Destroying to Forget: Practices of Spatial Erasure in the Holocaust and Argentina's military dictatorship (1976-1983)

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Resumen

Este artículo examina la borradura espacial como una estrategia deliberada utilizada por regímenes totalitarios para ocultar atrocidades, evadir la rendición de cuentas y silenciar actos de resistencia. A través de un análisis comparativo del Holocausto y de la última dictadura cívico-militar argentina (1976-1983), este estudio se centra en la destrucción del campo de exterminio Treblinka II y del centro clandestino de detención Mansión Seré. En ambos casos, la demolición siguió a momentos de desafío que expusieron fisuras en el control totalitario: la revuelta de 1943 de los prisioneros del Sonderkommando en Treblinka y la fuga en 1978 de cuatro detenidos de Mansión Seré. Estas rupturas obligaron a los perpetradores a destruir la evidencia física para preservar la ilusión de una dominación total.

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Basado en la comprensión de Raphael Lemkin del genocidio como un ataque tanto contra la vida humana como contra los fundamentos culturales e históricos de la existencia de un grupo, este artículo sitúa la destrucción espacial dentro de debates más amplios sobre memoria, historia y violencia estatal. Al comparar los esfuerzos nazis por arrasar Treblinka con la voladura de Mansión Seré por parte del ejército argentino, revela patrones transnacionales y transgeneracionales de borradura y sus consecuencias duraderas para la verdad, la justicia, las reparaciones y la memoria.

Enmarcado en el 80.º aniversario de los Juicios de Núremberg y el 40.º aniversario del Juicio a las Juntas en Argentina, este estudio sostiene que recuperar y preservar los sitios de terror demolidos es esencial para resistir el impulso totalitario de "destruir para olvidar". Apoyándose en la teoría biopolítica y los estudios de la memoria, destaca la centralidad de la memoria espacial para la conmemoración, la rendición de cuentas y la lucha a largo plazo contra el olvido impuesto.

Palabras clave: urbicidio, genocidio, memoria, borradura espacial, violencia masiva.

Abstract:

This article examines spatial erasure as a deliberate strategy used by totalitarian regimes to conceal atrocities, evade accountability, and silence acts of resistance. Through a comparative analysis of the Holocaust and Argentina's last civic and military dictatorship (1976-1983), this study focuses on the destruction of the Treblinka II extermination camp and the clandestine detention center Mansión Seré. In both cases, demolition followed moments of defiance that exposed cracks in totalitarian control: the 1943 revolt of Sonderkommando prisoners at Treblinka and the 1978 escape of four detainees from Mansión Seré. These ruptures compelled perpetrators to destroy physical evidence to preserve the illusion of complete domination.

Grounded in Raphael Lemkin's understanding of genocide as an assault on both human life and the cultural and historical foundations of group existence, this article situates spatial destruction within broader debates on memory, history, and state violence. By comparing Nazi efforts to level Treblinka with the Argentine military's dynamiting of Mansión Seré, it reveals transnational and transgenerational patterns of erasure and their enduring consequences for truth, justice, reparations, and memory.

Framed around the 80th anniversary of the Nuremberg Trials and the 40th anniversary of Argentina's Trial of the Juntas, this study argues that recovering and preserving demolished sites of terror is essential for resisting the totalitarian impulse to "destroy to forget." Drawing on biopolitical theory and memory studies, it highlights the centrality of spatial memory to commemoration, accountability, and the long-term struggle against enforced oblivion.

Key words: Urbicide, genocide, memory, spatial erasure, mass violence.

Introduction

Across different historical periods and geographical contexts, totalitarian regimes have consistently relied on secrecy, the destruction and concealment of evidence, as well as the denial of accountability to shape post-conflict remembrance. These practices of erasure are not incidental but intentional strategies designed to exercise control over populations. By obscuring, silencing, or negating victims' experiences, such regimes seek to prevent the emergence of narratives and spaces that might testify not only to suffering, but also to resistance and/or dissent. The destruction of material evidence and the modification of the landscape, thus, function as central mechanisms through which totalitarian systems attempt to sustain power and construct official narratives of the past.

The concept of *urbicide*, literally the "killing of the city," acquired relevance within international scholarly and policy debates during the Bosnian War (1992–1995) when scholars and journalists used the term to describe the systematic destruction of Sarajevo and other urban centers. This destruction was not merely collateral damage but a deliberate attempt to annihilate urban life itself. In the context of warfare, urbicide captures forms of violence in which the built environment becomes a target of aggression. Yet the intellectual origins of the concept predate these conflicts. In the United States during the 1970s and 1980s, urban scholars and architectural critics used the term to critique the systematic destruction of neighborhoods through modernization, urban renewal, and gentrification. In these debates, urbicide referred to the bureaucratic dismantling of urban communities under the language of development and progress.

