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# Pinochet's monument: the Altar of the Fatherland as difficult heritage in the civic Quarter of Santiago, Chile (2003–2006)

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## ABSTRACT

Even though we recognise that all heritage carries inherent complexities, this article draws on the concept of 'difficult heritage' to examine the case of the Altar of the Fatherland. This monumental complex was created in the early years of the Chilean dictatorship (1973–1990) to commemorate the coup d'état of 11 September 1973 and to underscore the parallels between Augusto Pinochet and Bernardo O'Higgins, the hero of Chile's independence process. Based on an extensive review of national press published between 2003 and 2006, the article analyses the moment when Chilean society began to question the Altar of the Fatherland, particularly one of its most striking elements: the Eternal Flame of Freedom. In the context of shifts in Chile's social and political landscape, the article argues that the Altar of the Fatherland emerged as a form of difficult heritage in the early 2000s. Moreover, it suggests that the political class chose to manage the 'difficulty' of this heritage by blurring the Altar's explicit connections to Pinochet and to the dictatorship. This process sheds light on how the transition from dictatorship to democracy also gave rise to difficult monuments, coinciding with changing notions of *patria* (fatherland) and heritage.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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Difficult heritage; Altar of the Fatherland; Eternal Flame of Freedom; dictatorship; Pinochet; Chile

## Introduction

In March 2025, speaking on television, a well-known Chilean comedian expressed his opinion that Augusto Pinochet – the dictator whose regime (1973–1990) perpetrated over 3000 executions and some 40,000 cases of torture – deserved a public statue having served as 'president of Chile' (CHV Noticias 2025). Later the same month, a councillor from the district of Las Condes in the Chilean capital proposed that a street be named 'Augusto Pinochet Ugarte', commenting that both Pinochet and former president Sebastián Piñera – democratically elected and in power first from 2010 to 2014 and again from 2018 to 2022 – 'have the same strengths and flaws' (Quezada 2025). The councillor understood the street named after Piñera as a precedent that justified proposing a street named after Pinochet. Proposals of this sort had become rare in Chile. While Pinochet's death in 2006 prompted a brief wave of attempts to commemorate him, these

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faded rapidly. The homages in 2006 included a motion by a group of right-wing deputies to erect a statue in his honour, and another by a group of councillors from Las Condes to name a street after him. These proposals were quickly shelved due to a lack of public interest, the clear delegitimisation of Pinochet in the wake of the Truth Commissions (Rettig and Valech) and the discovery in 2004 of his illegal bank accounts (Huneus and Ibarra 2013, 204; Stern and Winn 2016, 312). However, amid the current resurgence of *Pinochetismo* and the rise of the far-right (MORI 2023), calls to establish heritage and public memory to the glory of the dictator are no longer unusual (Infante-Batiste 2024). In the early 2000s, however, the situation was very different, as society sought to sweep away all national heritage linked to Pinochet (Infante-Batiste 2022). A key milestone was reached in 2004 when the Altar of the Fatherland (*Altar de la Patria*), one of Pinochet's most emblematic monuments, was dismantled by the democratic government of the time. Although a number of Pinochet's supporters sought to defend it, the desire to be free of the shadow of the dictatorship cast by the memorial prevailed and a series of modifications were made, including the removal of one of its most problematic components: the Eternal Flame of Freedom (*Llama Eterna de la Libertad*).

The present article asks why, in the early 2000s, the Altar of the Fatherland became a 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald 2006, 2009) and how this 'difficulty' was 'resolved'? Our proposal is two-fold. First, at the turn of the millennium, there was a shift in Chile's political-historical reality, and the figure of Pinochet and the 'memory of salvation' (Stern 2006) – a narrative that glorified the coup and the dictatorship – came under close scrutiny and began to lose social legitimacy. Although it does not directly explain the transformation that the Altar underwent during the period, this structural and contextual factor does constitute an important piece of background. As Harvey (2001) points out, in order to understand heritage, one must consider the context in which it exists. The second part of our proposal is that the political class chose to deal with the emerging 'difficulty' of this heritage by blurring the explicit connections between the Altar and both Pinochet and the dictatorship. For example, the meaning associated with Chile's national hero, Bernardo O'Higgins, was reformulated to distance him from the figure of Pinochet and transform him into a symbol of national unity. The Eternal Flame of Freedom was also removed from the space and quietly transferred to the Escuela Militar – the headquarters of the Chilean armed forces (Bianchini 2012, 294). Given its profound connection to the dictator, the Flame's meaning was almost impossible to alter, making its removal from the public space the only apparent solution. Finally, we reflect on how the reframing of this imposing monument, positioned so prominently in the civic quarter of central Santiago, reveals a shift in the notion of fatherland and heritage from an 'authorised' concept of what should exist within the urban space – a monumental, hierarchical and militaristic image of the fatherland advocated by the dictatorship – to one that is more collective, every day and of the people.

Although on some level all heritage is difficult (Smith 2025), the concept of 'difficult heritage' that is central to the present analysis was coined by Macdonald (2009) but rooted in similar notions, such as 'dissonant heritage' (Tunbridge and Ashworth 1996), 'negative heritage' (Meskell 2002) or 'heritage of pain and shame' (Logan and Reeves 2009; Seguel 2019, 57). As Macdonald (2009, 1) explains, these concepts refer to pieces of uncomfortable heritage that plague the public space with guilt, doubt, pain, suffering, trauma and reminders of episodes that everyone would rather forget, but which, in one

way or another, inexorably permeate the social fabric. She prefers the term ‘difficult’, which helps to account for the complexity involved in dealing with this type of heritage (Macdonald 2009, 3).

