigue that resulted from the arduous, endless, at times heated discussions, this fatigue, which necessarily implied that if one continued in this way there would be no consensus possible and thus no Mesa possible, made each one of us rethink personally, without even speaking it out loud, that we had to word things in a less confrontational way, try to reach a consensus and understand that we were among companions, and that the best way was to listen to each other, to listen, this was the only way that this would be able to move forward. (Interview GL 20.11.2006)

Another development that also contributed to a different atmosphere was the fact that the group of Vecinos por la Memoria became internally divided on what attitude to adopt towards the commission and stopped participating in March 2006. Some of its former members continued to participate, and later reconstituted as the new organization Vecinos por la Memoria Olimpo-Orletti.177

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176 The word pozo (pit) is frequently used to refer to secret detention centres during the military dictatorship. For a lexicon of the words and expressions used during the military dictatorship to refer to everything related to the repression, see: Feitlowitz 1998: 51-62.

177 Informal conversation with a member of the Mesa, Fieldnotes, 09.11.2006.
As the character of the meetings changed, a consensus was reached on the fact that the part that had functioned as a secret detention centre should remain as it was, but signposted. What to do with the rest of the property remained an issue of debate. The commission also agreed on the organization of public activities and on the creation of a popular library on human rights. El Olimpo was opened to the public for the first time at the end of November 2005. During a period of three days, people could visit an exhibition on the former secret detention centre Club Atlético and participate in workshops on the period of the military dictatorship.\textsuperscript{178} Other activities followed: a debate on genocide was organized, a documentary was shown on the situation in the schools of the province of Buenos Aires followed by a debate on education; a debate was organized on the Operation Condor, among other activities. A cycle of history workshops was also organized on Fridays in collaboration with the commission of Liniers, Mataderos and Villa Luro. According to \textit{Tomás}, one of the members of the commission, the organization of these activities further contributed to decreasing the levels of confrontation because people got to know each other better:

It has always been difficult, what happens is that afterwards, the passing of time and the concretization of some activities and some objectives make you see what you have in common. When you organize an activity and you complete it, you realize that all this militancy that you had side by side with the other person was translated into something, then you feel more like companions. So I think that something like this happened, the time made us feel more like companions, that we got to know each other better. (Interview TC 07.12.2006)

Thus from the end of 2005, the commission entered a new phase, which could be qualified as a phase of construction, consolidation and institutionalization. An expression of this was the decision to hire two more governmental employees to assist the person already in charge of the administration of the property. These three employees formed a nexus between the city government and the commission. They also coordinated the meetings of the commission, took notes, and were in charge of the internal communication. At the same time, however, in this phase of construction, many of the differences that had first led to open confrontations remained present and resurfaced on various occasions. Although this was not discussed openly, there continued to be substantial differences among the members of the commission on how memory should be constructed and transmitted from the particular space of El Olimpo. Whereas some wished El Olimpo to be a space from which to intervene actively in the struggles of the present, others believed that the significance of El Olimpo lay in its history as a secret detention centre. The latter group thought that the work of the commission should concentrate on what had happened in El Olimpo, and its significance in the broader context of state terrorism. One participant expressed this difference by stating that he wanted to carry out militant actions, whereas others wanted to testify.\textsuperscript{179}

This fundamental difference became evident in a discussion on whether the commission should participate in a front organized by secondary school students to protest against a wave of threats they had suffered at the end of 2006. This was firmly opposed by the representative of H.I.J.O.S., who argued that this should not be the function of the commission: ‘I think that the place of the Mesa should not be to talk about dismantling

\textsuperscript{178} \textit{Página/12}, 26.11.2005.
\textsuperscript{179} Informal conversation with a member of the Mesa, Fieldnotes, 09.11.2006.
the repressive apparatus. Here in the Mesa, we have to talk about El Olimpo. Part of
the problem also lay in the different conceptions of what the objective of the commission
was. H.I.J.O.S. was particularly strict in stating that the commission was an articulation of
different organizations, and that militancy should be practised from one’s own organization.
According to him, the commission had been created for a particular purpose, to discuss the
construction of memory in El Olimpo. However, for others, the commission was their new
space of militancy. Reflecting on this situation, one survivor explained: ‘There are many
companions for whom this has meant recovering their militancy, so they feel part of this as
militants’ (Interview AFB3 08.11.2006). For those who were participating on behalf of their
organization, the commission was not a space of militancy but a place to discuss a broader
project for El Olimpo. Their militancy was channelled through their organizations.

