

5

Last stand of the MIR: Londres 38

Londres 38 – the English equivalent would be ‘38 London Street’ – is the only chapter in which no single individual carries the narrative. The reason is that, whatever divisions existed amongst the survivors and families about the future of the building, by 2008 the dichotomy that had emerged was between the Bachelet-led centre-left coalition and the Allende-era radical left; and in particular, the remnants of the revolutionary party known as the MIR. The struggle to memorialise Londres 38 is a different kind of struggle to the others.

Towards the end of 1973, the dictatorship government realised that the occupation of the National Stadium must soon be ended. The international press remained unconvinced that the detainees were not maltreated. Two weeks after the coup the Archbishop of Chile, Raúl Silva Henríquez, demanded entry from the colonel in charge and spoke to many of the detainees, amazed to confront several people whom he knew and respected.¹ Several days later, he founded the Comité de Cooperación por la Paz en Chile (Committee for Cooperation for Peace in Chile) and oversaw what was at first the clandestine, later the principal, clearing house of information about the disappeared.

1 Roberto López, ‘Cardenal Silva Henríquez en el Estadio Nacional (1973): “Vengo a ver a mis hermanos en desgracia”’, [I come to see my brothers in misfortune], *Cambio 21*, 27 September 2007.

It was known as the 'Vicaría de la Solidaridad', the Vicariate of Solidarity, and was the destination for people like Nena González to pass on their secret news.²

On 21 November, the Chilean national soccer team was scheduled to play a World Cup semi-final against the Soviet Union. The world governing body of soccer visited the stadium. Concluding that no detainees were present (they were being held clandestinely in the changing rooms) it insisted the game proceed. Unsurprisingly the Soviets refused to play in a country that had overturned its elected Marxist government; the Chileans turned out to kick a solitary goal into the net unopposed. Chile moved to the final but much of the soccer press was scandalised.³ Week by week sporting groups asked to resume use of the training facilities or the main arena. The stadium would have to be vacated, and soon.

To minimise further accusations of torture and executions in the international press, by November some hundreds of detainees had already been moved to the far northern mining encampment of Chacabuco. At the same time, the just-established security force, the DINA, began planning a series of secret bolt holes, generally private houses seized from the arrested, where detainees could be taken quickly, interrogated and tortured before being trucked to the larger and already overcrowded former civilian prisons like Tres Alamos.

One of the first new clandestine sites to be chosen for the interrogation, torture and possible execution of detainees was an elegant nineteenth-century mansion in the middle of Santiago's CBD. Only metres from the capital's principal thoroughfare and opposite a busy hotel, its address was Londres 38. Until 11 September, when the military seized it, Londres 38 was the headquarters of the Santiago branch of the Chilean Socialist Party. From mid-November it became the first of the Santiago post-stadium torture and extermination centres. How many detainees passed through Londres 38 is unknown, but it probably surpassed

2 Initially the Committee for Cooperation for Peace in Chile, see 'Comité de Cooperación para la paz en Chile', Arzobispado de Santiago, Fundación Documentación y Archivo de la Vicaría de la Solidaridad.

3 'The soccer match that disgraced Chile', PRI Public Radio International, 11 September 2011.

1,000. Of these, 96 were known to have been killed, including 13 young women. The DINA called its new centre 'Yucatán'. It closed in September 1974.⁴

The first purpose of the initial detentions, apart from pre-empting the imagined counter-coup, was to extract the names of known subversives, and the whereabouts of the supposed arms stashes. Most of all, DINA interrogators wanted the identity and the whereabouts of the leaders, already hidden in their safe houses, of the *Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria*, the Movement of the Revolutionary Left, known as *el MIR*. The dismemberment of the MIR by the security forces, and the subsequent attempt of its remaining membership to establish itself within *Londres 38* after 2005, is one of the themes of this chapter.

The MIR, whose members were known as *MIRistas*, was a political party new to Chile. Tracing its foundation only to 1965, it was of a notably different caste to the other leftist parties. Its leadership was drawn mainly from the upper classes, the well educated, students and professionals. It differed, for example, from the Communist Party, founded in 1922, which had emerged from the Chilean factory and rural workers' movements and stood for the democratic exercise of workers' power. Before the coup the Communists were tolerated, if not respected, throughout Chilean society. The MIR never enjoyed that status.

In other ways also, the MIR did not sit comfortably anywhere on the continuum of the left. All that lot, the MIR claimed, had prostituted their revolutionary essence by leading the workers into an electoral and parliamentary swamp.⁵ Indeed, on Allende's election, debate raged whether the MIR should support him or oppose him.⁶ Describing itself as Marxist-Leninist, the party was to lead 'the working class and the exploited masses towards socialism and its national emancipation'. Its self-conception was never less than lofty: it held (again in its own judgement) 'a revolutionary audacity capable of opposing cynical imperialist violence with the virile and proud response of the armed masses'. Its belligerent stance and assumption of elitist leadership made

4 'Recinto DINA – "Londres 38"', *Memoria Viva*.