This difficulty has several specific components. First, difficult heritage is inextricably linked to the traumatic context that gave rise to it, and attempts to give new meaning to it are, as a result, remarkably complex. The author illustrates this with the example of the Nazi Party Rally Grounds in Nuremberg, where Hitler gathered his supporters and delivered speeches in the 1930s. A vast complex of immense buildings and esplanades, the Rally Grounds were key to the glorification and strengthening of the National Socialist ideology at the height of Hitler’s power (Macdonald 2006, 10). It was therefore extremely difficult for the Germans to decide what to do with the site after the war, and eventually a strategy of ‘desecration’ and ‘trivialisation’ was adopted (19), leaving it in a state of relative dilapidation and neglect and permitting its use for activities that watered down its Nazi ‘aura’ (19). The example of the Nuremberg Rally Grounds illustrates that the complexity of difficult heritage lies in its social significance and visceral connection to the context that gave rise to it, along with the challenge of reframing and integrating it into democratic societies (Barros 2020, 254; Malone 2017, 447). The clash between the original meaning of such heritage on the one hand and, on the other, the new democratic context, is not easy to resolve. As the present article recounts, this was the dilemma facing the Chilean authorities in 2003 in relation to the Altar of the Fatherland. However, unlike in Germany, this tension was never discussed directly, and everything was decided in a highly ambiguous manner typical of the transitional context of the time (Bianchini 2012, 294; Stern 2010, 7).

Other examples of difficult heritage can be found in Spain’s Valley of the Fallen and in the case of Peruvian military heritage. The Valley of the Fallen, known today as the *Valle de Cuelgamuros*, is a heritage site whose history, motivation and context make the task of resignification extremely challenging. According to Gallego-Vila and Solé (2020), the monument was presented by the Franco regime as a space of reconciliation that welcomed *all* victims of the civil war. However, in practice, the memorial served – and continues to serve today – to exclude and humiliate Republicans, since it was, from the start, part of Francisco Franco’s nationalist reconstruction project. As such, any attempt at resignification is severely hindered. In the case of Peru, Milton (2015) studied how heritage and memory have become a key tool for the military in upholding their version of the violence that swept the country in the 1980s and 1990s. She argues that the Peruvian armed forces often defend a heroic narrative of the past in which human rights violations committed by them were mere ‘excesses’. Based on this narrative, Milton explores the museographic project of the Peruvian National Police’s Anti-Terrorism Unit and the Monument to the Chavín de Huántar Commando Heroes. In both cases, the armed forces present a memory that glorifies their actions over the course of decades of violence. The problems raised by this case relate to the tension between a memory of glory and one of pain that is embodied by heritage (Milton 2015, 362).

The interest in difficult heritage in the early 2000s also undoubtedly coincides with a theoretical, conceptual and social expansion in ways of understanding the notion of heritage. In academic and public policy circles, heritage ceases to be seen simply as ‘the past’ linked to the monumental, universal and glorifying, in what is known as the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD) (Smith 2006). Instead, it is viewed as a ‘process’

whereby past, present and future converge, and in which materiality, the symbolic, and meaning-building agents also participate (Harrison 2013, 4). In this process, those who engage with heritage play a crucial role in transforming it into a space of performance and affect (Smith 2021). The field of Critical Heritage Studies encompasses other equally valid categories, such as intangible heritage, which is associated with the rituals and practices that form the basis of identity, and, as in this case, difficult heritage, which is connected to a traumatic and disturbing past (Meskell 2002, 566). According to some authors (Jelin and Victoria 2003, 1; Macdonald 2009), one of the main characteristics of 'difficult heritage' is that, given its direct link to traumatic histories, it allows us to interpret cities as 'texts' (Márquez 2019, 17) bearing both joyous and tortuous marks, which, in turn, invite us to interpret present conflicts in terms of those memories of pain.

## Methods

The main sources for the present research are press articles printed in the *El Mercurio* (Santiago edition, in print since 1900) and *La Nación* (in print from 1917 to 2010) newspapers between 2003 and 2006. The two publications complement each other as they represent contrasting political leanings: *El Mercurio* is associated with the right wing and *La Nación* with the centre-left. The year 2003 serves as a starting point for the study, marking the thirtieth anniversary of the coup d'état and the emergence of the first disputes over the future of the Altar of the Fatherland. The time frame concludes in 2006 with the inauguration of the Plaza de la Ciudadanía, which replaced the altar, in March of that year. The search was further narrowed by focusing on historically significant dates on which debates around the notion of 'fatherland' (*patria*) were particularly significant. We identified a number of key dates within the traditional version of the national past that remain designated national holidays: 21 May, Navy Day, in commemoration of the Battle of Iquique (1879), a major military milestone in late-nineteenth-century republican history; 11 September, in commemoration of the coup d'état (1973); 18 September, in commemoration of Chile's independence from the Spanish crown and the formation of the first government junta (1810) and 19 September, Army Day, in celebration of the *Día de las Glorias del Ejército*. In addition, newspaper coverage was examined on dates corresponding to key events affecting the monument, including governmental attempts to extinguish the Flame, its closure and its subsequent demolition: 7–12 October 2003, when the decision to extinguish the Flame was announced; 19–20 October 2004, when dismantling began; 7 December 2004, when the Flame was demolished and 8–10 March 2006, when Plaza de la Ciudadanía was inaugurated. We then conducted a structured qualitative document analysis of 77 press articles that met these criteria, seeking to understand why the Altar of the Fatherland came to be regarded as difficult heritage, as well as how authorities responded to the controversy. For each article, we prepared a standardised fact sheet summarising the reported events, identifying key actors and recording particularly relevant quotations and notable moments.

