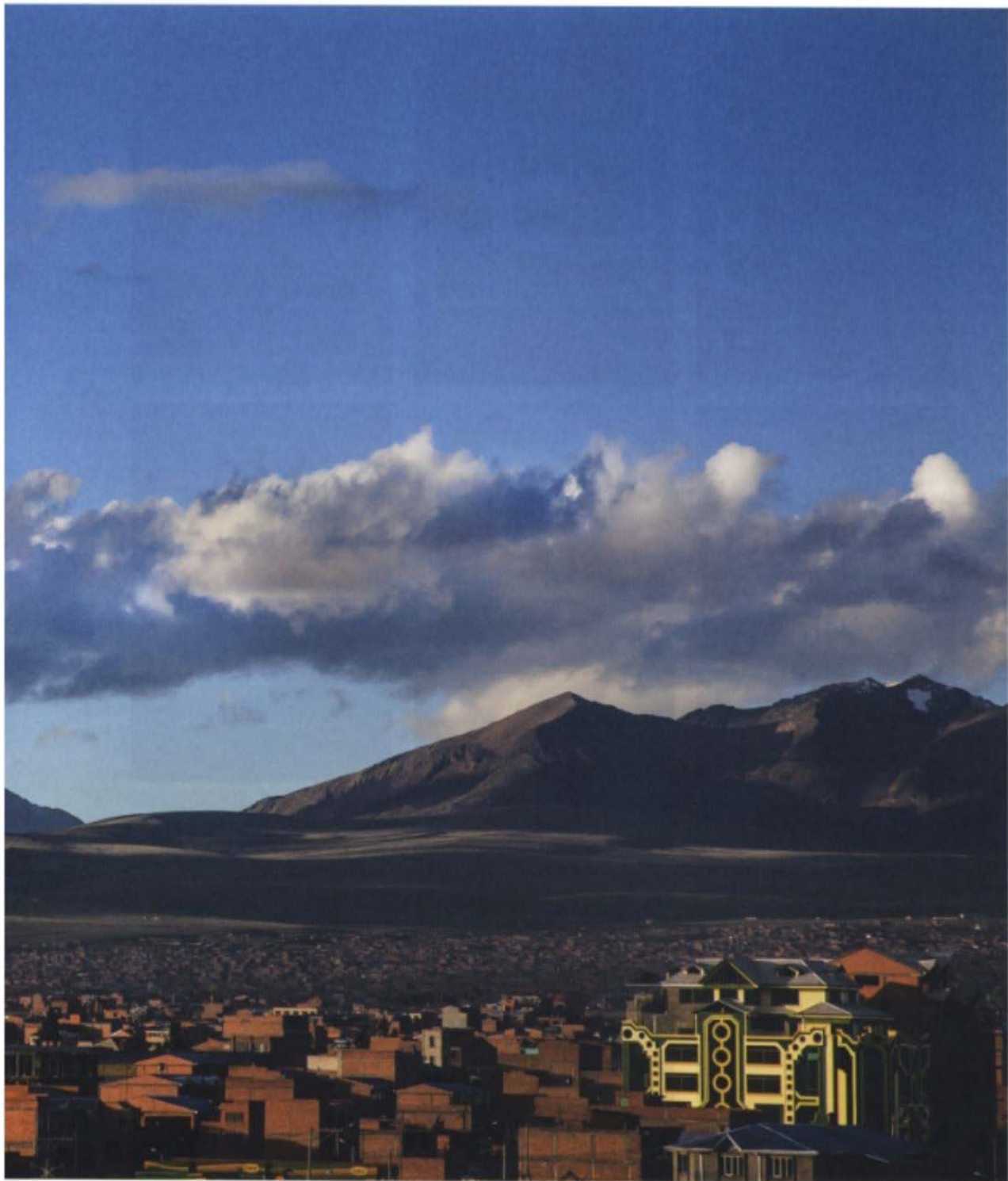
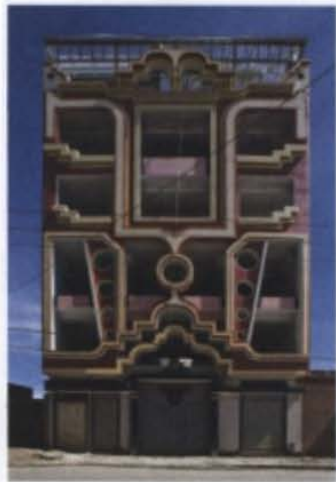