The different visions on the role and purpose of the commission was also related to
more fundamental differences on memory, which recall the broader divisions within the
human rights organizations discussed in chapter three. Whereas for some memory was
constructed through the organization of activities and through participation in struggles of
the present, for others it was about creating archives, documenting and reconstructing what
had happened. As a consequence, the advances made by the commission were evaluated in
different terms. Tomás for instance, a representative of H.I.J.O.S., was very critical about
what the commission had achieved until then: ‘I think that what happened, is that this need
[to do something] has been covered in the worst possible way, which is doing things for the
sake of doing them, without being able to have the necessary discussions...’ (Interview TC
07.12.2006). According to him, instead of organizing activities, they should have been having
in-depth discussions about how to reconstruct the identity of the disappeared of El Olimpo.
Paulina, member of the GAO group, was equally critical. She even stopped participating in
the meetings because she observed a lack of debate on a broader project that would permit
El Olimpo to be sustainable in the future. This was a very different picture for those
who considered that the organization of activities was part of the construction of memory.
They were generally far more positive about what had been achieved, as is illustrated in the
following quote of Liliana, survivor of El Olimpo: ‘For me it is a good place, as a trigger to
[...] to become aware [...] of what it can mean to lose rights, let’s say. And not only as
memory, as something static, but rather as something alive, because memory is also what
we are doing now (referring to the activities), what is happening now’ (Interview LC4
30.11.2006).

At the same time, there was another latent source of conflict which cut through these
different positions on memory, which had to do with who the legitimate voices in the
debate on El Olimpo were. This tension principally manifested itself between human rights
organizations and survivors on the one hand, and some of the neighbours participating in
the commission on the other hand. Among the victims and human rights organizations,
there was a fear that the essence of El Olimpo would be lost. Tomás explained this essence
as follows: ‘The proposal of H.I.J.O.S. is a bit around this, not doing just anything in El
Olimpo, El Olimpo is a clandestine centre, that is what it was, this is the place where people
saw our parents alive for the last time. And to generate a space for memory from this is
not to generate just anything, no, that can not be the case’ (Interview TC 07.12.2006). They

180 Meeting of the Mesa de Trabajo y Consenso, Fieldnotes, 28.10.2006.
sensed that this could happen if the neighbours gained too much influence, because on several occasions they had expressed the idea that for them El Olimpo should be for the neighbourhood, and oriented towards the needs of the neighbourhood. The neighbours on the other hand stated that they had earned the right to have their say about El Olimpo because of their struggle to expel the police from El Olimpo, and questioned the unrestricted participation of survivors and human rights organizations in the Mesa. The survivors and human rights organizations responded by saying that the neighbourhood was not the reason of their participation in the commission. Thus Liliana explained: ‘I do not come for the verificadora (when the place was used for the revision of vehicles), for the…the period that the police was there, […] I am not interested in what came afterwards. I am here for what happened during the dictatorship’ (Interview LC4 30.11.2006). They questioned the neighbours for not representing anybody, especially not after Vecinos por la Memoria had left the commission. Tomás stated: ‘They stayed in the Mesa. And they do not represent anybody, that is the question…’(Interview TC 07.12.2006).

