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¿Why Leeds?

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¿Why Leeds?

The following piece was written by Elisa Martinez Relano in 2023. Inspired by a student-led project exploring past and present solidarities with Latin America, Elisa, now completing an MA in the History of Art and Social History at the University of Leeds, wrote the following text. Her reflection on archival research around Chilean exile in the 1970s takes place in 2023, fifty years after the infamous coup, and is guided by a simple question: how and why would Leeds engage in solidarity activism with a place as seemingly distant as Chile?

Not only is this essay a fantastic contribution to scholarship on the Global Cold War and solidarity with Latin America, but it also captures some of the questions at the heart of this special issue: what can we learn from solidarities in the past? What meaning do they gain when reactivated in the present? And, why do archives matter?

See the contribution by Anna Grimaldi and Richard Smith in this special issue for more information on Leeds-based student projects relating to Chile 1973.

2023 serves a dual significance. Not only is this the 50th anniversary of the 1973 coup d'état in Chile, a year during which many other Latin American countries were under authoritarian regimes, but 2023 is also Leeds' Year of Culture, where the culture of those who live and have lived in this city are being celebrated. Leeds City Council Museums and Galleries, for example, have curated exhibitions such as 'Overlooked' and 'Leeds Artists Show' to tell the story of Leeds through the people who lived here. So, as the location for the annual exhibition project *Thinking Inside the Box*, Leeds is a very relevant location.

¹ Elisa Martinez Relano is a Master's Student in the History of Art and Social History at the University of Leeds, Elisa Martinez Relano has participated in a student-led project exploring past and present solidarities with Latin America. Her reflections on the project and her findings are featured in this special issue.

Yet, you may find yourself asking, what is it that links our city to the people affected by a military dictatorship in Latin America half a century ago? The fact is that the history of Chile played a part in the local history of Leeds, but also in that of the University of Leeds itself.

In 1976, [a mural](#) was painted within Leeds University Union by exiled activists and Chilean students. These individuals had found themselves in Leeds after leaving behind the right-wing dictatorship that had taken power in their homeland of Chile. General Augusto Pinochet had mobilised the armed forces to overthrow the democratically elected government of the Socialist leader Salvador Allende, and over the following years, opposition to the regime was silenced through disappearances, assassinations, imprisonment, and forced exile.

The mural eventually fell into disrepair after the decision to construct a wall covering the artwork, which resulted in it being hidden from view during the following decades. As a consequence, the painting and its message had been essentially forgotten (or silenced) until its rediscovery during building renovations in 2017. It was only when a Chilean student at the time recognized remnants of the Chilean national flag that an effort was made to identify the origins of the artwork. A restoration project was initiated to replace deterioration in the paint and plaster, while master's students of the University of Leeds' Art Gallery and Museum Studies programme carried out extensive research into the local Chilean community.



Image from LUU - <https://www.luu.org.uk/news/2020/06/24/a-spotlight-on-luus-restored-chilean-mural/>

Pedro Fuentes, Rafael Maldonado, Gilberto Hernández, Eduardo Espinosa, and Ricardo Escobar were some of the people who painted the Leeds mural in 1976. Gilberto and Eduardo served over two years in concentration camps or prisons and were only released in exchange for accepting a life of exile in Britain. During [interviews](#) conducted by the MA students throughout 2018, they spoke about their experiences as refugees in 1970s Britain. They expressed pride in being refugees, feeling gratitude and strength in their status as exiles and survivors. In particular, they appreciated the solidarity from local communities in Leeds, which is something that seems particularly relevant to the current wave of anti-refugee sentiment in Britain today. They also expressed that ‘the mural is a symbol of memory’, as well as ‘[solidarity and friendship](#)’. It was created during a period of concern for those who had stayed behind in Chile, and the central purpose of their involvement was to reinforce solidarity with their fellow citizens in Chile. The

senior management staff at their old universities in Chile had been replaced by members of the military command, which is also why the University of Leeds is such an important setting for the mural. The fact that they could express their political preoccupations more freely within an educational organisation here was a positive and reaffirming act of protest itself.



