



MONUMENT TO CRISTOPHER COLUMBUS

Buenos Aires, Argentina

-34.5571, -58.41009



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Executive Summary

The Monument to Christopher Columbus has caused great controversy as part of the heritage and historical memory of Argentina. Opinions were divided between his legacy as a discoverer of the 'New World' or as a 'perpetrator of genocide.' After several legal disputes, the monument, which had stood near the *Casa Rosada*, the presidential palace, was relocated to the coast of the Río de La Plata.

Introduction

In 2013, a battle between the president of Argentina and the mayor of Buenos Aires over the *Monumento a Cristóbal Colón* (Monument to Christopher Columbus) raised questions about the control of the commemorative landscape in the nation's capital city, as well as the Italian explorer's principal legacy as the 'discoverer of the new world' or a 'perpetrator of genocide'. Amid a bitter debate over the monument's removal, the city's Italian community demanded respect and recognition for what immigrants had contributed to building the nation, while the indigenous people were given no part in deliberations over a replacement monument intended to honour their legacies. The case examines the role of law and politics in shaping municipal landscapes and, with it, a national identity. The case also suggests the importance of a monument's location and iconography in signalling its place in the public consciousness and how a commemorative landscape can be re-scripted to align with evolving social values and priorities.

Background

In preparation for the 100th anniversary of the May Revolution, on May 10 1910, a Centennial Commission solicited proposals for monuments from Argentina's immigrant communities from Italy, Spain, France, and Germany.¹ The decision to erect a Columbus monument on the square across from the *Casa Rosada*² represented a major symbolic victory for Argentines of Italian descent. The effort was led by Antonio Devoto, a wealthy Italian-born businessman who had made his money in shipping, trade and banking.³ As head of the Columbus Monument Committee, Devoto negotiated with the minister of the interior to position the monument in Columbus Park, which had been created in 1904, across from the *Casa Rosada*, as part of a municipal beautification project.⁴ The construction, promoted by Devoto, was a gift from the Italian community of that country to the Argentine Republic on this anniversary.

The Italian sculptor, Arnaldo Zocchi, was commissioned to carve the monument. Made from white Carrara marble, the base consisted of a series of allegorical figures crowned by the 38-foot statue of Columbus. Two base reliefs were added. One showed Columbus requesting permission from the Spanish court to finance his voyage; the other depicted him presenting indigenous slaves to the king and queen after his return.⁵ A set of broken chains represented the freedom from oppression that millions of Europeans had found in the 'new world'. A quote from the Roman poet Virgil was carved into the base: 'No day shall erase you from the memory of time'.⁶

¹ Cheryl Jiménez Frei, "Columbus, Juana and the Politics of the Plaza: Battles over Monuments, Memory and Identity in Buenos Aires," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2019): 607-38.

² The *Casa Rosada* is the executive mansion and office of the President of Argentina.

³ Cheryl Jiménez Frei, "Columbus, Juana and the Politics of the Plaza: Battles over Monuments, Memory and Identity in Buenos Aires," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2019): 607-38.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, 622.

⁶ An image of the plaque with Virgil's quote can be found at *Endlessmile*, "Buenos Aires: Monumento a Colón," March 28, 2013.

The completed monument was unveiled eleven years later, on June 15 1921, in the presence of government officials and the Italian ambassador.⁷ Except for damage incurred during an attempted military coup in 1955, and the subsequent explosion of a 'medium intensity bomb in the foundations of the Monument' specifically targeting the monument in 1987 - without ever knowing the perpetrators of the act - the *Monumento a Cristóbal Colón* held a place of pride outside the *Casa Rosada* until the spring of 2013.⁸

History of the Contestation

In 2011, former president of Venezuela Hugo Chávez visited *Casa Rosada*, home of the Executive Power of the Argentine Republic. His visit would start the idea of removing Columbus statue after he said: 'What is that genocidal doing there? Columbus was the leader of an invasion that produced not a massacre but a genocide. An indigenous person should be there.'⁹

Years later, on March 23 2013, the newspaper, *Clarín*, reported that the *Salón Cristóbal Colón*, in the presidential residence, had been renamed *Salón de los Pueblos Originarios*, or Hall of the Indigenous Peoples, in recognition of the native populations of Latin America, and as a public slight to Christopher Columbus for his role in their extermination.¹⁰ The

Columbus monument was said to be next. The new location was to be in the coastal town of Mar del Plata, 250 miles to the south of Buenos Aires. When scaffolding appeared around the statue, the engineer overseeing the work on the site, Juan Arriague, assured the newspaper, *La Nación*, that the statue would 'not be moved to another location, we are only going to submit it to a restoration process.'¹¹ But President