# Learning from El Alto

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In the fast developing city of El Alto, Bolivia, just west of La Paz, an architectural phenomenon has emerged so rapidly that it still lacks a proper name. Some people refer to it extravagantly as 'spaceship architecture', others more dismissively call it 'chola architecture' (from *cholo*, a term used in the colonial period to describe descendants of Amerindian and African parents, today used disdainfully for anything or anyone 'native'), some even herald it as 'new Andean', but most just call it 'kitsch'. Indeed, to anybody familiar with the discretion and restraint of a so-called modern aesthetic, it does look pretty kitsch, perhaps even ugly. As a result, local architects, architectural bodies and university faculties have so far mostly ignored it, though it sporadically features in a newspaper here and there. And yet the brightly coloured buildings topped with luxury chalets continue to pop up all over El Alto, and in many ways represent the most interesting architectural development in the country. They have even established a trend that is spreading to other urban centres in Bolivia and in neighbouring Peru and Argentina.

Historically, El Alto itself was not a city but an impoverished borough of La Paz, Bolivia's administrative capital. It sits at the edge of the magnificent Altiplano – an elevated plateau that runs across the Andes, sealed off to the north by the Cordillera Real confluence of mountain ranges and its numerous glaciers, and to the south by the Salar de Uyuni, a salt lake roughly the size of Belgium. Immediately below El Alto, La Paz spills down the slopes of a steep valley, with the snow-covered peak of the Illimani mountain towering over it.

To the native Amerindian and Mestizo populations coming from the plains and the mountains in search of better living conditions, El Alto was the obvious place to settle when approaching the more European and richer La Paz. At various points in its history, El Alto has also been a stronghold for indigenous combatants, first against the colonising Spaniards and then later (after Bolivia had become an independent state) against the republican elite. One reason for this embattled past is that the only road that connects the capital to the rest of the country runs through El Alto: close this road, and you can cut off La Paz. The native Aymara leader Túpac Katari and his wife Bartolina Sisa used just such a strategy in 1781 when they laid siege to La Paz – a rebellion long celebrated as central to Bolivia's national identity.

Since this time El Alto has been home to some tens of thousands of residents, but over the last decades it has grown exponentially, to such an extent that with a population today of over one million it is now even bigger than La Paz. Its reputation always used to be as a suburb both somewhat sad *and* bad, but its standing and fortunes improved significantly after 2003 when a popular uprising and the massacre of over 80 *Alteños* (citizens of El Alto) led to the ousting of President Gonzalo Sánchez de Lozada – a friend of the later US Bush regime and a man disdainfully nicknamed 'el gringo' – and opened the way in 2006 for the election of Evo Morales, a coca-leaf producer of Aymara origins who had become leader of the historically marginalised, indigenous population of Bolivia. Within the space of just a few years El Alto – a city since 1988 – gained considerable economic dynamism and political relevance as Morales's presidency increasingly encouraged a process of decolonisation that promoted indigenous customs, languages and culture.

It was within this context that an engineer and contractor called Freddy Mamani Silvestre decided that it was time for the buildings of El Alto to follow Morales's lead. Mamani Silvestre, like Morales,

had come from a poor region of the country and shared his new president's attachment to Bolivia's indigenous culture. To rescue certain aspects of this culture and at the same time improve the appearance of the long-despised town he promoted an 'autochthonous' architectural language. Although there are other practitioners who employ similarly colourful facades, Mamani Silvestre is the man responsible for its most sophisticated and consistent articulation, as well as designing the largest portion of its exemplars.