As evident from the previous paragraph, the concept of urbicide has evolved significantly over time. Early formulations of the concept, such as those advanced by Ada Louise Huxtable in the 1960s, focused on the erosion of civic life produced by modernist planning and urban redevelopment (Huxtable, 1986; Jacobs, 1961; Berman, 1982). Later analyses by scholars such as Martin Coward and Stephen Graham expanded the term to address the deliberate political destruction of urban space during armed conflicts in the 1990s (Coward, 2009; Graham, 2004). This intellectual trajectory marks an important shift: urbicide came to be understood not simply as an unintended byproduct of modernization but as a deliberate strategy of domination. Whether through redevelopment policies or military violence, the destruction of urban space follows a similar logic of erasure. It targets the built environment not only as physical infrastructure but also as a repository of memory, identity, and collective belonging.

Building on Raphael Lemkin's understanding of genocide as encompassing the destruction of both human groups and their cultural worlds, this article situates urbicide within broader

debates about memory, history, and mass violence. Adopting a transnational and transgenerational perspective, it connects two seemingly distant cases: the Nazi destruction of the Treblinka II extermination camp and the demolition of Mansión Seré during Argentina's last civic and military dictatorship. Despite differences in geography and historical context, both cases reveal how totalitarian regimes used spatial erasure to conceal international crimes and suppress narratives of resistance that threatened their claims to absolute control. The destruction of these sites was intended to eliminate not only evidence of violence but also the possibility of remembrance.

From this perspective, spatial erasure must be understood as a constitutive component of state violence rather than merely its aftermath. Just as genocide seeks to transform the demographic composition of a society, urbicide aims to reshape the physical and symbolic landscape of a territory. The systematic destruction of cities, camps, and detention centers thus represents an extension of genocidal logic—one that seeks to eliminate not only human lives but also the landscapes that bear witness to suffering, resistance, and survival. The obliteration of the built environment becomes, therefore, not simply an act of war but a continuation of violence by other means: an attempt to destroy the spatial foundations of community, identity, and historical consciousness.

Genocide, urbicide, and the violence of modernity: The "banalization of evil" [*infrastructure*]

Understanding the destruction of space as a constitutive form of violence requires situating it within the broader historical and conceptual development of modernity. Across different historical periods, regimes of domination have targeted not only bodies but also the environments, institutions, and landscapes that sustain collective life. From coordinated assaults on cultural and institutional foundations to the industrialized violence of the twentieth century, spatial annihilation has functioned as both a material and symbolic instrument of power. The destruction of the built environment thus emerges as a key dimension of modern strategies of repression, linking the physical elimination of human groups with the erasure of the spaces in which their social, cultural, and mnemonic lives unfold. Tracing this genealogy allows us to understand how genocide and urbicide operate as interconnected forms of violence embedded in the structures of modern governance.

The significance of spatial erasure becomes particularly clear when examined through the conceptual framework of genocide. Raphael Lemkin, the Polish-Jewish jurist who coined the term in 1944, defined genocide not only as the physical extermination of a people but as the destruction of the essential foundations of their collective existence. In *Axis Rule in Occupied Europe*, he described genocide as a coordinated plan aimed at dismantling the political, cultural, and institutional structures that sustain a group's continuity (Lemkin, 1944, p. 79). This crime, as conceived by Lemkin, included the suppression of language, religion, education, and cultural institutions, crucial vessels of memory and identity

(Jurgenson, 2024, p. 82). From this perspective, genocide was originally envisioned as an assault that extends beyond the murder of individuals to encompass the eradication of historical continuity and communal life itself.

Lemkin's broader understanding of genocide is further illustrated in his unpublished manuscript *History of Genocide: I Antiquity, II Middle Ages, III Modern Times*. In this work, he examined cases ranging from antiquity to modern colonial violence, including the Spanish conquest of the Inca Empire (McDonnell & Moses, 2006). By incorporating colonial Latin American experiences into his conceptual framework, Lemkin demonstrated that genocide was not confined to European history but constituted a global phenomenon rooted in diverse forms of domination. This dimension of Lemkin's work challenges the Eurocentric orientation that has often shaped genocide studies and highlights the importance of situating Latin American histories within broader debates about mass violence and memory. By placing cases from Latin America in dialogue with European experiences, it becomes possible to reveal shared strategies of repression, concealment, and erasures that transcend geographic and temporal boundaries.