Figure 1: "Statue for Juana Azurduy". Image by Dennis Jarvis via Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 2.0](#)

Kirchner made her intentions clear when she announced plans to replace the Columbus monument with a statue of 19th-century *guerrillera* (warrior) Juana Azurduy of indigenous heritage, who had fought during the eight-year war of independence against Spain in the early 19th century. 'We want to be rid of Columbus in order to represent the entirety of Argentina's history and all the blood that has been shed,' Kirchner said. 'For this reason, we want to erect a statue of Juana Azurduy, the heroine of

⁷ Catalina Gaete, "Case Study IX. Re-Thinking Columbus. Monumento a Cristobal Colón, Buenos Aires, Argentina" In *Contested Histories in Public Spaces: Principles, Processes, Best Practices*, ed. Timothy Ryback, Mark Ellis and Benjamin Glahn (International Bar Association, 2021).

⁸ Oscar Parrilli, "Comunicado Del Gobierno Nacional Sobre El Monumento a Colón, polémica con Macri," *Télam*, June 1, 2013.

⁹ Clarín, "Monumento a Juana Azurduy: del día que Chávez pidió echar a Colón a su desalojo de la Rosada", *Clarín.es*, May 4, 2017.

¹⁰ Argentine Press News, "Argentina takes down Columbus statue from pedestal," *Argentine Press News*, June 30, 2013.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

independence.¹² The new monument was installed on July 15, 2015, with the presence of Bolivian President Evo Morales, who has donated a million dollars for the construction of the sculpture.¹³

On Saturday morning, June 29 2013, even with legal challenges pending, the Columbus statue was removed from the monument's base. Piece by piece, the monument was slowly dismantled. Mario Chiesa, the coordinator of the committee *Colón en su lugar* (Columbus where he belongs), a collective of more than 100 organizations advocating for the restoration of the monument to its 'historical site', claimed that this process was undertaken 'with a total lack of technical advice on marble statues.'¹⁴ The marble pieces - over 200 - remained scattered around the *Plaza Colón* for several months, while municipal allies of the mayor protested the removal. Lía Rueda, president of the Culture Commission for the Municipal Legislative Assembly, said in an interview with *El Mundo*: 'There is a law that establishes that a statue can only be moved with the consent of 60 legislators, the judiciary had issued an appeal for protection that obliged the president to agree to the removal of this particular monument with the municipal authorities.'¹⁵ Horacio Rodríguez Larreta, the mayor's chief of cabinet, was alerted to the removal on Saturday morning. He rushed to the square in an attempt to prevent the removal but arrived too late. 'This is a provocation by the national government not only to the municipality but also to the justice system,' Larreta told *El Mundo*, 'as well as to all the residents of Buenos Aires.'¹⁶



Figure 2: "Removal of Columbus Statue". Image by Banfield by Wikimedia Commons [CC BY-SA 2.5 ar](#)

Objections were raised primarily by members of the Italian community, who addressed their concerns regarding the threat to heritage assets of the city of Buenos Aires, as well as historical issues related to the supposed misrepresentation of history and the unfair claim of relating Columbus with a genocide. A representative of the city legislature, María Eugenia Estenssoro,

¹² Kristin Wesseman, "Lonely Together: South American Alliances Mercosur and Unasur Face Crisis," *KAS International Reports*, February 2, 2014, 71.

¹³ Clarín, "Monumento a Juana Azurduy: del día que Chávez pidió echar a Colón a su desalojo de la Rosada," *Clarín.es*, May 4, 2017.

¹⁴ Mario Chiesa, interview by Catalina Gaete, *IHJR*, October 15, 2018.

¹⁵ Ramy Wurgaft, "El paseo Colón, sin Colón," *El Mundo*, June 3, 2013.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

criticized the removal process. 'We are talking about destruction and dismantling, vandalism, not just against the history of the city but also a very important part of our history,' Estensorro said, then came the defence of the Columbus legacy. Stating: 'Columbus proved that the Earth was round. Until then, it was an unproven theory,' she said. 'He's not a genocidist who came to kill Indians.'¹⁷

In October 2014, the National Parliament voted on the relocation. The measure passed by a vote of 128 to 62, with 9 abstentions. The agreement was now supported by a legislative act, Law 26.963. The restoration and relocation of the monument were to be financed by the national government, freeing the local government from any financial responsibility as well as in the damages that might occur during the process. In parallel, the relocation of Columbus' monument was finally ratified by the Buenos Aires Legislature, and the figures composing the whole sculpture were removed and located to the shoreline near the airport. On December 19 2014, in a move that was now moot, the Court rejected the suit claiming the removal of the statue would violate the Constitution.¹⁸

