



## Buenos Aires Affair: The Adventures and Misadventures of Le Corbusier in South America

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A review of *Plan para Buenos Aires* (documentary film), directed by Gerardo Panero, 2022, Fueye Films, 79 minutes. It examines the documentary that relates the history of the unmaterialized master plan that Le Corbusier conceived for the Argentinean capital city in 1938. It highlights the statements of expert voices, but regrets not taking advantage of the rich and known archival iconography about the Swiss-French architect at that time.

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**Keywords:** Le Corbusier; urban planning; Buenos Aires; Grupo Austral

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Le Corbusier has proven one of the most inspiring characters for Latin American architecture. His spiritual and physical presence there has played a part in an intricate saga of celebrity worship accompanied by disappointment of promises of project contracts, his commitments to greedy and unreliable patrons, and a generous dose of haughtiness from late 1920s to the 1960s.

With rare exceptions, in European and North American literature, Le Corbusier biographies handle his relationship with Latin America as a footnote. From the reverse point of view, Latin Americans challenge this contending that his travels in South America (Argentina, Uruguay, Paraguay, Brazil and Colombia) led to formidable changes in his sensibility and thinking.

Among the various possibilities for seeing this interrelationship, the documentary *Plan para Buenos Aires* is a welcome narrative of the events and setting surrounding the Swiss-French architect's desire to work in South America, scripted from his visit to Buenos Aires in 1929 to the design of the Casa Curutchet in La Plata, built between 1947 and 1952.

The documentary depicts Le Corbusier's two-month stay in Buenos Aires, with a flight to Montevideo in-between. As the title states, it focuses on the plan for Buenos Aires proposed in a chapter of *Précisions sur un état présent de l'art et de l'architecture* (Le Corbusier 1930), and ensuing developments [Figure 1]. The Argentinean Jorge Ferrari Hardoy and Juan Kurchán, members of the avant-garde group Austral with Antonio Bonet (of BKS chair fame), collaborated on the project and organized the Estudio del Plan de Buenos Aires (EPBA). Crowning the sequence is Le Corbusier's disappointment with the appropriation of his ideas without payment from the Argentine government.



**Figure 1:** Le Corbusier presenting the plan for Buenos Aires to the Argentinean ambassador Ramón Cárcano. Source: Jorge Ferrari Hardoy Archives, frame of the documentary *Plan Para Buenos Aires*, Fueye Films, 2022.

The film takes us on this journey guided by a skillful collage of insightful talks by Argentinean experts – Sonia Sasiain, Cayetana Mercé, Jorge Francisco Liernur, Alejandro Lapunzina, Enrique García Espil, Eduardo Maestripieri, Fernando Domínguez, Pablo Pschepiurca, Norberto Feal, Graciela Mariani –, as well as Spanish ones – Xavier Monteys and Jaume Freixa. Le Corbusier’s voice is heard off camera, as is Antonio Bonet’s; archival photos and historical movie clips enliven and enrich the account throughout the documentary, as well as footage of Buenos Aires today.

Among other sources, two books circulate behind the scenes for the making and our understanding of the documentary: *La Red Austral: Obras y Proyectos de Le Corbusier y sus Discípulos en la Argentina (1924–1965)* (Liernur and Pschepiurca 2008) and *Le Corbusier en el Río de la Plata, 1929* (Gutiérrez 2009).

Collective narration is a common documentary guidance that attributes the content to those who speak. Nonetheless, the topics depend on previous knowledge and a chain of missing ideas and information that should be asked of the interviewees. The final cut is the director’s decision; however, those who know the context may note the absence of topics that are not revealed in the film. For example, proposals for the Argentinean elite that were left in promises and drafts, illustrating the early Le Corbusier’s avidity for commissions, a precursor to the pragmatism that ended up in his courtship with Nazism.

Dispersed iconographic documentation must be mastered by the screenwriter and director. Furthermore, while there is a good visual collection related to the episodes involving Ferrari Hardoy-Kurchan-Bonet’s participation in the Buenos Aires plan in the plot, there is only a moderate use of the wondrous hand drawings by Le Corbusier and other pictorial treasures held at the Fondation Le Corbusier (FLC); for example, the fifty-eight original sketches from the 1929 journey reproduced in the 2015 reprint of *Précisions* (Le Corbusier 2015). The careful analysis of this set of images by Tim Benton (2009; 2015) could have been inspiring for the screenplay. The books by Gutiérrez (2009) – and its bonus video – and as well by Liernur and Pschepiurca (2008) hint at cross-references or suggestions for iconographic sources: for instance, there is no evidence that articles (some illustrated) about Le Corbusier in Argentina in daily newspapers at the time were collected. A more careful bibliographic consultation could also have prevented errors in the photo captions and enriched the visual material displayed at the film.

This observation about missing visual documentation does not mean that it is an unsatisfactory screenplay. However, the scattered and persistent insertion of present-day urban images throughout the film is somewhat distracting. Stunning drone images

of a lush contemporary Buenos Aires, and slow (or accelerated) images as infills among the talking parts, suggest moods for the chronicle in certain moments. the recurrence of such similar images becomes redundant, weakening the evocation of the great early 20<sup>th</sup> century metropolis that touched Le Corbusier and other lively symbolic insinuations, to flow into imagery which is almost a touristic stimulus. I wonder whether these drone recordings could have been flyovers showing and explaining the areas redesigned by Le Corbusier and his disciples. Or, the Ferrari Hardoy-Kurchan's Los Eucaliptus building, so beloved by the interviewees, could have earned an accurate rendition from the air, if it could be seen like a bird in the same way we see the Casa Curutchet in the documentary.

Visual interludes rambling through Buenos Aires are a pause, in a film mostly tranquil in its tempo. This is not incongruous with the density of content, mainly from notable experts. The gathering of authoritative views and recompiled memories are the highlight of the documentary. However, not every collection of fragments can arrange a new pattern. The resulting mosaic is an imaginative and colorful visual account by the director, without a precise position of its own, in which the interstices between the tesserae are sometimes accurate and often too spaced. A screenplay does not necessarily need to be anchored in a theory. Depicting a patchwork, for a topic that can still be further developed, is the contribution of this documentary.

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## Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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