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Walking through the gentrifying bohemia of Palermo in my adopted home of Buenos Aires, I keep thinking about art's role as the midwife of urban renewal. When I arrived some three years ago, Palermo's London plane tree-shaded streets of battered cobblestones were lined with functional businesses barely holding on. But today, the boarding house next door to my home is a chic hotel; down the street, a grungy internet kiosk houses an independent dress designer's boutique; and two blocks further a dusty hardware store has become a bespoke stationery shop.

Like post-communism Prague and postwar Paris before it, Buenos Aires is bursting with art, design and fashion after surviving a grim epoch that ended in social tumult and economic collapse. Of course, this isn't Buenos Aires' first turn on the world's artistic stage: the Argentine capital has long been South America's cultural mecca; the native soil of artists, designers and intellectuals from Jorge Luis Borges to Antonio Berni and Le Corbusier protégé Jorge Ferrari Hardoy, designer of the famed BKF butterfly chair. But Argentina's 2001 implosion set free a new generation to take the city's unique mix of intellect, ingenuity and playful creativity to the world, and set off a building spree that pioneered Buenos Aires' re-emergence.

"There is an explosion of creativity in Buenos Aires. Crises give birth to that," says Haby Bonomo, an Argentinean painter who, after more than three decades in Paris, recently returned to spend half of each year in his native city.

The cliché runs that Buenos Aires is the Paris of South America, but I like to think of it as the French capital's scruffy cousin: similarly cultured, often broke, and infinitely more surreal. Buenos Aires has always been a schizophrenic city, metaphorically marooned mid-Atlantic, between its European aspirations and

its South American reality. It is an exaggerated archetype of the immigrant city, a stew of Spaniards, Italians, Syrians and Germans who share a language and culture, but still look to their ancestral countries for inspiration. "The integration came quickly but we never embraced a common identity," says Laura Buccellato, director of Buenos Aires' Museum of Modern Art (MAMBA).

Argentina's 2001 crisis and sudden price crash changed that, attracting thousands of foreigners to move in and create their own works – or buy them – and forcing local artists who would normally have fled to Europe and New York to stay in the country and look inward for inspiration. The world has savoured the results: UNESCO named Buenos Aires its first City of Design in 2005; its streets teem not only with tourists who love its low prices and mix of French and Art Deco architecture, but also with stars – from Willem Dafoe to Naomi Campbell and Natalie Portman; Francis Ford Coppola is filming his new movie here and it seems weekly that I read a breathless Coppola sighting in the local papers; and high-end shops and museums, from Harrods to New York's MoMA, are featuring the creations of Argentinean designers as the hottest new things. Buenos Aires may have been forced to leave behind its European dream, but it has achieved something better: fame for the curious mix that it is.

Walking past the towering 1930s Rationalist-style Kavanagh building on posh Plaza San Martin or browsing the Art Deco-crammed shops that spot the antique neighbourhood of San Telmo, I'm often reminded that Buenos Aires has been here before. From the late 1930s to the 1960s, especially, Argentina was a hothouse for industrial design. Today's generation is again conquering the globe. Since its 2003 founding, 'textile philosopher' Martín Churba's

