

Sites of power, instruments of public intervention: the Palace of Congress and the construction of federal power in Argentina, 1880-1916

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‘...the strength of an assembly in a measure resides in the hall it occupies.’

Alexis de Tocqueville *Recollections of the Revolution of 1848*¹

SUMMARY

This article intends to provide an analysis of the process of building a house for the Argentine Congress between 1880 and 1916. After the presidential campaign and revolution of 1880, Argentina entered a new political era that saw the definition of a political system under the hegemony of the Partido Autonomista Nacional and the consolidation of the federal state. The defeat of *porteño* militias in 1880 represented the end of the project of a national state controlled from Buenos Aires and the transformation of the town into the federal capital of the country. This new role meant that the city now needed buildings to accommodate new functions, a house for parliament among them. This article explores the significance of building the Palace of Congress as part of a broader plan by politicians, urban planners and bureaucrats to place symbols of republican greatness in central areas of the new capital. This study also focuses on the parliamentary debates that discussed the allocation of public funding for the construction of congress and the importance of giving the new capital examples of monumental architecture as a way to underscore its new political status. Finally, this article analyses the impact of the debates in congress and in the press about allegations of embezzlement and corruption that surrounded the building of the Palace of Congress.

With the defeat by the federal army of the ill-prepared provincial militias on the outskirts of Buenos Aires on 21 June 1880, the presidential office was secured for Julio A. Roca. The quick defeat of the 1880 revolution meant a significant step in the consolidation of the federal state and the subordination of Buenos Aires political leadership to the national authorities, and started a period of mostly institutional stability.² The battles of June 1880

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¹A. de Tocqueville, *The Recollections of Alexis de Tocqueville* [1898], in <http://oll.libertyfund.org/titles/tocqueville-the-recollections-of-alexis-de-tocqueville-1896>

² See E. Gallo, ‘La consolidación del Estado y la reforma política (1880-1914)’, in Academia Nacional de la Historia, *Nueva Historia de la Nación Argentina*. 10 vols. (Buenos Aires, 1999-2002), vol. IV (Buenos Aires,

were also a blow to a political tradition, with wide support in the province of Buenos Aires, that interpreted uprising against despotism as legitimate. Although the victory of the federal troops did not mean the end of this political culture – manifested again in the later revolution of 1890 – the federalisation of the city of Buenos Aires in 1880 strengthened the federal state and linked provincial politics to the dynamics of a new political order in Argentina.³

The battles of 1880 signified the end of a long conflict about the location of the national capital and had relevant consequences in terms of the relationship between Buenos Aires, the federal government and the provincial governments. It also meant that a permanent capital – seat of the national authorities – needed a fitting public architecture that would celebrate a new political order and express republican values. Among the buildings constructed in the following decades to fulfil that purpose, that for congress turned out to be both paradigmatic and controversial. Politicians, architects and bureaucrats sought to build a parliament that was a metaphor of the permanence of solid political institutions. However, its construction was embroiled in endless controversies and parliamentary enquiries about corruption allegations.

This article examines the process of constructing a house for the Argentine Congress and explores the significance of building a seat for parliamentarians as part of a broader plan by the political elite and urban planners to provide Buenos Aires with public buildings that contributed to legitimate state power, had an impact on political culture and guaranteed the publicity of legislative procedures. This article draws on recent studies on Argentine urban and political history –the approach is therefore interdisciplinary– and intends to provide an analysis of the debates among politicians, journalists and members of the public about the building’s construction and its significance in terms of parliamentary practices and as a symbol of a new political order. Finally, the article explores the impact of the parliamentary debates and press coverage regarding corruption allegations and administrative wrongdoings that surrounded the construction of the congress building. It

2000), p. 512. N. Botana, *El orden conservador. La política argentina entre 1880 y 1916*. (Buenos Aires, 1985). However, tensions between Buenos Aires and the central government continued in areas such as the control of the banking system. See P. Gerchunoff, F. Rocchi and G. Rossi, *Desorden y Progreso. Las crisis económicas argentinas 1870-1895*, (Buenos Aires, 2008)

³ A. Yablon, ‘Disciplined Rebels: The Revolution of 1880 in Buenos Aires’, *Journal of Latin American Studies* 40, (2008), pp. 483-511.

argues that a more diversified parliament –due to changes in electoral legislation– was more open to pursue thorough enquiries and to put pressure on the national executive and the judiciary to launch a criminal investigation.

Public space, monumentality and permanence

The constitutional arrangement of 1853-60 had crafted a federal government divided into legislative, executive and judicial branches and set a clear-cut separation of powers in the hope of both preventing tyranny and achieving political stability. Yet political stability between 1880 and 1916 was mainly based on the acceptance of the political supremacy of the national executive and the ability of the president to reach electoral agreements with provincial governors. The *Partido Autonomista Nacional* dominated national politics and provided most of the provincial governments of the period. The nature of the electoral system and negotiations with provincial elites helped the president to secure majorities in parliament, although partisan alignments were not necessarily guaranteed.⁴

The Argentine Congress was comprised of two chambers: the senate, representing the provinces (two representatives per province and two from the federal capital), and the chamber of deputies, representing the people and elected according to each province's population. The senate functioned traditionally as a legislative arena for liaison and coordination among provincial elites which controlled party politics within their own territory and as the national institution by which provincial politicians were engaged in the national decision-making process.⁵ However, in spite of the importance of the legislative body in the constitutional arrangement and the dynamics of political life, congress did not have a permanent building until the beginning of the twentieth century.

