Introduction

"History Is Ours, and It Is Made by the People"

La historia es nuestra y la hacen los pueblos.
—Salvador Allende, September 11, 1973

On September 11, 1973, Hawker Hunter jets from the Chilean Air Force (FACh, Fuerza Aérea de Chile), in coalition with the Chilean Navy and Army, left the coastal city of Valparaíso and headed to Santiago. They bombarded the presidential palace known as La Moneda and several other sites associated with the presidency of Salvador Allende Gossens (1971–1973). The dramatic destruction of the grand neoclassical building was documented by a television crew looking on from the roof of a neighboring hotel, and directly visible to all Chileans in the days that followed (fig. I.1). Allende died that day in La Moneda, and it was this conflation between the destruction of the building and the death of the president that foregrounds the role of architecture in the installation of the dictatorship. La Moneda was the first of many buildings to be destroyed, occupied, and appropriated by the dictatorial regime of General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte (1973–1990). This mode of operation demonstrated a keen understanding of architecture's role as a site of shared memory and identity, and its importance in the construction of the nation as an imagined community.

While this transformation of the Chilean built environment was visible to all, other less visible yet equally important urban and architectural operations were taking place. The dictatorship occupied, adapted, and designed a network of detention and torture centers to hold former functionaries or

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

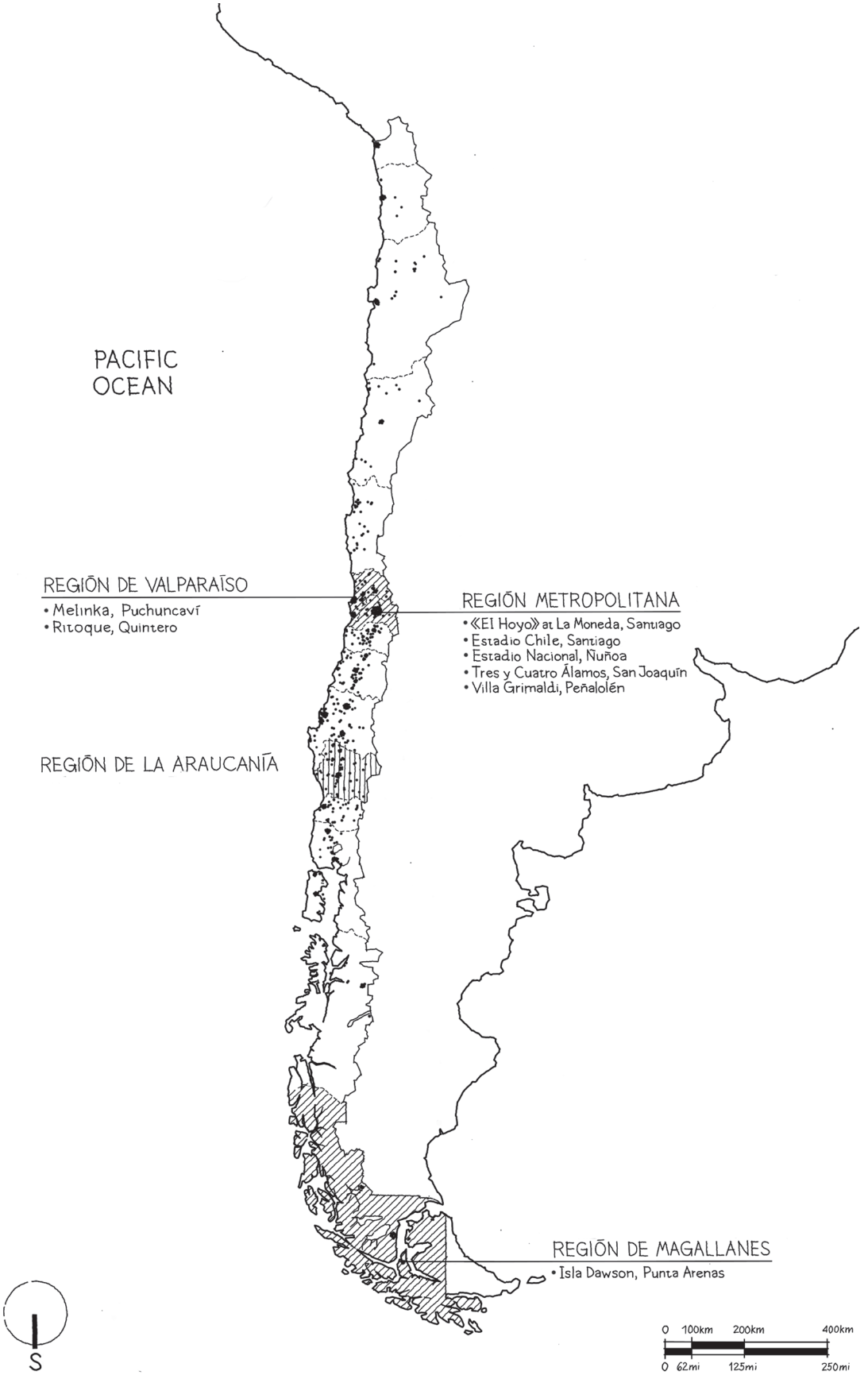
sympathizers of the prior regime, or anyone suspected of opposing them. These actions perpetrated by the dictatorship—to imprison, torture, and ultimately murder its own citizens—needed space in the built environment to operate. As successful as its big architectural gestures were, the operation of the new regime was dependent on these less visible, but equally architectural operations. The detention and torture centers ranged from publicly acknowledged holding spaces designed or adapted for these purposes—such as official military detention centers, stadiums, ships, former vacation resorts, army barracks, and jails—to clandestine sites, usually generic houses or offices transformed into torture centers both within and outside cities (fig. I.2). While some of the first imprisonment spaces were defiantly public, many of the more violent detention and torture centers were deliberately hidden. The network also included unmarked vehicles used to survey, capture, and move prisoners between holding spaces. The degree to which this spatial network existed in a liminal space, only partially acknowledged to the broader public, contributed to a pervading sense of surveillance and control, keeping the whole country in a state of occupation.

