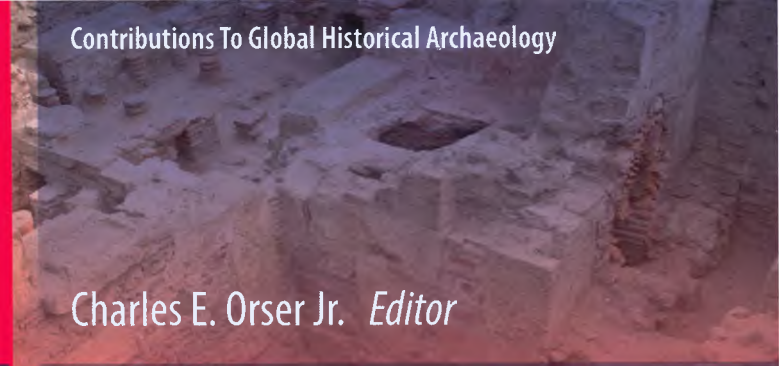

Contributions To Global Historical Archaeology

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Archaeologies of the British in Latin America

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Chapter 11
Archaeology of the Industrial Revolution and Building Construction Systems: Edward Taylor and His Failed Project in Argentina, 1852

Daniel Schavelzon

11.1 Introduction

Some years ago, we wrote about "The archeology of the rich and famous." Although it was a sarcastic phrase in an introductory book on historical archeology (Schavelzon and Igareta 2010, p. 101), the idea had a meaning. It was the result of having excavated the tombs and residences of several famous people locally, which for a very traditional kind of archeology was not adequate: we had to explain the overall social processes, not individual ones. The inspiration behind that idea was an inquisitive and provocative book by Orser and Fagan (1995) which described the difference between the efforts made by Henry Ford during 1923 and 1929 to preserve a set of houses and historic buildings, or to reconstruct the houses themselves by placing inside them the furniture used by Edison, Lincoln, and himself, among others. He also preserved nearly 250 traditional houses used by his own employees. Orser and Fagan made a comparison with what an archaeologist would do with them today. In spite of the enormous amount of money spent, the care taken in replacing each brick in its original place, and using the fragments of dishes from the same tableware, "Ford was definitely not interested in documenting anyone's lifeways" (Orser and Fagan 1995, p. 98); only in building a symbol of what he thought America was.

Edward Taylor was a great engineer-architect who had a short life in a place where the material conditions for his ideas did not exist. When these conditions did exist, he was a change manager for a few years, but the story overtook him. For the next generation, his work lost its meaning as modernity was characterized precisely by the speed of its transformations. And, he had to die at the precise moment the country was beginning to change profoundly. He fell into almost total oblivion; his works were quickly demolished without even a list. Archaeology managed to recover the buildings' forms, to understand their lives and their places in history.

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Archaeologists excavated several of his buildings and constructions, while other sites were simply studied meticulously in order to understand their construction systems and how the builders solved technical problems without access to the proper tools. His works were not saved, but as Orser and Fagan (1995) proposed, it was possible to understand the human being behind those works.

11.2 Edward Taylor: Changing Countries and the Discovery of a Problem

The discovery of the remains of a forgotten first bridge over the Salado River which had divided Indian and White (*criollo*) territories for centuries opened the door to the study of a little-known character: Edward Taylor (Fig. 11.1). The process of trying to understand the system of constructing the bridge, irrational at first glance

Fig. 11.1 Remains of the Salado Bridge when the river was at an unusually low level in 2009. The pillars in the water that helped its construction and support are still visible

but sophisticated if we consider the time and the local possibilities then available, led to another discovery: the forgotten life and troubles of one of the greatest architects and engineers of the first half of the nineteenth century in Argentina (Schavelzon 2010).

The end of the year 1825 saw the arrival in Buenos Aires of a young man who had graduated with honors from the Royal Academy of London, one of the first British immigrants to arrive in an organized group. He attempted to introduce new ideas in engineering and architecture, including the use of modern building materials and construction techniques in rural and urban large-scale constructions, as well as the use of industrial technologies in large private and public buildings. But, he was unable to find the appropriate social and economic context. He then chose to bring about changes through the use of traditional building materials: wood and brick instead of iron; ramps and mules in lieu of steam power; functional designs for the purpose of rationalizing the use of time in commercial and industrial activities (Schavelzon and Silveira 1998). However, although he held a prominent but late-in-life position in the city, built several private and public buildings, and even gave up his Presbyterian religion (two of his daughters became Catholic nuns), he was never socially or intellectually acknowledged. He was forgotten and most of his work were destroyed or altered by the next generation, when the Industrial Revolution really started in Argentina (De Paula and Gutiérrez 1974; Liernur and Silvestri 1993). From the point of view of international technology, Taylor's methodological systems no longer had any meaning; they were considered a means of mitigating a lack of resources, and they were forgotten, replaced by modern industrial productive systems. He was consigned to oblivion by the contemporary world he himself had advanced.

