

ANTHROPOLOGY

Citizen Participation, Associations, and Conflict: The Transformation of Valparaíso's Former Prison

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After a long period of dictatorship in Latin America, the quality and deepening of democracy have been associated with citizen participation. This article examines the social uses of the notion of participation beyond an exclusively institutional dimension. Starting from the example of the transformation of Valparaíso's former prison into a cultural space, initiated in 1999, this article studies participation in light of the fluctuating relationships to politics that different actors maintain. It examines how the former prison was transformed into a cause as part of a broader response to a neoliberal urban project and top-down practices. Further, this work analyzes the diverse experiences of commitment among the artists occupying the former prison, highlighting the tensions and dilemmas associated with the exercise of politics in a conflictual context.

Tras un largo período de dictadura, la calidad y alcances de la democracia en Latinoamérica han sido asociados a la participación ciudadana. Este artículo examina los usos sociales de la noción de participación más allá de su dimensión institucional. A partir del caso de la transformación de la Ex cárcel de Valparaíso en espacio cultural iniciada en 1999, este trabajo estudia la participación a la luz de la relación fluctuante que los actores mantienen respecto a la política. Por una parte, el artículo examina cómo la Ex cárcel se convierte en el objeto de una causa que hace parte de una respuesta más amplia a un proyecto urbano neo-liberal, así como a prácticas *top-down*. Por otra parte, se analizan las diversas experiencias de compromiso de los artistas ocupantes de la Ex cárcel, poniendo de relieve las tensiones y dilemas vinculados al ejercicio de la política en un contexto conflictual.

The notion of citizen participation is deeply rooted in the restoration of democracy in Chile, particularly during the last two governments of the coalition Concertación de Partidos por la Democracia, in power between 1990 and 2010. This imperative of participation was concurrent with the gradual reconfiguration of a weakened public sphere following the end of seventeen years of dictatorship (1973–1990) marked by human rights violations and the suppression of civil rights.

Several authors have pointed out that citizen participation in the 1990s and early 2000s in Chile remains within the bounds of the “politically correct.” Participation, promoted by a wide spectrum of actors and official devices—ministries, presidential circulars, ad hoc programs, and so on—does not imply substantive changes in the orientations and practices of the political and institutional process (Silva 2002; Delamaza 2010). On the contrary, it tends to be integrated in a pacted democracy between civil and military actors that seek an exit from the dictatorship and attempt “to find closure on the past through ‘reconciliation’” (Jelin 2010, 72). In fact, this post-authoritarian transitional period, characterized by the persistence of a culture of fear and political disenchantment regarding the extent of restored democracy (Lechner 2006), did not remove “authoritarian enclaves” (Garretón 1996) but maintained the Constitutional Charter dating back to 1980 and ensured the continuity of the neoliberal economic model installed by Pinochet's regime (Moulián 1997).

Even though formal efforts to deepen the participative component of public policies have been made recently—including the publication of Law 20500 “On Associations and Citizen Participation in Public Management” (February 2011)—the newly created bodies of participation do not have a binding nature: they are above all instrumental and consultative (Cleuren 2007), and the technical management of social problems thus remains predominant (Paredes 2011).

Furthermore, the issue of citizen participation in Latin America has often been linked to decentralization, though this upsurge of decentralizing and participationist initiatives in the region is not disconnected from a quest for legitimacy in public policies. In his analysis of the Colombian and Mexican cases, David Recondo (2007) shows that spaces of participation are not free of power relations and that they have real limits, sometimes imposed by the control exercised by central authorities over local authorities. Focusing on the Brazilian case, Evelina Dagnino (2007, 354) raises questions about the relationship between a “participationist discourse” and “the emergence of the project of a minimal state that progressively exempts itself from its role as guarantor of rights through the shrinking of its social responsibilities and their transference to civil society.” For Dagnino, the coupling of participation with the withdrawal of the state as a regulatory actor could be identified, with different nuances, in most Latin American countries to date. Indeed, this diagnosis seems particularly relevant to the Chilean situation in the 1990s and 2000s (Paley 2001).

But even though participation “rarely constitutes a threat to the dominant neoliberal economic paradigm” (Leal 2010, 95), with practices and discourses that can at best be considered as “means of pacification” (Neveu 2011, 202) or, more darkly, as a “new tyranny” (Cooke and Kothari 2001), understanding it from the perspective of case analysis requires us to go beyond an exclusively institutional point of view.¹ The notion of participation is both ambiguous and paradoxical and can be approached by its institutional connections as well as through the self-determination of grassroots community organizations (Paley 2001).

From this perspective, this article aims to examine how the logic and discourses of citizen participation in Chile are reclaimed by multiple actors in light of the transformation of Valparaíso’s former prison, which was decommissioned in 1999 and referred to as *ex-cárcel* from that moment until its main renovation in 2011.² It explores, more broadly, how politics was conducted among the occupiers of the former prison and their support networks, without restricting the issue to its institutional dimension. I will argue that these two dimensions—institutional and civic—intersect and confront each other successively; they cannot be considered as two isolated domains independent of each other.