With his political powers enhanced with executive authority, the former vice president of Argentina, Mauricio Macri, was able to remove Juana Azurduy from the square in front of the *Casa Rosada*, but was not able to restore the Columbus monument to its place of pride. As agreed, the Columbus statue was placed at the waterfront on *Avenida Costanera Rafael Obligado*, adjacent to *Aeroparque Jorge Newbery* in 2017. The two years, while it lay in pieces, had led to further damage to the marble, requiring restoration. In addition, the new location by the seaside had to be reinforced to support the tons of marble.¹⁹ Since the monument now stood under heritage protection laws, it was also subject to additional legislation that prevented statues from being moved from their location. According to the official decree 769/2019, this 'very important sculptural heritage' will be 'disseminated and preserved.'²⁰

Legal Challenges: Defence and Defiance

On April 4 2013, María Carmen Arias Usandivaras, president of a nonprofit organisation, *Basta de demoler!* (Stop demolitions!) filed a lawsuit seeking to block the planned removal of the Columbus monument.²¹ The suit charged President Kirchner with violating paragraph 14 of the Argentine Constitution, protecting 'Cultural and historical heritage', as well as crimes against municipal aesthetics. 'Given the immense damage being done to the community and its historical memory', the suit claimed, 'it can be said that the concept of 'crimes against beauty,' coined in Lord Elgin's time, is more valid than ever'.²²

¹⁷ Versión Taquigráfica Audiencia Pública.

¹⁸ Télam, "Rechazan La Inconstitucionalidad Y El Amparo Contra El Traslado Del Monumento a Colón," *Télam*, December 19, 2014.

¹⁹ Cheryl Jiménez Frei, "Columbus, Juana and the Politics of the Plaza: Battles over Monuments, Memory and Identity in Buenos Aires," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 51, no. 3 (2019): 635.

²⁰ Decreto 769/2019. Comisión Nacional de Monumentos, de Lugares y de Bienes Históricos, *Boletín Oficial de la República Argentina*, November 13, 2019.

²¹ *Amparo* is an extraordinary constitutional appeal similar to habeas corpus.

²² Noticias Urbanas, "Interpone Acción de Amparo. Solicita Medida Cautelar de no Innovar," April 4, 2013.

A second lawsuit followed in June 2013, this time filed by seven local Italian associations, claiming discrimination and invoking international conventions. It argued against the relocation as a measure that harmed 'the memory of our parents, grandparents, great-grandparents and other ascendants who as immigrants or descendants of Italian immigrants not only left shreds of life on this soil but also, in some cases, made donations at the time to erect the Monument.' The lawsuit claimed that the installation of the monument was encouraged and founded mostly by European immigrants as a gift for the nation and that the Law 5105 from August 26 1907, authorized the monument 'to be located specifically in the Plaza Colón and not elsewhere'. The city mayor, opposition leader Mauricio Macri, endorsed the Italian claim and vowed that Columbus belongs to the city of Buenos Aires, as reported in news outlets.²³

The essential dispute between Cristina Kirchner and Mauricio Macri was over control of the commemorative landscape in the nation's capital. Kirchner's claim to authority rested on the legislative act embedded in Law No. 5,105 of 26 August 1907. Kirchner's cabinet secretary, Oscar Parrilli, wrote in a communique on June 1 2013, that 'this monument was completed in 1921 and was never declared a National Historic Monument'.²⁴ Parrilli went on to note that the municipal legislature had just passed emergency legislation as a political ploy, declaring the Columbus monument 'well integrated into the historical and cultural heritage of the Autonomous City of Buenos Aires'. Parrilli observed that 'until two days ago, this monument was neither of interest nor concern to the municipality'.²⁵

Parrilli further cited Law No. 2862, enacted in 2008, in which the Office of the President and the Municipal Government agreed to transfer 'the care, maintenance and custody of the entire Columbus Park, including its monument' to the federal military authorities for 'reasons related to the security of the *Casa Rosada*'. Parrilli noted that Mauricio Macri was mayor at the time and had agreed to the transfer of authority. Beyond legal issues, there was also the matter of historic preservation. Parrilli said that after nearly a century of exposure to the elements, fissures had appeared in the marble that 'threatened the stability of the monument and had necessitated its removal for restoration'. Consideration also needed to be given to the interest of the 'Italian community of Mar del Plata,' the coastal town 250 miles south of Buenos Aires, 'which requested that the aforementioned monument on the Columbus Square be installed' in their community after 'conservation, restoration, enhancement and eventual transfer of the same'.²⁶

In a nod to judicial authority, Parrilli noted that the process of removal and restoration had been set to commence on June 1 2013, but was delayed, in compliance with the legal challenges, to allow time 'to present the technical and legal reports that support the position of the National Government'. In a closing observation, Parrilli catalogued nearly a dozen instances in which the Macri municipal government had either neglected or intentionally removed monuments, including '6 statues representing the Generalissimo Francisco Miranda, donated by the Venezuelan

²³ Jaime López, "Hallan un tesoro bajo la polémica estatua de Colón de Buenos Aires," *El Mundo*, April 4, 2014.