These issues surfaced in the debate on the statutes of the commission, an official document elaborated among all the members of the commission. Tomás criticized the fact that the voice of a neighbour weighed just as heavily as that of a member of Madres or Abuelas, and established a hierarchy in which victims and historical human rights organizations had more rights to speak about what to do in El Olimpo than a neighbour of a recently created organization. Thus he stated that in the rules as they had been elaborated:

A resident of the neighbourhood has…who has the representation of the neighbourhood organization that in my opinion is not a neighbourhood organization, has the same weight, has the same power of decision, has the same power to veto – and this seems very complicated to me – as an organization like the Asociación de Ex Detenidos [Desaparecidos] which has thirty years of militancy, which represents other things. It is not the same as what someone can think who has a total of thirty years of militancy. When I am given the voice of eleven years of collective construction, this should always generate an important basis. And I think…the problem is that this happens at the cost of the survivors who were inside, it is not the same a resident or a survivor, it can not be the same. And this happens at the cost of the human rights organizations. Leaving out H.I.J.O.S., I do not want to be navel-gazing, but if the Mothers participate, are you going to tell me that it is the same if the Mothers miss one of these meetings as when, I don't know, the Centro de Estudiantes del Cortázar, which has just been formed, is missing? (Interview TC 07.12.2006).

In the context of this discussion, the once firmly opposed members of the group Buscando un Destino, and of the former Vecinos por la Memoria found some common ground. Paulina, member of the group Buscando un Destino, criticized the fact that it was increasingly leaving out persons who did not have a personal story of repression. She predicted that the commission would end up being exclusively composed of victims and members of the human rights organizations. Similarly, Gabriela complained about the fact that since the rules were elaborated in the commission, it was becoming more difficult to participate as an individual without the backing of an organization. According to her, this would lead to

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a closed space without any possibilities to incorporate new voices. At the same time, the hierarchies between victims and representatives of the historical human rights organizations and non-victims were also internalized by many persons who had not been directly affected by the repression. Thus Elsa, member of the group Buscando un Destino reflected on this issue in the following terms:

Surely the last word will be for the [human rights] organizations… I can see myself as very enlightened, but if at my side a Mother of the Plaza de Mayo, H.I.J.O.S., or former disappeared are giving their opinion, I will give less value to my own opinion in their presence, because, you see, they have another motivation… I would like this kind of work (of deciding between many different actors), but they will always have the first possibility to decide. (Interview EC2 23.11.2004)

Clearly, the ideal of ‘opening up the game’ (abrir el juego) as expressed by one member of the commission, was difficult to realize. We will see that this did not apply exclusively to the case of El Olimpo.

Disputes between new and old actors

Initiatives to recover former secret detention centres and transform them into memory sites have acquired visibility since 2002. Like the project of El Olimpo, they have been the result of intense pressures of a variety of actors, and have benefited from the commitment of local politicians or the change in policies at the national level. In all these cases, once the decision was taken to transform a place into a site of memory, human rights organizations, survivors, relatives and engaged community members came to work together on the reconstruction of memory at these sites. Each one of these cases has its particularities, depending on the context in which they unfold, the persons involved in the process, or the number of survivors of a former secret detention centre. But, as in the case of El Olimpo, differences in perspectives have occurred concerning the extent to which neighbours should be involved in the process. This will be illustrated briefly by discussing two examples, the case of Club Atlético in the neighbourhood of San Telmo and the case of Mansión Seré in Morón, province of Buenos Aires. These cases are interesting because they express two opposed views on how the construction of memory is conceived and on the place attributed to the community in that process. These opposed visions seem to be related to the composition of the teams working on these projects.

The project to excavate the basements of the former secret detention centre Club Atlético, was initiated in 2002. This was a long-term demand of the survivors. The Direction of Human Rights of the city government played a leading role in the project. A first excavation uncovered the basements of the building, including the cells where the detainees had been kept, showing that there was enough to be discovered to justify a larger recovery project. The Direction of Human Rights invited human rights organizations, survivors and relatives of persons who had disappeared in Club Atlético to participate, as well as the group Encuentro por la Memoria and the neighbourhood assembly of Plaza Dorrego. A commission was created in which each organization could send two representatives, and