Lawmakers moved into their final building (the third since 1862) as late as 1906. Between 1862 and 1864, national parliamentarians shared the house with the province of Buenos Aires Legislature, as they met at the old semi-circular seating at the 'Manzana de las Luces', a traditional block of the city of Buenos Aires where the local university, Jesuit schools and legislative assemblies had been located in previous decades. National lawmakers had their second seat in a building which was just across the *Plaza de Mayo*, the

⁴ See M. O. Castro, *El ocaso de la república oligárquica. Poder, política y reforma electoral, 1898-1912*, (Buenos Aires, 2012).

⁵ Botana, *El orden conservador*, p. 111.

main public square of the capital city, a few metres from the Government House, in an area traditionally associated with political institutions since colonial times. The final house for the national legislative body was the result of an international competition that took place in 1895 after some toing and froing about the site for the new building and its main architectural features. The first two congress buildings, noted above, were never considered permanent houses, a fact that made apparent the precarious nature of the institutional arrangements and the relationships between the national state and the powerful province of Buenos Aires between the 1860s and the federalization of the city of Buenos Aires in 1880. It is revealing that during the parliamentary debates of 1862 some national deputies opposed the construction of a new congress building arguing that any permanent seat for the parliament in the city of Buenos Aires was equivalent to solving the capital issue through the back door.⁶ Even though in its original version the 1853 constitution established a federal regime with Buenos Aires as the federal capital, it was not until 1880 (with the defeat of the *porteño* militias and the federalization of the town) that Buenos Aires became the permanent seat of the national authorities and the capital of the country. The federalization of Buenos Aires finally put an end to the controversy about where to establish the federal capital, opening a debate about the nature of the capital and the need to erect *permanent* public buildings for a *permanent* capital. Even though the construction of public buildings was certainly not a local phenomenon,⁷ Claudia Shmidt argues that in the 1880s Argentine national governments sought to speed up a process of ‘republican occupation’ by providing permanent seats for the national executive, congress and the judiciary and by building a national library, museums, accommodation for immigrants, and a network of state schools.⁸

Evidence of this determination to underline the new political status of the city of Buenos Aires was the debate in the lower chamber of congress regarding the purchase of land and budget allocations for the construction of monumental buildings for the national

⁶ See Senator Martín V. Piñero’s speech in the Chamber of National Deputies, *El Parlamento Argentino 1854-1947*, (Buenos Aires, 1948), p. 452.

⁷ As Nikolaus Pevsner stated on European architecture, the construction of public buildings (governmental buildings, schools, theatres, libraries, hospitals) were among the best examples of nineteenth century town architecture. N. Pevsner, *An outline of European Architecture*, (Norwich, 1964), p. 383.

⁸ C. Shmidt, *Palacios sin reyes. Arquitectura pública para la ‘capital permanente’*. Buenos Aires 1880-1890. (Rosario, 2012); see also R. Molinos, ‘La piedra en el papel. La construcción del palacio del Congreso Nacional’, *Anales del Instituto de Arte Americano e Investigaciones Estéticas ‘Mario J. Buschiazzo’*, 41, (2011), pp. 87-97.

executive, congress and the courts. As National Deputy Delfín Gallo expressed it in 1882, the building in the 1860s had been the right one ‘...when Buenos Aires was only the provisional national capital, when it was just the residence of national authorities that could be changed at any moment, but [this building] is not worthy, it is not good enough for a Congress in the definitive capital of the Argentine Nation’.⁹ The public space associated with the state and public institutions was already prominent. It stretched from the Plaza de Mayo in the direction of the northwest districts, linking – thanks to the completion of the Avenida de Mayo – the Government House (*Casa Rosada*) to the area developed around Callao Avenue, where government officials and lawmakers finally agreed during the presidency of Miguel Juárez Celman (1886-1890) to build the new congress house. Politicians, intellectuals and urban planners looked mainly to Paris and other European cities for inspiration. They were determined to get rid of old buildings, widen the streets and provide Buenos Aires with a public architecture that gave the impression of permanence.¹⁰ A monumental site of eclectic style (although essentially with neoclassic features) inaugurated (but not completed) in 1906 was the answer to President Roca’s decision to have a legislative palace that was ‘worthy of the Nation and of the representatives of its sovereignty.’¹¹

Like other public buildings, the construction of congress was an expression of what Jorge F. Liermur’s described as the architecture of a ‘modern metropolis’, defined by its solid monumentality. Buenos Aires went through a number of Haussmannist¹² transformations during Torcuato de Alvear’s time as mayor in the 1880s (francophile leanings were easy to identify in Torcuato de Alvear’s correspondence) and grew in size between 1880 and 1887, incorporating neighbouring small towns such as Belgrano and Flores.¹³ This showed the intention of politicians and bureaucrats to provide Buenos Aires

⁹ *Diario de Sesiones Cámara de Diputados de la Nación* (hereafter DSCD), 24 May 1882, p. 98.

¹⁰ Brazilian and Argentine elites shared similar views in terms of urban reforms introduced in Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires respectively. See J. D. Needell, ‘Rio de Janeiro and Buenos Aires: Public Space and Public Consciousness in Fin –De-Siècle Latin America’, *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 37, (1995), pp. 519-40.

¹¹ Julio A. Roca’s speech before Congress, May 1881 in H. Mabragna, *Los Mensajes. Historia del desenvolvimiento de la Nación Argentina redactada cronológicamente por sus gobernantes, 1810-1910*, 6 vols (Buenos Aires, 1910), vol. IV, p. 15.