Within the twentieth century, these dynamics reached an unprecedented scale through the technological and bureaucratic capacities of modern states. Nazi Germany, for example, transformed urban and administrative infrastructures into instruments of enslavement and extermination (Shaw, 2008, p. 5). The Holocaust did not occur solely on conventional battlefields but unfolded through a dispersed network of ghettos, transit camps, and extermination centers embedded within everyday landscapes (Winter, 2003). These spaces were deliberately designed to facilitate the systematic persecution and destruction of populations while simultaneously normalizing violence within the routines of modern life. By embedding mass violence within bureaucratic and spatial infrastructures, the Nazi regime rendered atrocity both ordinary and administratively efficient. To situate it in the context of urbicide, this paper adds the word "infrastructure" to what Hannah Arendt (1963) famously described as the "banality of evil."

The relationship between genocide and urbicide becomes particularly visible when considering the role of space within these processes of domination. As scholars such as Stephen Graham (2004, pp. 137-140 and 154-171) and Martin Coward have argued, urbicide follows its own logic: it targets the infrastructures that enable social interaction, coexistence, and political resistance (Coward, 2009, 48). By destroying homes, neighborhoods, archives, and cultural institutions, perpetrators seek to eliminate not only the physical environment of a community but also the networks of memory and belonging embedded within it.

The convergence of technological modernity and genocidal intent reveals how the destruction of space can serve as a mechanism of both domination and denial. In contexts of mass violence, the annihilation of sites associated with atrocity becomes an attempt to

control the historical narrative itself. Totalitarian regimes have repeatedly sought to erase the physical traces of their crimes to construct sanitized versions of the past. As a result, the destruction of landscapes functions as both a material and epistemic project: it devastates infrastructure while simultaneously reshaping collective memory (Mbembe, 2019). In the cases of Treblinka II and Mansión Seré, sites of violence were not simply demolished or obscured. Rather, they were transformed into voids within the landscape—spaces where suffering becomes difficult to acknowledge, responsibility easier to evade, and, most importantly for the purposes of this paper, histories of resilience and successful acts of survival are rendered invisible.

Seen from this perspective, the annihilation of bodies and the destruction of spaces appear as complementary expressions of modern mass violence. Both operate through a biopolitical logic in which power extends beyond the governance of individuals to encompass the regulation and transformation of entire environments. Theoretical perspectives developed by Michel Foucault, Giorgio Agamben, Judith Butler, and Ann Laura Stoler illuminate how modern forms of power operate simultaneously on bodies and spaces. Foucault's analysis of disciplinary power emphasized the shift from spectacular public punishment to systems of surveillance and regulation embedded within institutions and spatial arrangements (Foucault, 1977). Yet subsequent scholars have argued that modernity did not eliminate violence but rather reorganized it through new forms of bureaucratic and infrastructural control (Žižek, 2008; Agamben, 1998; Spierenburg, 1984; Langbein, 1977).

Genocidal regimes illustrate this convergence of spectacle and administration. In Nazi Germany, violence operated simultaneously through public terror—such as street violence and mass shootings—and through the bureaucratic machinery of camps engineered for enslavement and extermination. These processes demonstrate how violence became both spectacular and infrastructural, embedded within the administrative and spatial structures of the modern state. Through this lens, urbicide can be understood as the extension of genocidal logic into the realm of infrastructure. Through the destruction of cities, archives, and memorial sites, regimes manipulate and erase the material conditions that sustain historical memory and collective identity.

The instability of boundaries between life and death, visibility and erasure, further illustrates the relationship between genocide and urbicide. As Agamben (1998) and Butler (2004) have argued, modern regimes of power often operate by determining which lives are considered politically valuable and which can be rendered disposable. Similar dynamics apply to space: territories become associated with populations and thus become targets of violence when inhabited by those populations defined as the enemies. The classification of spaces—whether as legitimate urban environments, zones of conflict, or sites of disposal—

often rests on the discretionary authority of perpetrators. This ambiguity enables violence to be enacted while maintaining plausible deniability.

Such dynamics become particularly evident in the use of euphemistic language to describe sites of atrocity. Just as genocidal regimes employ ambiguous categories to identify enemies, they often deploy neutral or technical language to obscure the violent nature of particular spaces. Detention centers, camps, or destroyed neighborhoods may be framed as security zones, redevelopment projects, or abandoned sites. These linguistic strategies contribute to the normalization of violence by masking the historical significance of the places in which it occurred.

