The Designing of a Translocale: The Politics and Place of Fashion in Post-2001 Buenos Aires

by

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Introduction

Global dynamics have been manifesting in Latin American cities since their inception, but at the dawn of the new century one particular global dynamic known as neoliberalism has become a central issue of debate. Argentina offers a particularly interesting example in the debates over globalization, following the economic crisis of 2001. Argentina is a country with a history of global connections, migration, and international economic transactions. After the dictatorship that lasted from 1976 to 1983, Argentina began to establish a more functional democracy. Yet, the country continued to struggle with economic woes and a fuller participation in global markets. During the 1990s, under the government of Carlos Menem (1989-1999), the nation followed a course of liberalization and privatization, as the traditionally export oriented economy turned in favor of an import driven economy and a proliferation of new commodities from abroad. Towards the end of the decade, this neoliberal era in Argentina met its demise as unemployment and discontent increased, and finally ended in the 2001 economic crisis. Following the crisis, national and economic progress were the unquestioned goals of Argentine society. Neither old nationalisms nor global models seemed to offer a linear course of action, though the importance of both was not totally extinguished. Material culture and local space come into play as significant factors in understanding how the market society is being appropriated and facilitating a fuller and more autonomous participation in the contemporary world.

While the entire nation has endured the effects of globalization and liberalization, I will specifically focus on the capital city of Buenos Aires.
Following its insertion into the neoliberal global market in the 1990s, Buenos Aires became what sociologist Saskia Sassen calls a global city: “[a] major city [that has] emerged as a strategic site not only for global capital, but also for the…formation of translocal communities and identities. In this regard, [the global city is] a site for new types of political operations and for a whole range of new ‘cultural’ and subjective operations” (38). However, along the lines of Canclini, who questions the homogenizing effects of globalization on traditional societies, I challenge the homogenizing effects of globalization, neoliberalism, and even tourism on local cosmopolitanisms, which need not be homogenous either in cities like Buenos Aires with a long and distinctive history.

A heterogeneous culture of multiple points of view and small-scale solutions, reacting to the market and the demise of traditional nationalisms and labor movements is finding increasing articulation. This is happening at a moment when many traditional ways of identifying, and big business, are losing power to a greater number of individualisms and group identities. In the current phase of globalization, the increasing global flows of capital, commodities, trends, and travelers are often equated with Americanization, or at least, homogenization. However, though it has been that case that entering the information society requires entering the market society (Barbero), the terms upon which such a passage necessarily takes place do not suppose an immediate and nonnegotiable homogenization of cultures and their respective objects and practices. As anthropologist Arjun Appadurai emphasizes in Modernity at Large, the debate about globalization today is a “tension between cultural homogenization and
cultural heterogenization” (32) when “[m]ore persons in more parts of the world consider a wider set of possible lives than they ever did before” (53).

Buenos Aires, however, is a large and very diverse city that is difficult to conceptualize in one motion. For this reason, I chose to look at the “translocal community” in a specific neighborhood of the city known since the 1970s as Palermo Viejo, and recently renamed Palermo Soho. It is a neighborhood within a much larger neighborhood known simply as Palermo, which contains numerous parks and grand avenues. Palermo Viejo, or Palermo Soho, is an area of about 900,000 square meters that was traditionally a residential neighborhood for working class families, with a cultural and architectural history dating back to the late 19th century. In the past decade, however, it has turned into a center of shopping, fashion, dining, and tourism, having been refabricated under a new bohemian-chic image; a place of global connections with a very local, traditional feel. Palermo Soho is an example of Appadurai’s concept of a *translocale*. A *translocale* is a site where “the logic of movement is provided by the leisure industries, which create tourist sites…[and] complex conditions for the production and reproduction of locality…[in which] the local subjectivity itself is commoditized, and the tendencies of [the] nation state [are to] erase internal, local dynamics through …modes of regulation, credentialization, and image production” (192).

The post-2001 fashion industry in Palermo Soho is a particularly illustrative process and form of cultural appropriation that shows the importance of this *translocale*. Canclini notes that in an increasingly transnationalized world, commodities that are consumed (such as clothing) can lose ties with their places of
origin. But in Palermo Soho, commodities can also reinforce these ties, both as an economic strategy of the government and industrialists to revitalize a productive middle class in an export economy, and as material products of aesthetic and personal experimentation. Perhaps taking fashion as the frame of reference for material culture and consumption may seem slightly out of kilter with larger cultural practices because of the ephemeral, frenzied nature usually associated with the practice of shopping and cooling these items. However, in this neighborhood, fashion commodities are being created and distributed by many local designers and small business owners who have found a way to recover after the 2001 crisis.

For French philosopher Gilles Lipovetsky, fashion allows the “demands and defensive tactics of special-interest groups” to become “more negotiable:” as individual creativity and local particularisms manifest in the commodities of fashion—within the global realm of fashion yet not entirely controlled by it— and the strength in the “element of playfulness” in individual design fortifies the “economic ethos” and cultural pluralisms that become a more robust and accepted element of a contemporary market-mediated democracy (7). Fashion combines nostalgia and imagination (Appadurai, 77), taking the body as its terrain, blurring individual needs acquired through commodities with social distinction and negotiation of identities. Fashion in most postindustrialized nations usually displaces production from consumption, taking pieces produced in a variety of global locations and deterritorializing them in glossy print or shopping mall storefronts.
However, fashion in Palermo Soho competes directly with global brands often found in magazines and shopping malls and does not displace them, but rather offers a counter argument by *reterritorializing* the relationship between producer and commodity in a *translocale* name branded for fashion itself. Appadurai’s focus on globalization revolves heavily around the concept of the deterritorialization of locales caused transnational global flows. But in Palermo Soho, I have witnessed more of a push and pull relationship. Independent design and artisanship is reterritorializing the space within the nation, while simultaneously opening it up to an international consuming public and global trends in aesthetics. As consumers of fashion mediate the array of colorful choices at their fingertips, fantasy mixes with nostalgia, heritage tourism with cosmopolitanism, and *underground* design with bargain hunting. In Palermo Soho it is fashion, a quasi-epitome of the hedonistic superficiality of late-capitalist consumption, that is also a medium for individuality and agency, and a mediator of the diverse, and contradictory elements of consumer culture where both producers and consumers personalize the commodity and give it meaning. Thus, despite its organizing principles and expansion through markets, fashion is also a materialized form of articulation of differences, not only of taste and class, but also of cultural or personal narratives and relationships to global flows.

Local forms of knowledge have always been in relation to foreign, or at least non-local, interactions that end up actually constituting in large part how locals learn to produce in their own conditions (Appadurai, 181). This is being facilitated

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1 I place *underground* in italics because it is the word used in Spanish by many of the texts and informants that I cite.
in Palermo Soho not only by the individual agency of the creators of the products, but large scale industrialists, non-profit foundations, the University of Buenos Aires, and other government-associated agencies; all teaming together to creatively and consciously revitalize the national economy and identity through spaces known as “circuits of design.” The contradiction of this process is that, while it embodies the deterritorialization that Appadurai and others describe as a defining facet of globalization, there is a contentious effort to reterritorialize the space through the production of “authentic” local objects.

I will argue that the translocale of Palermo Soho has become the crossroads of a local cultural response to neoliberal policies and their consequences. Through their appropriation of the fashion industry, several sectors of civil society have taken up agency within the market, transnational flows of information, and aesthetics to reposition Argentina in relation to global capitalism and symbolic economies of consumption. This response, however, is not without contradictions. Positioning one locale in relationship to the larger world of commodities and identities is not a task of either-or, but rather an exercise in understanding who is claiming agency and how. My approach to translocales differs with Appadurai’s definition in so much as he describes them as being created through “externally imposed” modes of regulation. The deterritorializing effects of globalization do not signal a disappearance of meaning associated with specific neighborhoods, but do signal a drastic change in meanings and practices in these places. Palermo Soho is a site that is playing with traditional paradigms of the relationship between production and consumption, creating a symbolic space of meanings out of a
functional place of work and commerce that is inserted in a larger map of industrial redevelopment within the nation state. It is a deliberate process that coincides with a rehabilitation of local identities through the market and global trends. It is a site in which cultural differences between the various actors in the scene are articulated through experimentation and exchange, where commercial and individual values interplay in ways that underline the utilization of fashion as both a democratizing and personalizing tool.

Fashion has been able to accomplish this task for several reasons. In the first place, following the devaluation of the peso and the shortage of resources that resulted from the end of import substitution for national production, many of the newly unemployed were able to begin producing articles of clothing at relatively low cost, and sell them to a market that no longer had access to inexpensive imported goods. The low costs of their articles also became very attractive to foreign travelers visiting the suddenly inexpensive Buenos Aires. Beyond this, the University of Buenos Aires and certain non-profit organizations have established a structural framework for fashion designers to be able to begin starting their enterprises. Individual design and playfulness with aesthetic forms have gradually become more pronounced in the businesses in Palermo Soho, and more respected by Argentine society at large. On the one hand these creators of clothing demonstrate an economic adaptation to post-2001 conditions, while on the other hand they are rejecting corporate modes of production and mass marketed trends that characterized the import substitution model of the 1990s’ neoliberalism.
Anthropology that attempts to engage with theories of “cultural contact” cannot simply attempt to contrast groups by only what “differentiates” them (Canclini, 90). Commodities and practices that are shared in common between different societies, such as the United States and Argentina, do not reflect common appropriations of these cultural forms. The circumstances out of which they have emerged, and the ways in which they have been experienced are different in not-so-subtle ways. Intellectually unraveling the factors and contradictions of a cultural politics in a cosmopolitan *translocale* is an emergent challenge for ethnographers, but not only for ethnographers. It is because they are not the only ones linking, as Appadurai puts it, the relationship between imagination and social life (55). The cultural response that I am analyzing is simultaneously being interpreted and steered by those producing this creative response: students, designers, artisans, and industrial organizations, to name a few, are endeavoring to turn Argentina into a “creator of trends” to deal with the world on their terms, so much as they can. Thus, I cannot pretend to be the sole interpreter analyzing field-based evidence against theoretical texts; the ethnography I endeavored became a meeting of minds in many respects, as the locals I talked to were participating in the discourse of this cultural response in their own city.

Ideals and practices go hand in hand as groups and individuals find and mediate their agency through cultural forms, be they materials or practices. In Palermo Soho following the neoliberal era and 2001 crisis, an alternative form of fashion, distinct from corporate models and values of competition, has created a translocal alternative to dominant systems. My field research was conducted during
my study abroad semester with FLACSO (*Facultad Latino Americana de Ciencias Sociales*) Buenos Aires from February to July of 2007, and during a two-week investigation in January 2008. When I returned in 2008, I was able to live in and experience this neighborhood, talking to designers and artisans in the weekend fairs, and was able to establish contacts with members of organizations that have been facilitating the emergence of a different sort of fashion industry. In a sense, this investigation took cultural studies out of the academy and into the locale more directly than I expected, as the social actors present articulated a stance on globalization that was often surprisingly revealing.

This work is divided into four chapters. In the first chapter, I will go back into a recent political history of Argentina as a nation, in order to more fully comprehend the factors that led to globalization. The role of neoliberalism, and U.S. based market expansion, is central to a historical understanding of contemporary globalization in Buenos Aires. Argentina’s well-established history as a nation with one of the strongest labor movements in the world—embodied in the country’s most prolific political figure, Juan Domingo Perón—met its demise as U.S. Cold War policies affected Argentina and precluded later neoliberal policies. This chapter addresses the relationship, ideologically and economically, between these two nations as a fulcrum upon which events and experiences have shifted, following Argentina’s emergence out of the dictatorship into a democratic society, coupled with an often barely functioning economy.
The second chapter attempts to illustrate the character of the neighborhood that I have taken as my subject in this study, unraveling the historical paradigms that have created the space, and that underpin the traditional identity that is seen by some as being eroded by the globalized name branding and conversion of the traditional neighborhood into the Soho of the South. It is a site that is at once tied to the city and its history, a place of personal narratives and grand narratives of reformation, yet at the same time a locale that transcends locality and becomes a meeting place of global flows. It is here that I investigate the contradictions and conflicts of the privatization of space.

The third chapter explores the production and sale of commodities within the neighborhood, and that takes the neighborhood as its spatial context. My primary ethnographic source is the weekend feria\textsuperscript{2} in the Plaza Cortazar, where artisans, designers, locals, and tourists come together to engage in a ritual of consumption that parallels neither mall shopping, nor “ethnic” tourism. I will also describe the non-profit and industrial entities that are instrumental in the neighborhood’s development within a larger process of national revitalization. It will become clear how the new models of production challenge corporate or liberal ideas of what constitutes progress.

The final chapter attempts to bridge many of these issues through an analysis and first hand ethnographic account of consumption in the neighborhood. Participant observation in the ferias, and a notation of trends in a localized global

\textsuperscript{2} Feria roughly translates as fair (n.), but in Palermo Soho it can refer to both the public fair of artisanship in the Plaza, as well the privately owned indoor corrals selling fashion that surround the Plaza. I will continue to use the Spanish term due to the flexibility of meanings it allows.
context, open up the possibility to demonstrate that “consumption is good for thinking,” to use Canclini’s maxim. Through analyzing both the ritual of shopping in the Plaza’s weekend *ferias* and the objects themselves, it becomes clearer how postmodern deterritorialization and the “disarticulation of the subject” are changing tastes across cultures in this translocal scene.
Chapter I
Politics and Urban Culture in Buenos Aires

History and progress are always contentious forces. Taking heed of what has happened in the past informs any path towards progress. Argentina has gone through many successive political and historical cycles, each one responding to the last and seeking to make a departure towards a better future. In this chapter, I seek to demonstrate the political processes that affected the porteño \(^3\) public in a way that illustrates the background to the post-2001 situation in Buenos Aires. Argentina has experienced a century of political instability, characterized by sudden changes, and with each political change came a reaction in urban life and political values. Each successive political power in Argentina has played a different role, however, in balancing national interests within the international arena. Argentina’s changing relationship with the United States in the last 30 years is of pivotal importance in the nation’s political history. Neoliberalism is the global economic model the most reflected U.S. hegemony following the end of the Cold War, particularly in the 1990s, in places such as Argentina. U.S. foreign policy and ideologies had profound impacts on Argentina during the country’s descent into the military dictatorship of the late 1970s, and the later rise of neoliberal policies.

The post-2001 Argentina is a response to the neoliberalism of the 1990s: a new and distinct phase in Argentine history and society, but one that in many ways

\(^3\) Porteño, a term that can be used as either a noun or adjective, refers to the residents of Buenos Aires. It roughly translates to “person of the port.”
retains elements of the previous metamorphoses of the nation within global Cold War tensions and neoliberal models.

At the beginning of the 20th century, Argentina’s political system was largely under the hegemony of the Pampa elites. Argentina made its initial wealth as an export economy, exporting beef and grains to other wealthy countries. As this was Argentina’s means of entrance into the world market, the Pampa bourgeoisie was the primary internationalizing force. Meanwhile, Buenos Aires, the “Paris of the South,” had a ruling class that planned the modernization of the city based on a European imaginary. Argentina sold its produce on the international market, and imported European items for consumption in return. In this way, the European-oriented elite formed the foreign paradigm for “modern” during this period (Guano, 183), and this trope, along with strong tendencies of nationalism, would continue in different ways into successive periods.

Argentina has one of the strongest labor movements in the world, starting in the 1870s and 1880s and becoming the primary vehicle for workers interests in the 20th century (McGuire, 205). As Argentina industrialized, the road was paved for what would become the nation’s defining political figure—Juan Domingo Perón—both for a generation of Argentine citizens themselves, and for the world looking at them. The European gentry that had been so omnipotent before, had given way to a new urban proletariat, ironically mostly of European immigrants. Argentina’s industrial labor force more than doubled between 1935 and 1946, adding more than half a million new workers. A new Buenos Aires was born, as a meeting point of Argentine and European bodies, defined by a new working class that “would
consolidate its new identity[,] an urban identity infused with rural elements, speaking a Spanish with Italian rhythms and slang, eating both beef and pasta, singing milongas and tangos” (Winn, 129). It was as a charismatic leader and strong populist that Perón was able to appeal to the opposing interests of business and labor, based on a platform of nationalism, domestic industry, and justice; vaguely articulated, but successful because of Perón’s unique “ability to seem all things to all people” (Winn, 132).

Perón’s policies raised the standard of living significantly for the working class between 1945 and 1952. He had developed a nationalist economic model that persisted, even after he was exiled in 1955, during the successive dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. Relations with the United States were not strong, although not hostile, despite rising Cold War tensions in Latin America over the Cuban Revolution. Perón attempted to follow a “third path” that pledged allegiance to neither side in the Cold War conflict, due in large part to Argentina’s significant grain exports to the Soviet Union (Norden and Russell, 20-30). Essentially, Argentina attempted to take neither side during most of the Cold War so the nation could independently maneuver its relations with the two superpowers to enable the continued expansion of national industry. Towards the end of the 1970s, however, the political tide began to turn in a new direction.

The labor movement and national independence from global superpowers lost its ideological hold in the government. The National Reorganization Process, also called the *Junta*, was the most repressive and violent manifestation of political power in Argentina of the entire century. The extreme forms that political power
took, and the effects it had on urban life of porteño citizens, contrast starkly with the current era of greater openness and state-moderated liberalism. However, the “military never intervenes without sounding out civilian opinion,” which in this period was a response to the failed return of Perón (McGuire, 238). The Junta epitomized the contradictory and hypocritical approach to nationalism that was begun under Peronism, and the profound trauma that it left on the Argentine psyche enabled a departure from military rule that would persist until the present day.

