The unprecedented urbanization of Latin America after World War II became the catalyst for exceptional architectural innovation. Countries in the region dealt with the challenges of modernization—from housing rapidly growing city populations to increasing production in the inland territories—even as many were rocked by struggles between democratic and authoritarian regimes. Whole cities, from Brasilia, the new capital of Latin America's largest country, to Ciudad Guayana, in the Venezuelan interior, were realized with breathtaking speed and became showcases for modernist architectural design. As the Cold War divided the globe into hotly contested zones of influence and the idea of a “third world” emerged, the region became key to the concept of the developing world.

As early as the 1940s, spectacular architectural designs in Brazil had captured attention worldwide. From the mid-1950s on, experimental architectural cultures appeared in a broad range of countries, from Argentina and Chile in the south to Venezuela and Mexico in the north. After the revolution in 1959, Cuba offered a countermodel to capitalist development. New attitudes toward public space, the relationship of building to landscape, and the role of the nation-state led to bold new architectural forms and solutions. Throughout the period architects in Latin America were deeply entwined with developmentalism, the doctrine that the state should promote modernization and industrialization in all aspects of life.

Latin America in Construction is itself a construction site of histories of modern architecture in Latin America. Over the last four years the curatorial team has culled archives and architectural offices throughout the region to gather original documents—design and construction drawings, models, photographs, and films—to open for reconsideration the achievements and legacy of this era. New materials have been created for the show: anthologies of period documentary films researched and edited by filmmaker Joey Forsyte, photographs by Leonardo Finotti, and large-scale interpretive models made by student teams at the University of Miami and, under the direction of the group Constructo, at the Pontificia Universidad Católica in Santiago, Chile.

The exhibition is intended to challenge the notion of Latin America as a testing ground for ideas and methods devised in Europe and the United States. It brings to light the radical originality of architecture and urban planning in the vast region during a complex quarter century.

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#ArquiMoMA
Prelude: A Region in Motion

From the mid-1920s to the early 1950s the burgeoning metropolitan centers in Latin America hosted a growing circle of architects who explored new building forms in response to national debates on modernizing society and the economy. They were also motivated by a desire to participate in the international architectural avant-garde. Far from merely imitating developments elsewhere, they undertook important architectural experiments. In Mexico, the revolution of 1910 led to the establishment of an entirely new national agenda, and architects sought to address urgent needs for housing and education. In Argentina, Uruguay, and Brazil, literary and artistic avant-gardes expanded to include architectural innovations that could meet the demands for new types of living and for skyscraper office buildings. And in Venezuela and the Dominican Republic, the capital cities were recast as paradigms of modern infrastructure.

By the 1940s Latin America’s emerging metropolitan architectural culture garnered international admiration in specialized publications, exhibitions, daily newspapers, and newsreels. In 1955, The Museum of Modern Art’s exhibition *Latin American Architecture since 1945* celebrated the architectural face of the region’s unprecedented urbanization in the decade after World War II. This gallery presents some of the most telling architectural projects of the years leading up to 1955, as well as period films that capture the rapidly changing rhythm of urban life in some of the major cities.
Campuses

In the opening years of the twentieth century, campus design in Latin America was deeply influenced by US models—perhaps nowhere more famously than in the Americanized Beaux Arts-style campus of the Universidad de la Habana (1905–30s) and in the clear influence of Frank Lloyd Wright on the Universidad de Puerto Rico (1946–66). But beginning in the late 1930s, notably in projects for Bogotá, Concepción (Chile), and Rio de Janeiro, planning for campuses announced radical new thinking: a modernist campus was not only a laboratory for new educational ideals but also a fragment of an ideal future city. The *ciudad universitaria* (university city) was born. In the mid-1940s, planning began for new university cities for the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) in Mexico City and for the Universidad Central de Venezuela (UCV) in Caracas, on sites outside the city centers. Both were at once motors for their respective cities' expansions and model cities in their own right. Both were built in a few short years to showcase modern architecture as a carrier of national identity and as a synthesis of the arts, integrating sculpture, murals, mosaics, and related arts. UNAM’s campus (shown on the right) was the work of scores of architects under the direction of Mario Pani and Enrique del Moral; UCV’s (shown on the left) was the work of a single figure, Carlos Raúl Villanueva, who worked with an international roster of artists to create a veritable outdoor museum. Today both campuses are on the UNESCO list of world heritage sites.
Brasília

