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Buenos Aires: The Architecture of Four Ecologies

James Betancourt · Wednesday, November 8th, 2017

As I sit here, reminiscing back on my trip to Argentina, I can only think about the tangy taste of a Guerrin carne suave empanada. Pictures of my trip only entice me to think about when I will be going back as a battlefield hardened Argentino, and not the disoriented, panicked tourist who mistakenly ordered only one empanada. Call it a business trip or an exchange program, but one thing is for certain, traveling to Argentina as an Architecture student has been a humbling experience not any youtube video, textbook, or even VR headset can reproduce.

Of course, even Reyner Banham had his fun while visiting Los Angeles! Ah yes, the Ban-man and his critical observation of Los Angeles architecture consisting of not just one singular style but a range of styles depending on the location. Of course, many cities can follow the model that Banham used as the framework for Los Angeles; Surfuria, the Foothills, the Plains of ID, and Autopia. As for Buenos Aires, this framework holds true, but I've altered it slightly to conform to the uniqueness of the city.

Buenos Aires, officially founded in 1536 is constantly growing like most other cities, but unlike most other cities there are a few characteristic that stay consistent with Buenos Aires. They are, as I like to call them, the four ecologies of Buenos Aires. Ecology one; the sur-urbia, ecology two; the roofhills, ecology three; the plains of Palermo; and ecology four; anti-topia.

Now, in order to understand what all this means, we must familiarize ourselves with what Reyner Banham meant when he categorized Los Angeles into four ecologies. Ecology one, surfuria, was a focus on architecture along the coast of LA. Surfuria highlighted how different the building style is in comparison to most other parts of LA, considering the type of coastal environment LA has, the homes built on the beachfront were designed to withstand both the urban and environmental situation.

Ecology two is named the Foothills and is probably the most unique of the bunch because of the motive behind the location. When referring to the foothills, Banham is talking about the architecture among the Silverlake, Echo Park, Hollywood Hills area. These places were urbanized out of sheer luxury, which is what makes them unique to the fact that they did not have to construct homes into the foothills so immediately. These homes are all terraced into the hills very majestically, and many of the homes that are built into the foothills carry architecture features whose function is justified by the location, such as cantilevers, an otherwise formal or expressive architectural gesture.

The third ecology, the plains of the ID, as Banham says an “unscrupulous, and profitable

subdivision of land” that stretches out past the perimeter of the greater Los Angeles area. Cities included are ones like San Gabriel, home of the San Gabriel Mission, a historical architectural style that plays a major influence on single family homes all throughout Los Angeles. The fourth and last ecology Reyner distinguishes is, Autopia. Seeing as how spread out Los Angeles is, Angelenos spend much of their time sitting in their car! The cabin of a vehicle being the spatial capsule which manages a much larger network of divisional lines known as the freeways and highways.

The analysis of Los Angeles, brings forth the idea of the four ecologies of architecture, and four is somehow the magic number when it comes to identifying niches within most modern cities. Buenos Aires is not that far off of having the same distinct urban appearances, yes there are slight differences due to geographical variance, but overall they’re similar.

Ecology 1: Sur-urbia



Sur or “south”-urbia if being translated from spanish is the southernmost town of Buenos Aires, which at one point was being constructed to be the capital of Buenos Aires province. Now known as the town, La Plata, it was founded in 1882 but had not been majorly constructed until 1952, and this is when the construction of the main gridded town was the focus. La Plata is a true planned city that follows a strict grid layout, with only two diagonals running through the grid allowing for shortcuts. The architecture of La Plata is very distinguishable among the rest of Buenos Aires, because LP was a designed city, the architecture that was built within the square must follow a strict style.

Among the grid lies an architectural jewel, Casa Curutchet completed in 1953, designed for argentine doctor Pedro Domingo Curutchet, by French-Swiss architect, Le Corbusier. The house is Corbusier’s only house that sits abutted between two pre-existing properties, and is also the only single family residence south of the equator.