This article is based on a corpus of about sixty semistructured, in-depth interviews with associative and institutional actors, public officials, artists, and artisans from different professions who took part in the rehabilitation and occupation of Valparaíso’s former prison or in the controversies that this urban infrastructure raised.³ First, it discusses how the concept of participation shaped the administration and rehabilitation of this place following its decommissioning. The analysis of associative forms seeks to highlight the contours and ambiguities of the actors’ relationship to politics, as well as the role played by the official entities. The nature of this relationship changed following a first wave of protests triggered by an official project designed to be built on the former prison grounds. While exploring the controversies aroused by a second conflict, I will analyze how the former prison turned into a political cause. Finally, I will address the experience of occupiers, particularly artists and artisans, exploring their forms of engagement during these disputes.

At the time of its construction around 1846, the prison was located far from the densely populated areas of Valparaíso. Its location at the top of a hill was determined by a former colonial gunpowder store, one of the first places of confinement in the city, around which the prison buildings were constructed bit by bit.⁴ Over the years, as a result of urbanization, the prison was caught up in the urban fabric. The overcrowded, unsafe, and unhealthy nature of its obsolete facilities led to its decommissioning in 1999. The prison, owned by the municipality, was sold to the state, and the decommissioned site and buildings then remained under the supervision of the regional Secretariat of the Ministry of National Assets (SMNA).

In order to manage the risks associated with the abandoned facility of 2.2 hectares, this public body contacted professionals in Valparaíso involved in cultural activity to create an association capable of managing the gradual restoration of the former prison site, who formed the Former Prison’s Friends Association (Corporación de Amigos de la Ex-cárcel). Visual artists, craftspeople, musicians, circus and theater performers—mostly far removed from the artistic legitimization circuits located in Santiago—were then invited to appropriate the old buildings for their practices and to display their work. SMNA inscribed this management approach into a cultural program called “Prison, a hill of culture” (*Cárcel, un cerro para la cultura*) which remained in effect between 2001 and 2003, and which aimed to promote participatory social uses of the place through co-administration with civic society actors.

¹ All translations are mine unless indicated otherwise.

² This period marked the opening of a major cultural facility called the Cultural Park of Valparaíso (Parque Cultural de Valparaíso) including the restored prison’s buildings.

³ The fieldwork was conducted between April 2011 and September 2013 as part of my doctoral research.

⁴ The hill would take its name, Cerro Cárcel (Prison Hill), from the presence of this structure.

The backdrop of this strong bias toward cultural activity was the campaign for the inclusion of Valparaíso (specifically the historical area of the port and a buffer zone) on the UNESCO World Heritage List, which was finally obtained in 2003. Heritage policies under the seal of UNESCO often operate in a top-down approach (Olivi 2013) and fit more broadly into a program of cultural branding of cities. Subject to important processes of economic tertiarization, the city for decades has had one of the highest rates of unemployment in the country (Muga and Carreño 2016). Heritage policies were part of an economic reactivation strategy that opened the way to gentrification and real estate speculation (Janoschka, Sequera, and Salinas 2014; Delgadillo, Díaz, and Salinas 2015).

Bearing in mind that according to the Report of the National Commission on Political Imprisonment and Torture (known as the Valech Report, *Comisión Nacional sobre Prisión Política y Tortura* 2005), the prison is listed as one of 151 detention and torture centers located in the Valparaíso region, it is necessary to clarify the relationship between its transformation and memorialization processes in Chile. The social memory of the prison of Valparaíso is, of course, strongly marked by political violence. In the late 1980s, political detainees staged a jailbreak, while some detainees were also murdered during their incarceration. Later, commemorative activities at the cultural park have been organized by former political prisoners and families of victims on symbolic dates, and some key actors in the process of transformation of the former prison had themselves been incarcerated during the dictatorship.

However, like other decommissioned and recommissioned spaces of incarceration around the world (Morin and Moran 2015), that of Valparaíso was first of all a “bustling urban prison holding all sorts of people” (Gevisser and Nuttall 2004, 515). Its progressive conversion into a cultural park, directly articulated to participatory discourses, contrasts with processes of citizens reclaiming other sites where political violence was perpetrated during the Chilean dictatorship. In fact, the conversion of former political detention centers into memory sites during the post-dictatorship period followed a bottom-up dynamic in which the state reacted to the demands of civil society groups (Collins 2011; Lazzara 2011; Hite and Collins 2009). Falling within the frame of a transitional justice process (Schindel 2009), these claims, and the actors that led them to the public scene, differ from those that gave rise to the former prison’s recovery, from the early 2000s at least until 2010, when priority was given to the conversion of the prison into a civic and heritage site devoted to culture and popular leisure and an artistic alternative workplace (van Diest 2017), more than a memory site linked to dictatorship violence.⁵

Co-management and Participation: First Attempts at Administration

The Former Prison’s Friends Association (*Corporación de Amigos de la Ex Cárcel*, henceforth FPFA) is the result of this cultural administration approach favored by the SMNA. It can be considered an example of “delegation logic” (Lochard 2013) in the face of the administrative vacuum and uncertainty with regard to the uses of the place.