Image of solidarity mural at the Leeds University Union building, from Leeds Art Fund

The artwork is bordered with a slogan in both Spanish and English: ‘...and there will be work for all’. In the centre, four faces of manual labourers (most likely, farmers and miners) are represented alongside a woman grasping a bundle of wheat. Above the scene, the Chilean flag appears to be transposed into the shape of a mountain or factory in the distance, a reflection of hope that nationalisation would put industry back into the hands of the general population and provide a better future for all. This Leeds mural is an exact copy of the Brigada Ramona

Parra mural in Chile's capital city Santiago². It formed part of a series of murals outside the Barros Luco Hospital that outlined this hope for nationalisation across mining, agriculture, and industry as well as the demanding happiness and the protection of children. In Chile, and Latin America more broadly, murals have a long history of cultural and political significance, particularly since the Mexican muralist movement of the early 20th century. In the years leading up to Allende's election, murals played a central role as an informative tool that encouraged the population to engage in politics. It was a time of instability, but there was a belief that positive change was attainable, and murals were an art form that had the ability to reach the masses organically. After the military removed Allende from power, these artworks were covered or destroyed. In this context, the restaging of the mural in Leeds allowed this group of activists to reoccupy the type of spaces that had been taken away from them in Chile. As a result, the Leeds mural is one of the only surviving versions and has since inspired others to restage the work. In 2019, a welsh-language version was painted at El Sueno Existe festival in Machynlleth Wales, and now in 2023 Thinking Inside the Box Leeds will reclaim this history again. Thus, the mural lives on, acting as a living artefact of the Allende-era Chilean struggle.

² The murals form a sentence which reads '...Y ahora también Chile, Y se nacionalizarán las minas, Y la tierra para el que la trabaja, y el cobre para los Chilenos, y nace el hombre nuevo, y habrá trabajo para todos, y a prepararte a dirigir la industria, y también habrá alegría, y no habrán angustias para nacer, y los únicos privilegiados los niños'; Alexandra Denisse Reyes Espinoza, 'Muralismo e imaginario latinoamericano. Análisis comparado de un sentimiento de resistencia latinoamericana, 1910-1973' (unpublished thesis, University of Valparaíso, 2019) pp. 61-66. <<http://repositoriobibliotecas.uv.cl/bitstream/handle/uvscl/3531/Tesis%20Alexandra%20Reyes%20Espinoza%202019.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>>



Cover of Inti-Illimani concert catalogue, 1985, from the Popular Music Archive at the University of Liverpool

This story did not end in 1976. The Chile Solidarity Campaign in Leeds continued to function throughout the late 20th century. The interviews with the Chileans who painted the Leeds mural reveal that many in Yorkshire condemned the dictatorship and advocated for the release of political prisoners in Chile. As part of *Thinking Inside the Box: 1973*, we visited the Popular Music Archive at the University of Liverpool and discovered yet more evidence of this Leeds-based solidarity. The picture here is of a concert brochure for the 1985 Inti-Illimani UK solidarity tour of London, Leeds, and Edinburgh. It demonstrates how people collaborated and participated culturally in supporting the Chilean people. Inti-Illimani were an Andean-folk-protest music group who were on tour in Europe when the coup occurred, allowing the Pinochet regime to ban them from re-entering their native country of Chile between 1973 and 1988



Image from the Inti-Illimani concert catalogue, 1985, from the Popular Music Archive at the University of Liverpool

This prompted a decades-long tour of the world. Their concert in Leeds on the 6th of October 1985, with the English folk singer Frankie Armstrong as a special guest, positions the city within a broader history of cultural solidarity for Chile.

On that day, the traditional harmonies of Latin America and English folk music were played in unity. It is important to note that this was not an isolated event. The concert programme also includes photographs from Chilean solidarity marches held in Leeds, which cements Chile within our city's culture of protest. In fact, [an advert and article](#) in the Leeds Student newspaper from 1980 confirms that Armstrong and Inti-Illimani had already played a charity concert in Leeds Town Hall on 21st November 1980 in protest of how the British government appeared to conceal the atrocities suffered by Chileans. Even the national report of the Chile Solidarity Campaign's activities noted the fact that 2,000 people, including the Labour MP Derek Fatchett as a speaker, attended Inti-Illimani's [concert in Leeds Town Hall](#) on 7th September 1983. By acknowledging the history that Leeds and the Chile Solidarity campaign share, we as a city are looking towards the past to inform the future.