Civil Society Promotion of Truth, Justice, and Reconciliation in Chile: Villa Grimaldi

by Victoria Baxter

The purpose of this article is to explore a civil society initiative that seeks to promote truth, justice, and reconciliation in the post-transitional society of Chile. The article will describe the role of civil society in promoting a site of memory on Villa Grimaldi, a former torture center in Santiago, Chile. The site of memory demonstrates the role that a nongovernmental organization (NGO) actor can play in complementing and in extending the work of a formal transitional justice process (i.e., a truth and reconciliation commission) in promoting truth about a past period of human rights abuses and promoting a sense of justice and reconciliation, particularly for survivors of the abuses. The case also outlines many of the relative advantages and disadvantages of civil society involvement in such initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Much of the literature about countries coming to terms with past abuses of human rights has dealt with the role of the state in addressing issues of truth, justice, and reconciliation. The literature focuses on the choices that successor regimes have in balancing their moral and ethical imperatives with the political constraints they face during and after transitions to democracy.¹ One of the most common official mechanisms for addressing the past is a truth commission. Truth commissions are defined as “bodies set up to investigate a past history of violations of human rights in a particular country—which can include violations by the military or other government forces or by armed opposition groups.”²

Public attention to truth commissions has increased dramatically with the establishment of the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission, which received widespread media and academic attention and raised the profile of truth commissions as a policy option for transitional governments.
However, there are many reasons why it is important to examine the role of civil society in dealing with the major issues of transitional justice, namely truth, justice, and reconciliation. First, even though current international law assigns the state the responsibility of upholding human rights standards, much of the recent general human rights literature has focused on the vital role that civil society, through nongovernmental organizations (NGO), can have in promoting human rights. In transitional societies, the role of civil society NGOs is particularly important because many of the official transitional justice mechanisms, such as truth commissions, are instituted shortly after the transition and may be undermined by political constraints and perceived or actual need to promote stability over reconciliation. In addition, these mechanisms are by definition temporary bodies, usually operating for six months to a year and concluding their work with the publication of an official report. However, the issuing of the final report does not signify the end of the work of promoting human rights, reconciliation, and justice within a society. Much of this work falls to civil society actors and institutions that can interpret (or sometimes disagree with) truth commission findings and can implement the specific recommendations made in the final report.

The purpose of this article is to explore a civil society initiative that seeks to promote truth, justice, and reconciliation in the post-transitional society of Chile. The article will describe the role of civil society in promoting a site of memory on a former torture center in Santiago, Chile. The site of memory demonstrates the role that a private actor can play in complementing and in extending the work of a formal transitional justice process in promoting truth about a past period of human rights abuses and promoting a sense of justice and reconciliation, particularly for survivors of the abuses. The case also outlines many of the relative advantages and disadvantages of civil society involvement in such initiatives.

CHILE’S TRANSITION

After a bloody coup d’etat on September 11, 1973, Chilean citizens were subject to a brutal seventeen-year authoritarian regime led by General Augusto Pinochet Ugarte. The worst of the repression occurred in the first few years after the coup when the country was ruled under a state of siege. A brutal secret police, subordinate only to Pinochet, carried out numerous detentions, disappearances, and torture. Throughout
the term of the military regime, the government perpetrated systematic violations of human rights against their perceived enemies, including arbitrary detention, torture, mass arrests, forced exile, and suspension of basic rights, such as freedom of association and expression.5

In 1989, Chile began a negotiated transition to democracy. Chile’s transition was marked by a limited democracy with the persistence of several enclaves of authoritarianism, including continued impunity for widespread human rights abuses and the continued presence of the military in the society.6 Despite these conditions, there has been a commitment to addressing the past and working toward reconciliation and democratization for the nation. Barahona de Brito provides a description of the efforts as two phases or attempts by different actors to redress the past—the “political” and the “judicial.”7 The first phase of promoting truth, justice, and reconciliation occurred on the national political level during Chile’s first successor civilian government of Patricio Aylwin (March 1990–March 1994). The strongest policy during the political phase was the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (Comisión Nacional de la Verdad y la Reconciliación, or CNVR) in 1990. The CNVR was charged with establishing “as complete a picture as possible” of the past human rights violations, with gathering evidence to identify victims and their possible whereabouts, with recommending measures of reparation and restoration of individual victims, and with recommending measures to prevent future human rights abuses.8 In 1991, CNVR published its public report, which dealt with the cases of just over 3,000 individual victims.