11.3 The Project of an Unattainable Bridge Beyond the Reach of Local Engineering

The year 1852 was one of the most eventful ones in national history: Juan Manuel de Rosas had absolute power between 1829 and February 3, 1852 (Irazusta 1953). He held onto power by promoting a conservative political model which rejected the construction of a nation in modern terms. He kept the identity of each region's pre-existing states and traditional crafts (in a kind of economic protectionism) and closed the country to international markets and ideas and to the complex network of relationships they implied. Modernity was viewed as a problem, as an enemy of a unipersonal and populist system of power. He was a first among equals, upholding a model of a federation of states, united before the perceived intrusion of liberalism and external capitalism. The national commercial bourgeoisie, who favored political and economic modernization, would that very same year organize a military coup that would send him into exile. And, it was to be in the country which he had identified as the root of all his evils: Great Britain, a country which, from that moment up to the present, would become a symbol of imperialism. This symbol was used to

gain the support of the national masses (Chiaramonte 1971; Lynch 1984; Rosa 1941–1942; Scalabrini Ortiz 1971). There are grounds for this association between Great Britain and imperialism, but understanding them would expose the double-speak still used today by political groups associated with nationalism. The year 1852 became a milestone with the fall of Rosas and the takeover by Justo José de Urquiza. This was a climactic moment in nineteenth-century history, and its powerful influence is still important in Argentine politics (Ferns 1968; Scobie 1963).

It was also in the year 1852 that the Terrero family, associates of Rosas in several of his agrarian ventures, especially the production of salted meat for export for consumption by slaves in the USA and Cuba, commissioned the state to build a bridge over the Salado River. Until the previous generation, the river had marked the end of the family's lands (as well as the nation's lands) and the start of Indian territory. The river had been the geographical boundary dividing Whites from Indians for 250 years as no bridges crossed over it (see Fig. 11.1). During the last few years, people had crossed the river in boats or horses, and the army constantly moved onto those lands considered culturally barren to fight the Indians further away each time. There were also pioneers, at that time just one generation, who ventured there to occupy the land and build their houses deep inside this territory. Nevertheless, it was an almost undisputed frontier. At the middle of the century, it was a land of confrontation, interchange, and war (Lynch 1984).

The Salado River is characterized by its irregular flow. As it flows through a plain, it creates meanders which change over time, and its banks collapse with every flood. The floods are powerful, and the river rises and falls regularly to this day. The river can grow from a width of 20–100 m in a few days, so people and cattle may have had to wait up to 2 months for the waters to recede, camping on its banks in the meantime. In summer, the heat causes the waters to become shallower, so there are places where it was easy to cross on horseback. But, when it rains, the river is unpredictable and treacherous, and it is difficult to judge its flow. The river was constantly being crossed before the bridge was built. Big ranches existed near the southern bank and the Indian population was rarely seen in the area, as they had taken refuge hundreds of kilometers to the south, towards Pampa and Patagonia. A bridge was necessary, useful, and important for commerce and the military, as well as for expanding the White people's territory, especially if a government could be formed on lands owned by friends of the man in power, and certainly if it favored his business interests and increased land for cattle. More land meant more power, money, and friends.