¹² Georges Eugene Haussmann, appointed Prefect of the Seine by Napoleon III in 1853, carried out major transformations in Paris, opening up boulevards and remodelling the ancient city centre. See F. Furet, *Revolutionary France 1770-1880* (Oxford, 2006), p. 459.

¹³ A. Beccar Varela, *Torcuato de Alvear*, (Buenos Aires, 1926).

with the space considered fitting for a national capital. Another explicit goal was the establishment of a permanent public architecture which would have –besides its functional role– a significant part in the symbolic construction of the nation.¹⁴ Therefore, monuments and buildings would be erected not only to reflect the memory of the city, but also to ‘shape a public space not just of the city but of the nation ...’¹⁵

Concerns about the design of the streets and the risk of Buenos Aires becoming a ‘medieval city’, cornered by narrow and ‘never-ending’ streets persisted among the political elite. As late as 1906, former President Julio A. Roca wrote from Paris to the mayor of Buenos Aires urging him not to abandon the plans to buy the Quinta de Halle which would allow the expansion of the Parque de Recoleta and open up large spaces for the circulation of air, considering that the parks at the limits of the city did not completely provide ‘hygienic conditions nor pleasure of life’.¹⁶ Roca’s concerns mirrored similar questions posed by architects and urban planners when they sought to transform Buenos Aires into a modern metropolis defined by monumental buildings, broad streets and a spatial layout.¹⁷ Like many European politicians and bureaucrats involved in the reconstruction projects of cities such as Paris, Vienna or Berlin, their Argentinian counterparts were eager to make circulation ‘...the dominant principle of urban design...’ and to locate public buildings accordingly.¹⁸

By the end of the nineteenth century, politicians, bureaucrats and architects were no longer debating what the congress chambers should be like, although functionality and a sense of grandeur were important. The semicircular seating in the chambers was largely accepted and the publicity of parliamentary sessions had been an important issue since at least the construction of the Buenos Aires provincial legislative chamber in 1822. Manuals

¹⁴ J. F. Liermur, ‘Construir el país. Imaginar la Nación.1880-1910’, in J. F. Liermur, *Arquitectura en la Argentina del siglo XX. La construcción de la modernidad*, (Buenos Aires, 2001); J. F. Liermur and G. Silvestri, *El umbral de la metrópolis. Transformaciones técnicas y cultura en la modernización de Buenos Aires*, (Buenos Aires, 1993), p. 177.

¹⁵ A. Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque. Espacio público y cultura urbana en Buenos Aires, 1887-1936*, (Quilmes, 1998), p. 102.

¹⁶ ‘Embellecimiento edilicio. Una carta del General Roca’, *La Nación* (hereafter LN), 20 May 1906.

¹⁷ Torcuato de Alvear’s reforms (mainly the opening up of the Plaza de Mayo and the creation of the Avenida de Mayo) are examples but also some articles published by the *Revista Técnica-Arquitectura*, even though there was already a pervasive debate among Argentinian leading architects on cultural nationalism. See, *Revista Técnica-Arquitectura*, 29 and 30, 31 August 1905 and 30 September 1905.

¹⁸ S. Gunn, *History and Cultural Theory*, (Harlow, 2006), p. 123. The construction of the Viennese Parliament on the Ringstrasse is a clear example of that concern. See C. E. Schorske, *La Viena de fin de siglo. Política y Cultura*, (Buenos Aires, 2011), p. 66.

of parliamentary practice had been in use since then, when the *bonaerense* political elite had looked for inspiration to Jeremy Bentham's essay on political tactics and legislative proceedings.¹⁹ When in 1882 the national deputies discussed a proposal to construct a single building for the lower house, some lawmakers argued that the influx of legislators had made the old building too small as there were not enough rooms for the committees and both houses had to share the same room. Gallo stated that a crowded building that could not comfortably accommodate legislators, staff and visitors, conspired against the constitutional duty of guaranteeing the publicity of legislative procedures. As a consequence of the lack of space, senators had to meet in a different room to which the public had no access, a situation seen as against the principle of publicity and transparency in parliamentary debates.²⁰

Parliamentary deliberations were of importance for the national press and a periodical devoted to congress debates (with the unequivocal name of 'El Parlamento') was launched in October 1880.²¹ The national constitution and the manuals for parliamentary practice at the turn of the century underlined the principle of publicity and the role of journalism. Reporters consequently had relatively easy access to the congress house. In 1907, with the new building recently inaugurated, a proposal was passed by the lower chamber that sought to have stands for journalists installed, although the press was reluctant to accept any regulation of its trade.²² Since at least 1882, parliamentarians had been more concerned with the constant influx of visitors who were trying to persuade politicians in one way or another and had easy access to the lawmakers' common rooms.²³ Furthermore, other legislators argued ingenuously that the construction of a separate building could help

¹⁹ F. Aliata, *La ciudad regular. Arquitectura, programas e instituciones en el Buenos Aires posrevolucionario, 1821-1835*, (Buenos Aires, 2006); J. Bentham, *Táctica de las asambleas legislativas*, (Paris, 1824). On the influence of Bentham on Buenos Aires political elite in the 1820s see K. Gallo, 'Jeremy Bentham y la feliz experiencia. Presencia del utilitarismo en Buenos Aires, 1821-1824', *Prismas. Revista de Historia intelectual* 6, (2002), pp. 79-96. On Bentham's ideas about the 'regime of publicity' and the role of the public in the political system, see J. Habermas, *Historia y crítica de la opinión pública. La transformación estructura lde la vida pública*, (Barcelona, 1994), p. 134.