The CNVR report specifically addressed truth and reconciliation. The report states that “the truth it was to establish had a clear and specific purpose: to work toward the reconciliation of all Chileans.”9 The CNVR made a series of recommendations regarding changes in the legal institutions, judiciary, and armed forces to instill a greater observance of human rights norms and standards. The report also recommended the creation of a temporary body, the National Commission on Reparation and Reconciliation, which was charged with following up on the individual cases of disappearances and with coordinating the delivery of specific reparations to the surviving family members of victims.10 Such reparations included scholarships to children of victims and pensions to family members. The CNVR also called for a host of symbolic reparation and reconciliation activities. Under the general goal of restoring the dignity of victims, the CNVR recommended public monuments dedicated to the victims, public parks also dedicated to the
victims of human rights violations, and the creation of a national human rights day celebration.11

While the CNVR represented a huge step forward in acknowledging that pervasive human rights violations were perpetrated during Pinochet’s rule, it was a fairly limited attempt to deal with the past because it only focused on a small portion of the human rights violations that had occurred. The CNVR’s mandate limited the commission to addressing only the individual cases that resulted in death and forced disappearance. This effectively ignored all of the survivors of torture and arbitrary detention, who were considered beyond the mandate. The CNVR also had to contend with sweeping amnesty laws installed by Pinochet before he left office that limited the ability of the commission to “name names” of perpetrators or to pursue formal prosecutions.

Chile’s second phase of promoting truth, justice, and reconciliation occurred largely in the national and international legal arenas during the mid- to late 1990s.12 Much of the impetus for the judicial involvement came from strong international pressure that called for criminal accountability for human rights abuses in Chile. The ultimate expression of this was the London arrest and a Spanish judge’s extradition attempts of Pinochet in 1998 to try him for human rights violations perpetrated against Spanish citizens during his regime. Pinochet eventually was released, but the sixteen months he spent in detention again renewed a debate about redressing the human rights abuses of the Pinochet regime.13 When the ex-dictator returned to the country, the Chilean Supreme Court stripped him of the constitutional protections against prosecution, although the courts ultimately determined that the aging ex-dictator’s health was too poor for him to stand trial. Human rights organizations have filed twenty-three denial-of-justice suits to the Inter-American Human Rights Commission with the hope that the regional court may have some ability to address the cases.

The third phase in dealing with Chile’s past is being conducted by civil society organizations. The Pinochet case reignited the human rights movement inside Chile and prompted many human rights organizations and civil society groups to take more decisive action to raise questions about the past and to work to promote truth, reconciliation, and justice within the society. Several recent books and films dealing critically with the transition to democracy and the past history of human rights abuses have become best sellers.14 While Pinochet was placed under house arrest in England, a new social movement of university students called
Funa also began staging demonstrations in front of the homes and businesses of accused perpetrators of human rights abuses. Funa receives support from existing human rights organizations and organizations representing families of the detained/disappeared in Chile. Many of the members of Funa are the children of parents who either disappeared or were victims of human rights abuses.