The Nazi concentration camp system represents the most extreme example of this transformation of space into a mechanism of governance over life and death. As Agamben (1998) argues, the camp functioned as the ultimate space of sovereign power, where individuals could be stripped of legal and political protections and reduced to "bare life." Within this system, the governance of bodies became inseparable from the governance of space. The spatial organization of ghettos, camps, and extermination centers facilitated the systematic destruction of populations while simultaneously concealing the full extent of the violence.

The cases of Treblinka II and Mansión Seré illustrate the continuity of this logic across different historical contexts. At Treblinka II, the Nazi regime combined bureaucratic efficiency with deliberate spatial erasure, destroying the camp in October 1943 following a revolt by the prisoners in early August. Similarly, during Argentina's last military dictatorship, the clandestine detention center known as Mansión Seré was demolished on March 24, 1978, after the escape of four prisoners. As a result, evidence attesting to the successful revolt was deliberately eliminated, preventing the site from being remembered not only as a location of atrocity but also as a place of resistance.

Viewed through a biopolitical lens, genocide and urbicide therefore appear not as separate phenomena but as interconnected technologies of modern power. Each seeks to annihilate life by targeting the physical, social, and mnemonic infrastructures that sustain human communities. The governance of life thus converges with the management of space, transforming landscapes into instruments of domination. Urbicide, in this sense, represents the spatial expression of genocidal logic: a mechanism through which the destruction of places becomes integral to the annihilation of peoples. Understanding this relationship is essential for analyzing how regimes of violence operate not only through the elimination of bodies but also through the systematic erasure of the environments in which memory, identity, and resistance are anchored.

Treblinka II: Erasure, concealment, and the architecture of denial

Treblinka II occupies a central place in the history of the Holocaust as one of the principal extermination centers established by Nazi Germany during the Second World War. Created as part of "Operation Reinhard," the coordinated program designed to annihilate the Jewish population of the General Government in occupied Poland, the camp operated between July 23, 1942, and October 1943. Unlike concentration camps that combined imprisonment and forced labor, Treblinka II was constructed exclusively for the purpose of mass murder. Deportees transported primarily from the Warsaw Ghetto and other European territories under Nazi control were typically killed shortly after arrival. In this sense, Treblinka functioned as an infrastructure of extermination whose primary objective was the rapid and systematic destruction of human life. Unlike Auschwitz-Birkenau, where barracks, gates, and crematoria ruins remain, Treblinka was deliberately dismantled by the perpetrators themselves. The Nazis sought not only to kill but to erase: to transform a site of mass murder into an anonymous landscape. As the largest extermination center after Auschwitz, nothing remained of it when the war ended (Arad, 1987, pp. 170–178; Wiener, 2011, pp. 229–246).

Treblinka II was established under the authority of Heinrich Himmler and implemented under the leadership of Odilo Globocnik, the SS and Police Leader of the Lublin district, who oversaw Operation Reinhard. The organization of the camp reflected the bureaucratic efficiency and logistical coordination characteristic of the Nazi genocidal apparatus. It was designed to operate at extraordinary scale and speed of the killing. Within hours of arrival most victims would be killed (Arad, 1987, pp. 37–43). The camp itself was relatively small but carefully designed to facilitate the process of extermination. Victims arriving by train were directed through a reception area where they were forced to surrender their belongings and undress before being led to gas chambers disguised as bathing facilities. These chambers used carbon monoxide to kill large numbers of people within a short period of time. The bodies of the victims were initially buried in mass graves, and Jewish prisoners forced into labor were compelled to dispose of the corpses and sort the confiscated belongings of those who had been murdered. As one of the deadliest killing sites of Operation Reinhard, it was responsible for killing of roughly 750,000 to 925,000 Jews in the span of 14 months (Hilberg, 2003, p. 893; Snyder, 2010, p. 273).

From the outset, the operation of Treblinka II incorporated mechanisms intended to conceal the crimes being committed there. The camp administration kept almost no records documenting the identities of the victims, and many deportees disappeared without leaving administrative traces. Over time, the Nazis intensified their efforts to destroy evidence of mass murder. Bodies buried in the mass graves were later exhumed and burned in large open-air pyres, and the ashes were scattered across the surrounding area. These measures were part of a broader strategy designed to eliminate physical traces of genocide and prevent the future discovery of the crimes committed at the camp.

Despite the regime's efforts to maintain secrecy, resistance emerged within the camp. On August 2, 1943, prisoners organized an uprising against the SS guards and auxiliary forces who controlled the camp. During the revolt, approximately two hundred prisoners managed to escape. Although many of them were later recaptured or killed, the uprising represented a significant act of resistance within the extermination system and exposed the functioning of the camp to the outside world. The revolt also undermined the Nazis' attempt to maintain absolute secrecy about the extermination program.

