Past, Place and Paint: A Neighbourhood Mural Project in Suburban Buenos Aires[1]

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Abstract: This article discusses the creation of a mural by the neighbourhood history workshop in a working-class district of Buenos Aires. The mural was chosen as a way of giving immediacy and visibility to memories of three distinct intervals in the history of the neighbourhood, the periods before, during and after military rule. In creating the mural, participants were able to re-establish some of the community solidarity lost during the era when community leaders were subject to repression and "disappearance" and give voice to some of the insecurities of the present. The mural portrays some surprising presences and absences in the collective memory of the different phases of the neighbourhood's existence and points to ways in which old and new members of the community can work toward a common future.

Résumé: Cet article discute la création d'une peinture murale effectuée par un atelier d'histoire locale d'un quartier ouvrier de Buenos Aires. Cette peinture murale avait été choisie pour son côté immédiat et visible représentatif de trois périodes distinctes de l'histoire du quartier; c'est-à-dire les périodes avant, pendant et après le régime militaire. En créant cette peinture murale, les participants ont pu rétablir une partie de la solidarité perdue à l'époque où les dirigeants locaux étaient sujets à la répression, aux disparitions; elle permet aussi d'exprimer certaines des insécurités actuelles. La peinture murale représente quelques présences et absences surprenantes de la mèmoire collective des différentes phases de l'existence du quartier. De plus, elle ouvre la porte à un avenir commun par les membres anciens et nouveaux de cette communauté.

How do people make sense of a past fraught with danger and contradiction? For the members of a history workshop in a working-class neighbourhood, one answer was to paint a mural. The mural, like the workshop that produced it, calls our attention to the difficult relationship between community and place in the Greater Buenos Aires neighbourhood called José Ingenieros. Much of the literature on memory sees working on the past as a way of getting at and thinking about collective identity (cf. Boyarin, 1994; Friedman, 1992a, 1992b). Workshop participants also saw the neighbourhood history workshop as a location where community might be remembered and thus somehow reconstituted and positively valued. In the attempt a group of neighbours engaged their past in a process and through images that provide a point of entry for considerations of popular memory on one hand, and the social constitution of place on the other.

The Setting

José Ingenieros is an intriguing location from which to examine working-class memories of Argentina's last 25 years. The neighbourhood where I conducted field work in 1991 and 1992 is comprised of 2 500 apartments in four-storey blocks with a total population of about 15 000. It is located in La Matanza, the most populous of the formerly industrial and working-class boroughs which form a ring around Argentina's cosmopolitan capital. Most residents are domestic labourers, semi-skilled construction workers, pieceworkers, low-income wage earners or self-employed.

An acute housing shortage set the stage for a squatter occupation of these apartments even before they were completed. Squatters were thus part of a moment of almost revolutionary effervescence surrounding the return of Perón at the beginning of the 1973 democratic period. The space they occupied was originally constructed as part of the National Plan for the Eradication of Shanty Towns, and some of the intended inhabitants were placed in the neighbourhood as well. In the time between the "*toma*," as the takeover is known, and the military coup in March 1976, squatters organized for the completion of the unfinished apartments and infrastructure, and for official recognition. They went beyond these most immediate concerns, however, generating lively community organizations including a health centre and a mothers' child care cooperative.