One of the most important aspects to understanding the culture in Chile surrounding the issue of dealing with the past is that the society has tended to characterize their choices in a very stark manner. Through opinion polls and statements made by political leaders in the early years of the transition, the society expressed their strong belief that they could choose a policy of pursuing either justice or peace.\(^\text{15}\) This was because there was real fear that dealing with the past would destabilize the fragile transition to democracy and would sink the country back into a period of terror.\(^\text{16}\) These fears were not entirely unwarranted. Pinochet continued to enjoy widespread support by a large part of the society and the military. To assess this power, one only has to realize that as late as 1993—three years into the democratic transition—the military staged a demonstration in front of the presidential palace. The show of force by the military was interpreted widely as a warning to the government not to pursue human rights trials.\(^\text{17}\)

In general, the government tended to support the line that Chilean citizens must move forward and must put the past behind them. When President Aylwin officially released the CNVR report, he stated, “For the good of Chile, we should look toward the future that unites us more than to the past which separates us.” He continued to state that working toward consolidating a future democracy was better than “to waste our energy in scrutinizing wounds that are irredeemable.”\(^\text{18}\)

However, victims of human rights violations do not have such an easy ability to forget about the past. Many survivors of human rights abuses continue to suffer psychologically and physically from the effects of torture. The survivors of arbitrary detention and torture during the seventeen-year military rule never received formal acknowledgement during the CNVR process. These victims did not even have a choice between either justice or peace because neither option explicitly or officially was offered to them. Because the government was not addressing their needs, many victims turned to civil society groups to organize and to petition for recognition of what had happened to them.
CIVIL SOCIETY CHOICES: REMEMBERING THE PAST

Civil society groups can play a role in remembering the past publicly. For example, civil society groups systematically can record and document past abuses in reports or through archives of testimony or evidence. Such efforts to document abuses can be submitted to the government or can be published independently when a government proves unwilling or unable to hold those responsible for human rights abuses to account. Beyond providing evidence for formal prosecutions, the collection and preservation of primary documents relating to a history of human rights violations also can serve to disprove future revisionists. It can take a society a generation or more to revisit and to explore the trauma of earlier periods. When the society is ready, the archives with primary documents allow the means for future historians, family members of victims, and members of the society to examine the facts and to draw their own conclusions.

The truth commission process is itself a process of remembering the past publicly and officially. Civil society initiatives can be complementary to the work of truth commissions, as commissions suffer from a chronic lack of resources and time to document fully the past human rights abuses. Many truth commissions face constraints to exploring fully the past because the nature of the political transition limits their ability to look at certain categories of abuses. Civil society groups can go beyond the mandate to explore the full range of abuses and to follow through on the recommendations made by the commissions to promote truth, justice, and reconciliation in the society.

Civil society efforts often encompass both retributive and restorative justice elements. For example, the student movement of Funa uses existing NGO documentation of human rights violations to name perpetrators publicly. The group sets up demonstrations in front of the home or business of an individual believed to have perpetrated a human rights violation during the regime. The goal is to combat official impunity for perpetrators with a public shame model. Civil society initiatives also can be more restorative in nature by attempting to affirm and to restore the dignity of survivors of human rights abuses.

Sites of memory can be viewed as an attempt to promote restorative justice. Sites of memory have three main genres or forms: publicly built centers or institutions (e.g., parks, museums, gravesites), unconstructed or found sites (e.g., previous torture centers or massacre sites), and activities (e.g., memory tours or anniversary celebrations). There is
often contention around the creation of a site of memory with debates within the community of survivors and the general public about the form and content of the site.\textsuperscript{24} For example, Maya Lin’s plan for the Vietnam War Memorial offended some who felt that the design did not serve as an appropriately heroic or conventional tribute to those who fought in the war.\textsuperscript{25}\r\nOther debates might be on the way the past is described, how responsibility for atrocities is determined, and how individuals are cast as either victims or survivors. In some respects, the debate and discussion makes sites of memory useful in promoting concepts of truth, justice, and reconciliation because it can become another venue to discuss the past and the needs of survivor groups. Perhaps such efforts also can serve preventative ends by teaching individuals to understand the past and to consider ways to change behavior in the future,\textsuperscript{26} although a powerful counterargument to this is that the many Holocaust museums, memorials, and education campaigns did not eliminate genocide. Despite the limitations, the development of the sites can serve to promote truth and reflection by educating individuals who may not have known about the past violence, as was largely the case in Chile. This can provide an “increment of justice” by putting into the public sphere that which a repressive regime has tried to silence or to deny.\textsuperscript{27}

**VILLA GRIMALDI**

Civil society groups took action to remember the past publicly in Chile through the creation of public parks and museums dedicated to the victims. Much of the work on the sites of memory is based on recommendations in the CNVR final report. The CNVR was asked to conclude its report with a series of recommended measures for reparation and reconciliation for the victims and society. While many of the recommendations dealt with specific acts of restitution and reparation to individually named victims, the report also suggested that the government should fund symbolic measures, such as the creation of public monuments and parks dedicated to the victims.