²⁰ DSCD, 24 May 1882, p. 101. Similar problems would emerge again in 1897 when an already crowded building would have to accommodate a number of new lawmakers elected as a result of a recent constitutional reform. See José Doyer to Marco Avellaneda, Presidente de la Cámara de Diputados de la Nación, 15 November 1897, in *Archivo de la Cámara de Diputados de la Nación* (hereafter ACDN), file 00041-S-1894

²¹ 'El Parlamento', LN, 3 October 1880.

²² DSCD, 19 July 1907. See also 'La prensa y el parlamento', LN, 21 July 1907.

²³ Senators of the United States also complained about crowds of visitors. See D. A. Ritchie, *The U.S. Congress. A Very Short Introduction*, (New York, 2010), p. 117.

improve the separation of powers because it would make it more difficult for the national government to influence lawmakers' opinions due to the distance between locations. Although some legislators suggested that financial difficulties made the construction of a new congress building more problematic (and it was therefore reasonable to wait for better times), members of congress agreed on the importance of having a permanent building.²⁴ The decision to build one house with two separate wings for the chambers or two separate buildings was also considered a way to end old parliamentary tricks. For instance, in the days leading up to the 1880 revolution, when the parliament was the scene of mounting tension, senators loyal to General Roca had prevented the session of the lower chamber (where they had no majority) with the simple strategy of resorting to filibusterism for endless hours. Both chambers shared the same room.²⁵

During the parliamentary debates of 1882, lawmakers discussed two possible scenarios: either the congress building was erected near the *Casa Rosada* or in the northwest area of the city, around Callao Avenue.²⁶ In 1887, during Juarez Celman's term in office, parliamentarians debated the role that politicians and engineers should play in case an international competition for the design of a single congress building was called.²⁷ Yet it was not until 1889 that a new law established the definitive location of the building, crowning the Avenida de Mayo.²⁸ In November 1894, congress passed the law 3187 authorizing the national executive to spend six million pesos on the building of a 'house' for the parliament, which was to be located in the area developed around Callao Avenue. Although the executive approved the architectural plans, a committee of 'citizens', made up of two members of the lower chamber and a national senator, were in charge of overseeing the works. By the time the international competition for its construction was announced, the term 'palace' had replaced the more humble term of 'house'. The committee also showed this desire for a monumental building in 1896, when they asked the architect who had won the competition, Vittorio Meano, to design 'an even more majestic dome' for the parliament building.²⁹ Meano –an Italian architect who also designed the legislative palace

²⁴ DSCD, 24 May 1882, pp. 101 and 104.

²⁵ H. Sabato, *Buenos Aires en armas. La revolución de 1880*, (Buenos Aires, 2008), p. 165.

²⁶ DSCD, 24 May 1882, p. 97.

²⁷ *Diario de Sesiones Cámara de Senadores*, 11 August 1887, p. 27.

²⁸ Schmidt, *Palacios sin reyes*, pp. 168-70.

²⁹ See records of the parliamentary committee, 23 October 1900, ACDN, file, 00023-PE-1900.

in Montevideo, Uruguay– submitted a proposal inspired by the Berlin Reichstag.³⁰ Not surprisingly, in 1897 the committee also agreed on a stone finish in order to enhance ‘its monumental features, and, even more so because it was the first public building in the capital city designed to last for centuries, it should be built in stone...’³¹

Delays and rumours about corruption allegations regarding the construction of the congress building led to an enquiry focused on the building company, potential overspending and the overseeing committee’s lack of controls. However, both lawmakers and the national executive agreed with the committee that had overseen the construction between 1896 and 1899: the congress building had to be the main ‘architectural monument of the capital, one of its greatest ornaments’ and its beauty and grandeur should impress inhabitants and foreigners alike.³² This is evidence of how significant the construction of the building was in terms of republican symbolism and civic pedagogy.³³

The idea that the congress building should express grandeur was also shared by other proposals submitted to the 1895 contest. For instance, Alejandro Christophersen’s report, included in his proposal, illustrates the consensus that the ‘... building, because of its costs and character, should be considered the most important of the nation’. Christophersen’s design also featured a ‘large square’ in front of the projected palace, inspired by those of the ‘European capitals’, so as to give adequate surroundings to the congress building and serve as a possible stage for national celebrations and for ‘mass gatherings’. Plans for the creation of a big square in front of the legislative palace took into account the existence of the Lorea square, near the location chosen for the congress building. It was only in 1907 that a number of blocks were expropriated and parliamentarians and the executive (at that time José Figueroa Alcorta) showed determination to make progress with the works, so that the square could be finished in time for the celebrations of the centenary of the 1810 revolution.³⁴

³⁰ F. Grementieri and C. Shmidt, *Alemania y Argentina: la cultura moderna de la construcción*, (Buenos Aires, 2010).

³¹ ‘Comisión del Edificio del Congreso’ al Ministro del Interior, Norberto Quirno Costa, 5 June 1897, in ACDN, file, 00023-PE-1900.

³² Message from the National Executive to National Congress, 11 October 1900, ACDN, file, 00023-PE-1900.

³³ See M. Agulhon, *Historia vagabunda. Etnología y política en la Francia Contemporánea*, (Mexico, 1994).

³⁴ A. Christophersen, *Memoria que acompaña el proyecto para el concurso del Palacio del Congreso Nacional*, 1895, p. 4.

