The Struggle for Plaza Italia

Civic movements, public square and democracy under construction in Santiago de Chile

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ABSTRACT (Max. 300 words):
In 2004 a controversial urban reform affected an iconic square in Santiago: Plaza Italia, the square that has been traditionally the point where masses congregate to celebrate major events and/or to challenge the government by means of popular demonstrations, was chosen as location for an official monument erected on the memory of Jaime Guzman. Guzman, a right-wing politician assassinated in 1991, was during the dictatorship one of the main ideologists of the 1982 Constitution that still orders the country. Paradoxically, the square has been the place were repeatedly, since Chile’s return to democracy in 1990, a referendum for a new Constitution has been claimed by civic and social movements. The way in which the monument was agreed was illustrative on the way democracy was negotiated in Chile: a trade-off game among representatives of the centre-left and right-wing party coalitions. Yet, the square resisted: residents, formal and informal workers in the area as well as citizens’ organizations joined together to oppose the decision to build the monument that had already been approved by the National Council of Historical Monuments and the local authorities. Their argument was that this monument would transform the place into a permanent point for social and political divisions and conflict. The subtext of this particular experience reflects how crucial public spaces maintain the seeds for a social underpinning of democracy that needs to be incorporated in the decision-making and governance processes of liberal regimes if democracy is aimed to become a viable experience. Ultimately, the installation of the monument was postponed and in 2008 reallocated to one of the wealthiest districts of the city. This civic struggle kept Plaza Italia for its demos, as a platform from which Chilean democracy is in continuous appraisal.

KEY WORDS:
Public squares; Democracy; Civic movements; Experience; Chile
“Human everyday life is always endowed with form, and this endowment with form always has an element of ritual” M. Bakhtin

This essay looks for the form of democracy as it is revealed in everyday life public interactions—thus it aims to grasp the social underpinnings of democracy meaning, that that is carried out in public spaces and in particular, in public squares.

Urban scholars agree that we should describe each place in the city as having an encoded meaning. The significance of public squares depends on their design, their location within the urban network, the public they aim to cater for and the actual use that is made of them, their history and the way in which their frequenters can recreate it anew, the way in which these frequenters reproduce the history that has formed the squares through their daily interactions.

As if noting something intrinsic to their character, squares are often preceded by the adjective “public”. This might be explained by the double function that characterises city squares: on the one hand, they are a privileged form that permit open access and reciprocal exposure to every individual that frequents and circulates in them; on the other hand, they represent a specific form, of urban communality, which is able to affect, articulate and shape the city and the social relations amongst its inhabitants. Public squares are shaped not only by their architectonic design, but also by the way in which the population affected by their presence negotiates their differences, establishing implicit and explicit pacts of conviviality by agreeing on their mutual rights and responsibilities as users of the space opened by the squares.

The significance of public squares for the political, social, economic and cultural dimensions of city life stems from the fact that the simple act of walking through a square transforms a private experience into a public one. “Public life” takes the form of a “life in public” when the residents of a city meet in the space made available to them by the squares. Squares offer spaces for gathering and socializing; they are produced either by design or by the city’s expansion as places for the public to ritualize interactions in public. At the same time, however, it is through these interactions and practices that squares themselves are shaped, acquiring meaning and reflecting changes in the nature of the interactions they stage.

For over two thousand years, the plaza has been a distinguished form in continental European cities. Indeed, the Roman grid-plan that organizes a city space around a central square has been the most frequent type of urban design used across continental European cities. Located at the geometric centre of the city, central squares gave unity to the expanding urban fabric, often functioning as self-contained spaces that were surrounded by institutions representing civil and religious power, but that were also used as open markets and points of social circulation and exchange (Zucker, 1959; Sennett, 1992 and Low, 2000). Thus, multifunctional central squares where shaped on the one hand by the presence of institutions which made explicit the hierarchical organization of urban society, but on the other hand, by the needs and activities of the squares’ inhabitants. This dual character is what explains the connection between the European square and the development of democratic ideals of self-government: in the square, citizens learn not only how to relate to the authorities, but also how to relate to each other.

In public squares, the democratic rights of assembly and speech might be enacted. These are places where publicity as we know it was developed and exercised since the 18th century, either via public speeches in the streets or in coffee shops and bars surrounding the squares (Habermas, 1989). Civic formation and expression occurs through public squares because they retain a privilege as settings where exchange in the form of negotiation and dialogue, as well as public resistance and challenges to authority, are located. People go to squares to see and to be seen; there they exchange information and become aware of the coming changes that may affect their individual lives and collective life in the city.

