

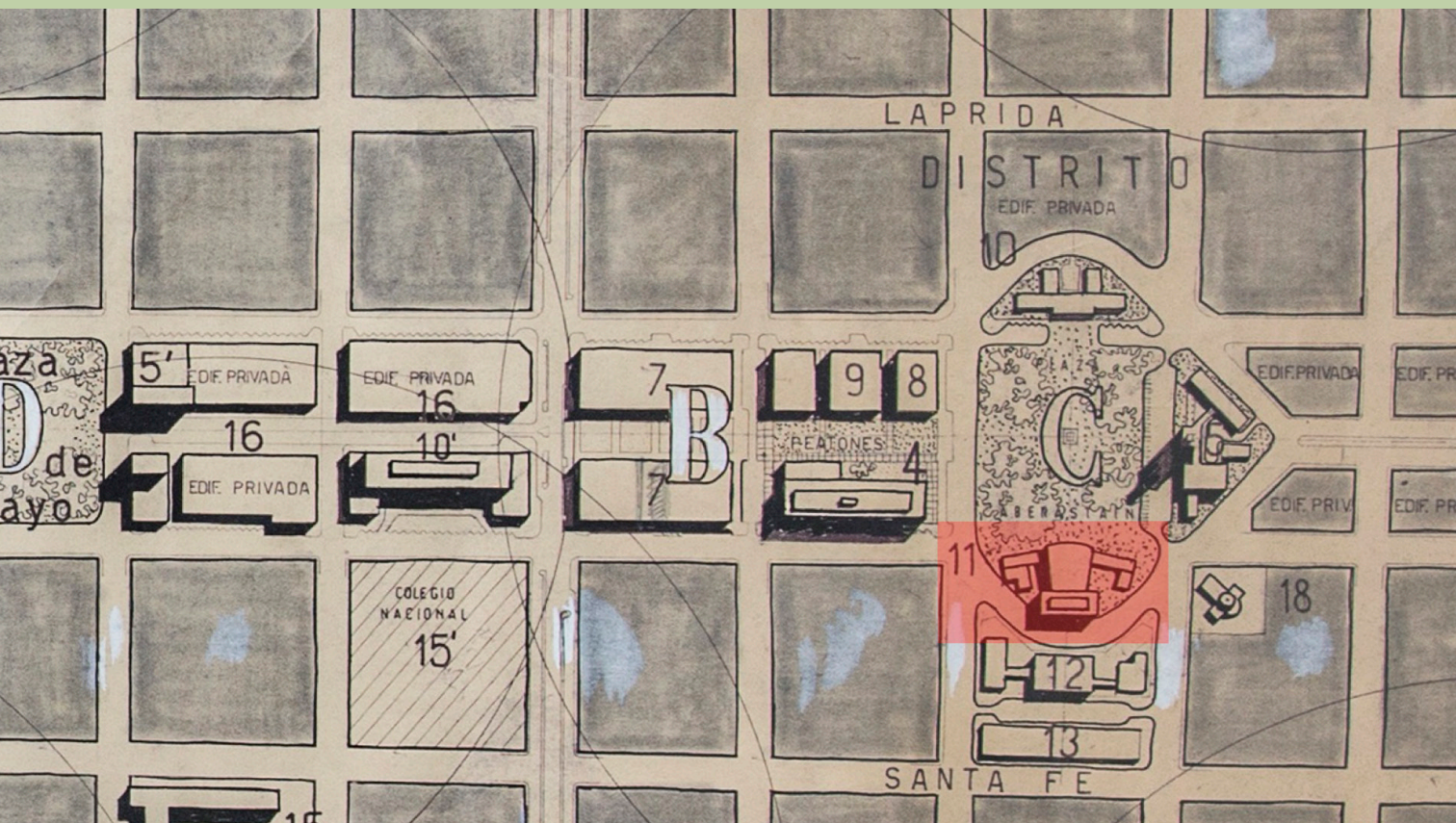
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# CENTENNIAL THEATER BUILDINGS IN SAN JUAN, ARGENTINA: BETWEEN LYRICAL TYPOLOGY AND ALTERNATIVE SPACES

SALAS TEATRALES CENTENARIAS EN SAN JUAN,  
ARGENTINA: ENTRE LA TIPOLOGÍA LÍRICA Y LOS  
ESPACIOS ALTERNATIVOS

EDIFÍCIOS DE TEATROS CENTENÁRIOS EM SAN  
JUAN, ARGENTINA: ENTRE TIPOLOGIA LÍRICA E  
ESPAÇOS ALTERNATIVOS



**Figura 0.** Detail of the Urban District of the Juan José Pastor Architectural Plan (11 is the Auditorium). Source: Urban History Museum (1948).

This article presents the results of the research developed and funded by the Faculty of Architecture, Urban Planning and Design (FAUD), through the FAUD-UNSJ Research Competition, won in the 2023 Call.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo ofrece resultados originales sobre las salas teatrales en San Juan, Argentina. La investigación inédita desarrollada fue de tipo exploratoria y hace foco en una circunstancia repetida en la ciudad. Para los festejos de los centenarios del país, se coincidió por levantar un teatro importante para la ciudad. En el año 1910, el Coliseo iba a convertirse en el escenario más importante, pero su construcción fue truncada y nunca se terminó; cien años después se inauguró el Teatro del Bicentenario. En el tiempo transcurrido, estos dos proyectos llevados a cabo por el Estado, presentan obvias divergencias y curiosamente, verifican notables similitudes lo que motiva a plantear la discusión teórica sobre Tipología. En ambos casos, el artículo indaga la actividad teatral local, que se mantuvo vigente por más de un siglo en dependencia de los cines y otros edificios alternativos (clubes, bibliotecas, escuelas, viviendas), las que no se identificaban con una imagen del teatro tradicional. Así se presentan, dos formas arquitectónicas que conforman parte el patrimonio cultural y material del arte dramático urbano.