The idea of moving Brazil's capital from Rio de Janeiro to the central plateau was born in colonial times and a federal district was declared shortly after independence in 1889, but a site for the new city was chosen only in 1955. The following year the newly elected president, Juscelino Kubitschek, declared his intent to have Brazil advance fifty years in five. Oscar Niemeyer was named director of architecture and urbanism for the new city. He built the presidential palace and announced a national competition for an urban plan for a city of half a million inhabitants. From twenty-six entries (two of which are presented on the right), the international jury selected Lucio Costa's plan. Costa's design was structured around two main axes, one of civic symbolism, terminating in the Praça dos Três Poderes (Plaza of the three powers), the other—with a gentle curve to it—an axis of the daily functions of the city, a highway spine flanked by housing organized in verdant neighborhood blocks (*superquadras*). The main bus terminal was placed at the intersection of the two axes, to be surrounded by the commercial, recreational, and cultural sectors, realizing a long-held modernist dream of a city centered on infrastructure and movement. Niemeyer's designs developed along the lines set out by Costa—a great esplanade lined with nearly identical buildings for the ministries and exceptionally sculptural designs for a cathedral, museum, and library. Although far from complete, Brasília was an irreversible reality at its inauguration in 1960.
At Home with the Architect

The growing prosperity of the middle class in many Latin American countries after World War II ushered in a golden period for the single-family house, often combined with inventive garden design. Presented here is an array of some of the most innovative and accomplished houses designed by architects for themselves or their families. Additional examples can be seen on the iPads and in copies of the exhibition catalogue.
Transforming the Urban Landscape

While headlines in the early 1960s focused on the spectacular development of Brasília, an entirely new city built in a few short years, transformations of older cities were every bit as dramatic, and none more so than the recasting of the former Brazilian capital, Rio de Janeiro. Here new relationships between monumental public buildings, landscape design, and natural settings were forged in a spectacular redesign that spread over nearly three hundred acres, changing the image of the city and its fabled coastline.

Dialogue between architecture and designed nature characterized many of the most ambitious undertakings of the 1950s and 1960s. In the Centro Cívico in Santa Rosa de La Pampa, Argentina, architecture helped restructure the administration and the experience of the country’s vast interior. Other projects modified portions of the Chilean coastline at Valparaíso to accommodate an expanded naval academy. A number of architects became keen observers of the climate, perhaps none more dramatically than Tomás José Sanabria, who designed the Hotel Humboldt atop the Avila mountain, connected to the city and to the coast by cable car.
A Quarter Century of Housing

After World War II, as Latin America was confronted with precipitous growth in urban populations, the region emerged as a laboratory of housing ideas and as a showcase of government investment in housing infrastructure. In addition to national government investment in housing, foreign aid also came from US-organized programs such as the Alliance for Progress, launched with great fanfare by John F. Kennedy in 1961, and from the Soviet exportation of industrial prefabrication technology, notably to Cuba and, briefly, to Salvador Allende's Chile. Housing became a subject of the ideological battles of the Cold War. The creation of the Inter-American Housing Center in Bogotà was important to the development of self-help solutions; it developed systems for creating strong bricks of rammed earth and built on earlier work done by the US in Puerto Rico. The UN sponsored the Proyecto Experimental de Vivienda (PREVI), a neighborhood of low-cost experimental housing in Lima that was seminal in thinking about the relationship between self-help and state-sponsored top-down models of housing.

Presented here is an array of some of the most significant projects, from scores and scores, undertaken in these years, mixing state-sponsored public housing with middle-class housing built by the private market. The timeline above offers some of the key political and economic events of the period as a baseline for connecting the institutions of the city presented in the center of the gallery and the housing on this wall with major political and economic events in a tumultuous period for the region.
Density and Innovation

The phenomenal urbanization of Latin America beginning in the 1950s was the subject of headlines. As more and more cities joined the roster of the most populous in the world, urban densities increased dramatically, necessitating inventive approaches to buildings at ever-greater scales. Structural innovations were tied to the search for maximizing space on tight building sites and to the quest for new spatial relationships, whether in a flowing open office plan or a complex architectural project with a range of functions.