5 Cited, *ibid.*, p. 5.

6 Lucía Sepúlveda Ruiz, *119 de Nosotros*, Colección Septiembre, LOM Ediciones, Santiago, 2005, pp. 29–30.

it analogous to a religious 'elect', and not necessarily popular with all factory workers or rural communists like Victor Jara; but conversely, its call to arms and its attractiveness to the younger and articulate urban generation helped to make it the first target of Pinochet's security forces.

Elitist though the party was, all levels of the MIR structure paid a terrible price for their rhetoric. Though many escaped or went into exile, hundreds did not. By October 1975, 347 MIRistas had been executed or disappeared. A MIR commander, Andres Pascal Allende, estimated that between 1,500 and 2,000 MIRistas were killed overall, of a total membership of some 10,000 at the time of the coup, equalling between one-half to two-thirds of all Chileans killed during the Pinochet period.⁷

In September 1973, the MIR's head was the charismatic but elusive Miguel Enríquez Espinoza. Like Che Guevara, on whom he modelled himself, he had once been a physician. Now, from a succession of 'safe' houses, he led the resistance of his party against Pinochet until October 1974, when he and several other MIRistas were killed in a spectacular firefight.⁸

Those MIRistas who survived the focused persecutions on the streets, in safe houses and at the National Stadium were among those first to be held in the just-opened Yucatán (Londres 38). In this way was the connection between the MIR and Yucatán established. Indeed, such was the persecution of MIR that, unlike other major parties like the Socialists and Communists, by 1990 the party had ceased to function even as a political force. After the transition to democracy, the remaining membership struggled to establish themselves in Londres 38 as soon as they were able, as much memorial to what the party had endured as signifier of its very existence. But we shall see how a succession of centre-left governments, 1991–2010, were unimpressed by its attempts. Similarly unimpressed were the other Allende-era parties of the left.

7 'Los Allende: con ardiente paciencia por un mundo mejor' [With burning patience towards a better world] by Günther Wessell, cited in 'Revolutionary Left Movement (Chile)', Wikipedia.

8 For a number of sources on Enríquez, see www.archivochile.com/.

In 1993 survivors led by Roberto D'Orival Briceño, brother of a detained-disappeared, formed a collective, which they named 'Colectivo 119', to press the memorialisation of a particular group of mainly MIRista detained-disappeared. The '119' were particularly connected to Londres 38 through 'Operation Colombo', a brutally clumsy attempt by the DINA to account for some of the many hundreds of the left who had disappeared in the first year of the coup. In June 1975 the DINA published its infamous list of 119 'missing' Chileans whose bodies had been supposedly discovered in Argentina, through the preposterous claim that they all had fought and killed each other.⁹ Conveniently, the bodies were so mutilated that they could no longer be identified: even fingers or hands were missing from many of the bodies. Such a statement, as obscene as it was ludicrous, was soon exposed as the lie it was; yet it allowed the DINA to continue to take refuge in the claim that it had no information on those missing people whom it had, of course, detained, tortured and killed. Ninety-four MIRistas were listed among the 119, of whom at least 47 are thought to have been killed within Londres 38 itself.¹⁰

The first detainees of Londres 38 arrived, mostly from the stadium, in sealed refrigerated vans or other vehicles, bound hand and foot, bundled into the formal entrance hurriedly turned into a makeshift docking bay. Unlike at the stadium, at Londres 38 they remained bound and blindfolded, day or night, dumped on chairs by day and the floor by night, from which movement at all times was forbidden. Food and toilet visits twice a day were the only collective movement allowed, though shortages of chairs and blindfolds ensured that everyone soon discovered where they were. The sound of the bells of the well-known Church of St Francisco were easily recognisable, while Socialists, familiar with the building, recognised the black and white tiles of the entrance way by peering below their blindfolds.¹¹ Nor did they need to be told what was in store for them. A detainee was thrown in amongst them so badly injured that he died retching in front of them, invisible but diabolically audible. Every day (except Sunday), every hour, seemingly every minute, came echoing down

9 'Londres 38', Wikipedia.

10 Ruiz, *119 de Nosotros*, p. 29.

11 'Recinto DINA – "Londres 38"', Memoria Viva.

the stairwell the names of those next to be summoned upstairs to be interrogated, punctuated by screams from those already bound on the *parrilla*.¹² Several times a day came roll-call, that at least ensured that every detainee knew who had arrived, or left or died. Patricio Rivas, a leading MIR official held in Londres 38 for 72 hours in late December 1973, recalls his arrival at the torture centre:

A kind of infernal choir filled the place. I heard screams of different tones, from different mouths, which blended with the summons of the agents. They were screams of horror that bit the air and which, even when they ended, still vibrated in space. They weren't screams of fear, they were of loneliness in the face of the incomprehensible. The voices of those young people remained there forever.¹³

Raimundo Belarmino Elgueta Pinto, former MIRista, recalled:

The principal method consisted of applying an electrical current on the 'grill', for which I was made to take all my clothes, they would tie me by the hands and feet to the electric bed, and connect cables to the fingers of my hands and feet and also to the penis and/or testicles and left a 'floating' cable which they applied to the different parts of the body. The 'sessions' were of variable duration, some very prolonged and others very brief.¹⁴

12 The Londres prisoner Erika Hennings, public address, 10 December 2009, recording in possession of the authors.

13 Quoted, Peter Read and Marivic Wyndham, 'The day that Londres 38 opened its doors: A moment in Chilean reconciliation', *Universitas Humanistica. Revista antropología y sociología*, no. 71, January–June 2011, p. 200: 'Una especie de coro infernal llenaba el recinto. Oía gritos en distintos tonos, desde distintas bocas, que se mezclaban con las órdenes de los agentes. Eran gritos de espanto que mordían el aire y que al terminar seguían vibrando en el espacio. No eran gritos de miedo, eran de soledad frente a lo incomprensible. Las voces de esos jóvenes quedaron ahí para siempre.'

14 'Testimonio de Raimundo Belarmino Elgueta Pinto', *Memoria Viva*:

En Londres 38 fui torturado diariamente, con excepción del domingo que en aquella época era todavía descanso obligatorio, mediante golpes de puños y pies y aplicación de corriente eléctrica sentado en una silla, acostado en la 'parrilla' o colgado de una barra metálica. El método principal consistió en la aplicación de corriente eléctrica en la 'parrilla', para lo cual era obligado a desnudarme, me ataban de manos y pies al catre metálico, me conectaban cables a los dedos de las manos y de los pies y también al pene y/o testículos y dejaban un cable 'volante' que aplicaban en diferentes partes del cuerpo. Las 'sesiones' tuvieron duración variable, algunas muy prolongadas y otras muy breves...

Despite its rapid occupation, the DINA soon found the building unsatisfactory. The loud symphonic music played in the street could not conceal the screams from the top floor. While local residents could be intimidated into avoiding the area, Londres was an important thoroughfare in the heart of the city through which passed observers, foreign officials, reporters or even the tourists of the Pinochet years. Thus even while the ordeal of the detainees continued, the security forces were busy preparing larger and better concealed torture facilities ready for use by the end of 1974.

Thanks to its high status, physical elegance and prime location half a kilometre from the seat of government, Londres 38 was not levelled by the dictatorship, as were many of the other major torture and execution sites, to conceal its atrocities. Rather, in 1978, the building was made over by Pinochet to the politically reactionary and quasi-military organisation known as the O'Higgins Institute, whose membership contained a significant number of former Army officers. They were still entrenched in the building after the transition to democracy, well able to summon deference in each of the centre-left governments elected after Pinochet's departure. Ten years later, in 2001, the O'Higgins members objected strongly to any reference to the brief but terrifying role of their headquarters as the first of Pinochet's specifically created torture centres. They aggressively denied knowledge to any enquiry and, to deceive strangers, changed the number of their institute from 38 to 40. For a decade the centre-left Concertación governments, implicitly acknowledging the potential of the O'Higgins Institute to encourage a further military coup, resisted any attempt at an official recognition of the building's past.¹⁵

For as long as the O'Higgins Institute remained in control of the building, commemoration of the site by mourners was as necessarily restrained as at the stadium. By day physical protest was impossible, but from 2003 peaceful and silent demonstrations began outside on the narrow pavement between the building and the hotel. Sorrowing families, and a few survivors, would gather once a week to place candles on the footpath in a *velaton*, or vigil. They might read aloud one or

15 Steve Stern, *Reckoning with Pinochet: The Memory Question in Democratic Chile, 1989–2006*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2010, pp. 270–71.

two testimonies, or paste photographs of the detained-disappeared on the walls. Father, mother, daughter, son, husband, wife, *Donde está?* Where is he? Where is she? Early next morning the O'Higgins workmen arrived to pull the posters off and whitewash the wall. The despairing cries to the disappeared had themselves disappeared. All that remained, to careful observers, were a few whitewashed corners of posters too hard to remove, and the tiny marks at ground level where the vigil candles had discoloured the once elegant white façade.



The front façade, Londres 38, showing the marks of burning candles resting against it during the vigils held for the detained-disappeared.

Source: Photograph by Peter Read, editing Con Boekel.

The silent reverent vigils did not remain so for long. The government's actions, though founded in sensible deference to the O'Higgins Institute, only served to focus attention on a building so easily accessible by day, and where dozens of pedestrians walked past or stopped at the evening vigils. By 2005 the mourners' numbers at the vigils were swollen by young people intent on changing the meaning of the once silent ceremonies. They began to call a rhetorical roll to demonstrate an improbable solidarity between Chile's old political left:

The Socialist Party of Chile?

Presente!

The Communist Party?

Presente!

El MIR?

Presente!

El MAPU? [The small Popular Unitary Action Party that formed a part of Allende's coalition]

Presente!