## Context

The Altar of the Fatherland dates back to the 1930s, when Santiago's Civic Quarter was built. The result of a long-held desire on the part of the political class and in line with

other civic quarter projects that were in vogue in the early years of urban planning (Almandoz and Ibarra 2018), the imposing, modern site consisted of a complex of government buildings centred around the presidential palace of La Moneda (Bianchini 2012, 84; Ibarra 2024). According to plans put forward by Austrian urban designer Karl Brunner, the Civic Quarter should combine certain elements of continuity and tradition with an expression of the new political reality of Chile at the time, reflecting the increasing access to political power enjoyed by the masses (Bianchini 2012, 84–86). At the exact point where the Altar of the Fatherland would be erected during the dictatorship, Brunner envisioned an avenue that would connect La Moneda with a new National Congress building (90).

In 1941, amid the celebration of the fourth centenary of the founding of Santiago, the first stone of an Altar of the Fatherland was placed in Parque Almagro, although the monument was never completed (Gutiérrez 2017, 182). It was intended as the resting place for the ashes of all [the heroes] so that they may be venerated by the children of this country [...], set apart from concerns that sow division, as a symbol of the unity that the fatherland calls upon its children to uphold (Gutiérrez 2017, 182). In the three decades that followed, five other similar plans were put forward, but none came to fruition. As Gutiérrez (2017, 185) recounts, of these six projects, ‘three were proposed as monuments exclusively to Bernardo O’Higgins; four sited the monument in the Civic Quarter; three suggested combining within the same structure his remains, a crypt and a monument; and one even proposed its construction in the same location, near to the site that was eventually chosen’. Thus, the proposal to create a tomb for O’Higgins’ remains as part of an ‘Altar of the Fatherland’ was far from an original proposal by the dictatorship – the idea had been in existence for almost four decades prior to the coup d’état of 1973.

On 11 September 1975, to mark the second anniversary of the coup, the military junta held a civic event to inaugurate what was to be called the Eternal Flame of Freedom (Figure 1). The Flame became the first major component of the Altar of the Fatherland. On the night of the opening, following an address by Pinochet in which he praised the armed forces for having ‘saved’ Chile from Marxism and asserted that ‘freedom is not a free gift’ (Morales 2014, 7), four cadets from the army, navy, air force and *Carabineros* (Chile’s police force) handed torches to the members of the junta, who lit the Flame (Escobar 2009, 37–38). In late September of the same year, the Flame was moved to the Terraza Caupolicán on Santa Lucía Hill.

In August 1978, plans for a funerary monument to Bernardo O’Higgins were announced. The tomb would be installed upon a so-called Altar of the Fatherland, which would be built on the site of the Flame (Escobar 2009, 41). The altar would provide symbolic legitimacy to the dictatorship and establish an explicit link both between Chile’s national hero and Pinochet and between the coup d’état and Chilean independence. In the wake of the coup, the figure of O’Higgins had become central to the regime’s rhetoric. Having brought about a ‘second independence’, this time from the ‘Marxist yoke’, Pinochet heralded himself a ‘second’ liberator, following in the footsteps of O’Higgins (Escobar 2009, 42).

Indeed, from the earliest weeks following the 1973 coup d’état, the Chilean military dictatorship promoted the idea that its intervention had liberated the country from Marxism, inaugurating a process of ‘national reconstruction’ and the restoration of institutional order (La Discusión 1973a, 1). This narrative was widely reproduced in



**Figure 1.** Photograph of the inauguration of the Eternal Flame of Freedom (1975). Credits: Cineteca nacional, *por siempre libre* (1975), produced by the government information directorate and directed by Jorge Morgado.

the press of the period, where the new regime was presented as the continuation of a historical mission comparable to the origins of the Republic. Within this framework, the figure of Bernardo O'Higgins was repeatedly invoked as the 'hero of independence' and a foundational archetype of the nation, establishing a symbolic link between the nineteenth-century emancipatory struggle and the political project of the dictatorship (La Discusión 1973b).