**Palabras clave:** ópera, modelos, estado, teatro, ciudad

## ABSTRACT

This article provides original results about theaters in San Juan, Argentina. The unpublished research was exploratory and focused on a repeated circumstance in San Juan. It was agreed to build an important theater for the city to celebrate the country's centenary. In 1910, the Colosseum was going to become the most critical stage. However, its construction was cut short, and it was never finished. One hundred years later, the Bicentennial Theater was inaugurated. In the time that has passed, these two state-led projects present evident divergences and curiously noteworthy similarities that motivate us to discuss the theoretical aspects of the typology. In both cases, the article investigates the local theater activity, which remained active for over a century, relying on cinemas and other alternative buildings (clubs, libraries, schools, homes), which were not identified with a traditional theater image. Thus, two architectonic forms that are part of the cultural and material heritage of the art of urban theater are presented.

**Keywords:** opera, models, state, theatre, city

## RESUMO

Este artigo apresenta resultados originais sobre salas de teatro em San Juan, Argentina. A pesquisa inédita realizada foi de caráter exploratório e se concentrou em uma circunstância recorrente em San Juan. Para comemorar o centenário do país, foi acordada a construção de um importante teatro para a cidade. Em 1910, o Coliseu se tornaria o palco mais importante. No entanto, sua construção foi interrompida e nunca foi concluída. Cem anos depois, foi inaugurado o Teatro do Bicentenário. No tempo transcorrido, esses dois projetos liderados pelo Estado apresentam divergências óbvias e, curiosamente, semelhanças notáveis que nos motivam a levantar a discussão teórica sobre a tipologia. Em ambos os casos, o artigo investiga a atividade teatral local, que permaneceu ativa por mais de um século, contando com cinemas e outros edifícios alternativos (clubes, bibliotecas, escolas, residências), que não se identificavam com a imagem tradicional do teatro. Assim, são apresentadas duas formas arquitetônicas que fazem parte do patrimônio cultural e material da arte dramática urbana.

**Palavras-chave:** ópera, modelos, Estado, teatro, cidade

## INTRODUCTION

This article presents and analyzes the first official theater in the city of San Juan<sup>1</sup>, opened to celebrate the country's second centenary of independence. The building was examined through a historical perspective, which motivated the first review of local theatrical activity spaces since their inception.

In the history of San Juan's architecture, it seems contradictory that, despite a vibrant theatrical activity, no buildings were designed for that purpose. Perhaps, even for this reason, there was no history of studies on local theater spaces. This research is conducted to become an inaugural contribution to the recognition of the architectural spaces that framed theater in the city. The review of both situations determined the uniqueness of identifying two important cases in the more than a century-long study period. Both examples are lyrical theatrical typologies that complement other spaces that were, and still are, adapted for theater purposes.

Adapted buildings and those built for theatrical performance constitute a heritage where the imprint this artistic discipline leaves on any city can be partially rescued. Although theater is often an art of the present, and the space that contains it is considered an accessory, the legacy of performances determines in the audience unprecedented ways of looking, thinking, and interpreting the architecture portrayed and experienced in the performance itself.

The research registered the spaces used for San Juan's theatrical activity for over a hundred years (1905-2016), focusing on two landmark buildings: the city's most important halls, such as the Coliseo from 1910 and the Bicentennial Theater in 2016.

The study detected that the validity of theatrical activity in the city was initiated, consolidated, and endures in:

- Adapted areas (housing, commercial premises, and later, in cinemas),
- Private institutions with an assembly hall among their facilities (schools, clubs, libraries, institutes, banks) and
- A single official building designed and built by the provincial State, inaugurated in 2016.

Until a few years ago, San Juan did not have an example of an architectural model of a building built for the theater. Therefore, no typological evolution accompanied the development and growth of this artistic activity. Although active vocational casts, some private academies, and even the university theater degree program continuously proposed innovative productions with original dramaturgy, where they took place was not overly important; and *what* and *how* were more essential than *where* the theatrical act was being held or performed.

<sup>1</sup> San Juan is a small-scale province, located in central-western Argentina.

Without a specific architecture for theater and particular studies on the subject, the research chronologically reconstructed the network of theater spaces in San Juan to discover whether their characteristics could be incorporated and materialized in the Bicentennial Theater. Given the qualities forged by San Juan's contemporary theatrical activity, a debatable resolution is evident.

Even though there were studies and publications on dramaturgy and theatrical activity, this article presents the first results on buildings that hosted these events. The press was consulted as a primary source so the story of the locations and their periods of operation could be determined. On the other hand, the addresses were classified according to the original uses of the buildings: public (schools and neighborhood unions), private with modifications (housing, commercial premises, movie theaters), and finally, without spatial alterations (warehouses and marquees).

Except for social clubs, there were 17 appropriate spaces to build the theater in San Juan. These spatial alternatives for theatrical use were kept during the reconstruction of San Juan (from 4 to 5 rooms active during the decades of the 1950s and 1960s), and later, the quality for appropriating other buildings (in which seven on average in the last 40 years had functions) was retained. It should be clarified that many of these do not exist today because they were demolished or remodeled for commercial purposes. However, some photographic records give an account of their activity.

Given the background information found, the research focuses on analyzing the formal characteristics of the spaces and styles (as appropriate), which leads to taking the concept of typology as a central theoretical basis.