In 2004, news spread that the O'Higgins Institute members would be invited to find a new site for their headquarters. It was no coincidence that at this point the unity between the collectives advocating a memorialisation of Londres 38 – in a form as yet undecided – began to fracture. At least two collectives demanded a distinct voice. One was Colectivo 119, already created to honour the 119 murdered political prisoners, whose members were almost all MIRistas or their families. Naturally, their first demand was the recognition and memorialisation of the 119. A second collective, confusingly named the 'Friends and Families of the 119' (Amigos y Familiares de los 119) occupying a lower socioeconomic place, and with no direct links to the victims of Londres 38, nevertheless believed themselves to be more genuine inheritors of working-class struggles than the elitist MIR. Indeed, it was they who began to shift the solemn weekly witnessing to the dead towards the political soapboxing and noisy critiques of the Concertación governments that from 2005 marked the evening gatherings. Londres 38 was acquiring the new status of protest site in addition to its role as historical actor.¹⁶

A second tension to split the collectives Colectivo 119 and Colectivo Amigos y Familiares de los 119 was whether to accept the government as partner in memorialising the building. The inexperienced and often belligerent 'Friends and Family', unused to negotiating with the state at any level, held that no one associated with the building should deal with a government that had prevaricated and compromised with the military. The leader of the Colectivo 119, Roberto D'Orival Briceño, whose brother Jorge was among the 119 disappeared, understood that their connection to the building, apart from through his own

16 Marivic Wyndham and Peter Read, 'The disappearing museum', *Rethinking History. The Journal of Theory and Practice* 18(2), April 2014, 165–180.

group, was tenuous.¹⁷ His collective of former MIRistas was better educated and more confident in negotiation, which only increased the opprobrium directed at it. Even though it had established itself on the coat-tails of the 119, the Friends and Family Collective thought its attempts at negotiation to be counter-productive, or worse. Where was the leadership of the left, it asked, when the rank and file began to be rounded up, tortured and killed? Why had so many abandoned their posts and gone into exile, to return only when it was safe, while the workers had suffered most? In return, Briceño's collective hammered at the theme that the working-class distrust of the 'establishment', of whatever political colour, was destructive and stupid. Privately, some held that the ignorant left would probably destroy places like Londres 38 should they be allowed to build workers' houses on the site. Only peaceful protest and patient negotiations would persuade – not force – the government to act. As the gap between the collectives widened, the footpath activities became more discordant. Songs, recitals and theatrical roll calls for worldwide oppressed minorities began to replace the fewer personal testimonies at the evening vigils. Vigil candles were overshadowed by displays and puppet shows, amplified music and denunciations – not of Pinochet's regime, but of Bachelet's!¹⁸

It was in the context of the 2004 Valech Report's multiple testimonies of torture at Londres 38 and elsewhere, and in the expectation that the O'Higgins Institute would be prepared to move to new quarters, that Bachelet's centre-left government finally declared the building a historic monument.¹⁹ A somewhat obscure bronze tablet sunk into the pavement outside the building revealed only a few details of what atrocities had occurred inside:

Londres 38 Secret Centre of detention, torture, disappearance and execution 11 September 1973 – September 1974. It is estimated that more than 2,000 people were detained in Londres 38, 96 of whom were executed, are currently disappeared or died later as a consequence of the tortures; 83 were men and 13 women, two of whom were pregnant. Declared a Historic Monument in 2005.

17 The Friends and Family Collective, led by Ximena Muñoz, has been renamed 'Collective 119 for Human Rights'.

18 Read and Wyndham, 'The day that Londres 38 opened its doors', pp. 202–3.

19 'Report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture' ('Valech Report'), 29 November 2004.

The restrained language and the position of the plaque on the pavement, rather than on the wall, indicated that the Department of Historic Monuments was anxious not to offend the powerful and the threatening. Behind closed doors the Bachelet government continued to negotiate with the O'Higgins Institute, not to resume the building, but to offer several attractive sites elsewhere in the city to exchange for Londres 38.

Dissent among the memorialisers, exacerbated by rumours, continued to widen. Most of the Socialist members of Colectivo 119 split to form a new but not unfriendly group, Colectivo Londres 38, to look after their own party's interests in the building. Both rejected the endless Friends and Family mantra of 'No negotiating with the government'. Only peaceful protest and patient negotiations, they reasoned, would convince the government that the institute should be persuaded to leave. Trying to smash in the front door of Londres 38, as some extremists in the Friends and Family were demanding, would be highly counter-productive. Keep this up and everyone would finish up with nothing. The Friends and Family Collective sidetracked the demand for memorialisation by a separate agenda of free education and health benefits that should be granted not only to the children of victims of repression, but to all working-class children. Discussion intensified: if there was to be a central archive of historical research installed in the building, rumoured to be the government plan, what would be its purpose? Should the planned memorialisation inside be specific to the building, sombre and contemplative, or should it confront visitors with torture instruments? Who would control it? In the last resort, should the leftist groups work with the government towards reconciliation and, if so, at what price to justice and truth?

