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Meaningful architecture: Zanjón de Granados, San Telmo, Buenos Aires

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The Zanjón de Granados complex is one of the most inspiring architectural experiences recently finished in Buenos Aires. It is difficult to describe it constrained by orthodox definition, to classify the action carried out as conservation, restoration or conversion, but there is no doubt about its remarkable qualities, full of references to high-quality, even timeless, architecture.

Introduction

When peeping through the window openings on each side of the ascetic iron entrance door of *El Zanjón de Granados* (*zanjón* means 'big ditch'), passers by immediately feel like explorers discovering an unexpected hidden treasure. If you could ask them what they see, they would probably answer in the words of Howard Carter in front of the entrance to Tutankhamen's tomb: 'Wonderful things!' It is one of the most rewarding architectural experiences built in Buenos Aires in recent years, where the old fabric and a new installation are perfectly different yet in complete harmony.

A ditch in central Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires was settled twice on a flat surface of land by the *de la Plata* river, first in 1536, to be abandoned shortly afterwards, and definitively in 1580. Small streams, flowing from West to East and draining into the river, used to influence colonial village life. While most of the time their beds were reduced to slim ditches, they became physical barriers when it rained, flooding streets and disconnecting the southern and more populated area of the town from the city centre around the *Plaza Mayor*, the main square. The streams were called *terceros* and their existence is well documented in

the city's historical records.¹ Until the beginning of the twentieth century, many of the ditches remained open but, following the modernisation and infrastructure policies of a then-burgeoning country, they were piped and integrated into the city's drainage system. The *tercero del Medio* – also known for part of its course as *Zanjón de Granados* – located in the core of old Buenos Aires, was one of the first to be piped in the nineteenth century, and its bed lies under blocks and streets of Buenos Aires which had long ago forgotten about its existence until recently when it was rediscovered by accident.

Revisiting the past

The *Zanjón de Granados* has now been rescued from oblivion by an unusual architectural development which also adopted its name. It is sited in San Telmo, the historic district of Buenos Aires. San Telmo is not only the southern and oldest district of the city, it is associated with its founding period as well as with later immigration and, of course, the tango. Its flourishing colonial period was abruptly interrupted by a yellow fever epidemic in 1871, when the original population moved to the healthier northern district and successive waves of immigrants, first from Europe and then from other Argentine provinces,