Even as the proponents of modernist city planning advocated the separation of cities into clear functional districts for commerce, housing, recreation, and transportation, hybrid mixed-use forms emerged, embracing the messy variety of the city. While some buildings unified diverse functions with harmonious facades, others took on radical new forms. This too was the period in which Latin America joined the international debate over the skyscraper and its role in defining not only the skyline but also the street life of the metropolis.
Export

From the arrival of the Spanish and Portuguese in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries to the twentieth century, Latin American architectural history was largely written in terms of the importation by the Americas of models developed elsewhere. In the first half of the twentieth century, planning expertise was imported, first from France and later from the United States. Much less attention has been paid to the internationalization of Latin American practices.

Ever since the New York World’s Fair of 1939, where the Brazilian pavilion won accolades, exhibitions have played a major role in showcasing the innovative forms and attitudes embodied in much work by Latin American architects. But there have also been more permanent and sustained exportations of Latin American architectural expertise. Roberto Burle Marx had offices in Brazil and Venezuela in the 1950s and 1960s, and with the advent of the military dictatorship in Brazil in 1964, Oscar Niemeyer moved his office to Paris. As countries established new economic and political relationships in these decades, architecture in Latin America became more international. Seen as part of the third world after World War II, Latin America also exported aid in the form of expertise, buildings, and plans. Mexico provided schools to countries throughout the world, including Yugoslavia, Italy, India, and Indonesia, and Lucio Costa designed a new city in Nigeria.
Utopia

Utopian thinking has long been seen as a particular feature of twentieth-century avant-gardes in their commitment to the artist or architect as a dreamer of ideal worlds and a better future. In Latin America utopian thinking often involved an embrace or rejection of the accelerating pace of industrialization and the national embrace of technology. For some, technology offered the possibility of imagining entirely new spatial relations. For others, technology was a dystopian failure at its very heart, to be addressed with either sharp criticism or radical refusal.
In 2013 MoMA commissioned Los Angeles-based filmmaker and video artist Joey Forsyte to research and produce the city portraits presented here, as well as the films on view in the galleries that follow. Two years of research in archives throughout the Americas have been condensed into eight-and-a-half-minute anthologies of historic footage, edited to evoke the parallels and contrasts between the rapid transformations of seven cities: Buenos Aires, Montevideo, São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Caracas, Havana, and Mexico City. The films are arranged in order of the cities’ geographic positions, from south to north, following an arc that encompasses the Atlantic front of Latin America. They are periodically synchronized to show the same footage on all screens, suggesting shared motors of change. These include modes of transportation (streetcars, trains, automobiles, ocean liners, zeppelins, and airplanes), electrification, health care, education, newspapers, radio, and telephone systems. The films also show industrialization carried out for both civic and military purposes. During World War II, Brazil sent troops to Europe and Mexico deployed a mission in the Pacific.

The extracts featured in each film are listed on panels here, divided by city. Credits for the production teams and source archives are in the vestibule of the exhibition, opposite the large screen showing Instagram images from various cities represented in the exhibition.
Buenos Aires

In the opening decades of the twentieth century Buenos Aires was one of the fastest growing cities in the world. It was the first city in Latin America to reach a population of one million, and Argentina's gross domestic product grew at an unprecedented rate. The city's port was the busiest in Latin America and served as a chief transit point for the export of the agricultural riches and meat of the pampas, and for an influx of immigrants—at first largely from Italy and Spain, and later from other parts of Europe. The city's expansion and urban transformation were based on models imported from continental Europe, with broad boulevards lined with apartment houses reminiscent of Paris and Madrid, although the port was developed as one of the most modern industrial infrastructures anywhere in the world.

The skyscraper era in the southern hemisphere began in Buenos Aires with the Palacio Barolo (1919–23) by Mario Palanti, for a while the tallest building of reinforced concrete in Latin America, and continued with the residential tower of the Kavanagh building (1934–36), by Luis María de la Torre. The Avenida 9 de Julio, began in 1935, became the widest avenue in the world. Its main feature was the obelisk commemorating the four hundredth anniversary of the founding of the city, designed by the architect Alberto Prebisch and erected in two months between March and May 1936.
Montevideo

