

## INTERACTIVE DIGITAL OBSERVATORY ON THE CULTURAL IDENTITY OF ITALO-ARGENTINE HERITAGE

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### Abstract

The contribution discusses the little-known topic of Italo-Argentine cultural heritage. The data gathered during the numerous studies performed so far have served as the basis for a Scientific Observatory. Its goal is to promote knowledge of the material and immaterial assets testifying to an integrated cultural process between the two countries as well as to highlight the relationship between Italian and Argentine culture during late twentieth-century mass immigration when Italians actively participated as designers, builders, entrepreneurs, businessmen, and teachers. All the data has been classified and is now being disseminated using a new archival and distribution medium: a visual, participatory experience present in public areas and the urban landscape.

### Keywords

Knowledge, Cultural identity, Italo-Argentine Heritage, Digital Archives

### 1. *The digital archive: a RE-cognisable identity*

The concept of *identity* represents an ensemble of increasable tangible and intangible values, values that are crucial when collecting information about a person or, better still, about a specific place. Identity not only defines the characteristics, contents, and elements by which that particular place or person can be recognised by others, it also bequeaths its values to future generations.

This study highlights the identity shared by a number of architectural works, designed by Italian architects and built in several cities in Argentina by Italian and Argentine workmen. The study adopted a strict philological and scientific approach, a crucial basis for any historical-artistic endeavour focusing on new frontiers of knowledge. Systematically arranging the material within a very precise, structured framework facilitates improved re-cognition of these works thanks to a common denominator; in fact, the works are characterised by a system of values transmittable in the future. The careful, in-depth critique and fact-finding study and interpretation of said works, based on historical documentation including photographs, design drawings (of built and unbuilt works), led to the creation of a

systemised catalogue, i.e., a digital observatory; the main objective of the catalogue is to rebuilt and restore the tangible and intangible value of “memory” (Pettoello, 2015).

Creating a common “digital observatory” is a dynamic process to safeguard the experimental activities and studies performed so far. New applications can be added to the existing material, for example re-elaborations of archival images or 3D models capable of providing the perceptive aspect, albeit in digital form. This would not only add new pieces to the puzzle of tangible heritage, but also re-enable fruition, and promote suitable long-term conservation. While the “time” variable increases the importance of analogical documentary sources as a way to ensure they remain unaltered or (possibly) better preserved over the years, the management and safeguard of digital or digitalised documents is crucial if we wish to tackle the relentless process of technological transformation. It is also important to ensure that a digital archive – material which can always be added to – be extremely reliable and relatively safe because the information it contains is extremely diversified.

The way the data is organised should be based on the objective to not only share knowledge, but

also ensure that scholars always input dynamic and flexible information and expertise (Porfiri, 2018).

The digital archive contains several kinds of metadata superimposed on existing buildings; it implements reality and becomes part of collective memory. Depending on users' interests, they can pose real time "questions" on several informatory levels, moving from static images to dynamic and interactive, multilevel images. New material is continuously inputted into the digital container: historical and social images, and graphic documents about the topic in question. By applying different filters, any aspect of the cultural heritage can be highlighted; the objective is to preserve its historical memory and ensure effective safeguards. For example, the archival

kinds of users: citizens, tourists, scholars, technicians, and architects; its aim is to reinstate a link between historical, architectural, documentary, and technological research and the social topics of the urban community.

Not only will the digital observatory be constantly updated, several experiments on urban reality are already being performed using tools capable of transforming the city: a network of stations or multimedia points has been established and can be accessed using everyday instruments such as smartphones or tablets.

These reference points create a diversified knowledge-gathering itinerary and allow visitors to find their way around the city and its neighbourhoods. Visitors can not only learn from the historical-artistic info points dotted in public