Following the uprising, the Nazi authorities decided to dismantle Treblinka II completely. The camp's buildings were demolished, the mass graves were opened and the bodies burned, and the terrain was deliberately reshaped to conceal the existence of the extermination center. The ground was plowed over and planted with crops and trees, transforming the landscape into what appeared to be an ordinary agricultural area. Through these measures, the perpetrators attempted to erase both the physical evidence of genocide and the memory of a successful act if resistance within the confines of the camp itself. This effort formed part of Sonderaktion 1005**,** a secret operation aimed at eliminating evidence of mass murder across Eastern Europe. When Soviet troops liberated the area in August 1944, they found an eerie empty expanse wrote Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman, who visited the charred site that month: "The station building was razed to the last brick; the rail-way track and even the ties were removed. Lupine was planted on the site of the camp ..."Grossman described the ground of Treblinka as still yielding terrible secrets: "The earth ejects crushed hones, teeth, bits of paper and clothing; it refuses to keep its awful secret. These things emerge from the unhealed wounds in the earth" (Grossman, 1946, pp. 405–406; Bilsky, 2025).

Over time, efforts to document and memorialize Treblinka transformed the site from a landscape of absence into a place of historical memory but finally came to fruition in a solemn ceremony on May 10, 1964, when the Treblinka memoria was unveiled. The recovery of the site required interpreting a landscape deliberately engineered to conceal the crimes committed there and to silence narratives of resistance and human agency. Survivor accounts played a crucial role in this process because they provided detailed descriptions of the camp's spatial organization and the procedures used during the extermination process. Without these testimonies, reconstructing the history of Treblinka would have been far more difficult. Named the "National Monument of Martyrology", the opening ceremony was attended by survivors and representatives of Jewish organization from around the world. The erected eight-meter-high stone monolith resembles a shattered Jewish tombstone, spreading beyond it is a field of 17,0000 jagged stone set in concrete as symbolic cemetery. The former camp's boundaries are demarcated by large stones, and the path of the railway spur and selection ramp is outlined with concrete ties and multilingual plaques explaining the camp's history (Young, 1993, pp. 186-196. After the fall of communism in 1989, international awareness and visitation of Treblinka increased,

prompting enhancements to the memorial's educational mission. In 2018, the site was officially reorganized as the state museum named now "Treblinka Museum: The Nazi German Extermination and Labor Camp (1941–1944)," underscoring that it was a German perpetrated site, not a "Polish camp".

Mansión Seré: Disappearance, destruction, and the politics of memory in the last Argentina's military dictatorship

Mansión Seré—also known as Quinta Seré or by its operational codename "Atila"—functioned as a clandestine detention center during Argentina's last military dictatorship (1976–1983). Located in Morón, in the western outskirts of Buenos Aires, the site exemplifies the dictatorship's reliance on secrecy and spatial control to sustain its apparatus of violence. Unlike Treblinka II, which was constructed explicitly as an extermination center designed for the industrialized annihilation of human beings, Mansión Seré was not originally conceived as a site of extermination. Rather, it was a pre-existing civilian structure—a residential mansion—appropriated by state authorities and transformed into a clandestine detention center. This distinction is crucial, as it reveals different modalities of violence Treblinka II, on the one hand, embodied a totalizing project of genocide, Mansión Seré, on the other, illustrates a genocidal restructuring of society regime grounded in the strategic invisibilization of violence.

Originally built as a French-style estate in the early twentieth century, Mansion Seré was later acquired by state authorities and eventually repurposed by the Argentine Air Force following the 1976 coup d'état. By late 1977, it had been incorporated into a broader network among the 340 clandestine detention centers identified by the Argentinian National Commission on the Disappearance of Person Truth in its report "Never Again," creating a decentralized but coordinated system of repression. Within this network, Mansión Seré operated under the jurisdiction of subzone sixteen and became a key site for the illegal and arbitrary detention, interrogation, and torture of individuals perceived as political opponents (Fabri, 2021, pp. 33–49). Based on survivor testimonies, approximately fifty detainees have been identified at Mansión Seré, although the total number is believed to have been higher due to the fragmentary nature of the available evidence (Memoria Abierta, n.d.).