Ecology 2: The Roofhills



The “Roofhills” or as many may mistake as the “Foothills” of Reyner, is exactly what it sounds like, an Argentine interpretation. Buenos Aires, like the rest of Argentina is very flat in geography, and there really is no need for skyscrapers, or even mid rise buildings for that matter, yet we see them anyway? The only explanation for this phenomenon is logistical reasoning. Building vertically allows for opportunity within the urban fabric, that most other typical urban strategies do not offer. For example, allowing the worker, their home and their workplace to be within a reasonable distance of each other. Los Angeles on the other hand, includes independent residencies crammed into sides of hills, and on average an hour drive from the center of the city.

However, Buenos Aires does produce a mountainous terrain! The buildings themselves offer their roofs back to the city in the form of a patio space, garden or even a rooftop restaurant. The Roofhills of Buenos Aires are a model like many other cities in that it offers a usable space for its inhabitants. At the same time, the Roofhills are unlike many other cities in that nearly every rooftop is designed to accompany inhabitants.



Ecology 3: The Plains of Palermo

Buenos Aires as mentioned, is very flat, and there areas in the city that reflect this. An older community called Palermo is one example of the urban building typology reflecting the geography. Business are usually 32 square meters max, and restaurants are about double that. Behind the main street of Palermo is the neighborhood, where small businesses and hole in the wall restaurants reign, again, expressing the texture of a city that once was. Palermo is the flattest part of Buenos Aires, there is not a single vertical geographical feature within the entire city, something that is unusual in Buenos Aires.

Palermo today is a very Avant-garde, the residents are people of the creative realm, middle class artist, architects, designer that vary from ages 25-35, with the exception of many established residents of yesteryear. The texture of the neighborhood is mirror image of who resides. The walls are vibrantly colored, screaming independence and creativity. A walk down a random alley is like walking down a ill warranted art exhibit!

Ecology 4: Anti-Topia

Like Los Angeles, transportation is very big in Buenos Aires, but unlike LA the car is not.

The freeway system of LA created an architecture like no other city has, negative spaces around the various interchanges, onramps and offramps, bridges, underpasses and overpasses, all have created spaces unique to the city.

Buenos Aires on the other had, no one drives cars, sure there are many who are the exception, but for the most part, everyone takes public transportation. Public transportation is king in the city of Buenos Aires. You cannot get anywhere in this city without the purchase of a subé card, which grants access to the interconnecting subway, bus, bike, and rail system. The PT system has been layered over each other decade after decade, and yet the system flows so well one would think it was implemented all at once! For example, transitions from a rail platform to a bus stop is a matter of walking up to the street level, where the bus stop you need is right there, fantastic designing! If you're feeling adventurous, take a subé bike, similar to metro bike share.



The various Subway tunnels, bus routes, stops and lanes, bike share stations, and rail ways create a integrated system within the city that creates an architecture of its own, the Anti-topia. A city without the car at its focus, but rather the bus!

There is a highway system that connects the city to each other by means of personal vehicle, but it wraps around the outskirts of the city, and is very inconvenient. Trust me, I would know, 1.5 hours to school by taxi was not fun, when a 20 min bus ride could have sufficed.

Los Angeles and Buenos Aires are two distinctive cities with a mile long list of differences. Architecturally speaking, the differences are slight variations of each other, allowing the arrhythmic characteristics to come to light more easily. These characteristics are best explained

using an adapted version of Reyner Banham's four ecologies; Sur-urbia, the Roofhills, the Plains of Palermo, Anti-topia.

Buenos Aires was an experience to not be forgotten, and a starting point to build on an understanding of the world from a culturally relative point of view. Traveling is an opportunity that should never be taken lightly! Allowing oneself to dive into a culture outside of their own, is an experience that will not only benefit them at a personal level, but will add a great influence to their work. This very trip has been an impact to my studio (architecture) work, especially since our most recent studio project is located in Argentina.

The trip to Argentina was the travel segment of a 5th year architecture studio, led by Professor Gerard Smulevich of Woodbury University's School of Architecture. In cooperation with University of Buenos Aires School of Architecture, Design, and Urbanism.

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