Located on the north shore of the Río de la Plata, where Spanish and Portuguese colonial interests clashed, Montevideo was founded by the Spanish in 1724 for strategic reasons. In the 1910s the city was transformed dramatically by the construction of La Rambla, a project of roads and promenades along the coast that united the gridded colonial center with the growing eastern quarters, particularly at the beachfront of Los Pocitos. Around the same time, electric trams were introduced and a new port was built. The city's networks connected it to both the productive Uruguayan interior and to international trade. In 1928, the centennial year of independence, Mario Palanti's Palacio Salvo, the city's first—and for many years only—skyscraper was built, entirely of concrete; it stands a hundred meters tall. The following year ground was broken for the Estadio Centenario (Centenary stadium) by Juan Antonio Scasso, which, along with the construction of the Hospital de Clínicas, announced a new scale and modern visage for the capital. Air travel had an enormous impact on the relationships between cities in the period, shrinking travel times and overcoming natural obstacles. The hold of airships on the imagination is evoked here by footage of the Graf Zeppelin's passage on July 1, 1934, en route to Buenos Aires. The Facultad de Ingeniería (Engineering school) of the Universidad de la República (1938), designed by Julio Vilamajó, ushered in a new era of modernist architecture and public works. After the passage of a national law that created condominium ownership of multiple-family dwellings in 1946, a boom in modernist apartment house construction began to change the look and the scale of the city's residential quarters. Luis Garcia Pardo's Edificio El Pilar (1957–58), one of the finest International Style buildings of the period, appears in the final shot.
Rio de Janeiro

Founded in 1565 on a spectacular harbor site, Rio de Janeiro was the capital of Brazil from 1763 until the inauguration of Brasilia in 1960. Modernization was catalyzed by independence from Portugal in 1889 and driven in the early decades of the twentieth century by the creation of an electrified streetcar system (1905) and the demolition of large swaths of the colonial center for the creation of new boulevards, anchored by the cross axis of the Rio Branco (1930) and the Avenida Presidente Vargas (1942). Against the backdrop of the dramatic Corcovado and Sugarloaf Mountains (the latter accessible by cable car after 1912), the city’s sea level topography was fundamentally transformed beginning in the 1930s using landfill from the hills demolished for earlier projects. The downtown was redeveloped as a modern government quarter of ministries, including the ministry of health and education, seen in some of the most arresting images in the film and represented in the exhibition by a model. It was joined by the new building for the Associacão Brasileira de Imprensa (Brazilian press association) by the brothers Marcelo and Milton Roberto. Stretching south from the vast landfill operation that created the Aeroporto Santos Dumont in the 1930s, the coastline to the Botafogo neighborhood was recrafted as a parkway, combining a modern road system with the landscaped Parque do Flamengo conceived by Roberto Burle Marx. Affonso Eduardo Reidy’s Museu de Arte Moderna (1953–67) anchored the park’s northern end. Rio’s population grew with great speed throughout the period; the city had 1.15 million inhabitants in 1920, 3.28 million when Brasilia was inaugurated in 1960, and 5.09 million in 1980.
São Paulo

Perhaps no city in South America was transformed more radically in the twentieth century than São Paulo, which grew from a low-scale city comprising the mansions of coffee barons and industrialists, with a population of just over half a million in 1920, to become the largest city in the Americas by 1980, when its population hit 8.4 million on its way to today's 11 million. Sprawl and the gradual push of the poorer classes to the periphery were already key features of the city's development in the 1930s, particularly as the residential center gave way to new densely packed office and commercial buildings. This transformation of the old core was accompanied by the rise of a new center along the Avenida Paulista in the 1950s and 1960s. The financial capital of Brazil also declared itself a major center of avant-garde art with the famous Semana de Arte Moderna (Modern art week) in 1922. In 1930 another exhibition declared a place for architecture within the avant-garde when émigré Gregori Warchavchik built a modernist house and opened it first as an exhibition house for six weeks, an event seen here in rare footage. After World War II modernist apartment houses began to transform the physiognomy of whole quarters; the footage highlights one such apartment building, in the quickly developing Higienópolis area, designed by João Batista Vilanova Artigas, the leader of the São Paulo or Paulista school of architecture.
Caracas

