

The World as a Collection of Postcards: Evita's Architectural Project(ion)s and the Making of Argentinean Identity

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*"I would like to look at the world as one looks at a collection of postcards."
Eva Duarte¹*

In 1951, when the República de los Niños (Children's Republic) was inaugurated, Evita could not be present: she was deathly ill and lying in bed. But, as Daniel Santoro expresses in his picture "Evita pregnant with Children's city"² this republic was one of her dreams, her last wish for her children as a 'symbolic mother' of the Argentinian descamisados. (Descamisados is a neologism she invented to describe the poor people who were denied access to the privileges of Argentinian society – it is reminiscent of the sans coulottes of the French revolution, but in strict Catholic Argentina they would be the ones 'without shirts'.)

Peronism is a highly complex phenomenon which still pervades Argentinian life today. The role of peronism and the significance of Evita's image in the construction of Argentinian identity has been discussed in great detail. What has been neglected is the architectural politics of Perón's regime (1945-1955) that became manifest in a large number of building projects from schools or holiday camps to hospitals. This huge construction wave has left its traces on Argentina's national identity. Opposing not only 'self' and 'other' but also 'proletarian' and 'oligarchic', the architectural projects reflect the (strange) ideologies and aesthetic ideals of peronism that are as eclectic and contradictory as Evita was herself: the discourse and the flag of the poor coexisted with jewels and Christian Dior's design.

Evita planned most of these projects herself, acting through the "Fundación Eva Perón", a self-invented section of the Argentinian government. As a kind of 'fairy of the descamisados', she created as if with a touch of a magical hand here a hospital,

1 In an Interview in 1944, quoted by Tomás Eloy Martínez (1995): Santa Evita, Barcelona, Seix Barral, p. 1.

2 In Daniel Santoro (2004): Manual del niño peronista, Buenos Aires, La Marca.

there a house for women. No other period of the Argentinian history was so ‘constructive’ – at least in the material sense of this word. Only to mention some figures: more than 4000 schools and 500,000 flats were built in those years (Petrina, 2004, p. 18 et sqq.).

These peronist buildings do not have a unique style but draw on a wide variety of styles ranging from the ‘monumental’ seat of Evita’s Foundation, following the best tradition of totalitarian regimes, to the modernist designs of Amacio Williams. Even Le Courbusier was in Argentina those years, leaving a big influence – he built the famous “Casa Curuchet” by La Plata in 1949. As Alberto Petrina pointed out, this eclectic freedom of design made room for, amongst others, a book of propaganda that can easily juxtapose diverse styles like picturesqueness and rationalism (ibid., p. 18).

Middle Class Utopia with Authoritarian Features: Ciudad Evita

Evita’s favourite style seems to have been the “Californian Picturesqueness” that dominates architectural complexes such as Ciudad Evita, Ciudad de los Estudiantes (a hall of residence for students coming from outside of Buenos Aires), Ciudad de los niños Amanda Allen (a children’s city for orphans, also in Buenos Aires)³ and several holiday residences such as Chapadmalal and Rio Tercero.

Ciudad Evita, a workers’ city of 30 square metres built between 1947 and 1955, was inspired by Ebenezer Howard’s concept of the garden city. The houses are a mix of Californian bungalows, invoking the dream of the ‘American way of life’, with a sort of naïve style, Evita’s personal touch that also characterizes other projects. Since all the holiday residences are also built in this style, a big part of the Argentinian workers and middle-class families associated it with the nice experience of (sometimes the first or the only) holidays in their lives.

Like Howard’s very ‘realistic’ utopia, Ciudad Evita is not a revolutionary project but embodies the values and the aesthetics of the middle class. Even though the idea of providing thousands of families with a home signified a huge social achievement, this did not find expression in the architectural realization of this project. The architect’s scale was used without imagination and the product is, at best, a kind of domestic, mediocre utopia.

3 The Construction of the Ciudad Infantil went on day and night for five months and twenty days. It was completed in record time and inaugurated on July 14, 1949. See about it the article of Dolane Larson: The Amanda Allen Children’s City in <http://www.evita-peron.org/fu62.htm>.

The ‘Little Utopia’ of the Children’s Republic: A Young Democracy between Motherland and Jail

In the history of utopias, including architectural ones, there are more audacious projects. In the context of Latin America it is interesting to bear in mind that Thomas More wrote his *Utopia* roughly at the time when the continent was being conquered. Since then, there have been many attempts to build such ideals in these ‘new’ territories – from the Jesuit Missions in Argentina and Paraguay to the ‘utopian cities’ planned by Sarmiento (Agiopolis) or Bolivar (Las Casas) (Morosi, 1999). In Argentina, as Julio Morosi pointed out, one of these plans was realized in 1889, with the construction of the “city of Jules Verne”, the fantastic city of La Plata, near Buenos Aires. The plans for this city also made eclectic use of styles – commonplace in Argentinian history and architecture due to the diversity of immigration – drawing on, among others, the Paris of Baron Haussmann, Versailles and Karlsruhe. This model won the gold medal in the Exhibition of Paris in 1889 and the French minister of Foreign Affairs said to the Argentinian consul: “You go on amazing the world.” (ibid.)⁴

Probably without being aware of this anecdote but following this tradition of southern utopian projects which ‘amaze the world’, Evita initiated a revolutionary project on the outskirts of La Plata only sixty years later: República de los Niños (Republic of Children), a miniature city where all the buildings are scaled to the height of ten years old children, a unique project for this time. In addition, it involved a symbolic gesture of nationalization and democratization of spaces – two concepts which were central to the political vocabulary of peronismo: this terrain used to be the property of the Golf Club, the English aristocracy settled in Argentina.