Public squares—central squares, market squares—are not simple “squares” like those located in particular neighbourhoods, which have been designed as part of the urban amenities and infrastructure. To those who frequent them, they are often much more than just a square: central public squares reveal the city, its past and present struggles, its different sounds and modes of interaction, its known or forgotten legends—the multiple rhythms, as Lefebvre would say, through which the city gains life. Central public squares are habitually inhabited by formal and informal workers and different types of dealers and streets vendors. They are gathering points for a plurality of city residents and tourists or 2

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2 Public squares create a sense of identification that fosters the idea of the city as a place where, in theory, each individual might find a place of belonging. By means of sharing multiple experiences—the experience of being in public, of forming part of the public—central squares are recognized as places where the demos is formed. Being a member of a city has always been closely linked to the attainment of citizenship status—a condition which is increasingly problematic and challenged by the presence of a rising number of foreign populations—not necessarily formal immigrants—which actively coexist, use and give life to public squares. Indeed, as Holston and Appadurai (1999) asserted, it is this permeability to diversity that gives cities the power to redefine and further develop the concept of citizenship, or as Bauböck suggested, the need of “reinventing urban citizenship” (2003).
visitors—an infinite number of people occupying and signifying these particular places as historical and social constructions within the city. In general, central public squares are concrete and ichnographic spaces marked by notions of the common and they are able to reflect a common history.

_Plaza Italia_ is an arterial places in the capital city of Santiago, Chile. Paradoxically, although it is referred, understood and imagined as “square”, _Plaza Italia_ owns its form to the conjunction of three parks and two main avenues that divide the cardinal points of the city. As roundabout it is overcrowded by the traffic of people, goods and merchandises, and vehicles of private and public transport. Another particularity of this square in comparison with conventional central squares is absence of administrative buildings representatives of civil-power surrounding it. Nevertheless, _Plaza Italia_ is a focal points of encounter, social celebration and contestation for Santiago’ citizens, a common reference point for the capital’ inhabitants.

**Santiago and its Plaza Italia**

"The end of Delights and the beginning of Providence" (19th century popular adage)

Since the year Santiago was founded, _Plaza Italia_ has geographically and symbolically marked the expansion and development of the city. Located on the Eastern edge of the natural triangle shape that formed the city, in the map above, this square spontaneously emerged as one of the city’s limits, and soon became the spot by which the different segments compounding the city would be identified. The square rests at the point where the main avenue that crosses Santiago from east to west, Alameda de las Delicias, becomes Providencia, as the popular saying suggests— a change not only in terms of name, but also in terms of socio-economic differences.

_Plaza Italia_ played a crucial role in organizing urban life. The square was located in the right angle formed by the conjunction of the two main lines along which the city grew: the river and the main avenue Alameda. This location was ideal for the placing of the city’s water distributors (“Cajitas de Agua”), which naturally generated an opening space that would later be occupied by the square. The water distributors were soon surrounded by a stone waste-disposal area. By the end of the 18th century, the space that the plaza would come to occupy was populated by a number of shanty houses called _guanguaníes_, meaning “people” in indigenous language. These first slums were concentrated on the

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3 State intervention in the city started during the second half of the 18th century. Most state interventions focused on the creation of public institutions that would manage the land acquired by the state in the outskirts of the city.
North and South river banks—at the edge of the city—and had a population mainly formed by rural migrants without stable jobs, who would come to work on the farms and manor houses surrounding the colonial city (de Ramón, 2000).  

Plaza Italia occupies the right angle of the natural triangle from which the city grew. Santiago in 1895, www.memoriachilena.cl

From the mid 19th century onwards, the city of Santiago experienced a rapid and unplanned expansion that progressively situated Plaza Italia in a capital position within the city grid. The space that would later be occupied by the square was the point of conjunction of various functions that supported citizens’ survival: it was the place where several irrigation land channels started, where food was stored and distributed from the agricultural land surrounding the city. It was also a crucial place for circulation and exchange (Cruzat, 1957). The greatest deficiency in the topographic plan of Santiago was the absence of public squares and parks, despite Vicuña Mackenna’s planning efforts. Thus, Plaza La Serena—the first name given to Plaza Italia—was one of the first squares to be officially founded in the city in 1875, in the empty space at the intersection of Camino de Cintura with the junction where Alameda turns into Providencia Avenue, next to the water deposits by the South side of the river bank. The project was exceptionally financed by particular donations, and was built by a workforce made up of prisoners who not only constructed the square, but also worked on the subsequent canalisation of the river. By law, in 1892, the land located within the first 100 metres from

The lands to the north-west side were mainly owned by a few aristocratic families and religious orders, a fact that blocked state action to create public housing during the following century (de Ramon, 2000).

These areas were distinguished from the poor areas of the 16th and 17th centuries, since those were mainly populated by servants and labourers (mainly indigenous) brought to the city to satisfy the needs of private owners or religious orders, but who could not reside in their same residence and not even within the city limits (de Ramón, 2000).
the river bank was designated for public use. This allowed not only the creation of the plaza, but also of the three parks located in its immediate surroundings (Municipalidad de Providencia, 1997). At once, what was then Plaza La Serena became a centre of transport, exchange, circulation and leisure activities. As the water distributors for the city were located there, the area naturally developed as a point of agriculture and market exchange. The existence of the plaza though emphasized the social limits and hierarchies among the different segments that made up the city: a poor South, a still rural East occupied by manor houses, religious orders and hospitals, and aristocratic areas surrounding the foundational administrative centre. The plaza occupied a space that allowed these different segments access to the administrative city-centre, while still maintaining a clear social distinction based on residential distribution. Soon though, in despite of its character as a social boundary, the square became a place not only for circulation and trade, but also for social gatherings (Gross et al., 1984).