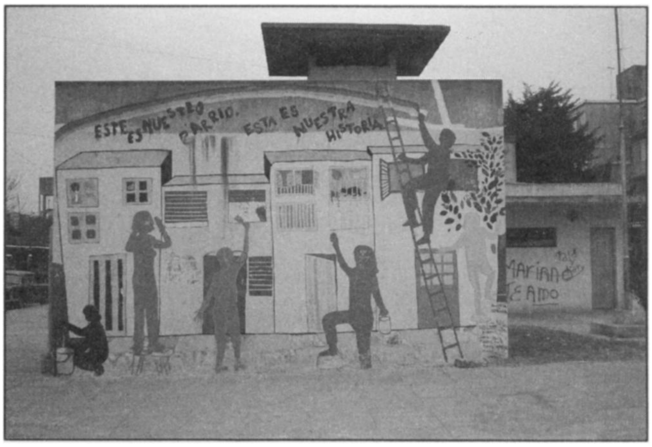
Things changed after the 1976 coup. There were disappearances: delegates to the neighbourhood council, political activists and doctors from the community clinic were among those kidnapped by plain-clothes military and police. The repression included other less horrific activities as well: there were "censuses" in which military conscripts surrounded the neighbourhood, searched apartments, checked documents and took people in for questioning. From 1979, the neighbourhood even had a military administrator. In general, poorer neighbourhoods were seen by the state as either a refuge for, or a hotbed of subversion. These experiences made manifest the ways in which the neighbourhood itself—unlike middle-class neighbourhoods, I would argue—was a target of suspicion.

After 10 years of democracy, everyday concerns in the neighbourhood are drugs, crime and the physical deterioration of the buildings and infrastructure due to vandalism and neglect. Outsiders, and some residents as well, see José Ingenieros in much the same way that many North Americans see "housing projects." Fears people may have had about the intrusions of the authoritarian state have been supplanted by fears of violence on the street and the violence of the market: crime, hyperinflation and soaring unemployment. The present tempers people's memories of previous eras. Some fault the military for the destruction of neighbourhood organization and solidarity, but most remember orderliness and lack of crime as positive characteristics of the military period, often at the same time as they disapprove of the human rights violations they now know to have existed. The past is difficult for residents of José Ingenieros, and it is usually spoken of only partially and obliquely. The history workshop I instigated and helped organize was a way to watch people work with and make sense of this past.

The Mural

Figure 1 shows the mural in which workshop participants rendered a version of the past for themselves and their neighbours. It shows the neighbourhood's apartment blocks at four different moments represented by four buildings in a row. The first shows the time of the *toma*, when some buildings were not even finished, and when many neighbours lacked access to water, electricity and gas; the second depicts a later period with infrastructure installed; the third is the present, with bars on the windows signifying fear and insecurity in the face of crime; and finally, we see a future when the gardens are green and people feel safe. In front of all this is a series of silhouettes of people working and painting to better the community. Above everything is a rainbow being painted and as yet unfinished, and the title, "This is our neighbourhood, this is our history."

Figure 1



The meaning of the mural is neither transparent nor expected. This depiction of the period from 1973 to 1992 renders preoccupations and tensions that are central to life in the neighbourhood, however. The contrast between the images in the mural and official histories, both dominant and oppositional, is striking and important.

Popular Memory

Recent writing on popular memory (Popular Memory Group, 1982, Swedenburg, 1991) uses Gramsci's notion of common sense to talk about the practical knowledge that subalterns have about their past and present.[2] These authors emphasize the difficulty which popular sectors have in articulating a history that runs counter to the official stories that exclude them. The Popular Memory Group writes: "If this is history, it is history under extreme pressure and privations. Usually this history is held to the measure of private remembrance. It is not only unrecorded it is silenced. It is not offered the occasion to speak" (1982: 210). It was this common-sense history, however, that I set out to discover in my research. I wanted to know how the members of this particular neighbourhood understood and lived with their particular pasts. I used a number of methodologies, most importantly participant observation and interviews, but the history workshop provided a privileged vantage point because it was precisely about the attempt to articulate the "common-sense history" of José Ingenieros. It was also a specific social context which complemented and stood in contrast to more private and personal accounts.

Argentina's recent past is painful and conflictive. For the people with whom I worked, the 1973 to 1992 period includes memories of the tumultuous return of Peronism, the apparent order and/or repression of dictatorship and the hopes and disappointments of democracy. Further, for many, the lessons of years of military rule are not easily forgotten, although often never even articulated. In this sense a workshop (*taller* in Spanish) on the history of the neighbourhood is a complicated project charged with implications. Why, then, were people interested? Why were they willing to get involved in it?

