

Photo by Alejandro Vigilante.



# Buenos Aires

By Saxon Henry

It was the Franco-Swiss master Le Corbusier who ignited the first sparks of Modernism in the Argentine capital of Buenos Aires. The architect accepted an invitation from the local Friends of the Arts Society to travel to the city in 1929, to give a series of 10 lectures on subjects as diverse as furniture and town planning. Victoria Ocampo, founder of the cultural journal *SUR*, commissioned a modernist house in Buenos Aires in anticipation of Le Corbusier's visit, and he completed drawings for her. But in a surprise move, she chose Argentine architect Alejandro Bustillo, a classicist, to design the home: the **Casa Victoria Ocampo**, 2831 *Rufino de Elizalde*, completed in 1929, which was Buenos Aires's first modernist building.

"We might wonder why Ocampo, who represented at the time a certain avant-garde, wanted Bustillo to build her house, a 'manifesto house' of her ideas, since Bustillo was an architect who detested those ideas and preached a return to the most rigorous classicism," wrote Ernesto Katzenstein in 1992 in *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts*.

Bustillo's perspective was a popular one. In fact, classicism, especially French Gothic and neoclassical styles, had ruled absolutely in the architecture of Buenos Aires up until this point; the city was known as the "Paris of the South." Professor Alberto Petrino, Director General of Heritage for the City of Buenos Aires and co-author of the forthcoming book *Modern Architecture in Buenos Aires (1929–1945)*, remarks, "It is very symbolic that the first sign of Modernism in Buenos Aires was from an architect who had

previously worked in a classic style. This shows that Modernism was born in Buenos Aires with great ambiguity." According to Katzenstein, Ocampo chose Bustillo over Corbu because she wanted a professional with a stringent work ethic to concretize her ideas rather than someone she perceived to be a difficult artist. He adds that Le Corbusier later admitted in his book *Precisions on the Present State of Architecture and City Planning* (1930) that he had seen, in the house, "Picassos and Légers framed by a seldom-to-be-found purity."

Bustillo achieved this purity with a variety of geometric forms and partial symmetries, which resulted in an unadorned façade with the modernist characteristics that Ocampo had envisioned. And though the clean angular quality that is a hallmark of early Modernism defines the interiors, Bustillo's schematic is on the conventional side, as the rooms align on an axis and are repetitively arranged.

Ocampo's manifesto house would not remain Buenos Aires's only modern structure for long, even though many architects like Bustillo continued to produce architecture inspired by the Beaux Arts Academy throughout the 1930s. Early in the decade, the city's first modernist skyscrapers began to rise, and they remain some of Buenos Aires's most important early examples of Modernism. The first, which was also the first skyscraper to be built of reinforced concrete in Latin America, was the **COMEGA Building**, 222 *Corrientes Avenue*, designed by Argentine architects Alfredo Joselevich and Enrique Douillet, completed in 1932. The office



building, which is clad in travertine, sits at the gateway to Corrientes Avenue, in the heart of Buenos Aires. The top portion of the building is made up of two identical wings with a narrow tower rising through them, creating a resolute, unembellished profile.

The **SAFICO Building**, 420 Corrientes Avenue, designed by Walter Moll, has a stepped tower that mimics the New York “wedding cake” style. Also completed in 1932, the building has a compactness that was dictated by the building codes of the time and by Moll’s desire to leave the symmetry of the city block uninterrupted.

Petrina explains that the climate in which these early modernist manifestations were born was fueled by Le Corbusier’s lectures and his influential journal *L’Esprit Nouveau*, by New York City’s new skyscrapers, and by a veneration of Frank Lloyd Wright. “Wright caught our attention and we greatly admired his work,” he says. “We also admired Rockefeller Center, the Chrysler Building and the Empire State Building, and we wanted to build our own versions.”