The city experienced industrial, commercial and demographic growth, an expansion of its export economy and an increased presence of foreign commerce, all of which provoked constant changes in the urban landscape. Plaza La Serena was becoming the reference point for identifying the different zones that made up the city: a religious, industrial and rich East; a commercial, agricultural South; residential and administrative sectors in the West and a recreational area on the North bank of the river. New social habits and consumption patterns derived from these changes and the zones in which the city fostered its expansion. As a consequence of these changes, Plaza La Serena was consolidated as a centre of circulation, exchange and social gatherings where the different segments of the city converged for the sake of their own interests and those of the city.

At the end of the 19th century, decentralised urban investments that favoured the square proliferated. The liberal governments and the short-lived parliamentarian system of the period promoted an administrative decentralization ruled by the Comuna Autónoma law in 1891. Plaza La Serena benefited from these transformations: located where the districts of Nuñoa, Providencia and Santiago met, the plaza was the point that demarcated and distinguished the administrative from the residential city, as well as the upper from the middle and lower class districts located in its four cardinal directions, and from there, electric trams and trolley buses operated towards the different areas of the city.

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5 This law provided legal means to urbanise the rural surroundings of the city. The law divided the territory into districts, regardless of their previous urban or rural condition. Thus, the formerly rural areas around the foundational city acquired an urban status and administrative independence. As a result, a network of 34 districts formed the city of Santiago. In terms of further changes affecting the plaza, the creation of two new municipalities is worth mentioning: Nuñoa to the south in 1891; and Providencia to the east in 1897 (Gross, 1996).
Based on its spontaneous centrality, it is of no surprise then that records suggest that the first popular revolts in Santiago took place in this square. In October 1888, people gathered in Plaza La Serena to complain about a rise in the electric-tram prices. As one can imagine, the demonstrations took place around the tram terminals, while the square was the meeting point from which the protestors departed before walking towards the central transport terminal in Alameda Avenue, in the core of the foundational city (de Ramón, 2000). During the 20th century, numerous strikes and demonstrations against growing socio-economic inequalities and the state policies underpinning them, gathered in and departed from this square. The plaza was ritualised as an assembly point, a place from which demonstrations departed, regardless of their final destination or specific content.

In 1892, as part of the commemoration of the discovery of the Americas, Plaza La Serena was renamed Plaza Colón. As well as the change of name, what gave the plaza a new spirit was the reform of the train station, which now operated freight trains for the transport of animals and agricultural products coming from the South. The presence of the train station increased the exchange of agricultural products and the commercial activities of merchants and traders; peasants and urban workers mingled in the square. By 1901 the station formed part of a train network which provided direct access to the main slaughtering house in Santiago and the main port of Valparaíso. Santiago grew as a segmented city, but in this context it was only this square the binding node that would keep the city together. Wealth accumulated between 1850 and the period before the 1930s crisis was concentrated among a few families who were involved in the increasing commerce and export of raw material production. Prosperity was exhibited through sumptuous buildings in the central and Western zones of the city, causing controversy due to the contrast with the deprived living conditions that affected the majority of the population (de Ramón, 1998, 2000; Gross, 1984, 1996). The square was the central point where all these different types converged.

“G: I think [the square] has improved, because more people come here. I mean... I have always seen Plaza Italia as a central place. Here anyone can meet.

D: Do you think it has been always like that?

G: I think it has... this is like the centre. Chile is a country of roads that are straight lines, so this is the spot where all streets meet, that is Plaza Italia

D: And there is no other place in Santiago that could replace it?

G: ... no, no, as a meeting place, maybe the park, but the centre-centre is Plaza Italia, because it is where Maipú meets with the upper districts of Apoquindo, Providencia; there is Santa Maria [across the river] and it’s where La Dehesa meets with Recoleta... so this is the exact point where all meet” (Graciela, street vendor—January, 2004).
It was in 1910 that the square acquired its definitive name, the one Graciela uses to name it: Plaza Italia. During the centenary celebrations of Chilean independence, the Italian community living in the country gave the city a monument of a lion freeing itself from its chains, being guided by an angel. The monument was placed in front of the train station; the esplanade where the monument was located and the space created for the square have changed a few times since then. Indeed, the plaza reached its current appearance at the end of the 1920s. In 1928 its official name was changed again to Plaza Baquedano, because a monument for General Baquedano, one of the national heroes of the Pacific War, and a smaller monument for an “unknown soldier”, were placed at the centre of the roundabout. The lion monument was moved further north, to the beginning of Parque Forestal. However, “there is a system of order, I was told: Plaza Baquedano is where the monument is and Plaza Italia is all this, forever (laughs)” (Graciela 30, street vendor—January, 2004). Despite the change of location of the monument that gave the square its most popular name and the controversies the late official name given to the square has caused, the place retained the name Plaza Italia in the collective imaginary of the city residents.6