### Theatrical activity in the neighborhood

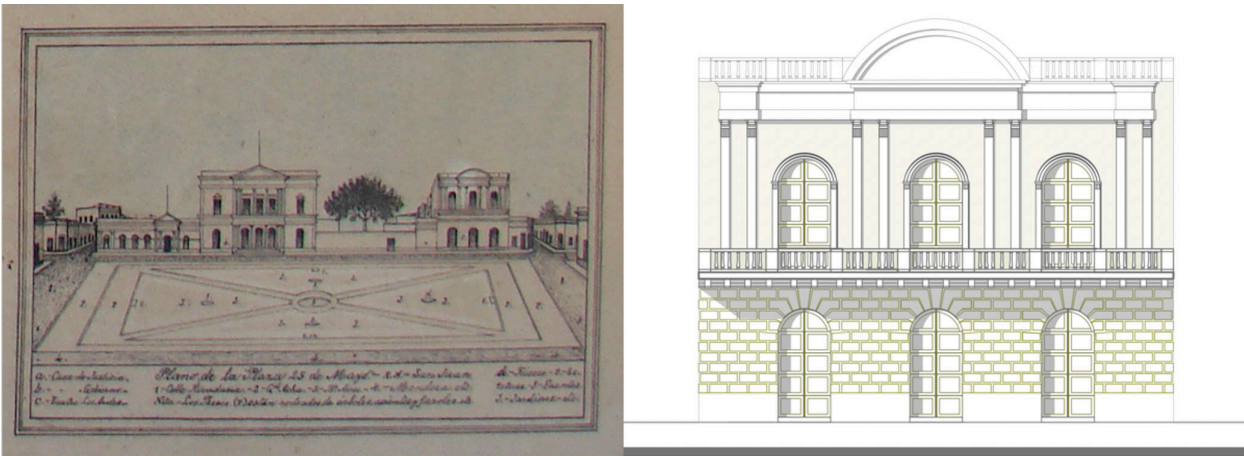
Various chronicles quoted in the book *Writings about the San Juan scene* of Alicia Castañeda (2011) agree that the history of theater in San Juan begins in the early decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and that its first performances were held to provide social and cultural exchange during the long and peaceful nights of San Juan.

Theater proposed cultured entertainment, teaching, adherence to good customs, and social figuration, taking shape in specially conditioned domestic spaces. The functions took place in the homes of well-to-do families, according to Fernández (2001), "motivated by societal needs channeled by the most enlightened citizens themselves in the face of State apathy" (p. 24). The theatrical imaginary was forged in an elite that could

## METHODOLOGY

## DEVELOPMENT



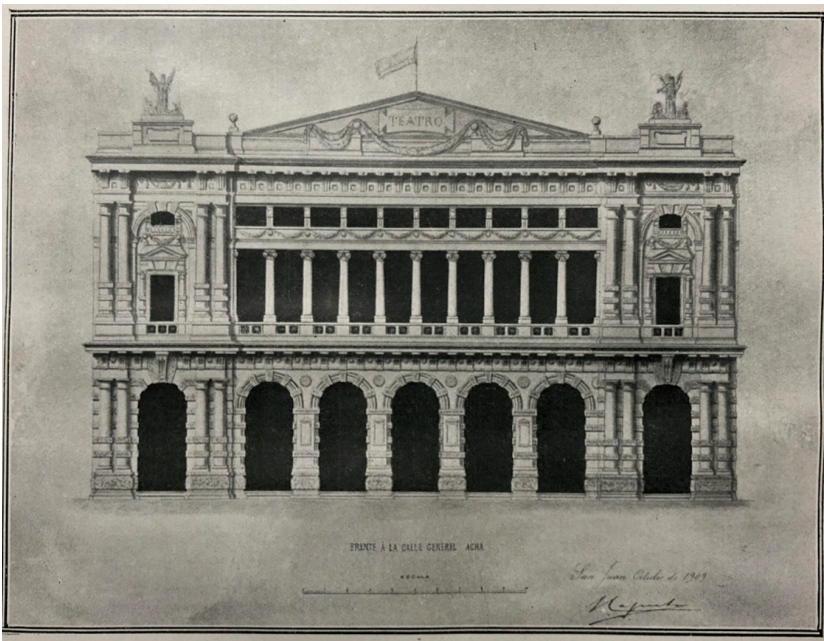


**Figure 1.** Plan of the 25 de Mayo Square, Vera’s drawing from 1891 (Los Andes Theater can be distinguished on the right), and a graphic reconstruction of the facade, according to photographs from the Agustín Gnecco Museum. Sources: CEDODAL (Documentation Center of Latin American Architecture) / drawing by Nicolás González, 2024.

see these vocational groups and the visiting casts in touring shows perform. Both artists could perform their works in private premises with a basic setup: a room where chairs could be placed and a painted drop curtain hung.

San Juan’s spectators became regulars and interested attendees, as the spectacle enlivened the monotonous rhythm of their daily lives. The newspaper *La Unión* reports that by 1880, the Los Andes Theater was already operating with intense activity from operetta, zarzuela (Spanish musical theater), and dramatic art companies. This building belonged to a group of merchants who received a state subsidy, exempting them from paying taxes and allowing them to organize various events (Fernández, 2001). The continuity of functions promoted an educated artistic taste among the public. The different genres hired conditioned the building to require constant maintenance, leading to criticism. “The public’s first impression of the company that performs in Los Andes was unfavorable. This is not strange... added also the inconveniences of premiering in an uncomfortable and unfinished theater”, appreciations of the newspaper review on June 4<sup>th</sup>, 1988. It is presumed that this was the only room with general and elite boxes, galleries, stalls, and a candy store. As for its characteristics, the theater appears in a drawing by Cirilo Vera in front of the 25 de Mayo Square, on the same sidewalk as the Government House (Figure 1).

The Los Andes Theater had a layout similar to other halls within the country. These halls sport Italianate neoclassical decorative styles, with cushioning, classical columns, balustrades, and finial arches. Under this guise, the only theater in San Juan also adhered to the European opera model, which was gaining worldwide popularity, although this hall was not exclusive to one genre. Studies on the theatrical theme in Argentina have shown that this theater could be considered second-rate because of the number of companies that performed. Later, severe damage was done to the building due to the earthquake that hit the area in 1894, resulting in its demolition. Even though its absence created the need for San Juan to have a theater again, building such a space would take more than a hundred years.