Perón came back in 1973 to lead Argentina once again, but this time Perón failed at being able to articulate any sort of cohesive politics. The 78 year old was clearly not fit to run the country in any way, and he was dead by July of 1974, leaving his politically incompetent wife to run a country that was in economic shambles. Between 1973 and 1977, moreover, the stage for the Junta was set as the AAA (Alianza Anti-comunista Argentina) carried out political assassinations. The alliance was essentially a right wing terrorist organization that attacked left-wing political groups in the nation, some of which were also carrying out terrorist attacks (Graziano, 22). Small-scale terrorism from both the left and the right plagued the entire nation, and the administration of Isabel Perón declared a state of siege in November 1974. 70 percent of production halted as both workers and business went on strike, and virtually every Argentine sector was in opposition to this government. Isabel, as president, had herself appointed most of the members of the Junta to their military posts. Isabel’s government had begun the trend of carrying out clandestine political assassinations, and, even though she was deposed, the Junta was largely a continuation of the repressive mechanisms of her administration. The Junta deposed
Isabel Perón in March of 1976, and appointed Jorge Rafael Videla, (the tenth appointed President since 1930), with the majority of popular support (Graziano, 25). The Junta did not come about only on its own accord, but reflected the actual desires of an Argentine public that had become increasingly disillusioned with the poor economic conditions of their country and the inefficiency of their civilian government.

The Junta proclaimed a new era, though it would not be the one that Videla articulated upon assuming office: the installation of the new government was “the final closing of a historical cycle and the opening of a new one…[in which] respect for human rights is not only borne out of the rule of law and international declarations, but is also the result of our profound and Christian belief in the preeminent dignity of man as a fundamental value,” he declared this just months after his assertion that as many people would be killed as necessary in order to restore a national order (Qtd. in Graziano, 25). The Junta’s ideological approach amounted to a restoration of what were considered the traditional Argentine values of Christianity and Western civilization. These values were said to be under attack by subversive elements, who must be abducted, tortured, and killed in order to establish a new national order of human rights and economic stability. The Junta was founded upon Cold War paranoia of a Soviet/Eastern-invasion of the West, Christianity and the United States. The Junta adhered to a national protection doctrine along the lines of the U.S document NSC-68, created in 1950 by the Truman administration to define the aggressive U.S. stance against the Soviet Union (Graziano, 26). The Junta waged its war against leftist subversives, and their
presumed sympathizers. It was no longer simply about terrorists with guns and weapons, but any perceived ideological threat to God and nation, and the values that the Junta sought to embody through mass killing.

The communist invasion of the Argentine imaginary suddenly turned into its own citizenry. The Junta especially went after students and members of the labor movement. General Luciano Menendez stated: “We are going to have to kill 50,000 people: 25,000 subversives, 20,000 sympathizers, and we will make 5,000 mistakes” (Qtd. in McGuire, 220). The Junta assumed a great deal of ignorance about their citizenry, denying involvement in the abduction of citizens from their homes, and destruction of their property, on the premise that the paramilitary abductors were in civilian clothes.

The United States became the Junta’s most attractive potential ally. The Carter administration (1977-1981), however, did not approve of the Junta’s human rights abuses. As the military junta went far beyond only attacking the leftist guerillas, who were relatively small in number, and targeted all suspected subversives by kidnapping and torturing, the Carter Administration sought to distance itself from authoritarian regimes like the Junta and the previous U.S. Cold War stances in favor of a more ethically based approach to foreign affairs premised on human rights (Norden and Russell, 23). The Carter Administration publicly criticized Argentina’s human rights violations, blocked loans and international finance, and placed an arms embargo against the nation. Ironically, although the United States had formulated a policy requesting major producers of grains to participate in the embargo enacted

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4 Official estimates place the number of disappeared around 9,000, while unofficial estimates are as high as 30,000 (Norden and Russell, 23).
during the 1979 war in Afghanistan, Argentina refused to comply and even boosted their sales to the Soviet Union (24).

Ronald Reagan’s election in 1980 dramatically changed relations between the U.S. and Argentina, due to the Reagan administration’s more extreme anti-communist stance. Reagan welcomed the military leader, and soon to be president, Roberto Viola as the first official visitor from Latin America to the United States, and he immediately lifted sanctions against Argentina. In addition to this, Reagan actually reinstated support for loans as well as military aid and training to Argentina, despite the congressional resistance. Reagan, unlike Carter, sought to contain leftist elements in Central America, though only by financial means so as to protect his administration from the potential criticism of congress or the U.S. public. With the support of the U.S., Argentine military trainers helped to obscure the U.S. involvement in Central America. Following the 1979 Sandinista revolution in Nicaragua, Argentine military began to provide aid for the counterrevolutionary forces, helping them organize and train their militias (Norden and Russell, 24-25).

Despite the new leniency from the U.S., the Junta, sensed possible retribution for their crimes, and attempted to avert any possible culpability by passing the Law of Presumption of Death Because of Disappearance—normalizing the legal status of the desaparecidos. The “Dirty War” against the citizenry did not, at any level, unite the country and promote progress into a new historical era. The Junta, knowing this, decided to attack an external adversary in order to mobilize the nation, and subordinate antigovernment sentiment. In June of 1982, they launched the Falklands-Malvinas War against the British occupation of the islands off the
coast of Argentina. The Argentine military was humiliated by a quick defeat, demonstrating their true weakness and lack of competency to wage a “real” war. The military regime mistakenly assumed the United States would support their war against Great Britain, or at least remain neutral, due to their support for the Reagan administration’s policies in Central America, and willingness to take the fall for the U.S. involvement in Central America. However, the U.S. sided with Britain, providing the British military with use of American satellites as well as missiles and aircraft fuel (Norden and Russell, 23-26).

The humiliation and revelation of the true military incapacity of the Junta, along with a devastated de-industrialized economy—as the Junta had tried to curb the power of the “subversive” labor movement—not to mention the effect of the estimated nine to thirty thousand disappeared, prompted the Junta to declare a return to democracy. In the Final Document on the War Against Subversion and Terrorism and the Law of Nation Pacification, the Junta attempted to alleviate itself of its crime, declaring that any transgressions of human rights were errors and that amnesty would be granted for such transgressions. The ideological premise and effects of the “Dirty War,” the defeat in the Falklands/Malvina War, and the efforts of the Junta to sweep it all under the rug left a lasting effect on the Argentine public. It was the end of a metanarrative, in a sense, of the power of military caudillos to take the reins of a country and fix it. Argentine citizens had experienced, finally and for the last time, the effects of dictatorship and military rule.
Both Perón and the Junta had large democratic support, but opposite aims. Peronism was premised on national industry and a lack of allegiance to any global superpower. The Junta attacked the labor movement that Perón had appealed to, and dismantled national industry in favor of international finance. Nonetheless, the shift from modernist, Western, and Christian control of a nation had finally given way to a belief in democracy, progress toward tolerance, and a disarticulation of totalizing beliefs of Argentine identity. But such a rebirth of sentiment would require radical changes in the structure of society that would play out over the next two decades. The Argentine public began to figure out how to articulate their identity in an emerging postmodern context, while searching for a democratic government that could create the economic conditions necessary for such a society to begin to thrive.

Raul Alfonsín, of the Union Cívica Radical (UCR) was elected president in 1983, and it was the first time that the Peronists had lost an election. Alfonsín immediately repealed the amnesty law and created the National Commission on the Disappearance of Persons. The civilian government began to try the former military government in court—the first time in Latin American history. Alfonsín stated, “Out of the wreckage we are building the foundation of a modern Argentina” (Qtd. in Graziano, 57). Although the Alfonsín government would initiate this process of reconstructing Argentina into a different nation, he would not succeed in fixing the troubled economy.

The 1980s have been called by many Argentines the “lost decade” because of the lack of economic consolidation and acceptable standards of living. According to McGuire, due to the weakness of the labor movement (caused by
deindustrialization and the *Junta*) and the nationalist tendencies of the Peronist Party, the UCR won the 1983 election and orthodox Peronism never recovered. Hyperinflation at the end of the decade, and Alfonsin’s neglect of popular sectors and development of the interior, ended his presidency in demise. Despite the lack of economic success, however, democracy prevailed. Peronists and the UCR were both profoundly affected by the *Junta*, and began to become self-reflective about their role in those events and to develop the capacity to function democratically. Neither party had an inclination to invoke the military, and they no longer sought to eliminate one another (McGuire, 222).

Through the 1980s at least, the public had learned to be open to democracy, and when Peronist Carlos Menem was elected president in 1990, it was the first time in 61 years that power had been passed from one leader to another democratically in Argentina. It was also the year that the Cold War had finally ended, marking a new phase of U.S. foreign policy in the Americas. Argentina’s relationship with the United States, during the entire Cold War period, had been determined by the United States’ ideological conflict with the Soviet Union. Perón had tried to follow a “third path,” that took neither side, but Argentina ended up siding with the United States during the military *Junta*. With the fall of the Soviet Union, however, the left and communist ideologies lost their appeal as an alternative for the U.S. embodied approach to capitalism, and neoliberal models seemed to be the only alternative for many struggling nations (Norden and Russell, 29).

Menem was called a Peronist who had “abandoned Peronism:” he disassembled protection for Argentine industry, and overturned subsidies set up by
Perón (Winn, 153). According to Levitsky, the labor tradition had helped paved the way for the democratic transition and even in the 1990s, according to one survey, 80 percent of national unions and 90 percent of local unions, participated in the Peronist party (69-71). It was through this traditional relationship with the working class, however, that Menem was able to institute neoliberal policies that were mostly to this sector’s disadvantage. Menem would initiate huge privatization of the economy, public services, and even the military, in some of the “most far-reaching reforms in the world,” which were, however, democratically produced (Levitsky, 69). Menem had little ties to old Peronism: he said “Those who want to hang on to an ideological past are completely mistaken. This world is evolving, and if your ideas don’t keep pace, you will fail totally. I can’t expect to succeed in 1992 with a program from 1946” (Qtd. in Winn, 154). Yet again, another political cycle had begun, and with it a new cultural paradigm of values and myths. However, Menem would at least be the first president since Perón to complete a full term in office.

Following the Cold War, the United States was able to more effectively establish the trend of international liberalism, or neoliberalism, which defined “relations among Western industrial democracies built around economic openness, political reciprocity, and multilateral management of an American-led liberal political system” (Norden and Russell, 31). International entities like the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade embodied this international liberalism, which during the Cold War had been curtailed by the Soviet Union’s competing economic models and ideologies. In the early 1990s, both the UCR and the Peronists were “competing to be identified with the
newly fashionable neoliberal economic model—the only perceived alternative to the old nationalist, statist, and redistributionist policies” as by the late 1980s, the Peronist party had formed more ties with big business (McGuire, 235). The biggest change was the now infamous 1991 Law of Convertibility, pegging the Argentine peso one to one with the American dollar. The Menem administration chose strong ties with the United States, a direct contrast to Argentina’s tradition of nationalist independence. Menem’s foreign and domestic policy was premised on United States hegemony in the world, U.S. leadership in the Americas, and economic liberalism and privatization. Argentina, following the end of the Cold War, wanted to form close ties with the “winner” (Norden and Russell, 42-89). As with Viola and the Reagan administration, Menem was the first Latin American president to be rewarded by the U.S. with an official visit to Bill Clinton in 1993.

The post-1983 democracy was sustained by a strong civil society, in spite of the failures of the Menem administration’s neoliberal policies. The Law of Convertibility took control of the currency away from the government, leaving it completely vulnerable on global changes and economic downturns, like the Asian financial crisis of 1998. Furthermore, the unemployment rate was consistently in the double digits during the entire second half of the decade (Levitsky, 81). In the chapters that follow I will emphasize, in more detail, the neoliberal effect on the culture through the proliferation of new commodities, new values, and new spaces. However, it must be said that the neoliberal era caused a huge cultural shift in values and practices in Argentina, for all social classes, but especially for the middle class that was able to enjoy new commodities, services, and a sense of first-
world identity. Class differences were sharp, and would soon become disastrously manifest in 2001, but in the 1990s it was the elites that “command[ed] the largest share of the country’s wealth and monopoliz[ed] public attention through their frivolous extravagance” (Guano, 198). Not all, or even very many, Argentines were benefiting from neoliberal reforms, but the symbolic value of the transformation in new spaces like malls and the rebirth of upscale apartments and hotels in the formerly industrial port, Puerto Madero, legitimated the neoliberal agenda—for a while.

Argentines that I have spoken to regarding the issue had strong things to say about the decade, and the politics that shaped it. A married couple of artists, Nicolas and Deborah, who ironically live very close to the Puerto Madero waterfront in a very stylish, antiquated apartment building, talked about how their feelings towards the cultural changes caused by the government began in enchantment, and, as before, ended in disenchantment.

**Nicolas:** At the beginning of the 1990s it was like a reinstatement of the blue bloods. We had the fantasy to be able to “do it on your own” from *marketing* [English] By the end of the decade I felt more like a leftist. It’s not that I’m against the Yankees; it’s just that it wasn’t ever *my* decision to be like one. I guess it left me with an agnostic sentiment about our politics [sic].

**Debora:** It began like a fantasy, to want to be in the first world in comparison with the Argentina of before.

Their sentiments express the reality that despite the opening of the market in Argentina, the actual living conditions necessary to legitimate the model did not manifest. If Peronism can be taken to symbolize a political situation that stirs up a lot of excitement in the beginning and generates new political myths, then Menem was certainly a good Peronist. However, popular movements and labor movements
were very weak during this time, as the “casualization of labor” created an ever
growing population of low-paid workers, who would become Argentina’s “new poor” by the end of the decade (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 96). At the same time, however, identity-based movements, like the gay liberation movement, became strong (Brown). Laura, a single mother in her early forties, noted that there were positive cultural effects despite the disgraceful end: “To have democracy allowed the culture to come out, expression in life. The ‘90s were really cultural in a lot of ways, in the arts, music, and style. The underground began. The ‘90s were the learning process [apredizaje] to not be so prejudiced: a more open city.”

The negative tendencies became more apparent in the middle of the decade, eventually took their toll, and the 2001 crisis broke out. Menem, following the Constitution, could not be elected to a third term, and was followed by Fernando De la Rua, of the UCR. After the extreme devaluation of the peso, large waves of protest and looting broke out on December 18 and 19. The government declared a state of siege, and the police ended up killing more than two-dozen protesters. De la Rua resigned on December 20th, and by January 1st Eduardo Duhalde, of the PJ (the Peronist Party), became the third president in less than two weeks. Faith in the political system collapsed with the economy, as Argentina’s GDP contracted by 16 percent in the first three months of 2002. National unemployment climbed to almost 25 percent (Levitsky, 83). In the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires, 80 percent of the population fell below the poverty line (INDEC statistics cited in Guano, 183). The mantra of the time “Que se vayan todos [throw them all out]” was indicative of
the fact that a huge number of Argentines began to reject all political parties (Levitsky, 83).

The 2001 crisis was the end of any “residual notions of Argentine exceptionalism” that the public may have allowed themselves to believe in the 1990s (Grugel, 87). Natalia Nupieri, a fashion designer, explained:

It was a huge change because of Menem. My experience is that we went through a period in 2001 in which the economy changed and there was a crisis of resources. Before that there had been a substitution of imports when everybody was wearing things from outside. We were used to living with objects from outside, during ten years when we had that president, who stopped all the national production and brought in good and bad things, mostly bad because, honestly, we’re paying a high price, that we stopped being ourselves, and just chose to believe that we were part of the first world. We had this dream, and then 2001 happened. We were prejudiced for international brands and such, that really only very few could have.

The chaos revitalized trade union activism and new cooperatives in abandoned factories, however. Duhalde decided to take control of the sources of production, and to mobilize state-society relations, as he turned to old ideas of national development that had been abandoned since the 1980s. The government, in this moment, made its break with neoliberalism, and began creating a new policy based on a new role for the state in key economic sectors, social services, market mediation, and in civil society. He promptly dropped convertibility, and the devaluation of the peso meant that that government was committed to national industry more than at any time in the last 15 years (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 95-96). The import substitution model was a continuation of the deindustrialization started under the Junta. However, following 2001, the devaluation of the peso and return to
a state-mediated economy meant that Argentina was poised to restart production and renew their traditional export economy.

Nestor Kirchner had campaigned on an anti-neoliberal platform, and became president by default in 2003 when Carlos Menem withdrew from the race. His new program was called *neodesarrollismo*, in emphasis of its incorporation of traditional elements of Argentine nationalist management of the economy (as under Perón). The plan focused on rebuilding Argentine domestic industry, and improving public services. In 2002, Argentina began to vigorously expand its exports. By 2005, poverty had dropped to 33.8 percent from 57.2 percent in 2002, and unemployment was down to 10 percent (INDEC cited in Grugel and Riggirozzi, 98).

Instead of trying to improve economic relations with the U.S., Kirchner instead chose to focus on ties with peripheral nations. Private and foreign capital still played a bigger role in policy making than at any time under Perón: Kirchner’s *neodesarrollismo* was an experimental process, that did not pretend to have all the answers about how to balance a strong state with the vulnerability of economic fluctuation in the world market. The middle classes that fell through the cracks at the end of the 1990s have mostly recovered, but the poorest working classes still remain in destitute conditions. Grugel and Riggirozzi state that managing the often-competing interests of business and labor was one of the main challenges of the new economic system. Essentially, *neodesarrollismo* is challenging “the [neoliberal] myth that state-managed economies are synonymous with close, autarkic systems and are inefficient, clumsy, and slow to respond to global change” (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 105).
Throughout Latin America the trend that was prevalent in the 1990s for “global models” is giving way to more nationally organized economies that are significantly different than those which characterized the 1940s-1960s. The nationally organized economies are attempting to sensibly carve out advantageous positions for their own economies within the global one (Grugel and Riggirozzi, 100). Argentina’s third world experience, before and during the 1990s, gave its citizens the capacity to be critical of U.S. consumer culture, and the ability to be considerably more than a submissive public of consumers enchanted both by the novelty of foreign goods, and the prestige associated with their culture of origin. Argentines are more concerned about living well as Argentines, and have given up on a “future that is another country” to quote Guano’s perception of the culture in the 1990s (184). Globalization was a paradigm within neoliberalism for a while, but this has changed.