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183 Informal conversation, Fieldnotes, 17.10.2006.
survivors and relatives could participate without restriction.\textsuperscript{184} In 2003, the commission was formalized in a Comisión de Trabajo y Consenso, with the task of designing the general contents and ideological fundamentals of the programme. An Executive Unit was also created, in charge of the coordination and evaluation of the day-to-day activities of the project. In both commissions, besides the actors already mentioned, the labour unions Central de los Trabajadores Argentinos (CTA) and Unión de Trabajadores de Prensa de Buenos Aires (UTBPA) participated, as well as employees of the relevant areas of the city government.\textsuperscript{185}

Club Atlético became the first project of recovery of a former detention centre in the capital city of Buenos Aires. Therefore, in contrast to El Olimpo, where with the exception of H.I.J.O.S., Hermanos, and the AEDD, human rights organizations are formally represented but do not go to all the meetings, in the case of Club Atlético most historical human rights organizations participate actively. They constitute, together with the survivors and the siblings of the disappeared, the main participants in the commission (Interview PL 22.10.2004). The neighbourhood organizations participate but according to one of the participants, employee of the Direction of Human Rights, ‘what the neighbours bring in is little. They have given information in the beginning, telling that they heard the screaming and saw policemen coming in and out the building, but besides that they do not have a lot to bring in. What we are looking for are the people who own the houses that border El Atlético. […] We delegated this part to the neighbours, but well, it is difficult’. Reflecting on this situation she stated: ‘For us the thing is not a priority’ (Interview CA 13.08.2003). The priority for the commission is rather to reconstruct the history of the repression: who passed through the centre, what happened to them, how was the centre organized, and who were responsible for the human rights violations that took place here? The commission also displays a high level of institutionalization, and a strong participation by the city government. Except for victims of the repression, it is difficult to become a member of the commission. Awareness-raising activities have been organized on a regular basis, especially at schools, but they are meant to inform, not to get people involved in the project.

Mansión Seré is different from both the experience in Club Atlético and El Olimpo in several ways. Mansión Seré was once a beautiful antique house, located in the provincial municipality of Morón. After having been in disuse for a while, the house was occupied in 1976 by the air force, and converted into a clandestine detention centre generally referred to as Atila or Mansión Seré. The place was used until 1978 as a clandestine detention centre, but dismantled after the escape of four detainees on 24 March 1978. The house was partly destroyed by the air force. From 1978 until 1985 the ruins remained abandoned. What was left over of the house suffered further decay because residents stole materials from the house to resell them. In 1985 the municipality of Morón decided to convert the place into a sports centre and despite protest actions from human rights organizations the remains of Mansión Seré were destroyed, erasing every evidence of its existence. In 1986 human rights organizations of Morón placed a commemorative plaque and they started to demand excavations of the foundations of the house. It was only when Martín Sabatella became mayor of Morón that they found a response to their requests. Sabatella created the first

\textsuperscript{184} Interview CA 13.08.2003; Delia Barrera, ‘Desenterrando el horror… para hacerlo memoria’, \textit{Tantas vidas, tantas voces} año 2, nº6 (December 2002) 4-5.
\textsuperscript{185} Interview CA 13.08.2003; Folder ‘Proyecto de recuperación de la memoria del centro clandestino de detención “Club Atlético”’.

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Direction of Human Rights of Morón and financed an excavation in the park, which started in 2002.

The excavations were realized by a team of archaeologists and anthropologists of the University of Buenos Aires, all students and mostly without a direct connection to the historical human rights movement. The team of archaeologists and anthropologists became the most important entity in the project. Thus, whereas in Club Atlético it was a technical commission subsumed to the commission, in the case of Mansión Seré the team of about thirty archaeologists and anthropologists was the decision maker. Reflecting on the differences between Club Atlético and Mansión Seré, Cecilia explains: ‘With Mansión Seré, we know each other, we have participated together in talks. But they have another way of working. There the most important entity is the working team, the group of archaeologists and social anthropologists. Here it is the contrary: the most important is the commission. The archaeological team is at the disposition of the commission. These are different ways of working’ (Interview CA 13.08.2003). Furthermore, in Mansión Seré the group of survivors is far less organized and less numerous than in Club Atlético or even El Olimpo. These elements have contributed to giving the project a different orientation.