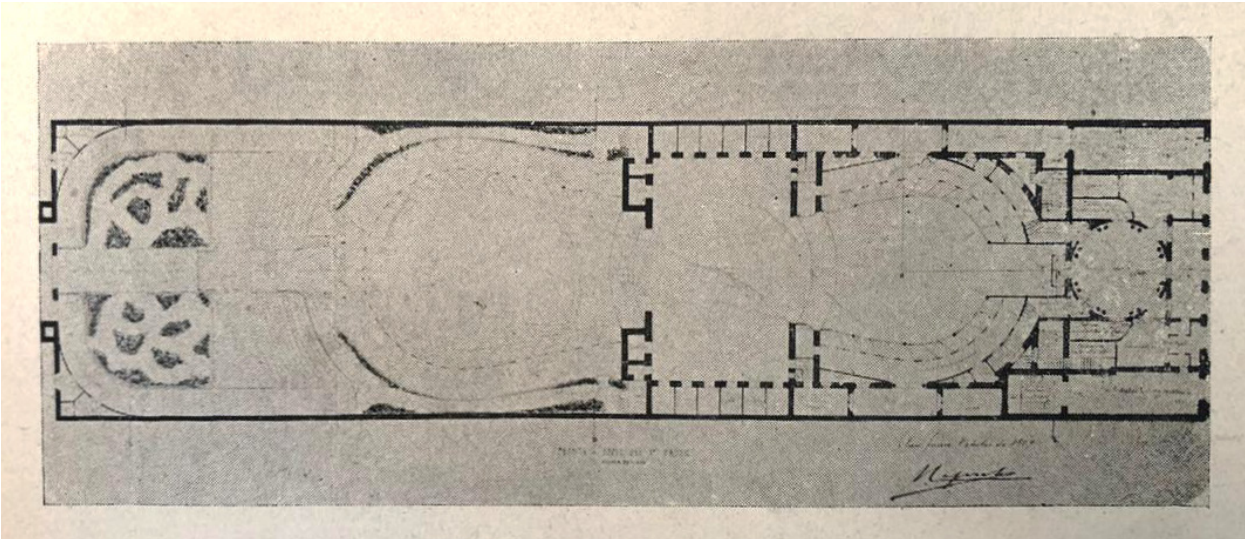
**Figure 2.** Facade of the New Theater. Source: Arquitectura recobrada. Vizcaino, 2021.

### The Coliseo, a municipal theater

In the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite the regular railway service, the more than 1,100 km distance between Buenos Aires and San Juan seemed to remain the same. Despite the constant rhythm of the colonial atmosphere, the city's changes were delayed. The prosperous and growing Argentina of that time proposed multiple projects to be built throughout the country to celebrate its first centenary. For San Juan, several of these would foster the transformation of the village into a city.

Around 1904, San Juan's people expected to show off new public buildings with different styles. The idea of cosmopolitanism permeated these projects' language. These were made known through newspapers, brochures, and gazettes, announcing that the State would change the modest appearance of the village of San Juan. Among other buildings, the plans of the Municipal Theater of San Juan, also known as the Coliseo or Colosseum, stand out in the book "Centenario Argentino", highlighting the interest in constructing that building around May 1910 (Figure 4). Lyrical theater took the lead and, in general, so did musical theatrical performances with major productions, which according to Méndez and García Falcó (2012) "also required architectural spaces with a strong, almost lavish institutional identity" (p. 35).

It is evident that a city without architects, as in San Juan during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, had to resign itself to what was being designed in Buenos Aires, where the prevailing aspiration was to turn the great capital into the Paris of South America. The drawing of the main facade of the Coliseo Theater (Figure 2) is a worthy example of the prevailing Academicism, which omits any colonial aftertaste. In this way, a new



**Figure 3.** Floor plan of the Coliseo Theater. Source: *Arquitectura recobrada*. Vizcaíno, 2021.

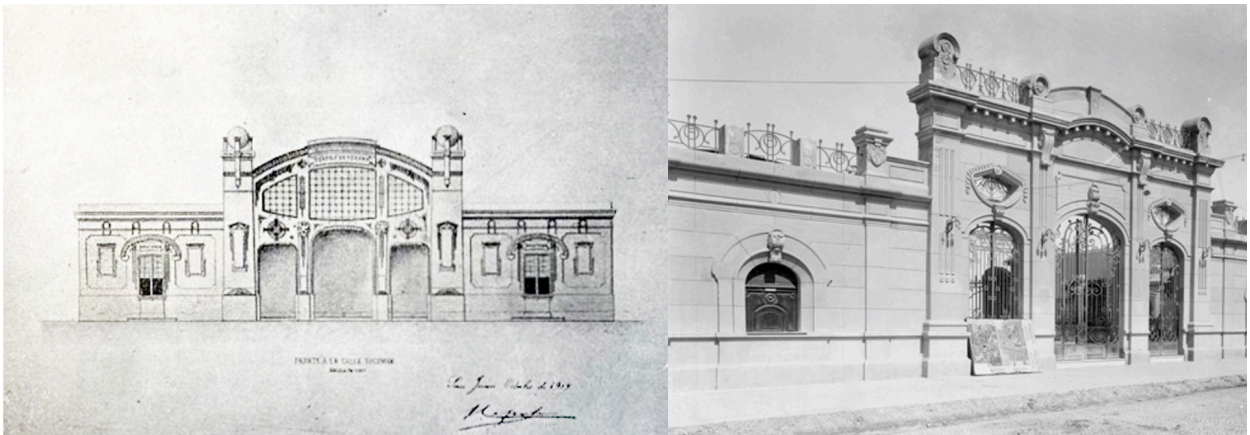
canon of architectural beauty is formed for the village’s drabness: symmetry, order, proportion, and modulation through the cushioning in its plinth, mannerist pilasters, moldings, styled columns with balusters, and the roof of the loft emerging between two sculptures.

The exuberances are not only in the aesthetics of the façade, but also account for the size of the building. The site allowed for a double facade and functionality along two streets: the closed room facing 25 de Mayo Square and an open-air theater for summer functions (Figure 3). The Italian-style theatre typology is interpreted correctly, given that it needs to be built essentially as a lyrical and ballet theatre<sup>2</sup>. The room was designed as a horseshoe fitting into the rectangle, with stalls and three floors with balconies. This model reveals the Europeanizing aspiration within the immigrant framework flowing throughout the country. For this reason, a building with this hierarchy fulfills the need to preserve cultural ties with the countries of origin and also to integrate, according to Schmidt (2018), “the new place of residence in tune with the political interweaving of actors and the consolidation of State institutions” (p. 14).

