



## BACK IN TIME

by Tony Beckwith  
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### THE BRICK PALACE

Most of us, when entrusted with a little power, will immediately find ways to abuse it. I know this from personal experience. In my final year at the British Schools I was made a Prefect and sat in on what we called Prefect's Court, a forum for providing guidance and enforcing discipline among male students. On one occasion I got a little carried away with my own sense of self-importance and said some rather harsh things to an unfortunate boy who had been hauled up for some misdemeanour or other. I took full advantage of my position of power and forgot all about the guidance I was supposed to be providing. Instead of being helpful and kind I gave full rein to my inner autocrat. Why? It's a question I've been asking myself ever since, as I observe examples of this behaviour in so many walks of life.

Nowhere was this singularly unendearing human trait more evident in Montevideo in the 1950s than at the Palacio Municipal. This was where one came to do business with the city; to get a driver's license, register a vehicle, apply for a building permit, and so on. It was an imposing piece of architecture, as one would expect from a building that called itself a Palace. It was, and still is on the main downtown thoroughfare, the Avenida 18 de Julio. Construction workers broke ground in 1935 and were soon laying the foundations for the structure designed by the Uruguayan architect Mauricio Cravotto (1893–1962). The Palacio opened for business in 1941, but along the way had deviated slightly from Cravotto's plan. The upper section was to have soared to an ambitious height of 114 meters, but funds ran a little short, for one reason or another, and some cost-saving measures left it topped out at 78 meters. It was thus

the second-highest building in town at the time, quite a bit shorter than the Palacio Salvo, which was just down the road overlooking the Plaza Independencia. It had long been a source of great pride for Uruguayans that the iconic Palacio Salvo, at 95 meters tall (100 meters when you counted the radio antenna on top) had for many years been the tallest building in Latin America.

In another cost-saving measure, the exterior plaster was not applied to the Palacio Municipal as originally planned, leaving the red bricks exposed and prompting the populace to refer to it - more or less affectionately - as the *Palacio del Ladrillo*, the Brick Palace. It was nonetheless City Hall, the administrative headquarters of the municipality of the capital of Uruguay, and thus a place of great civic importance. Fittingly, there was a huge esplanade in front of the building that was perfect for giving political speeches and rallying marchers for demonstrations. It was here, in tribute to the Italian roots of the municipal tradition, that the architect installed a life-size copy of Michelangelo's statue of *David*, a salute to the nation that contributed so much to the countries of the Río de la Plata.

The men and women who staffed the desks and windows in the Palacio's vast, drafty halls were state employees, of course, and their salaries were therefore paid out of our taxes. Yet despite being, in a very literal sense, our employees they treated us, the citizens, with a dismissive air of contemptuous disdain that I thought rivalled my treatment of that unfortunate boy in Prefect's Court. It also taught me something about being on the receiving end of an abuse of power. Their attitude was bewildering, and led me to ponder



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the unfathomable depths of human nature as I stood in line to purchase a new registration sticker for my Vespa.

“*Nojoven*, first of all you need a tax stamp. This is not the window for tax stamps. You get tax stamps on the third floor. But that window isn’t open on Thursdays, so you’ll just have to come back tomorrow. *Next!*” Somehow, the way she says it makes it sound as though it’s all my fault. And there is a certain gloating undertone I don’t appreciate, a thinly veiled delight in



being the bearer of bad news that is not helpful at all. But what can you do? When I arrive at the tax stamp window bright and early the following day I discover that it is actually closed on Fridays, so I’ll have to come back next week. When I confront the lady at the first window who provided me with flawed information

she gets testy and tells me in no uncertain terms that she has other people to attend to and who do I think I am anyway, holding up the line like this? *Next!* Where does she get off, talking to me like that? *Me*, her employer!

By the 1950s, Uruguay was no longer the prosperous, enviable country that had been regarded just a few years earlier as the “Switzerland of South America,” but the term was still in use in a rueful, nostalgic sort of way. As I stood in line at the tax stamp window the following week I wondered how Swiss state employees treated their customers, and was soon fantasizing about a utopian Municipal Palace where I was pampered as though I was personally responsible for providing salaries for all state employees. Then my rose-tinted bubble burst and I tumbled back down to earth as I heard the man at the window saying, “...but your insurance has just expired. There’s nothing I can do. Why didn’t you come last week? Now you’ll have to pay a fine! Insurance renewals are on the fourth floor, but that window doesn’t open till Tuesday. *Next!*”

## SILVER RIVER LODGE

All our meetings are held on the 3rd Monday of every month, from March through November, at the William G. Best Masonic Temple, located at 1429 Canelones Street, Montevideo.

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