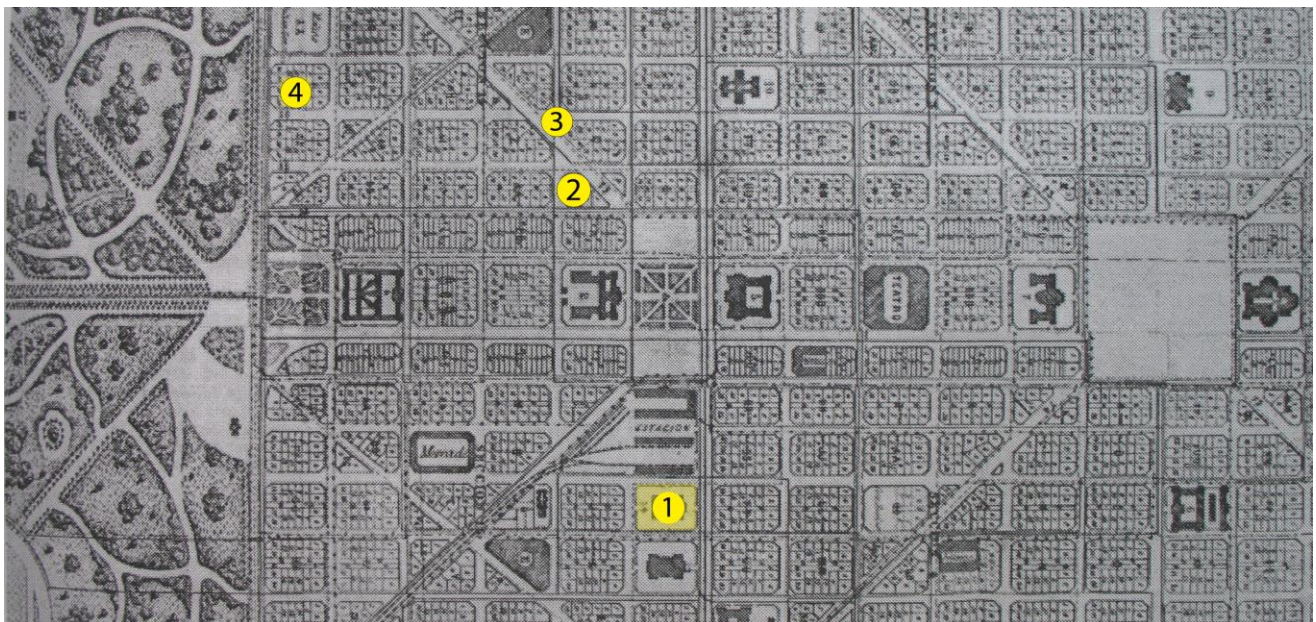


Fig. 1: Monumental Foundation Axis of La Plata

drawings can provide information not only about the design phases of an object, but also about the owner, designers, and builder<sup>1</sup>, as well as the history of the Italian and Argentine workmen involved and the works they built. In some cases, the database also provides more technical data about significant architectural elements. This communication is intended for several different

areas, roads, and the urban landscape of the city, but also enjoy a visual and above all participated experience: the info points represent a new channel of information narrating the works and their surroundings. Moving beyond the static images of drawings, photographs, and historical information heightens the perceptible but above all cognitive knowledge of the object in question, in turn enhancing emotional involvement.

## 2. Trials in the city of La Plata

Trials (or experimental activities) were performed in the city of La Plata: the sample area was the Monumental Foundation Axis in the city,

<sup>1</sup> International Sapienza Research Project: "Costruttori italiani in Argentina. La Plata, 1918-1945" in the framework of the Interuniversity Agreements, A.F. 2015 between the Dipartimento di Storia, Disegno e Restauro dell'Architettura (DiSDRA) of Università Sapienza di Roma and the HiTePAC, Historia, Teoria y Praxis de la Arquitectura y la Ciudad /Instituto de Investigación of the Faculty of Architecture and Urban Planning of the Universidad Nacional de La Plata.



along Avenidas 51 and 53 between Avenidas 1 and 19<sup>2</sup> (Fig. 1).

The city was built from scratch in an area known as “Lomas de la Ensenada”, 60 km south-east of Buenos Aires, the capital of the Republic of Argentina (Icomos, 1999).

aerial views from inside the city; however, all this was lost due to new, unregulated architectural and urban planning projects introduced in later years (Fig. 2).