When we started the *taller*, I saw it as formalizing an existing relationship in a way that would recognize the active role of residents in my project, as well as giving their participation a degree of autonomy. These neighbours were already trying to answer my questions and introducing me to people who they thought had something interesting to say. It soon became clear that few were interested in working on the neighbourhood's history for itself, rather it was seen as a tool to achieve some other more pressing goal.

One of the principal objectives of years of repression had been the fragmentation, even atomization, of all kinds of social networks (Villereal, 1984; Acuña et al., 1995), and in this neighbourhood it had been largely successful. The perceivable result of this recent past is a population that has turned inward. Many people who used to participate in community organization say they are no longer interested. The abrupt and prolonged break in such activities means that not only activists and leaders but also certain practical organizational knowledge has been lost. Thus, one of the principal preoccupations of the *talleristas* was how to recreate or recover a sense of community like that which some remember from the early days of the neighbourhood. Once we sat down to think about the possibilities that a history workshop offered, it soon became clear that few were interested in working on the neighbourhood's history for itself, rather the workshop was seen as a way to address other more pressing concerns. Several months into the first *taller*, four of us went to talk about it on a local FM radio station. After discussion, participants decided that representatives of the group should say the following:

> — We are a group of neighbours who meet on Saturday afternoons to drink *maté* [a distinctively Argentine tea] and talk about the history of the neighbourhood.
> — The workshop is a space for those of us in the neighbourhood who believe that our history matters too.
> — The *taller* allows us to talk about our experiences, the ways in which we have lived different moments. We have become aware that although we are neighbours we haven't all lived the same history in the same way. There are four complexes within the neighbourhood. There are squatters, and people who had been assigned apartments. Because of this, we have different visions of different moments.
> — We express what happened to help us understand the present and make plans for the future.
> — We believe it is important that what we are learning not stay only with us. That's why we feel an obligation to go on the radio, for example. (From the workshop minutes)

People felt the need to articulate, or perhaps recreate, community identity and to look to the past as a source of inspiration and examples. Some felt themselves to be excluded from "History," and wanted to write themselves back in. People hoped a history workshop might awaken concerns for the neighbourhood. If we could "recuperate memory" as they put it, perhaps earlier moments might serve as models for present organization. This was to be a history for the future, as our flyers rather self-importantly proclaimed, "A neighbourhood without history is a neighbourhood without a future."

This view of history, although much theorized by North American academics, was common sense for other participants—in fact it was the main reason people considered the *taller*, or my work for that matter, worth the bother. In explaining this to me, many people quoted the popular Argentine song: "If history is written by the victors, that means there is another history. The true history." They thus agreed with writers like Raymond Williams who call our attention to the counter-hegemonic possibilities of history.[3] Argentines are more likely than many North Americans to recognize the malleability of the past. Rewriting the past, as in official school curricula and history texts, has been normal in the switch back and forth between Peronist and non-Peronist, military and civilian, and more and less nationalist governments over the last 50 years (Shumway, 1991). On one hand, this makes Argentines in general more conscious of the manipulation of the past. On the other, it makes them more sceptical.

In addition to the demobilization engendered by the dictatorship experience, other factors also make community organization difficult, as they did the much more modest efforts of the *taller*. The shared insecurity and neediness caused by the precariousness of the squatters' position in the early years facilitated sharing and co-operation between neighbours. The current relative stability, on the other hand, permits them to take their housing for granted and to concern themselves with their individual, household problems. But stability does not mean economic well-being, and present conditions in Argentina mean that many neighbours lack the time and energy for activities unrelated to their most immediate needs. We occasionally lost workshop participants when they acquired a second job.

The History Workshop

The idea of the history workshop is connected to the movement in social history which focussed on "history from below." The history workshop was seen as another methodology for getting at subaltern histories and silenced voices. The term itself is used as a gloss for the collective thinking through of history, generally by participants in the events or members of the communities in question. Such workshops have employed various methodologies with a variety of groups, around the globe.[4] The most obvious Argentine precedents are the *talleres* run as part of the National Reading Plan under the Alfonsín government (1983-89) (Alvarez, 1989). With the exception of a project on railway workers (Accortini, 1990), these tended to focus on small towns of the interior and worked mostly with local intellectuals: the town librarian, schoolteachers, someone from the mayor's office. That a project of this sort should have been sponsored by the state is striking. In going outside of Buenos Aires and other big cities, it represented an attempt to amplify the field of Argentine history.