Rising incongruously over much poorer and duller dwellings across El Alto, Mamani Silvestre's four-, five- or six-storey buildings are distinguished by the vibrancy of their colours as much as by the distinct, and utterly unprecedented, design of their facades. In the absence of any obvious architectural reference, the buildings seem clearly to echo a native tradition – and in particular the long-established Andean practice of using strikingly bold colours for festive garments, developed in deliberate contrast to the monotonous tones of the Altiplano and its vast plains. Indeed, the passion for gaudy colours (or *colores chillones*) is amply displayed in the multilayered pleated skirts worn by Aymara women, the so-called *pollera*. The fabric for the skirts has for many years been designed in El Alto but today its manufacture is outsourced to Korea or China, and it comes in a synthetic material that enhances its shiny effect. Further underlining their debt to indigenous cultures, Mamani Silvestre's buildings complement these colours by borrowing familiar patterns and details from pre-Columbian Tiwanaco custom – such as the Andean Cross or zoomorphic figures reduced to complex geometrical forms – which are then given built expression through his stepped and gabled elevations, reflective or coloured glass and an intriguing combination of different shapes and forms.

But if you think the facades are bizarre, just wait till you see the interiors, because the second and third floors of these buildings contain their *pièce de résistance*: a double-height *salon de eventos*, or event space, typically used for parties and weddings. Here the extravagance of the facade explodes in a cosmic array of mirrors, decorated columns, elaborate chandeliers, hundreds of LED lights, oversized, zigzagging plated windows and painted balustrades, creating the interior ambiance of a funfair. Most weekends the *salons* are fully booked by families, unions, congregations or other local groups set on perpetuating the peculiarly Andean fondness for fraternities and celebratory gatherings. The cost of fitting out a *salon de eventos* in such exuberant style typically accounts for a good proportion of the building's \$250,000–\$500,000 overall cost, but it only takes a couple of years to earn this money back through events bookings.

At the top of the building sits the chalet, often capped by its own gabled roof and with a multi-tiered chimney. Many observers have wondered why the style and form of these penthouses breaks from the general look of the building, or why they are set back from the perimeter – given the altitude is already 4,000m, it is not as if there is any demand to go higher and produce an elevated terrace for barbecues or sunbathing (the one thing that *Alteños* consistently try to avoid). In La Paz, the rumour is that the chalet reproduces the traditional space around the peasant hut, but in El Alto they say it is an expression of the certain degree of discretion you get when building 'slightly above' the permitted height, and that the break differentiates the commercial building below from the owner's nobler private dwelling above. Some even argue that following an Andean conception of space, it also allows the owner to be closer to the *alapa*

(higher world), while sitting over the *akapacha* (earthly world) of the main body of the building. More pragmatically, Mamani Silvestre explains that unlike the commercial spaces which extend to the very perimeter of the plot, so as to maximise rentable area and revenue, the chalet can be smaller and therefore also slightly warmer (central heating being pretty much non-existent in El Alto). Beneath the actual space of the chalets, and above the *grander salon*, are usually located one or two flats for the owner's children, while on the ground floor the building operates as a mini shopping centre arranged astride a central corridor with a public toilet at its rear.

Commissioned by newly prosperous merchants and businessmen, these buildings are ostensibly built to show off the wealth of their owners, but as event spaces they also represent a valuable source of income. This entrepreneurial aspect of their profusion again reflects a unique characteristic of El Alto's largely Quechua and Aymara population. *Alteños* are masters in trading – it is not unusual for certain families to have their children educated in Chinese so as to cut out the middle-men when buying goods from the Far East, which are imported wholesale and then dispatched around Bolivia or to the harbour cities of Chile and Peru. Some of these offspring even spend up to two months in mainland China's commercial districts at the invitation of Chinese sponsors, and return with containers laden with a rich variety of goods. At the same time, the trading aspect of the city is also fed by revenues from the co-operative mining industry and by an array of small- and medium-sized businesses run by its especially industrious populace. Much to the dismay of Bolivia's conservative elite, El Alto has become the cradle of an economically and culturally emergent class, the new Aymara bourgeoisie, buoyed by mercantilism and by the political stability the country has enjoyed under its popular Aymara president. Each of these 'spaceship' buildings can be seen to symbolise the cheerful economic and political disposition of this emerging class.