The construction of the first generation of public buildings along the monumental axis



Fig. 2: Aerial view of La Plata

The urban layout is the result of several plans heavily influenced by the formal, concise application of late eighteenth-century philosophy; however, the original project was only followed for the first fifty years after the city's foundation<sup>3</sup> (Gandolfi 2005; Gandolfi & Gentile, 2006). The real goal of the original project and its spatial quality can currently be understood by looking at

consolidated the city's monumental image which had been officially requested so as to achieve the long-awaited civic prestige required of the new capital. The designs of the eclectic-style buildings, financed by the provincial government, were chosen after several international design competitions, the work of the Dept. of Engineers, and contracts with freelance businesses. The Italians were involved primarily in supervision and construction; one should not forget that in 1884 fifty percent of the population was of Italian origin.

The construction of the new capital of the Province of Buenos Aires took place during a unique moment in the country's history: the economic boom and political transformation of the Republic of Argentina. Building a new capital of the Province of Buenos Aires was the direct result of the federalisation of the city of Buenos Aires after the revolution in the eighties; it was a political decision that ended the quarrel about who should benefit from the very substantial

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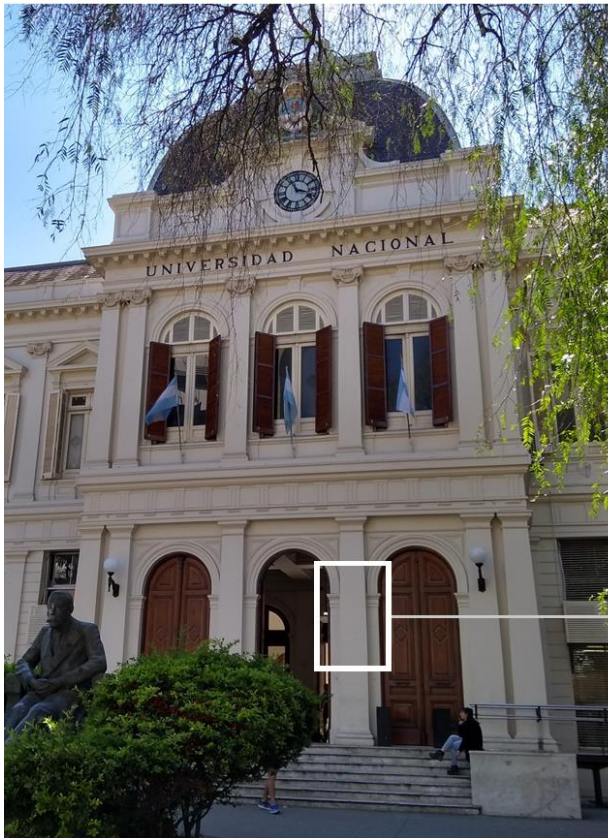
Dipartimento di Storia, Disegno e Restauro dell'Architettura; Italian work group Emanuela Chiavoni, Francesca Porfiri, Gaia Lisa Tacchi, Giulia Pettoello, Alekos Diacodimitri, and Paolo Di Pietro Martinelli.

<sup>3</sup> Given the situation, Dardo Rocha, governor of the Province of Buenos Aires, created an ad hoc Dept. of Engineers. Pedro Benoit, director of the department, was also tasked with presiding over three commissions: one to study the city, another to design the city, and a third commissioned to design public buildings.

customs duties, i.e., between “*porteños and provinciani*” (the inhabitants in the port area and the population in the rest of the region) (Carbonari 2007; Carbonari 2009).

This study used new methods to disseminate knowledge about cultural heritage thus paving

The initial idea behind the observatory was to provide interested individuals with an audio guide they could use to discover important historical heritage which, albeit fragmented, shared the same characteristics and features (Ippolito & Cigola, 2017).



**Fig. 3:** Ex Banco Hipotecario of Buenos Aires Province. Arch. J. A. Buschiazzo-L. Viglione. 1882-1884. Street 7 between 47 and 48. La Plata. Photographs taken by the authors.

the way for new urban, historical, and social interpretations of this unique cultural identity - a perfect match between Italian and Argentine culture. For example, the assigned QR code helps to culturally identify the buildings along the pre-established routes; this creates a sort of “talking city”, a city that conveys the most important information so that visitors can understand and learn about its historical development, designers, typologies, and much much more. One of the possible spin-offs can be the development of a cultural circuit that might interest governmental and institutional agencies, thereby allowing these works and spaces to be assigned their rightful social-economic-artistic-political importance (Fig. 3) (Lerario & Maiellaro, 2014).