The radical break with the metanarratives of Argentine modernity (embodied by Perón) that influenced the Argentine disposition for autocratic rule, has given way to stable democratic values, even when the given administration lacks the capacity to deal with the economy and the needs of its citizenry. In the last two decades, postmodern cultural expression and global flows of information, people, and commodities have allowed Argentina, whatever its situation, to still be a functioning member of the global community. The “agnostic sentiment” that Nicolas expressed is quite typical of the more moderated, hybridized political-economic approach that Argentina is endeavoring. The 1980s and 1990s were each eras of a sort of two steps forward, one-step back experience. Economic disasters
paralleled a stabilization of democratic culture, social tolerance, and new cultural forms.

The dominant myths of the current era, as I will explore in the following chapters, are not like those of previous decades, nor are they so fortified and universalized. And while the neoliberal era is over, capitalism is not. Class divisions still exist, but the middle class is growing: a new middle class that is taking root in Palermo Soho. Argentina’s historical experiences shape the values and opinions that they shared with me, the values they ascribe to the commodities and practices they have preferences for, and how they sense their national identity in the world, politically and culturally. It is not stable, nor is it set in stone. It is in a process of articulation, and, as we have seen, even when that identity seemed most stable it was overturned. The current decade is, however, unique in this sense. There is not, as there even was in the 1990s, the urge to jump on any bandwagon of national identity, or economic system. Adaptation and experimentation are the most dominant values, politically, culturally, and even aesthetically. Buenos Aires, the port city of “good airs” with a global history, continues to be a global city importing some and exporting many commodities—and eventually, maybe, trends and values.

In the next chapter, I will explain how the neighborhood now known as Palermo Soho came into existence historically and culturally. This translocale fuses the Argentine experience that has emerged out of the economic and political processes just described with international flows of people, ideas, and commodities.
Chapter II
Neighborhood Transformations in Palermo

The neighborhood known as Palermo Soho has a rich history that, if anything, is shaped by cycles of change dictated by an evolving vision of what the neighborhood means for those who live in or pass through it. The experience of walking through this neighborhood today is a travel through different epochs, as the original character and architectural distinctiveness of the late 19th century *casas bajas*, or low houses, still remain as either residences or the new businesses that populate the area (Appendix B.2.1). During my field research in the neighborhood in January of 2008, I resided in a traditional “*chorizo*” style home from the late 19th century, owned by a local family but marketed online by a travel agency as a finely furnished vacation rental. I witnessed a site of contradictions that, all together, leave the visitor with an image of a changing neighborhood, where commercial progress is superimposed on the historical and architectural past.

In this chapter I attempt to highlight the cyclical nature of this neighborhood, as it has continued to evolve since its inception in the 1880s, while certain significant features of the neighborhood have remained prized and left almost unchanged. I will explain how the names of the neighborhood and of the sites within have changed over the years, within the greater city of Buenos Aires. Its

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5 *Chorizo*, meaning sausage, is the style of residence common in working class neighborhoods in Buenos Aires built in the late 19th century. They are named so because of the way in which one room of the house follows another in a U-shape, while all can be accessed from an interior patio allowing for privacy in these rooms, which would have been inhabited by different members of an extended family.
new identity contrasts with its history, and shows how different eras have brought different changes which eventually turned a traditional working class neighborhood into a well recognized *translocale*: name branded with respect to a U.S. city, but remaining completely *porteño* at the same time.

Although the movement of citizens from around the world within the neighborhood may have only become a defining characteristic within the last decade, the location has long been a recipient of global flows that have shaped its initial formation and subsequent metamorphoses. The global has affected not only its material history within the greater city, but the ideological and cultural paradigms of its identity as well. The project of the Argentine metropolis, the city of Buenos Aires, was one of building a modern city, influenced by both European and North American tendencies. Adrian Gorelik, in his book *La grilla y el parque*, chronicles the era between the mid 19th Century and 1936, when the creation of the modern metropolis took place as an attempt to divorce itself from its earlier Spanish colonial history: structurally, Buenos Aires is a 19th century reformist city. Succinctly put, the endeavor of the metropolis was a process of “mercantilist rationalization:” a process of reshaping social relationships by breaking with the notion of the traditional colonial city, and creating one that is both “quantified and abstract,” as the form of modern existence (21).

In 1887, the national government annexed an enormous amount of territory in the province of Buenos Aires in which it would expand the federal capital from about 4,000 hectares to 18,000. In that moment there were only about 25,000 inhabitants in an area that would become completely urbanized by 1936. The border
of the capital (which still stands today as General Paz Avenue) was at that time nothing more than the open Pampas, a limit which almost represented the limitlessness of the city from which Palermo would be born as a “new city…born out of the nothing” (13-14). How the process took place is an intricate history of material construction, utopian projects, and an urban population that, through immigration, was seven times greater 1910 than in 1870. However, according to Gorelik, this profound urban transformation finds its origins in two historical factors: the claiming of the prairies for new urban space and, therefore, the establishment of suburban neighborhoods as new centers (Palermo is the classic case in point), and the “production of networks of global meaning” that recreated what was “the city” (14-16).

International, modern currents were highly influential in the creation of Buenos Aires, both in terms of the grid structure and the meaning of public space, even before the project began during the years of Domingo Faustino Sarmiento (1868-1874). In his focus on the grid structure of the modern city and the construction of large parks, Gorelik explains how they function as both material artifacts established in certain historical periods, and as cultural figures and symbols in a process of creating public space (16). In the reformist project of creating the modern metropolis, there is a dichotomy between structure (material culture and economics) and society: the cultural and political life within the structure takes the structure as its own geography (35). In Buenos Aires at the turn of the last century, the reformists intended to create a “European” city, influenced by British, French, and Italian elements. This does not suggest, however, that Buenos Aires is a parody
of a European city, nor does it suggest that the relationship between city and society was roughly parallel to that in other places. The city planners who designed the grid for the city did it incorporating both European models and the North American idea of a central park: but it would be a mistake to understand a “triangular relationship” between the United States, Europe, and Buenos Aires as “mediated by some vague idea of the generic prestige of the European city facing the absence of history and beauty in the [Latin] American city” (31). The city that Buenos Aires turned out to be is completely unique.

Public space is a term that lacks a concrete definition, as it changes with history and location: “it is a product of the interpretation between urban form and the political culture in certain moment in history” (21). Public space in Buenos Aires was constructed “from above” by a political culture that wanted to shape society. Gorelik generally posits that urban form became the city, a reformist city that molded a new kind of society. On the one hand, it is a conceptual task of giving “the political” a form in urban space, and on the other hand a political task of creating a “public arena” and “right to the city” to mediate the tensions amongst different social groups coexisting in urban space (22). Public space in parks, however, was intended to fulfill its role in the “urban imaginary” as a civilizing and hygienic place. The park takes the grid as its object of reform, and provides open space that is meant to be utilized as public space, which as Gorelik points out, necessarily entails the idea of a “political sphere” of public participation (19-37).

Public participation in the reformist sense, however, was vaguely abstract when market forces and powerful private interest wield influence over urban
society. While the uniform grid structure of the city and public parks demonstrate the state’s attempt to control civil society, the market eventually fragments this space into different segments with different meanings and identities. Buenos Aires naturally became a capitalist city, which means that public power could not solely dictate the uses and appropriations of public space. The designers of Buenos Aires intended to create an urban “rationality” that was not the same as the market that imposed its own mechanisms upon the uniformity of the grid. The creators of Buenos Aires’ urban grid conceived of a conservative reformism in public life: the uniformity of the grid balanced by the organic open space of the park, and as both these spaces integrated the landowners and the proletariat into citizens of the metropolis, a society is shaped by the urban form itself (Gorelik, 45).

If the modern metropolis (the grid) had reform and separation from the traditional city as its aim, and if Buenos Aires at the turn of the century was an epitome of the reformist project, than the creation of Palermo was based on an even more ambitious reformist ideology. Palermo was essentially a rural community that became converted into a barrio of the city, a new type of public space on a different scale than the already established city center. Palermo was meant to be a “new city,” imagined by Sarmiento as a park that would become the center of the greater city (18).

The reformists may have intended for Palermo to become a new city, but it was a site that had already existed for over two centuries, and the reformists were in fact attempting to erase part of this history in favor of a progressive ideal. The site already had its name, Palermo, when Sarmiento intended to reform it. The origin of
the name of Palermo is, to this day, slightly contested. Juan Domingo (or sometimes Domenico) de Palermo became the proprietor of the lands when he arrived in Argentina from Sicily at the beginning of the 17th century. Vicente Osvaldo Cutolo, in his history of Buenos Aires’ neighborhoods, speculates that Domenico de Palermo may have given this name to the area in order to establish ties to his homeland and give a title to the land that was specifically not of Hispanic origin (639). The area first became recognized by the winery that he established there. The competing story claims that there was a chapel at one point dedicated to the Italian, Saint Benito de Palermo. This saint was an Italian of African origin, and it has been suggested that there was a cult dedicated to him by the black population of Buenos Aires (Nogues, 421). A local historian and aficionado of the neighborhood, Roberto C. Boracchia (who wrote a personalized history of the neighborhood in the 1960s), preferred to believe in the latter argument for the origin of the name of Palermo.

Juan Manuel de Rosas, who ruled Argentina from 1829-1852, is a well-recognized caudillo of Argentine history, known for his affiliation with the landed elite and the gauchos, as well as for his harsh treatment of his political opponents. It was Rosas who definitively put Palermo on the map of political and social consciousness in Buenos Aires in the 19th century. Rosas became the owner of the territories of Palermo in 1836 where he established his estancia as a place of retreat and recreation, living in almost complete isolation. Rosas, however, maintained his power from his estancia, which served as the seat of the government while he was residing there (Cutolo, 646, 713). When Rosas was deposed, his enormous estate was confiscated through legislature passed in 1857 and 1872, and turned into public
property of Buenos Aires. His mansion was destroyed in 1899 and, in a symbolic
gesture, replaced by a statue of his ideological opponent Sarmiento. This initial
reclaiming of the territories of Palermo was not only physical, but also ideological
and represented the transformation of Buenos Aires from a city controlled by the
whims of an autocrat who favored the rural elite, to a modern reformist ruler who
favored a more international vision of the urban space.

The years of Sarmiento were years of the “cult of Buenos Aires:” the
development of the press and industry, changing social institutions, and a growing
city premised on global metropolitan principles created an aspiration at the time for
a city that could represent the new era and be a unifying example for the whole
country (Gorelik, 77). Palermo was meant to be the central park for the new city,
because in this instance Sarmiento was not only influenced by city parks in Europe,
but also by the park movement in the United States during his extended visit from
1865-1868. New York’s Central Park was the basis for the reformist Palermo, in the
heart of an industrial city: a cultural center and epitome of modern transformation
(58). Palermo began to turn into a park upon what had once been the estancia of
General Rosas, and is today the Parque Tres de Febrero. As the former abode of
Rosas, it was the site of a rupture with the past, as Sarmiento states:

Palermo will be transformed into an object of public interest, absolving the
public of the damnation that has weighed over it and condemned it to
inevitable destruction: the monuments of tyranny will be converted into a
Model School and Exposition of Industry with instruments of civilization
and progress, a dignified revenge for those it sought to enslave (Qtd. in
Gorelik, 71).
Palermo, however, did not fulfill this role. Palermo did not become centralized, as the city center remains today where it was originally, though the parks of Palermo are the largest in the city.

Palermo, as already stated, began as part of the Pampas and all of the original territories that form the current neighborhood were originally *quintas* held by landowners. The original part of Palermo was urbanized in 1885, and later became known as Palermo Viejo [Old Palermo]. As the city expanded, the landowners were pushed out and the lands were partitioned off into 38 original lots. The site which I took within Palermo Viejo as my central area of study, known originally as Villa Alvear, forms what is now the eight blocks (Appendix A.2.1) surrounding the Plaza Cortázar. It is what Cutolo refers to as a “*sub-barrio*” (714), while another Argentine historian, Germinal Nogues, refers to it as a “*microbarrio*” (441). While the villa no longer definitely exists independently, it still forms the heart of Palermo Viejo. In 1885 a company known as Moreno Mosconi & Cia decided to create a “workers’ city” a few blocks south of Santa Fe Avenue. Since 1874 two medical doctors named Guillermo Rawson and Eduardo Wilde had had the idea of creating such a workers’ city as a sort of utopian community.

The city mayor, Torcuato de Alvear, laid the founding stone of this community, which took his name. The eight blocks of Villa Alvear were roughly the same then as they are today. They are distinct from all the other in the city due to the fact that they are bisected by small alleyways made to facilitate the transportation of materials for the workers. These alleyways also demonstrate the communal form of life the represented the early neighborhood, now these alleyways (many of them
painted over with interesting murals) are little side streets with an eclectic mix of small shops (Appendix B.2.2-B.2.3). Though the eight blocks are seldom called by the original name (except in historical accounts of the neighborhood), the architectural characteristics have been maintained externally, while much of the old houses have been renovated on the inside (Cutolo, 682-683). The neighborhood also maintains the quiet ambiance of a residential neighborhood, similar to nearby Caballito, but distinct in its maintenance of the casas bajas as opposed to high-rise apartments allowing for greater urban density.

One of the most obvious signals for the metamorphoses the neighborhood has passed through is the continuous changing of names of the neighborhood itself, and its landmarks. Palermo Viejo is notably as famous for the traditional ambiance as having been the residence of the famous Argentine writer Jorge Luis Borges (1889-1986), after whom the central street bisecting the neighborhood was recently renamed in place of Serrano. The neighborhood remained a working class residential place, almost exclusively, until the 1960s when artists and intellectuals slowly began to take interest. At the end of the 1970s, the neighborhood had acquired prestige and began to be known by the name of Palermo Viejo. The barrio was viewed as the prime location in the city for the tradition of the narrow, low-level chorizo houses coupled with pleasant urban vegetation. The name “Viejo” would seem to obviously derive from the old architecture that was preserved, but a 1986 publication by the Inventory of Urban Patrimony (Inventario de Partimonio Urbano-- part of the school of Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Buenos Aires) claims that the title
was applied to the whole neighborhood from an art gallery that was established in the 1970s (Novoa, 9).

The Plaza Cortázar, still known popularly as Plaza Serrano by many, and previously carrying the name of General Eduardo Racedo, became a central point for restaurants, galleries, and cafes with live music around the 1960s (Cutolo, 714). On a walking tour of the neighborhood in 2007, the local tour guide told my group of U.S. students that all of these places had been closed during the dictatorship, and the plaza was out of use. However, at the end of the dictatorship in 1983, it was in Plaza Serrano where the first bars in the city began to reopen—a story confirmed to me by a local bartender who I asked. According to Mario Toer, a well-known professor of Political Science and Sociology at the University of Buenos Aires (and my host while I was studying abroad in Argentina during 2007) the changes in the neighborhood one sees today began slowly in the 1980s when intellectuals, himself included, began to populate the neighborhood. Mario told me it was this cultural trend of artist and intellectual subcultures that foreshadowed the later economic boom that took place starting in the 1990s.

According to a 2004 government publication by CEDEM (Center of Studies for Metropolitan Economic Development), between 1993 and 2002 the number of commercial business in the neighborhood increased by 64%, and increased by another 12% by 2004 (Appendix A.2.2). Interestingly, the majority of businesses, over 65%, continued the same commercial activities a decade later. According to the study, by 2002 Plaza Serrano, not yet renamed Plaza Cortázar, became the focal point of local commercial activity. Certain commercial activities, such as the sale of artisanship
items and clothing, increased by 143% and 33% in the neighborhood, respectively (Appendix A.2.3).

Despite these changes, however, the traditional sector of Villa Alvear has been protected, and the Codigo de Planeamiento Urbano (a government passed urban code) has restricted new construction. In fact, it is the same traditional low-houses that form the basis for much of the commercial development in the neighborhood. Many have been sold by the traditional owners and converted into the businesses that are reshaping the neighborhood. Following the 2001 crisis, Ryan Centner describes the city after the 1990s as split into “neoliberal fragments” where different kinds of citizenship emerge “between groups with conflicting claims, the local state, and developers” (4). This particular fragment of Palermo became transformed in character following 2001, into Palermo Soho. It is also important to note that the area of Palermo across the train tracks from Palermo Soho has been renamed Palermo Hollywood. This area is the center of the Argentine film industry, and for this reason has taken its new name.

The neighborhood is now mostly known as Palermo Soho, although many continue to use Palermo Viejo to refer to the neighborhood. For previous residents like Mario, it is still Palermo Viejo “and will always be” Palermo Viejo. As the neighborhood was only known as Palermo Viejo for less than thirty years, it has already transformed the emphasis of its image, moving on from “old” Palermo to a more globalized sort of name brand epitomized in the “Soho” renaming. On a business card for a store called Tir na nog (which sells small, mythically inspired statuary) the change is explicitly noted in the business’ description: “A storybook
image that escaped from the books and became a reality in a little corner of Palermo Viejo, that is now called Soho.” The owner of this store, Sergio, told me that he opened for business in 2004, and he creates his statues in his workshop in the back of the store. He also told me that he has benefited immensely from the influx of tourism and the new reputation the neighborhood has acquired. Based on the numerous interactions I had with those working in the neighborhood, it is practically unquestionable that this Soho attributes its name to the SoHo of New York City.

In his book *SoHo: The Rise and Fall of an Artists’ Colony*, Richard Kostelanetz gives a detailed account of the lifecycle of New York’s SoHo between the early 1960s and 2000s. What his book makes clear, and what I find to be applicable, is that SoHo New York was not a bohemia, a place established to counter bourgeois living, but rather an artists’ colony: it was a place that was defined by the work that was done by the residents who lived there, not by their politics (7, 55).

SoHo served as both the residential neighborhood and the performance space for the artists who lived there during that almost forty-year period. Many of the artists there worked through coops and non-commercial art venues, while the neighborhood also became a world-renowned center for commercial art (86).

He explains, through personal experience with the neighborhood since its inception as an artists’ colony, that it was a cultural space lacking the radical politics that are often attributed to artists, especially during the 1960s. This is particularly interesting as Palermo Soho is often described in tourist guidebooks (such as Lonely Planet) and by those who work there as a place with a very “bohemian vibe,” despite the fact that it is also a place of high end commodities that epitomize a very refined
bourgeois lifestyle. Like SoHo, Palermo Soho has a very bohemian aesthetic derived from artisanship and the traditional character of the neighborhood, which allowed designers and artisans to begin working there. Palermo Soho, the new phase of the neighborhood, began at the end of the 1990s, and accelerated following 2001 crisis as Argentine citizens were finding different ways to cope with the unemployment.