In contrast to the experience of Club Atlético, for the team working on Mansión Seré the crucial element of the project is to get the community involved in the reconstruction of the memory of the place. The community, in their view, are the residents of the neighbourhood, and by extension, society at large. The team working in Mansión Seré particularly insists on the necessity to involve the neighbourhood in the project, because they see the participation of the residents as a guarantee for the continuity of the project over time. Thus Carla, one of the members of the team, explains that in their work in the neighbourhood,

we are looking at the material patrimony, […] and also at all that is oral history, everything that the neighbourhood starts to tell us. That is very arduous because you are involving them in the participation of the project, which in fact is one of its characteristics, the open character of this project, that is to say: in themes that have to do with memory, let’s not always take the same actors, let’s not work only with ex-detained-disappeared, with family members of the disappeared, with human rights organizations, but let us work with the neighbours, where there are also a lot of groups and organizations working, because we say: if the neighbour is not conscious that this place is his, or does not consider the place to be his, then really this work does not make too much sense… (Interview CDV and XV 16.10.2003)

What the residents have to tell about their experiences is considered of great value. Thus Ximena, another participant in the project, explains: ‘…part of the oral history is also present in the history of the neighbours. They saw a lot, they lived in front of the place. It is this thing that when we are talking about reconstructing the history, we are speaking of reconstructing the whole history, not only one part of the history’ (Interview CDV and XV 16.10.2003).

At the same time, it has not been easy for the team to acquire the necessary legitimacy among the local human rights community to speak about the memory of state terrorism. They were initially hired with the idea that they would ‘just excavate’, and they were not expected to expand the project and transform it according to their own ideas. The configuration of people mainly coming from the capital city of Buenos Aires, young, with little experience in human rights issues, and with a scientific and technical background, contributed to making it difficult for the group to be accepted. The fact that the team received a small allowance
from the municipality of Morón also complicated their situation because the traditionally
oppositional historical human rights organizations of Morón saw them as employees of the
local government. Some organizations openly disagreed with the project and boycotted it.
Carla explains: 'Well, we have had experiences of sessions (with human rights organizations
and institutions) that were quite complicated. [...] They said to us: you are a technician. We
are excavators who take things out and nothing more, we are not even allowed to make an
analysis of our findings' (Interview CDV and XV 16.10.2003).

According to Carla, it is difficult for the historical human rights organizations to accept
the participation of new voices in the construction of memory:

To whom does this patrimony belong? It is everybody’s and nobody’s at the same time, it is this
idea of participation or possession, and here there is a lot of that, this idea of protagonism and
to say: 'this is mine and I am the owner of this'. No, no. This is the difficult thing to realize and
explain to a lot of human rights organizations who have been working for thirty years in a certain
way, and each of them from their own perspective. (Interview CDV and XV 16.10.2003)

The issue of who has the right to speak about the past emerged several times in a meeting
with other groups working on secret detention centres in the city of Buenos Aires, showing
that it was not confined to Mansión Seré. Indeed, we have seen that it also emerged in the
context of El Olimpo, and the different actors involved in this process have questioned each
other’s legitimacy to speak and decide what to do in El Olimpo. What these experiences
show is that the construction of memory when it involves a multiplicity of actors, from
victims, to human rights organizations, politicized neighbours, students or local authorities,
can be a cumbersome affair. The variety of perspectives on what to do with former secret
detention centres, what their function should be, and who should be involved in the process
of memory construction has led to sometimes open, and sometimes covert disputes over who
has the right to speak and decide on these places.