Unexpectedly, in February 2006, the O'Higgins Institute put the building up for sale. The collectives claimed victory, but the government forestalled discussion as to who would own it by announcing that it, not the collectives, was already the owner of Londres 38. It confirmed its plan to install on the site a yet-to-be-established Institute for Human Rights.

At last here was something that could unite the collectives. Almost everyone, it seemed, opposed the government's plan. In March 2007, Colectivo 119 invited all interested parties to a meeting to decide the preferred purpose. The Colectivo Londres 38, dominated by Socialists,

demanded that the building should be dedicated to the history of the Pinochet repression and the memories of all those who had suffered within its walls – by implication, *not* just MIRistas, and *not* just the 119. A participatory process should define its uses, after which the state should have no role beyond ensuring that its management was public, democratic and participatory.²⁰ Meanwhile, the building remained locked and bolted and the government gave no indication when it would allow public entry.

Stymied, the collectives planned their own exterior memorialisation, to be much more obvious and informative than the Department of Historic Sites' understated and obscurely placed plaque. The collectives agreed that in the pavement of the public street outside the building, 300 black-and-white granite tiles would imitate the floor inside the building that victims had glimpsed through the bottom of their blindfolds. A further 98 bronze placards would list the names and ages of the 85 men and 13 women believed politically executed in the building. As significant as the name would be a statement of political affiliation. One would read, for example:

Abundio Alejandro Contreras González
28 years old MIR

The government agreed that this (slight) further memorialisation of the detained-disappeared might proceed.

No sooner had the divisions closed in opposition to the government's plans, than they reopened on the alternative agendas for the conservation and memorialisation of the building. Now that the plaques and memorials were in place outside, what should be interpreted inside, and how, and when? One end of the spectrum of possibilities stood for an empty, silent building, bare and darkened rooms for quiet contemplation. What would be the place of the MIRistas? The centre-left and moderate Bachelet Cabinet was by no means enamoured of memorials to a pro-Cuban revolutionary party that did not believe in democratic rule; and it was this vision of a specific, MIRista-dominated memorial House of Memory that the state's agencies would

20 Colectivo Londres 38, 'Londres 38. Un Espacio Para La Memoria', pamphlet, 10 December 2007.

progressively thwart. The state would tolerate no memorialisation of a particular site at the expense of its plans for its own wider, and more diffused, account of the recent past.

It was at the official opening and reoccupation of the building, scheduled for International Human Rights Day, 10 December 2007, that the point at which the divisions between the three collectives, as well as the interests of general state and the localised victim, at last became unedifyingly manifest.

What would the day bring? Colectivo 119 wanted a solemn and respectful ingress by which only its own members should first be admitted to begin to exorcise their memories and conduct their rituals. Tensions rose as the Ministry of National Assets announced that, contrary to the wishes of seemingly everyone else, it would take charge of the formal opening as a major media event. The collectives debated whether to boycott the event; most people decided that it was in their best interests to attend. But during the morning, rumours spread that the Minister, hearing of a planned counter-demonstration by the Friends and Families Collective, had postponed the formal opening until further notice. By three in the afternoon, few in the crowd gathering outside knew what was to happen, or when. By four, 200 people stood outside awaiting developments, debating, listening to speeches and performers. The building's windows and door on the bottom floor were wide open, but representatives of the Communist-dominated Friends and Families Collective stood outside barring entry to all but their own members. By half past four, the number of people being allowed to walk in and out of the main entrance was increasing. Suddenly a spokesperson for the Friends and Families Collective, showing its customary contempt for all things governmental, announced defiantly that since the Minister had forbidden entry, those present should 'force' their way in.

We must repudiate the Ministry, *compañeros*, for [all] government still represents the long repression of the workers. The entry of we urban unionists will be like a vigil, but something more. Treat it with the utmost respect, but move in.

Swept aside were the Colectivo 119's plans for a dignified, formal opening by the Minister, invitation-only, ritualised, ecumenical, sombre, ethical and poetic. The chance to impress upon the Minister

how important was the site to the MIR and to the families of the 119 was lost.²¹ Two hundred people, denied entry for 34 years, pushed forward.

Those in the first dignified surge found themselves bypassing a man weeping uncontrollably, just inside the interior entrance, comforted by a woman while a video photographer held them in close focus. His sobs, momentarily, were the only sounds to disturb the reverent silence. Little by little, silences became hushed conversations. At this still point, each traumatised family was claiming a space for its own truth. A voice from somewhere asked what a room was used for. On the second floor a weeping woman disclosed to a friend that her disappeared son and a journalist detainee had been paraded together in this very spot. They could hear their footsteps on the wooden floor; through their blindfolds, they could see the light of day filtering through the wooden shutters. The journalist had survived, her son was disappeared. His photograph hung from her neck. *Donde está?* She turned to the back wall and wept afresh. Other mourners took an incense stick and made their way to the upper floors, those of interrogation and torture, to pore minutely over their walls and floors in search of painted-over messages. A man searching above the picture rail in the *parrilla* chamber found, perhaps, what he had been looking for: a tiny potpourri of flowers, dated 2005.²² In the basement, a couple were earnestly examining the tiny mosaic of colour tiles in the pantry, evidently searching for something they expected to be there.