In April in 1979, the urn containing O'Higgins' remains was moved from the Santiago General Cemetery to the Altar of the Fatherland (Escobar 2009, 72). Although opened to the public decades later, access to this new crypt was initially restricted. The Altar was inaugurated on 20 August 1979 in a civic ceremony to mark the 201st anniversary of the birth of O'Higgins. The ceremony took place in Plaza Bulnes – the same location as the inauguration of the Eternal Flame of Freedom 4 years earlier. Finally, on 5 October 1982, the Flame was brought back to the site, thus completing the Altar of the Fatherland complex (Bianchini 2012, 172). The completed Altar consisted of the Equestrian Statue of O'Higgins by French sculptor Albert-Ernest Carrier-Belleuse, inaugurated in 1872 (Escobar 2009, 29); the O'Higgins Crypt, created from Carrara marble by Italian sculptor Rinaldo Renaldi and initially inaugurated in the Santiago General Cemetery in 1869 (33); and the Eternal Flame of Freedom. The Flame was rekindled once again during a re-inauguration ceremony at the Altar of the Fatherland in October 1982 with torches borne by 77 young members of the army. The speeches again emphasised that the actions of the armed forces in September 1973 had brought about a second independence for Chile. In this sense, the Altar of the Fatherland came to articulate the military and the religious within a ceremonial dispositif imbued with a foundational meaning (Errázuriz and Leiva

2012, 113). The recovery and resignification of O'Higgins's legacy contributed to inscribing the regime of Augusto Pinochet within a narrative of historical continuity, in which the institutional rupture of 1973 was reinterpreted as a 'second independence', oriented towards the refounding of the nation and the restoration of its essential values.

As Smith (2021, 4) notes, 'Heritage is something that is done rather than possessed; it is an action and an intent rather than a "thing" or a "site"' and, in this respect, the regime used the Altar's militaristic infrastructure to actively create a new nation, one that embodied and reflected the values of order, authority, anticommunism and nationalism. Accordingly, the altar was instrumental to the regime's need to establish an epic and military 'origin' discourse and was very much in line with authoritarian trends around the world (García Canclini 2010, 159). Echoing fascist architecture, the monument's centrepiece was the O'Higgins crypt, serving as a material expression of the national spirit – militaristic and masculine – along with the brazier bearing the Eternal Flame of Freedom, representing the 'liberation' from Marxism by the coup d'état of 11 September 1973. The combination of these two components within the complex bestowed upon it an indisputably fascist overtone, which was reinforced by its stone construction, its imposing dimensions, its height, the white marble of the crypt, the steps reminiscent of an Aztec pyramid (Bianchini 2012, 172), its brazier and the equestrian statue that establishes hierarchy (Escobar 2009, 11–12). The Altar was designed to inspire awe at the power of the regime and appreciation of its liberating 'deed'. The aesthetics sought to impose authority by shaping a space in which to host rituals to strengthen the regime's bond with citizens (20) and as a reminder of the 'salvation' it brought – the 'sacrifice' (hence the idea of the 'altar') (21) made by the armed forces in the face of the socialist threat posed by then-President Salvador Allende (1970–1973). Thus, the altar represented 'the idea of nation: conservative, traditional' (Joignant 2007, 46) and the dictatorship's 'permanence and power' (Escobar 2009, 23). According to Wilde (2008, 156), 'the symbolism was patent: the dictatorship represents a "re-founding" of the nation based on its most traditional historical values'. Pinochet sought to present himself as a new iteration of the national hero, Bernardo O'Higgins, who at the beginning of the nineteenth century had led Chile to independence from the Spanish Crown (Figure 2). The dictator therefore proclaimed himself leader of Chile's second independence, this time from socialism (Joignant 2007, 36). What he failed to foresee, however, was that the Altar might not be destined to endure indefinitely, and at the beginning of the twenty-first century the democratic government of the time took steps to erase all associations between the monument and the Pinochet regime, and the Flame became far from 'eternal'.

## Results

### *The Altar of the Fatherland as difficult heritage*

Although the Altar of the Fatherland was mentioned relatively little in the public discourse during the 1980s and 1990s, this changed in the early 2000s, when it became the subject of considerable outcry due to its symbolic link to the dictatorship and Pinochet. Thus, at the dawn of the twenty-first century, amid a shift in the country's social mood that saw growing criticism of the dictator and the 'memory of salvation'



**Figure 2.** Photograph showing O'Higgins' motto, 'live with honour, or die with glory', on the Altar during the inauguration of the Eternal Flame of Freedom (1975). Credits: Cineteca nacional, *por siempre libre* (1975), produced by the government information directorate and directed by Jorge Morgado.

(Stern 2006), along with a loss of the regime's social legitimacy, the Altar became an item of 'difficult heritage'.

The atmosphere of disapproval towards the monument is clear from the national newspapers, especially in public statements and opinion columns written by relevant actors. For example, in October 2003, Roberto Brodsky, a prominent Chilean novelist and scriptwriter, called it the 'Flame of mediocrity' and asked whether it had perhaps become a piece of 'shameful' heritage (Brodsky 2003). In September 2003, a note in *La Nación* titled 'The Flame goes out little by little', alludes to the need to cleanse the monument's dictatorial burden, calling for 'new meaning for the symbols inherited from authoritarian regimes, rather than their obliteration' (Bellido 2004). Thus, in 2003, the flame ceased to be a relatively tolerable symbol of the dictatorship and became an item of controversial and 'difficult heritage' that, given its association with Pinochet, should at the very least be given new meaning and, at most, should be eliminated. It was no longer acceptable for the Altar to represent 'liberation from the Marxist cancer', as advocated by the regime's proponents, or for O'Higgins to have been transformed into the likeness of Pinochet.