This said, it is no surprise that the most famous representation of early Modernism in Argentina, completed in 1935, is the 33-story **Kavanagh Building**, 1065 Florida Street, a hybrid of German rationalism and the American Art Deco skyscraper. Financed by Corina Kavanagh, one of the wealthiest women in the country at the time, and designed by Gregorio Sánchez, Ernesto Lagos and Luis M. de la Torre, the apartment building has been lauded for its adaptation to its site, a triangular plot that slopes toward Plaza San Martín and the Río de la Plata. At its base, the building swells toward the forked intersection that defines the property’s north-eastern edge like the prow of a ship.

The Kavanagh was the tallest reinforced concrete building in the world when it was built, and it was the first in Argentina to have central air conditioning. Like the Kavanagh, many of the modernist structures in Buenos Aires are apartment buildings, and a cursory look at the facades of a handful of them proves that the preservation of private buildings is a delicate subject. While some structures have been maintained perfectly, others are suffering. This is not only an economic issue but a cultural one, says architect Jorge Kuperman, who left Buenos Aires in 1981 due to Argentina’s political upheaval, after receiving his masters degree in architecture and urban planning from the University of Buenos Aires.

“In Buenos Aires, the government does not tell homeowners how to manage their properties; it simply would not be tolerated,” he explains. “The Kavanagh has been designated a historic building due to its architectural significance, so it is protected, but other historically important apartment buildings are not.”

Kuperman, who founded his Miami-based firm, JSK Architectural Group, in 1982 and served as president of the Miami chapter of the American Institute of Architects in 2006, explains that a movement toward the preservation of Buenos Aires’s gems is in its infancy, so it will



Photo by Manuel Álvarez.

**Opposite** Clorindo Testa was looking for something different to house the National Library (1960–90) than the high-rises that were springing up during the 1930s. Something different is exactly what he designed – a Brutalist building on a platform that overlooks the adjoining parks and takes advantage of the city and river views.

**Above, top** The Avenue Diagonal Norte, c. 1940, shows the homogeneous streetscape typical of Buenos Aires before the modern era.

**Above** Casa Victoria Ocampo (1929), the first modernist building in Buenos Aires, was the brainchild of its namesake. Le Corbusier praised the home, which was designed by Alejandro Bustillo, during his visit in 1929.

likely be a long time before privately owned buildings come under scrutiny. “The Sociedad Central de Arquitectos, which is the Argentine equivalent of the American Institute of Architects, is just beginning to educate the public as to the importance of preservation,” he explains.

To see some of Buenos Aires’s notable modernist apartment buildings, a drive or stroll along the **Avenida del Libertador**, a divided, tree-lined street that runs along the eastern edge of the city, is a great place to start. Architect Antonio U. Vilar designed several significant modernist structures along the expansive boulevard. His triad of prototypical apartment buildings at 1028, 1082 and 1146, which were built in 1934; as well as the **Edificio Palermo** at 3590, an apartment building built in 1936 and the 1941 headquarters of the



**Automobile Club of Argentina (ACA)** at 1850 (designed in collaboration with J. Bunge, H. Morixe, Jacobs, Jiménez, G. Sánchez, E. Lagos and L.M. de la Torre) are all excellent examples of Vilar's systematic rejection of gratuitous elements. "He became our prototype of the modern architect," remarks Katzenstein. "His work...satisfied the search for homogeneity of taste by adopting a neutral language, that of the reiteration of unembellished forms and a deep adhesion to function and, more precisely, to objective conditions."

As architects fully embraced Modernism during the 1930s, a theater district with notable Art Deco, modernist and hybrid styles blossomed on Corrientes Avenue. The **Ópera Theater**, 860 Corrientes, designed by Alberto Bourdon, with its hybrid Deco spire, was completed in 1936. In 1937, it was joined by the **Gran Rex Theater** across the street, 857 Corrientes, designed by Alberto Prebisch.

Along with Vilar and Wladimiro Acosta, Prebisch was one of the main advocates of the early modern movement in Argentina. The Gran Rex and the **Obelisco** — the 1936 monument in the center of the Avenida 9 de Julio that commemorates the 400th anniversary of the founding of the city — are considered two of his greatest achievements. With an interior reminiscent of Radio City Music Hall in New York, the Gran Rex's enormous three-story entry hall is sunlit by a wall of glass impressive for its time.