The use of a domestic architectural space for such purposes highlights the regime's strategy of embedding terror within the fabric of everyday life. As stated by Silvina Fabri (2021), the materiality of space is central to this analysis, as it enables the construction of forms of appropriation, mechanisms of articulation between the spatial and the social, and modalities of representation. In this sense, spatial configurations are not neutral backdrops but constitutive elements in the production and mediation of memory. As Pilar Calveiro (1998, p. 147) has argued, clandestine detention centers operated "in the middle of society… on the other side of the wall," revealing their proximity to everyday life and their

dependence on social invisibilization. This observation aligns with findings from the National Commission on the Disappeared (CONADEP – Argentina), who documented a vast and dispersed network of clandestine detention centers embedded across the national territory (CONADEP, 1984, "Centros Clandestinos de Detención (C.C.D.)." Together, these analyses demonstrate that Mansión Seré, on the one hand, was not an isolated facility and, on the other, that was deliberately integrated into urban and suburban landscapes.

Rather than existing as isolated facilities, these sites were deliberately embedded within existing urban infrastructures -including police stations, transport hubs, and residential buildings- thereby enabling both the normalization and concealment of state violence (Feitlowitz, 1998). As documented by the CONADEP, many of these centers operated in civilian buildings, police facilities, and even military installations that were repurposed as clandestine detention sites (CONADEP, 1984). Cases such as Club Atlético, Olimpo, and Pozo de Banfield illustrate how this repressive apparatus was woven into the fabric of everyday urban life, allowing violence to unfold in close proximity to the populations it targeted while remaining at once perceptible and deniable.

This integration underscores how the built environment functioned simultaneously as an instrument of repression and as a medium through which violence was obscured, regulated, and later contested through practices of memorialization. In this sense, Mansión Seré did not function as a site of immediate extermination like Treblinka II. Rather, it operated within a system that sought to render violence invisible through practices of disappearance. Victims were not only physically removed from the public sphere, but also symbolically erased, as the state denied their detention and concealed their fate. This aligns with broader patterns identified in the study of enforced disappearances, where the absence of bodies and information becomes a central mechanism of terror.

The dynamics of concealment at Mansión Seré became particularly evident following the escape of four detainees on March 24, 1978—exactly two years after the coup d'état. In an act of resistance and defiance, Claudio Tamburrini and three other prisoners managed to flee the site after months of captivity, exploiting a moment of vulnerability within the camp's security apparatus (Tamburrini, 2023). Their escape not only disrupted the regime's control but also exposed the existence of the clandestine center, thereby threatening the secrecy upon which the system depended heavily.

As with Treblinka, the exposure of Mansión Seré triggered a swift and deliberate strategy of spatial erasure designed to conceal evidence and restore the regime's control over the narrative. The Argentine Air Force evacuated the remaining detainees—transferring some to other detention centers and releasing others—and proceeded to destroy the site. The mansion was set on fire and later dynamited in an explicit attempt to "erase the traces" of the atrocities committed there (Comisión Provincial por la Memoria, n.d.). This act of destruction mirrors broader patterns of spatial erasure identified across totalitarian

regimes: the deliberate demolition of sites of violence not merely as a practical measure, but as a strategy to evade accountability, conceal the fissures that exposed the fragility of their model of total control, and reshape the terrain of memory.

The aftermath of the dictatorship reveals a second critical dimension of the site's history: the struggle over memory and the processes through which the effects of erasure were addressed. Following the return to democracy in 1983, the ruins of Mansión Seré remained for several years before being completely demolished in 1985 and replaced with a public sports complex (von Schmeling, 2025). This initial transformation can be interpreted as a form of symbolic overwriting, in which the site's violent past was obscured by its incorporation into everyday civic life. Yet, as memory studies have shown, such attempts at normalization often coexist with persistent demands for truth, justice, and reparations.

Beginning in the late 1990s, survivors, families, and local human rights organizations initiated efforts to recover the history of Mansión Seré and to challenge its spatial erasure. Such efforts culminated in the establishment of the "Casa de la Memoria y la Vida" in 2000, the first memory site of its kind in Latin America dedicated to a former clandestine detention center (Farinelli, 2025). The process of recovery involved not only commemorative practices, but also forensic and archaeological investigations aimed at uncovering the physical remnants of the destroyed structure. Excavations of the site's foundations provided material evidence that supported judicial processes and contributed to the prosecution of perpetrators (von Schmeling, 2025).

The recovery of Mansión Seré thus required interpreting a landscape that had been deliberately altered to conceal its history. Today, Mansión Seré stands as a paradigmatic example of the politics of memory in post-dictatorship Argentina. Its evolution from a clandestine detention center to a public memory site reflects broader societal commitments to truth, justice, and reparations. At the same time, it underscores the enduring tension between erasure and remembrance: while the dictatorship sought to eliminate both bodies and evidence, subsequent generations have worked to reconstruct and preserve the memory of what occurred.