Meanwhile on the first floor, in the largest room of the mansion, once the drawing room, then the main holding cell, a discussion was beginning. First respectful, then noisy, soon heated, it centred on the future of the building. The drama of the afternoon was precipitating a climax of tensions years in the making: to express individual grief, to give voice to national workers' movements, to bind the site to international human rights, and to further the cause of national reconciliation. Boiling over here were not only the emotions of the terror but the years of frustration at the institute, at the government,

21 Roberto D'Orival Briceño, interview, 11 December 2010.

22 The date probably referred to an entry into the building by some former detainees and judicial investigators.

at the other collectives, at each other in a divided political left with nowhere to go. Roberto D'Orival Briceño bellowed at the Family and Friends Collective:

Why do you keep excluding us? We are constantly being discredited but this sort of exclusion and behind-the-hand criticism has got to stop. We need to combine not only to decide the building's future but the whole future of the left in Chile.²³

A proposal to set up a café, proposed by the Friends and Family, was furiously shouted down. 'You haven't suffered with us.'²⁴ A woman asserted that her sister had been disappeared upstairs in this very building and that she would never, ever, allow the place to become a coffee shop for tourists.

Who had the moral rights to the building – intellectuals or workers, survivors or supporters, professionals or well-meaning supporters? Was it the MIR? Or was it the families of the 119? Would the opening of the building be a victory for local activism and the current struggles of Santiago urban workers – the present; or a victory for local memory, truth and justice set in a context of international human rights – the past; or the Concertación's developing national agenda of investigation of victims (not perpetrators) and reconciliation – that is to say, the future? In the broadest terms, the question was: Who in the end holds the emotional and moral rights to this building, and to Chile's immediate past?²⁵ Perhaps fortunately, the debate was terminated by the arrival of Erika Hennings, former tortured detainee of Londres 38, widow of a detained-disappeared, expelled to France in October 1974, and articulate spokesperson for the Colectivo 119.²⁶ To an audience at last hushed, she related that her teenage daughter, standing white-faced beside her, had never before entered the building. Though beatings took place in the room where she stood, her worst memories were footsteps echoing up and down the wooden staircase all day, waiting to be called to what she called the extermination room. *When you were called, you knew.* Her husband Alfonso defied orders to creep across to her by night to touch her. *It was an act of love I'll never*

23 Roberto D'Orival Briceño, interview.

24 Ibid.

25 Discussion based on informal conversations by the authors with members of rival factions while waiting for the doors to open.

26 For biographical details see, for example, 'Alfonso Chanfreau', Wikipedia.

forget. Someone had been thrown from – she pointed – that window. Some detainees had been hanged from – that staircase. She glanced up and whispered, ‘I can’t go there’. She asked to be alone with her daughter for a few minutes.

The tour, 2010

The opening of the house was a year in the past, and the first guided official tour was still 18 months in the future when Michele Drouilly, sister of a detained-disappeared MIRista, allowed the authors entry to the silent site.²⁷

These first interpretations of the terror were personal, precise and agonising. From perhaps minutes of the building’s opening, tiny ornaments and drawings had begun unobtrusively to appear. In a cramped and windowless cell (probably originally a storage pantry) a drawing depicted four blindfolded, handcuffed individuals jammed together on the floor. On the landing outside the torture chamber – originally a bedroom – another tiny drawing showed the infamous interrogators Miguel Krassnoff and Moren Brito, flanked by a guard, sinister and threatening. A blindfolded, naked detainee hung upside down suspended by the knees and hands from a pole. A naked man was shown plunged by two guards into a barrel, probably sewage. Some of the reproductions were attached by three corners, or hung crooked or slightly torn. Their positioning was unmistakably urgent, neither decorative nor informative, indeed, since each picture was only some 8 by 12 centimetres, they seemed more analogous to flowers on a grave than to a public display. Each depicted a specific torture in its precise location: the drawing of the figure in the barrel hung in the upstairs bathroom, in the part of the building now closed to visitors. Each of these locations had become a private altar for perhaps a solitary mourner. While some of those experiences were not specific to Londres 38, their reproductions memorialised the exact and unspeakable events that had occurred not anywhere else, but *here*. On the ground floor, in another bathroom, someone had glued an image of a young man’s face on an inlet valve that served poignantly to frame it.

27 See Chapter 7.

Throughout the building, still closed to the public, the mood of the impromptu signage was one of barely restrained horror and grief at what had happened *here*, not there, and to *this* person, not that.

To this point in late 2010, neither the Department of National Assets nor the collectives had agreed on the direction of any historical display. It was to be another full year before the first indications of the shift from the minutely particular to a general statement about the building themselves took form.