Kuperman points out that the Gran Rex highlights how Buenos Aires architects introduced modernist elements with restraint. "This building is an example of an architect who was experimenting with rational, clean and modern elements in measured ways," he explains. "Compare the glass curtain wall on this building with that of the Teatro San Martín, which was built almost two decades later." Begun in 1953 and completed in 1960, the **Municipal General San Martín Theater**, 1530 Corrientes Avenue, designed by Mario Roberto Alvarez and Macedonio Oscar Ruiz, featured many technological advances, such as a massive glass curtain wall, double-height halls, and a continuous glazed façade along Corrientes.

Like these buildings that sustain the dramatic arts, a Buenos Aires icon celebrating literature sprang from a modernist's vision. Clorindo Testa, with Francisco Bullrich and Alicia Cazzaniga, brought his version of Brutalism to bear on the **National Library**, 2502 Agüero. Begun in 1960, the concrete building was not completed until 1990 because of political and economic chaos, and most *porteños*, as the inhabitants of Buenos Aires are known, felt that the National Library was outmoded before it was finished. However, Testa, who continues to practice architecture at the age of 83, still arouses awe in many Argentine architects working today.

Ileana Versace, who teaches architecture at the University of

**Below, left** The Kavanagh (1935) is one of the landmarks of South American Modernism. Its exceptional aesthetic and technical quality were recognized with a special award by the American Society of Engineering in 1994 and it was designated a National Historical Monument in 1999.

**Below, right** The Ópera Theater (1936) was an early addition to Buenos Aires's theater district that sprang up in the early 20th century.



Photo by Manuel Gomez.

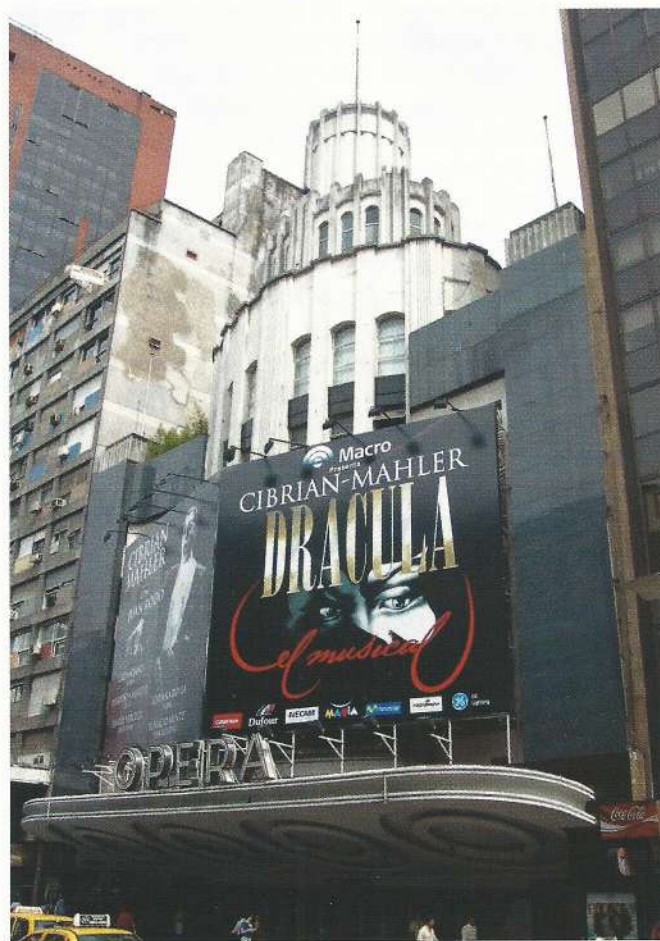


Photo by Alejandro Vigilante.