One such initiative is a park dedicated to the memory of the victims on the grounds of a former torture center called Villa Grimaldi.\textsuperscript{28} Villa Grimaldi was privately owned with grounds that housed a main estate and several smaller buildings, including a water tower, barracks for domestic help, and a pool. In the 1960s, the villa was an exclusive getaway for wealthy citizens of Santiago. In the 1970s and during the presidency of Salvador Allende, the villa took on a new life as a place
where progressive Chilean intellectuals and artists gathered to hold conferences and workshops.

After the coup in 1973, so much of life in Chile changed drastically, and Villa Grimaldi was no exception. In May 1974, the National Directorate of Intelligence (Dirección Nacional de Inteligencia, or DINA) took control of Villa Grimaldi and put it into full operation as a detention and torture center. The site was preferred because it was located in a relatively isolated area in the foothills of the Andes but was only a forty-minute car ride from downtown Santiago. Villa Grimaldi was DINA’s main interrogation and torture center during the height of the repression in Chile, from 1973 to 1978. During this time, DINA officials brought 5,000 individuals to the site for torture and interrogation. At least 226 people were tortured to death, were murdered, or “disappeared” at Villa Grimaldi.

A government official sold the property in 1987 to a private developer in an illegal attempt to profit from the sale. The Chilean media exposed the illegal scheme, but not before the demolition of the main house and outlying buildings was complete. After the transition to democracy in 1989, human rights workers petitioned the government to build a monument on the site to remember its past history. In 1996, the government formally opened a public park on the grounds of Villa Grimaldi and renamed it Peace Park.

Villa Grimaldi represents an interesting case because of the high level of involvement by the NGO community to infuse the site with historical memory. The government has fulfilled the minimum obligation to establish the site, but one author notes that the government “has not stepped into the volatile territory of drawing lessons from the brutality and human rights violations that [the] regime carried out. To take the next step, to provide informed comments at the sites, to make available pamphlets or audio guides that explained what the military had done, would move toward assigning blame to the Pinochet government, something that to date has been approached gingerly in Chile ...”29 Officially, the government funded the creation of the park as public property and, after being petitioned by civil society groups, later funded the creation of a wall containing the names of all the prisoners who died at the site. The site also has markers briefly identifying the torture that occurred in front of the remains of the buildings. However, the markers are extremely terse and provide little to no context about who the victims of torture were and why such extreme measures were used against Chile’s own citizens.
The civil society sector has been involved with documenting the past, identifying both victims and perpetrators and with providing this information to the public so that they can know what occurred in the past. Notable efforts have been made by organizations representing victims, such as the Agrupación de Familiares de Ejecutados Políticos (Association of Relatives of the Executed Political Prisoners) and Agrupación de Familiares de Detenidos Desaparecidos (Association of Relatives of the Detained-Disappeared). In Villa Grimaldi, many of the organizations were active in lobbying for the conversion of the land to a community peace park and site of memory. One actor at Villa Grimaldi is Pedro Matta, a Chilean national who fled Chile in 1976. Matta returned to Chile in 1991 from the United States where he had been living in exile and began to conduct his research and advocacy at the site. He has a deeply personal connection to Villa Grimaldi and Chile’s history of abuse. Matta is a former detainee in Villa Grimaldi, where he spent several weeks in 1975 enduring the worst of the torture committed at the center. In 1975, DINA forces arrested Matta, who was then a law student in Santiago. His “crime” was being one of the thousands of university students who were organizing against the military regime. After his eventual release from Villa Grimaldi, Matta left Chile and lived abroad for the rest of the dictatorship.