The criticisms concern a number of issues. First, in the early 2000s, public opinion of Pinochet was beginning to deteriorate. His arrest in London in 1998, growing public awareness of human rights violations committed during his tenure, and the multiple lawsuits and judicial investigations against him for crimes against humanity were driving the erosion of his social legitimacy and a fall in admiration for the dictator. All of this was

compounded by the approaching 30th anniversary of the coup d'état, which was unleashing a veritable avalanche of memories linked to the atrocities of the dictatorship (Stern and Winn 2016, 400). In fact, for Stern (2010, 211), Pinochet's arrest marked 'the start of a major unravelling of memory impasse' and the emergence of a 'culture more sensitized to human rights' (Stern 2010, 212). Growing awareness of victims and a rise in the legitimacy granted to their memory was manifested in a number of television programmes, conferences, assemblies and cultural activities aimed at highlighting the importance of memory and human rights (Aguilera and Badilla 2022, 5). Memory of the victims achieved unprecedented public recognition and legitimacy nationally, demonstrating that the memory of the past and especially the pain of those who suffered repression by the dictatorship, remained more alive than ever (Hite, Cath, and Alfredo 2013). It was during this period that impetus on the part of the state and civil society began to grow in favour of the public memorialisation of victims through the creation of memorials and memory sites (Stern 2010, 315). At the same time, the memory of salvation (Stern 2006) gradually withdrew to a space of 'shame' (Joignant 2007, 122; Stern 2010, 297–298). One of the most prominent examples of this came during the 1999 presidential elections, when right-wing candidate Joaquín Lavín, a former regime collaborator, made a clear attempt to distance himself from the figure of Pinochet (Stern and Winn 2016, 294). Although, as Stern (2010, 269) asserts, the Flame (along with the Altar) was the 'sacred symbol of salvation', as the narrative of salvation was quenched, so the legitimacy of the monument also fell into crisis.

In this shifting climate, Huneus and Ibarra (2013) examined the gradual but sustained decline of public opinion regarding the Pinochet regime. From a peak of 34% in 2000, by 2002 it had fallen slightly to 32%, but by April 2003 it had dropped to 26%. Approval rose slightly to 29% in July 2003, but plummeted again to 21% in July 2004 following the discovery of money laundering by Pinochet in what became known as the Riggs bank scandal. According to Angell (2007, 140), a 'gradual erosion of the Pinochet legacy' was already in evidence at the time, and this led to strategic distancing on the part not only of the political parties closest to the dictatorship but also the judiciary and the armed forces in order to avoid tarnishing their reputation. The two institutions began to undergo a generational shift, heralding a new approach to the past that cleansed the image of their involvement in human rights violations (Angell 2007, 148). In fact, the army launched a concerted drive to distance itself from the dictatorship and the figure of Pinochet. Although the process was not comprehensive and arguably remains incomplete to this day, the speeches made by the General Commander-in-Chief of the Army, Juan Emilio Cheyre, point to a new path for the armed forces. For example, in October 2004 Cheyre attempted to tone down the association between Bernardo O'Higgins and Pinochet – a link made explicit by the Altar of the Fatherland – by proclaiming that 'there is a single process of national independence in Chile', thus implying that the coup was not akin to 'independence' and that O'Higgins was not Pinochet (El Mercurio 2004a).

At the same time, the figure of Salvador Allende was gradually resurrected and raised with pride by public opinion (Joignant 2007, 102). In the year 2000 an imposing statue was erected in his honour in the Plaza de la Constitución, only steps from La Moneda (Hite 2003), and in 2003, President Lagos cut the ribbon on the Morandé 80 memorial in La Moneda in commemoration of the doorway through which his body was carried on

the day of the coup (Hite 2012, 82). The two sites became commemorative epicentres for the Left and the focus of media attention on the part of a citizenry who were becoming increasingly daring in their celebration of the figure of Allende (Hite and Collins 2009, 393). Meanwhile, Pinochet was continuing to decline in popularity, motivating certain actors to write letters to newspaper editors warning of the betrayal implied by abandoning his memory (Ugarte 2003). Drawing on Huneus and Ibarra (2013), those who defend Pinochet tend to identify with the political right. The majority are affiliated with the Independent Democratic Union (UDI), a party founded in 1983 by Jaime Guzmán – one of the main architects of the 1980 Constitution and a civilian collaborator of the dictatorship – while others belong to National Renewal (RN), a right- and centre-right party established in 1987, likewise during the dictatorship.

In this context, the Altar of the Fatherland, sited so close to the statue of Allende and Morandé 80 and with its clear representation of the dictator, began to feel starkly out of place, and it became evident that an alternative was needed in order to alleviate the discomfort caused. Talk then began of the need to extinguish the flame, although ‘through agreement between the irreconcilable sides’ (Castillo 2003). In light of all of the above, it is unsurprising that one of the most prominent symbols of the dictatorship, the Altar of the Fatherland, came into question at the same time as Pinochet and the legacy of his regime were beginning to lose approval and social legitimacy.

Notably, the legitimacy crisis surrounding the Altar (and Pinochet) stems partly from the strengthening of victims’ memory, which directly challenges the prevailing ‘memory of salvation’. This shift is closely related to memory policies pursued under President Ricardo Lagos (Socialist Party). According to Hite (2012, 82), ‘in the wake of the 1998 arrest of former dictator Augusto Pinochet and with the dawn of a new millennium, the Chilean state began, with Lagos, to claim a politics of commemoration’. Key actions – such as inaugurating the statue honouring Salvador Allende (26 June 2000), reopening the Morandé 80 door (11 September 2003), and promoting the 30th anniversary of the coup – reflect this emphasis on commemoration. Thus, these official acts contributed to a broader reconfiguration of debates over the memorial’s legitimacy (Hite and Collins 2009, 393; Stern and Winn 2016, 401).