Through an Internet blog known as “Trendy Palermo Viejo,” I was able to establish contact with Nancy, the blog master and owner of a small shop in the neighborhood called Atípica (atypical) selling original artisanship items from the Buenos Aires province. I visited her in her store, full of indigenous themed items and beautiful home furnishings that she sells as consignment items for the makers of these products. She explained to me how the neighborhood had changed:

Well about more or less ten years ago, some independent designers began to work in this neighborhood, working out of the casas bajas. They really were working from the heart [hecho del pulmon] with a lot of strength and with their own means. In the last few years, the global brands began to come; it has been a certain type of inversion. Originally [in the 1990s] the designers, with their own hands, painted and fixed up the entire area. It’s not that easy for them now, but they originally picked this place because they had a personal history here, or knew people here. Usually it was something like their father had a mechanical workshop and he let them use part of it.

Like SoHo New York, those who used the space pragmatically originally formed Palermo Soho, and the work that they did there was unique and individual (Kostelanetz, 156). Nancy had visited SoHo New York in 2001, and mentioned to me:

It could end up being like SoHo in New York, in Manhattan. So I suppose because of that they started saying, just a few years ago, Palermo Soho. But it seems to be that our Soho is more developed than yours [in the U.S.]. Well, I don’t know all of the places to go there, but
as a tourist there comparing it with here, I think here it is more like a party, it is more of a pleasure to see so many places with people sitting at tables, and the kinds of stores that we have here.

Nancy was essentially referring to the more gentrified character of the contemporary SoHo, and expressing that she hopes that her Soho does not become like that, or become overly commercial, though that is what she fears. She also emphasized the difference between SoHo New York, and the Soho of Buenos Aires that demonstrates a difference between U.S. and Argentine cultures. Café culture and public spaces like the Plaza are not part of the New York SoHo, but they are very traditional to Buenos Aires.

However, fashion designers were not the only people finding a new occupation in the neighborhood. While I was in Buenos Aires between February and July of 2007, I went to the Plaza Cortázar on several occasions for a late night rendezvous with friends. At that time, the Plaza was not open, but appeared to be a construction site with a small group of tents pitched in the middle, and several signs indicating a protest. Almost a year later, as I returned, I found the feria in the Plaza Cortázar (Appendix B.2.4-2.6). Every Saturday and Sunday a feria takes place, and draws huge crowds of locals, and tourists from around the world. In the Plaza itself are several stands selling a variety of handcrafted items, ranging from textiles and jewelry, to dolls and high quality paintings and original works of art. There are several cafes and restaurants with sidewalk seating surrounding the Plaza, as well as five separate, smaller ferias of fashion. These smaller ferias, with names like Planeta Bs.As. and Diseño Arg, are large corrals that are only opened on the weekend (some open aired and some indoors) that have several partitioned off booths where small-
scale producers of original clothing designs can sell their items. In the heart of the neighborhood, amongst all of the higher end or well-established stores, is this feria that attracts considerable attention. One of the artisans in the feria, Ana, explained to me how it came about:

I came here five years ago, and I picked a spot and began selling for a year, but after that they wanted to tax us. There was a struggle, because the government wanted to kick us out, and we managed to get the feria legalized. Now we’re all fine, and each one of us has our booth. [During the protest] we were here for 26 days; we slept here in tents. The government seized the plaza and wanted to remodel the whole thing and kick us out, and we didn’t want to lose our place of work. This is how I make my living, how most of us here do. This neighborhood has grown like this thanks to this [feria]. If you came here 15 years ago, you wouldn’t have seen anything. The big brands all came later. This is a really special place for selling because the whole world comes here, lots of tourists, who want to buy what we make ourselves.

Having finally realized what was behind the demolition site appearance that I had seen in the previous year, I understood Ana’s enthusiasm for how it now functioned. There was a newly built playground for children in the Plaza, as well as sturdy metal racks that displayed different original paintings each weekend of a local artist. The artisans had their cars parked around the perimeter of the Plaza, often accompanied by family and friends sitting on lawn chairs and enjoying the activity, helping one another out at the stands throughout the day. Often those who sell in these ferias come into the line of work through personal contacts. One designer, Hilda, told me “It’s good that we have a space here, because I know a lot of young designers who make handbags and can’t sell them because it is hard to find a space, but here you can find a space, at least in the street. I came here because a girl I know gave me the information through word of mouth.” One of the vendors who was not in
the Plaza, but on the sidewalk along Borges Street, told me that he would love to sell his small gifts in the Plaza, but it is difficult to get a permit from the government to sell there. I asked one of the artisans in the Plaza, Juan, who was selling handcrafted metal medallions how one goes about acquiring a permit.

It’s a procedure. You set up an appointment, and after that you do a presentation, or a demonstration of what you are going to do. You register for this with a government office, and then you call them later to go in and get the supervision [fiscalizacion]. It’s sort of like a test [prueba] when one has to show what they will sell, and if you pass this test and if you are accepted they give you a spot and a permit. [The criteria are] technical, that the products be artisanship, and that they don’t come from an industrial process, or contain industrial parts. They prioritize hand made work. You aren’t supposed to sell imports, but sometimes it happens, but there are restrictions that try to ensure it is artisanship. The problem is government corruption sometimes, so some people bend the rules and pass around money and they pretend they don’t notice, but generally if you don’t follow the rules they will place a sanction on you.

Based on what Ana and Juan had told me, it seems that the feria began as a clandestine type of affair, but as more money poured into the neighborhood the government began to take a more hands-on approach and decided to channel the commerce that was taking place there. Fortunately, for the original artisans who worked there, it seems that their interests have been codified in a way that protects their work, and draws in money and people who are interested in items of personal value.

Palermo Soho is, of course, not a direct parallel in most ways to SoHo New York. In Palermo Soho, the gentrification and creativity go hand in hand, and the maintenance of the traditional barrio, its modernization, and transformation into a selling point with this new name brand are more like contradictions than decisive conflicts. SoHo or Soho is more of a disembodied emblem that was able to be
nominally transplanted and still make sense to people cross culturally in a
globalized translocale. Interesting, this displacement of names took place at the
same time as the original SoHo in New York was losing its identity.

SoHo New York, as described by Kostelanetz, began its decline as an
underground art scene in the 1990s, and met its end in the early 2000s. Cosmetic
stores, modeling agencies, an Apple store, and a loft purchased by conservative
media-mogul Rupert Murdoch, coupled with the flight of artists to other
neighborhoods such as West Chelsea in Manhattan, signaled the final end of the
original SoHo (226). In Palermo Soho, commercialization and underground design
and artisanship are not opposing polarities, but there is a tension. There is already a
Nike store, a Lacoste store, and Diesel (all well-known and fairly high priced global
brands) while some shops sell a mixture of local and global brands such as Puma.
Many of the established storefronts reflect well-established and highly profitable
businesses that do not necessarily epitomize the traditional neighborhood nor the
small-scale workshop-produced clothing that is evident in the feria.

However, the relationship is hard to pin down as a direct conflict, but rather
seems to be part of a more complex cultural politics that is taking place. Nancy
commented to me in person, as well as in several blog entries, that the traditional
architecture has been suffering as large apartment high-rises have been allowing for a
more profitable, high-density form of living in the neighborhood (Appendix B.2.7).
Ana had mixed feelings about the changes:

It’s a special kind of commerce here, that sells to the whole world
because of the tourism. The neighborhood doesn’t epitomize Buenos Aires, maybe what is fashion [English] of Buenos Aires, but other places are more representative of the city. Palermo Soho is only one!
It’s like a little tiny world apart. Maybe in another time I would have said that it’s “really crazy, or bullshit [re loco (sic), una mierda]!” but now I’d say it works out.

Small-scale designers also had mixed feelings about the neighborhood as a commercial center, both global and underground at the same time. Mirta Constanza, a local designer, commented:

I really like this neighborhood, the mixture that there is, and how it has grown. But I don’t like that some take advantage that is has grown, and ruin the values of what has grown here. I think we could work here with less cost, but there are always some groups that have more purchasing power and the rest of us have to take care of ourselves...The global brands have to leave it here to the designers, because they already have their space in the shopping malls. The young designers from the University of Buenos Aires are very creative, it’s a real life process. It seems like those who have the most purchasing power aren’t interested in the creativity but just in the money.

However, the private owners of the indoor ferias, a designer I met named Hilda made sure to point out, are some of the people with the purchasing power who want to help this creativity. She noted that the owner of her indoor corral-feria on Borges also owns the Brujas Disco in the Plaza Cortázar: a restaurant and bar that empties out and turns into a fashion feria during the days on the weekends. The consuming public that comes to Palermo Soho brings both the global brands and the money that displace some small-scale proprietors, but also helps fuel others because of their diversity of tastes and interest in creativity and novelty. Sandra, who sells handmade clothing of traditional weavings, told me that the public the neighborhood draws is unique from anywhere else in the city.

Palermo Soho created the possibility for all of us who just started [producing] to have a space. Before there wasn’t a place to sell my clothes. I would have had to open a business, find a location. Now people can access differences of what is considered fashion. There is a
public here that likes this sort of atypical fashion, like here [in this corral] there are a variety of designs, and students of design can sell their things. That is the concept: something different…the ferias like this one depend on the Secretary of Culture of the city of Buenos Aires, because the people on the street can really sell anything [meaning knock-offs]. This has helped give me a spot to sell real items and for me tourism is what has really helped me in this neighborhood, that’s who I mostly sell to.

One of my informants, Natalia, made it clear that to her there is a cost benefit analysis that has to take place, but for her the costs are worth it.

I’m so glad it exists, but it has its contradictions and its disadvantages, like the marketing of the city [markentinizar la ciudad]. The price that you have to pay for being talked about sometimes is to lose the traditional identity of the neighborhood, and a lot of people complain, or think the neighborhood has been sold. It was put into agreement to transform the neighborhood and sell it to this explosion of activity, and the price of properties soared. As the industry develops, it can incorporate more designers, but it all has to do with planning.

The “selling out” of the neighborhood concept is not clearly articulated, because the costs and the benefits go hand in hand. The government has passed an urban code restricting development and demolition of traditional houses, but the prices in the neighborhood continue to augment with its success. Mario, an enthusiast for the traditional neighborhood and a critic of the “Soho” renaming believes:

The benefits associated with the creativity and design exist, along with what creates a tourist location and place of fashion. To make sure it lasts, we’ll have to restrict the reappearance of the well-known brands. The old residents who have decided to sell have actually received a certain benefit because of the increase in the value of their properties. But those that continue to live there and miss the peaceful streets of yesterday don’t have to be compensated, for it is but a law of progress in an infinite number of places. I do think it is important to conserve the traditional characteristics so that the neighborhood continues to be livable.
I asked Mario, as a previous resident and Argentine sociologist, what he thought about the role of local elites or big business in the development, as this was a huge issue in the neoliberal era in the development of urban space. He said:

The role of the elites and of the hegemony of money in different real estate booms is always there. Nevertheless, I would suppose that in the case of Palermo it is simply the laws of the market without much manipulation. It has been a good time for that neighborhood for about 20 years or so, and I think all that has been sold has been sold at a good cost. Those that have sold [the traditional houses] were from the middle class, not an upper class, and they must have found more economical places to live without much to lament, except in their memories. The truth is that those who opened up this path were intellectuals and artists, not the rich. What I mean to tell you is that there hasn’t been a different kind of drama here than in the other neighborhoods of Caballito or Flores, or earlier in Belgrano, where old mansions that should have been preserved were torn down.

Palermo has continued to change almost ceaselessly since it began so long ago, as a series of landed estates. Whether being transformed by a revolution from above that never quite turned out (as in the Sarmiento era), or an evolution from below that is employing democratic sectors of society in a global market, Palermo Viejo, or Palermo Soho, has had a shifting identity that has been most clearly defined by its aesthetics and functionality as a unique place of work and commerce. In this case, the seduction of novelty that may entice a consumer to purchase is not due solely, or primarily, to marketing, but rather to the character and history of the place of commerce that distinguish it within the city and within the world. Each consecutive renaming of the neighborhood, as well as the original name of Palermo itself, has an elusive origin that can only be decisively placed in the mouths of the people who live and work there.
What is interesting is that this change is a deliberate process (not controlled by hegemonic entities) to create a new name brand for a locale that can embody the processes of production and commerce that take place within it and have meaning for people from around the world who flock there. Furthermore, from everything I could gather, the functioning of the neighborhood is almost entirely local, save for a few exceptions, and demonstrates a contrast to corporate models of urban consumption found in other world cities. Palermo Soho: both are names borrowed from other places at different points in history that only make sense placed next to one another in this interesting and dynamic *translocale* of Buenos Aires.
Chapter III
New Trends in Production

In the introduction to *Goods, Power, History: Latin America’s Material Culture*, Arnold J. Bauer states that he “hope[s] that…readers [will be able] to see the objects and commodities we consume today not as disembodied tools or tiles stacked on the shelves of hangar-like Home Depots…but rather to imagine the makers of these things” because, due to the emergence of a world market, “the rupture between producer and consumer has become nearly complete” (6-7). In this chapter, I will try to describe the makers behind the products consumed in Palermo Soho. Towards the end of his book exploring the long history of commodities in Latin America since before colonialism, Bauer concludes about the current era: “As we enter this new cycle of economic organization and consumption patterns, the present neoliberal sameness that from the northern reaches of Sonora to southern Chile seems to have fallen over the land, will turn out to be as transitory as all the others” (219). The transition is gradually beginning in Palermo Soho.

In its particular locale in Palermo, not only is the relationship between production and consumption becoming more transparent, but also it is one small instance of a new model of consumption that is thinking outside of the neoliberal box. The producers of fashion and artisanship commodities in Palermo Soho are turning the tide in trends of production and consumption in a way that, at least for now, brings up questions about what writers like Bauer have said about our current era. While Palermo Soho is far from being a micro representation of Latin America, it is but one point within a larger network of Argentine economic and cultural
adaptation of their material culture and the values that underlie how they choose to produce in a location of transnational interactions. The renationalization of fashion and textiles is helping the nation by fueling an export economy, and has taken Palermo Soho as one particular starting point in this process.

The research for this chapter is based on my interactions with designers, artisans, and vendors in the lively weekend ferias surrounding the Plaza Cortázar, in the eight blocks within Palermo Soho originally known as Villa Alvear. Furthermore, in order to understand fashion in Argentina and fully be able to analyze the material objects I have encountered, I was able to establish contact with experts on the new fashion economy in Argentina. Employees of the Instituto Nacional de Tecnología Industrial [National Institute of Industrial Technology] (INTI) and TN& Platex, the largest spinning mill in the nation and a major player in the agro-textile industry, both provided me with insights that enabled me to better understand the process behind the clothing and textiles sold in the neighborhood. Within the textile division of the INTI is a special department called the Observatorio de Tendencias [the Observatory of Trends], comprised of students from the School of Architecture and Design at the University of Buenos Aires.\footnote{The students who are employees of the Observatory of Trends at the INTI work under the direction of sociologist and fashion designer Susana Saulquin, who is also the director of textile design at the University of Buenos Aires. One of her students and employees, Natalia Nupieri, invited me to the Observatory in January of 2008 and granted me an extensive interview so that I was able to understand how the University and the Institute function in the fashion economy of Buenos Aires.}
The relationship between Argentina and the world, in terms of fashion, has changed with each decade and historical epoch. Saulquin affirms in the introduction of her book, *Historia de la moda argentina*, [History of Argentine Fashion] that Argentina, unlike the U.S. and many European countries, has had a long history of creative restrictions and inferences that have often stifled the possibility of free expression for both producers and consumers. The reason for such restrictions is not only the geographic distance of Buenos Aires from centers of fashion like Paris and Milan, but also the economic instability of the country, traditional class hierarchies limiting consumption, lack of national identity due to immigration, and, most obviously, the continued presence of authoritarian regimes between 1930 and 1983 (12).

The global period of industrialization, between 1914 and 1950, created enough mass-produced articles of clothing available to the public in developed countries that Saulquin calls it the period of the democratization of fashion. Fashion began to shift from a form of social distinction, to a form of social adaptation (132). More individuals became informed consumers of global trends, able to choose their own styles of dress. This democratization of fashion caused by expanding markets created the seasonal changes of trends that have become commonplace in consumer societies, and these changes began to occur more rapidly. The fashion industry developed more sophisticated methods for creating and projecting new trends that

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7 I must preface, however, that my intellectual understanding of fashion first came in this instance—my only cultural comparison being the lifetime of images that I have registered as a consumer of clothing and media.
were determined as much by their profitability as by the volume and type of textiles available in a given season (131-181).

Argentina, however, followed a different trajectory than the developed world. Since the beginning of the 1950s, certain values had been finding increasing expression in fashion: an increase in consumer options, less class distinction through dress, yet more articulation of different tastes, hedonistic over-consumption, the use of new technology, and the recycling of previous styles. According to Saulquín, these factors reached their peak in the 1980s in the world of mainstream fashion, during the “culmination of postmodernity” in fashion (181). The masses had gained access to many styles of dress through which they could differentiate their lifestyles. However, in Argentina this was not the case. Argentina had “its back to postmodernity” as the country began to de-industrialize and maintain a relatively closed economy, while in Western Europe and the United States the processes described above became stabilized (183).

The textile industry was largely neglected by the economic and political powers of the era, beginning in the late 1970s with the military dictatorship that deindustrialized the nation and attacked the labor movement. During the administration of Jose A. Martínez de Hoz in the Ministry of Economics (1976-1981), the Junta privileged finance as the primary source of capital. The Junta’s economic plans decreased manufacturing, and withdrew capital from the textile industry in particular. Following the democratic turn in 1983, the new government was unable to stop the downward spiral the country had fallen into. Based on calculations by the Camara Industrial Argentina de la Indumentaria [the Argentine
Industrial Chamber of Fashion], taking the production level in 1970 as its base, the production volume had fallen to 34.3 percent by 1989 (cited in Saulquin, 184).