The two workshops I was involved in organizing were somewhat different from these *talleres* in that they sought to understand the distinctive historical vision not just from another place, but also from another social class. Here, in the interest of space, I focus, on the second of these *talleres* because it was more successful and responsible for the mural. The principal of the neighbourhood preschool and I organized the workshop collaboratively. The woman I call Alejandra was one of the few outsiders who had developed a good working relationship with neighbours; she was even able to call meetings that people from the community would actually attend. This workshop operated out of the preschool. Participants were mothers and grandmothers of pupils (who could attend since their charges were in school at the time), the principal, some staff, myself and various others. Its membership shifted, although a core group formed. We met 24 times over five months and, according to my sources, it continues to be sporadically active. Attendance ranged from 2 to 25 people, and ages from 21 to 60. One of the productive divides in the *taller* was generational. Younger participants had grown up in the neighbourhood, and were generally trying to reconstruct a history which they vaguely remembered but had yet to understand. Older people tended to focus on their personal experience because the workshop was an environment that accorded this experience significance.

The *Taller de Memoria* Mural

The preschool workshop was called *taller de la memoria del barrio* in contrast to the first which was known as the *taller de la historia del barrio*. It is not clear to me precisely what significance people accorded to the difference, but they were quite insistent about it. Raymond Williams' discussion of tradition is suggestive here (1977: 115ff). By using the idea of tradition in place of history Williams underlines the significance of the past in a daily sense. Traditions are not just about "historical events" however we might understand them, but about "how things have been" in the broadest possible way. Likewise the shift from history to memory as the subject of the *taller* brings it closer to the experience of participants.[5] It is probably less intimidating and more accessible; after all, everyone has memories. The Popular Memory Group argue that these are also less well analyzed by those who hold them. Subaltern histories are "held to the level of private remembrance" (as quoted above).

The previous *taller* in the community centre had demonstrated the need for markers of progress. People had felt frustrated by the lack of tangible advance, even when we had rich and fruitful discussions. It was clearly important that, from quite early in the process, the new *taller* have a clear goal of producing something. The inclination of many participants was a written document since this fits into dominant ideas, and their ideas, of what history should look like. Alejandra and I pushed for a medium that would be both more accessible to other neighbours and more open. Participants considered a mural, a radio program, a photo exhibit, a video, a festival or a neighbourhood clean-up day.

The workshop finally decided that our first project should be a mural painted on some large public wall in the neighbourhood. When we discussed why we wanted to paint a mural, people gave the following reasons:

- To communicate;
- To make people think, reflect;
- Because it is nice/pretty [*lindo*];
- A mural gets to people more than something written; it calls attention to itself;
- The very fact that there is a group of people working calls attention and communicates a message;
- We can communicate our hopes, the things we want. (Minutes of the *taller de memoria*)

Once we had agreed on the medium, we had to start thinking of the history of José Ingenieros in terms of images rather than verbal storytelling. Although the history workshop technique is frequently classified as part of oral history because it looks beyond written documents it often goes outside the spoken altogether. Photographs, for example, can be a rich source, conveying a sense of the past and helping people remember. It may also be easier to express some things in non-verbal forms, especially if they are emotionally or politically difficult.

Of course the mural has its limitations as an expressive form, but some of these were also advantages: we did not have to understand the whole history of the neighbourhood, we only had to have a few things to say. The fact-finding part of the project could continue as we worked on representation. The sense that we needed to have everything figured out had been a stumbling block in the earlier *taller*, keeping us from thinking seriously about how to express our findings. Also the mural is a very public form requiring little commitment on the part of its audience.