Moreover, Lagos’s government, together with human rights organisations, began discussions to create a ‘House of Memory’ to preserve archives from the dictatorship period (Rojas and Shaftoe 2022, 121). This initiative became the first major step towards the later Museum of Memory and Human Rights, established under Bachelet (2006–2010). Lagos also advanced human rights heritage construction (memorials) across Chile; efforts continued under Bachelet as well (Stern and Winn 2016, 316–317). These state-led advances in memory and human rights also help clarify why debate over the Altar’s legitimacy intensified during this period.

### ***How to resolve the ‘difficulty’? The removal of the Flame as a faithful reflection of transitional logics***

Amid an atmosphere of criticism towards the Altar of the Fatherland, in early October 2004 the government declared that it would no longer be able to pay the gas bill for the Flame. By this point, the monument had already come to be seen as the ‘Flame of *Pinochetismo*’ and a ‘symbol of oppression’ (Castillo 2003) – an intolerable legacy of

the dictatorship. Its connection to Pinochet was too strong. In one opinion column, a history graduate said of the Flame: 'As its fire burns, Chile's memory recalls the cruelty that took root [with the coup d'état]'. August 2003 saw a group of people – one of them a member of a well-known foundation – make a spirited attempt to put out the flame using fire extinguishers, and they were arrested by the police. Their motivations were eminently political, as they considered it 'a symbol of the Military Regime' (Emol 2003). Thus, not only was the dictatorial charge of the Flame present at the time of its inauguration on the second anniversary of the coup (1975), but it also fulfilled a symbolic function of maintaining the memory of salvation in the public space (Stern 2010) – a memory that, by 2003, had begun to lose its legitimacy (Stern and Winn 2016, 360).

The decision to remove the Flame caused considerable commotion, especially among Pinochet supporters. In response, Cristián Labbé, a former officer of the National Intelligence Directorate (DINA), the dictatorship's police force, and later pro-Pinochet mayor of Providencia, put forward municipal funds to cover the gas bill. Likewise, Sebastián Piñera, then leader of the National Renewal party, offered to donate 10% of the cost of keeping the Flame lit. While the government insisted that the measure was neither 'political nor ideological nor motivated by hate' (Gálvez 2003b), it was clear that the lack of budget was not the main reason for switching it off. Newspaper cartoons showed people bringing gas cylinders to subsidise the cost of the Flame, highlighting the absurdity of the justification.

In this context, for those who supported Pinochet, the attempt to remove the Flame was perceived as an affront. For instance, a Navy commander and designated senator rebuked those calling for its removal in *El Mercurio*, describing the Flame as a symbol of 'how Allende's administration was prevented from leading Chile into communism', and stating that such a measure was 'fostering unnecessary hostility' (*El Mercurio* 2003). Similarly, another individual, writing in the same newspaper, referred ironically to the 'curious way of achieving savings' and suggested that it 'reflects an aversion to military values and symbols' (Romero 2003). Additionally, a right-wing commentator lamented the removal of the Flame, arguing that it 'symbolises and commemorates our liberation from a totalitarian regime' and that the country remains indebted to the 'military government' (Pérez de Arce 2003). Such was the uproar that Michelle Bachelet, then Minister of Defence, brought the controversy to an end by offering to pay the gas bill from her ministerial budget, arguing that the Altar of the Fatherland was of enormous importance to the armed forces. However, the Altar was dismantled shortly afterwards to make way for the renovations, and the space was inaugurated in 2006 as the Plaza de la Ciudadanía. On 18 October 2004, the remains of O'Higgins were exhumed and transferred temporarily to the Escuela Militar (Escobar 2009, 59), and on 5 December, after 29 years alight, the Eternal Flame of Freedom was finally snuffed out. It was a silent and stealthy operation, as if to avoid hurting feelings (Bianchini 2012, 294), and was barely reported in the press. Thus began the reconfiguration of the Altar: The Flame was removed, and O'Higgins was given a new position of prominence. As part of this, the hero had to be redefined: the stain of *Pinochetismo* was scrubbed away (293) and the Flame – inseparable from the dictatorship – disappeared. This sequence of events clearly illustrates how heritage is a political practice that both shapes and is shaped by struggles over meaning, identity, authority, and power, as seen in cases where statues attract intense public and media attention (Smith et al. 2024). The

relationship that developed between Chilean society and the Flame followed a similar pattern and provides a clear example of the close connection between heritage and politics.