The association, active between 2001 and 2005, brought together social science professionals, journalists, lawyers, architects, and artist-educators at local universities, as well as independent artists and artisans and local NGOs. It had about seven active members.⁶ Although they had various professional backgrounds, the association’s members shared quite similar characteristics in terms of class, level of education, and generation, and they received no remuneration. Contrary to what its original name suggests, the FPFA was not a “corporation” but a “functional community organization,” which under Chilean law is a nonprofit association with its own legal personality that “aims to represent and promote specific interests of the community within the territory of the municipality or group of municipalities.”⁷

The FPFA, defined by its subsidiary and nonoppositional origin, was different from the heritage protection associations that were constituted from the second half of the 1990s onward in Chile. These heritage associations were dominated by middle- or upper-class activists and professionals who were in a position to assert technical expertise in public debates (Guerrero 2012), denouncing the risks associated with the demolition of historical buildings without regard to the neighborhoods’ sociospatial contexts. These associations flourished between 2000 and 2010, and the citizen and participatory dimensions were

⁵ However, this aspect came to the fore in the 2010s. The Cultural Park of Valparaíso was classified as a historical monument by the National Council of Monuments in 2018 because of the human rights violations committed on the site during the dictatorship (van Diest 2019).

⁶ A large proportion of inactive members were well-known personalities of the city linked in some way to cultural sectors. Among the members were the vice president of the Chamber of Commerce and Tourism of Valparaíso, the owner of a representative bar in the city, and the director of the Municipal Theater of Valparaíso at that time.

⁷ Law 19.483 of the Ministry of the Interior, art. 1, no. 1, <https://www.leychile.cl/Navegar?idNorma=30850>.

increasingly emphasized. The effects of urban regulations that fall within a neoliberal logic and give real estate companies a great deal of leeway have thus become the main subject of dispute for these associative actors, currently spread throughout the country.

An institutional genesis

Former members of the FPFA say that they were inspired by the government promotion of citizen participation and wanted to contribute to what they call “co-management” of this place. The FPFA, in fact, was neither completely autonomous nor perfectly integrated with the institution (Barthélemy 2000), although it was formed at the initiative of the SMNA. As one of its former presidents described, “Our job was to administer and get in touch with the local office of the Ministry of National Assets, through a procedure between the civil society and the state that was quirky.... Because it was the citizens who in a way did the job of the state, things worked.... For in Santiago, in the ministry, they were not willing to recruit someone or hire a professional to take charge of this weird cultural thing that was happening in Valparaíso.”⁸

As suggested by this excerpt from the interview, the engagement of local actors was to some extent a response to the centralization of the decision-making process. But the relationship that local actors established with the decommissioned prison was also closely related to the individual pathways of both the most active members of the FPFA and the key institutional actors. The secretary of SMNA himself was a university student in the late 1980s, a militant of the centrist Christian Democracy (Democracia Cristiana) party, who had been detained for a month in Valparaíso’s prison. During his interview, he stated that the prison was not a “neutral place” for him, which strengthened his resolve to preserve the place, as his personal experience happened to be shared by many visitors:

The number of people who came to the Ex-cárcel was impressive. I would say that a third of the people were former detainees who came with their families. And they told them their stories, so many stories! It was a very powerful thing. Of course I brought my family too, to tell them my story in the prison, because I had been there.... This made us fall in love with the place and led us to think that we must work hard for it.⁹

At the same time, the path that led FPFA members to become involved with the prison’s cultural occupation initiative was marked by other experiences from the prison world, mainly as a result of some of the FPFA members being workshop facilitators for common law prisoners. These experiences seemed to awaken sensitivity, as my interviewees suggest, with regard not only to the social and material conditions of prison settings but also their symbolic and memorial significance, mainly in relation with the painful conditions of the incarceration.

This would serve as the basis for concern on the part of FPFA to contribute to the heritage construction and dissemination of traces of the stigmatized worlds of the prison, a perspective shared by the SMNA at that time. This convergence, based on experiences common to institutional actors and citizens, seems to go against the “strictly vertical conceptions of relations between the state and civil society” (Neveu 2007, 20) and thus tends to blur the boundaries between these two spheres.

The definition of social ties and the relationship to politics

FPFA members repeatedly refer to the ties of friendship at the base of the association, linking them to their professional status and the affirmation of expertise, on the one hand, and their “nonpartisan” relationship to politics, on the other. For example, the first president of the FPFA describes the first moments of the process of occupation, in which he played a fundamental role, as being “spontaneous,” “without political strategies,” and driven by a “pure voluntarism.” Commitment to the association was said to be animated by an idea of “giving of oneself” through volunteer work and by a sentimental attachment to the place. At the same time, the idea of doing politics had a negative connotation and was seen as subordinated to “individual autonomy” (Vermeersch 2004, 681).

The reverse side of this distancing from politics is the value that the members themselves gave to specific projects whose physical support was the former prison: “At first, we arrived with a kind of innocence.... What interested us were the artistic issues; the political aspect we became involved with later,” one of

⁸ Man, former president of the FPFA, interview of April 18, 2012.

⁹ Man, former regional secretary of the Ministry of National Assets, interview of April 4, 2012.

my interviewees, a university teacher who held a visual art workshop at the former prison, said about the matter.¹⁰ He explained that it was “because of the necessity [they felt], and not because they were ideological activists” that he and his students started using the place.

However, this rejection of politics was somewhat ambivalent. A former participant in the FPFA told me that she found “two [types of] militancy surrounding the Ex-cárcel” when she began to engage in the social life of the place:

L: One type was the politicians, who tried to put demands on the table, to negotiate, to give visibility to the project, to form alliances ... and the other type who were rather activists, who were there with the tools, the hammer and the brush, [who were] trying to gather the necessary money.... They were political too, but more involved in the concrete aspects: daily action, ensuring that the space is open, that our water is not cut off, that the little money we had is well used, that we do not end up without resources.

