Museo Internacional para la Democracia
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The making of the museum for Democracy: changing politics

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The museum is not in the capital city, Buenos Aires, but in Rosario, 300 km to the northwest, in the center of the richest area for agricultural production. Rosario concentrates activities and attracts investment from all producers in the region.

Rosario citizens are the children and grandchildren of immigrants who came from Europe before, during and after the two world wars, at a time when they were warmly welcomed. In recent decades, new immigrants are coming from neighboring countries and northern Argentina and China and other eastern countries, but they arrive under very different circumstances. Thus, we have an incredible diversity of races, religions and social backgrounds which, no doubt, is the starting point for the history of the city: Rosario has been the cradle for many great defenders of democracy, who rebelled and fought against injustice. As an example: during the last 25 years, local governments were the only Socialists in this huge country and, with much difficulty, they managed to stay in power despite the successive national and provincial Peronist governments.

Argentina is a complex society. A community continuously hit by economic crisis, and deeply divided by political passions. We are used to corruption and impunity, which for decades have been imposed on citizens with the complicity of governors, judges and media. In recent years this situation was exacerbated and complicated by the admission of international drug cartels, bringing the levels of violence and insecurity to an incredible degree.

In this context, we are building a museum for Democracy. The museum is a private initiative, supported by Foundation para la Democracia Internacional, a non profit, non governmental organization, with the mission of promoting the values of Democracy. This institution is chaired by Mr. Guillermo Whpei, a businessman and philanthropist who is serving FIHRM as a representative for Central and South America.
We own a magnificent collection. As Orhan Pamuk said at the beginning of the week, museums are not just about displays...our task is creating an empowering experience for visitors to push themselves for positioning as citizens. It is a big challenge.

Originally, the team had conceived the museum as a space to illustrate the process of democratization in Argentina. We understood this process as a path to a better future for all citizens, and therefore we outlined the concept of the museum with the purpose of highlighting the historical events aligned with that ideology. Thus, we were getting ready to present our story: declaration of Independence, abolition of slavery, sanction of the national constitution, conquests for social justice, universal voting rights, vote for women, gay marriage...and special spots to remind visitors not only about our last military government (which meant state terrorism between 1976 and 1982) but also the euphoric return to democracy in 1983, when the elected president famously stated “Democracy feeds, educates and heals”. We were happy preparing to celebrate 33 years of interrupted Democracy.

But after a few years working on these ideas, right now the context has changed: we have a new government, with a very different political position. President Mauricio Macri achieved a very tight victory in the elections, with 51% of the votes. It is interesting to point that, seven months after his victory, even when openly fighting against his predecessor's corruption offenses, the President hasn't got full support: citizens remain divided, with a high level of radicalization. May be this a sign of the times. Whatever, Argentina has started a process to unmask, denounce and condemn corruption.

This is what’s going on nowadays, but we started planning for the museum during the government of the Kirchner family, when the facts now under investigation where almost impossible to be discussed. Now it seems to be the right time to develop programs to mitigate inequality, to reorganize the state institutions, to heal the political parties and to put our citizen’s education back on track, so everyone can value and defend his/her democratic rights. Obviously, the changing political context had an impact on our decisions about the content to be presented at the museum.

But we had to face another setback, even more difficult to deal with, which was highlighted by philosophers and historians who make part of our team.
They were definitely not happy with our original approach. They insisted pointing out that the most remarkable aspect to be presented about democracy is that **it will always be an unfinished process**. Some of us took our time to realize that we were wrong presenting historical milestones without remarking that **they are not definitive achievements**. May seem obvious now.

Our original proposal broke into pieces. What would be the purpose in highlighting that slavery in Argentina was abolished by law in 1853, while today, in our country, there are thousands of people enslaved for sex, industrial or domestic work?

Should it be wise to use our limited resources to explain the evolution of electoral laws instead of focusing in the fact that many candidates have bought their votes from impoverished citizens? **Creating a museum to celebrate what has been achieved would be insufficient** and we would be missing out a great opportunity.

We realized that our purpose will be better achieved if the traditional story is mentioned, but the focus goes into the analysis of the many contradictions and dilemmas which are undermining our fragile democracy. What we need is to raise awareness about the many injustices **yet** to be solved.

While part of the team dealt with the definition of the museum content, another group advanced in restoring the building to house it. It is an iconic place, very representative of our democratic history. It was not an easy task to recreate the original atmosphere while adapting it to house the collections and the required technology.

It took us 7 years to come to this point, but next September the reconstruction will be completed, and then the fit out will start. We are now happy about such an unexpected delay, because it was also the same timescale for the change in our politics. So, to conclude: we are not only finishing the gilding of the museum, but we also know where its real value lays.

Ends.

(Susana Meden, 2016)

http://www.democraciainternational.org/?sec=museo