Karl Brünner a famous Viennese urban planner, greatly influenced the creation of a pre-regulatory urban plan for Santiago that would modify its grid, architecture and sanitation system. Regarding Plaza Italia, Brünner succeeded in his proposal to define it only as a place of transit and circulation by adopting three main modifications: the creation of a diagonal avenue to disperse the traffic towards the

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6 A clear sign of this contradictory character, and the prevalence of urban imagination over the official naming, is that the name “Plaza Italia” has been the name given to the location of bus stop at this intersection during the complete reform of public transport carried out in Santiago during 2007.
eastern side of the city; the destruction of Estación Pirque and the altogether suppression of the electric tram lines (Blanco and Valiente, 1997). Firstly, the train station was demolished at the beginning of the 1940s and was immediately replaced by a new park built towards the South that would connect the new and old residential zones—Parque Bustamante. A number of diagonal avenues surrounded the square to facilitate the flow of traffic in the city, while trolleybuses gradually replaced the public tram system. By the mid-1960s, both had been completely substituted by buses.7

*Plaza Italia* became the point from which socio-economic segregation could be identified, from which the segmented character of the city became evident. The square was, and still is, a point where differences were conveyed, but also demarcated for defining the shape of the city. A hospital, several religious orders and factories in the east coexisted with peripheral shanty areas and slums in the North and palaces in the Southwest. The semi-rural areas surrounding the city were always part of its dynamics, either as locations for excursions and leisure, or as the sites from which peasants travelled daily to the city to sell their agricultural products. This proximity, together with the Comuna Autónoma law, facilitated the urbanisation of these areas.8 Middle-class families formed new neighbourhoods further east, beyond the religious buildings, in attempts to escape from the rising costs of living in the civic centre and to grab the opportunity to become homeowners. Poor migrants and working groups moved into crowded households, or “conventillos”, previously abandoned by the middle classes, in the centre and around the train stations. Thus, the plaza symbolised the place where the residents of each part of the city could situate themselves and the others, defining the socio-economic hierarchies and functioning rhythms of urban development for the various areas of the city.

From 1925, San Cristóbal hill was modelled and opened as a site for entertainment, consolidating *Plaza Italia* as the place “*where everything can happen*” (Loreto, frequenter—January, 2004).9 Newspaper-sellers, colporteurs and shoe-shiners hung around the area of the train station. Pio Nono Bridge linked the plaza with the North bank of the river, Bellavista, which became known as an area for entertainment and leisure with an intellectual and avant-garde atmosphere, where theatres, literary

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7 Lately, the failure of all these measures has been proved: Santiago is a highly polluted city, and the public transport system based on the circulation of an extended network of buses has proved inefficient in terms of time and connections across the city — a problem that has increased with the latest reforms of the transport system, Transantiago. Not surprisingly, in 1997 a metro line was inaugurated in the direction covered by the former train line, from Baquedano towards the southern district of Puente Alto.

8 The commercialisation of these areas initiated real estate speculation in the city, since many of the mayors of these new municipalities were landowners in the new districts. Since the municipality had to give official authorization for the urbanization of an area, it is not surprising that between 1910 and 1920 many of these districts became new middle class urban zones (de Ramón, 2000).

9 In 1925, on San Cristóbal hill, the metropolitan zoo and a casino were built, and the funicular railway towards Santa Lucía hill provided an exceptional view over the city.
coffee houses and restaurants which remain today sprang up. From the end of the 1930s until the military coup, Santiago was an emporium of Latin American politicians and intellectuals hounded by military and autocratic regimes across the continent. The arrival of Spanish refugees from the Civil War enriched the street life around the coffee shops and theatres and made Plaza Italia a compulsory destination and gathering point.

Nevertheless, after these transformations, the square did not lose its importance and precisely due to its intensified character as centre of transit and traffic it consolidated as one of the main concentric points in the city. When in 1960 the first regulatory plan for all the districts in the city was approved—Plan Intercomunal de Santiago—the square was the location from which the plan was organised and expanded to the rest of the city. The plaza was considered the “km 0” for the numbering of the districts of the city. This was a concentric organization that facilitated the reification of territorial hierarchies and socio-economic divisions in the city. The evolution of Plaza Italia reflected and was coincident with the evolution of the grand urban plans implemented in the capital. The square identified itself with the changes taking place in its surroundings, providing the different segments of the city and their residents with a unified place of identification in an increasingly segregated city. For