KIM WISKERKE / ALAMY MARILYN KINGWILL / ARENAPAL



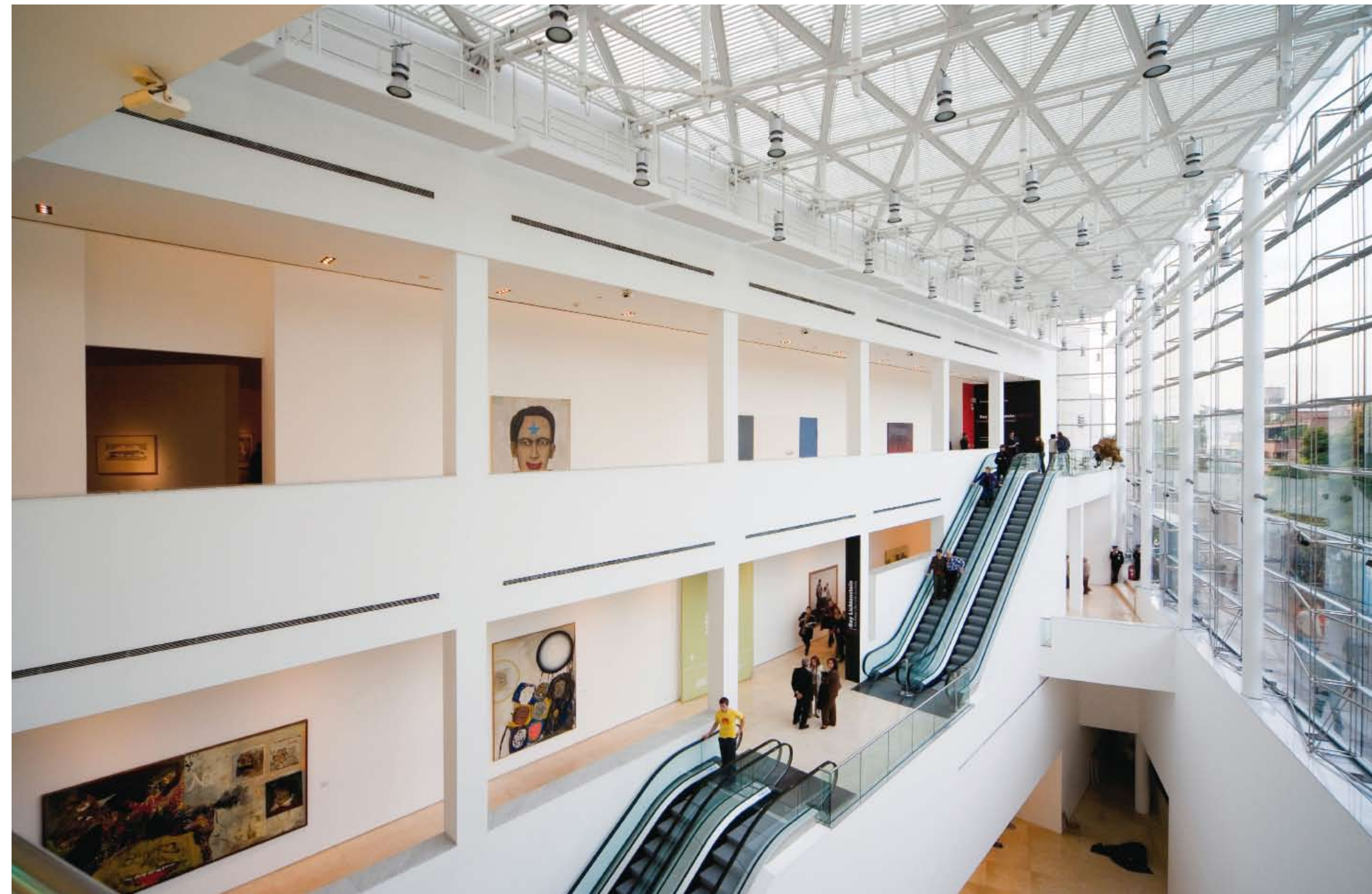
DON'T CRY FOR ME

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Out of economic collapse comes creative renewal in Argentina's vibrant capital, says Ian Mount

Right: A scene from Gaby Kerpel's Fuerzabruta (top); and the MALBA (bottom)





Tramando, an airy store of clothing and objects fashioned from innovative textile experiments, has spread from the swanky Recoleta neighbourhood to Tokyo and New York; young architects Carolina Galeano and Francisco Poggi have seen their expandable BabyBox crib pull in prizes from New York to Brazil; 12 local fashion designers were featured in Harrods' Argentina Week last year; and Cristián Mohaded and Luciana González Franco's one-piece nylon and leather Teo stool was a winner in the first edition of Milan's Premio Vico Magistretti. In 2007, Argentina exported \$500 million in design goods.

Designer Min Agostini, who left architecture for fashion six years ago, says the boom can be traced back to the educated and creative Argentines who lost their jobs and turned to design and art at the turn of the millennium. "A lot of people were without work and had more time on their hands. For me, the idea was: 'If I can't make money, at least I'll do something I enjoy,'" she says, as we wander the aisles of La Rural convention centre at the edge of the city's sprawling, beautiful park system, where some 270 designers have packed the eighth edition of the city's top design fair, FERIA PuroDiseño. Agostini's unique women's clothing creations, flowing rhomboids in purples and oxidised shades, remind me of Frank Gehry's architecture and perfectly fit her dark-eyed, square-jawed, almost architectural face. Her clothes were part of Harrods' Argentina Week and decorated the store's windows last August.

Sipping a *café con leche* in Dadá – an appropriately art-monikered bar/restaurant with a retro-tiled bar and dry martinis – I ask Carolina Muzi, the design writer at Argentina's largest newspaper *Clarín*, how Argentinean art and design seem to compete so well with that of far richer countries like Italy and Spain. Like Agostini, Muzi came to design late, and since then she's done as much as anyone to explain and promote Argentinean design to the world. She

ascribes the country's rise to its *atalo con alambre* (tie it with wire) ethos of doing a lot with a little. You can see the creative struggle in the designs, as highly educated designers try to produce work with neither the money for imported materials nor the factories set up for high-quality manufacturing. Designer Alejandro Sarmiento shows typical ingenuity with his recycled rubber Ruberta Iron chair and cardboard-and-rivet Circus Stool.

