



September 2022 Newsletter

Daniel Schávelzon and Afro-Argentina Heritage and Archaeology

By Ana Igareta

Daniel Schávelzon's extensive work in archaeology and heritage studies was recognized by the Society for Historical Archaeology's Mark E. Mack Community Engagement Award in 2022. The Mack Award honors individual researchers or research project teams who exhibit outstanding best practices in community collaboration, engagement, and outreach in their historical archaeology and heritage preservation work. The award commemorates the life and career of Mark E. Mack and encourages diversity in the Society for Historical Archaeology and our profession by cultivating relationships between archaeologists and stakeholder communities. Every year, researchers from all over the world are nominated for the prize and in 2021 I had the opportunity to nominate my mentor, Daniel Schávelzon. I have known Daniel for almost 30 years, since I was an archaeology student who started working as a volunteer in his team. Today I have the pleasure of being his colleague and friend, but I have never lost my student status: working with him means to be always learning.

In the mid-1980s, Argentine archaeology emerged from the paralysis imposed by years of de facto military government and resumed an interesting path of theoretical and methodological development. However, this renaissance was little known by the non-specialized public, since archaeologists kept their results within the academic sphere and showed no interest in exposing them to the community. While other disciplines such as biology generated "popular" products of remarkable quality, archaeology remained entrenched in universities and research institutes. Then Schávelzon burst onto the scene. With an extensive background in architecture, art and archaeology, he set out to bring to the public the issues that archaeology addressed and discussed, convinced that the past and all the stories built upon that past are collective goods that should be known, questioned and appropriated by the community. Schávelzon accepted the challenge of talking about archaeology in settings where other scholars thought that there was

nobody listening. And he did so using clear and entertaining language, intended to engage but without cutting out information or simplifying interpretations. Instead of assuming that the audience was going to get lost along the way, he offered himself as a guide. Radio, television, civil associations, books, documentaries, courses, internet, written press, open talks; he used all formats, spaces and platforms within his reach (some extremely novel for the time) to communicate the progress of his research. Before anyone defined the concept of Open Access, Schávelzon strove to make his entire production freely available on the Internet, so that it could be consulted, discussed and criticized by anyone interested, regardless of their field of expertise or academic level.

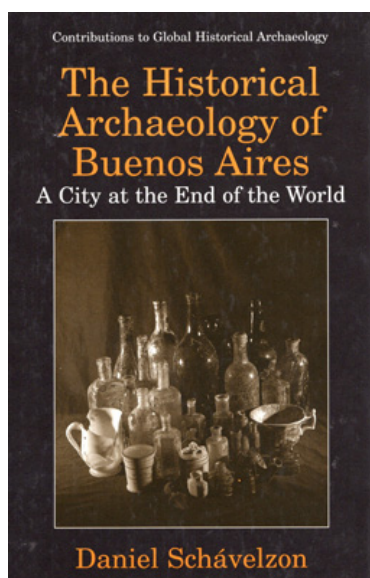
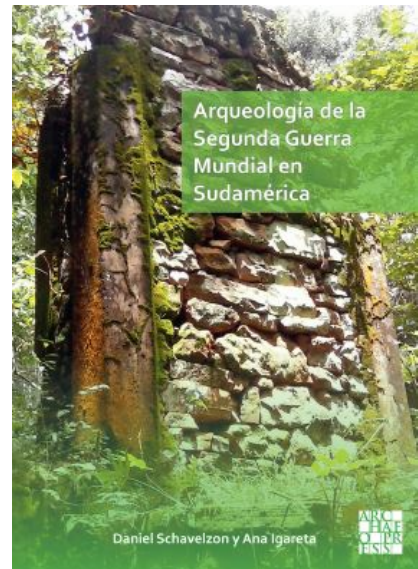


Teyú Cuaré, Misiones, Argentina, 2015. Daniel Schávelzon and Ana Igareta listening to Crispulo Lucero, one of the oldest inhabitants of Teyú, narrate how stone buildings are usually built in the area. Photograph by Matías Hernández.