Argentina was also at a different level than the rest of the world in regard to subcultural movements that stimulated new trends in the fashion industry. Subcultural movements in the United States and Europe influenced fashion trends in the developed world as these movements had wider impact during the 1970s. Successive generations of youth began to rebel against the establishment and express different worldviews. The hippie movement of the 1960s rejected consumerism and attempted to create an alternative society. Later in the 1970s, the U.S. Punk movement developed out of disillusionment with middle class life and expressed itself not only through chosen unemployment, but music and especially styles of dress (Traber). Both of these examples of subcultural movements found much of their expression in distinctive dress that initially communicated belonging to the group, and that would later influence larger trends.

In Argentina, the history is quite different. As with the hippie and punk movements in the United States, the trope of value in Argentine counterculture was the subaltern, but it had considerably different value for Argentine youth than it did for middle class, suburban youth in the U.S., needless to say. The subaltern, according to Alabarces, was particularly appealing to youth because, after the military dictatorship, they themselves had a real experience as a disenfranchised minority (2). The subaltern element of countercultural movements that became part of popular culture in Argentina was not a co-opted stylization of poorer sectors of society by the more privileged, nor the “sub-urban other” Traber describes in white,
middle class youth’s fetishization of urban poverty in the punk movement. In Argentina popular culture has traditionally been “the dimension of the subaltern in the symbolic economy” that “creates alternative practices that create the production of a new hegemony” (Alabarces, 2-3).

National rock (rock nacional) in Argentina began in the 1960s, and was the first major politicization of Argentine youth that tried to supercede class; a “style of music that pretend[ed] to be a conception of life and the world” (Alabarces, 5). As a movement and mentality that originally tried to reject the commodification of ethics and style, rock eventually evolved into other forms. In short, rock in Argentina progressed through depoliticization (an integration into the mainstream), the “jet-setting effect” of an internationalized scene, and “domestication” (essentially taking out the rough, controversial edge)—followed in the late 1980s by a conservative return to the retro ideals of rock nacional and a radicalization of the differences between the two poles. This radicalization of the differences is what Alabarces means by the occurrence of “tribalization,” (7-9). As these subcultural groups began to make their appearance in the era of democratization, Saulquin notes the development of these “urban tribes” in fashion. According to Saulquin, most of the groups had comparably small influence on Argentina except for rock nacional, because its ability to represent a national identity. In an era of insecurity, rock nacional articulated a change in the mentality of Argentina youth, with a specifically national character (191-200).

At the end of the 1980s, youth were channeled as a revitalizing force in the Argentine textile and fashion industry. Although the industry as a whole suffered, it
was through an *underground* movement that the seed was planted for the next decade’s explosion of creativity and design. In typical Argentine fashion, the economic difficulties of the late 1980s sparked innovative solutions. In the case of fashion and textiles, the University of Buenos Aires (UBA) created an undergraduate degree for fashion and textile design. In July of 1988 the architect Juan M. Borthagaray, from the *Facultad de Arquitectura Diseño y Urbanismo* [the School of Architecture and Design] of the UBA, and his secretary and fellow architect, Carmen Cordova, set out to create the new program. In the early years of the 1990s, with the creation of the new degree, the word “*diseño*” began to become part of the everyday vocabulary of Argentines (Saulquin, 230).

This small group of young artists and designers became a new vanguard. The hot spot for the *underground* was a bar called Bolivia. One of my informants, Laura, gave me a first hand account of what it was like to go to this place in the 1990s, as an epitome of the new *underground* scene.

*Underground* means like a transgressive person, the genius, to cross the limits. It was [in the 1990s] like a mix of yuppies with bohemians. For example, there was this bar called Bolivia in [the neighborhood of] San Telmo, and you had to knock on the door [to get in]. It was secret, but there was a lot of cultural buzz going on there, new music, drugs, very bohemian. Not everyone had access; it was sort of a clandestine type of place.

Part of the success of the design program at the UBA was its relationship with artistic movements. The students of design at the UBA were keen observers of new changes in society and channeled them artistically into their work and *underground* cultural scene. The first fashion show called “*Latina winter by cottolengo fashion*” [sic] premiered in 1989 in a former hospital across from the bar
Bolivia, valorizing Latin American and subaltern cultural motifs. Based on Saulquin’s descriptions, the *underground* served as the cultural capital that powered this generation of new creators; however, as students of the UBA, they learned to understand the market as well, and began to circulate the idea that Buenos Aires could become the Latin American capital of fashion (Saulquin, 227). As Fernando de la Rua (of the UCR) became mayor (1996-1999), the city government, unlike the Menem administration, began to lend a helping hand to independent fashion design. De la Rúa’s administration and private sector industrialists formed the *Centro Metropolitano de Diseño* [Metropolitan Center of Design] in 1996.

However, if creative influence was building, the actual economy for local fashion was not. Between 1990 and 1994, massive privatization of the economy, foreign investment, economic deregulation, and the Law of Convertibility seriously impacted the fashion and textile industry in particular. First of all, Argentine consumers became part of a greater social imaginary of global products and lifestyles, eager to embrace what they believed was a more first world way of life. The public began to see more international brands of fashion enter their market each year. In 1991 Ralph Lauren arrived in Argentina, followed in 1993 by Kenzo, in 1997 by Louis Vuitton, and in 1998 the first Zara franchise came to Buenos Aires. If consumers had limited options in the closed economy of the 1980s, the 1990s turned into a “tyranny of consumers” (Saulquin, 210).

Industrialists who suffered under the *Junta* were not able to recover during the 1980s due to hyperinflation, and the neoliberal 1990s only made their situation worse. Their slot was filled by import substitutions, and unlimited imports of used
clothing. Imports increased by 9800% and prices of clothing fell by 52%. This meant the end of 2500 productive units, and the loss of 180,000 jobs in textile manufacturing. The fashion business during the nineties basically had two sides: clandestine chains of production and imports. Black market production was nothing new in Argentina, but the decrease of legal manufacturing meant more migrant workers from neighboring countries became involved in the production of knock off goods, that actually ended up generating huge earnings for some of the illegal entrepreneurs (Saulquin, 211). Neoliberalism caused many ills for the textile industry in Argentina, and the demise of this one industry represented a significant portion of the rising unemployment of the decade.

Given the economic trends and cultural zeitgeist, tensions escalated between local design and global imports. A polarity came into focus between production that could be classified as artisanship, and industrial mass production and imports. Independent designers sought to reestablish what they felt was their own, what was local and autochthonous to Argentina. But they had to compete with attractive global brands that made their way to Buenos Aires. As the decade wore on and suitable income and employment for the middle class declined, independent designers would soon find the opportunity to insert themselves into the mainstream national market.

The paradigm of polarity between the global brands and the small local designers came to a halt as consuming public lost its purchasing power in the crisis of 2001. The maxim that from crisis comes opportunity held true for Argentine fashion: when “the system of contracts that orders social relations had been burned,
Argentine creativity and originality made its appearance” (Saulquin, 252). There was no demand for national industry during the period when imports reigned, but the devaluation of the peso meant that imports were no longer in the price range of most Argentines. Local manufacturing not only could return to producing exports, but it had to in order to adapt to the suddenly reversed economy. The devaluation also meant lower prices of articles that attracted new buyers and tourists. The independent designers were ready for the opportunity, and small-scale production once again began to flourish in places like Palermo Soho, as Nancy had described. Natalia explained to me that “flexibility like this happens in moments of rapid change…when a ton of workshops of small-scale clothing pop up.”

Various small-scale private enterprises and cooperatives came into existence, held together by a common interest in alternative forms of design. Industrialists gradually began to take interest in independent designers. If industrialists and independent young designers had previously lacked strong ties, they began to establish them because they realized they were both in the same situation. (Saulquin, 252). During the 1990s many porteños lived within the dream that they were part of the first world, but following the 2001 crisis, many became aware that in order to be part of the global community, it would take more than blindly following neoliberal models and literally matching their currency to the American dollar.

The largest spinning mill in the nation, TN & Platex, was established in the 1950s by Agop Karagozian, whose son, Aldo, was running the business in 2001. According to Aldo, the new mission of TN & Platex after 2001 was to:
Get closer to the links in the chain of production, so that those selected can develop their work with industrialists and, in time, get in touch with designers. We are [industrialists and designers] actually two different worlds, but this has to change…The only way the Argentine textile industry can survive is to generate new things, with their own identity, incorporating designers with creativity and new ideas” (Qtd. in Saulquin, 253).

At the end of 2003, TN & Platex spearheaded a new organization of various actors in the chain of textile and clothing production, the Fundación Pro Tejer. 8

According to their own website, Fundación Pro Tejer is “a non profit, non partisan, professional organization, established to protect and defend the interests of the whole textile industry…. founded in 2003, Pro Tejer Foundation is made up of companies, technical and educational institutions, trade unions and chambers with the purpose of strengthening and developing the whole textile industry.” Amongst the mission and aims of the foundation are:

- [To define] educational plans through well-known institutions such as the University of Buenos Aires, the National Technological University and the National Institute of Technological Industry [INTI]. [To create] a high-quality internship program able to cover the demands of the whole textile sector.
- [To recover] Argentina’s leadership in the fashion industry by supporting local designers and demonstrating that our textile industry can compete in different areas against international standards.
- [To foster] entrepreneurship and [nurture] entrepreneur creativity, adding value and variety to their products.
- [To encourage] business associations between large, medium and small sized industries in order to strengthen the sector and meet the new demands of national and international markets.

Employees of both the Fundación Pro Tejer and the INTI shared with me information on the methods they are specifically developing to achieve these aims.

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8 Proteger in Spanish means “to protect,” whereas tejer means “to weave.” Pro Tejer (which sounds the same as proteger) thus has a double meaning of protection (of the agro-textile industry) and “pro-weaving.”
Natalia explained to me how educational institutions are developing a competitive strategy for Argentine fashion by considering trends occurring in different locales.

What we do here [in the INTI Observatory of Trends] is try to translate the field research we do in Europe. [We distinguish] the circuits of trends [there], and see how to apply them to Buenos Aires. We take a lot of pictures in the streets there, during different seasons, and see what new things we observe. In Argentina what happens is that we always look to Europe, we’re really rooted in Europe, like people have nostalgia for Europe, for its complexity in contrast with the pragmatics of the United States. We’ve been doing this for six years. With the photos from over there we began to do a project of revealing the socio-consumer trends here in Buenos Aires. But in our research there, we realized there is a new eclectic trend where the people in the stores and stuff tell us that they look towards Buenos Aires and even come here to travel.

Natalia provided me with the CD Rom compilations of the INTI’s street research, and pictures from designer fashion shows organized to demonstrate new, generalized trends. However, in the projects undertaken by the INTI, Buenos Aires is not just a transplant of Europe, but a nexus between the interior provinces of the country and the trends from abroad. INTI, and the Fundación Pro Tejer, are trying to actively and aesthetically integrate the interior, and create more “circuits of trends” beyond Palermo Soho, and beyond the city. Natalia explained:

The autochthonous has been much more revalorized here… a lot of times people from the interior come here to study or have a shop and they bring their culture, they have their own things. In general, that’s what it is, to bring in what is yours [traer lo propio]… We have been creating in the past year a map of Argentine design, picking a certain number of places in Argentina, so that it isn’t only so concentrated in Buenos Aires. But inside of Buenos Aires we picked Palermo, and some other places, that are circuits of design. Places like Buenos Aires… were like the periphery two or three years ago, so based on what we were researching in Europe, we decided to plant a map of design here. It would be tool, or a certain asset that would benefit us in the sense that we could define this of “what are we? Where are we going? How to we make trends?” The definition of this identity isn’t
really a closed case yet, because this is the work that is in progress right now.

The INTI, in conjunction with the Fundación Pro Tejer and individual designers, is trying to create a national “map” of Argentine design, beginning, in this case, in Palermo Soho. Argentine designers are seeking a place within the developed world by trying to articulate an identity within the global fashion industry. By drawing on the creative agents working in the textiles and fashion throughout the nation, they are creating new trends with the recourses that they have within their own country. There is a sense of competitiveness that revolves more around a national identity and creative agents, rather than a corporate model of competition for higher profits. In fact, during my entire interview with Natalia, she never mentioned competition for profit once, but spoke frequently of the need for creating a higher standard of living. Their philosophy is very concerned with public and private cooperation that facilitates creativity and innovation in style, rather than a laissez-faire, winner-take-all strategy.

Palermo Soho became the first point of reference on this “map of Argentine design” on September 29, 2007, when an event was held in Palermo Soho called *Por la calle*, or “along the street.” It was presented by TN & Platex and organized by Fundación Pro Tejer, INTI, the Centro Metropolitano de Diseño, 95.1 metro radio station, and the newspaper *La Nación*. The event allowed shoppers to follow “circuits of design” through the neighborhood and look at the new shops of young designers. Sofia Marre, of the Fundación Pro Tejer, gave me the promotional materials, as well as a CD-Rom video recording of the event documenting the shoppers and street promotion. A 15-page pamphlet (Appendix A.3.1) and guide to the event was placed
in various magazines and distributed at the event by young employees of the
Fundación Pro Tejer, describing the objectives of the event, which I will paraphrase.

Por la calle is a tour along urban circuits where textile and fashion design are
present. The objective is to discover the concepts of Argentine identity in design.
Each person who follows the routes included in a map/guide in the pamphlet is meant
to see and interpret the trends that Argentina is generating. The participants could
follow different thematic itineraries and visit the local designers and see their
creations, combining recreation with education. In the future there will be similar
events in the neighborhoods of Recoleta and San Telmo, as well as in the cities of
Rosario and Cordoba. Fundación Pro Tejer and INTI are confident that Argentina is a
generator of new trends, so they created a comprehensive approach to present the
personal visions of the designers (A.3.2). Pro Tejer is invested in the event in order to
promote the agro-textile industry, while Observatory of Trends at INTI Textiles is
trying to amplify a systematic way to interpret global trends in various world cities
(A.3.3). The event was ordered into three “circuits” of design: texture, form and
ensemble, each with their destinations and connecting pathways illustrated on a
neighborhood map in the pamphlet (A.3.5-3.6). Natalia explained to me the meaning
of the three circuits:

We identified three circuits for Por la calle. One of them is texture, and that has to do with the experimentation with textiles. These
designers work with their own weavings. It’s less aesthetics and more production. Then there is the circuit of forms, which has more to do
with morphology and more how the clothing fits the body, something very characteristic of the program of fashion design [at the UBA].
The third circuit is ensemble, where designers combine dissimilar elements, from different cultures and different subcultures of
Argentina. They combine them and recreate them. It’s a pretty small group because it’s actually quite difficult, they’re people with a lot of
strength, with a lot of identity, because they’re all things that don’t fit in with what’s habitual. Another tendency of this group is to relate things to the arts. Many [who do ensemble] aren’t from the design program, many are from fine arts or self taught, which is also very common for fashion here, because if you think about clothing it’s relatively easy to produce with the possibilities that there are, and has a lot of cultural meaning. It’s really hard to have a career as an artist or painter, you have to have the economic position or be super-dedicated, or a very bohemian spirit. It happens a lot that those from the University reclaim [design] from the big producers and businesses that don’t respect certain characteristics of what is design, which really has to do with improving the quality of life.

The pamphlet goes beyond promoting the event, and actually offers cultural critique in explaining the aims of *Por la calle*. It reiterates the question of the 1990s, with a passage written by Susana Saulquin, explaining that the deepening of the global economy created a need to find both an individual and collective identity through new means. Independent design has become increasingly popular since the 2001 crisis, particularly because it facilitates the search for individuality and creates a national trademark. Saulquin’s passage explains that in the 1990s, the proliferation of mass marketed commodities created an “emptiness” of identity for the Argentine consuming public, that is now being filled by Argentine designers creating trends of their own to share with the world (A.3.4).

In the video recording of the event I was able to watch, artisans in the Plaza attached balloons with the *Por la calle* emblem on them, while the employees handed out these balloons and the pamphlets to the shoppers. What is interesting is that this form of publicity is nothing like corporate advertising, just as the businesses it promotes are not either. It is sponsored by a radio station, a national newspaper, and TN & Platex, and emphasizes cultural critique of mass marketed design while promoting individual designers who come out of the UBA. Argentines who visited
the event may have been happy to see the emphasis on their own nation as a generator of trends, rather than as passive recipient of global trademarks. However, given the transnational character of the neighborhood, tourists must have also taken serious notice of the event. *Por la calle* was meant to speak to a larger public, and the message is clear: “Argentina also generates trends.”

In the U.S. neoliberal model, I would argue, the proliferation of market commodities and the variety of styles is one of the justifications for the liberal values of the market. Unbridled market expansion is hailed as the hallmark of a customer driven economy. In light of the prevalent assumptions of liberal models, it is very interesting, and perhaps peculiar, how well the cooperation between private and public institutions in Argentina is working out in an open global market. It is the collective effort of learning institutions, the state, and the private sector that is establishing places like Palermo Soho within a national framework of economic development that is premised not on profiteering, but on experimentation and creativity with aesthetics.

The process of material production is taking a radical new direction, and this systemic shift finds both its causes and effects in the new trend of valorization of the process itself. The flourishing of independent designers and artisans reflects a new emphasis placed on the transparency behind the process of producing the objects they sell. Local Argentine designers and artisans have been able to insert themselves in the local commercial scene with greater success due specifically to their originality and keen maneuvering of the current economic and cultural trends.
Their own sense and taste fill the role of market research, with the help of the INTI Observatory of Trends.