C: But C, who you associate with the “activist trend,” also worked at the Ministry of National Assets?

L: Yes, but all her activity [at Ex-cárcel] was during her free time, it was not during her work schedule at the ministry. In fact, she ... how to say this? She had this double militancy.¹¹

As these excerpts from the interview suggest, the officials themselves—as well as professionals belonging to the FPFA—are characterized here as “activists.” These categories, which clearly refer to politics while at the same time highlighting the entanglements between the two spheres mentioned above, would later become the bearers of positions in a context of progressive politicization of the former prison.

In her study on associative life in France, Martine Barthélemy (2000, 12) observes that “associative autonomy and return to the local sphere are partly organized by the state.” This “associative ambivalence” (2000, 15) would go along with what Dagnino (2007) calls a “perverse confluence.” Taking into account the “context of the neo-liberal adjustment” of the 1990s, she observes that “[the] basic intention [of state sectors] is to have the organizations of civil society assuming functions and responsibilities restricted to the implementation and execution of these policies, providing services formerly considered duties of the state itself” (Dagnino 2007, 355). Furthermore, as pointed out by Julia Paley (2001, 9) for the Chilean case, this institutional use of participation “allows states to manage citizen action in ways that fit governmental agenda ... reducing citizen protests against public policy.” The reference to volunteer work and activism mentioned in the previous interview extract seems to be consistent with official mechanisms that directly follow the instructions of citizen participation, while highlighting the major objective of the rehabilitation of the former prison.

Challenging urban commodification, denouncing centralism

In 2002, a real estate project called Campus Cultural was presented by the company Novaterra in response to a government tender. Aiming to promote Valparaíso’s candidacy for inclusion on the UNESCO World Heritage List, this project proposed to divide the site of the former prison into two parts, one of which was intended for a residential and hotel complex to finance the cultural infrastructure that would be installed in the other part. The vertical decision-making process that the central-presidential level imposed on local actors—including the FPFA and the SMNA—and the entrepreneurial perspective displayed in the project were both strongly contested. These aspects revealed the fragility of the official discourse on the citizen participation of the associative and cultural actors engaged in the rehabilitation of the former prison. Furthermore, Campus Cultural revealed a divide within the official sphere itself. While local authorities, including the SMNA, appropriated and endorsed the idea of citizen participation, the central-presidential level promoted above all the economic recovery of Valparaíso. Thus the transformation of the former prison was considered more of an opportunity to capitalize on than a full-fledged objective.

This new configuration led to a reorientation of the perception of this urban site as well as a change of the subjective relationship to politics on the part of the FPFA members, who evoked their feelings of becoming “activists” and starting to “learn the languages of politics” during that particular period. This “reframing” (Goffman 1991) was as much the result of a reaction of the FPFA to this conflictual situation as a consequence of the exchanges that it established with other actors of the local associative-professional world. Thus, for example, the role played in this context by the NGO Territorio Sur stresses the importance that “associative

¹⁰ Man, visual artist, interview of April 6, 2012.

¹¹ Woman, former member of FPFA, interview of April 5, 2012.

expertise" (Lochard and Simonet-Cusset 2003) gains in the context of an increasingly tense situation with regard to public authorities. Territorio Sur was invited by the SMNA itself to use the facilities of the former prison, where it moved in the early 2000s. The organization, which—as one of its former members points out in her interview—had among its objectives the “participative management of public spaces,”¹² was quickly integrated into the FPFA and started to be perceived by some of its former members as an actor that “installs the language of politics [and] strategies to interact with the state”¹³ from the premises of the former prison. Citizen participation, one of the objectives of the NGO, was thereafter activated, creating a mobilization opposed to the official steps of the presidency concerning the former prison, and becoming one of the main arguments for the rejection of the project. The disappointment with institutional actors—the first members of the FPFA saw themselves as their “co-managers”—was manifest and led to a learning process that opened the way to politicization. Of course, the ensuing dispute was not led by the FPFA exclusively: about fifty signatories—individuals and groups—joined a network they called Movement for the Best Future of the Ex Cárcel (Movimiento por el Mejor Destino de la Ex Cárcel). The most active participants—Territorio Sur, the College of Architects of the Valparaíso Region, and the association Ciudadanos por Valparaíso—used their expertise and militant capital, forged by the latter two in their commitment to other causes opposing urban commodification (Rojas and Bustos 2015). New groups of artists and individuals, who were not members of the FPFA and belonged more to the local artistic and cultural scene than to professional life or the world of experts, also joined the network. They were keen to protect the prison infrastructure and linked the issue to broader urban controversies through their criticism:

We prepared a manifesto that was signed by many people, many of them were occupying the Ex-cárcel, many of them devoted their time and their energy to these issues ... assemblies, [creating] stickers, gathering signatures, coming to events, socializing the problem.... This was a moment of intense activism. You had to be there, you had to give hours your life without any economic gain. And, in parallel, you had to be discussing more in depth where we were going, what we wanted ... because we didn't want only to defend the place: we wanted to produce a proposal for the place's development too.¹⁴

During the interviews, the discarded project of the Campus Cultural was also mentioned by my interlocutors as constituting a “first fight” that would only make sense in light of other more recent conflict episodes: “First Pinto [the mayor Hernan Pinto] wanted to do the building, the condominiums. It was the first ... that's it, it was the first fight.”¹⁵