These imprisonment spaces were initially known in Chile as "concentration camps," a term that seems to have been the closest reference available to many of those imprisoned. The philosopher José Santos Herceg has traced the appearance of this term in multiple narratives of those imprisoned, and concludes that "it appears in the testimonies as a borrowed term, or perhaps as a stolen one, since no authorization was requested to use it."[1] After the Chilean people voted Pinochet out, the Chilean government started compiling lists of people detained, tortured, and executed by the dictatorship, as well as lists of the sites in which they were detained, tortured, and executed, through the production of the Rettig Report (1991) and the later Valech Reports (2004 and 2011).[2] The 2011 Valech Report compiled 31,831 cases of survivors of torture and political imprisonment and 622 disappeared and executed by the military dictatorship.[3] In these reports the use of the term "detention and torture centers" became the designated convention for the spaces in Chile.

The organization in charge of the most violent period of this repressive campaign was the Chilean National Intelligence Directorate (DINA, Dirección de Inteligencia Nacional), effectively Pinochet's secret police, led by Manuel Contreras Sepúlveda between 1973 and 1977. At the start of the

► Figure I.2. Detention and torture centers in Chile, with locations of the centers discussed in this book. Drawing by Nicolás Verdejo in collaboration with the author. "Recintos Región Metropolitana," Museo de la Memoria y los Derechos Humanos, https://interactivos.museodelamemoria.cl/recintos/.

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.



© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

dictatorship, decree 521 gave the DINA the authority to detain any person while the country was under a state of exception, effectively granting this agency unlimited powers. In 1977 the DINA was dissolved and replaced by the National Information Center (CNI, Central Nacional de Informaciónes). Contreras was replaced in an effort to dissimulate the crimes of the DINA and mask its continuity. At first, these organizations targeted anyone associated with the deposed Allende regime, as well as members of the Revolutionary Left Movement (MIR, Movimiento de Izquierda Revolucionaria) or the Socialist and Communist Parties. Ultimately, however, their violence extended to anyone who might convey information or be vaguely suspected of being able to do so. While suspicion was inflected by markers of race, class, and gender, it targeted political orientation and the possibility of collaboration, providing few visible markers to identify its targets. The chaotic and at many points seemingly random abductions affected all sectors of Chilean society. We now know that many bodies were thrown into the ocean or abandoned in the desert of Atacama, further rendering their death invisible. The term that came to designate the missing throughout South America was "desaparecidos."

Desaparecidos (those who have been disappeared) is a verb turned into a noun in which the agent of the action is absent, an identity without a perpetrator. The concept of "the disappeared" first took shape in South America in 1955, when the Argentinian military dictatorship actively suppressed armed guerrilla movements, but it would gain currency with the actions of military dictatorships in Brazil, Argentina, and Chile in the 1960s and 1970s. The term denotes the unverified, clandestine nature of these actions, in which bodies were abruptly made absent with no body to mourn and no one to blame. Discussing the disappeared in Argentina in 1979, the dictator Jorge Rafael Videla argued, "While they are disappeared they can have no special treatment, because they have no entity, they are neither dead nor alive."[4] Disappeared people are not only excluded from the rosters of both the living and the dead but are also robbed of their personhood and turned into a statistic. The political scientist Jenny Edkins has indicated the politics of control that mobilizes around the notion of the missing, a politics that turns to the administration of populations that transform people into objects to be governed, instrumentalizing the individual.[5] Countering this instrumentalization, Edkins argues for a politics that misses the person.