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10 This was the first legal instrument that gathered together Santiago’s multiple districts in one single master plan of urban development. Previous regulations were coordinated by the promulgation of individual laws dating from the early 1830s. The first regulatory plan for the city was made public in 1874, but it concerned only what later became the foundational city, stating the criteria that would regulate the capital’s urban expansion (de Ramón, 1998, 2000; Gross et. alt., 1984).
the authorities and ordinary citizens, the plaza assumed an architectonic form as “monument-square”, a place that was representative of the institutional affecting the city fabric, but also the way in which they were adopted by peoples’ ordinary interactions.\footnote{Its particular location in the city is the crossing of multiple streets: the Avenues Alameda, Providencia, Vicuña Mackenna, and the streets Pio Nono, Merced and Ramon Carnicer, and the convergence of three parks—Bustamante, Forestal and Balmaceda. All these streets and parks play important roles in Santiago’s urban fabric.}

“[Plaza Italia] is an excellent place... it is an excellent place for everybody to meet, it is just where the upper district meets the lower part [of the city], it is the centre of everything. When there are celebrations in Chile, there are no differences in Plaza Italia. Here it is Chile. Plaza Italia is Chile gathered together” (Alejandro, frequenter—January, 2004)

Indeed, the square plays a central role as a gathering place for popular demonstrations occurring in the city. Since the football World Cup of 1962, when Chile not only hosted but took third place in the tournament, Plaza Italia has been the key place for public celebrations, especially after emblematic national or international football matches. In addition, as we have seen, since the late 19th century the plaza has been hosting political and social demonstrations. In April 1957 massive marches and violent demonstrations took place in the square in protest against the rising prices of public transport and basic services. During the popular upheavals that followed in the 1960s, the image of Plaza Italia as an assembly point was intensified. While the city expanded either through illegal appropriations of land by poor immigrants or through the migration of the elite to the northeast of the city, the square defined the limits of appropriation for each segment. In these processes, the square reinforced its character as a hinge, as a spontaneous meeting place for people coming from different backgrounds who would, in their turn, gather to state their various claims to the authorities.
During the 1960s, under the governments of the Frente Popular, urban policies were oriented to organize the city according to the social needs of its residents. Numerous illegal land occupations had occurred in the outskirts of the city, while urban policy mainly aimed to tackle the lack of housing and sanitation facilities. With the military coup of September 1973, public efforts to plan and control the city’s growth as well as to socialize public spaces and services within the city vanished.

By imposing a neo-liberal economic and social model, the dictatorship assumed two strategies to organise urban development: urban cleansing and *laisser-faire*. In 1979 land was declared an “unlimited resource”, thus flexible urban limits and planning, with reduced state intervention, were supposed to allow self-regulation of private interests and needs regarding land-use and urban expansion (Gurovich, 2002). The construction of an intra-urban train line was suspended and in its place, Avenue Providencia was lengthened. The price of state land was readjusted by law in order to balance the state’s fiscal reserves, following an immediate process of land privatization and real estate speculation (de Ramón, 2000). In 1981, a new law redefined and expanded the metropolitan limits of Santiago in all directions. Social integration attained through the social housing programs of the previous governments was restricted, and efforts were concentrated on the reallocation and forced zoning of deprived and poor areas. These actions were aligned with the government policy of cleaning and regulating the city space, and of focusing on social interventions in order to decentralise public investments and to promote the autonomy of each district in the city.

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12 Under the governments of Eduardo Frei and Salvador Allende, between 1962 and 1973, various structural reforms took place, creating several administrative divisions which acted upon the modernization of the city, especially in terms of urban infrastructure and circulation. Worth mentioning here are the design of a Transport Plan for the city that considered the establishment of a subway and intra-urban trains, and the promulgation of a presidential law for the promotion of social housing and land regularizations in 1971 (Gurovich, 2002).

13 The dictatorship focused on the promotion of transport and circulation facilities for urban development: the creation of a north-south highway along the country and a circumvallation around Santiago that has been finalised recently under the democratic government, via private/public partnership investments. In 1975, the first Metro line was inaugurated between Moneda (house of government) and Salvador (a nearby district towards the east), passing though *Plaza Italia* with a station named “Baquedano”. Indeed, the influence of the armed forces permeated the urban fabric: when completed, the first Metro line ran between Los Heroes in the west of the city, and Escuela Militar, in the east.

14 Families were often removed from districts where basic social services were provided—water, electricity and wastewater systems—to districts with limited urban services. Other problems were the insufficient transport facilities and the privatisation of the transport system that affected families that were reallocated to districts that were far from their places of work. All of these features consolidated the segmentation that affects Santiago today. See de Mattos, et al. 2004; Rodriguez and Winchester, 2004.
The increasing inequalities and structural poverty that characterized the dictatorship in social terms were reflected in the urban organization of the city: Santiago extended limitlessly to the north and east, where prices of land and housing increased. With few exceptions, poor residents were relocated mainly in the north-west and south-west fringes of the city, consolidating a model of a ring of poverty surrounding the city. While wealth was concentrated in the Northeastern areas, the foundational city was relegated and reduced to governmental administrative functions (Rodríguez and Winchester, 2004).