This kind of narrative temporalization of the conflicts around the former prison is in fact connected with the way that the place was progressively turned into a “cause” (Boltanski and Claverie 2007), gaining momentum particularly thanks to two arguments that articulated a “rise in generality.” First, the rejection of the project was part of the general condemnation of the privatization of urban space. That was crystallized in the slogan “no to the sale of the former prison” (No a la venta de la Ex-cárcel) that appeared on leaflets and in demonstrations. Of course this choice was not incidental. After the return of democracy, privatization processes implemented during the Pinochet regime continued to affect basic public services (housing, health, education, pension system, water supply, and energy), thus contributing to worsening social inequalities and raising strong questions about the economic model implemented (Vergara 2005). In the urban area of Valparaíso, these processes were visible in the dilemmas affecting the management of the port, the problematic consequences of unemployment, and the installation of large shopping centers that would occupy vast spaces of the urban fabric (Rojas and Bustos 2015). At the same time, the term *condominio*, used to refer to this project by many interviewees—even if it only concerned a part of the intended uses—takes on a symbolic meaning here insofar as it activates a mindset of spatial inequality. Indeed, in Chile, the term *condominios* frequently refers to “gated communities,” exemplary phenomena of privatization and urban segregation in the context of the neoliberal model (Borsdorf, Hidalgo, and Sánchez 2007; Janoschka 2002). The heritage value attributed to the former prison thus became a symbolic resource to be promoted and mobilized against the commodification and privatization of the city.

¹² Woman, former member of Territorio Sur, interview of March 26, 2012.

¹³ Man, former president of FPFA, interview of April 18, 2012.

¹⁴ Woman, former member of Territorio Sur, interview of March 26, 2012.

¹⁵ Women, actress, interview of March 8, 2012.

The second basic aspect of the cause was opposition to centralism. The aim was to reveal the neglect of local projects by the institutions, which went against the participatory slogan put forward by the public actors themselves. For instance, some interviewees remembered that the authorities promoting the Campus Cultural declared that this project would help Valparaíso become “the best neighborhood of Santiago, with a sea view,¹⁶ and that this phrase, which was received as an insult by local organizations, “provoked war.”¹⁷ The speeches of those who took part in this conflictual episode repeatedly refer to Estación Mapocho, a former railway station in the central area of Santiago that was transformed into a major cultural center in 1994. This was logical, since actors with leading roles in the management of the cultural center Estación Mapocho were also involved in the promotion of the Campus Cultural project. However, it was also a way of denouncing the lack of participatory dynamics in these large cultural facilities created under the governments of the Concertación in Santiago (Paul I Augusti 2015), whose project Campus Cultural was explicitly inspired by.

Associative and Conflictive Reconfigurations

The disputes around Valparaíso's former prison during these years brought out the difficulties faced by the actors in finding an “agreement in a context of collective action” (Pagis 2007, 75) against a new megaproject promoted by the government.

The rejection of the Campus Cultural project, mainly because of the collective actions and heightened public awareness of the issues concerning the place, opened up the space to a new configuration. The management of the former prison was handed over to the Regional Government office; the SMNA ceased to play a direct managing role, even if it continued to be the official owner. The mobilization to defend the place convinced the Regional Government office of the need for a formal agreement in which it was stipulated that the future project would be exclusively devoted to culture, barring the way to residential real estate projects. At the same time, the FPFA's privileged position as an interlocutor with the official administration of the old prison was questioned by new occupants, who challenged its seniority-based legitimacy. Former members of the FPFA called for elections, the results of which were not favorable to them. The association was thus dissolved and replaced, in 2005, by the Former Prison Cultural Park Association (Corporación Parque Cultural Ex-cárcel) constituted by a more diversified body of mostly new occupants. The contention between the two camps was aggravated by the gradual disengagement of the authorities from the former prison, which resulted in a lack of resources and progressive deterioration of the buildings. A former administrator of the Regional Government office remembers the way in which this “disengagement order” was transmitted to her by her superiors at the time: “I was told that nothing else was going to be financed, because the Ministry of the Interior was saying that the Regional Government office had to get rid of the park [Ex-cárcel], because it was a burden.... So that placed me in a very complicated situation, because they [her hierarchical superiors] removed the support I needed to continue my work and thus people started to be against me, [that is] the most radicalized groups in the park.”¹⁸

Consequently, the perception of most of the actors close to the newly created Former Prison Cultural Park Association was that the successive administrators “were not coming to administer the cultural park; what they wanted was to close it.”¹⁹ In this conflictual context, the new positioning of the associations was characterized by a double tension between the occupants and the public authorities, on the one hand, and among the occupants themselves, on the other.

A controversial gift

In early 2007 the government's desire to build a new cultural infrastructure on the site of the former prison crystallized around the name of the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer. Publicly announced as a gift by Niemeyer to Valparaíso, the project envisioned a huge cultural facility and was thus seen by its promoters as a kind of enhancement of the entire city related to the recent heritage labeling. The local management of this architectural project was criticized from the outset for failing to heed political, aesthetic, and urban questions (van Diest 2014). The artists and other cultural workers occupying the former prison, as well as various associations, pointed out the fact that the Brazilian architect had never been to Valparaíso, as evidenced by the futuristic features of his drawing, contrary to the aesthetics and urban traits that

¹⁶ Woman, member of the NGO Ciudadanos por Valparaíso, interview of March 30, 2012.