It should be noted that the project’s most unique contribution focuses on the stage, which acts as an articulator to determine mirrored stalls, whose use alternates according to the season. The stage is a proscenium of parallel curtains, and a rotating floor was available to dynamize the change of scenery. According to Tusquets (2019), this setup represents “an unprecedented contribution, an authentic innovation” (p. 95). It is important to emphasize that behind the Italian typology, the Coliseo installs modernity by proposing an unprecedented spatial order of the building, specifically in the exterior-interior relationship. Of course, therein lies the project’s fundamental value, of belonging, as defined by Waisman (2009), where a program

<sup>2</sup> The story of other Argentine cities show that opera was the main genre used to construct the new halls: Rivera Indarte in Córdoba, Argentino de la Plata, El Círculo in Rosario, or Juan de Vera theater in the city of Corrientes, among others.





adheres to a typology that adapts to local customs, such as attending a summer show under the stars.

After the effervescent period of the first centenary, the results were not as the State expected, and San Juan slowly changed its physiognomy. According to Videla (1989), without a master plan that included the Museum of Fine Arts, library, and especially a large hall, "Architecture for culture ended up being a set of loose and improvised initiatives, almost all either never or only half built" (p. 719). Consequently, only the outdoor theater was built in the Coliseo along with minor works of facadism on the sidewalk side (Figure 4), which means one can presume, according to the posters in the photographs, that films were screened there.

### The theater between movies

Despite not having a building for this purpose, San Juan residents retained their enthusiasm for theater, mainly due to the influx of cultural and entertainment events organized by migrant societies, which, as Fernández mentions (2001), consolidated an audience for the demand. From the end of the 1920s, theatrical activities were held at the Estornell Theater (Figure 5), the only establishment available after the Los Andes Theater disappeared. By then, the schedule offered was interspersed with film screenings, which, over the years, dominated the entertainment billboard.

It should be noted that, at that time, the Spanish, Lebanese, and Italian collectives' clubs included theatrical activities in the program for their venues, with a stage inside a large enclosure used for all kinds of meetings (parties, assemblies, congresses). This was the case of the Casa Italia, a project by Alula Baldassarini (Figure 6) that, according to Gironés de Sánchez (2005), "had a large party room, private rooms, and an acoustic theater" (p. 144).

**Figure 4.** Drawing of the project and built facade of the Coliseo Theater (1910). Source: Vizcaíno, 2021.

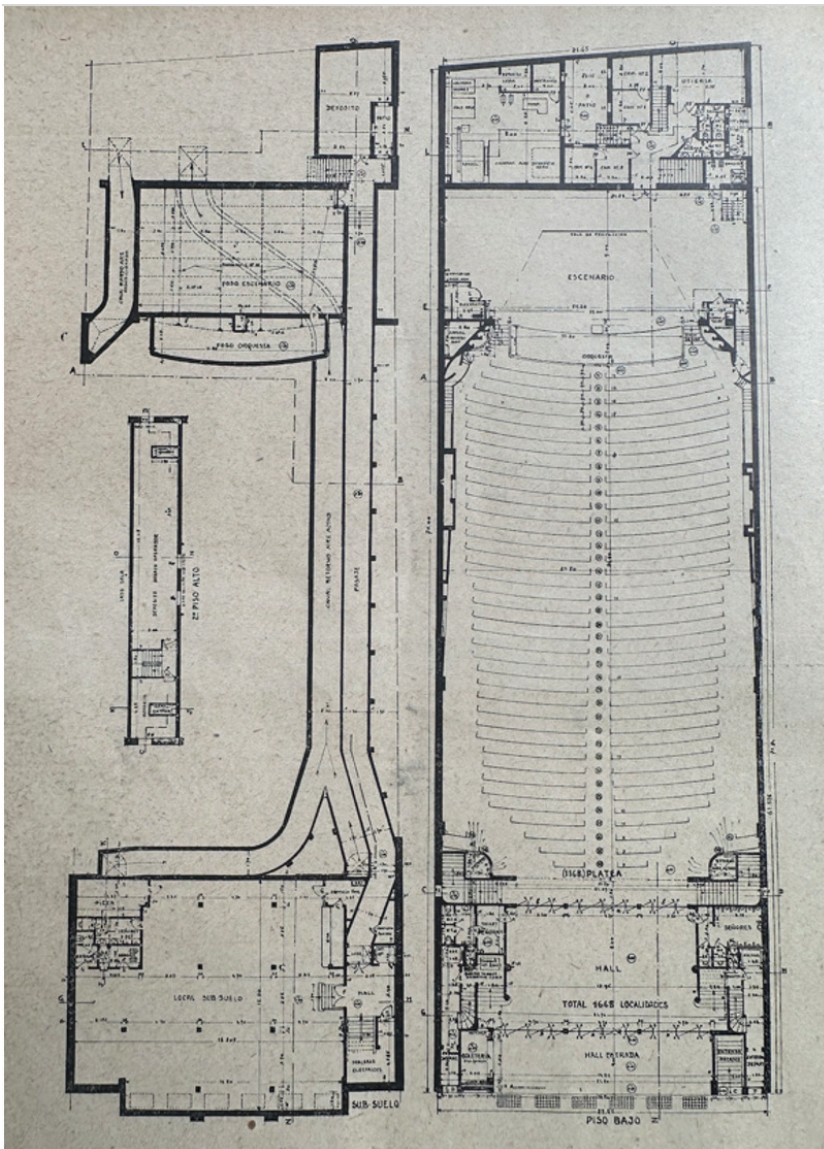


**Figure 5.** The theater stands out on the Casa Italia (1929) facade, an unbuilt project.  
Source: Arquitectura recobrada. Vizcaíno, 2021.

**Figure 6.** The Cervantes and the Estornell cinema-theater deployed novel architectural languages in San Juan. Sources: Urban History Museum - The Tribuna Newspaper, 1942.







**Figure 7.** Even with excellent equipment for theatrical functions, the basement and ground floor of the Estornell theater cinema set up the project for the best view of the screen. Source: Bourdon, A. (1994) CACYA Journal

The emerging movie business attracted crowds, leading to the Cervantes cinema opening in 1932 in front of the foundational square<sup>3</sup>(Figure 6). This space was promoted as a performance hall, holding concerts, zarzuelas (Spanish musical theater), and theatrical performances. The building's shape had the technical requirements for cinematographic projection, and its facade and interior decoration style were associated with an Art Deco language. Cinema in San Juan became a phenomenon that inevitably led to the creation of a new type of building with, according to Méndez and García Falcó (2015), an aesthetic avant-garde, that was consummated with architecture, deploying architectural abstractions of modernity" (p. 23).