The digital observatory is basically an interactive, implementable and searchable online platform used by professionals but also amateurs.

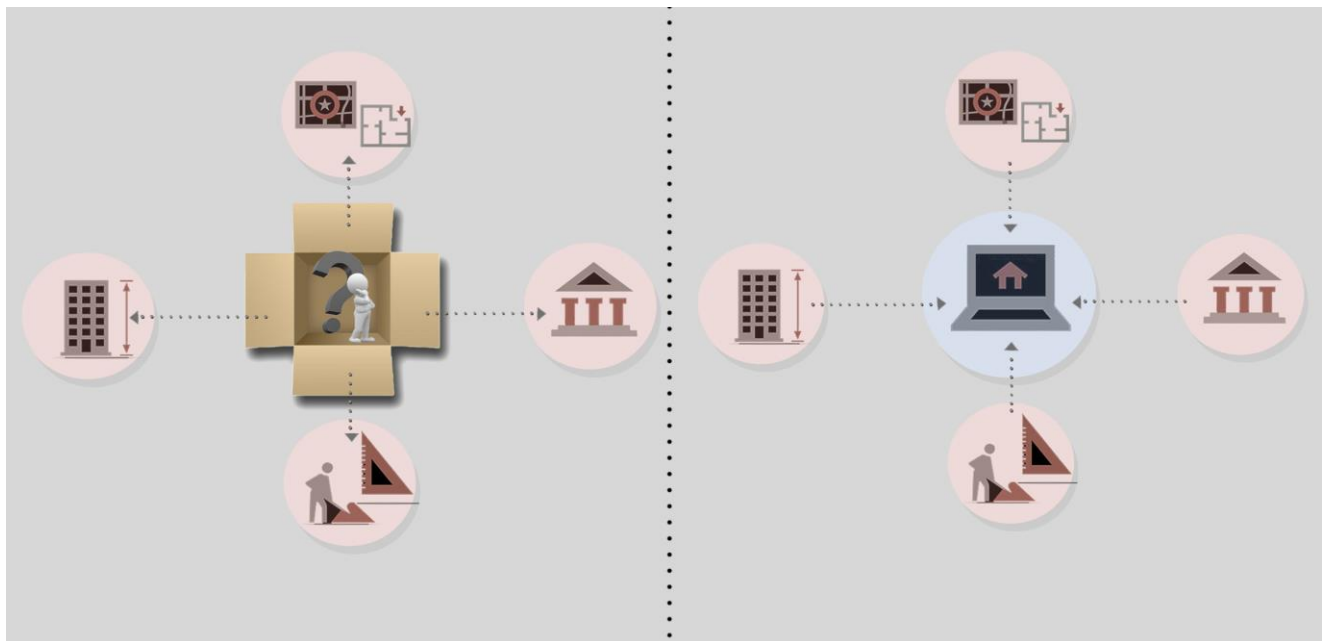
This approach enhances the dialogue between individuals and our architectural heritage by freely exploiting all the potential of the digital medium; the added value it creates for the artefacts in question helps to redefine their identity (Ottavianelli & Gandolfi, 1997).

Regarding the digital observatory structure we can imagine it made by many “building reference boxes”. A cube that opens all its faces showing its essence, declined in four main aspects: historical drawings; informations about architects and builders; distinguishing features; functional layout. We can show it in the “Banco Hipotecario” example (Fig. 4) (Trivi & Carbonari, 2019).

### 3. Studies undertaken

Extensive documentation exists regarding not







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**Fig. 4:** Digital observatory structure. The “building reference box” of ex Banco Hipotecario Provincial – Actual Presidencia (UNLP), declined in its four main aspects. Digital scheme made by the authors.  
Functional Layout-Image source: *Secretaría de Planeamiento, Obras y Servicios de la UNL*

Argentina, but also the architecture and urban spaces they created (Ave & De Menna, 2011). However, the material is difficult to access because it is not all in one place, making it hard to form an overall picture of the many material and immaterial aspects of the country's cultural heritage (Figg. 5-6-7).