The mantra I learned as a teenager working in a store, the “customer comes first,” is not necessarily the case in Palermo Soho. I choose to address the producers of these objects before I address the consumers of these objects, because I am not looking at large scale production in which market research and advertising mechanisms are factored into the production process. I am looking at entrepreneurs who either alone, or through the help of family and personal contacts, have established a livelihood out of demystifying the commodification process and selling something that is personal to themselves and reflects their own personal tastes, values, and life story. Personalization of consumer commodities is a more commonly noted practice, which will form part of the next chapter. But personalization of production— a producer filling part of the role of consumer him or herself—is the “new trend.” Natalia explains it clearly:

It is getting more and more diversified. There are more options, for a greater number of people. You’re not going to see very few selling to very many, but many selling to many. You’re friends don’t necessarily like the designer that you like. With diversity there is also combination; you can decide. For me, personalization has to do with not being so straight-edge [soberbio] and not having to incorporate mass elements. It’s not that that’s going to disappear, but it’s more and more important what is behind a product. Like, behind this product there is a designer with a history, who tells something through a discourse [the clothing] that affects me [as the consumer]. With mass products, there has to be behind it a respect for workers, animals, materials, and the environment. There has to be transparency in the product. This is what I see.

Part of the tactics of international brands and corporations is to seduce new, foreign markets through novelty and an ability to constantly change and keep up, a
classic example of the imperializing influence that globalization is said to have (Sarlo). The local producers in Palermo Soho demonstrate that while novelty and seduction have economic underpinnings, it is not the exclusive privilege of foreign companies, and merchants of style and prestige to own or embody this process in cultural production and consumption.

Palermo Soho was, and to a certain degree continues to be, a neighborhood characterized by workshops and small-scale production. As one walks through the neighborhood amongst all of the beautiful boutiques, upscale restaurants with a carefully crafted ambiance, designer hotels, and name brand stores, there is something that distinguishes this place from other commercial zones and shopping districts. That difference is that all of the goods for sale exist along side signs of design and creation, not only consumption. The process and the product both try to reveal themselves. In other words, unlike walking along Santa Fe Avenue, just a few blocks to the north, Florida Street (a pedestrian mall) or, to use a cross-cultural example, any shop-filled street in a U.S. city like Denver, Palermo Soho makes it clear to any person who is there that it is not an area that exclusively caters to shoppers and insulates them from anything else pertaining to the objects for sale.

Personalization an essential part of the process of production and the earning of a livelihood for so many of these designers and artisans, and it is one the pillars of the neighborhood’s success, new brand name identity, and strength against corporate models. If the neighborhood is pulling in money (and therefore being legitimated by the government of Buenos Aires), it is because it offers selection to the consumer; a classic principle of business. But this selection comes from the
diversity of production that could only be facilitated by individuality and personalization of commodities before they have gone up for sale. The diversification of tastes apparent in consumption is reflected by a market that creates more styles to capitalize on it.

The small-scale producer is not struggling alone against the current—the small-scale producer is the current. I can attest that every single independent, small-scale producer who was willing or able to give me the time to chat about what they make and sell demonstrated this principle of a relationship to their work. The location for them, with the influx of tourists eager to look at the novel, locally identified items, was helping them make money: often enough to get by. This was the function of the barrio, to make them money. The items were not necessarily made with the assumption that they would make money, but the space to sell them in was.

Some interviews I conducted epitomized personalization in particular. Ana, a porteña who appeared to be in her thirties, has a stand in the Plaza Cortázar weekend feria selling marijuana paraphernalia and propaganda for the decriminalization of marijuana in Argentina and the world. She told me:

I live on this. We here continue living as artisans. I know that there are a lot of people around here that are in a position to make a ton of money, but each one does what they know. I make and sell these things with the idea [tema] of the decriminalization of marijuana here in Argentina and, really, in the world. Each one of us gets to decide what we do, so I live on what I believe in [vivo de lo que soy]. My contribution is with my stand here selling things for smokers, and also to explain to people that don’t smoke that they have prejudices against my better vibes [que tienen perjuicios con mi mejor onda] and that they don’t have to have these prejudices….it doesn’t matter to me what the government says about it.
Ana (having a legal permit to sell her items in the feria) works through a
local cooperative to make enough money to support herself and promote her
worldview to a global public that comes through. As I approached her, I
heard her speaking English to an American tourist, and she was very happy
that her location in the feria gave her the chance to make a living according
to her beliefs.

With the recent surge in independent fashion design in Buenos Aires,
designers are not just designing based on what the consumer will buy from them,
but on what they find tasteful themselves. To take it one step further, some
designers even design what they believe, based on a matter of principles, the
consumers ought to be wearing. Some say that the corporations, through advertising
and endorsement, are selling us how we they decide we are supposed to live, and
while that is an arguable topic, independent fashion designers can certainly perform
this practice. Hilda Perez, a 50-year-old woman who recently began her own
fashion line, intended to include with her products a form of social commentary.
Before beginning her fashion line she worked in education. She sells her women’s
clothing line in an indoor corral called Estoy Mirando [I’m Looking] amongst other
designers who have booths inside. It is located on Borges Street about one block
from the feria.

I make clothing in all sizes. My friend and I pick a model and we
notice the trends that can work for people like me, because generally
there isn’t clothing for people like me. I always wanted to make
clothing because I was never able to find things that I liked in the
market and that fit my body right. The Argentine woman is very
small, and there are basically two sizes: little on top, and big below.
Argentine fashion has a lot of variety, but at least I can speak for
women of my generation, I’m fifty. It has to be elegant, and
original, and I like to have something that looks like something a model has. In the last ten years there have been a lot of new designers, and a lot of American influence, but I don’t like that because I think it is a very inelegant influence, it is not a good one, its almost dirty [hasta el aspecto de sucio]. I never liked that. I was a teenage hippy, but I was a well put-together hippy, and now they’re not like that, the girls are always wearing sneakers, they don’t care about the aesthetic or the body. It’s better to see a woman in heels and a skirt, like a costume that looks like it costs a lot. And the worst is the women of my age that don’t know their age. I mean, a forty-something woman who looks like a teenager. And I don’t like that because it also affects the teenagers, so that they don’t have parameters or models to follow. Jeans are okay every now and then, but not to be dressed up. So I sell these things here, and also from my house in [the neighborhood of] Saavedra where I can make things personally when my customers call me.

As humorous as her self-explanation may sound, Hilda has the goods to back up her argument. Her dresses, skirts, and blouses all reflected a classic elegance, made with carefully selected floral print and embroidered fabrics. She made them with herself in mind, as she made a point that she always wears her own designs. Hilda was not only trying to be creative and start a new career, but she was attempting to offer a social critique on what she saw to be negative trends in Argentina and wanted to make her contribution.

For other producers, learning the craft itself is what was behind their decision to begin selling their items. Sandra sells woven objects that she makes herself with machines in her workshop in the neighborhood of Once. She describes how she came to make her creations and sell them in Palermo as a personal path of following her own interests to eventually supplement her income as a teacher:

I work with themes of nature. I am self-taught, and I always liked to weave when I was a little girl. I took two classes on weaving with a woman from [the province of] Salta. Later I was an avid reader and learned a lot of weaving that way. I really began when I was seven years old, but I started to do all this [gesturing towards her products]
about six years ago. I only started to sell though about three years ago. I began to sell in the street until I was able to come here. But this isn’t my actual job; it’s more of a pastime. What I do is more artisanship than design.

Novelty is the rule in this neighborhood. For Sandra, her designs sell more to travelers than to porteños, although porteños do purchase from other designers like Hilda. Multicultural commodities, if they can be so called, are an integral part of the neighborhood, where a store like Nancy’s Atípica [Atypical], Sandra’s weavings, and the objects sold in the Plaza Cortázar float freely, carrying something from the interior of Argentina to the borderlands of Palermo Soho.

Neither the INTI nor the Fundación Pro Tejer place emphasis on commercial competition. I found little mention of competition expressed by the designers I encountered in Palermo Soho as well. In fact, none of the designers or artisans I talked to discussed the question of competition at all, unless they were referring to global brands encroaching on the neighborhood or individuals who sold knock-off goods in the streets. In this case, it is not so much competition as certain businesses not displaying the ethics and authenticity that events like Por la calle are trying to emphasize. Most designers and artisans came into their line of work in the neighborhood through relationships with other producers, and expressed enthusiasm for their shared success.

The traditional barrio may be crumbling in many ways due to globalization, but not due solely, or primarily, to global hegemonic entities. National and local individuals and organizations are working to recreate the neighborhood with the future of a yet unarticulated Argentine identity. In creating a brand name for the neighborhood, a process is beginning to create a national trademark [marca
nacional] of Argentine design and creation of trends. Brand naming, cooling, is part of a process of developing economic vitality for certain middle and working class sectors in the fashion and artisanship markets that are utilizing the market system locally. They are selling to a global public of consumers, through means other than those of the model of U.S. liberalism or corporate fashion, while maintaining standards of high quality.
Chapter IV
Consumption in the Translocale

The questions of globalization and personalization of objects are, in most of the literature I have cited, applied in the study of consumption more than in the study of production. Media and marketing play different roles and are not expressed in the typical commercial sense. Instead of mass advertising, the products that I will analyze communicate their value to the consumer through different means than those that usually characterize analyses of consumption. In the first place, the physical site of consumption is very different from other places in the city of Buenos Aires. Secondly, the identities and tastes of the consumers in this particular site distinguish the act of consumption here in special ways. If I have not already demonstrated sufficiently that Palermo Soho is a site of global meanings and interactions, consumption in the neighborhood solidifies this point. The questions I will seek to answer are how the neighborhood itself has created a brand name manifest in the objects and practices of consumption, and how consumption in the neighborhood represents or contradicts the general concept of what consumption of objects is.

I take Canclini’s definition of consumption, that it is the “ensemble of sociocultural processes in which the appropriation and use of products takes place” as a viable starting point for beginning an analysis (38). Furthermore, I will agree with his point that consumption “contributes to the integrative and communicative rationality of a society” (40) when distinct sectors of society take interest in
commodities produced by others and, through taste and discrimination, understand or attribute some measure of social significance to them.

In order to distinguish Palermo Soho as a site of consumption, I will contrast my research of the neighborhood temporally and spatially from research done by Emmanuela Guano in the late 1990s Buenos Aires. Her article gives a very detailed, but now dated, analysis of the changes in urban space and cultural climate due to neoliberal reform, hegemonic discourse, and consumerism. Because of the growing urban instability due to social inequality and escalating class tensions, new privatized spaces provided a sanctuary for the middle class from the urban insecurity of everyday life. It was convenient for the Menem administration and proponents of the neoliberal model, to create certain spaces, the “spectacles of modernity” that were the subject of her research. They were means through which the Menem administration, the local elite, and the hegemonic imaginary could persuade the angst ridden middle classes to accept the doctrine of neoliberalism (Guano).

It was not until the 1990s that the shopping malls emerged, called in porteño Spanish simply shoppings.⁹ These places include Abasto, an enormous building that once served as a produce market, and now stands as a shiny, streamlined four story shopping with a McDonalds, Nike store, Zara, Adidas, and a large American-style

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⁹ Shopping is not a colloquial term. Upon exiting the subway on Line B at the Carlos Gardel station, with direct access to the Abasto Shopping, one sees a sign with arrows point to “Aceso al shopping.” The Spanish term centro comercial is about as general as commercial center would be in English, while galería, or galería de compras (the word in many dictionaries for mall) in Buenos Aires refers to traditional arcades that lead off the street into a building lined with tiny shops selling related items, many of then found along Santa Fe Avenues or Florida Street.
cinema with multiple theatres. Another well known shopping is Galerías Pacifico\(^{10}\) on Florida St.: a pedestrian street lined with a whole array of tiny tourist shops, galerías, much larger stores and even a video arcade, packed with all kinds of sketchy characters. The street starkly contrasts with the guarded and safe-feeling shopping. As an American, and a temporary middle class resident of Buenos Aires for several months, I myself even felt a sense of relief to be in these places and away from the stresses that often accompanied walking along the busy streets of Buenos Aires. Inside of a shopping, I was able to release my constant awareness of my urban surroundings, only to need be aware of the plethora of high-end items that were out of my price range as a student, or comfortably meander around with a fellow American doing some shopping in a place that we found unchallenging because of its familiarity. Thus, even in the 2000s, the shoppings continue to be consistent with Guano’s description of spaces of segregation, where some can escape the social realities of urban life (194).

This segregation was produced as a form of seduction of a particular segment of the masses, according to Guano. By a certain point in the 1990s, the middle class was no longer benefiting from Menem’s neoliberal reforms and shoppings were showcases, or “museums” of modernity (193). Corralled off from the neighborhoods they are a part of and policed by security guards (Guano even calls them citadels), the shoppings provide spatial experiences that she likens to the experience of reading a fashion magazine. This is because so few had the

\(^{10}\) This contemporary shopping is a 19\(^{th}\) century galería, in the classic sense, designed with French architectural styles, that has been converted into a very upscale, globalized shopping.
purchasing power necessary to buy the items, even during the period of the Law of Convertibility. It was the act of gazing there that drew the middle classes; a pleasant weekend activity, or way of feeling a part of global consumer culture like that of the first world.

I agree with Guano that what draws people to these places is the ambiance. And once there, due to the financial inability to actually purchase such high priced goods, it is the “idea of consuming foreign goods” that is sold to the middle classes (197). Somehow the *shoppings* still exist after 2001, filled with people on the weekends conspicuously not carrying shopping bags. They are a sort of indoor, segregated public space where middle class *porteños* can go to have lunch, a cup of coffee, or wander around with friends and family—turning the U.S. consumption model into something more fitting for an Argentine urban experience. The *shoppings* remain a testament of the experience of globalization in the 1990s, which Guano goes so far as to describe as “a hegemonic modernity that inscribe[d] itself onto the desires and the self-representations of a fairly docile public, one whose experiential horizons and desires compl[ied] with the dominant discourse on consumption as the tool for social inclusion and participation” (192).

If Guano’s strong statement quoted directly above held true (or at least true enough) in the 1990s, I do not believe it does any longer. It certainly sounds like what Canclini discusses as the “supposed irrationality of consumers” (41). The *shoppings* do still exist and people still flock there, but so many have learned their lesson from the 1990s and have learned savvier consumer habits, and developed new tastes. This is where Palermo Soho comes in. The supposition of consumers as
“docile” and manipulated by hegemonic forces with shiny new objects with recognized, global labels attached to them is not what is happening: it would completely deny what is the essential process of the new development of the neighborhood. Local forces are deciding to take the reins in the production of tastes within a framework to respond to globalization and its drastic consequences.

Even big labels like Nike had to adapt a little bit. As opposed to the Nike store in the Abasto shopping—an athletics store that looks like any in the U.S.—the Nike in Palermo Soho is called “nike soho,” all lower case, and from the outside it is hard to tell what it is. The sign’s print is so small that it almost unreadable from down the block, while the facade of the store is decorated with loud, cartoonish little creatures that blend well with the trendy atmosphere. It lies on the same street, Gurruchaga, with Diesel and Lacoste: the most globally recognized brands I noted in the whole neighborhood fitting on this one block. Although the shopings are a fairly sharp contrast from Palermo Soho, they are not the polar opposite. Hegemonic forces are not imposing themselves on a docile market of consumers, but the area is still part of the circuit of global capitalism: a fact that cannot be denied.

Palermo Soho is basically an open space, but it is segregated from other places and sectors of the city mostly symbolically through the concentration of capital, the generally quiet atmosphere at any given time (except when filled with shoppers), and by a weekend police presence in the Plaza and in front some of the higher end stores. I was told by my host family that the store owners must pay for this presence. According to the artisan in the plaza, Juan, who explained to me the
permit process, the police are provided in the Plaza by the government “so that the tourists can shop in peace.” After having lived very near to the city center during my five-month stay in 2007, I can attest that there is a very conspicuous lack of panhandlers and street kids trying to ask for money. It was a common occurrence in the other neighborhood for me to be approached by teenage boys asking for money, either in a polite or threatening manner. In Palermo Soho, I was only harassed for money once by such a young man as I stared at the window displays. He was wearing jean shorts and a soccer jersey, and he tried to demand money from me, but I refused and walked away until he left me alone. I noticed, however, that there was consistently a group of these young men, all wearing blue or red soccer jerseys and shorts. I witnessed one of them being quite friendly with a shop owner, demonstrating that they must have had some sort of presence in the neighborhood, though I cannot try to speculate what it was. Street crime, drug trafficking, business, and the police often collaborate for common ends in Buenos Aires.\footnote{These relationships are explained in detail by Javier Auyero in Routine Politics and Violence in Argentina: The Gray Zone of State Power.} In this case, it is hard to say why in some cases there is and in other cases there is not the form of urban insecurity that Guano described the shopings as offering sanctuary from. Palermo Soho, given its quiet, bourgeois atmosphere makes street incidents like this particularly more rare, though the safe guards around the space are nothing comparable to those of a shopping. Therefore, Palermo Soho is more of a hybrid between the shopings and the urban reality of Buenos Aires, in terms of spatial experience and feelings of security.
Drawing on Bourdieu, Jon Tevik’s ethnography of “the meaning of the taste” of the young, professional middle class of Buenos Aires offers some general points for understanding consumer taste in this city. Tevik defines taste, or *gusto*, as “a preference that ends up being communicated through the objects and practices with which we create a profile of our existence” (119). Lifestyle is what is especially communicated, through an array of symbols that demonstrate a meaning or virtue that others are meant to perceive. These tastes can be associated with a particular social segment or group to confer distinction, or even stigma. Taste is a dual process, between the individual’s own appropriation of the object or practice, how it is perceived as legitimate or illegitimate, and how social meaning is attributed to the subject by others according to the objects and practices that conform to their taste (119-127). Tevik states that taste is a preference that has been commodified, and then tied into the individual’s “stylization of life” that “communicates a social rejection or a desire that generates social distance or mimical [sic] aspiration” (123). In other words, one buys things to be part of one current, and to also say that one is not part of another.

Argentina, in contrast to the developed world, does not have access for all (or near all) sectors of society to goods that define taste. Nor, in the current era, is mass marketing and mass production of large-scale goods taking place at a comparable level. According to Tevik, modern marketing blurs the line between production and publicity: publicity that creates a meaning of the product in the consumer’s mind through a design or strategy, and this meaning should create a desire (126). In his ethnography of the middle class, he shows how spaces like the
Santa Fe Ave. and Florida St., full of mass produced, and often foreign, goods are places where the middle class consumer “extracts” information, and engages in an experiential aspect of consumption (133). At the end of this chapter, he describes how the taste of the middle class (expressed and interpreted through things like fashion, music, and recreation) creates fluid group affiliations (due to the fact that trends change rapidly), but constantly fills different parts of an expressed “hierarchy of lifestyles” (148). Through styles and tastes, groups or individuals communicate their legitimacy as members of a professional, middle class. Taste does then, for Tevik, communicate belonging to the professional middle class through mimicry of the styles of the group (or sub-group) and creating distance from other groups—in his analysis, the people called *los grasa* [the greasy ones] of lower class, often darker skinned origin.