"As I said, this is a central plaza, it is what divides the average from the higher levels, because from here, from Plaza Italia upwards [towards the mountains in the east] everything is different; and from Plaza Italia downwards [to the west and administrative centre] everything is different... it is like there’s an imaginary division, but it really is a division" (Maribel, car cleaner—January, 2004).

With the neo-liberal and focused urban policies implemented during the dictatorship, Plaza Italia’s character as social boundary was strengthened. As an urban, social and imaginative boundary, the square became the frontier line between the wealthy and the poor segments of the city, the civilized and the untamed popular neighbourhoods Permanent curfews and the presence of police kept the city under apparent order and control until May 1983, when popular protests against the regime broke out. As illegal gatherings, protests were orally called to Plaza Italia; if the marches managed to depart, they headed towards the foundational-administrative city. If the presence of police forces did not allow the marches to depart, the plaza became a battlefield between citizens and state, police and military
forces. Political protests brought people back to the streets in spite of the repression. Different parts of the colonial city recovered their symbolic status as the destinations of marches departing from Plaza Italia. The causes and themes argued during these gatherings were diverse, but they were similar in that they expressed an extended restlessness regarding political and socio-economic conditions in the country. In the square, a social call underpinned the political demand for democracy.

“In the end, people stay at the margins, because things are, and they have always been, there have always been institutions, but life... even if things are one way, people have to act, life, I mean, people do not get worked up over silly things, I mean, if in Plaza Italia there is a government, I don’t know, fascist, or let’s say a communist one, this will always be Plaza Italia, it won’t change, do you understand?” (Marlene, frequenter—January, 2004)

The relevance or irrelevance of the government’s political form for people’s involvement in political actions is not what is surprising about Marlene’s statement. Rather, it is the conviction with which she describes the square as the place where social life is organized, either as a part of or aside from an existing official organisation. Up until today, Plaza Italia has signified the rhythms of the city, the visible and invisible struggles taking place among its different segments, unified as part of the same urban fabric. Even when the regime changed, the square continued as a privileged place for confronting or legitimising the authority in power. When finally Pinochet’s regime was institutionally overthrown by a referendum in October 1988, spontaneous demonstrators gathered to celebrate in Plaza Italia.

As if responding to a tacit convention, the plaza continued to play a crucial role for the congregation and departure of multiple and diverse demonstrations throughout the 1990s; spontaneous or organized mobilizations of people would gather in the square to overcome the social and urban boundaries of the city—either with the excuse of football victories, gay parades, university festivals, cultural and religious events or socio-political protests—to represent what one of the frequenters quoted above described as “Chile as one”.

15 When the bottom photo of the previous page was taken, police officers were entitled by law to ask people for identification cards and proceed, at their own discretion, with “detention based on suspicion”. The law was eradicated in 1998 for being incompatible with the democratic Rule of Law. Yet, in 2002 it was modified to re-establish authority for police officers to check citizens’ identities on public security bases.

16 Paradoxically, until 2002 demonstrations departing from the square were banned from marching in front of the governmental palace supposedly because of security reasons. The paradox is intensified when considering that the place chosen to build the Plaza de la Ciudadanía, the citizens’ square, was precisely in front of the palace.
“Because they can come here to have a drink, to wait for their girl, here lovers meet up… yes, people like Plaza Italia. It is typical when someone says: let’s meet up in Plaza Italia, let’s do this or that, let’s meet in Plaza Italia, let’s go out for a drink in Plaza Italia… plus you have apartment buildings, you have shops to buy bread, to drink, to eat, the pharmacy… so, here you have whatever you want! Plus, look, in front of Plaza Italia there is nothing, a little bit further up from the Plaza: nothing. You have what is here!”

(Maribel, car cleaner—January, 2004)

“N: Let me see… we’ve had the metro for a long time now, the metro changed the face of this place a bit… I don’t remember much, I’d have to see photos of how Plaza Italia was before the metro. But in general the architecture of the place has not changed much, well yes the CTC tower, but apart from that, these buildings are nothing special, not that modern… but the spirit of Plaza Italia does not change.

D: What do you mean?

N: This is like a break within the city, like a breath… the fact that there are green parks, you can see the hill, there is like more sky, you see? It is more open, and maybe that also helps the mind to work more openly…”

(Nilo, frequenter—March, 2004)

From 1990, the democratically elected governments changed the directions guiding urbanization processes, though they still favoured the privatization of services and public goods as well as the commercial use of urban land to create sub-centres in the different districts — as will be illustrated in the following chapter regarding the promotion of shopping malls as instruments of urban development (Rodriguez & Winchester, 2004). Under conditions of explosive, unequal and fragmented urban growth driven mainly by real estate speculation and service privatization, Plaza Italia, in the core of the city, was perceived as a hinge in this fragmented city, a place able to break socio-economic hierarchies and the point representing the splitting of the city fabric.

“D: What do you think about Plaza Italia?

L: When? At what time of the day?

D: At any time...