Could such a bridge be built? Until that moment, a bridge with an arch nearly 36-m long had never been proposed because it would have been impossible to construct with bricks and lime. But, it was necessary, even in a time of war and political struggle. The question remained: was the bridge feasible? True, it could be built, but it was not deemed a feasible project, although plans had been drawn up. The problem lay in the availability of technical resources: modern resources, an engineer with special skills, and nontraditional building materials such as cement and iron in large quantities. With regard to the first requirement, ideas of modernity had arrived in the country—independence, slave liberty, a constitution, a federation as

Fig. 11.2 Taylor's Areco Bridge, within the limits of the resistance of traditional materials in a modern structural design, almost identical to, but smaller than the Salado River Bridge

a republic—but they could not be implemented because the arrival of the Industrial Revolution had been delayed, and with it the iron technology that would allow the construction of hitherto unimaginably wide bridges. It was possible to find a good engineer, but few of them had been trained abroad (no more than five) and none had ever built a complete iron structure (Buschiazzo et al. 1965a, b; Ortiz et al. 1968). Iron had been used in iron railings, but as there were no trains yet, it was used only for balconies, decorations, and nails, imported from abroad, or reused after reforging. Iron was not available for weight-bearing structures. Local builders, who had mostly kept architecture within the boundaries set by a traditional and conservative order, were not suitable for this task (De Paula and Gutiérrez 1974). Several had used architectural innovations and European models and shapes, but they were not familiar with the new technologies (Aliata 2006; Fig. 11.2). It is one thing to introduce Neo-Gothic art for a facade, but it is totally different to build a roof with an iron structure.

Economic and political conditions made it impossible for the materials to be brought from Europe, much less from Great Britain, a country with whom there was an almost continuous state of war. It had begun with the two failed invasions of Buenos Aires in 1806 and 1807, the taking of the Malvinas/Falkland Islands in 1833, and the battle of Vuelta de Obligado in 1845 against France and England in order to prevent trade in ports other than Buenos Aires by closing the rivers to foreign ships (Alen Lascano 1963; Burgin 1949; Ferns 1968; Rosa 1941–1942). In other words, there was no chance of carrying out a modern and efficient construction project. And, nobody imagined that the Rosas regime would fall in the same year as a result of Urquiza's military *coup-d'état*. Nobody knew what would come of the

approaching changes, whether importation would be allowed, or if liberalism would become a possibility (Chiaramonte 1971; Lynch 1984). The material culture discovered by archaeology has shown clear and rapid changes related to the international market (Schavelzon 2013). And, the opening of an international market, no matter how smuggling worked previously, takes time to work. An example was the Taylor Salado's bridge: started in 1852, it was finished three years later with no changes from the original project, probably because Taylor was occupied with large-scale projects in Buenos Aires at that time.

11.4 Edward Taylor in Buenos Aires

The chosen option for the building of the bridge was an architect and engineer named Edward Taylor, born in Scotland in 1801. He arrived in Argentina after graduating from the Royal Academy of London in 1824 (Schavelzon 2010). He was undoubtedly capable of tackling the task, but, as mentioned above, he did not have access to either the technology or the materials. His previous works had been—all but one—small scale in all respects: he had only managed to make a few investments in land, build traditional urban houses, and perform house renovations. He had been waiting for years for the English-speaking community to need someone who was more than an architect. His predecessor, Richard Adams, had received all the commissions from cemeteries to schools until his death in 1835 (De Paula 1968). Rosas had given Taylor the go-ahead to build the first Presbyterian Church in the country just a year earlier, but it would only be completed in 1861. He had also accepted his inclusion in a public works commission after the failure of previous commissions due to political interference in technical matters and the scarcity of funds. Taylor was a specialist who had already developed good political relationships, although he was not Rosas' main builder (Schavelzon and Ramos 2009). He had no commitments to other groups, was little known, and had married a woman from a local Catholic family who was also a Presbyterian, though both later converted to Catholicism. Above all, he was far removed from Bernardino Rivadavia's previous failed liberal government, which had attempted a sudden modernization of the state in every aspect, especially in cultural and economic matters; Taylor had no ties with people who supported these ideas (Aliata 2006).

Taylor's work occurred at a climactic moment which other writers have labeled "The turning point of Argentine architecture" (De Paula and Gutiérrez 1974), a long period stretching from Rivadavia's attempts at modernization and a handful of buildings (1826–27) up to the arrival of the European architects during the 1860s (Buschiazzo et al. 1965b). The present-day Government House, a symbolic building representing change to a modern world, saw its beginnings in 1873—Taylor had passed away years before—with a Swedish architect Carlos Kihlberg abandoning forever both the Spanish traditional model and the previous Rosas period. Kihlberg would not be the first to bring about change, and as the Government House was at that time the Post Office it helped cement the idea that capitalism was being built

through efficient communication (Buschiazzo et al. 1965a; Ortiz et al. 1968). To sum up, we can trace a timeline starting with the Liberal period up to 1827, followed by Rosas' Conservative period (1829–52) and ending with the Confederation period, when Buenos Aires split off from the rest of the country (1854–61) and which was characterized by an autonomous Liberalism. The period of great Liberal architecture, during which the country reached a high international level, started with some government buildings during the presidencies of Bartolomé Mitre (1861–68) and Domingo Sarmiento (1868–74). Urquiza's new National Constitution opened up the ports and rivers in 1853 according to the Liberal way. Taylor stopped working due to ill health in 1867 and died a year later.