Tevik gives a nuanced critique of those who categorize consumption as the behavior of the naive masses being caught up in the seduction of globalization of goods and meanings. In the case of Palermo Soho, the consumption of meanings and objects fits one half of Tevik’s analysis, but not the other. Within the relative confines of the neighborhood, the middle class is certainly omnipresent. However, the barrio represents an *interactive* community of consumers in which those partaking in the practice of consumption as they shop, and define taste through the objects they purchase, show signifiers of middle class that become even more flexible than the subjects of Tevik’s study. It is true, as stated in the second chapter, that the neighborhood has become a middle class focal point for consumption and has created a brand name for itself, which facilitates this process of consumption.
However, the community of consumers that gather there are from disparate parts of the city and the world, bringing their cultural habits with them as they peruse in the translocale.

Consumption in the barrio represents Canclini’s assertion that “consumption contributes to the integrative and communicative rationality of a society,” (40) as the local Argentine designers, residents, artisans, and consumers come together in one locale and articulate new ideas of identity that are shared with people from different part of the globe. I will make this clearer by providing my own participant observation and collection of primary sources I have collected as representations of “taste” in the barrio. I walked amongst a diverse and interactive group of consumers surveying personalized goods with a taste value already inscribed upon them by their creators.

Palermo Soho is illustrated by several maps as a special place of consumption. These maps also reinforce the spatial segregation of the neighborhood, which was established long before it became anything of what it is now. There are three maps produced by an organization called mapas de buenos aires (Appendix A.4.1), a trademarked name, but lacking a website. The three maps show Palermo Soho, and Palermo Hollywood as well, with numbered dots corresponding to specific businesses, color-coded according the category. There is one map for “clothing, accessories, and ferias,” another for “furniture, objects, and lodging,” and a third for “dining and drinking.” In addition to these maps, there is another freely circulated at shops, hostels, restaurants, and hair salons (where I got my maps), by an organization called Saber a donde ir [Know Where to Go]. This
map has a similar dot layout as the others (A.4.2). It is a comprehensive map, thicker, and more like a packet, with categories for art, tourism, fashion, beauty, dining, lodging, lighting, and miscellaneous. This map is more descriptive in tone than the *mapas de buenos aires*. On the cover of it reads “Argentine circuits and trends” and at the bottom in small print it explains its characterization of the barrio: “this corner of the *porteña* city [este rincon de la *city* porteña] alternative offerings ‘the design of the vanguard’” and continues in a separate paragraph:

> Exclusive sites of furniture and objects, books, music and art, a variety of bars and restaurants that stand out by their original styles, with sophisticated decorations and eccentric dishes. The *porteño* Soho presents a different style, where the old fashioned [antiguo] and the modern meet in a fashion and intellectual environment [en un ambiente fashion e intelectual].

This map also has an interactive website. There are maps as well for Recoleta and Las Cañitas, both adjacent *barrios* to Palermo and generally characterized by a more comfortable, middle class lifestyle. Although Palermo Hollywood is included in these maps, one look at the *Saber a donde ir* map shows that there are clearly about five times as many dots (representing sites of recommended or promoted consumption) in Palermo Soho. On all of the maps, the backside is filled with tiny, thumbnail like advertisements for all of the categories of businesses involved. There are boutique hotels, sushi restaurants, Vietnamese restaurants, contemporary Argentine restaurants, Asian import stores, travel agencies, spas, Puma, “nike soho,” as well as some of the independent designers’ shops that participated in *Por la calle*. Also important to note is the presence of
businesses for demolition apertures, whose advertisement is a photo of late 19th century style stained glass, like in my chorizo apartment vacation rental.

Although many businesses list websites, as far as I know this is the only form of direct advertisement in the neighborhood. The maps do have basic, and often erroneous, English translations for the basic titles and headings. None of my informants, however, advertised in these maps, like Mirta Costanzo, who owns a shop called Algo differente [Something Different] selling “exclusive artisan designs” in clothing for women, only a block and a half from Plaza Cortázar. I am not aware of how much it costs to advertise in these maps, but according to Mirta it was not worth the money for her; enough people pass by her shop and notice the rack of clothing she puts outside and take interest in it, she told me.

I saw tourists carrying these maps frequently, due to their distribution no doubt. They surely must have had some affect, one must assume, on how tourists perceived the barrio, and even which places they chose to visit. I also saw, more than anything in the tourists’ hands sitting at the cafes around Plaza Cortázar and nearby streets, the Lonely Planet Buenos Aires City Guide; recognizable to me by its cover of tango dancers’ legs and window shutters from the famous buildings of La Boca. It seems to be the most popular guide (amongst English language tourists), as it was also the one almost exclusively carried by myself and my fellow FLACSO students upon our first weeks in Buenos Aires. This guidebook, meant for “travelers,” as opposed to tourists, states in the beginning

Introducing Buenos Aires
Buenos Aires is absolutely buzzing with a new-found energy. The sudden crash of Argentina’s peso in 2001 turned one of the most expensive cities in the world into one of the cheapest, and from a
traveler’s perspective this place feels like Prague—before it took off: Buenos Aires is getting hotter by the second and the secret’s just coming out, so cash in you chips while you can, there is no better time to visit this amazing metropolis…BA is a twist of modern infusion into old-world languor, thrown in and mixed with Argentina’s own effusive personality.

Right there, on the first page of information about the city, the “traveler” is presented with what they essentially need to know about this city. They know in a few lines, as I have tried to show in several more, that after the 2001 crash (which was not really so sudden) in Buenos Aires (well, parts of Buenos Aires) new, cool opportunities opened up that are especially attractive from a financial, or exchange rate, perspective. They also know that Buenos Aires is a modern city, meaning it will meet their basic comfort needs and expectations for certain standards of living, with ties to the “old-world” and all its charm, while still being a place with its own unique, local identity. Despite the problematics I have intimated with the presentation of these concepts, Sandra Bao et al., the authors of this book, translate the city into an advertisement for the tourist/traveler that captures many of the nuances and overall themes of the present moment and simplifies them into what a savvy traveler/tourist will need to know.

The section on Palermo reveals even more of what the tourist, traveler, or consumer can expect. “Palermo is heaven on earth for Buenos Aires’ middle class…while Palermo’s day-life is great, the nights are even better…endless eateries to try out, while bars and nightclubs fill in the void between dusk and dawn” (69). The Lonely Planet books have special blue boxes throughout them with more detailed information of special interest, such as gay life, traveling with kids, café culture, and culinary specialties. There is one such box entitled “Hip Old Palermo.”
Palermo Viejo is probably the capital’s most trendsetting spot, and you shouldn’t miss a visit to this charming neighborhood…Palermo Soho…has a more bohemian feel…[it has] one of the main centers of porteño nightlife and the heart of the barrio—lively and raucous Plaza Serrano. Visit on a Saturday after midnight and you’ll see groups of young hipsters hanging out…A whole slew of young designers have opened up shop here since the devaluation of 2001—not only have imports of good quality clothing gone sky-high, but everyone’s still looking for a decent job. Incredibly creative and well-made garments are available, and the prices are relatively affordable…[it’s] fun just to walk around and discover someplace new. For a more defined approach, pick up one of the many widely available maps to help you find that perfect candle store…(72).

In the feria, I met a group of recent American college grads, enjoying sitting at one of the plaza cafes, people watching and flipping through their guidebooks. There were five of them, four women and one man, and we had a short dialogue as follows:

**Q: What brought you to Palermo Soho?**
Guy: Two of us chose to stay in this neighborhood. Well, that’s where we dropped off our bags anyway. Three of us are on our way back to New York and the other two of us just got here. We just used her house, how did you get your house?
Girl 1: We’re roommates from San Francisco, I found it [the vacation rental] online, but I chose this neighborhood because I had an Argentine friend who said that this was the place to stay. This is the first time we have all been here. We came to Palermo Soho for New Years and then went to Bariloche.
Guy: We visited some other parts, actually stayed in Recoleta. This, in comparison, is more fun
Girl 3: Yeah more fun, more people, better bars. It was fun to go out on New Years here.

**Q: Is this neighborhood representative of Buenos Aires?**
Guy: Not at all. It seems to be gentrified compared to a lot of other neighborhoods, it’s kind of up and coming.
Girl 1: We have actually met a lot of internationals who have left their jobs and bought places here. It’s a more international feel. We’ve met quite a few U.S. and Canadians at bars around the neighborhood here.
**Guy**: We met Patrick, for example, a Canadian from Montreal who lived in New York and made his fortune, and a bought a 150K U.S. dollars apartment somewhere here, between Costa Rica and Nicaragua[streets].

These young travelers expressed another side of this *translocale*. Despite the local significance of the neighborhood, they were actually able to feel at home and make connections with other North Americans who themselves had become neighborhood residents. The local scene is obviously quite appealing to North Americans like Patrick as it contrasts with their experiences in their own country. Despite the traditional feel of the environment, it took almost no time for these travelers to note the gentrification and internationalization of the locale.

**Q: Have you done very much shopping?**

**Girl 3**: Today we went over to Abasto, the shopping mall, they had like Christian Dior. It just seems like crazy to me, super expensive.

This U.S. traveler offered a colloquial, yet poignant critique of the *shopplings*. She was obviously not impressed by the “spectacle of modernity” at Abasto, so I asked if they had any criticisms for Palermo Soho.

**Q: What don’t you like about the neighborhood?**

**Girl 2**: Definitely one thing that surprises us, is that we are reading on the internet and stuff, that people will try to rip you off whenever they can and we haven’t gotten that at all.

**Girl 1**: I think it’s weird that you have to stand in line to get into a store, because there is one over there [motioning down Serrano street] that only lets a certain amount of people in [laughing].

**Guy**: That’s a sign of prosperity! There are two things that I saw today that I was actually really psyched to see. There were places, like at bars, where they turn into little ad-hoc stores and they sell like little t-shirts, I think it’s great, it’s got healthy feel. I wonder if SoHo, like New York or Brooklyn were like that back in the day. Getting rich, and then going to Brooklyn and stuff. Also, I think it’s interesting how there’s a secondary market for people selling food and coffee to the merchants here.
For them, this was actually their first “Soho” experience: in Buenos Aires. The “healthy feel” of alternative commercial practices struck them as unique and not like a North American city, though they question if it was something that was prevalent in the past. SoHo New York, based on the account of Kostelanetz, did not offer alternative sales of fashion nor public spaces like the Plaza with a lively marketplace. This minor observation and comparison shows that the translocale of Palermo Soho is completing its circle of meaning, as North Americans question their own cities and cultural habits in light of what they have learned in Buenos Aires. In this case, Soho in the benchmark for SoHo, and the unique ambiance is preferred over the gross manifestations of U.S. neoliberal policy like the shopings.

The international exchange is what the travelers recognize and especially like about the neighborhood. In few words, they expressed awareness of the differences of the small-scale market and the “up and coming” nature of the neighborhood. These travelers are different than the archetypal tourist observing locals. They are well aware they are observing global exchange in the global environment that is particular to Buenos Aires. I would put forth that heritage tourism is significantly less important to savvy travelers than cultural, commercial, and adventure tourism. If different members of society interact and mediate their values through consumption, a transnational scene like Palermo Soho allows for a discourse of meaning between different citizens through practices and commodities—and travelers find this very interesting.

Another group of U.S. travelers gave me some opinions as well. They were a group of three middle aged Americans from Los Angeles, who told me that they
chose the neighborhood because they found an amazing vacation rental and liked the bars, particularly Bar 6 (advertised in the maps). But when I asked if they thought it was a representation of Buenos Aires, they gave me a look as if to say “are you serious?” Jeff, a professor at UCLA who has been to Buenos Aires more than four times mentioned that when traveling to other parts of the city, or outside of the city, any traveler can notice the villas miserias (shanty towns). He told me: “They’re just trumping this up for image, but this isn’t the real Argentina, you don’t have to know much to know that.” While the neighborhood may be a locus for travelers, it is not a “tourist trap.”

The ferias of clothing and accessories, that form the perimeter around the art and artisanship feria in the Plaza Cortázar, open up with full force on the weekends. During the week the place is completely desolate, and when I first arrived I wondered what mysterious things were behind the doors of the places surrounding the quiet Plaza (Appendix B.4.1). Although there are several ferias around the Plaza, it is really just one big event and gathering of different people. The vendors told me that most of the travelers were Latin Americans (many Brazilians, Venezuelans, and Mexicans) as well as Europeans. I could hear Americans, Brits, and Australians all blare their nationalities as one moves through the crowd; behaving at ease amidst the chaos. The cafes are full all day, until the evening when the ferias close, and until they start up again for the late night hours. Where I could distinguish them, I approached the vendors to ask them about their business. Amidst the movement and activity all around, the best way to break out of my isolation
within the crowd was to reach out through the objects for sale, and take an interest in them. My interest, however, was dual. I wanted to communicate with the people who were selling the items and understand the business they were doing. I also wanted to evaluate the items to make an informed decision to take back part of Palermo Soho with me that I could wear on my body as a reminder of my experience in the neighborhood, and express my own sense of taste and style, which was changing due to the influences of the local scene.

I wandered amongst the clothes, looking for something that appealed to me, noting the trends and tendencies of the clothing and seeing which articles particularly stood out to me for one reason or another. These clothes are all what is generally called “street style” or “street clothes.” Entirely casual, there were all basic elements of a daily wardrobe: t-shirts, shorts (with stripes, checkers, or plaid), the occasional pair of non-denim pants, fitted hoodies with zippers, blouses, skirts, vests (the kind typically worn with a suit, but in this case meant to be worn over a t-shirt or tank-top), leather jackets, pleather jackets, inexpensive pumps (elegant slip on shoes) for women, and tables of accessories such as sunglasses (usually unisex) and plastic or inexpensive metal jewelry. There were also several booths selling pins and patches with various images and slogans meant to make a statement. A shopping such as Abasto reflects the corporate segregation of tastes in a similar way as any U.S. mall: stores meant for professionals, edgy punk styles for teenagers, athletic wear, and global mainstream brands such as Dior and Kenneth Kole. Everything was all mixed up in the feria in terms of tastes, although certain styles of manipulating the garments were repeated by various vendors. Young, fashionable
Argentines walked through or stood in groups, browsing and looking at everything, enjoying a weekend with their friends shopping or just hanging out around all the activity. Nobody looked stressed, and nobody was in a rush to buy.

Of particular prevalence, however, were garments with emblems of the subcultures that have so affected fashion, which I described in the last chapter. The symbolisms of punk, heavy metal, and *rock nacional* seemed to find their ideological currents expressed through the styles of the shirts sold at the *feria*. One label, called *De los cojones* [From the Balls], had obscene messages printed across the t-shirts, anti-American slogans, and even drugs and drug paraphernalia emblemized across the front. Another designer was selling stenciled t-shirts with skulls, guitars, and glorifications of rock and roll. Sarlo notes the mainstreaming of these motifs away from their subculture of origin:

Rock has fulfilled one of its possible destinies: No longer program it has become style. Rock’s delayed expansion into less rebellious youth culture comes complete with the recycling of the romantic, Satanic, and exceptionalist myths…Become style, (and the same thing happened to the historic avant-gardes), rock is now cited by every strain of youth culture. If rock, like the hippies, found in dress a mark of exceptionality, nowadays the idea of dress as a means of differentiation between cultural tribes has spread everywhere in all sort of permutations (28).

The items I have described, and many of the trends in the INTI’s research CD compilations from Europe noting such trends as “Neo-punk romantic” and “1970s urban bohemian,” might be what Sarlo calls “hypersignifying objects” (23). The clothing all had style, in the sense that it was stylized, but it did not communicate a “taste culture” affiliation, as is often the supposed case with many forms of youth expression. I would say that these subcultural motifs, likely both global and
national, have been translated into aesthetic emblems in the disarticulation of fashion: decreasingly substantiated by social class or group membership. Cultural capital, as originally expressed by Bourdieu in *Distinction*, and reiterated by Jon Tevik in his ethnography, is a class distinction through taste. To this, writers such as Traber have added subcultural capital, as a way of expressing membership to the mini-hegemony of a taste culture like the punk scene in LA in the 1970s.

However, these garments do not fit cleanly into either category. Buying and wearing one would not demonstrate an explicit desire to flaunt my social class, and it would not confer belonging to any particular “cultural tribe” that I might try to become a member of. Argentine and world *ideoscapes* (Appadurai) of rock and roll have become aesthetically interpreted to sell a home made garment. The affect on the buyer, however, is probably determined by national origins and experience with these emblems. It would not signify the same thing for me as for the designer, nor for a person from Mexico, Argentina, or Germany who might be attracted to these kinds of clothes. The clothes are individual experimentations with the use of the textiles and forms for basic garments that follow larger trends of color and ensemble. Even though the garments were all basic pieces like t-shirts or cotton mini-skirts, they were individualized in subtle, handicraft ways or with prints upon them.

After having walked through all of the *ferias* and side streets multiple times, I decided it was time to close in on the items that interested me and talk to the people who were selling them. In *feria diseño b.a.*, one of the corrals directly facing the Plaza, I looked at some t-shirts and talked to the older woman, Angela, who was
selling them. I inquired about the shirts and how they were made and she told me how her nephew had lost his job in 2001, so he and his wife had decided to begin making shirts. His brother, her other nephew, made the small messenger bags for men that were sold along side the shirts. Her opinion of the barrio was extremely positive, as she said he had been able to begin making money, and had since gotten another job in addition to making the shirts. She told me how problems come up every now and again like the 2001 crisis, but they find ways to cope and survive: “that’s what we do in Argentina.” I asked her if she thought the current conditions would persist, and if she thought the business would be viable. She replied that she did not know, but if something else happens “we’ll readapt again.”