In 1941, the Estornell family business promoted the expansion of one of the main areas and added a venue for showings, embarking on constructing another hall, encouraged by the film's box office (Figure 6). The project included a hotel, a candy store, and a ballroom, and was led by Alberto

<sup>3</sup> This building was not damaged by the 1944 earthquake, but was demolished by the opening of José Ignacio de la Roza Avenue, a new civic-commercial central intersection in the colonial checkerboard.

Bourdon. For the first time, according to Vizcaíno (2024), “the second Estornell theater would be promoted under the cinema-theater category” (p. 5). The brand-new room is presumed to balance both activities' spatial and technical requirements. However, the resulting shape shows this followed a cinema format, just like the Cervantes. As the Tribuna Newspaper mentioned on August 21<sup>st</sup>, 1942, **the room is for monumental projections**, detracting from theatrical events. Among its shortcomings are the extreme distance from the stage to the back row, or the almost zero slope, asserting that the main goal was the best possible view of the screen (Figure 7).

Between the two Estornell theaters, it is interesting to highlight how the theater's typology is renewed by its association with the movie business. The newest theater was integrated into a multi-purpose building, in tune with urban changes and commercial challenges. The company repeated the investment in twenty years, building another modernized theater. This showed how the massification of films required specific buildings. Vizcaíno, Garrido, and Bossay (2020) define the cinema as a material legacy that absorbed the rhythms and cultural trends of the contexts where it was implanted. The cinema business differs from the theatrical halls in its dynamics. It maintains the classic canons of representation and accommodates itself in any setting. Despite this, the layout, size, and rooms of the Estornell cinema-theater allowed concerts, ballet, and prose performances. It was consecrated as the official stage for several decades for the provincial galas on commemorative dates.

At this point, the theater-cinema relationship poses a key discussion for the research. As part of the **type** idea proposed by Moneo (2004), cinemas in San Juan repeated the same formal structure of theaters- a large dark box- to get the best view of the screen or stage. In fact, did both uses in the same space provoke an erroneous opinion in the people of San Juan to identify the shape of a theater? The interest in reviewing cinema typology, similar to the “absent” theaters, is understood as a memory of the current city. Therefore, and according to Vizcaíno (2021), the similarity that identifies a set of buildings, approximates understanding the reasons that justify these insistences. The interesting thing about this is to recognize that, before the rise of films and their new buildings, the theatrical content held in any field continued to attract viewers. Therefore, theater's meaning and transcendence reside in a network of material relationships, as defined by Waisman (2009), to which the imaginaries of the population are added.

### Modernity in the Reconstruction of San Juan

Regarding the historical background analyzed, it is argued that San Juan's history had a point of inflection with the earthquake that struck on January 15<sup>th</sup>, 1944. This earthquake almost completely razed the buildings, which later motivated the deployment and discussion of a set of proposals that pushed for the definitive reconstruction of the city, which took several years.

Approving an Organized Urban Plan layout took several years of debate and concretization, with many backs-and-forths. For Healey (2012), “the clash of economic and social interests, added to the political fluctuations of the time,





**Figure 8.** Detail of the Urban District of the Juan José Pastor Architectural Plan (11 is the Auditorium).  
Source: Urban History Museum (1948).

and the succession of conflicting reconstruction plans for the city, continues alongside an intertwining with fictitious speed” (p. 103). While Goenaga (2021) defines that “the focus of urbanism was on the demand for new institutions after the transformation of state institutions” (p. 7), it turns out that this strengthened the state’s presence in its role of commanding the reconstruction, and, according to Healey, its presence could be extended through its buildings. In the approved Pastor Plan, a Theater for the City resurfaced once more as a necessity, under the name of Municipal Auditorium (Figure 8). The building forms the tip of the new central avenue east of the colonial checkerboard, with municipal offices, a post office, and the neighborhood market; curiously, the denomination and inclusion of “theater” appear only for the design of non-central neighborhoods.

The final Plan did not progress as expected; it was only partially materialized, and the Auditorium was never built. Without an official room, the dependence on organizing and holding government events in private venues ended with the signature of the federal auditor Bernasconi. In April 1958, the Sarmiento Cultural Hall, owned by a primary school, was decreed as the official theater of the Province<sup>4</sup> It met two essential requirements: its size (with more than 1000 seats) and accessibility to the street. The initial remodeling comprised enabling the entrance and the ticket office on Alem Avenue and becoming independent from the educational establishment.

### Other alternative spaces

With the opening of more cinemas<sup>5</sup> in San Juan, movies exceeded their average audience. The screening rooms acquired unusual prominence for

<sup>4</sup> Although currently the Sarmiento Theater continues to operate under the culture area, the room is identified as part of the Sarmiento Superior School, which covers an entire block.

<sup>5</sup> Between 1942 and 1965, 12 movie theaters were built in San Juan, and an equivalent number of open-air cinemas were added, making up the neighborhood’s second exhibition circuit.



the city, becoming a model of a renovating architectural language. Meanwhile, the stage activities attracted a select audience to different spaces smaller than the cinemas, with disparate characteristics.

The local vocational groups regularly used the institutions' assembly halls: Lebanese Syrian Club (Figure 9), Casa España, Franklin Library, and San Juan Bank, which had a sufficiently sized event space, for between 200 and 350 spectators. Unfortunately, these examples were designed with minimal technical conditions: difficult to darken areas, chairs instead of armchairs, shallow stages, and almost no technical support for lighting and scenography. The deficiencies denote a particular bias of having been proposed as spaces for amateur theater, a reason that they failed to inspire, nor did they modify their characteristics to promote outstanding scenography.