In May 1906, the opening of parliamentary sessions took place in a new palace of congress. The opening ceremony reflected the importance given to the new building and the presidential speech underlined the fact that the inauguration was taking place in the context of solid prosperity.³⁵ Flanked by his cabinet and guarded by an army regiment, the president made his way from the *Casa Rosada* to the congress building in the ceremonial chariot. Three infantry battalions took up position along the Avenida de Mayo, while the president was welcomed by an audience of diplomats and members of the supreme court, accompanied by a large crowd of members of the public, who had received the widely distributed invitations.³⁶ The building was not yet finished, but its elegant features, the presence of ‘distinguished ladies’ in the gallery and the men in tailcoats made the reporter from *La Nación* compare the opening ceremony to ‘the Opera on its best nights.’³⁷ This craving for rituals fitting for the new congress building was also noticeable in how parliamentarians conducted themselves with congress staff.

Journalists and writers observed that the chambers had acquired a certain ‘esprit du corps’ due to the constant interaction among lawmakers, the fact that many of them shared a similar background, and the exchange of perks among members.³⁸ The new building had brought about changes in daily practices; the dimensions and facilities were certainly different and lent a certain air of grandeur (albeit republican) to parliamentary proceedings. In previous decades, writers and journalists had expressed nostalgia for an idealized Buenos Aires, characterized by the republican austerity of its inhabitants.³⁹ However, accounts of life in the new palace reinforce the idea that some of those old practices were being abandoned and suggest an increasingly deferential relationship between parliamentary staff and lawmakers.⁴⁰ However, the opening of the congress building in 1906 brought expressions of discontent from both janitors and parliamentarians. As reported in *La Nación*, a new disciplinary regime was introduced for employees with the move to the new building. This would lead to a ‘palace revolution’ by the janitors, tired of sanctions, the bell

³⁵ See LN, 13 May 1906.

³⁶ ‘Apertura del Congreso’, LN, 12 May 1906.

³⁷ ‘Congreso Nacional’, LN, 13 May 1906.

³⁸ See, for example, LN, 27 April 1880 and J. N. Matienzo, *El gobierno representativo federal de la República Argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 1910).

³⁹ V. G. Quesada, *Memorias de un viejo*, (Buenos Aires, 1998).

⁴⁰ However, the lower chamber’s manual of parliamentary practice at the turn of the century stated explicitly that it was only the chamber that could be addressed as ‘honourable’, not its members. *Reglamento de la Cámara de Diputados de la Nación Argentina*, (Buenos Aires, 1909).

summons and the newly-introduced, more “aristocratic” dress code: ‘...at 1 o’clock a new summons, and this time the janitors show up wearing tailcoat or frock coat, white tie, starched shirt front and gloves made of Scottish linen.’⁴¹

The final decision about the construction of the congress square in 1907 completed the civic monumental axis running between the *Casa Rosada* and the congress building and was – as Adrian Gorelik argues – a success of composition that would achieve ‘...in a masterful way the crowning of the Avenida de Mayo with the congress, offering a perspective that is more American than European’. It is significant that in a short period of time (about two years between 1908 and 1910) the square (with its monuments to the congresses of 1813 and 1816) was constructed, allowing the political elite to pursue its main goals regarding the centenary celebrations of 1910: legitimacy and patriotic pedagogy. The construction of the new square also showed how local officials were imbued with ideas of urban progressivism and how much bureaucrats and members of the social and political elites were concerned about the narrowness of the streets that surrounded the congress building and its square. In 1899, Senator Miguel Cané had already proposed a bill that would expropriate a series of blocks so as to ‘...give air and light to the congress building...’ A law proposed by President Manuel Quintana in 1905 provided the legal framework for that urban transformation, but it was President Figueroa Alcorta’s need for a suitable stage for the centenary celebrations that would lead to the expropriation of the land and the construction of the *Plaza del Congreso*.⁴² The square became one of the main locations for the celebrations, reinforcing in this way a conservative attitude to urban planning since politicians and bureaucrats would miss the opportunity to use the construction of new monumental buildings to renovate other areas of the city.⁴³

Disorder, scarce progress and dubious business

By 1913, the centenary celebrations of 1910 had given way to a more sombre atmosphere in congress. Recently elected deputies from the Radical and Socialist parties in opposition

⁴¹ ‘La revolución en el palacio’, LN, 23 May 1906. According to George Reid Andrews, there was a large number of Afro-Argentines working in the Congress building. See G. R Andrews, *Los afroargentinos de Buenos Aires*, (Buenos Aires, 1989), p. 216. See also M. Fidel Quinteros (pseudonym of Ángel Carrasco), *Memorias de un negro en el Congreso*. (Buenos Aires, 1924).

⁴² See ‘La doctrina de la expropiación’, LN, 22 June 1907; ‘Ecos del día. La utilidad pública’, LN, 30 July 1907.

⁴³ Gorelik, *La grilla y el parque*, p. 195.

were more determined to criticize the shortcomings of the previous political order (1880-1912) and its supposed achievements. It is therefore no surprise that the congress building, with no signs of completion, did not escape the climate of the post-centenary years. Lawmakers questioned the architectural quality and artistic merits of the building. They also denounced the existence of a ‘negotium’, an expression that the Socialist deputy Alfredo Palacios used when addressing the chamber, giving voice to the rumours among members of parliament and the public regarding dubious maneuvers in the construction of the palace.⁴⁴ Ministers of the national government appeared before congress to defend the executive against the accusation of abuse of ‘administrative power’. Although these critics also referred to previous governments, in particular the years between 1900 and 1907, a weakened national government was in a difficult position to face such charges from lawmakers and the public, which seemed to accept these corruption allegations surrounding the *Palacio de Oro*.⁴⁵ Palacios reinforced these accusations by comparing the construction of the **cCongress** building with that of the *Palazzo di Giustizia* in Rome, which had also been the subject of a parliamentary investigation in 1912.