According to Angela, this feria had only been there for two years, but her nephew had been selling his items on the street before, in Palermo Soho. A younger woman, Sofia, also approached to add her input on the situation, explaining how much she enjoyed being able to interact with all the people from different places, particularly different countries from Latin America. Sofia then helped me sift through the shirts. They were all v-neck t-shirts, like the majority in all of the ferias (traditional round necks were hard to come by), but obviously home made. Around the collar, and the sleeves, no complete seam was made, but rather the fabrics were simply laid over one another leaving rough, slightly frayed edges lacking any piping. They came all in various bright colors, except for a green earth tone that caught my eye with a Japanese-style floral print on it. I also chose a red one with a similar, but slightly different print on it. She was eager to discuss which ones were better, saying “esto es muy bueno.” Some prints, with skulls and heavy metal
embrils on them, appealed to me less, and I suppose she read my face as she said
“esto, no.” The label inside of the t-shirts reads “ Kopada/ Ropa Urbana
[Kool/urban clothing].”

At the feria across the other side of the plaza, diseño arg, I finally decided I
had to get one of the hooded, short-sleeved shirts with a snap-button down collar
that I had been seeing throughout the ferias with slight variations. The one I picked
had bright green and white stripes, a style further demonstrated what to me was a
very Argentine look at the moment (at least I had not seen it anywhere else). It was
strikingly similar to ones I had seen elsewhere, and lacked any sort of label in it. I
asked the older woman selling it, and she told me that her daughter makes them all
at home and she just sells them because her daughter has a baby. I suspected that
she could have been one of the re-salers I had been warned about, but, since the
shirt was no worse than the rest, I made my purchase anyway.

Adjacent to the feria diseño b.a. is an enclosed corral-store called Verbo
[Verb], that had different stalls for different local fashion labels lacking the capital
to open their own shop. It was a nice, air-conditioned store with someone to open
the door as customers enter. The clothing was of a higher quality, more expensive,
and even more distinctive and experimental than in the ferias. There was athletic
wear made with leather, and cotton-synthetic weave pants in bright colors and
pastels, both of which I chose to pass on. I did, however, decide to buy something a
little crazier to add to my wardrobe that I could only get in Palermo Soho. I sifted
through neon t-shirts with optical illusion prints on them, and settled on a (v-neck)

12 Copada means cool, but in this case it was spelled with a ‘k’ to make it look more
stylized.
pink shirt by a label called “La Liga de Poeticos” [The League of Poetic Ones]. I also found a sleeveless hoodie that epitomized the barrio to me, and that I knew no one else I knew would have. It was navy blue and orange striped, and within the stripes were subtle, little symbols of skulls, lotus flowers, fish skeletons, zippo lighters, and cartoon heads as well as the name of the label, “Datura.” It has a very wide piping along the bottom that covers the waist and fits very tightly, creating a slimming look on the wearer—something I have never seen even the most expensive hoodie from the U.S. store American Apparel have. But what really closed the sale was that on the inside tag, below the label’s name “Datura,” was printed “Palermo Soho:” one label that sold me on another and would remind me of my trip.

In this neighborhood that is trying to revitalize national industry and creativity, people of various national citizenships come together in one space to consume, and engage in a relaxed and lively market place of locally produced objects and artisanship that has inserted itself into the veins of cosmopolitanism. Bauer affirms that the consumption of goods is more than the “need for subsistence…or even for display or identity” and that even in traditional societies in Latin America goods serve to “fix public meanings” (5). Furthermore, he states: “foreign models have provided an important reference for consumption” (202). In the interactive space of Palermo Soho and the weekend fashion and artisan feria, foreign models of consumption work both ways, influencing one another. Travelers come and take part of the neighborhood trademark and consume individual creations born out of whatever the producer finds meaningful and useful to put into
an object. Experimentation, or disarticulation, is the “trend” that seems to have
more prominence over the hierarchies of class and taste cultures that often dominate
fashion in more restricted or traditional settings. Displaying or flaunting class status
has become considerably less tasteful, whereas shock value has become
commonplace. Textile, form, and ensemble are the building blocks in the creative
process of individual stylization. The neighborhood *feria* provides the setting in
which the ritual of shopping can be undertaken by consumers, fixing meanings to
the commodities they find in a uniquely *porteño* context.
Conclusion

The *translocale* of Palermo Soho is a site of contradictions that, nonetheless, has become a spatial and social articulation of Argentina’s cultural response to neoliberal economic models. The *porteño* public has experienced, in the last 30 years, significant changes in their political culture. One way this public has adapted to the successes and failures of democratic and dictatorial regimes is through the objects that they create and consume, and the meanings that they attach to them. In the era of globalization that began in the 1990s, the change of cultural habits has been incremental and increasingly nuanced. Economic hardships and the dizzying acceleration of the availability of commodities have required the citizens of Buenos Aires to become more than passive recipients of global flows. In the present moment, they have returned to their sense of economic autonomy, while leaving the nationalist tendencies of their past to history. As the global economy has reached deeper into the lives of ordinary citizens, individuals have become forced to come to terms with the meaning of these transformations in their lives.

The shift from a neoliberal society means that local conceptualizations of globalization are beginning to change, and the terms of cultural criticism must begin to change as well. Writing in 1994, the Argentine cultural critic Beatriz Sarlo criticized the neoliberal ethos of the day. The new hegemony of the market canceled out the importance of a vanguard that could authenticate aesthetics and the spaces of traditional neighborhoods. She explains that meaning and beauty matter little in the
objects circulated by the global market, where the hierarchy of the market itself reigns supreme:

> [I]n Argentina, at least, it has become quite clear that the crisis in meaning on a global scale leads not so much to a new freedom of activity that would produce a multiplicity of particular meanings, but rather to a state of competition in which those who have more material and symbolic possessions are in a better position to impose the particularisms that arise from their own specific interest (153).

It was in the 1990s, with the opening of the economy, that the culture industries arrived and “undermined the bases for authority that had once made it appropriate to think in terms of a pedagogical paradigm for aesthetic material” (132). The signaling of postmodernity, the end of the metanarratives of the left and the traditional intelligentsia, allowed for a proliferation of market-based identities and values. Aesthetics and space were left to the control of the market, where a lettered elite could no longer determine the criteria for taste, and the “differentiation between subcultures [was] subordinate to the processes of expansion and homogenization” (94). Privatization through the market squelched the importance of public space in Latin American cities as well. She describes how neighborhoods had been in decline; lacking the “face-to-face” foundation they had in previous decades. She says that the “youngest members of society do not find here any of the cultural traits that once attracted young people to these spaces forty or fifty years ago” (92-93).

I have not tried to prove that the criticisms of an intellectual like Sarlo are wrong. Rather, I have attempted to demonstrate that similar criticisms have been internalized and expressed by ordinary citizens who have found a functional way of creating employment and counteracting hegemonic systems of meaning. Fashion in Palermo Soho keeps pace with the quality of mass-produced articles, but does not
displace individual and group concerns for corporate models of competition. Liberal models that emphasize the importance of competition for creating prosperity have met with state-mediated models of cooperation that allow for individual and collective agency in commercial transactions. The criteria for aesthetics rest neither with a traditional vanguard, nor with corporate mechanisms, but rather with a civil society comprised of individuals and learning institutions experimenting with the market itself and new concepts of taste.

Buenos Aires is a city that was spatially and ideologically designed with public space and public participation in mind. However, privatization during the 1990s and a continued desire for membership in the global market have created contradictions between private and public space. In the traditional barrio of Palermo Viejo, the communal, working lifestyle that characterized it for most of its existence, and that continues to lend it its charm, is being transformed and even displaced. Critics like Sarlo note the “ruins” of cultural life that are appearing in Latin American cities as individuals’ lives become more privatized and the public sphere, and public space, become more diminished (61). The name branding of the neighborhood draws a distinct public, participating through an exchange of commodities and ideas, hybridizing the effects of privatization with a ritual of public participation in the weekend ferias that have revitalized the Plaza Cortázar, that at the same time have bid farewell to the Plaza Serrano of the historical past.

However, as Appadurai notes, nostalgia is a prominent feature of (post)modern societies that have become subjects of mass consumption (53). The Palermo Viejo of yesterday is a both a selling point of Palermo Soho, and
simultaneously what some see as a sacrifice to progress and globalization. However, preservation of the past was the opposite of what the neighborhood was created for. These competing discourses of meaning, preservation and progress, are not polarities. Instead, local “authenticity” is negotiating its place in an increasingly global and cosmopolitan environment mediated by market commodities and cultural production. Argentine identity is in the process of being articulated following what many of my informants described as an emptiness of identity in the neoliberal 1990s. Buenos Aires does not continue, as Guano puts it, to long for a “future that is another country” (183); but it does not long for a return to its historical past either. Preservation of the past is a contradictory process of maintaining a locality and local identity while creating a solid material foundation to not be swept away by global flows of information and merchandise. Even in places as transnationalized as Palermo Soho, therefore, the cosmopolitan element is not a homogenous manifestation of globalization. It is a cosmopolitanism created by citizens of a metropolis that has never been divorced from global trade and movement of bodies.

Susana Saulquin and Natalia believe that a new trend has taken foot that will continue to grow. This new trend is transparency in the product, and a product that has been personalized by its creator. Production and consumption of articles of clothing are based not only on appearance and novelty, but on a story behind the product that demonstrates respect for the values of cooperation, creativity, and “improving the quality of life” (Natalia). Fashion, like the objects sold by the artisans in the Plaza Cortázar, allows the consumer to feel a sense of pride in purchasing a product that has meaning and integrity, as opposed to a mass-produced
object. Canclini discusses the question of authenticity, describing it as “illusory” due to the historical processes of hybridization that constitute an individuals “repertoire of objects” and continues: “We can also see an analogous hybrid process in the mixture of ‘autochthonous’ and ‘foreign’ ingredients in consumption by popular sectors, in the peasant artisans who adapt their archaic knowledges in order to interact with tourists…” (44). I would diverge with this supposition, however, by suggesting, that this authenticity he describes, which is very representative of the artisanship and production in Palermo Soho, is not illusory but rather contested: it holds real contextual and personal meaning for the producers and consumers who create or appropriate these objects. The authenticity of the objects comes both from a symbolic value that associates them with the locale (indigenous themed artisanship, or local designers for example) but also through a personalization of the objects on the part of the producer. The individual is expressed through the object put up for sale, which the buyers can appropriate to express themselves, or record their personal experience in their memory with their “artifact.” The authenticity is elusive and the point of emphasis on this authenticity is not the same for each person involved. Experimentation with design also means experimentation with meaning and therefore the question of authenticity. Nevertheless, the contrast between consumption and lifestyles during the 1990s and the post-2001 era has made the point of emphasis more clear. These objects are more than mere commodities, but material forms of a cultural response and ideological criticism of neoliberal and corporate chains of production and consumption.
This cultural response was not an complete overturning of global models, however. The gentrified nature of the neighborhood and the relative wealth of the consumers still show a side of Argentina that wants to be part of the first world, as was the dream of the 1990s. A way of pursuing a more first world identity is not clear, nor can this one *translocale* demonstrate a generalized trajectory for how this can be done. Although Palermo Soho is integrated into the national economy, it is a peculiar place nonetheless. While the producers and designers in the neighborhood are *reterritorializing* the market and finding ways to benefit more fully form it, the public that is flooding in to consume items and even purchase real estate continues to *deterritorialize* the space.

The future of Palermo Soho is yet uncertain. It is a strong example of how certain individuals have adapted to poor economic conditions and created a space of consumption that can revitalize a troubled economy and remedy unemployment. However, Argentina and the city of Buenos Aires have not remedied the social ills and inequalities that became more pronounced in the previous decades. While the informants I spoke to in the neighborhood often chose to not dwell on the negative aspects of their city, the problems remain. Furthermore, tastes are flexible and one cannot predict for how long corporate chains of production can be kept at bay. As the INTI and the Fundación Pro Tejer incorporate more “circuits” into the greater “map of Argentine design” and further establish a national trademark, Palermo Soho may become one of multiple *translocales*, each with their own flavor and history. As older residents sell their homes for higher prices, and new residents
without a memory of Old Palermo move in, the neighborhood will undoubtedly change.

Sarlo critically describes that the “the market’s symbolism...cancel[s] out...the old regime” of political meaning, lettered culture, and public culture (96). The market has changed all aspects of the “old regime,” but it certainly has not canceled it out. Instead, they are superimposed upon one another. Cultural critics make be inclined to take the perspective of the demolishing effects of the market partially because giving a description of the hybridization of old and new hierarchies and systems of meaning is extremely difficult. Processes like the ones that I have analyzed are ripe with contradictions that make an effective polarity of the effects of market globalization and local, traditional forms of appropriation a new challenge for social scientists. The situation of the current moment, moreover, is sure to change.

Different groups of people from different geographic and cultural origins are more interactive than at any point in history. I have attempted to demonstrate that globalization does not equate with homogenization or Americanization. In the contemporary world, more (but certainly not all) citizens are able to reposition themselves and recreate their identity in more ways through the market and transnational flows of information. Standardized forms of cultural production are less common (Appadurai, 54), and experimentation is on the rise. This is both a challenge and an opportunity for contemporary ethnography. In my field research, I could not rely on traditional models for how to understand a specific culture in a specific location. I could not provide a snapshot of a one place, but could only
provide a description of the nuances and contradictions of how social actors have claimed agency following social changes. I agree fully with Appadurai, that “[t]he terms of the negotiation between imagined lives and deterriotrialized worlds are complex, and they surely cannot be captured by the localizing strategies of traditional ethnography alone” (52). My ethnographic research was not traditional, and I was not the sole interpreter. Citizens living in more complex worlds of meaning are indeed able to negotiate more “imagined lives.” Not only are they able to negotiate them, but they are also increasingly more aware of how to articulate them; and that is what I found especially unique about my ethnographic research. The informants that I found seldom provided me with information that I had to interpret in order to include into my argument; they actually helped me find my argument. Their critical and nuanced understandings of life in a global city and an often-unstable economic climate were instrumental in the North-South dialogue that my research often amounted to. As a U.S. student looking at the effects of neoliberalism (a U.S. economic model), I was rewarded with precise perspectives on transnational interactions and global change. This ethnography itself was experimental, and, I would argue, effective. Cosmopolitan citizens who claim agency against hegemonic forces are very informed indeed, and I believe what Appadurai calls “cosmopolitan ethnography” or “macroethnography” (52) is as much analysis and documentation as it is dialogue and the sharing of ideas.
Appendix A


A.2.1

A.2.2
A.2.3


VARIACIÓN DE LOCALES EN EL SECTOR INDUSTRIAL

A.3.1
A.3.2
A.3.3

Mirada alenta

El Observatorio de Tendencias del INTI Textiles integra un equipo de trabajo multidisciplinario. Nuestra principal aportación es la generación de información de manera periódica y sistematizada sobre tendencias en indumentaria y textiles.

Construir y perfeccionar, durante siete años, un método de trabajo para captar e identificar tendencias en el mundo que nos permite ahora focalizarnos en el fenómeno del diseño en la Argentina. Los primeros resultados nos permiten afirmar que el trabajo con elementos no tradicionales para el sector textil, la reciclaje de residuos, la reutilización y el reciclado de materiales son tendencias creativas de nuestro entorno.

Nos hemos propuesto de la construcción de este mapa del diseño argentino, de manera sistemática, como una herramienta útil y poderosa para mejorar nuestro posicionamiento en el mundo, como generadores e inspiradores de tendencias.

Promover el diseño

Desde la Fundación ProTejer, como principal promotor de esta iniciativa, creemos que la Argentina puede generar tendencias a nivel global. Por eso le proponemos a la gente, por medio de Por la Calle, circuitos de observación, una manera de compartir la visión periodista y original de nuestros diseñadores. La Fundación ProTejer impulsa este proyecto en su misión de proyectar el crecimiento de la industria textil y de indumentaria argentina, mediante el posicionamiento en el nivel nacional e internacional de nuestro país como generador de tendencias.

La Argentina tiene universidades, profesores, instituto técnicos, empresas y profesionales del diseño que han aprendido a desarrollar sus bases en entornos desfavorables, sacando el mejor provecho de los recursos disponibles con una actitud creadora. El fruto de este aprendizaje, unido a la pluralidad cultural característica de nuestro país, constituye el capital que hoy le permite a la Argentina la proposición internacional en el diseño textil y de indumentaria.
Usina de tendencias

POR SUSANA SAILIANO
Para La Nación

Las opiniones están rebeldes. Para algunos, la entrada y salida, que en la actualidad se están dando en la moda y el diseño, se debe a situaciones coyunturales, así como de lúdicas, o simplemente que el diseño "está de moda". Sin embargo, para otros es la necesidad de hacer crecer durante dos décadas, y más allá de situaciones negativas o francamente desfavorables, que la realidad era transformándose.

Si bien no hay una certeza de que el éxito de la Argentina en el sector de la moda y la moda del diseño se deba a invertir en 2001 un esfuerzo en estructuras para el modelo de diseño y aportarla a la Argentina como tema serio y estratégico. Pero finalmente fue un aspecto de la moda, y de la Argentina, que desde diferentes ámbitos y durante muchos años, se formaron y toman la vía y el camino de la inclusión.

Próximos circuitos

En noviembre y diciembre próximos, se realizarán actividades como "Radio Metro difunde" que se realizará en la ciudad el jueves. Se han programado actividades para que la gente pueda conocer y participar de las actividades que se realizan en el ámbito del diseño argentino.

Radio Metro difunde

Convirtiéndose en el diseño. La Metrópolis también presenta esteność por las calles del barrio por entre las distintas tiendas y exposiciones que se realizan en diferentes lugares de la ciudad.

Mes del Diseño

EVENTOS

CENTRO METROPOLITANO DE DISEÑO

DEL 3 AL 31 DE OCTUBRE

INFO WWW.CMD.GOB.AR

gobBsAs

MINISTERIO DE PRODUCCIÓN INDUSTRIA Y CULTURA

COMUNICADO OFICIAL C.T.M.
A.4.1
Appendix B

B.2.1

B.2.2
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