bodegas especially in the area of Mendoza, a study of important historical-artistic public buildings in the city of Buenos Aires, industrial buildings, CIAE power stations, Chorizo houses, entertainment venues, theatres, estancias (country homes), and domestic architecture (this study is still underway)<sup>5</sup> (Girini & Sartor, 1998). Two thematic databases have already been

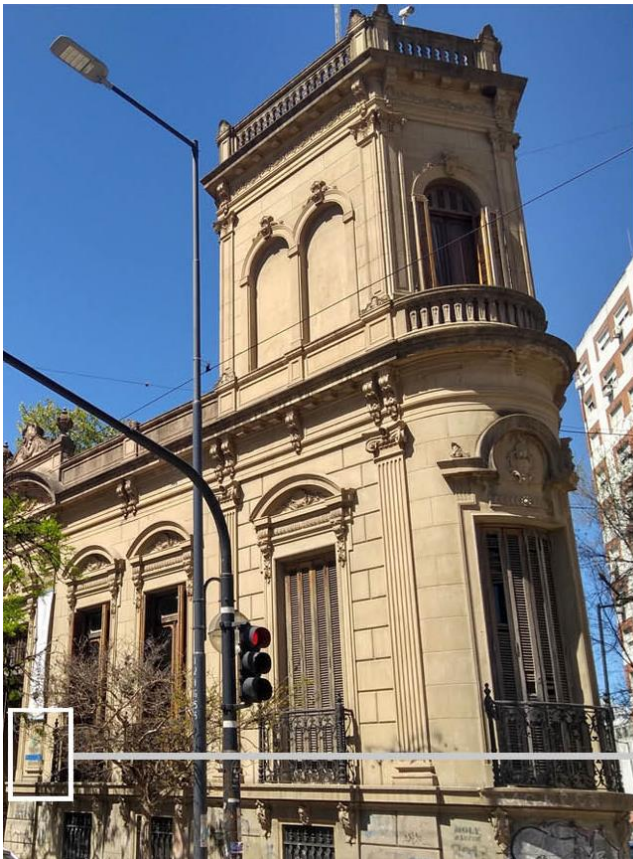


Fig. 5: Palace Zappetini-Campodónico 1906. Arch. I. Coquel. Diagonal 79 between 5 and 56. La Plata. Photographs taken by the authors

This study began in 2006 thanks to the relations between Italia Sapienza di Roma and the UNLP University of La Plata and also the involvement of a number of Italian and Argentine universities<sup>4</sup> (Docci & Chiavoni, 2013).

As time went by the group felt there was a need to study different building types in order to understand which ones shared the same theoretical and practical work practices, the same artisanal expertise, and a shared cultural background. Several research projects were initiated: an analysis and survey of Argentine

created, one for the Chorizo houses and one for the buildings in Buenos Aires (ADCCLPA 2017). The Chorizo house is just *one* architectural urban building type found in many Argentine cities; its flexibility made it possible to absorb the increase in the population during the period of greatest social mobility. Several examples of this interesting cultural heritage are still visible: many houses have been significantly modified, others have remained unaltered, and some, considered

<sup>4</sup> Università Sapienza di Roma, Università di Cassino, Università di Bologna, Universidad Nacional de la Plata, Buenos Aires, Universidad Nacional de Mar de la Plata, Universidad Nacional del Litoral, Santa Fe.

<sup>5</sup> "La participación italiana en la construcción de los ámbitos de sociabilidad de las ciudades de la Provincia de Buenos Aires entre los años 1880-1950 - los casos de Buenos Aires, La Plata, Bahía Blanca y Balcarce". FAU-HiTePAC Headquarters (2012-2015)



as a heritage at risk, are currently for sale (Carbonari & Chiavoni, 2017).

The database for public buildings in the city of Buenos Aires contains all the material collected during research in archives, libraries and holdings as well as drawings and surveys rapidly executed and not performed during direct knowledge-gathering campaigns (Gorelik, 1998).



overseas. In the article entitled “The lost files of the immigrants’ archive” published in the newspaper Clarín on 16 November 2008, Alicia Bernasconi states that “It’s unbelievable that there is no dossier on immigration in a country like ours when in 1914 a third of its population came from Europe”.