The problem of where to put the mural generated considerable discussion. There were many possible blank walls, but several factors entered into consideration. The first decision was whether the mural should face inward toward other residents or outward toward passers-by and adjoining communities. Because José Ingenieros is located at the intersection of two major arteries there is a lot of passing traffic. One mother argued for an outward-facing mural because she was concerned about the image of José Ingenieros. Her children's friends were not allowed to visit her apartment. She saw this as the product of a long-standing tension between residents of "the complexes" (as the neighbourhood is sometimes known to outsiders) and the supposedly more respectable bungalows of Ciudad Evita which adjoins José Ingenieros to the south. She felt the need to show outsiders that José Ingenieros is not a bad place. Others argued that we had things to say that neighbours themselves needed to hear. The group eventually decided that the first mural should be prominently located within the neighbourhood, with the understanding that an outward-facing mural might soon follow.

Next was a decision about where the mural should be located within José Ingenieros. Everyone knew a place near their apartment that would be ideal and each lobbied for her own. We settled on a spot facing onto one of the few internal streets which was also situated on the pedestrian mall frequented by people from all over José Ingenieros.

Finally, there were the issues of ownership and territoriality. The people who lived behind the wall had to give permission, but we did not expect problems here. More worrisome was the issue of *pintadas*. The painting of political slogans in red, white and black is an important part of Argentine political culture (Chaffee, 1986, 1989). In the neighbourhood the various local political offices had acquired traditional use rights for certain key walls. One participant had, some years earlier, been physically threatened by a rival group when she and her allies tried to paint over a *pintada* on someone else's wall with a human rights slogan. The wall we eventually chose had neither problem. We could find no currently active political group which claimed responsibility for the old *pintadas* on the side of a small building housing electrical equipment.

Unlike most murals discussed in the literature, the choice of medium was almost incidental for the *taller de memoria*. As is evident, none of us were artists, although we did have a draftsman in our group. For technical expertise, we turned to a former preschool teacher who was also a painter, but the whole project was a collective endeavour. She stoically resisted the *talleristas*' attempts to defer to her.

The design was generated in a few of our Wednesday workshop meetings. Many of us also met on Saturday afternoons for the dusty work of scraping down and bleaching the wall. Preparation involved many hours removing years of *pintadas* off the 18-by-12-foot wall in what felt like a form of political archaeology. The entire process took a month. Some of the people from the first workshop participated in these sessions, partly because the meeting time was convenient, but also, I suspect, because of the concreteness of the enterprise. The ideas were generated by participants working in groups of three or four. The final composition was a synthesis of these ideas. We agreed on a design before going out to paint, but it was discussed and altered as we went along.

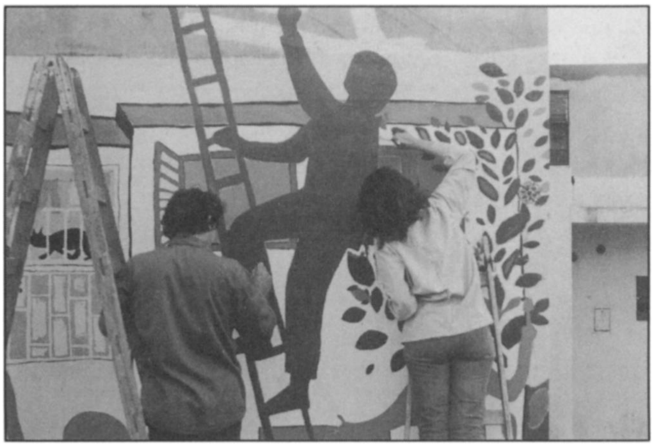
Although the mural genre might have been expected to obviate any obligation to work chronologically, the mural does contain an explicit linear narrative. The periodization it expresses, however is somewhat unexpected. First is the *toma*, which is not surprising, since this is always cited as the foundational event; then the neighbourhood, once it is well established; third the present, and finally the future. There is a silence in the mural: the notable omission of the dictatorship as a period. The bars on the windows of the third building are intended to reflect a climate of fear of crime *in the present*. The second building cannot be easily dated. Shutters and door are closed, however, and there is paint peeling off the building which represents a time somewhere between 1973 and the present. As noted earlier, this history does not fit neatly with official ones.