Conclusion

Despite many differences, all the local experiences discussed throughout this chapter do have
a number of features in common. The first groups that started to work on memory in their
neighbourhoods were part of broader developments within the struggle for truth, justice
and memory that became visible from the mid-1990s. Former acquaintances of militancy,
study and work of the disappeared played leading roles in the shift that occurred from
remembering the disappeared merely as victims, to remembering them for who they had
been as individuals. This development occurred simultaneously with a necessity to establish
memory marks in the public space as a means to counter denial and impunity and at the
same time trigger collective forms of remembering. The neighbourhood commissions that
were created in the mid-1990s were part of these new expressions of memory. They were also

\footnotesize{186 Interview DB 20.06.2003; Interview AR 04.11.2003. Meeting of different recovery projects of former
secret detention centres, Casa de la Memoria, Fieldnotes, 04.10.2003.}

\footnotesize{187 See also: Oral Archive of Memoria Abierta, 'Interview with Verónica Seldes' 02.09.2003.}

\footnotesize{188 Meeting of recovery projects of former secret detention centres, Casa de la Memoria, Fieldnotes,
04.10.2003.}
clearly inscribed in the broader struggle of the historical human rights movement, focussing on the victims of state terrorism: they assumed their demands for truth, justice and memory, and in many cases were composed of persons who had links with the historical human rights organizations and had been familiar with a personal story of repression.

At the same time, these groups differentiated themselves from the historical human rights movement by focussing on places and people that were located outside their traditional sphere of influence and action. They had a clear intention of ‘decentralizing’ memory: instead of making demands on the state and demonstrating on the Plaza de Mayo, they wanted to take memory to places where people were not accustomed to speaking openly about their personal experiences during the military dictatorship. Furthermore, they had concrete objectives and chose for a small-scale, localized approach, believing that this was the best way to start transforming social reality. In this sense, these neighbourhood experiences were also part of a broader development characterizing the landscape of social protest, and which was largely related to a disillusionment with representative democracy and more traditional forms of collective construction. The institutional crisis and social protests of December 2001 importantly contributed to reinforcing these alternative forms of collective organization. The high levels of politicization also strengthened the existing experiences of memory construction in the neighbourhoods and created a fertile ground for the emergence of new groups working on memory at a local level.

The initiatives that arose in the neighbourhood of Floresta to recover El Olimpo for memory were similar to the local committees for memory that emerged in other neighbourhoods of the city. These initiatives started to unfold in the mid-1990s and were extremely diverse, ranging from the more institutional proposal of the GAO group to the anti-institutional Vecinos por la Memoria. This group was a direct continuation of the neighbourhood assemblies that flowered throughout the neighbourhood from 2001 onwards and its presence shows the impact of the events of 2001 on local memory initiatives. The crisis of representation of 2001, which found expression in the slogan Que se vayan todos, proved to have ramifications in subsequent years. It was expressed in the radical rejection of the group Vecinos por la Memoria of any governmental involvement in the context of El Olimpo as well as of any group who might propose a more institutionalized form of memory construction, as was the case for the GAO group. The possibility of an official decision to relocate the police, and the situation that emerged after the national government had ordered the relocation of the police, intensified existing conflicts on the role of official authorities in the process of memory construction in El Olimpo.

The fact that these disputes were about a place that had a symbolic importance that reached far beyond the local context of the neighbourhood increased the complexity of the case. The symbolic significance of El Olimpo and the involvement of external actors differentiate El Olimpo from other neighbourhood initiatives but make it similar to other experiences of recovery of former detention centres. The concrete possibility to construct a memory site in El Olimpo made it of interest not only for neighbours but also survivors, for relatives who had lost their loved ones and for historical human rights organizations. The involvement of new actors from outside the neighbourhood, including official authorities of the city government increased the diversity of perspectives on what to do with El Olimpo. In effect, a dispute arose about who had more right to speak about what to do in and with El Olimpo. Tensions emerged between victims and human rights organizations on the one hand, who fear that the identity of El Olimpo as a former secret detention centre will become lost
and neighbours on the other hand, who fear that they will be left out of the decision-making process. These tensions are not confined to El Olimpo and appear in the context of almost all the experiences of recovery of former detention centres that have emerged since 2002. In all these cases, the question arises as to how to construct memory on the basis of diversity, instead of trying to impose one vision to the detriment of others. This is an exercise that both ‘old’ and ‘new’ actors find difficult, as will also become clear from the following chapters.