It was not the first time that the issue of corruption had come up in political debate. At the beginning of the 1890s, a combination of political crisis, financial speculation and a complex economic scenario made corruption one of the central topics during the heated final months in office of Juárez Celman. Journalists, intellectuals and politicians criticized the rife financial speculation, which they described as materialism, and the profligacy of *porteños*, all of which made them nostalgic for an improbable return to an idealized austere and republican golden era.⁴⁶ By the end of the 1880s, *La Nación* had already denounced presidential meddling in provincial politics, and the lack of checks provided fertile terrain for corruption. According to the newspaper, the presence of an *oficialismo corruptor* (corrupting influence from the governing party) was evident in electoral maneuvering that put republican institutions at risk and in the unjustifiable growth in personal fortunes

⁴⁴ It is been argued that there might be a correlation between ‘the rise of public concern with corruption’ and ‘the rediscovery of citizenship and the increasing demands of citizens on their representative governments...’ W. Little and E. Posada-Carbó, *Political Corruption in Europe and Latin America*, (London, 1996), p. 4.

⁴⁵ Castro, *El ocaso*.

⁴⁶ N. Botana and E. Gallo, *De la república posible a la república verdadera (1880-1910)*, (Buenos Aires, Ariel).

permitted by a congress dominated by a single party.⁴⁷ The 1913 parliamentary debate took place in a very different political climate, given the recent electoral reform of 1912 and the electoral performance of new political parties. Although parliamentarians were using arguments similar to those of the late nineteenth century (i.e. the existence of an ill-defined separation of powers and corruption among government officials), there was a greater impact due to more diversified chambers as a consequence of the introduction of the new electoral law.

Yet, lawmakers and members of previous national governments had already tried to put an end to constant mismanagement and to identify those who had been responsible for overspending and, allegedly, embezzlement. Already in October 1900, the satirical magazine *Caras y Caretas* had published a cartoon on its cover that showed how important the scandal had become for public opinion. In its drawing, a huge ant (*hormiga*) symbolizing the amount of concrete (*hormigón*) used in the construction of the building, ran away with a sack of cash. According to *Caras y Caretas*, the construction of the congress building was becoming a relevant topic on the political agenda due to the corruption allegations. The magazine pointed out that, of a total budget allocation of 6 million pesos, \$4,173,000 had already been spent, mostly on the foundations of the building. It was hard to believe that the sumptuous ‘Greco-Roman’ building would one day become the seat of the ‘homeland fathers’.⁴⁸ Sarcasm and strong criticism were common among members of the public who followed the debate in the national press.⁴⁹

Pressure from the press and public opinion led the national government to launch an enquiry into the slow progress made in the construction of the building and into allegations of mismanagement. In a message to congress in 1900, the president acknowledged that the original budget allocation stipulated in the 1890s was not enough to continue with the works and, although he secured the funding needed, he proposed postponing some of the most expensive features (such as the stone finish) until better economic times.⁵⁰ Furthermore, congress passed a law in November 1900 that ordered an investigation into

⁴⁷ P. Alonso, *Jardines secretos, legitimaciones públicas. El Partido Autonomista Nacional y la política argentina a fines del siglo XIX*, (Buenos Aires, 2010), p. 327.

⁴⁸ ‘La cuestión del día. El nuevo edificio del Congreso’, *Caras y Caretas*, 13 October 1900, 106.

⁴⁹ See, for example, ‘El palacio de Oro’, LN, 6 October 1900; ‘El palacio famoso’, 14 October 1900.

⁵⁰ On the financial difficulties at the turn of the century, see Gerchunoff, Rocchi and Rossi, *Desorden y Progreso*.

the construction techniques and the architect's responsibilities, and established that the national executive would be in charge of supervising the construction until its completion, resorting to funding that would be included in the national budget approved by congress.⁵¹ Similar concerns about the lack of correlation between the money spent and the slow progress made reemerged in 1907 when the minister of public works attended a parliamentary session called to deal with the subject. However, this time lawmakers were not only critical of the significant amount spent on the building but also of its architectural merits. National Deputies Antonio Piñero and Emilio Mitre complained about the oversized dome, the dysfunctional distribution and the dimensions of the senate chamber. The lawmakers acknowledged the imposing monumentality of the building but complained about the rooms for parliamentary committees. If the congress building appeared to be a 'monument', it was far from being a comfortable house for parliamentarians.⁵²

The French journalist Jules Huret was impressed by the European appearance of Buenos Aires city centre when he visited the town in 1910. Huret noted that the imposing monumentality of some buildings such as the congress palace introduced a welcome element of disruption in an otherwise monotonous urban landscape that spread over 18,000 hectares (double that of Paris and triple that of Berlin).⁵³ However, such favourable impressions, by foreigners and nationals alike, did not deter the process of scrutiny about the congress building and its construction that peaked during the parliamentary sessions of June 1913. Lawmakers' interventions were clear evidence that, in addition to the questions raised regarding alleged financial mismanagement, there was also a pervasive negative view of the architectural value of the congress building. During the session of 13 June, the Socialist representative demanded the chamber launch an enquiry and form a parliamentary committee that would pursue a thorough investigation about the public funds spent on the construction of the 'extremely expensive palace'. Palacios argued that the alleged mishandling of public funds ('negotium') - the topic of 'everyone's conversation' - had occurred and requested a parliamentary and criminal investigation to uncover the links

⁵¹ 'Mensaje al Honorable Congreso', 11 October 1900, in Ministerio de Obras Públicas, *Documentos relativos a la construcción del Palacio del Congreso*, (Buenos Aires, 1901), p. 7. See a letter from the architect Vittorio Meano to the parliamentary committee, 26 October 1900, ACDN, file 00041-S-1894.