Here is one of the most important things the *taller* taught me. Throughout my field work, I kept encountering what seemed to be an obsession with the quality of physical space: sewage, trash, garbage. This fixation appeared again in the context of the *taller*. It finally became clear to me that this was a way of thinking about order and community. Both were complicated ideas, given the history of dictatorship. When people told me "this is not a slum" it was this physical deterioration that they feared might mislead me. This deterioration was tied to poverty, but also to the dissolution of community organizations which resulted from the pressures of the authoritarian state. Who might have organized neighbours to clean or improve the neighbourhood after community activists were targeted for repression?

The themes of order and community, as well as the tension between them, help explain what is probably the mural's most conspicuous design feature: the juxtaposition of the buildings and the silhouettes. The contrast is partly an artifact of the process, two groups' designs were selected and put together. The buildings express a concern with the physical space of the neighbourhood, and especially its present sad state. Only through working on the mural did people become conscious of the fact that the neighbourhood is not, actually, in worse shape than it was at the time of the *toma*. Rather, the neighbourhood in general had seen a rise and fall over time. There is also considerable variation within the neighbourhood.

The silhouettes address more overtly social themes about co-operative community-oriented labour. While the buildings, at least for the artists, express a marked chronology, the silhouettes are more slippery. They were originally seen as both a description of the past and hopes for the future, but they were actually created by tracing our bodies onto paper and then painting them onto the wall, so they are a sort of visual pun—referring to the narrative of the mural and to the mural painting itself—which was strongly felt as we worked (Figure 2). This slipperiness was partly intentional; the silhouettes were meant to represent continuity between the constructive community activity in the past and in the present. They constitute a rather explicit bridge in that the silhouettes can be placed in the times which the mural depicts, or outside them. The woman getting water from a spigot who explicitly belongs to the *toma* is clearly on the same plane as the painters or muralists.

Figure 2



One effect of the mural not to be belittled is that it is cheerful and lively in the grey concrete context. To some, the act of painting was seen as communicative in itself. The fact of our persistent, collective and community oriented effort in a central location within the neighbourhood would convey its own message about the possibility of neighbours working together. Traffic was light since we tended to paint Wednesday afternoons when there was little street life and during the Saturday afternoon siesta. But for those who were around, we presented an unusual sight. Children, in particular, hovered on the edges of our activity and were often handed paintbrushes so they could participate.

Popular Memory, Dimensions of Political Practice

The work of the *taller de memoria* through its activities and especially its mural, calls attention to the complex relation between space, place, history, identity and politics. Geographers have begun to call their fellow social scientists to task for our underdeveloped understandings of space and place. Doreen Massey, for example, criticizes a notion of place, "as bounded, as in various ways a site of an authenticity, as singular, fixed and unproblematic." She suggests instead that place should be, "thought of in the context of space-time and as formed out of social interaction at all scales, then one view of place is a particular articulation of those relations, a particular moment in those networks of social relations and understandings" (1994: 5). The very history of José Ingenieros militates against the assumptions she criticizes. The construction of José Ingenieros as a space and place is so recent and so obvious a process, and such a difficult one, that one could hardly think of it as authentic or unproblematic. One of the important struggles in José Ingenieros is precisely to develop community in the sense that proposes shared solutions to common problems.

On the other hand, neighbours' and muralists' descriptions of José Ingenieros suggest that essentializing place is not exclusively the academics' vice. Residents of this neighbourhood tend to fall into a similar trap. Part of this has to do with the struggle to form a collective identity and/or sense of community which might underwrite collective action. Despite all the co-ordinators' best efforts, participants still represented the history of the neighbourhood using the convention of depicting the physical space it inhabits. The portion of the design which includes the buildings was produced by a group working with pencil and paper, although our artist guide tried to dissuade them from what she saw as a medium which tends to the over-literal. For some neighbours, José Ingenieros *is* its grey concrete monoblocks (colour, too, was added later). Like the perpetual return to the material conditions of the neighbourhood (garbage and decay) the focus on the buildings equates the community with the space. The crisis of the space *is* the crisis of the community. Thus social problems (lack of community organization, alienation and crime) are read as physical ones (the decay of the neighbourhood).