Buenos Aires and runs her own Buenos Aires-based firm, Exhibia XHB, with Marina Vasta, is a Testa devotee. "In my mind, he remains unequalled in terms of his artistic sensibilities," she explains. "I have to say he's the architect that still inspires me above all others." Argentine-born architect Pablo Jendretzki, of the New York-based firm Jendretzki Architecture and Planning Consultants, agrees that Testa is one of Argentina's finest: "He is simply constantly thinking outside the box, and reinventing ways to interpret space and form."

It was during the 1950s and '60s, when Testa produced some of his most renowned buildings, that Argentine Modernism came into its own. During a recent trip to Buenos Aires, Kuperman visited Testa, watching the architect draw as they talked. "He uses a pencil like a paintbrush," says Kuperman. "I think this explains why his architecture is as expressive as it is."

Testa's **Bank of London** building, 101 *Reconquista* (with SEPRA, 1959–66), was another Brutalist marvel. Kuperman remembers field trips to the building as a student. "We visited the building each week to study how an architect could effectively design everything down to the counters and office chairs," he recalls. "The building was renovated in the 1970s and it was incredibly controversial, even though Testa himself was involved." In Kuperman's opinion, the building lost some of its integrity during the updating, after which, ironically, it was landmarked.

In the television screen-shaped punches that pock the skin of the Bank of London Building and the furled eyebrows on the National Library, Kuperman sees a similarity to Le Corbusier's Chapel at Ronchamp. But though his Latin American interlude made its mark on the minds of architects like Testa, Le Corbusier never designed a building in Buenos Aires. His only Argentine project was **Casa Curutchet** (1948–54), a private residence in La Plata, a city about 34 miles to the south of Buenos Aires. And while his concepts certainly inspired quite a few local architects to design their own modernist mainstays, many contemporary architects and scholars believe that Modernism

## Visiting Buenos Aires

Buenos Aires is a city of neighborhoods, and one of the best destinations for those who love everything modern is Palermo, which is divided into Palermo Soho, Palermo Hollywood, and Palermo Viejo.

Argentines are incredibly creative when it comes to designing furnishings and accessories, and Palermo is chock full of imaginative shops, trendy cafes and hip art galleries. Seeing how architects and designers have updated buildings in these neighborhoods is almost as exciting as the shopping and dining.

### Shopping

#### Tienda Palacio

Honduras 5272

5411-48 33 94 56

[www.tiendapalacio.com.ar](http://www.tiendapalacio.com.ar)

Housed in a former mechanic's garage, Tienda Palacio's space was renovated by the artisans who design its products, from acrylic chandeliers and furniture, to pop art and serigraphed wallpaper.

#### Unimate

Thames 1373

5411-47 74 13 97

[www.unimate.com.ar](http://www.unimate.com.ar)

Designer Jorge Filizzola's bright, clean-lined store showcases his and other Argentine designers' furniture, including Filizzola's playful molded furniture, which comes in an array of bright colors. He also carries lusciously hued blown and slumped glass pieces by Planos Viau.

#### Grupo Modo

Thames 1308

5411-47 78 71 59

[www.grupomodo.com.ar](http://www.grupomodo.com.ar)

This shop, designed by Gusavo Yankelevich, specializes in chic accessories and modernist-inspired furniture made of wenge wood and Argentinian guindo wood, both polished to a high sheen.

### Lodging

#### Hotel Home

Honduras 5860

5411-47 78 10 08

[www.homebuenosaires.com](http://www.homebuenosaires.com)

You'll want to make this your home away from home if you have your heart set on staying in Palermo, as the hotel's garden area with its petite pool is tucked into the

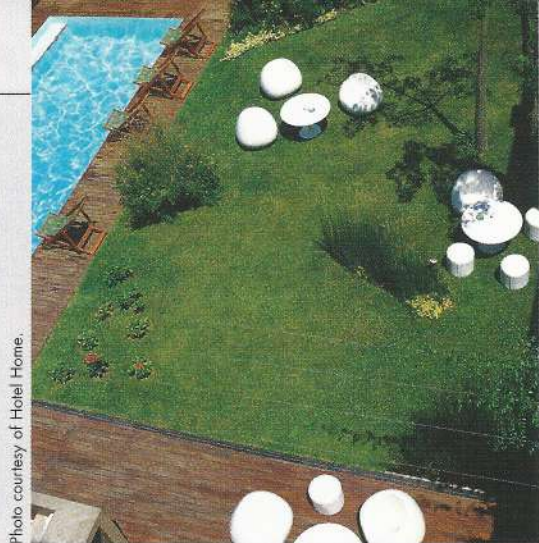


Photo courtesy of Hotel Home.