⁵² DSCD, 23 August 1907, p. 935 See also, 'El Palacio del Congreso', LN, 25 August 1907. Similar complaints were voiced as soon as it was inaugurated. See 'A la casa vieja' LN, 30 May 1906; 'El Palacio del Congreso. Demolición de la sala del Senado', LN, 13 May 1906.

⁵³ J. Huret, *La Argentina de Buenos Aires al Gran Chaco*, (Buenos Aires, 1986), p. 46.

between delays in the construction of the palace and the lavish spending of public funds. Improper procedures and irregular expenditure were among the most common allegations pointed out by the press and the national lawmakers. They focused their attention on the millions of pesos spent on the ‘foundation’ of the congress building and on the stone work added to accentuate its monumentality. Palacios also requested that congress reconsider the legislative proposals submitted by Republican lawmakers Antonio Piñero and Emilio Mitre in 1907. The Socialist lawmaker claimed that corruption allegations about both the construction of the legislative palace and the national government’s decision to erect a ‘monument to the Revolution’ would lead people to the conclusion that ‘...our speciality in public works is miscalculation and mismanagement.’⁵⁴

Apart from the debate about how taxpayers’ money had been spent and the extent of administrative mismanagement, opposition politicians Alfredo Palacios and Délfór del Valle also accused the national executive of overstepping the boundaries of its constitutional administrative powers and questioned its determination to pursue the enquiry. Palacios was critical of Minister of Public Works Ezequiel Ramos Mexía’s veiled attempts to block the formation of a parliamentary committee that would look at contracting malpractices and challenged the minister’s view that the corruption allegations were basically a ‘myth’ (‘leyenda’). Palacios argued the public was right to believe that citizens’ money had been squandered and that lawmakers such as him were in a better position to interpret ‘people’s noble aspirations’ than an unelected official such as Ramos Mexía. Although the congress building had been designed to ‘flatter Argentine patriotism’, Palacios claimed that it was ‘palpable evidence of murky business’ and that it was important to end the sad tradition of public officials’ impunity.⁵⁵ Holding the opposite view, the minister of public works argued that the responsibility for overseeing the construction of the congress building lay not only with the national governments of the previous two decades but also with parliament itself, which had allowed the committee that monitored the works to languish. Furthermore, since the turn of the century lawmakers had also passed specific laws and approved the annual budgets that funded the construction of the palace. Even though over 24 million pesos had been spent on the construction (an

⁵⁴ Cámara de Diputados de la Nación, *Investigación de las obras del Palacio del Congreso. Informe de la Comisión Especial*, (Buenos Aires, 1915), p. 11.

⁵⁵ Cámara de Diputados, *Informe*, p.67 and 68.

amount that did not include the cost of the land and the stone work), the national directorate for architecture reckoned that the final cost would be close to 35 million. Ramos Mexía suggested that the final cost should not cause distress among the public because it matched its ‘architectural importance’ and defended the merits of the building against mounting opposition from the press and public opinion.⁵⁶

Lawmakers and government officials were embroiled in a debate about the architectural value of the building and its correlation to the funds already spent. The Radical lawmaker Delfor del Valle was also extremely critical of the sculptures created by Lola Mora and placed by the main staircase that led to the main entrance on Entre Ríos street. Del Valle had already claimed that the statues that were supposed to adorn the Palace had the opposite effect and were the result of administrative wrongdoings: ‘These statues are hideous, an insult and an offense to the founding fathers they are supposed to immortalize...’⁵⁷ The minister of public works did not agree with those like Del Valle who wanted to put the budget allocation for the congress building on hold and push for a thorough investigation. According to Ramos Mexía, the parliamentary debate about the construction of the palace had nothing to do with a criminal investigation and the controversies had more to do with ‘rules of good taste’⁵⁸ Even though Minister Ramos Mexía argued that the building, which was ‘...worthy of the representatives it houses...’, compared favourably to the great European monumental buildings, the Socialist lawmaker Palacios noted that the Viennese Parliament (in which ‘every detail is a true work of art’) costed only twelve and a half million pesos.⁵⁹

As had happened in 1900 and 1907, the parliamentary debates about corruption allegations regarding the construction of the congress building had significant press coverage. The two *porteño* newspapers with the largest readership – *La Nación* and *La Prensa*- published a number of articles in September 1914, when the parliamentary committee made its report public. Both newspapers favoured a criminal enquiry and speculated about the evidence gathered by the committee.⁶⁰ According to *La Nación*,

⁵⁶ Cámara de Diputados, *Informe*, p. 65.

⁵⁷ Cámara de Diputados, *Informe*, pp. 24 and 90.

⁵⁸ Cámara de Diputados, *Informe*, p. 58.

⁵⁹ Cámara de Diputados, *Informe*, p. 69.