Likewise, the figure of O'Higgins, whose history is so closely intertwined with the country's independence, was open to redefinition by both the right and the left (Guerrero and Cárcamo 2013). In the context of the transition back to democracy, it now served as a symbol of unity and reconciliation rather than liberation. General Cheyre proclaimed in August 2003 that O'Higgins 'would be pleased with the efforts to "rebuild the national spirit"' (Gálvez 2003a). As O'Higgins' remains were exhumed, the General declared that the Plaza de la Ciudadanía 'rescues, redistributes and reconfigures all that unites us and nothing that can divide us', adding that 'there is undoubtedly only one process of National Independence in Chile and only one Liberator' (El Mercurio 2004b). General Osvaldo Sarabia professed that 'it is good to see O'Higgins as the father of Chile, since that is what unites us', thus distancing himself from Pinochet's interpretation of the national hero (La Nación 2003b). Minister Secretary General of Government, Francisco Vidal, stressed that 'the Flame of Freedom is of the military government', and its creation by and for the regime makes it difficult to give it fresh meaning (Gálvez 2003b). Thus, the decision to keep O'Higgins but to do away with the Flame constituted a compromise – a halfway house that left all parties more or less satisfied and avoided controversies as much as possible. This commitment closely aligns with the memory framework favoured by authorities in this post-authoritarian context: 'memory as a closed box'. According to Stern (2010, xxxi), this type of memory narrative emphasises the need to obscure the most painful elements of the past and to look towards the future to avoid controversy and confrontation. It is 'a conscious component – a political and cultural decision to "close the memory box"'. For Achugar (2007, 540), this type of narrative framework is also highly characteristic of the military world, which in this context longs for the 'forgetting of the past to overcome differences and move on with new and more pressing needs'. Thus, the resolution was typical of the transitional context, which Stern (2010) and Bianchini (2012) have characterised as ambiguous and 'formulated'. On the one hand, the military agreed to the Flame's removal, while on the other, the democratic authorities allowed O'Higgins to remain in place, albeit as a fresh symbol of fraternity and national pride – not of *Pinochetismo* – in the wake of the 'open wound' left by the coup d'état (Bianchini 2012, 292). This was in line with the discourse maintained by the authorities of the time, which centred on the need for 'unity' in the face of past quarrels. O'Higgins fit into the narrative of 'unity', while the Flame – a clear representation of the coup – was associated with division. What is more, the intensity of the Flame's symbolism was in part due to the fact that Pinochet ordered the construction of very few monuments representing his personage, meaning that much of the symbolic burden of the figure of the dictator was concentrated on that particular object. In addition, the decision to remove the Flame was very much in line with the military's objective of presenting a 'friendly' and more approachable face to the citizenry in order to leave behind the scars of past human rights violations (Bianchini 2012, 294).

## Discussion

The history of the Altar of the Fatherland reveals two complementary processes: on the one hand, the notion of homeland is put under strain; on the other, there is a re-reading of the concept of heritage. Together, they illustrate that 'difficult heritage' tends to create

conflict for societies, as the meanings embodied by it at a given point in history do not necessarily coincide with the expectations, values or needs that societies seek to affirm at that same point. Until that moment, the notion of fatherland – understood by Anderson (1993, 23) as an ‘imagined community’, that is, a political construction in which a group of people share elements of identity, history, culture, boundaries and a sense of sovereignty – embodied primarily by the Altar, was that of a society that had been deeply scarred by the military and the recent dictatorship. Pinochet had dreamed that the Altar would drive the mutation of the Civic Quarter into a ‘Military Quarter’ (Bianchini 2012, 171) to reflect the idea of a nation built on the military as the epitome of all power. However, by the early 2000s, the nation’s warlike rhetoric, typical of the dictatorship, was in retreat, giving way to a transitional narrative rooted in unity, peace, dialogue and reconciliation. This is demonstrated by countless letters to the editor on key national dates. Such letters called on the authorities, for example, for the Chilean flag to be flown throughout the month of September, rather than only on the national holidays of the 18th and 19th, since it would ‘promote in us the spirit of celebration and unity above confrontation’. On 18 September 2003, the *La Nación* (2003a) editorial implored that ‘looking beyond the differences and conflicts [of the recent past] that arise between us [presumably referring to the thirtieth anniversary of the coup] let us raise a toast to peace and unity among us’. A year later, and in a similar vein, *El Mercurio* (2004a) published an editorial asserting the desirability of rushing through the judicial cases concerning human rights violations, since this would ‘fully re-establish the spirit of unity that has always presided over the commemoration of Army Day’. These calls for unity championed the need to create a notion of Chile in which O’Higgins and the Altar of the Fatherland did not equate to Pinochet, the coup or the dictatorship. It was about the need to establish a connection with the country without the negative burden of the recent past – an attitude characteristic of a transitional context in which the official discourse seeks unity and reconciliation (Stern and Winn 2016, 273).

Another process that occurred simultaneously to attempts to construct a fresh demilitarised national narrative was the transformation of the notion of heritage. In fact, in the Western world, the new millennium heralded a change in the mode of experiencing heritage in urban space, with citizens beginning to view it as a tool for the exercise of democracy rather than as merely contemplative and aesthetic. It is in this context that movements aimed at protecting, promoting and enhancing urban heritage, complete with all its history and identity, began to emerge and intensify in Chile in response to growing real estate speculation (Ibarra and González 2021). Although neighbourhood and heritage rescue movements in the country first began to take shape in the 1960s and 1970s – many of them inspired by urban planner Jacobs (1961), whose philosophy of the urban environment argued that it should be co-built by and for communities – the phenomenon truly began to gain momentum in the 2000s, based on the idea of the values of heritage as an experience of democracy, participation, inclusion, citizenship and urban welfare (Smith 2006). Thus, heritage began to be seen as a tool of struggle for the defence of a city that is both of and for all – built from the neighbourhood up and open to different interpretations and manifestations. It should no longer be seen as a static entity whose language makes sense only to the elites, but as a cultural platform that embraces a diversity of non-traditional social manifestations. The Altar of the Fatherland and its Eternal Flame of Freedom embodied a concept of heritage that was monumental and