His decision to move back to Chile came after the family of a friend of his who had “disappeared” in 1974 asked him to return so that he could make a judicial deposition about his friend’s disappearance before the CNVR. He elected to stay in Chile and to use skills he honed while living abroad and working as a private investigator to research human rights abuses in his former detention center. At that time he was linked to two human rights NGOs, the Families of Executed Political Prisoners and the Assembly of Human Rights of District 24, the district in which Villa Grimaldi is located.

During those early years, Matta was the only known ex-prisoner who was researching the former torture center systematically. He spent most of 1991 and 1992 locating former prisoners and former DINA collaborators. In 1992, he located a former leftist militant who had been detained by DINA and had agreed to collaborate with them to identify and arrest other leftist militants and human rights activists. Matta’s interviews with the collaborator provided her with an outlet to discuss her deep regret at her activities and provided Matta with a great deal of insider information about the daily activities at the torture center. Many of the victims spent the majority of their detention blindfolded so
they could not always describe the location of the buildings or identify their torturers. Matta used the information to document a day-by-day record of what occurred in Villa Grimaldi. He has a notebook that documents the grim statistics of the center—individuals listed in blue ink survived; those in red were killed or disappeared. In total, Matta identified over 1,600 former prisoners but believes the total figure of detainees to be closer to 5,000.

Matta was involved actively in the debate on how publicly to commemorate not only the victims who were killed but also those who survived. As most of the buildings had been destroyed, there was a debate about how the Peace Park should look. When the government began considering creating the site of memory, Matta called a meeting with former prisoners to discuss what the park should contain because he believed they should have the final say in the design. He described the process: “The group was divided in their opinions: part of the group wanted to rebuild the former torture center as it was during the time of its functioning (which proved to be impossible because there was not enough funding to do that); another part wanted to demolish everything that remained there and to build a beautiful park to the memory of those who disappeared or were killed at the site, and finally, another group, in which I counted myself, proposed that all the artifacts and buildings that were not destroyed by the dictatorship should be preserved for the memory of this country and a park should be built around them. This was the proposition that was finally approved.”

The design of the park includes the remains left behind and placards placed throughout the site that describe the uses of various buildings during the site’s days as a torture center.

In 1998, several human rights groups added one more element to the site, the creation of a wall of names of 226 Chileans who had died in the torture center. Listing the names of the surviving victims would not be appropriate because it could violate their privacy or perhaps could jeopardize their safety as ex-DINA militants could use the information to harass the survivors to prevent them from telling the truth of what occurred. Although financed by the government, no government official attended the commemoration of the Wall of Names. In a 1998 news report, Matta is quoted as saying that the government would not be welcome at the event because it would be “unacceptable, incongruent, and in-consequential” for the current government to attend a human rights event at the same time they refused to allow Pinochet to be tried in Spain for crimes against humanity. A government official stated that a scheduling conflict prevented their attendance.
While Matta was pleased that the site has been preserved and the victims appropriately remembered on the Wall of Names, he also has created an extremely useful visitor’s guide. The small booklet contains a historical overview of Villa Grimaldi as well as descriptions of the torture techniques used in various locations throughout the center. This booklet expands on the placards and gives a fuller and more contextual description of the horror of Villa Grimaldi. In addition to the visitor guide, Matta conducts free walking tours of Peace Park for groups who are interested in learning about the past. He has created a scale model of the former detention center that he uses in the tours and takes with him to international conferences and universities where he lectures on human rights issues and his research.

The publication of the book is an interesting commentary on Chile, as it was printed only in English. Matta stated that funding constraints made it possible to publish the book only in one language. His argument was that many of the groups who take his tours are from foreign countries and could read a visitor’s guide more easily in English. He also believed that publishing in English is important because “the importance of Villa Grimaldi goes beyond [Chile’s] borders.”33 However, this was an interesting choice because it means that the majority of Chileans who do not speak English do not have access to the visitor’s guide.