The two elements of the mural represented in the two superimposed designs—the preoccupation with physical space on one hand, and with community on the other—were recurrent themes in the *taller* itself. They are related to current problems in the neighbourhood, and to distinct visions of the nature and causes of these problems. By superimposing the figures on this representation of the space, the workshop tried to call attention to the social dimension of these problems. These figures, as well as the mural's caption, make an argument about the role community activity has and might play in improving the space, and remaking the place.

Like writers on popular memory, participants in the *talleres* explicitly tie history to identity and politics. Further, work on popular memory is seen as a tool toward reaffirming or forging collective identities. Activists care about this because they believe that fortified collective identities can then be turned into collective endeavours and political action. The Popular Memory Group defines popular memory "first as an *object of study*, but, second, as a *dimension of political practice*" (1982: 205). Throughout the *talleres* we were continually reminded of this connection. As I have noted, many participants were quite explicit about the politics as the reason for doing the history.

This tension became apparent especially when the significance of our activities was called into question explicitly in discussion, or implicitly, by poor attendance. At issue was whether the *taller* mattered. Was it just indulgent intellectualizing, as some argued? Some saw the workshop and its talk of the past as abstract, perhaps interesting but also a luxury in the face of the serious problems the neighbourhood confronted. These critics saw talking and doing as contradictory, and even mutually exclusive, activities. One challenge came when there was a serious problem with contamination of the water in the neighbourhood. People from the community centre targeted this issue; little time was left for meetings of the *taller de memoria*. Alejandra and I found that we agreed with their decision to give priority to the water problem. We also found, however, that our co-operation through the *taller* facilitated the flow of information and helped co-ordinate the activities of the preschool with those of the community centre with respect to the water crisis. The workshop became a location where concerns could be informally discussed and information exchanged.

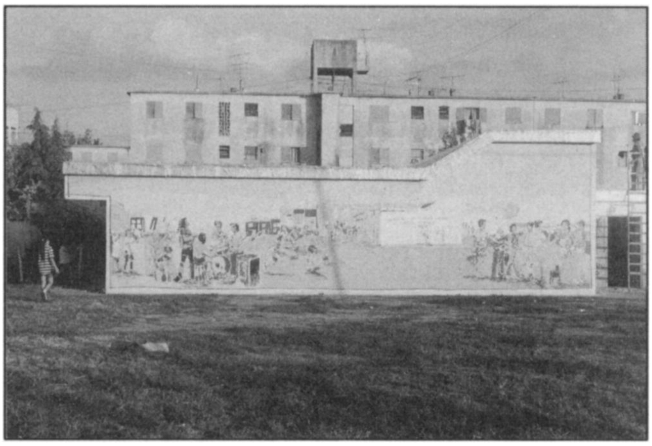
Another animated debate about the utility of the workshop arose as we discussed possible projects. Neighbours concerned about the lack of green play spaces for children suggested refurbishing one of the unkempt gardens. Some people said that a playground was something the neighbourhood really needed and that our energy should be directed at the needs of the children. Others said that although the idea was good, this was a *taller de memoria*; we should build on what we had learned by staying closer to our theme. Here the presence of outsiders emerged as a concern; by this they meant myself, Alejandra and the teachers. Could we say that this was a neighbourhood workshop when there were often fewer neighbours than non-neighbours? Notably the person who expressed this concern most forcefully was the same one who wanted to get away from history-oriented activities "and really do something concrete." He was also a relative newcomer to José Ingenieros and tended to talk about neighbours as if the category did not include himself. Thus activities about the community's history and identity may not have touched him. Contradictorily, he was one of the workshop's most persistent and industrious participants. Other members pointed out that, although the neighbourhood has been in need of fixing up for a long time, groups had not successfully organized around this issue, while people were meeting in the *taller de memoria*. It was worth taking some time to consolidate a base using something that seemed to be working.