The architects Lima, Gallo and Cuenca conceived an original puzzle that combines a fantasy world (based on Andersen’s and Grimm’s tales) with the basic democratic institutions on a ground of fifty hectares. The latter so called Centro Cívico includes a Parliament (a copy of the British Houses of Parliament with one tower inspired by the Palace of the Signora de Florencia), a Palace of Justice (Gothic style), a Government House and buildings for the three forces of the army (!), all in a child’s size. Apart from the three branches of political power, there are buildings that represent the spheres of economy and religion: a Catholic church (Norman style) with stained glass inside and, of course, a bank (inspired by the Ducal Palast of Venice). Finally, the children’s republic also includes other spheres of socioeconomic life, such as a small radio station that represents the ‘fourth power’ as well as an airport, a railway and a petrol station, a farm with small animals and an artificial lake shielded off by a customs control. The worlds of the children’s stories, such as Peter Pan or Little Red Riding Hood, border the lake and can be reached by ship. The whole project thus combines imagination with the political sphere of government and justice and the world of production – the

4 The work of Morosi is also essential to understand the utopian planning and history of the city of La Plata.

latter epitomized by the farm, one of the pillars of the Argentinian economic model at the time (even though the peronismo supported the industrialization of the land there are no factories in the República).

From the architectural point of view, this is an amazing and original construction, chiefly because the small size ‘democratizes’ the buildings (as far as I know the first construction of this kind in the world), but also because the fantastic architecture combines elements from the most diverse cultural inheritances: the Palace of Culture is inspired by a mixture of the *Taj Mahal* (outside) and the *Patio de Leones of the Alhambra* (inside), the Palace of Justice is Northern Gothic, the Parliament is Gothic Revival, the houses in the street are German *Fachwerkhäuser*. The most beautiful part are the roofs. “[T]hey represented all the styles of the nicer roofs in the whole world. (...) Old roofs, from legends, difficult to build”, remembers the site supervisor, Neif Anun (Barcaglioni et al., 2002, p. 20). It is interesting to add that most of the workers who built the complex were immigrants, so that not only the design but even the construction of this cultural mosaic was imbued with this fruitful diversity. The architectural styles were not only selected for aesthetic but also for political reasons. They were to evoke and convoke different traditions with their ‘values’ – or at least the clichés of the latter: the ‘transparency’ of the Dutch legal administration (Palace of Justice), the Anglo-Saxon model of democracy (Parliament) or the technological and scientific achievements of the Arabic culture and the Orient (Palace of Culture).

However, the political dimension of this project is just as amazing. The aim was to provide the children with a ‘real republic’ with their own parliamentarians, judges, police and military.⁵ A legend tells that Walt Disney was so fascinated by his visit that the República de los Niños became a model for his Disney World. In fact, these two complexes are strikingly similar, although Disney World is merely a ‘fantasy world’ without the political dimension that lay at the heart of Evita’s project. Yet, this heart was never really beating. The children’s republic was always perceived as a kind of ‘Third World Disney World’. While most of the Argentinian children remember to have been there, their memories usually include playing with fairies or travelling in a little ship, but not participating in democracy. Even the name of the republic changed with the different dictatorships: it first became Children’s Land and then Children’s City, thus losing the republican component to a geographic term.

Over time the place was abandoned and forgotten. Only in 2001, for its 50th anniversary, the republic was renovated: there has been a revival of the pedagogical projects and there have also been attempts to reconstruct the small democratic institu-

5 There had already been several pedagogical attempts to create systems of “children’s democracy” before this project. The most famous and interesting among these was carried out by Janusz Korczak in his orphanages in Poland at the beginning of the twentieth century. These pedagogical experiments included a children’s own Parliament and courts of justice. However, Evita had probably not heard of these forerunners when she planned the children’s republic. About Korzcac’s project see: Ruben Naranjo (2001): Janusz Korczak. Maestro de la humanidad, Buenos Aires, Novedades Educativas & Editorial Milá.

tions.⁶ Today, the visitor may be confronted with a variety of scenes that demonstrate a certain political eclecticism: on the one hand, there is a deserved exhibition of the Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo that deals with the children who disappeared during the last military dictatorship and with the right to have an identity.⁷ On the other hand, the author was prevented from entering the Houses of Parliament during her visit because it was being used for a catechism class! Surrealism hidden in Argentina's everyday life.