L: But, there are different worlds... Plaza Italia in the morning, during the day, reflects the city I think… and at night it is what you don’t see of Santiago. Look, now it is late, and it is a new world, a different place, another city. None of the things you find at night
you see during the day… at night it is full of characters, during the day it is routine”
(Loreto, frequenter—January, 2004)

As a reference point, the square plays a dual role: it is a place that is part of the city residents’ daily routines and a centre for eccentric and spontaneous events, and the gathering of multiple kinds of publics, especially at night. The square does not only have one well-known monument that gives the city its identity, but on a daily basis, this is a space that articulates the various dynamics existing among city residents. Although it is used as a busy centre of circulation and traffic during the day, characters that are normally “unseen” by the rest of the city gather there at night. Traditional bars are linked to the presence of sex workers, particularly homosexuals and transvestites, the circulation of artists and street performers often heading to the Bellavista district, but also gothic and punk groups, together with a number of different urban gangs who use the square as a gathering point at night.

In the segmented city that Santiago has become—described by Rodriguez & Winchester as a mere aggregation of 34 districts—Plaza Italia, located at the intersection of two of them, acts as a point of unity that paradoxically unifies by means of evidencing the divisions affecting the city. The square signals the limits, and in doing so it is recognized as one of the few unifying places within the city: it organizes and directs the vial and traffic network that shapes Santiago, their connections and distances, and precisely because of this, it is irrevocably the place that reflects the clashes and conflicts among its residents.

“It seems that the only thing they want to do now is dismantle the square because they are doing this thing [monument] for Guzmán! That is what they said. There are rumours they are going to do it in February. They want to take Baquedano down and put a 2 metre high Jaime Guzmán, I don’t know how wide, it’s absurd! You see, I never liked that guy because he had a big mouth… he protested a lot against the poor, and why? Because he was for Pinochet!... but we are not going to allow that” (Sonia, street vendor - January 2004)

D: And what is this thing about the pedestrian area?

R: It is a project that is already done, and they are going to do it… I cannot imagine how that is going to be, but I think Plaza Italia is going to die.

D: Why?

R: Look, in the first place, there are not going to be parking lots, this is not going to exist anymore (a taxi rank), this is going to die this year, certainly, here they are going to do a
pedestrian street, I mean a pathway, and they are going to put Jaime Guzmán... so when there are no parking lots, there are less people, and if they do this underground transport thing, then Plaza Italia is going to die... but that is the future.

D: But why is it going to die if it is going to be pedestrian, there should be more people?

R: Less people because there is not going to be transport anymore...” (Ricardo, shoe-shiner — January 2004)

In 2004, just after the main part of the field work for this research was carried out, a controversial urban reform affected the square: Plaza Italia was chosen to host a monument to one of the leaders of an extreme right-wing political party, created during the dictatorship when most political parties were banned. He was also one of the main ideologists of the 1982 Constitution that still rules the country. In 1991, when he was a Senator appointed by constitutional decree, he was murdered. The decision to build him a monument was a trade-off among representatives of the centre-left and right wing coalitions: if a monument for Salvador Allende was erected—which it was, as part of a series of monuments for former presidents surrounding the governmental palace—Guzman’s legacy would also be commemorated with a public monument. The chosen place was Plaza Italia.

Residents protest against the building of the monument ©Villegas, 2008.

However, residents, formal and informal workers in the area as well as citizens’ organizations joined together to oppose the decision to build the monument that had already been approved by the National Council of Historical Monuments and the local authorities. Their argument was that this monument would transform the place into a permanent centre for social and political conflicts. Eventually, the
installation of the monument was postponed and later in 2008 reallocated to one of the wealthiest Northeastern districts of the city.¹⁷

“The Struggle for Plaza Italia” trigger the most recent urban reform affecting the shape of the square, transforming it into the “Explanada de las artes”. The struggle was indeed the result of a confrontation between residents and local and national authorities over a political monument. By 2002, the Senate had approved a law (19.205) allowing the construction of a monument in remembrance of one of the leaders of the country’s extreme right political party who was killed in 1991. The approval of the monument was the result of negotiation between the two major political coalitions.¹⁸ The monument was meant to be 34 metres long and 6 metres high—basically a wall in the middle the square. Instead of being concern about how to justify the placement of a controversial monument in this location, local representatives and the responsible authorities were worried about the mechanisms to provide guarantees for the integrity of the monument, but without questioning the location. For citizens, aside from their astonishment at the misinformation given to them regarding the urban changes that would directly affect routinary life in the square, the monument was a clear sign of political provocation and a further source of conflicts: In a city as segmented as Santiago, a monument of this character would impose a division in the only place in town that represents “united Chile”. After a number of protests took place during the last months of 2004, the construction of the monument was suspended and relocated to a wealthier district on the northeast side of the city.