Urquiza took power and removed Rosas at the end of his 1852 revolution, which was the time the ports were opened following the appearance of the new constitution. This allowed the importation of new building materials and led to changes in construction, changes that affected the structural engineering but not the aesthetics. The bridge was the end of an era, the last attempt to achieve with the available materials what the modern world did differently, a sad example of conservative nationalism closed in on itself. It must be remembered that the first steamship arrived from abroad in 1825, but it was only in 1857 that the railway made its appearance and produced great changes in economic and agricultural development, that is, after the Rosas government (Weinberg 1998).

11.5 The First Construction: Solving Technical Problems Without Adequate Technology

At some unidentified time around 1850, Edward Taylor was summoned by the Huergo family, the descendants of an industrialist who had begun to build a distillery and liquor bottling plant which had been envisaged as a great business enterprise (Schavelzon and Silveira 1998). The construction had begun, but the builders had abandoned the project and there were complex lawsuits involved. Meanwhile, the owner had died and the large investment was no longer financially viable. Taylor transformed the building plans and drew up a new project where he changed the building system but not the materials, making use of previously resources which were available but out of sight.

Buenos Aires, as was the case in all of Hispanic America, based its production on a massive workforce of unskilled, inexpensive slaves. Why would slave owners develop techniques that simplified work in a slavery system? Capitalism and slavery had come into conflict, and Taylor was living in the midst of the emancipation process. It had begun in 1813 but did not end, at least in Buenos Aires, until 1861, when the state was reunified with the rest of the nation. In the countryside, architecture was the traditional kind with overlying bricks, walls of unlimited width, and no innovations except minor aesthetic changes (Ortiz et al. 1968). It was in this fashion that Taylor met his first challenge in building the distillery: implementing new tech-

niques using traditional construction systems and tools, and common construction materials. It is clear that his solution was so simple that it must have attracted the attention of Governor Rosas during his late career, as he changed his views on Taylor's capacity in just a couple of years.

The city of Buenos Aires was founded next to the La Plata River on a bluff a few meters high (at its highest point it was 10 m high). From the very first years the lower-lying areas were chosen, through which the river could be accessed, although even then it was a hard task for heavy oxen-driven carts to move along the muddy streets. The distillery was situated precisely on one of these points of entry on the bluff, about 5 or 6 m above river level, which was enough for Taylor. The distillery was constructed on several half-levels in such a way that one of the floors lay below the level of the street in front of it. The building entrance was through the upper floor in a backstreet, where goods were unloaded and then lowered by means of large troughs or chutes onto carts on the lower level, coinciding with the main street on the other side of the block. From there, the goods were distributed having already been separated according to each retailer's needs. It was a simple, elementary system that took advantage of the natural incline in the terrain. Years later, cranes were installed and operated for a century. Modern concepts of reducing production costs were applied, which involved the rational use of available resources. Although the idea was simple, it was novel at a time when no innovations were taking place. No stone was available in the region and construction used clay bricks from earlier times.

The second change was that the builders did without the system of brick walls and wooden beams. Wood was expensive and difficult to obtain in Buenos Aires because there were no forests of any kind in the immediate region. Taylor showed that it was possible to build with brick vaults, like a vaulted church. In this particular case he built three overlying floors that formed long, vaulted, superimposed galleries. Apart from church vaults, the system had not been used in any other kind of building, and only Taylor was using this construction system in the city. Only one architect, an Italian, in those early years, drew up projects consisting of vaulted civil constructions but these which were never carried out, and he later left the country (Aliata 1998).

11.6 The Salado River Bridge

Taylor built the bridge but it collapsed one unrecorded day, and its existence was forgotten until its remains were rediscovered in 2009. Some years before, a document showed that it really had been built, but that nothing visible remained of it (Rufino 1994). Nobody knew what it was like or how the problem of building it had been solved. The Salado River fell so low in 2009 that it was possible to locate the bridge and study it (see Figs. 11.1 and 11.3), and to start checking the information with the archaeological excavations of other Taylor buildings (Guillermo 2016; Schavelzon 1998, 2010; Schavelzon and Silveira 2008). This information could be supplemented with archival documents, drawings, maps, and even photographs.