²⁴ See also Marisa Lerer, "Christopher Columbus and Juana Azurduy: Revising and Revisiting Historical Monuments in Argentina," *International Public History*, December, 22, 2018.

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ *Ibid.*

Embassy, without the intervention of the legislature and without the current location being known'. Parrilli also cited the removal of 'a crane donated by the Japanese community', a commemorative plaque, and '500 centennial trees' that had been removed along a major avenue. Parrilli said that President Kirchner was not going to be obstructed by the machinations of *Mauricio Macri y sus colaboradores* (The mayor and his collaborators).

Decision-Making Processes

The legal debate took place mainly between the National Government and the city of Buenos Aires (president and mayor), although it also included non-profit organizations and members of the Italian community. Therefore, despite the precautionary law issued on May 31 2013 that stopped the transfer, the judge in charge of the National Court in Federal Administrative Litigation No. 12, rejected this approach and validated the removal of the monument. The appeals raised by the associations were rejected by the courts. Finally, the Argentine Government and the city of Buenos Aires agreed on June 5 2014, the transfer of the monument to the waterfront on *Avenida Costanera Rafael Obligado*.

Summary and Conclusions

Seven years after the start of the controversy, neither statue occupies this place of pride. The gardens of the Casa Rosada have been fenced in and a presidential heliport was built in 2018, during the years of the government of Mauricio Macri (2015-2019).²⁷ The statue of Juana Azurduy was moved to the front of the Kirchner Cultural Center in 2017, after a short-lived stay on the lawn of the government palace.²⁸ Meanwhile, the statue of Columbus stands at a new location next to Río de La Plata. In 2019 it was declared a national monument, and therefore and, according to that designation, can no longer be removed.

The case of the *Monumento a Cristóbal Colón* provides important insights into the role of rule of law and due process. As acrimonious and politicised as the dispute may have become between the president and the mayor, the contestation remained within established legal frameworks and procedures; indeed, both parties sought to exploit the existing legislation, or the legal status of the object, to best advantage. Another important insight was the role of iconographic signalling of a monument as well as its location, in particular, the use of positioning within the commemorative landscape to reframe the narrative around the contested object.

One significant flaw in the process was the absence of indigenous voices in the deliberations and final outcome. The lack of public records of indigenous organizations officially promoting or supporting the removal is especially striking since the purpose of the relocation of Columbus and replacement by Azurduy was explicitly to recognize and embrace a previously marginalized community. The reappraisal of the Columbus legacy that emerged during the 1990s was driven in good part by indigenous communities, seeking acknowledgement of their side of history. It is rather remarkable that the decision taken by Argentine authorities did not include the participation

²⁷ José María Costa and Tomás Marcó del Pont, "Macri ya usa el nuevo helipuerto dentro de la Casa Rosada," *La Nación*, February 6, 2018.

²⁸ *La Nación*, "El monumento de Juana Azurduy ya está frente al Centro Cultural Kirchner," *La Nación*, September 16, 2017.

of indigenous communities in any of the processes. This case raises the important issue of equal and proportionate participation of all stakeholders in order to ensure the credibility and acceptance of the measures taken.

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About Contested Histories

In recent years, there have been many contestations over memorials, street names, and other physical representations of historical legacies in public spaces. These contestations often reflect deeper societal tensions whether triggered by political transitions, demographic shifts, inter- ethnic strife, or a growing awareness of unaddressed historical injustices.

The Contested Histories project is a multi-year initiative designed to identify principles, processes, and best practices for addressing these contestations at the community or municipal level and in the classroom. Conflicts about history, heritage, and memory are a global phenomenon, and, although each case is different, comparative cases can indicate lessons learned and reflect best practices.

About IHJR at EuroClio

The Institute for Historical Justice and Reconciliation (IHJR) is a research centre at EuroClio - European Association for History Educators in The Hague, The Netherlands. The IHJR works with educational and public policy institutions to organise and sponsor historical discourse in pursuit of acknowledgement and the resolution of historical disputes in divided communities and societies.

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