What did result from this controversy was that the square was redesigned during 2006. The parking lots located at the Eastern edge were removed, as were the benches on the Western edge. The place was renamed “Explanada de las Artes”. No benches have replaced the old ones, except for the large cement bench separating the esplanade from a small garden by the main avenue. A mobile police station is permanently located on the Western side, on the corner with Vicuña Mackenna, and busy bus stops have been placed along the pavement. Certainly, this reform opened up the space of the square, but it has also led to the permanent presence of police, supposedly for security reasons, the banning of informal commerce, and the normally challenged use of the esplanade by young skateboarders and rollerbladers.

¹⁷ The neighbours’ and workers’ struggle against the installation of the monument is described in Chapter 6.
¹⁸ The parties negotiated over the use of monuments in the city to stimulate memory: if right-wing representatives agreed to support the construction of a monument to commemorate Salvador Allende (the former president, ousted by the military coup), the representatives of the centre-left coalition, and particularly the socialists, would support the construction of a monument to J. Guzmán, a right wing leader, in the future (Villegas, 2008).
This new sterile shape had not, until now, interfered with Plaza Italia’s role as a social, symbolic and physical landmark in the city.

“I think Plaza Italia carries the weight of being Plaza Italia. I mean, already the fact of being Plaza Italia and all that it entails, which already makes it a distinctive place. Even if sometimes you can fail to differentiate it from any other place, when you are in a hurry or need to get from point A to point C, and Plaza Italia is in between, then Plaza Italia has no value, you see… but when you walk through slowly and you get involved in its reality, a bit, you realize that it is a special place... and it will never stop being... look, this will be a special place until it loses the symbolic meaning it has for the people who come here” (Rodrigo, street seller—January, 2004).
Plaza Italia is a place for transit and circulation, communication and exchange, identification and differentiation. The square moved from being at the edge of the original city enclaves, becoming a gate that provided access to the city space in material and symbolic terms. Despite originally being a place outside of the foundational administrative centres, it became key point within Santiago’s urban fabrics. Its symbolic centrality is not dependent on the presence of administrative buildings, but on the power people confer to these spaces as social magnets. Plaza Italia is the places where the residents of the city gather—either in celebration, commemoration or protest—to state the urban bond that relates them to the city and also, inevitably, to each other.

Plaza Italia has evolved as a consequence of the changes in the societies that fill them with life. It provides its societies with a place to connect with what they have been as well as what they are meant to become. Plaza Italia is a hinge in Santiago, not only between their different quarters and social segments, but also between past events and future expectations, through the ongoing practices of daily life.

Santiago’s residents managed to bring together people with different political preferences for the sake of preserving the “neutral” nature of the square. Plaza Italia is the place in Santiago where student demonstrations and the festivities that mark the beginning of the school year take place; sporting celebrations, political celebrations or expressions of discontent also take place there. As a site of both rupture and union, the square is the city’s platform for popular expressions of various kinds, and in this sense, the square is a stage where all residents may feel represented.
Plaza Italia convokes demonstrators or celebrators to disperse them across the city, regardless of their final destination. As unifying place it is the square that materialise and represent the unity of people. Plaza Italia is a liminal places, where all kinds of people can feel at home and can appropriate the spaces in order to state their claims, regardless of their political inclination. The liminality of it is historically grounded and spontaneously manifested; it stems from their normality as places of protest and celebration and the collective is ritualised. Daily life in these squares drifts between normality and spontaneity, when routines are suspended for the symbolic renewal of the collective imaginaries of Santiago.

“It is a habitual place, it became a habit. Don’t ask me why, but all the buses pass by Plaza Italia, you see?” (Soledad, frequenter Plaza Italia—March, 2004).

“lu know this man, he sells fruits during the summer. In winter he sells chocolates and those things... there are people I know by sight. I also recognize the bartenders in some of the bars around here and they recognize me. Yes, I would say this is like a neighbourhood—an attempt at a neighbourhood because not everybody lives here. I mean a neighbourhood where people do not live but maybe they feel even more rooted than in the place where they normally live” (Nilo, frequenter Plaza Italia—March, 2004).

If there is one place in Santiago in which the imagination of their residents is visible, it is Plaza Italia. Quoting A. Amin and N. Thrift, “the city dreams itself through its inhabitants… [they] have the ability to produce new forms of interaction, to mutate and so exceed themselves” (2002: 122-4). In the cases of Santiago it is through this square that the cities become visible to their inhabitants, at the same time that exceed all attempts to control and regulate them. Even if recent changes demonstrate an attempt to re-engineer the experiences of the city by means of modernising it as sites of circulation and traffic rather than as assembly points, Plaza Italia is still a sites through which the history of Santiago’s expansion is reflected. It is in this places that the rhythms marking urban life are defined not only by people as they live their daily lives, but also by the openness of the space and of the practices people carry out there, through which they learn protocols of behaviour and social interaction that more often than not facilitate a daily, civic coexistence with alterity. Assuming that the square belong to everyone who goes there, frequenters operate a form of conviviality and mutuality which, under democratic ideals of freedom and equality, might also expand the current conceptualizations and understandings of democracy as a way of life.