Caracas was a quiet capital, its Spanish colonial grid plan intact, until oil was discovered in Venezuela in the 1920s. Foreign investment and rural migrants poured into the city, fueling Caracas's rapid transformation from the capital of an agrarian nation into a metropolis. In the 1930s, the population was 163,000; by 1957, it had passed the one million mark, and the city's footprint had increased almost ten-fold. In 1939, the French urban planner Maurice Rotival devised a master plan for modernization, which led to the creation of a boulevard that cut through the colonial center and was anchored by the twin towers of Cipriano Domínguez's Centro Simón Bolívar (1949). But road works were not confined to the urban center. A highway was cut through the massive mountain range of El Ávila to link the capital and its coastal port. After 1953, dictator Marcos Pérez Jiménez launched the national program El Nuevo Ideal Nacional (The new national ideal), promising the “rational transformation of the physical environment.” Jiménez pushed for the completion of the Universidad Central de Venezuela campus, located on a monumental boulevard leading to the military academy. He promoted the design of the Parque del Este by Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx and inaugurated the Hotel Humboldt, by Tomás José Sanabria, atop El Ávila, connected by cable car to both the city and the coast. From the 1940s, the Banco Obrero, a state fund for housing, sought to get ahead of the growing housing crisis by increasing investment and planning. Projects escalated from the urbane El Silencio, whose arcades, redolent of colonial architecture, formed a new urban plaza, to the huge postwar developments that were scaled to the mountainous landscape.
Havana

Havana's population doubled between 1930 and 1959, from 728,500 to over 1.5 million. The city's colonial core remained largely intact as the commercial neighborhood of Vedado and other residential quarters rapidly expanded the city eastward. Cuba's economy prospered in the 1950s with the rise of sugar cane prices, brought on by the loss of the European beet sugar industry, and the upswing in US tourism to Havana. This facilitated a building boom; new modern infrastructure, tourist hotels, and luxury apartment houses and residences were constructed, in a city moving continually westward. In the interwar years, Cuban architecture was shaped by Neoclassical imagery and US prototypes, as in the new building of El Capitolio (1926–29). But in the postwar era, Havana's architecture became involved in defining a tropical cosmopolitanism in dialogue with Miami, Los Angeles, and Rio de Janeiro. The new look and ethos was best embodied in buildings such as the Radiocentro building (today Cinema Yara) (1945–47) and a burgeoning landscape of resort hotels, most notably the Havana Hilton (re-baptized La Habana Libre after 1959) by the Los Angeles firm of Welton Becket. Yet despite all of the development, the class divide was ever greater. In the mid-1950s, more than one third of Cuban households lacked amenities like electric light, and discontent with Fulgencio Batista's corrupt regime gave rise to political resistance. The revolution triumphed on New Year's Day 1959. Fidel Castro's new government inherited elaborate plans for a modernized and expanded Havana. These included the extension of the capital to the east of the harbor and projects that had been drawn up for the national planning board, such as the regulatory plan by José Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener from New York, with Cuban Mario Romañach.
Mexico City

Like Buenos Aires, Mexico City experienced massive transformation and modernization at the turn of the twentieth century, undertaken with the express intent of rivaling European cities, Paris above all. The most visible contributions of President Porfirio Díaz's long reign (1876–1910) were the great avenue Paseo de la Reforma, the monumental Palacio de Bellas Artes (Palace of fine arts), and the congressional building, the last two finished after the 1910 revolution. The latter was transformed into the great open-domed Monumento a la Revolución. The revolutionary government launched programs for modern schools. Mexico's renowned public mural program promoted national history, seen here in the courtyard of the Ministerio de Educación Nacional. In the early twentieth century the city began to expand westward. The population increased by at least a million every decade in the years after 1940, when it stood at 1.75 million. While much of the residential development was low-scale, the profile of the city changed around 1950 as the population soared above three million. The Torre Latinoamericana became the region's tallest skyscraper. In the same years work began on the campus of the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México, which was moved from the colonial core to the lava fields south of the city. Nearby, the garden suburb of El Pedregal was launched by the architect Luis Barragán. The house the German émigré architect Max Cetto designed for his family in this residential community is shown in the film. From the 1940s to the 1960s, large-scale housing projects also contributed to changing the scale of the city, including those by the architect Mario Pani, whose complex Centro Urbano Benito Juárez is pictured in the film. Today Mexico City is one of the twelve largest urban conurbations in the world, neck to neck with the slightly larger São Paulo.