hierarchical, in what Smith (2006) refers to as the Authorized Heritage Discourse (AHD). In contrast, the flame's removal in 2004 served to transform the Altar into a piece of heritage that was open to the public. This led, in March 2006, to the inauguration of the Plaza de la Ciudadanía and, within its bounds, a 'new' Altar of the Fatherland containing the crypt of Bernardo O'Higgins, but free of the Eternal Flame of Freedom. The new plaza takes the form of an elongated esplanade, divided into three sections by Avenida Libertador Bernardo O'Higgins, Santiago's principal arterial road. The first section, located to the south of the Palacio de La Moneda, includes a surface-level water feature and the Centro Cultural La Moneda situated underground. The central section of the plaza, positioned between the two carriageways of the Alameda, consists of a rectangular lawn whose centre is occupied by the Bicentennial Flag, inaugurated in 2010. The third section incorporates the new Altar of the Nation, located below ground level, which contains the crypt that contains the remains of Bernardo O'Higgins, as well as those of two unknown soldiers. The crypt was installed in an underground space covered with a transparent roof, thus allowing light to shine upon a heritage that was once dark and sealed off. In fact, people had previously been unable to access the crypt, but today this is possible thanks to pedestrian ramps and the creation of a museum, which is free to the public. It is striking, however, that during discussions in 2003 and 2004 about what to do with the Altar of the Fatherland, its proponents were emphatic that the Altar and its Flame constituted 'heritage'. In other words, they declared it heritage as part of a positive discourse, overlooking any potential difficulties that it might represent, in order to grant it legitimacy and thus prevent its modification. For example, in a scathing response to attempts to remove the Flame, Mayor Labbé made it clear that his district of Providencia 'wants to preserve the country's historical heritage' (González and Cerda 2003). However, this attempt to keep the Flame in place through 'heritagisation' was unsuccessful – as mentioned above, the Flame was eventually extinguished and, with it, the notion of hermetic and imposing heritage. The Plaza de la Ciudadanía, with its new flameless Altar of the Fatherland, heralded a fresh concept of heritage that was 'very different from the dark and closed-off space' that existed between 1982 and 2004 (Bianchini 2012, 294), and the demise of the dictatorship-era monument gave way to a renewed vision of the fatherland.

## Conclusion

In this article, we have sought to answer two questions: why in the early 2000s the Altar of the Fatherland and its Eternal Flame of Freedom became a piece of 'difficult heritage' (Macdonald 2006, 2009), and how this 'difficulty' was resolved. We began by exploring how the Altar of the Fatherland – which was both created by and the symbolic representation of Augusto Pinochet, the coup d'état and the subsequent dictatorship, and which endured even after the return to democracy – became 'difficult heritage' amid Chile's changing historical-political context, in which the figure of Pinochet and the 'memory of salvation' (Stern 2006) were losing their social legitimacy. We then exposed how the political class of the time chose to tackle the 'difficulty' of this heritage by downplaying the explicit connections between the Altar and the dictatorship. This resulted in the removal of the Flame and a reframing of the national hero, Bernardo O'Higgins, this time as a representation of national unity rather than a reflection of Pinochet. The two phenomena reveal a shift in the notions of fatherland

and heritage from an ‘authorised’ and military concept advocated by the dictatorship to one that, today, is more democratic and citizen-centric.

The questions posed in this article arise from a context in which academia is increasingly interrogating the legacies of *Pinochetismo* in Chilean society (Infante-Batiste 2023). This renewed focus is due not only to the growing positive reassessment of the 1973 military coup since about 2023 (MORI 2023), but also to a new political development. In 2025, for the first time, all three right-wing presidential candidates had, at some point in their political careers, declared themselves *Pinochetistas* (Pinochet supporters) – an unprecedented situation (it is worth recalling that Piñera, a right-wing president elected twice in a democracy, voted ‘No’ in the 1988 plebiscite to prevent Pinochet’s continuation in power). In this context, the question of why the Altar of the Fatherland was transformed becomes especially significant. It helps us understand contemporary developments regarding the symbolic, material, and political legacies of *Pinochetismo*. It appears that the conditions that once led to the transformation of this monumental complex and rendered it a form of ‘difficult heritage’ have deteriorated in the present. Today, memory and human rights policies are in crisis and are likely to be even more so under a harder-line right-wing government such as that of José Antonio Kast (2026–2030). Moreover, the figure of Pinochet has experienced a strong resurgence in positive valuation, a phenomenon that was clearly observed at the presidential campaign closing rally of Johannes Kaiser (far right National Libertarian Party leader). There, amid the crowd, it was easy to spot people carrying flags, pins, and placards honouring Pinochet, as well as street vendors selling mugs, headbands, and T-shirts bearing the dictator’s image. This suggests that, at least in the near future, Pinochet’s legacies are unlikely to be subjected to the same level of societal scrutiny or condemnation that the Altar of the Fatherland once provoked. While this may change, the strong public censure that previously rendered this site a form of ‘difficult heritage’ appears, for the time being, to have largely dissipated.

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