Some of the former detainees have visited Peace Park, although Matta did not design a special project to bring former detainees to the site because he believes the ones who will want to visit usually will come on their own initiatives. Former detainees bring family members as well as questions about what had happened. Because of being blindfolded, the terror of being held, and the torture inflicted on so many of the detainees, many do not have a clear sense of what the site was like. For this group, Matta will arrange special tours where he presents his research and his recollections about the buildings to help the former detainees reconstruct their experiences. He also remarked that some former detainees never will visit the site because they prefer to put the past behind them as a self-protective mechanism. He believes some also fear that if knowledge about their detention became known publicly, their families or colleagues would shun them.

In September 2002, I visited Villa Grimaldi and participated in a tour with a woman, “Rosa,”34 who believed that she was a former detainee at the center. In the middle of one night in 1976, police knocked on the door of the apartment she shared with her husband and two children. Despite her husband’s protests, the police detained Rosa, and
she was taken, still wearing her nightgown, outside to a police van. In the van, the police placed tape around her eyes, and she was guided into the front seat between two policemen.

She remembers the van driving for a while and eventually stopping. At this point, she was taken out of the car, was brought into a building, and was guided up a flight of stairs. Her blindfold was removed, and she was placed in a room that had two bunk beds and a chair. There were women occupying all four beds, so she took a seat on the chair, and the man left. One of the beds held an eighteen-year-old woman who cried and moaned. She had just come back from an interrogation session where she had been raped.

Rosa did not know why she had been taken; no official reason had been offered either at her house or during the drive to the detention facility. Her husband was politically conservative and was a respected businessman. She attended graduate school part time in sociology while also raising her two small children. She had friends on both sides of the political spectrum. In general, she was quietly sympathetic with the groups that had supported Salvador Allende and worked against the dictatorship, but she was not politically active herself. She was interrogated on several occasions about her friends on the left, but after a few days, it became clear that she did not have any of the answers the police were seeking. She reports that she was not raped or beaten, but she did not know when, or if, she would leave the detention center. She did not even know where she was being held.

After a tense few days of bracing for the worst, Rosa was informed that she would be going home. Again, they placed tape over her eyes and drove her back to her neighborhood at dawn one morning. As mysteriously as she had been taken away, she was brought back to her house. But her ordeal was just beginning. The experience of being suddenly arrested left her deeply scarred. She hardly could sleep at night, and when she did, she was plagued by nightmares. She often would cry for days on end and was so afraid and depressed that she would be unable to leave her house. Her husband was unsympathetic to her traumatized reactions, and eventually the marriage ended.

Before their separation, Rosa’s husband did offer to consult some private channels to see if he could find out any information about why she had been detained and where she had been held. She was told that she was taken to Villa Grimaldi, but no clear reason as to why she was identified or any more information was given. Although she knew that Villa Grimaldi had been converted into a site of memory, she had made
no effort in the years after the end of the dictatorship to visit the site or to learn more about her detention.

Initially, she stated that she did not want to go to Villa Grimaldi but wanted her son to visit the site. The evening before he was scheduled to go, she decided to attend with him. They both took one of the informal tours operated by Matta. As she walked through the site and listened to the descriptions of the buildings, she learned that all of the structures were only one story high. She realized that she could not have been taken to this site because she remembered that she was taken up a flight of stairs to the room where she was held.

Although much still remains unresolved about her experiences, Rosa reports that she was ultimately happy with the experience of visiting the site. By learning more about Villa Grimaldi, she settled a lingering suspicion that she was held in a different detention center. She rarely has opportunities to discuss her past and found the chance to talk with a former detainee gratifying because it was someone who truly understood what she had experienced. Her son was aware generally of the human rights abuses that occurred in Chile during the dictatorship and knew many of the particular events of his mother’s detention but was surprised to hear about some of the torture techniques explained on the site.

