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ON THE COVER

"Descarga Cero" by Jake Kheel, environmental director of Puntacana Resort & Club in the Dominican Republic, shows waste before being processed in its ambitious Zero Waste Program.

Buenos Aires

Wasteland BY JESSICA SEQUEIRA

WALKING DOWN AVENIDA JUAN DE GARAY LAST week, I passed a giant black trash bag that had ballooned and burst. Orange peels, burst tomatoes, candy wrappers, cigarette butts, Coca Cola bottles, torn newspapers and used condoms had spilled over the sidewalk and mixed with mud from the recent rains, so that pedestrians had to skip over the trash or veer into the street to avoid it. At the time it struck me as oddly beautiful, like some kind of symbol—as in most urban spaces, the distinction between private and public life verges on nonexistent here, and the insides of the city were on display in all their putrefying glory.

One of the most intimate ways to understand a city is by looking at how it treats its waste. The relationship between humans and what they cast off goes back to the primitive days when, out of love or fear, men chose to come together and form societies. The question now is whether modern cosmopolitan cities have reached the stage of maturity necessary to confront what they have discarded. Will they attempt to transform it into something usable, or pretend it does not exist even as it continues to build up around them?

Buenos Aires is an ideal case for thinking about what to do with what has been left behind. The sprawling Latin American city produces 6,000 tons of waste every day, the leftovers of nearly 13 million people. "Wet" waste is sent to an enormous processing plant called the Complejo Ambiental NORTE III in the district of José León Suárez, while "dry" waste is sent to a treatment plant in Villa Soldati. The Suárez plant has received a fair amount of negative press, as over the last year the bodies of three young women were found dumped there. (The cultural attitude toward women making basura, or trash, a common insult and this a logical end for them has been discussed ad nauseam by the local press.) These plants operate overtime processing what the city churns out, but remain far from sufficient to handle the avalanche of garbage.

Recycling has not traditionally figured high on the political agenda in Buenos Aires, but that is changing. Under city government head Mauricio Macri, a new Ministry of Environment and Public Space was created last year, and several recycling plants are now being constructed with accelerated completion times. Macri will be a contender in the 2015 presidential election, but political exigency alone doesn't explain the rush; those working for the ministry are genuinely concerned with improving the city they live in. Buenos Aires' relationship with garbage and its new focus on recycling speak to mutually beneficial links between political allegiance and social improvement which, as with so much here, are more complicated than they first appear.

On a sunny September afternoon, Juan and Andrés—two engineers from the "Urban Hygiene" wing of the new ministry, sub-section "Treatment and New Technologies"—drive me to a new recycling plant for a glimpse of what the city is working on. The plant is located in the Bajo Flores neighborhood, across the street from the Pedro Bidegain stadium home to the San Lorenzo football team, and is very close to where the Pope used to work; San Lorenzo remains his favorite club. During the car ride we pass a building with a sign for "Madres contra el paco" [Mothers against paco]. Paco, a drug similar to crack cocaine, has seen its use increase exponentially over the last decade, especially in run-down parts of the city like this one. "It isn't the nicest area," says Andrés, "but the idea is for the plant to improve the surrounding zone."

The plant itself is a reconverted coal factory, abandoned in the 1970s after operating fewer than six months. As we pull into the "Planta Varela," named after the street it is on, they give me a bit of background. "We're a small department, just seven people who take care of every-

The waste-processing plant is a reconverted factory.

PHOTOS BY JESSICA SEQUEIRA

thing. We have a very large budget but few people. It's a nice problem to have," says Juan. "The plant has already started working really hard, 24 hours, six days a week. Trucks like to come at night to unload cargo when there isn't so much traffic and there aren't as many problems. But it isn't at full capacity yet. In a month and a half it will be up and running perfectly."

After we park, Andrés goes to speak with the truck drivers; negotiating with them on behalf of the government is his job. Juan and I continue onward, trucks pulling in to dump material all the while, although a machine part broke in the morning and operations are temporarily suspended. The plant takes in about 2,000 tons of material a day; the company running it won the government contest with a proposal to recuperate 95 percent of this material.

Walking across the entrance lot, we reach a second space. A machine high above with parts imported from England is being assembled, its gaping mouth prepared for input. "We have to get machinery from abroad since Argentina still doesn't have factories that produce such new technology," Juan explained. "It takes more time to instruct a supplier how to make a part than to order a new part from overseas."

We crunch back over the dirt to the main building and squeeze through a set of criss-crossing metal bars into the old factory. It's a shell of what it once was and soon will be—the site for an additional machine and staff offices. In a display of aesthetic optimism, however, the walls have already been painted the "Macri" green characterizing all the city government's "Ciudad Verde" [Green City] projects across Buenos Aires.

The plants that the government has in the works are for plastic bottles (producing PET flakes), tree clippings (producing chips) and organic waste (producing compost). They are being set up extremely quickly, with scheduled completion times of one to four months. Large green recycling containers and black trash containers—the ones people danced on top of after the World Cup semifinal win—will also continue to be placed throughout the city, accompanied by 34 "green points" which accept recyclable materials from neighborhoods without containers.