Two architects participated in founding two emblematic places for artistic experimentation in texts and montages. In the 1960s, *El Globito* stood out (Figure 9). This was a chamber theater with a circular floor plan (a school of puppetry, plastic arts, music, and pantomime worked there). The architects Federico Blanco and Felix Pineda were involved in its construction and the drawing and painting classes taught there<sup>6</sup>. Later, *El Planario*, owned by the architect and actress Carmen Renard, appeared. This was a house that was remodeled to teach acting workshops and where riskier montages were made, which interested an even more select group of spectators. According to local theater studies, existentialist French texts dominated the schedule. The plays were performed in a space with the audience arranged in a circle or semi-circle, following the adapted Greek theater format.

For some studies conducted on local theater, *El Globito* and *El Planario* generated the substance of a thematic, learning, and communication change while encouraging the audience to have another version of the theater in a building that had not been built for that. In both cases, their smaller stages modified the distance between the spectators and the actors; consequently, so did the role of the scenography and the costumes, which provided another sense to the scenic event. Like in other cases, the alternative rooms consolidated a network of spaces for the San Juan theater, where creativity was constantly tested.

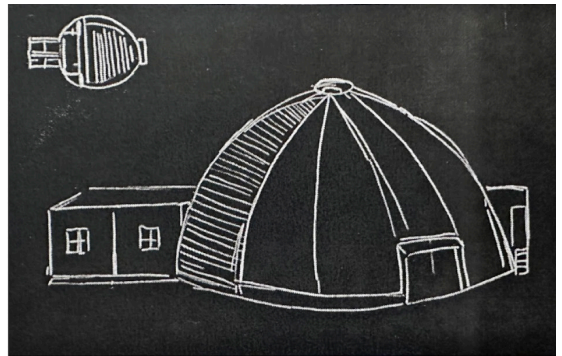
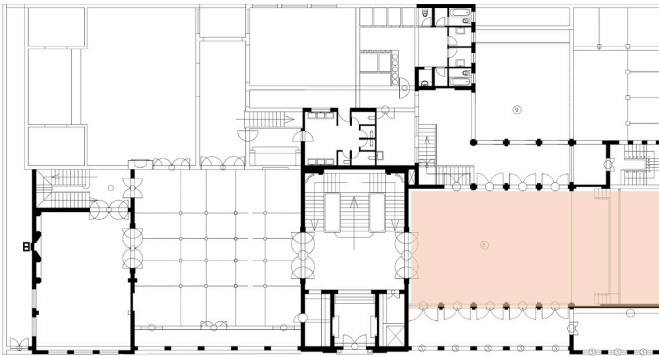
In other words, commercial theater was linked to figures from Buenos Aires who occasionally disembarked in San Juan, making stops on the traditional tours to the country's interior. With a large audience, these functions took place strictly using the cinemas and the Sarmiento Theater, whose multifunctionality blurred it under the concept of being projected as a school assembly hall.

### The great theater

The Bicentennial Theater, whose construction was announced in 2007 and inaugurated on October 21<sup>st</sup>, 2016, was the product of a process convened by the Provincial Government under the project and price public tender format<sup>7</sup>. This means the award would not necessarily be chosen

<sup>6</sup> This is currently the Department of Visual Arts of the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters of the National University of San Juan.

<sup>7</sup> Currently, a preliminary project identified as the 2nd prize of the competition for the Bicentennial Theater of San Juan (2011) is displayed on the web, a situation that raises an instance of competition that was never reported as such, nor made public and visible to experts or the San Juan community..



for the lowest cost or the proposed architecture's quality. In this sense, it is worth asking whether the definitive architectural project was decisive in choosing Panedile Argentina, ICB Construcciones, and Perfil S.R.L. as the winning companies over the other two proposals submitted.

The site chosen to build the theater was on the former San Martín railway station, a large block adjacent to the Civic Center (where most government offices are found). Its presence vindicates the leading monumentality of State architecture and, in a certain way, evokes the hierarchical location of the Auditorium in the Pastor Plan for Reconstruction: a building surrounded by public use space at the tip of a critical urban intersection (Figure 10).

Due to the celebration of the second centenary, this building had very different political circumstances from those of 1910. However, its program and final resolution contain the essence of the Coliseo Theater:

The Bicentennial Theater has a ring shape around an inner courtyard surrounding the room intended for lyrical theater. This urban cloister generates two gardens that attenuate and shelter the extreme heat. In their journey, the walker does not perceive themselves to be abstracted by any formal metaphor or technological boast; they recognize a dominant functionality and, through the set of volumes, identify it as an urban landmark (Figure 11).

As shown, building a lyric theater continued as the purpose and determined the architecture according to the genre. The main hall is in the "Italian style" and can accommodate 1,129 spectators. The opera's demands require a large stage (with a rotating disc 16 meters in diameter), an orchestra pit for 100 musicians, and masking the mobile acoustic diffuser. Inevitably, these qualities are directly associated with *typology* because, according to Forty (2000), "this outline replicates the conservative procedure in that functional-types are formal-types" (p. 304). With an independent entrance, on one of the side facades, there is also a smaller room that houses 190 spectators. This Secondary Theater Hall is intended for any performance, from prose to chamber concerts (Figure 12).

**Figure 9.** Ground floor of the Lebanese Syrian club (indicating the area of the Assembly Hall) and El Globito, according to the evocative sketch of the director, Oscar Kummel. Source: Writings on the San Juan scene. Alicia Castañeda, 2011.