And the response from the public was overwhelming. In Argentina, his last name became a synonym of historical archeology. His works became reference texts for specialists, but also a topic of conversation for school students, journalists, teachers, and curious people. But Schávelzon did not stop at bringing the results of his research to the public: he literally brought archaeology closer to them. He designed and developed several urban archaeology projects throughout the country, opening up an unprecedented line of work at national level. In cities like Mendoza, neighbors got used to having archaeologists working on their sidewalks and discovered that they could ask questions, give their opinions, and be heard. The interaction was not easy and required an enormous effort from all parties to generate dynamics of dialogue that

would contribute to the construction of the archaeological tale, but the results exceeded all expectations. As usual, this innovative attitude earned him fierce criticism from colleagues, professionals who felt that scientific dissemination threatened their standing as data holders. Because of his engagement with the public, Schávelzon was accused of being less committed to “doing science.” Over time, many of his detractors ended up developing similar activities, which were demanded by a community that had become more educated by previous efforts.

It is impossible to give a full account of all the subjects Schávelzon dealt with throughout his career. Their heterogeneity hinders any attempt at classification; from his study on the material culture of the inhabitants of Buenos Aires city to his work on the plundering of art in Argentina; from his highly-referenced catalogue of historical ceramics to the discovery of a Nazi installation in Misiones, from his text on the use of stone during the colonial period to the history of Argentine architects, a hundred subjects attracted his attention and were objects of study, analysis and public communication. Nevertheless, a careful review of his work allows noticing a common theme that underlies and links all his works: the appraisal of stories and individuals pushed to the sidelines by the official history. Those whose roles had been minimized or simplified, sometimes due to the scarcity of known evidence, often for convenience.



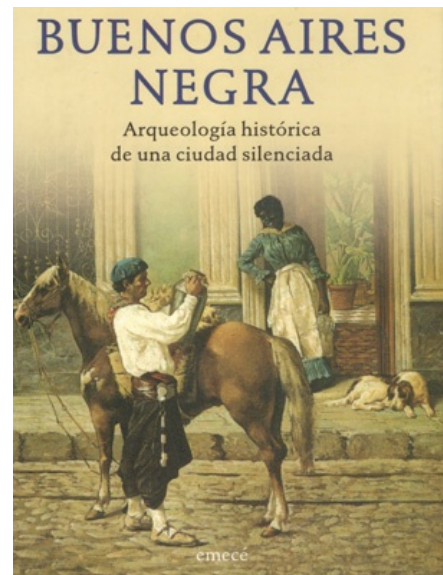
Perhaps the best example of this is his early exploration of the materiality and social life of African descendant (Afro) populations in Argentina, in a context in which few local scholars had shown interest in investigating the slavery process or how the populations involved in it interacted and were linked. Through careful review of archaeological, written, artistic and linguistic documents, Schávelzon gave dimension, entity and agency to the participation of Afro groups in Argentine history. His iconic 2003 book, “Black Buenos Aires,” definitively demolished the notion of Argentina as a country with a European past implanted within

an American matrix and where the slave trade had been an isolated and occasional event (a version that part of the population still embraced). His research contributed to situate the history of Argentina within Afro-American history, which had, until that moment, been mistakenly perceived as alien to the country. His results influenced a whole new generation of archaeologists and became the foundation of projects and thematic networks with diverse approaches that advanced in rethinking Argentine history and constructing it as a much more complex, contradictory, and multiethnic process than it had been previously considered.

Also Schávelzon's knowledge of issues related to the Afro population and the processes of slavery and resistance that occurred in South America was proven when he was called upon by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as one of the specialists who participated in the discussions that led to the recognition of the Cais do Valongo (Valongo Wharf), in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, as a World Heritage Site.

Valongo is the first place of memory linked to the African diaspora in the Americas to have achieved such recognition. It took three long years of presentations and discussions to convince local and international authorities of the intrinsic value of a complex archaeological site whose safeguarding required the modification of a railway route, the cancellation of building permits and the preservation without restoration of "the most important physical trace of the forced arrival of slaves from Africa to the American continent."

Schávelzon fought to create spaces he never intended to occupy. He trained dozens of researchers to investigate issues he considered relevant, but also to discuss his interpretations. He has definite opinions about facts and people (and has never had a problem in expressing them) but he takes care to present the information he has used to build them and is willing to listen to other versions. When he makes a mistake, he makes it public and investigates the reasons for it; then, he goes on looking for different answers. If there is one concept that permeates all of Daniel Schávelzon's work as a researcher, teacher and



disseminator of science, it is that of science in and for democracy, and I believe that there is no better phrase to sum up his career and merits.

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