One of the questions that remains to be answered is why a regime with authoritarian features like Perón's carried out such a progressive and democratic project that aimed to teach children the importance of democracy, not only in the roles they would play there but also in the concrete experience of those spaces. And why did architects and pedagogues, not only in Argentinian historiography but also in the international architectural, political and educational debate ignore this imaginative use of the architect's (and political) scale that engendered the children's republic?

The Fascist Utopia: A Giant without a Shirt

"To decipher discourse through the use of spatial, strategic metaphors enables one to grasp precisely the points at which discourses are transformed in, through and on the basis of relations of power." Michel Foucault⁸

These questions become even more puzzling if one thinks of Evita's other architectural project, the last one I will present here. She wanted to build a "Monumental descamisado": an Argentinian Colossus, 137 metres high – almost as big as Notre Dame and thus, as this comparative model shows, 45 metres higher than the Statue of Liberty and three times as big as the Christ in Rio de Janeiro. As Ignacio Jawtuszentko pointed out in his recently published article about the incredible story of this monument, Evita intended to build the highest monument in the world for the *Descamisado de la Patria* (she had been very impressed by Napoleon's tomb in Paris) (Jawtuszentko, 2004, p. 8 et seq.). When she saw the plans, her comment sounded almost ironic: "It is nice because it is big and simple." Following the necrophilic tradition usually cultivated by fascist regimes, the plan was to bury the remains of an anonymous descamisado in the same place. Moreover, Evita herself wanted to be buried in this huge mausoleum.

6 For a more detailed description of the process see Barcaglioni et al, op. cit.

7 Abuelas de Plaza de Mayo is an organization of mothers of "desaparecidos" (people kidnapped and killed by the military regime) who are looking for their grandchildren – more than 500 babies where kidnapped by soldiers who killed their parents and gave them another "identity". The Abuelas have found 77 children since 1977 and are still trying to find more, asserting the right of the children to have an identity. For more information see: <http://www.abuelas.org.ar/>

8 Quoted in Perry, David C. (1995). *Making space. Planning as a Mode of Thought* in: Liggett, Helen and D.C.Perry: *Spatial practices*, London, Sage Publications: 209.

This colossal, fascist muscle man built in the best totalitarian style was planned and carried out in the same year as the fantastic, miniature democracy of the República de los Niños with its hearth of democratic institutions. Furthermore, this is not the only one of Evita's projects that carries fascist traits. For example, a bird's eye view of the picturesque Ciudad Evita shows Evita's profile – a characteristic feature of totalitarian architecture (Argentinian “history gossip” has it that another city was to be built for Perón's profile to face hers). Indeed, the touch of the peronist ideology is somehow also evident in the República de los Niños: not only was the army provided with a number of big buildings⁹ but the republic also had a small jail in the cellar of the Palace of Justice. This impression is further enhanced by anecdotal evidence: For the republic's inauguration child authorities were elected, among them 20 boys playing grenadiers. In order to be able to do their job properly, they even learned to ride ponies (!). However, one small detail was missing: the guns. Professor José Maria Lunazzi who was leading the Association of Toys Producers (*Cámara de los Juguetes*) was a pacifist and opposed the production of war toys. Nevertheless, he had to find a craftsman who quickly produced the guns. Perón was not ready to inaugurate the children's republic without them: he never forgot that he was the General (Barcagliani et al., op. cit., p. 28).

Evita died in 1952 and in 1955 there was a military revolt against Perón (*Revolución Libertadora*). The army hated Perón but, above all, they hated Evita. As another totalitarian regime was installed, the Argentinians were forbidden by law to pronounce the names of Perón and Evita or their relatives (Decreto Ley 4161). Evita's embalmed body was stolen. Perón sought political asylum with his friend Stroessner in Paraguay and subsequently with his other loyal friend, General Franco.

And what remains of Evita's huge architectural projects? Some of them, such as the hospitals and the holiday residences, are still ‘alive’. Many of the buildings were misappropriated by the army. Others, like the Ciudad Infantil Amanda Allen were completely destroyed and only survive in ruins. The República de los Niños was, as I have already mentioned, abandoned and became merely an amusement park. The Monumento al Descamisado was never finished, parts of it are still below the ground of Buenos Aires. Some statues of the compositions which were made to decorate the mausoleum (like “The social Justice” or “The Rights of the Workers”) were beheaded and thrown into the Riachuelo (Jawtuschentko, op. cit.): the same river that thirty years later served the army to depose of its victims.

The use of architecture by authoritarian regimes has a long story – here in Berlin it is enough to remember the architect of Hitler, Albert Speer. But what is interesting about Evita's projects is the contradictions or maybe the dialectics inherent in them: the mixture of authoritarian and democratic ideals. The building of a miniature city involved both the democratization of architecture for children and the conceptualization

⁹ Today, after the experience of the last dictatorship, these buildings are used for different purposes, such as a project on children and science carried out by the University of La Plata.

of the Argentinian society as a big kindergarten that she was ‘managing’: the world as a collection of post cards, maybe.

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