The *taller* temporarily petered out after the completion of the mural, which was coupled with the departure of my co-organizer (a promotion moved her to another part of the province), the end of the school year and the fact that I too would soon be leaving. We closed with a showing of photographs of the mural-painting process, displayed at the preschool and in an administration office near the mural.

Lest the reader carry away too rosy an image of the *taller*, I should note that the workshop always seemed on the verge of extinction. Just when it was about to take off in a flurry of activity, something would happen to set the whole thing back several steps. Nonetheless, people did meet to reflect on their history in the workshops. The reasons and the ways they did this point to the place of history and memory in social life. Authors like Passerini (1987) and Portelli (1991) have indicated something of the complexity of popular memory, but the workshop experience begins to point to its role. It is a location where people can begin to produce histories in which they figure—literally, in the case of this mural. The *taller de memoria* I have described indicates something of the slowness and complexity of this process. The double image of the mural in particular stands as a metaphor for how difficult it is for people to fully integrate themselves into the picture.

In the final analysis, what is most important is the significance that neighbours assigned to the workshop. For them historytelling is an important part of history-making. When members of the memory workshop tried to depict the past, they were speaking through their present concerns, and addressing a community that they saw as having moved from activism to apathy. The process of designing and painting the mural was a way of understanding the past, and it was intended to instruct other residents on the virtues of collective community-oriented action—by example and through its images. It is striking that they chose a spatial idiom to represent their community. At least some saw the *taller de memoria* as an experience that could aid in recreating social ties by helping to forge a common, positively valued, identity in the face of the social atomization which is a product both of Argentina's repressive past and of the economic liberalism of its present.

Figure 3



I close the story of the workshop and the mural with a final image (Figure 3). In February 1994, I received a letter from friends in the neighbourhood bringing me up to date on the activities there. A new mural had been painted on the side of the community centre building just before Christmas. Painted in one day because of rumours that the wall of the centre was to become the canvas for a new *pintada*, the new mural shows young people partaking in the activities of the centre: a soccer game, a rock band, neighbours meeting and talking. This wall is on the edge of the neighbourhood directed outward. In the face of dominant discourses marginalizing the community, the struggle to paint an optimistic image of the future continues.

Notes

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2 For Gramsci, "common sense" is the collection of beliefs, prejudices, ideas and principles which each of us encounters and absorbs as we become social beings (1971: 323). It is the "product of history and a part of the historical process" (1971: 326). Common senses are thus specific to particular times, places and social contexts. Further, and more importantly, common sense is inherently "disjointed and episodic" (1971: 324). It thus contrasts both with the relatively coherent dominant ideologies and religions, and with critical thought which takes "common" and "good" sense as its

starting point for the building of coherent philosophies and interpretations of the world (1971: 323-325, 423, 199).

3 "It is significant," writes Williams, "that much of the most accessible and influential work of the counter-hegemony is historical: the recovery of discarded areas, or the redress of selective and reductive interpretations. But this, in turn, has little effect unless the lines to the present, in the actual process of the selective tradition are clearly and selectively traced" (1977: 116). The connections Williams describes here are precisely the sort which Gramsci has in mind when he calls for a movement from "common sense" to critical understandings (see note 2, above).

4 See *History Workshop Journal* in general and especially Selbourne, 1980 and Samuel, 1980; Lindenberger and Wildt, 1992; Johnson et al., 1982; Brecher, 1984. I have the impression that the history workshop is used quite a lot throughout Latin America and Africa, but as I have come across few references this remains an impression (see the special issue of *Radical History Review* on South Africa including Witz, 1990 and especially the fascinating article by Bozzoli, 1990). For Chile, see Paley, 1993.

5 Both "*memoria*" and "*historia*" have even more complex constellations of meaning in Spanish than do their English equivalents. *Memoria* means "memory" in the English senses, and also "memorial" and "memoir." *Historia* includes the various English meanings of "history" and also "story," so does not necessarily have the same connotation of veracity as it does in English.

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