Fig. 11.3 Massive construction of brick and wood at the southern end of the Salado Bridge, exposed by the low river level in 2009

A study of the bridge's architecture showed the existence of two ends on both banks of the river, built with huge masonry blocks of brick and lime. Marks showing the previous existence of wooden beams, used to reduce the length of the vault, were found on the river banks. Both massive extremes acted as huge counterweights, because the only structural solution with this material was to have buttresses of different heights to take the lateral stress. The bridge itself was built with five arches supported by thin brick pillars set in the river bed. Inside, large wooden columns were put in place to withstand the lateral push of the water. Until then, bridges had been made of replaceable wood, so attempting to construct with compact masses of bricks was illogical in some sense, as the secret was not the material but what joined it together. It was, however, the only possible solution. The bricks would work under compression, supporting the weight of the bridge itself; the wooden girders would prevent the water pressure from destroying the pillars due to their flexibility. It was a primitive, simple, and nonfunctional solution, which went beyond the materials' possibilities and which had an uncertain future. The wooden beams were affected by the humidity; they expanded inside the inflexible brick mass and finally destroyed it. (We ignore deciding whether it was before or after this that Taylor built a nearly identical bridge in the city of San Antonio de Areco, but its smaller size preserved it and it is still in use today; see Fig. 11.2.) The problem was not one of engineering but of the availability of adequate materials, especially iron and cement, without which the task was impossible.

One detail noticed in the laying of the bricks is that Taylor wisely solved the problem of the huge weight at both ends of the bridge such that they would not support the beginning of the bridge itself. He bored two large, horizontal, cylindrical

holes, above and beneath which he placed wooden planks to transmit the stress and reduce the load. These were good decisions for an engineer lacking the appropriate resources. Three years later, Carlos Pellegrini, the first local engineer to be trained in France (De Paula and Gutiérrez 1974), was able to commission a Scottish workshop to construct a large iron roof for a new theatre in the city, almost as wide as the bridge. Ten years later, Pellegrini also built a successful bridge crossing the Salado River, made entirely with imported iron, which was in use for a century.

Because Taylor did not have hydraulic cement, he had to wait for the level of the water to drop to build the foundations of the arches in the water. Alternatively, he might have built a diversion of which there are no remains. This work was carried out in a world where cement had been in use for years, and Rosas himself had made use of it in some constructions such as the Alameda, built by Felipe Senillosa, who had been trained in Spain. Senillosa was able to import a few barrels at the beginning of Rosas' government, after which it became unavailable, or at least rare and expensive (De Paula 1965).

The construction of the bridge was finally inaugurated; it was tested several times over three years with large amounts of traffic and loads and worked perfectly (Rufino 1994). But, on an unknown date after less than 20 years, and due to the frequently rising river, the structure was destroyed and disappeared from sight. The huge brick and lime pillars were no substitute for cement and iron. Neither was there any stone available to give the bridge more weight and rigidity, and if there was, it was situated on Indian land which was not developed into quarries until 20 years later, around 1870. The limit at which traditional building systems could operate had been reached. Only after international trade was reestablished could a different bridge be envisaged. The bridge, as a material object, meant a profound change in the economy, in society, and in politics.

Finally, there was something which could only be explained in the context of Rosas's closed economical politics: building the bridge with its wooden supports on the river bed prevented any chance of navigation except when the river was high enough, which was more than half of the year. There were attempts 30 years later, but nobody knew about the existence of these pillars and bricks on the ground, and the trials led to failure. What mattered was crossing the bridge, not transforming it into a means of transport, which has no explanation except for the lack of a global vision of regional development.