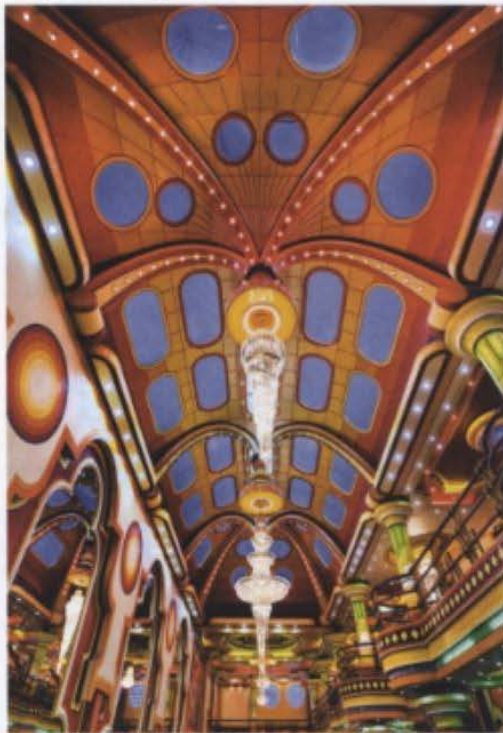
Despite the curiosity and attention these buildings have attracted, it is hard to find any really engaged discussion of their popularity. Randolph Cárdenas, an architect and author of one of the very few studies on the subject, has recounted how they have always been dismissed in pejorative terms by the architecture schools of La Paz – even though very few people outside El Alto seem ever to have ventured inside one, and nobody really knows who designed them, or whether there is a single draughtsman or several involved. Freddy Mamani Silvestre has never been asked to give an interview, nor has he been profiled in any way. Recently, however, more and more voices have come to the defence of these

buildings, some daring to claim that they are a genuine expression of the city of El Alto or, more fancifully still, that they represent Bolivia's true national architectural style. Some go even further, and propose that academia should open up to these polychromatic architectural expressions and offer formal instruction in their design.

In our own architectural history lessons we have long been taught that modern architecture appeared at the start of the twentieth century as a result of technological innovations that drove new forms of production and construction and, consequently, new ways of organising work and habitation. Modernism's new homogenising ways, however, proved not always compatible with the distinct social fabrics, geographies and cultures of the less industrialised, less urban countries into which it was subsequently introduced. In the second half of the last century, attempts were made to resolve

these contradictions. Kenneth Frampton called for a 'critical regionalism' – an architecture with local knowledge and local flavour that would still respect modernism's guiding principles. In obvious contrast, others such as the architect-couple Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown exhorted architects to abandon the canonic and instead embrace the commercial, playful and populist style of the everyday main street. This criticism, of course, opened the way for postmodernism and its pastiches, which soon demonstrated its limits: a cacophony of elements from the past, chosen arbitrarily from any era and mixed at random, was no more local or democratic than a rigid European modernism.

The intergalactic, polychromatic *chola* architecture of El Alto, as expounded principally by Freddy Mamani Silvestre, does not represent a quest for a heroic past or an everyday vernacular. Rather, at its heart is a fundamentally contemporary urban version of indigenous cultural elements. Today, the Aymaras and Quechuas who live in El Alto use mobile phones and computers, learn Chinese and set up businesses in Shanghai and Guangzhou, run major transport and construction companies and are masters of the rapid accumulation of capital. They are, in this sense, contemporary in every way, yet at the same time they do not cease to be Aymara or Quechua or Mestizo, and they carry on their own cultural traditions. It may not be long, therefore, before we are able to look at the city of El Alto with new and astonished eyes. For its architecture challenges us to rethink how form establishes an identity, how the heterodox can complicate the established rule and parameter and how a new appreciation of trade can make our own laws and limits become more flexible. We should learn, then, to feast our monochromatic eyes on colour, and in the process come to love a difference.



Elisabetta Andreoli and Ligia d'Andrea,  
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La Obra de Mamani Silvestre*  
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