

## Eye on Buenos Aires

Story by Allison Arieff

When planning a trip to Buenos Aires, you may be consumed by visions of feisty tango dancers at every turn but upon arrival in this sprawling metropolis, you'll quickly realize that, in many ways, tango is to Buenos Aires as the Chrysler Building is to Manhattan—iconic and historically significant to be sure, but only a very small part of the picture.

So go ahead and bring your dancing shoes—there are non-touristy outposts for experiencing the real thing (try Salon Canning)—but it's definitely more important to pack your Pumas and to get a good solid rest on the long plane flight because Buenos Aires demands a lot of energy. The city is vast—its metropolitan area runs 35 miles across—and its populace of over 12 million seem-ingly runs on an entirely different clock. Forget having dinner before 11 p.m.; the bar scene gets going around 2 a.m. Fortunately, BA's morning ritual of café con leche and media luna (lightly sugar-dusted half-moons of pastry that put American croissants to shame) makes waking up from all that late-night carousing more pleasant and slightly more tenable.

Because of the dizzying scope of this city, it's best to plan your sightseeing within a few of its 47 distinct neighborhoods: the Recoleta, San Telmo, Palermo Soho, La Boca, and Puerto Madero. But to further facilitate your Argentine wanderings, we turned to architect Sebastián Weisz of ChLW for a-not-found-in-the-guidebook guide to the wealth of significant architecture in the city, from Beaux Arts to Brutalism. Weisz founded ChLW four years ago with partners Martin Chatruc and Javier Leibovich. As a design firm, he explains, "We are committed to an aesthetic view that never forgets the context and culture we live in."

We asked Weisz about his favorite buildings and got his unique perspective on the city's architectural landmarks.

It seems like there are a lot of great young designers working in Buenos Aires today. Is there a big design community here?

Yes, especially in the Palermo area. During the mid-'90s, a great number of new architectural and design studios were opened by practitioners looking for creative independence. There are also many art galleries that show and promote the work of up-and-coming artists from all over the country. You can walk through this circuit that goes from Palermo extending to Abasto. The best neighborhoods to see architecture are San Telmo, Palermo Soho, and La Boca.

Who is your favorite architect? What's your favorite building in Buenos Aires?

My favorites are Alvar Aalto, Oscar Niemeyer, Carlo Scarpa, and Enric Miralles. From Argentina, Pablo Beitía, Oscar Fuentes, and from the city of Rosario, Rafael Iglesia. They work on exciting new projects and are not part of a corporate view of architecture.

For my favorite building, I'll choose two: the Museo Xul Solar and the Banco de Londres. Xul Solar was a painter and sculptor with a deep knowledge of linguistics, music, astrology, religion, and philosophy, but above all, he had a brilliant mind and an extraordinary memory. His museum is one of the most important and iconic architectural works of the last 20 years in Argentina.

And Banco de Londres? It's such an unusual building. How did the public react to it?

Designed by Clorinda Testa, Banco de Londres is situated in a downtown corner of Buenos Aires where a lot of the city's financial activity takes place. The idea of this project is one of the most original and audacious manifestations of international architecture of the '60s. The creative possibilities of concrete are exploited in all their potential. Without a doubt, the building has generated great public interest and sparked an open dialogue on architecture here since it was first erected in 1966.

Back to museums, what do you think of MALBA (Museo de Arte Latinoamericano de Buenos Aires), which opened in 2001?

The scope of Eduardo Costantini's collection gives a new view of Latin American art history. I really love a Roberto Matta painting there called *The Disasters of Mysticism*. It has an unusual depth that is hard to explain with words.

What insider info can you let us in on about Teatro Colón?

One performance I particularly enjoyed there was the projection of Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* (1927), with the live accompaniment of the Buenos Aires Philharmonic Orchestra. What I love about the building, besides its magnitude and urban setting, are the basements, which can be visited and where you find all the stage- and costume-design studios. There are public tours where you can visit the dressing rooms and see the making of the backdrops as well as all the elements that go into putting together those elaborate stage productions.

Le Corbusier was quite taken with South America—about which he said in 1929, “Under such light, architecture will be born”—and Buenos Aires in particular. How do you think Casa Curutchet, compares to his other buildings?

Casa Curutchet stresses Le Corbusier's concept of “promenade architecture.” “It's a symphony of space”—these were words written by Amancio Williams to Le Corbusier in a letter of September 14, 1949. [Williams, an important figure in the architectural avant-garde here, had a strong influence in the design and construction of the house.]

Speaking of promenade architecture, what do you think of Santiago Calatrava's new footbridge that was erected in 2001?

Puente de la Mujer was well received by the city. It adds another element to the waterfront flow and to the urban composition of Puerto Madero, the most important waterfront project in Buenos Aires.

Tell me about the Palacio Barolo.

Barolo Palace is one of the most important examples of turn-of-the-century eclecticism in Argentina. Finished in 1923, it was built by the Italian architect Mario Palanti and commissioned by the Italian businessman Luis Barolo. Until 1936, it was the tallest building in Buenos Aires. Inspired by *The Divine Comedy*, Palanti conceived of the building as a medieval temple filled with symbolic elements that referenced Dante.

The Italian influence here is seen not only in architecture but in cuisine. So where's the best pizza in the city?

El Cuartito, which I first visited about 20 years ago. They've been around since 1940. I especially recommend fugazzeta (onion-and-cheese pizza).

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