11.7 The Work of Edward Taylor in Buenos Aires

After building his bridge, and with a change of government, Taylor changed rapidly and became for many years the best-known architect in town, in public and private works, and in architecture and town planning. The amount of work he carried out between 1852 and his illness in 1867 is impressive, so much so that it becomes impossible to accept that he built all of the works attributed to him. In spite of the lack of documents or written records about his life, many of his works have been

Fig. 11.4 Buenos Aires Customs Central Building: built by Taylor and a symbol of the international opening of trade of the 1852 Revolution (Archivo General de la Nación)

located thanks to archaeological research, because the generation following Taylor considered him old-fashioned and his name sank into oblivion. He was brought back through the excavation of his works, ignoring the fact that they were his, analyzing the structural and ornamental details, through typological similarities in the use of nontraditional construction systems in the area. Likewise, he was identified in the construction of large residential homes where he used a traditional English typology known as New Renaissance (Brandariz 2002).

His most significant works, professionally speaking and according to the symbolic meaning of the new postrevolutionary national state, were those carried out for the Customs (Fig. 11.4). They are significant not because of the buildings themselves, where he was able to apply the logic of the Industrial Revolution and the technology associated with it, but because they became symbols of the new city and the entrance to a new world: the international market. It was composed of three buildings placed in strategic locations from a symbolic point of view: one was located facing (now behind) the Government House and the old Spanish Fort; the second was next to it; and the third was a wharf jutting out 300 m into the river, thus highlighting how important international commerce was to the liberal government. Just a few meters away were railroads, one to the north and the other to the south that transported merchandise away in an easy fashion. But, with a closer look, the image of the building, so functional and modern, was antiquated. Its arches on the two floors forming the facade were decorative, superimposed on the real wall, with no use other than imitating a tradition.

Fig. 11.5 The Annex of the Customs: note Taylor's use of the unevenness of the land for entering the different floors of the building (Archivo General de la Nación)

The Customs House central building (Guillermo 2016; see Fig. 11.4), which still carries Taylor's name even though it was pulled down in 1894 (now part of his underground remains are a museum), and the Annex Building next to it, demolished in 1936 (Fig. 11.5), marked at that time the new official architecture and the center of the city for the next half century, becoming the physical image of Buenos Aires and its new economic and political power. The project for the riverside area, where ships, customs, railways, warehouses, cranes, tunnels, bridges, and roads interconnected, was unusual for Taylor's time, and was never completed as part of his main project. What is now, as it was in colonial times, the central square in the city, has buildings representing political and religious power. This area had turned into a commercial hub connecting the country with the world. As time went by, it would become as it had been a century before, as urban infrastructure moved to the outskirts of Buenos Aires. Modernity was no longer shown through the use of technology. Bridges and tunnels, steam engines for loading and unloading goods, railroads, and cranes for lifting heavy loads all became commonplace in the landscape (Fig. 11.6). Taylor represents the moment of change, the adaptation to a transformation that was slow but important. But, for the new generation, and for the start of the first generation of national engineers—the first one was in 1870, Taylor's work was *demodée*, out of fashion, out of date. He quickly stopped being modern, as changes happened extremely fast.

Little is left of all that, but archaeology has succeeded in recovering a large part of it, thus allowing an understanding of the changes it signified. Taylor was forgotten to such an extent that a major museum in the country (the Presidential Museum),

Fig. 11.6 Archaeological remains of the tunnels which run inside the Customs Central Building, built to accommodate the differences in level between the river and the city, excavated in 1983–85

which uses the archaeological remains of the Central Custom Building, bears his name. But, not a single book contains the dates of his birth or death or explains why the museum bears his name (Schavelzon 2010).

11.8 Conclusion

The structure of brick masonry made with bricks and lime, and with inner wooden columns, now fallen into the Salado River, was an attempt to construct at a bridge which joined two banks that had not been previously connected. The river separated two opposing territories and cultures, not only two sides. And, the attempt failed, just like the political and economic system which prevented access to nineteenth-century technology. It could be viewed as the last great example of a period termed, wrongly, postcolonial; for others, it was the coming of modernity and a sign that everything was ready for the new building materials to replace those inherited from the colony (De Paula and Gutiérrez 1974; Ortiz et al. 1968).

In one way, the bridge failed to save two worlds, two epochs. History cannot be stopped, and to be at the end, or at the beginning, or to just stay in the middle is impossible. Taylor changed construction systems in Argentina in less than a decade, altering the image of the city center, replacing the symbols of power and religion with customs houses, cranes, ports, warehouses, tunnels, wharfs, and railways; a new image but with old solutions. However, history would be ungrateful to him: after waiting decades for change, he died young and the next generation consisted

of specialists who had nothing for which to thank the past. They had other challenges to solve and thus forgot about him. His works were pulled down and in half a century not even his name would be found in books.

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