## CONCLUSIONS

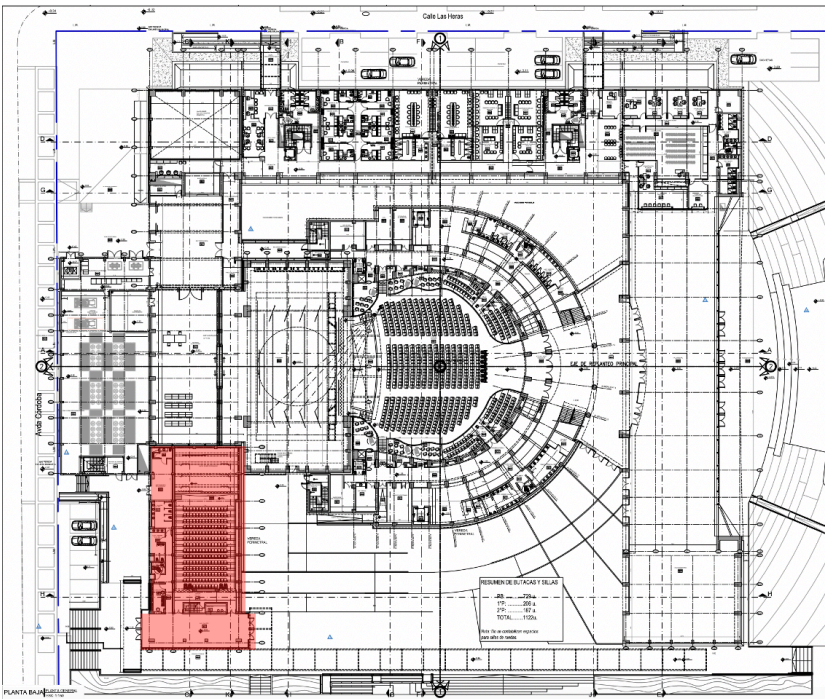
**Figure 10.** Above, the Bicentennial Theater at the tip of the civic intersection, below, its main facade. Sources: Government of San Juan, 2020a.

The article presents an unpublished description of the first major theater in the city of San Juan, Los Andes, and from this unfolds a panoramic chronology of an architectural typology installed between 1904 and 2016, at a critical political and cultural moment in the country. After over a century without a theater in this small city (with a density of 9.3 inhabitants per square kilometer), it was finally materialized with the Bicentennial Theater. Only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century did San Juan's desire for a high-quality hall come to fruition. However; regarding their formal characteristics and theoretical discussion, some special points stand out in a historical review of the spaces that preceded theatrical activity in the city.

Currently, the Bicentennial Theater, as an essentially lyrical theater, seems to sound *out of time*, according to Waisman (2009). The rise of the opera, which eclipsed the stages with repertory works of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, today maintains a general crossroads to delineate its future worldwide. The need for partnerships with counterparts, such as the Teatro Colón in Buenos Aires or La Plata, reduces the number of performances of this exclusive genre, as do the high costs for a hall like this, which is economically offset by other musical events (recitals and concerts).

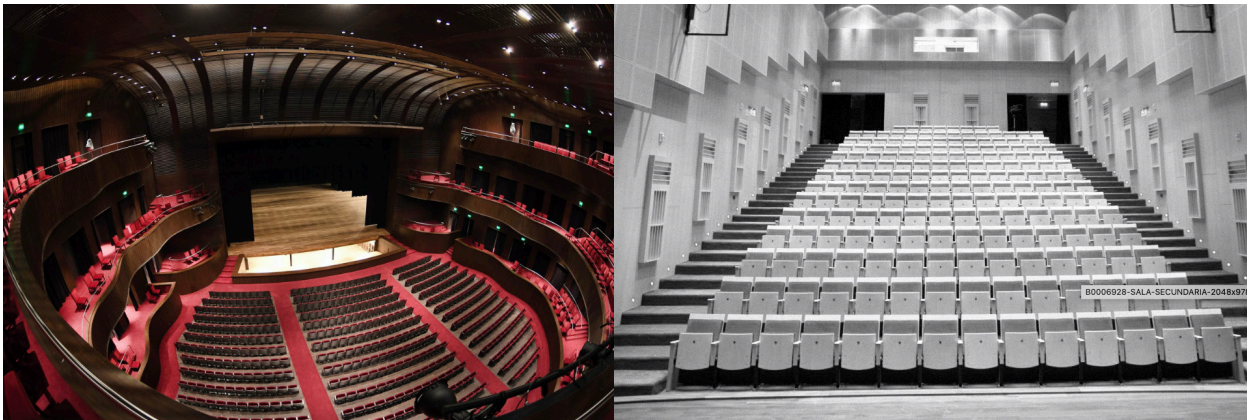
From the urban point of view, the monumental scale makes the new Bicentennial Theater a reference that emphasizes the perspective of its location on the longitudinal axis of the land. As for the interior, the lobby's





**Figure 11.** General floor plan of the Bicentennial Theater, and in detail: the 190-person room.  
Source: Government of San Juan, 2020b.

**Figure 12.** Interiors of the main and secondary halls of the Bicentennial Theater complex.  
Source: Bicentennial Theater, San Juan. Argentina, 2020.



oversized design does not justify its functionality. The role of being the space that anticipates and prepares to discover the great hall is blurred, as it poses a hierarchical competition between both enclosures.

The reference to out-of-time can be expanded to the form chosen to build the long-awaited San Juan theater, which used the same typology as the Coliseo Theater, which was proposed in 1900. More than a hundred years separate the unbuilt project and the recent work, with a conceptual contradiction, the spatial resolution of the latter, which validates and replicates the "Italian-style" model, interpreting this gesture as a typology that has not evolved, nor adjusted to new times. For example, the balcony layout, some of which are unusable, or the low slope of the stage, which makes it difficult to see the lower stage, raise doubts as to why another format of room, stage, and pit for musicians could not be implemented, more in line with contemporary technologies for live shows.



The general organization chart in the building minimizes traditional theatrical representation, disposing of a room with a smaller capacity and dimensions that can be functional for any of the scenic genres.

In this sense, it is worth noting that, at the same time, the validity of theatrical presentations in San Juan continues to take place in alternative places for local entertainment<sup>8</sup>, which shows that the public's interest in the theater is maintained and the local casts develop the ability to accommodate the staging according to where the function takes place. Given this, it is worth asking whether, instead of a lyric theater such as the Bicentennial Theater, it would have been more appropriate to build an avant-garde hall or a complex of halls for various theatrical functions, whose typology would have appropriated the most valuable quality of the San Juan theater and that determines its validity: that of spatially adapting anywhere.

<sup>8</sup> Currently, there are 10 alternative spaces that accommodate theatrical activity in San Juan.

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CONTRIBUTIONS

Conceptualization, M.V.; Data curation, M.V.; Formal analysis, M. V.; Funding acquisition, M.V.; Research, M.V.; Methodology, M.V.; Project management, M.V.; Resources, M.V.; Software; Supervision; Validation, M.V.; Visualization, M.V.; Writing - original draft, M.V.; Writing - review and edit, M.V.

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