¹⁷ Man, member of the Chilean Committee of the International Council on Monuments and Sites (ICOMOS), interview of April 16, 2012.

¹⁸ Woman, former administrator of the Ex-cárcel as employee of the Regional Government office, interview of April 16, 2012.

¹⁹ Man, former president of the Former Prison Cultural Park Association, interview of April 27, 2011.

characterize the city's landscape. But above all, promoters of the project were blamed for the absence of any participative arrangement—not even simple “consultation”—with the groups involved in the social and cultural life of the former prison, who in fact only learned of the project through statements made to the press by public officials.

Nevertheless, different official actors then took center stage. The Ministry of National Assets (and its local affiliate, the SMNA), formal owner of the former prison as a representative of the state, took a lower profile, clearly relegated to the bottom of the institutional hierarchies involved in these promotional processes, and the mayor of Valparaíso at the time, Aldo Cornejo, of the center-conservative party Christian Democracy (Democracia Cristiana, part of the Concertación, the ruling coalition), positioned himself as a key spokesman for the project. It was actually another public body, the Department of Architecture of the Ministry of Public Works, that played a leading role as the technical authority and project developer and tried hard to bring home the pressing need to close the place on the grounds of the infrastructure's degradation.

The centralist and top-down perspective adopted for the institutional management of the cultural infrastructure was thus denounced, with the project being recalled as “not responding to a citizen demand.”²⁰ For their part, local professional and civil society organizations such as the College of Architects and Ciudadanos por Valparaíso also raised technical objections, as the project would not respect current urban regulations. Not only would it not be suitable for this part of the city, they said, but it would also lead to most of the historic prison structures being razed, even though they were in fact protected and had been labeled as a Historical Conservation Building since 2004.²¹

Between citizen space and workspace

The tense relationships among the occupants are key to understanding the forms of protest that the project encountered. The conflict between the wave of new occupants and the first occupants/co-managers of the former prison had its roots mainly in their different conceptions of their relationship with government institutions. While the first occupants favored dialogue and collaboration with public officials—in a delegation logic subsequently weakened as a result of the conflict triggered by the project Campus Cultural—the new occupants, organized within the new Former Prison Cultural Park Association, adopted an explicitly confrontational position.

Unlike the FPFA, the new association claimed to be politically engaged in a wide range of local as well as national issues, which, at the leadership level, was accompanied by a will to politicize the situation of the former prison infrastructure.²² In the course of the interviews, my interviewees referred to a polarization between “technocrats” (the former occupants, close to the FPFA) and “hippies” (the occupying members or supporters of the Former Prison Cultural Park Association). These binary categories were not called into question: on the contrary, my interviewees used them to give me a schematic picture of internal divisions.

In this tense framework, two concrete developments gave rise to the outright rejection of the Niemeyer project. A series of suspicious fires—their origins have never been determined—ravaged various facilities of the former prison. Having burned artists' materials, working tools, and a small site museum managed by a few former members of the dissolved FPFA, the disaster led most of the first occupants to leave the site. While some interviewees described these incidents mainly in terms of the material losses that led them to search for new workplaces in the city, for the oldest occupants who had developed long-term artistic or cultural projects there, it represented a severe emotional shock. As recalled by an artist whose workshop burned in the fire: “When we left the Ex-cárcel we were very bruised. Then I left the place and I didn't come back in two years, after the fire.”²³ Moreover, these fires are linked by some occupants to another traumatic incident, the municipality's decision to close the Ex-cárcel overnight during the Easter weekend of March 2008: “The fires made everyone leave [the Ex-cárcel] ... and on top of that, there was the closure, it was a terrible closure, I don't know how many days our things were there, maybe more than a month, a time during which we couldn't work, we couldn't do anything.”²⁴

The closure had the effect of forcibly evicting people, arousing strong reactions and later triggering a mobilization machine that took the fight quickly to the judicial arena. In a bid to facilitate the reopening of

²⁰ Woman, former member of FPFA, interview of April 5, 2012.

²¹ This classification concerned more precisely the former prison's main gallery. It was the result of the modifications of the urbanism regulatory plan in association with the labeling of the so-called historical sector of Valparaíso as a human heritage site by UNESCO.

²² These issues mainly revolve around the questions of support for the historical demands of the indigenous Mapuche people and the demonstrations over environmental conflicts generated by mining projects in the north of Chile.

²³ Man, architect and visual artist, former member of the FPFA, interview of April 6, 2012.

²⁴ Woman, artisan and jeweler, interview of April 26, 2011.

the facilities, Niemeyer's project was challenged before the courts, while at the same time the dislodgement was publicly condemned as an infringement of the artists' rights to continue their artistic work insofar as they lost their tools and workplace.

The repertoire of collective actions (Tilly 1984) undertaken against the Niemeyer project included letters to the authorities, assemblies, the search for the support of politicians in a context of imminent municipal elections, the publication of articles in local newspapers, processions, and demonstrations. More specifically, the installation of a soup kitchen (*olla común*) seems to be a representative action of the "work of signification" (Cefaï and Trom 2001) developed by the actors. This soup kitchen was installed for a few weeks in Plaza Aníbal Pinto, a highly visible crossroads in the urban area of Valparaíso near the headquarters of the Regional Government office.²⁵ The symbolic meaning of the action certainly disrupted the touristic and picturesque image of the city that the authorities sought to promote. While referring to a Latin American image of self-management and food solidarity (Hiner 2011), it illustrated the precariousness and need for a place of work for artists and artisans who used to occupy the former prison. This was a way to exhibit the necessities of those who were now barred from using this place through an interaction with passersby.