The Museum of Immigration created in 1974,



**Fig. 6:** Factory Minoli. Manufacturer Farroni. Street 56 between 1 and 2. La Plata. Photographs taken by the authors.

The digital container also includes photographs illustrating life during the long years of immigration, as well as historical information about the individuals acknowledged as important figures in the field of art and design.

#### 4. Digital Archives in Argentina and Italy

In the Republic of Argentina there are very few scientifically developed digital archives about the immigration process, and none of them explain the Italians’ input in the construction of houses and cities in Argentina. This situation is particularly contradictory since immigrants from several regions contributed to its construction; they came from neighbouring countries, from other countries in Latin America, and from

and the Centre for Contemporary Art, which opened in 2012, are just two of the museums dedicated to this topic. They are both located in the Immigrants’ Hotel which between 1911 and 1953 used to house immigrants from Europe, Asia and Africa.

Both known by the acronym MUNTREF, they focus on disseminating information about the events that prompted immigration. The exhibits include all kinds of documents and cultural heritage artefacts. The Museum of Immigration has the same database as the Latin American Emigration Study Centre (CEMLA, 2013); this facilitates retrieval of data regarding individuals and arrivals (MUNTREF, 2013). Other state archives contain data about the income of

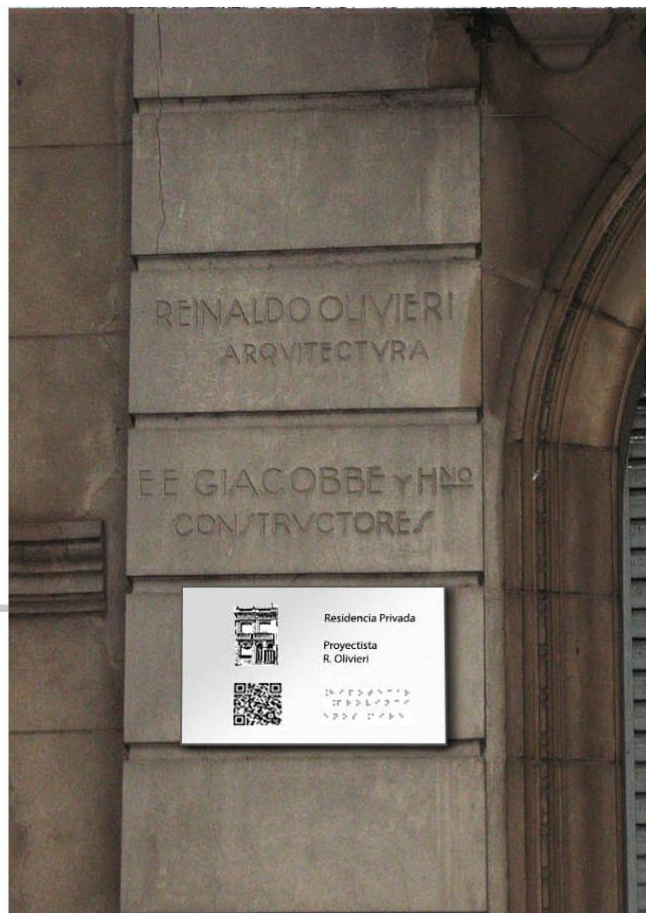
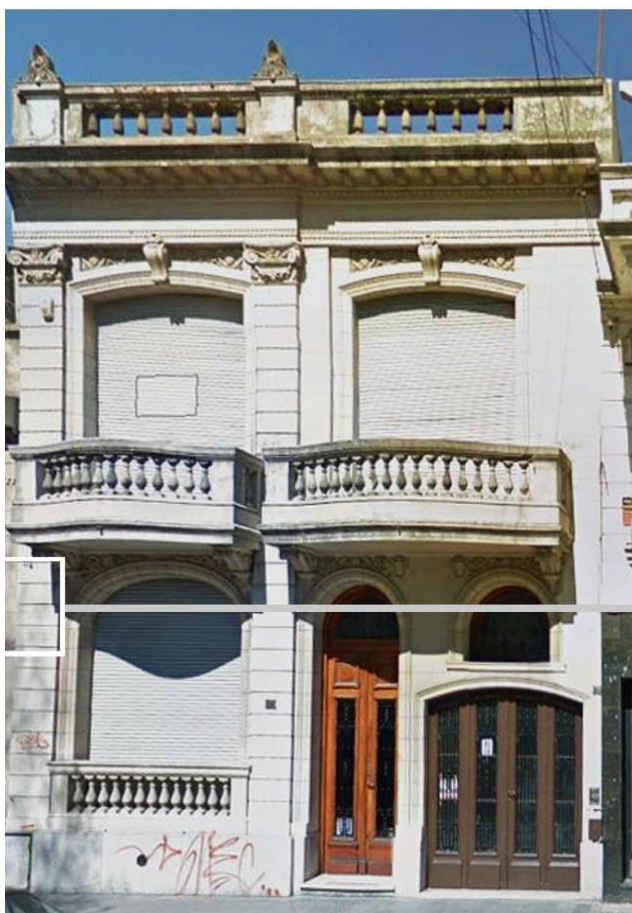
immigrants in Argentina: they include the Archivo General de la Nación, the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos –CEMLA– and the Dirección Nacional de Migraciones<sup>6</sup>.