But the engineers express their hope for an even deeper change in the culture. A first step to achieve this is an educational center planned for the Soldati plant, a destination for student field trips. "All this is not just about constructing works, but about generating the consciousness necessary to resolve problems rooted in long-standing Argentine tradition," says Juan. "Changing the way we interact with what we produce is really important and really challenging."

Along with countries like New Zealand and Denmark and left-leaning cities like San Francisco and Seattle in the United States, in 2004 Buenos Aires adopted a "Zero garbage" policy, known locally as the "Ley de basura cero." According to the Greenpeace Argentina website, the goal is to create a self-sufficient system in which industry is helped to reduce or eliminate waste products, with materials recycled from the start rather than requiring toxic chemical treatment later on. The challenge is how to do so without debilitating industry. A model example would be a dairy company that is able to transform whey left from cheesemaking into additional subproducts.

But disinterest in recycling on the part of both individuals and private companies is widespread. Buenos Aires' 64-kilometer long Río Matanza, known as the Riachuelo, is the third most contaminated river in the world in large part due to the untreated sewage and industrial waste habitually released into it. In *Contaminados: An Immersion in the Filth of the Riachuelo*, journalist Marina Aizen identifies three main culprits of this industrial waste: refrigeration companies, tanneries and electroplating companies. The first two release primarily animal byproducts, the third chemicals.

Despite the efforts of the Autoridad de Cuenca Matanza-Riachuelo ("Acumar"), an organization that monitors what companies do with their waste, dumping continues on the sly. Various "mochadas," or tricks, have been developed to bypass inspectors and the WALL-E style camera installed to watch the river—some as simple as getting rid of waste at night and flushing large amounts of water on top to confuse chemical sensors. Resistance comes from the reality that treating by-products in an ecologically responsible way is often expensive and time-consuming. Excuses for dumping waste in the river rather than recycling it range from "Everyone else does it and

we'd lose competitiveness" to "What we throw out is natural" in the case of animal byproducts.

In fact, animal waste decomposes into ammonia, nitrate and nitrite. Nitrate in particular combines with the blood and replaces oxygen; according to Aizen, if contaminated water is given to an infant, it has a high likelihood of ending up with blue baby syndrome, an ailment registered frequently at hospitals in the metropolitan area of Buenos Aires. Like the engineers I spoke with, Aizen is hopeful that Buenos Aires will change but emphasizes how difficult this will be, since "in the metropolitan area, business deals, politics and the power hubs of different state strata are connected by a kind of invisible Facebook in which everyone owes everyone else favors."

And what about that waste whose creation is unavoidable? The umbrella term in the business for everything that enters a plant is "solid urban waste." Trash, in other words—paper, cardboard, metals and plastics, but also the least glamorous kind of waste. In a country in which the words mierda and culo are thrown around with the same frequency as like and um in some parts of California, it is perhaps unsurprising that people are open about discussing fecal matter. Sophisticated recycling techniques are already in place in José León Suárez, where a specialized plant converts this type of solid waste into "biostabilized material."

Waste in the villas is an issue of its own. The city sends trucks around to the slums at a rate approximately double that of the rest of the city, but waste seems to proliferate there much faster. Entire neighborhoods like Villa 21-24 have been built on top of mounds of trash, such that dislodging any part increases the risk the whole thing will collapse. One slum in Avellaneda is referred to as the "Inflammable Villa" for the health effects it suffers from proximity to a nearby petrochemical plant.

Nearly the entire time we are at the Planta Varela, Andrés remains in conversation with a few quite agitated-looking men. "Those are the owners of the dump trucks," Juan says. "There are always problems with the unions. You know, 'You let him pass and not me,' that kind of thing. We're working to standardize papers and keep the trucks in good condition. We want to keep notes on everything; today everything is being regularized. But change is difficult. You understand how it is with unions and strikes; these boys can be complicated."

"One really serious problem is that they dump the contents of their trucks wherever is convenient. They see a corner where there aren't any people and just leave the trash there, because you have to pay to drop it off with the CEAMSE [Coordinación Ecológica Área Metropolitana Sociedad del Estado] and they would rather pocket that amount. With this plant the city has arranged things so that trucks can come and unload their contents for free, with the aim that 100 percent of the trucks reach their final destination."

Documents from the city government say it is "working to provide drivers with better conditions of hygiene, health and work security, along with a stronger sense of identity and a better relationship with neighbors." This speaks to the fact that workers have traditionally been hired on an informal basis and paid little.

Another difficulty is that the national government of President Cristina Fernández de Kirchner is often politically at odds with the city government of Mauricio Macri. "It's difficult to get things done because we don't have the support of the national government, which is always trying to do the opposite," says Juan. The push by Macri on behalf of the environment, far from neutral, is in many ways an attempt to demonstrate the efficiency of his Propuesta Republicana (PRO) party in getting real results in the run-up to 2015.

I ask if there's pressure to get things done because of the election. "It's very likely there's a rush for that reason," Juan observes. "But that's the reality, and it enables us to do a lot of good things. The truth is that the political situation accompanies the facts, so that we can really take on these issues. Luckily the city government stood firm and was able to make this a concrete reality, because usually here it's just talk and more talk. There's a lot of work to do, and it's a continual learning process. In six months all this will be insane, a real sight to see. We're in full swing, full speed ahead."

Trucks can come and unload their contents for free.

PHOTO BY JESSICA SEQUIERA

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