However, this public intervention cannot be understood only as an opposition to the architectural project of Niemeyer. It was inspired by a kitchen space fitted out inside the former prison in 2005, which not only was a unifying space for the wave of occupants arriving from that moment on—mainly those related to the new Former Prison Cultural Park Association—but also crystallized the rivalries between the two factions of occupants. As one of my interviewees suggested, it functioned as a "center of operations, where the oldest occupants did not fully participate, because it was not their practice, it was not their way to get in touch with space."²⁶ The kitchen thus represented a borderline between "us" and "the others" that was replayed on a "public stage" (Queré 1992) in this precise protest context. The purpose was to oppose not only Niemeyer's project but also the cooperative principle implemented by the former FPFA members in their relations with the public authorities.

Although the issue of citizen participation was not absent from the public discourse put forth by the detractors of Niemeyer's cultural facility during this conflict, it seemed to have receded into the background; this was in contrast with the fact that it had been one of the key slogans shared by the FPFA and the SMNA in the first five years of the Ex-cárcel period. The most explicit demands now mainly concerned cultural and artistic work, with good reason: at the time of my fieldwork, very few of the artists interviewed who worked in the former prison had a source of income for their artistic activities, and many of them needed to find jobs in other areas. Thus, half (ten) of the artists interviewed declared that at the time they occupied the former prison, they had other occasional or permanent jobs, mainly in the hotel and restaurant sectors, in small businesses, or in urban transportation. In addition, they often mentioned having implemented activities related to their own trades: for example, by presenting their work on the street or in other public spaces in order to "pass the hat," in the case of performing arts, or creating marketable products, in the case of the visual arts. The lack of a workspace fits into this context of precariousness.

However, apart from the demands articulated in the public space, in the end it was the courts that would decide the dispute involving the reopening of the former prison, after which the debates would refocus on technical aspects directly related to the material conditions and the patrimonial dimension of the old facilities.

Experiences of engagement

At the beginning of this article, I referred to the ways in which FPFA members were reconfiguring their relationship to politics and to institutional actors in the face of the Campus Cultural project. This reconfiguration took place as a result of a will to defend a place in which the FPFA members were working, and was affected by multiple reasons and experiences inscribed in their previous trajectories. Yet it was also the fruit of their interaction with other associations such as Territorio Sur, whose objectives were more explicitly inspired by the notion of citizen participation. But how did occupiers, including the artists and craftspeople who frequently used prison facilities as a workplace, experience the various forms of engagement made possible in the face of the conflict triggered by the Niemeyer project?

Although the question can be approached from different angles, I focus attention here essentially on the relationship between artistic work and political activity, since most of the occupants at the time were artists and artisans (mostly theater, circus, and visual artists). Although many of them became involved

²⁵ The information provided by my interlocutors in the field and that published in the press do not agree on the duration of this action, mentioning forty-five days in one case, three weeks in others.

²⁶ Man, member of a spirituality group, interview of May 7, 2012.

after the Campus Cultural affair, some had started using the premises of the former prison—including the workshops—almost as soon as the decommissioning ended. For some artists occupying the site, it was essentially a question of participation in support of the actions carried out by the leaders:

The leaders, they conducted a political struggle with the authorities to maintain our project, which we were proposing from the beginning, until the exit [of Ex-cárcel]. So we, in a way, were not tied to the direct treatment they had. We were ... I don't know, the "strike force," we were [part of] all the steps that were taken, the soup kitchen in the street, we showed up so that people see that we were many to be there.... We supported the organization.²⁷

This relationship between artistic work and political activity could also be perceived as conflictive, as is the case with artists who reported being "leaders" in spite of themselves and experienced the new condition as disruptive to their creative activities.

By contrast, the same situation was also considered as a form of socialization that would help them develop political skills to put into practice in other local disputes: "I think I have a great school in this place, of all sorts of things, not only as regards the artistic, but also on the organizational aspect, the political ... , meaning, to have experienced all this. It makes me feel that now I can move between different organizations. Because some problems are very similar."²⁸

Nonetheless, while the relationship to politics involved a learning process for some, for others genuine participation required the creative practice of artists in the first place. Politics was thus perceived as an activity centered on particular interests and devalued as the "politicking" of groups and individuals seeking for sectoral benefits and engaging themselves in "everlasting discussions"²⁹ during assemblies. For these artists, it was the disinterested artist's work that appeared to be the appropriate instrument for the goal of helping the place to thrive: "We thought if we stay in words and words, meetings and meetings, we are wasting our time for making ceramic pieces, as simple as that!"³⁰

Of course, the disparagement of political participation as opposed to participation through work on the margins of protest and deliberative discourse cannot be understood as a reaction to a single cause; in the construction of the relationship to politics it is "the whole social history of the individual" (Gaxie 2002) that counts. The importance of friendship—Why continue to defend the old prison if most of one's friends decided to abandon it after the fires and the eviction?—and the feeling of being more or less equipped with the "skills" (Gaxie 1978) necessary for political negotiation with institutional actors were some of the reasons for a progressive disengagement put forward during the interviews. These aspects bring to light the "fundamentally situated, context-bound nature" (Eliasoph 2013) of the forms of participation and the relation to politics I observed.