**Above** The pool and garden of the Hotel Home.

neighborhood like a breath of fresh air. The owners of Hotel Home, Tom Rixton and Patricia O'Shea, worked with Argentine architect Rodrigo Cunill to design a hotel filled with natural light. Though it is new construction, the purity of the angular cement, wood and glass lines form a modernist-inspired backdrop. Rixton and O'Shea filled the public spaces with 1950s Scandinavian chairs and sofas, and mid-century classics like Saarinen's *Tulip* chairs and tables, Robin Day *Polyprop* chairs, and Eero Aarnio's *Pastille* chairs.

### Dining

#### El Lambaré

Gurruchaga 1755

5411-46 31 50 06

Though a decorative wood facing has been attached, the modern heritage of the building with its modestly curved balcony is without question. Lounge in roomy chairs in this cozy restaurant, a perfect place for quiet reading in the afternoon with the sun pouring in through an ample skylight. *Al fresco* dining is also a treat, as Palermo is an interesting spot for people watching.

### Art

#### Braga Menendez Arte

##### Contemporaneo

Humboldt 1574

5411-47 75 55 77

[www.galeriabm.com](http://www.galeriabm.com)

Another former mechanic's garage that has been converted into a sleek, modern space, this gallery leans toward mid-career artists. Recent exhibitions include an installation of Vanessa Chimera's ethereal etched mirrors, Hernan Salamanca's "Espectro" series, and Paolo Bertocchi's "Gioco/Giogo" constructions.



Photo by Manuel Gomez.



Photo by Daniela Moc Adden.



never took hold in Buenos Aires as strongly as it might have due to classicism's firm grip on Argentine sensibilities. Even now, the people who wish they'd never lost a classic mansard roof or a Gothic spire to Modernism's pared-down planes are surprisingly vocal.

Still, Modernism has a significant presence in Buenos Aires's eclectic mix of architecture. Scott Timm, the director of programs and outreach for the Miami Design Preservation League, lectures about architecture in the Southern Cone, the South American region that includes Chile, Argentina and Uruguay. He says of the city, "On one corner, I felt as if I was strolling through Paris, while after only a few blocks, I felt I was walking through a modern city. This is the true surprise of Buenos Aires."

And while some sections of the city are still unified architecturally, others hold block after block of classical and modern buildings fused together like their culturally diverse inhabitants, who initially hailed from countries as varied as Italy, France, Spain, and Germany. It is in this ambiguity, which the modernist movement in Buenos Aires could not completely conquer, that we see the city and its architecture in the truest light. ■

**Saxon Henry** writes about architecture, interior design and art for a variety of publications and Web sites. A contributing editor to *The Miami Herald*, she is also the author of the book *Big Home, Big Challenge: Design Solutions for Larger Spaces*.





**Opposite, top** The Gran Rex Theater was built during the climax of Buenosairian Rationalism. The work of Alberto Prebisch, the building was completed in 1937 and was welcomed by a thriving film industry in Argentina.

**Opposite, bottom** The Bank of London Building (1959–66), now the Hipotecario National Bank, is one of the most recognized examples of modern Argentine architecture. Corindo Testa's Brutalist masterpiece was chosen as the most important work of Latin American architecture in the "20th Century Architecture Exhibition," held at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles in 2000.

**Above** Considered the best example of modern architecture in Argentina, Casa Curutchet (1948–54) is in the town of La Plata, about 34 miles south of Buenos Aires. Designed by Le Corbusier, who never visited the site or met the client, the home has several of the architect's hallmarks: *pilotis*, *brise-soleils* and balconies that extend the width of the façade. Photo c. 1954.