⁶⁰ ‘La intervención judicial’, LN, 25 September 1914; ‘Las denuncias sobre la malversación’, *La Prensa* (hereafter LP), 23 September 1914.

although public opinion had been following the First World War closely and was concerned about the nature of the conflict, the corruption scandal around the construction of the congress building had also captured its attention.⁶¹ Furthermore, lawmakers and journalists accused the national executive of not complying with the state administrative laws as shown by the use of presidential decrees in 1905 and 1909. More importantly, the scandal surrounding the congress building opened a door to a debate in the press and parliament about the extent of administrative malpractice in the state bureaucracy and the involvement of politicians and state officials.⁶²

Opposition lawmakers described themselves as the true representatives of the public that had expressed its anger concerning administrative mismanagement through the national press and at social clubs. Although the minister of public works was of little help during the parliamentary debate, it was the head of the national directorate for architecture, engineer Maurice Durrieu, who in 1911 had gathered relevant evidence for the enquiry about the 'Palacio de Oro'. The results were published by the national executive a year later and were the main piece of information used to justify the creation of a committee. In September 1914, a parliamentary committee submitted a report to the lower chamber requesting a complete investigation about how the building company had spent the budget allocations of the previous two decades, demanding the suspension of all payments and advising legal action against those who had benefitted from their positions. In 1914 and 1916, two presidential decrees enforced the measures adopted in law 9499. However, it would not be until 1920 that President Hipólito Yrigoyen decided to terminate the contract with the building company given that '...the contractors had committed fraud...'⁶³

Conclusion

In common with other houses of parliament and legislative chambers, the Argentine Congress building was the place where representatives of the people gathered to legislate while articulating different ideological views, values or interests. It also contributed to the particular political status of Buenos Aires as the national capital and, with its solid stone

⁶¹ 'El Palacio de Oro', LN, 9 September 1914.

⁶² 'La inmoralidad administrativa', LP, 11 September 1914; 'La sanción del senado', LP, 11 September 1914.

⁶³ Benjamin García Torres (Federal District Attorney). *La construcción del Palacio del Congreso. Dictamen acusatorio*, (Buenos Aires, 1921), p. 17.

façade, gave a sense of permanence to governmental institutions once it was completed. Like other parliament buildings the Argentine Congress and its façade were supposed to provide a sense of stability, strength and greatness. Resorting to some variation of ‘neoclassical architectural style’ was not therefore a surprise and it was easy to find examples of that, from the Capitol in Washington to the Reichsrat in Vienna.⁶⁴ The Argentine Congress house did not occupy ground of any particular historical significance but the political elite decided its location was to be in a modern and developed area of Buenos Aires, at the opposite end of the Avenida de Mayo, thus forming a civic monumental axis. This location contributed to shaping an area associated with state institutions that went from the Plaza de Mayo (where the Government House is) to the northwest districts (around the Callao Avenue), where the courts and the parliament building were erected. The construction of a new House was not only a symbol of the new political status of Buenos Aires but it also sought to symbolize political stability and the creation of a new political order.

If the Palace of Congress was the site where political rituals were performed – as was apparent in the opening of the parliamentary year in 1906 – the building itself was also conceived to be more than just the sum of its different parts. That is to say, it had to show not only the permanent nature of the federal capital but also that it was worthy of a nation and a site of power. Unfortunately for those who had to perform their duties in the building every day, that could also mean that the beauty of the composition and the imposing monumentality were more important than the practicality of the layout of the chambers and the rooms for the parliamentary committees. Parliamentarians complained that the rooms were uncomfortable and unsuitable for parliamentary work.

Lawmakers were also concerned about the publicity of legislative procedures recognized in the national constitution and manuals of parliamentary practices. They argued that the congress building had to comfortably accommodate legislators and visitors in order to guarantee the principle of publicity and transparency in parliamentary deliberations. The importance of the national executive during the ‘conservative order’ cannot be underestimated but congress retained an important role in the constitutional arrangement,

⁶⁴ C. T. Goodsell, ‘The Architecture of Parliaments: Legislative Houses and Political Culture’, *British Journal of Political Science* 18, (1988), pp. 290-91.

particularly in times of political crisis like in 1890 or 1895. Moreover, religious associations, clubs and political parties petitioned parliament at the turn of the century and tried to influence lawmakers' decisions by demonstrating outside the congress building. Therefore, the building inaugurated in 1906 –and the so-called *Plaza de los dos Congresos*– would become not only a symbol of republican institutions and of an emerging nation-state but would also shape public areas and provide a place where a variety of groups protested and voiced their concerns.⁶⁵

Yet at the turn of the century the congress building also became an example of administrative mismanagement and contracting malpractice. Lawmakers, the press and government officials became embroiled in a heated debate about the 'architectural importance' of the building and, more importantly, about corruption allegations. Parliamentary debates in 1900 and 1907 led to enquiries and thorough reports were published but there was no political decision to pursue a criminal investigation. A more diversified parliament as a consequence of the 1912 electoral law guaranteed a more articulated campaign about previous wrongdoings and more determined lawmakers eager to launch investigations into the mishandling of public funds during the *ancien régime*.

The parliamentary debates of 1913 and 1914 about corruption allegations did not help improve the reputation of congress at a time when lawmakers were under pressure for their alleged failure to attend sessions, parliamentary obstructionism and poor legislative records.⁶⁶ Politicians, bureaucrats and architects agreed that a new congress building should impress the public and become a significant example of republican symbolism; a monumental palace that expressed a sense of grandeur and was 'worthy' of the nation. And yet, its construction had become a symbol of corruption compromising to some extent congress' standing as a political institution in public opinion. The findings of the parliamentary enquiries were debated by a congress that was experiencing a transformation in its composition due to the 1912 electoral law and the corruption scandal opened the door to a larger debate about pervasive administrative mismanagement in the state bureaucracy and the extent of corruption among government officials.

⁶⁵ On Buenos Aires' 'culture of mobilization' see H. Sabato, *The Many and the Few. Political participation in Republican Buenos Aires*, (Stanford, 2002).

⁶⁶ Castro, *El ocaso*, pp. 93 and 315.

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