Participatory drifts

As Niemeyer's project was finally dismissed in late 2008, the administration of the former prison was transferred to the National Council of Culture. It was at this moment that citizen participation reemerged as an overriding concern taking mainly two forms.

First, a top-down arrangement was made, consisting in a nationwide public architecture competition launched at the beginning of 2009; this time, however, it was presented as respectful of the former prison's historical premises. It was no longer solely a question of choosing an architectural project to be realized, but principally a question of ensuring the necessary consensus so that this new cultural infrastructure would not be contested. Thus the various committees associated with the competition aimed to allow dialogue between the occupiers' representatives, the National Council of Culture, and other local actors that played a decisive role in the conflict over Niemeyer's project, such as the College of Architects of the Region of Valparaíso and the organization Ciudadanos por Valparaíso, as well as city heritage organizations denouncing urban privatization, and the association of former political prisoners of Valparaíso. The main objective was to define a "management model" for this new facility. As a way of legitimizing this process, citizen participation was often alluded to by both official bodies and the media, in contradistinction to the management of the Niemeyer project, now presented as a failure and an example of clumsy and nonparticipatory management.

²⁷ Woman, circus artist and acrobat, interview of March 9, 2012.

²⁸ Woman, visual artist, interview of March 20, 2012.

²⁹ Man, sculptor, interview of March 20, 2012.

³⁰ Woman, ceramist, interview of April 3, 2012.

At the same time, participation was encouraged through a bottom-up approach carried out by the last occupants in a more deliberative way. In this perspective, a series of open meetings called *Conclave* were held in June 2009, aiming to develop an alternative management proposal for the new cultural facility project. These meetings led to the drafting of a seventy-five-page document that was handed over to the authorities. The figure of the “people” thus took center stage in rejection of a so-called elite culture, with the notion of culture posed as a “fundamental human right” that cannot be “exclusively destined to privileged groups.”³¹ Several of my interviewees reported, however, that the proposals developed during the gathering had failed: “We worked in a dialogue to find an agreement and to know what the position of the government was to be. These working tables lasted a very long time, but in the middle of all this the government changed, so nothing came of it, the agreements came to nothing.”³²

It is important to recall the often nonbinding nature of the participative processes mentioned at the beginning of this article, as well as the new context created as a result of the advent of a right-wing liberal government at the beginning of 2010, putting an end to the *Concertación* cycle started after the dictatorship. In 2011, the new facility project, Cultural Park of Valparaíso, was chosen from among the competitors and was finally inaugurated in this new politico-administrative framework.

Conclusion

This work has highlighted the imperfect and nonlinear nature of participation (Clarke et al. 2014) as well as the multiple reappropriations of “citizen participation.” This approach may seem particularly paradoxical if one takes into account the historical-political context of Chile. The concept of citizen participation, which figured prominently in the discourses and public policies of the center-left governments of the *Concertación* (1990–2010), has been characterized by various authors as “politically correct” and often conducted with top-down practices. In the broader Latin American context, it set targets of efficiency, legitimization of public action (Recondo 2007), and governmentality (Paley 2001), a framework in which participatory and neoliberal political projects converge (Dagnino 2007).

The case of the former prison of Valparaíso provides us with an example of the interdependence between public administration and citizen action. In other words, far from being independent of each other or in binary opposition, these two spheres appear as parts of a continuum as they are related and connected through a combination of arrangements and entanglements. The institutional sphere turned out to be nonmonolithic, with the various bodies concerned having different perspectives on the function to be given to the old prison infrastructure—putting it at the service of either an experimental local democracy project or the economic recovery of the city. Yet the analysis of the associative forms put in place, the reconfigurations and tensions they were subject to, and finally the challenges catalyzed by the two official projects—*Campus Cultural* and that of the Brazilian architect Oscar Niemeyer—brings to light the occupants’ fluctuating relationship to politics. This goes from ambivalent forms of refusal, through a gradual development of conflicts, to the final compromises that resulted in the construction of the Cultural Park of Valparaíso, today a major cultural facility in the city.

As the theater of multiple social uses and speculations, the former prison of Valparaíso became the object of a cause based on at least four arguments: the rejection of urban commodification and privatization, the rejection of centralism, the claims of a right to work by local artists, and, finally—an aspect that has been left here in parentheses but is crucial—the defense of heritage and social memory. This multifaceted cause is part of a broader spectrum of urban challenges in the age of neoliberalism, in which Valparaíso—impacted by deindustrialization and hailed as a “cultural city” through the heritage policies stemming from the UNESCO label—has an emblematic value (Rojas and Bustos 2015).

These often overlapping arguments may take precedence over one another depending on the circumstances and the level of legitimacy of the actors who use them. The key role that knowledge—technical, associative, professional—plays in these disputes and the way they relate to the question of legitimacy in a context of increasing “technification of urban conflicts” (Ibarra 2015) are avenues for new investigations.

While the claim of a “right to the city” (Lefebvre 1973) is evident in this case, grasping the fluctuating forms of the actors’ relationship with politics forces us to explore their diverse experiences of engagement, which are certainly not limited to an urban dimension. Thus we have seen that the collective actions that bring these claims to the public stage find their origins backstage in the internal organization.

³¹ Manifesto extracts, unpublished document.

³² Man, circus artist, interview of April 2, 2012.

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