Landscapes of erasure: genocide, state terror, and the politics of memory

Treblinka II and Mansión Seré reveal a shared logic of spatial annihilation that connects mass violence to very different historical and geographical settings. Both sites were used to kill, but also to conceal evidence, and to prevent the materialization of places where grief, testimony, and resistance can gather. At Treblinka II, the Nazis paired industrialized extermination with a program of obliteration that dismantled structures, exhumed and burned bodies, crushed bones, and reworked the soil into an agricultural landscape. At Mansión Seré, the Argentinean Air Force dynamited, burned, and buried a clandestine

detention center after a high-profile escape of four detainees, then allowed recreational uses to overwrite the terrain. In both sites, the perpetrators sought to transform space into absence, and then absence into denial, converting the landscape itself into an accomplice to oblivion.

The contrasts are as instructive as the affinities. Treblinka II functioned within a continental project of racial annihilation and was designed for rapid and near-total erasure of records. Mansión Seré operated under the guidelines of a national counterinsurgency plan that relied on secrecy and deniability within a functioning society. Treblinka's violence was concentrated and spectacular in its scale but administratively normalized through rail timetables, reception yards, and gas chambers. Mansión Seré's violence unfolded through abduction, torture, and disappearance in an ordinary neighborhood, hidden behind a bourgeois façade and bureaucratic euphemisms. The result, in both, was a calculated vacuum of evidence. In Treblinka, very few architectural traces survived, which pushed later remembrance toward negative form, aerial imagery, and testimonial reconstruction. In Mansión Seré, partial foundations and artifacts could be recovered through archaeology, and these remnants became anchors for a municipal memory park, trials, and civic pedagogy.

Following Agamben's and Žižek's line of thought, and in contrast to Foucault's claims, we argue that these sites of mass atrocity reveal that invisibility does not end violence but instead reorganizes it into a protracted politics of memory. Treblinka's engineered void, which erased almost every physical trace of the camp, compelled commemorative practices to invent a memorial language built entirely around absence. To make this site speak, experts have relied on testimony, forensic interpretation, and "negative form"—that is, symbolic markers, voids, and non-representational elements that articulate meaning through what is no longer materially present. Mansión Seré, by contrast, exposes a different yet equally deliberate production of invisibility. Its destruction created a silence in the urban landscape that allowed children for years to unknowingly play soccer over the ruins of a clandestine detention center. Unlike Treblinka where almost no material traces survived, Mansión Seré's remnants became a material counterpoint to the state's attempt at erasure, enabling the creation of the Casa de la Memoria y la Vida and transforming what had been a void into a space of civic pedagogy. In this context, memory-making depended not only on testimonies and forensics but also on a municipal decision to reinscribe the ruins with meaning, generating a memorial grammar rooted in reconstruction rather than absence.

At Treblinka, the 1943 revolt precipitated the final dismantling of the camp and the deception of a farmhouse on site. At Mansión Seré, the 1978 escape produced a similar logic of architectural disappearance. In both, spatial destruction was a counterinsurgency against memory in the making. The longer aftermath shows that resistance did not stop with demolition. Victims, families, and local institutions developed counter-archives that

turn ruins, soil, and testimony into evidence. Archaeology at Mansión Seré and the documentary reconstruction of transport systems to Treblinka II illustrate parallel methods of rematerializing what was meant to conceal and/or vanish. Additionally, both cases demonstrate that successive generations must work against physical environments that once refused them. The very success of those efforts, however, depends on distinct memory regimes. In Poland, wartime obliteration and postwar geopolitics constrained early site-specific reconstruction. In Argentina, democratic transitions and judicial reopenings enabled a thicker material and ritual presence.

The transgenerational implications are also clear in both cases. Erasure attacks not only bodies but also the infrastructure through which communities remember, teach, and pass on knowledge. Future generations inherit landscapes that may appear mute at first glance. Thus, it becomes their responsibility to restore meaning to these environments by recalling the very stories the perpetrators sought to erase and thus convert absence into a legible record which guarantees social recognition. It also faces recurring countercurrents, including denialism, vandalism, trivialization, and political fatigue. The response at Mansión Seré, where hostile graffiti was transformed, exemplifies how memory work can reframe injury and serve as a tool for conflict resolution.

Finally, the comparison reframes urbicide as a biopolitical companion to genocide. The annihilation of a place aims to sever the conditions that make lives speakable in time. Treblinka II and Mansión Seré therefore teach that measures of truth, justice, and reparations require more than identifying perpetrators and victims. It also implies rebuilding the spatial and archival grounds where memory can endure. The afterlives of these sites show that the most durable refutation of erasure is a living practice of remembrance that teaches others how to find, read, and keep faith with what remains. The comparative lens thus clarifies how spatial destruction operates simultaneously as material annihilation and as epistemic control.