Although Matta has not conducted any formal research on the impacts of former detainees visiting the site, he does believe that it can be a cathartic activity for the individuals, as it appeared to have been with Rosa. He is not convinced that the parks themselves directly can impact the national consciousness of Chileans as much as careful documentation efforts on past abuses. Given the continued contention about Chile’s past, many Chileans will not visit Villa Grimaldi, and there is no formal or informal campaign to attract people to the site. He feels that the 1998 arrest of Pinochet in London as well as the increase in criminal actions filed in Chile and abroad may have a deeper impact on the society as it attempts to confront its past. In the meantime, he is continuing his research and advocacy at Villa Grimaldi, raising attention both domestically and internationally to the site’s history.

CONCLUSION

Civil society efforts can play a role in promoting accountability and justice for past abuses and in serving to assist in the long-term task of reconciling former parties after a long period of violence. One of the
clearest strengths of a civil society involvement in sites of memory is its ability to take action where governments prove to be unwilling or unable to be involved either in the creation or the ongoing upkeep of the sites. In the case of Chile, the government has been involved with the bare minimum aspects of the site of memory project at Villa Grimaldi by providing for the land to be converted to a public park and by not making any serious effort to discuss the torture and detentions that occurred at the site. However, it is because of civil society’s involvement, such as those conducted by Pedro Matta, that the site of memory project has included a more robust approach to dealing with the past. Although the visitor’s guide is available only in English, the guide makes a serious effort to put the site into a larger historical context and more systematically explain the use of torture at the site.

In some cases, it also may be preferable to have a civil society institution administer the sites because it may have greater moral legitimacy with victims. In Chile, the official approach to documenting the past through the CNVR process did not deal fully with the complex issues of torture and detention, and survivors were not able to be acknowledged officially because they did not fit within the mandate of the commission. A civil society group does not have the same political limitations and may be able to address more topics. In other countries, significant portions of the former regime may retain control of the government or may continue to wield great influence. In these cases, nongovernmental initiatives may be perceived as more neutral and more respected by the human rights community.

There is a potential trade-off from having the site of memory work occur in the civil society sector. These efforts may have great legitimacy among victims who may not trust the government to represent their needs but may not have legitimacy with the rest of society. In Chile, despite his London arrest, Pinochet continues to yield a great deal of support from the population. Civil society groups can be seen as lacking objectivity precisely because they champion the cause of victims. This weakness may be applicable particularly to Matta’s work because of his personal experiences as a former detainee; he cannot be viewed as an impartial representative. While his experiences provide the background and the passion that underlie his deep commitment to the project, they may compromise his ability to act in a more impartial or objective role regarding the site or human rights abuses in Chile.

The metaphor often used to describe the process of reconciliation is one of a long road or a journey. This notion captures the sense that
reconciliation, as well as justice, is a process—not a single event with a clear conclusion. Transitional justice is a period of articulating a new common future for the government and for the society. This vision of the future includes one that is based on democracy, the entrenchment of the rule of law, greater respect for human rights, and some degree of reconciliation with the past. Given the enormity of the challenge, many actors must take part in this process of building a new future, including many civil society actors, such as human rights activists, academics, and social justice organizations.

Like many transitional societies, the political dynamics and the society in Chile have evolved and have changed in the post-dictatorship years. In many different and interacting phases, Chileans in the government and civil society have sought to confront their country’s past and to work toward reconciliation. The work of the Villa Grimaldi site of memory project demonstrates one such effort and highlights many of the advantages and challenges of civil society involvement with working for truth, justice, and reconciliation.

NOTES


7. Ibid., 150.


13. Ibid., 163.


15. Ibid., 165.

16. Ibid., 158.


21. Ibid., 1099.


25. Ibid., 140–41.

26. Ibid., 144.


30. Matta (personal interview conducted with author by email, July 2002). Information about Matta’s work is from this interview unless otherwise noted.
31. Matta, personal interview.


33. Matta, personal interview.

34. The individual’s name has been changed to protect her privacy. The author sought permission to discuss her past in this article.