The tensions were neatly displayed in a wordless exchange between collectives and individual in what had once been the reception area of the building. That the collectives were prepared to work together was apparent in a rather bureaucratically worded sign – the first inside the building – propped against the chimney above the marble mantelpiece. Note the prioritising of the achievements of the different collectives:

Had it not been for the actions of the ex-detained [Collective 119], the families of the victims [Collective Londres 38] and the social organisations [Families and Friends of the Collective 119], this site would still remain ignored. Virtually ‘erased’ from the city.

During the year an unknown mourner had placed five photocopied cards, mostly representing victims of a single MIRista family – Alberto Gallardo, Roberto Gallardo, Catalina Gallardo, Rolando Rodríguez and Monica Pacheco – arranged against the wall of the first room that one entered. Beside each card was propped a paper rose. Below each photograph was typed:

Executed by the DINA 9th of November 1975.²⁸

The poignant memorials were arranged propped against the first signage in the building, partially, though no doubt deliberately, obscuring its message.

28 These were placed by Alberto Rodríguez Gallardo, infant survivor of the deaths of many of his family in 1975, at the hands of the DINA. All were members either of the MIR or Communist Party; Alberto Rodríguez Gallardo, ‘The truth is I don’t know the word “justice”, and even less the word “pardon”’, *El Irreverente*.

During 2011, though the building was not yet formally open to the public, favoured members of the collectives might find their way into the building to impose their own vision of what the memorial should become, while several judicial enquiries asked survivors such as Erika Hennings to accompany them on inspections. But what now appeared to be the first state-sponsored signage in the building indicated that the agonised recognition of certain sites was giving way to a creeping generality. The largest space on the ground floor, where the detainees were held handcuffed and blindfolded, was the only room whose purpose to the DINA was identified. It was here that Patricio Rivas had absorbed the 'infernal choir, those screams of horror that bit the air' that 'when they ended, still vibrated in space'; here Alfonso Chanfreu had crept across the midnight floor to touch his wife Erika Hennings for the last time. The signage, in contrast, was prosaic and flat.

DETENTION ROOM. Common room in which during the day the male and female detainees remained seated and blindfolded. During the night the chairs were removed and they slept on the floor.

At the same time, other signage was appearing in different rooms, directed by a more poetic hand, but one which also eschewed both precision and location. It was not clear who had written them, nor for whom. This caption seemed to reflect the horror that Rivas could not forget:

The problem was not, nor is, only to speak or tell of what was experienced, rather to find ears that want to listen.

This caption appeared on a door on the first floor:

The ear allowed them to see without eyes, identify the house and its surroundings, recognise days and nights and hold in their memory the voices of friends and comrades.

And prominently inscribed on the walls of another room:

How does one fill this void so full of entrapped memories? This is a past that continues to be part of our present.

Finally, the visitors, even if making their own way in, could reflect upon this wall signage, first scribbled on a cigarette packet by a woman prisoner, the MIRista Muriel Dockendorff Navarrete. She wrote it

to her friend Sandra Machuca, fellow detainee in another Santiago interrogation and detention centre, Cuatro Alamos. Muriel died, Sandra, and the precious message, survived.

I remember when I met you in the house of terror ... In those moments in which a light was a dream. Or a miracle, however, you were light in those darknesses. We were one in one misfortune. Today thousands of misfortunes. Later I see you as before, as I know you will be today, in some other place, always looking to windward. We will meet through the mists that we will dispel.

Do not forget me.²⁹

Heart-stopping as Muriel Dockendorff's farewell message was, the explanation below introduced a new element into the display. It indicated for the first time that the Concertación Government's interpretation of Londres 38 might not only compromise the minutiae of every room, but the particularity of the building itself.

Letter written by Muriel Dockendorff Navarrete – today a detained disappeared, to her friend Sandra Machuca, 10 October 1974, while both were detained in the camp [now Site of Conscience] Cuatro Alamos.

At the time of signage, no certain evidence existed that the MIRista Muriel Dockendorff had ever been held in Londres 38 at all. Yet in the decade that followed, it was such heroic statements that reminded MIRistas of what they had once been, and why. Though the party was in ruins, the visionary ideals that bound them demanded an honoured remembrance.

It was towards the end of 2011 that the purposes of the building, which the government had first signalled in 2005, became more obvious. Londres 38 opened officially with an exhibition and guided tour in 2011. Dominating and beginning the display was a historical timeline that marked the annual course of the dictatorship. It began with the story of the 119 disappeared radical leftists – while noting that such psychological warfare was practised by other dictatorships of the time! In the account of succeeding years, even Londres 38 did not always figure. The text for the year 1983, for instance, noted only

29 'Muriel Dockendorff Navarrete', *Memoria Viva*; see also, Berenice Dockendorff Navarrete, *Homenaje a Muriel*, self-published, Santiago, March 2008.

the first of the widespread nationwide strikes against the dictatorship. The caption for 2005 noted the year in which Londres 38 was handed over to the collectives. For 2010, the year in which the government assumed a more direct control over the historical interpretation, the signage traced the state's own role precisely. A laboriously worded sign explained that, 'meeting the will of the current government', a working group had been formed of the three collectives, along with representatives of the Presidential Assessors Commission of Human Rights, the Program of Human Rights of the Ministry of Interior, the Metropolitan Regional Administration, the Executive of Architecture of the Ministry of Public Works and the Council for National Monuments. 'Amongst others'!