The temporality of disappearance is also important: there is a date for the disappearance, but no specific moment of death. Recalling the early days of the dictatorship when this idea was still taking shape, the former prisoner Nubia Becker Eguiluz concludes that "in a certain way, most of us were temporarily disappeared."[6] Once someone was taken, there was no way

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

of knowing if they would return, if their bodies would be found or not. The cruelty of disappearance is rooted in its uncertainty. Those who returned did so with deep physical, mental, and emotional trauma. Page after page of prisoner testimonies tell stories of broken families, permanently altered life paths, and pervasive physical and mental health issues. The temporarily disappeared and the permanently disappeared constitute a scar on the history of South America in the second half of the twentieth century. They are the protagonists of this history.

The DINA moved imprisoned individuals through its network of detention and torture centers; the unexpected result of this circulation was a tangled network of sightings and relations. People were brought together and torn apart, but they formed strong bonds that united them in solidarity. For example, Miguel Lawner Steiman (1928–), former executive director of the Corporation for Urban Improvement (CORMU, Corporación de Mejoramiento Urbano), was imprisoned in several camps. In Ritoque he met and collaborated with the playwright Óscar Castro Ramírez (1947–2021). Castro and his sister were briefly imprisoned at Villa Grimaldi, as were his sister's husband Juan MacLeod Treuer and mother Julieta Ramírez Gallegos—MacLeod and Julieta Ramírez were disappeared, but many witnesses met them there. Many of those who survived Villa Grimaldi were taken to Tres and Cuatro Álamos and reencountered each other there, or later, in exile. We know of these connections because imprisoned individuals remembered and documented them as a political action. Keeping a record of names, faces, places, and dates—who was where when—was a valuable action in resistance to the state's erasure. Many of the camps were strategically destroyed or repurposed as the Chilean dictatorship transitioned into democracy in 1990. In their insistence on drawing, documenting, and remembering the details of their imprisonment, those who survived the dictatorship continue to resist its long legacies. Reading their testimonies, I realized that their connections demanded a specific historiographic approach: a history of many protagonists.

Spatial Solidarities reads the actions of these individuals as spatial gestures and forms of making space used to break through their imprisonment in different ways, by communicating with each other, caring for each other, and organizing toward action. Significant research has been done on these spaces of imprisonment from other disciplines. Scholars working in memory studies, anthropology, philosophy, and other areas have examined the built environment produced by the dictatorship. While the actions of the dictatorship were threatening and large in scale, the practices I discuss as spatial solidarities might be considered small and often intimate in nature: from accommodating bodies in small cells or knocking on a wall to signal

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.

presence, to memorizing the dimensions of a room, designing impromptu furniture and small accommodations, and creating a town through theatrical performance. The architectural historian Swati Chattopadhyay has centered the power of small spaces to recast the architecture of empire.[7] I turn to these spaces to examine how they were changed by the actions of the people imprisoned within them. These actions, I argue, outline spatial tactics of solidarity that imbue the design and making of space with the capacity to assist in human connection, mutual aid, and resistance. I have benefited here from conversations with S. E. Eisterer and the scholars assembled on our ongoing project, *No Small Acts*.[8]

Modernity and Coloniality

The actions of the dictatorship suggest that the regime understood the power of architecture to signify and represent, and mobilized this power to assert what Aníbal Quijano has described as the "coloniality" of power.[9] With this term, Quijano refers to the patterns of power that emerge from colonialism and outlast it, defining aspects of intersubjective relations, knowledge production, and culture. Building on the work of Quijano, Walter Mignolo has described coloniality as "the darker side of modernity," outlining the correspondence between the colonial and modern world as well as the recurrence of its violent patterns.[10] The processes of colonialism and settler colonialism extracted land and wealth from América's original Indigenous inhabitants and transferred it first to the Spanish and then to criollos—people of European descent born in América. Allende's regime dramatically redistributed that wealth: at the scale of the territory by strengthening the processes of agrarian reform to return land to Indigenous groups; and within cities by facilitating access to housing. Pinochet's dictatorship dismantled these actions by transferring land and capital to military interests and private enterprises. The populations that endured the most because of these policies often overlapped in their distance from both whiteness and wealth.

Spatial concentration as a technology of governance has had an important role in the history of world conflicts and a long absence in architectural history. The historian Daniel Nemser finds the root of these design operations in the Spanish colonization of América.[11] In his examination of architectural history's disengagement with the figure of the concentration camp, the historian Andrew Herscher traces how the spatial technology of the camp, a colonial artifact, returned to Europe in the course of World War I.[12] A quarter century later, the German Reich radically escalated the scale and violence of the concentration camp. These histories are both distant from and proximate to 1970s Chile. The rise of right-wing military

© 2026 University of Pittsburgh Press. All rights reserved.
Not for distribution. Provided by the publisher University of Pittsburgh Press for review copy purposes only.