The Fundación Agnelli, later called *AltreItalia*, has the biggest database. It is constantly updated, lists all Italian arrivals between 1882 and 1920, and provides information regarding immigrants’ children, alphabetically classified by year. Only partial data is available: name, surname, nationality, civil status, age, profession, religion, port of embarkation, ship’s name, and date of arrival. The database also contains a list of Research Centres and Associations, Regional Associations, Museums and exhibitions,

multimedia sources. In Italy, the MEI, Museum of Italian Emigration, is located in the Vittoriano Monument in Piazza Venezia (Rome).

The material in the museum provides data that facilitates comprehension of the mass emigration phenomena from 1860 to the present day<sup>7</sup>.

This extensive Italian cultural heritage illustrates the multiple regional and local emigration phases in Argentina and other parts of the world; “... it is the Italians’ house of memory and symbolises the unity of our country, albeit in its diversity”<sup>8</sup>. The museum represents the dialogue of Italian communities abroad; the museum itinerary is divided into three sectors:



**Fig. 7:** Private house. R. Olivieri. Street 5 between 54 and 55. La Plata  
Photographs taken by the authors.

Genealogical Research, Magazines, Agencies, Bulletins, newsletters, films, documentaries, and

the historical reference period from the birth of the country to the period of mass emigration; the regional itinerary or geography of emigration; and the interactive journey of Italian emigration

<sup>6</sup> Immigrants’ income has been recorded since 1820 because at that time Latin American countries were already independent. The data is downloaded digitally into the Archivo General de la Nación. Entries after 1881 are catalogued in the Centro de Estudios Migratorios Latinoamericanos (CEMLA, 2013).

<sup>7</sup> The museum was sponsored by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs with the collaboration of the Ministry of Cultural Heritage and Activities.

<sup>8</sup> MEI, Museum of Italian Immigration.



providing educational enhancement based on the cinema, literature, and music, etc.

### 5. Conclusions

The existing archives mentioned so far are only part of an extensive experimental study which has finally begun to produce initial, positive cultural feedback in several cities in Argentina by constantly proposing new, future lines of development or in-depth analysis. For example, one such development could be the creation of cultural itineraries at night; the latter could take advantage of the artistic illumination which for some time has been used as a methodological method to enhance cultural heritage, e.g., archaeological-museum sites.

These itineraries, road axes, and stories about the history of the selected buildings, narrated and linked together as part of the “talking city” network, could be used both day and night by all kinds of users.

The data archive, or digital observatory of knowledge, is remains the solid source on which the study is based: it is an interactive, implementable and searchable online platform used by professionals and scholars, but also open to amateurs. This approach enhances the dialogue between individuals and our architectural heritage by freely exploiting all the potential of the digital medium while the added value it creates for the artefacts in question helps to redefine their identity<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Although the article was jointly written by the authors, Francesca Porfiri focused more on the paragraph entitled *1-The digital archive: a RE-cognisable identity*, and on the paragraph entitled *4-Digital Archives in Argentina and Italy*; Fabiana Carbonari curated in-depth the paragraph *2-Trials in the city of La Plata*; while Emanuela Chiavoni the paragraph *3-Studies undertaken*. The paragraph *5-Conclusions* was jointly written.

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