Conclusion

Although numerous sites of atrocity were destroyed and the reasons for their demolition vary, the particular connection between Treblinka II and Mansión Seré lies in the fact that both were demolished in the aftermath of successful acts of resistance. In both cases, destruction followed moments in which the regimes' systems of control were exposed: the prisoner uprising at Treblinka in August 1943 and the escape of detainees from Mansión Seré in March 1978. These events rendered visible what had been deliberately concealed, transforming what had operated as an "open secret" or as a "half-truth" into material evidence. In consequence, the subsequent destruction of both sites must be understood not only as an attempt to suppress evidence and evade accountability, but also as a deliberate effort to erase the memory of resistance itself. The visibility of these ruptures

revealed fissures in the regimes' claims to total control—fissures that had to be symbolically and materially repaired through acts of spatial erasure.

As Amnesty International has emphasized, "enforced disappearance is frequently used as a strategy to spread terror within society" (Amnesty International, n.d.). Within this framework, the concealment of bodies and the destruction of sites functioned as complementary mechanisms of domination. Both the Nazi regime and the Argentine military dictatorship relied on the production of invisibility as a means of governance: terror was generated not only through violence itself but through its concealment. Yet, when that invisibility was disrupted—when what was meant to remain hidden became visible—the regimes responded by intensifying practices of erasure. Thus, the destruction of Treblinka II and Mansión Seré was not incidental but constitutive of their respective systems of terror.

Placing these cases in dialogue requires moving beyond surface-level parallels in repression and secrecy to examine deeper structural affinities, particularly in their conception of legality. One of the most significant precedents in the institutionalization of enforced disappearance can be traced to the Nazi *Nacht und Nebel* (Night and Fog) Decree of 1941, through which disappearance was not treated as a crime but codified as a lawful instrument of state policy. This transformation of disappearance into a legally sanctioned practice reveals how regimes of terror operate not outside the law, but through its reconfiguration.

Within this broader framework, the concept of urbicide—traditionally understood as the destruction of cities—requires reconsideration. Building on Raphael Lemkin's insight that genocide entails not only the destruction of human groups but also the dismantling of their cultural and spatial foundations, this study argues that spatial erasure constitutes a core technology of modern domination. Treblinka II and Mansión Seré demonstrate how totalitarian regimes weaponize architecture and landscape to annihilate life while simultaneously erasing the evidence of their crimes. In this sense, urbicide must be understood not merely as the destruction of built environments, but as the deliberate obliteration of the conditions that make memory, visibility, and accountability possible.

Viewed through a biopolitical lens, genocide and urbicide emerge not as distinct phenomena but as interrelated expressions of modern power. In both, the destruction of bodies is inseparable from the destruction of the infrastructures—material, social, and symbolic—that sustain collective existence. In the case of urbicide, spatial erasure operates to obscure violence and foreclose the possibility of its recognition. In the case of genocide, spatial destruction becomes constitutive of the crime itself, as it dismantles the cultural, historical, and territorial foundations that enable group continuity. Together, these processes reveal how violence extends beyond physical annihilation to encompass the regulation of visibility, memory, and historical intelligibility.

The recovery of the landscapes of Treblinka and Mansión Seré must therefore be understood as an act of forensic counter-cartography, transforming sites of erasure into terrains of truth and memory. Such process aligns with what human rights frameworks identify as the collective dimension of the right to truth—the shared entitlement to know the circumstances of past violence, as well as the identities of victims and perpetrators (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2014; International Center for Transitional Justice, 2013; United Nations Commission on Human Rights, 2006). Exhumations, mappings, and memorials thus function as forms of memory activism, through which civil society reclaims the tools of concealment and converts them into instruments of justice, recognition, and reparation.

Ultimately, this article argues that urbicide should be reinterpreted not solely as the destruction of cities, but as the erasure of the conditions of visibility itself—a political strategy aimed at foreclosing the possibility of witnessing. Against such erasures, practices of spatial recovery and memorialization reassert the relationship between space, truth, justice, reparations, and memory. Confronting the ruins of both the Holocaust and last Argentina's civic and military dictatorship entails confronting an enduring struggle over who holds the power to inscribe, erase, and remember. While spatial erasure forms part of the grammar of genocidal and state-terror projects, counter-archives, forensic reconstructions, and memorial landscapes work to reassemble these erased geographies, rendering absence legible once again. In doing so, they reaffirm Raphael Lemkin's insight that genocide destroys not only people but also the "essential foundations" of group life—and that the reconstruction of those foundations begins with reclaiming the very spaces where violence sought to erase itself.

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