Guide Leopoldo Montenegro reminded visitors of the significance of this new agenda: the building should not be allowed to remain a thing of the past but must develop the means of educating future generations and develop a pedagogy. Only state funding could repair the damage to the house; indeed, he reminded his every audience, the Rettig Report had stressed that sites like Londres 38 were the state's responsibility.³⁰

Equally significant was what, by 2011, had vanished. The drawings of the detainees cramped in a tiny cell, the photocopies of the Gallardo family members obscuring the entry signage, the depiction of individual tortures, the tiny photograph of the young man in the lower bathroom – all were gone. Leopoldo Montenegro was unable to explain their disappearance: he did not know that they ever had been there. To the question as to why, for example, there was no physical evidence of torture instruments such as the *parrilla*, as the Museum of Memory and Human Rights was displaying at this time, he replied that such an object would be 'contrary to the aesthetic of the display'. Indeed it would.³¹

By 2012 the displays had assumed a new irony. The most dominant voice when the building was still in the hands of the O'Higgins Institute, that of the Colectivo 119, was now altogether absent inside the building, its displays relegated to the pavement outside.

30 Leopoldo Montenegro Montenegro, guide, video recording of tour of Londres 38, 30 November 2011. The Museum of Memory and Human Rights was inaugurated by President Michelle Bachelet in 2010.

31 Leopoldo Montenegro Montenegro, interview, 3 December 2012.

In September this took the form of a nine-panel temporary exhibition, packed away each night, presenting a photograph and biographical information on each of the detained-disappeared.³²

In 2012 the years of struggles to rescue Londres 38 as a specific Site of Conscience of the MIR, especially of the 119, appeared to have come a full circle. The same spatial tensions of the time prior to that day in 2007 when Londres 38 first opened its doors, between the public and private, the outside and the inside of the site, still held. The years of vigils and pasted photographs of victims of Londres 38 outside, when the building was occupied by the O'Higgins Institute, had answered only their immediate purpose. Now the physical and metaphorical spheres of interior and exterior had imposed themselves: the state in control over the politics and interpretation of the interior of the building, and the collectives in charge of the various public spaces staged outside. The extent to which some members of the collectives have resigned themselves to these divisions of space and power was reflected in an anonymous justification of the status quo that argued, in phrases as clumsily opaque in English as they are in Spanish:

[W]e aim to go beyond the traditional concepts of museum or commemorative space, privileging the relationship with the community, in pursuing a collective and participatory conception. This means that the memories related to the site involve other groups and sectors of society, whose participation is necessary in order to generate processes of elaboration of those memories and the construction of collective knowledge a constant and always inconclusive dynamic. Therefore, the realisation of the project necessarily meets in the convocation of other social sectors, creating new links and networks which facilitate the process of the recuperation and elaboration of memories.³³

What had gone wrong since the optimistic days when the O'Higgins Institute finally left the building? Like the equally emblematic National Stadium, the political left had been routed by the Concertación's own interpretative purposes. Bedevilled by internal divisions between its many claimants, the grieving families had been outmanoeuvred. By 2012 it seemed evident that the decade-long negotiations between state and collectives had been settled decisively. The history and

32 For Erika Hennings's comment, see Ramona Wadi, 'The right to memory in Chile: An interview with Erika Hennings, President of Londres 38', *Upside Down World*, 2 May 2002.

33 Cited, María José Pérez and Karen Glavic, 'La experiencia de la visita y la visita cómo experiencia: memorias críticas y constructivas', *Londres 38 Espacio de Memorias*, 2011, p. 2.

politics of memorialisation of Londres 38, reflected so eloquently in the constantly changing signage, pointed to how that state had been able to turn the divisions in the left to its favour.

George Orwell wrote of the Spanish Civil War, 'No one who was there in the months at a time when people still believed in the revolution will ever forget that strange and moving experience'. MIRistas believed in a version of that same revolution that, similarly, failed. Deprived of both physical home and physical memorial, the MIR thereafter took refuge in rehearsing its pride in the stirring ideals and selfless comradeship of a generation prepared to die for its beliefs, a brief flowering of a conviction that the world could be and should be changed by dedicated young people. By 2012, though, that matchless time seemed another universe.³⁴

34 Orwell to Cyril Connolly, quoted, Valentine Cunningham, *British Writers of the Thirties*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 1989, p. 422.



Londres 38 with its message of November 2015, 'Break the pact of silence'. On the darker flagstones are inscribed the names of the detained-disappeared believed held here, and their political affiliation.

Source: Photograph by Peter Read, editing Con Boekel.

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