In a sprawling Palermo atelier-filled design factory gathered around an interior courtyard – a building where I've long dreamed of having an office – Patricio Lix Klett pulls on his first cigarette of the day and sips maté tea as he explains his own *atalo con alambre* works, the La Feliz line of wicker-like lamps and seats, handwoven from inexpensive domestic plastic, that support a person's weight and return to form without an internal metal structure.

According to Arturo Grimaldi, the coordinator of design at MALBA, Buenos Aires' seven-year-old Latin American art museum, this educated ingenuity – combined with the well-honed use of native materials such as leather – gives Argentinean design both a contemporary feel and a handmade quality that appeals to international tastes. The curator of the museum's 2007 Genealogías del Sur: Conductas de Diseño design show, which featured Sarmiento and two other local designers, Diana Cabeza and Usos, Grimaldi also collaborated with MoMA in New York to put together Destination: Buenos Aires. New Argentine Design, a group show of pieces by 13 designers that are sold in the MALBA and MoMA museum shops. The pieces tell Argentina's design story, from whimsical leather desk accessories from vacaValiente (an homage to the "brave cow") to a backpack from the Palermo-based Humawaca that apes the BKF chair.

Art, too, is on the rise. Top contemporary galleries, such as Recoleta's Ruth Benzacar and Palermo's Dabbah Torrejón and Braga Menéndez Arte

BUENOS AIRES HAS ALWAYS BEEN A SCHIZOPHRENIC CITY, METAPHORICALLY MAROONED MID-ATLANTIC, BETWEEN ITS EUROPEAN ASPIRATIONS AND ITS SOUTH AMERICAN REALITY

PABLO ARULIAK, SETH WULSIN

Left, clockwise from top left: Installation at Braga Menéndez; artwork by Cristina Schiavi, also at Braga Menéndez; Puente de la Mujer; Teo stool; Lámpara Blanda de Pie Alta; Seth Wulsin's Caseros Prison installation

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Contemporáneo, show a burgeoning group of young artists that includes Fernanda Laguna, Cristina Schiavi, Flavia Da Rin and Patricio Larrambebere.

Sitting on the second-floor terrace of a sleek new Palermo café – overlooking a new boutique hotel and a tiny plaza named after Anglo-Argentine philanthropist William Morris – Da Rin, a pixie-ish 30-year-old photographer who specialises in morbid fairy-tale-like self-portraits that bring to mind John Currin’s mix of beauty and the grotesque, says her contemporaries thrived by forming collectives in the wake of the 2001 crash. After being picked for the prestigious Currículum Cero young artists show at the Benzacar Gallery, she won a two-year study grant with famed Argentinean painter Guillermo Kuitca.

The sense of possibility and rebirth that brought me to the city also brought many others. And not to watch: rather, to create. Seth Wulsin moved to Buenos Aires because he couldn’t afford studio space in New York. In 2006, he completed an ambitious public art project in which he turned the porthole window grids of the notorious, and soon-to-be-demolished, Caseros Prison into faces of prisoners, which shone out onto the neighbourhood at different times of the day. It was simple yet powerful – to me it was a perfect example of the native/foreign blend that defines the city. “Buenos Aires seems to have some kind of intriguing quality that lends itself to artistic creation,” says Wulsin, 27. “There is this overlay of generation and degeneration, things falling apart and regenerating at the same time.”

Such excitement has not gone unnoticed by foreign collectors: last year 113,000 visitors took in the city’s annual ArteBA art fair. Among them was Luis Pérez-Oramas, the curator of Latin American art at MoMA, who bought works by Eduardo Stupia for MoMA’s collection. I’ve watched happily as Buenos Aires’ much denigrated art institutions have

finally caught up with the artists. In 2002, the city government founded the Centro Metropolitano de Diseño (CMD), to provide professional training and commercial outlets to designers. Today it’s seeing deserved attention. The CMD is anchoring a design manufacturing boom in the Barracas neighbourhood, where Martín Churba fabricates his textiles. In the old Italian immigrant neighbourhood of La Boca, the Fundación Proa art space has contracted Milan-based architects Caruso-Torricella to build a modern expansion, replete with glass facades that will serve as rear projection screens and open the museum to the public, set for late 2008. And in San Telmo, Argentine-born Emilio Ambasz has designed the new MAMBA, planned for late 2009. Famed for interweaving nature and architecture in such projects as the Casa de Retiro Espiritual, near Seville, Spain, Ambasz’s plans blend MAMBA’s current home, an old tobacco company, with a tree- and vine-covered façade and a huge titanium image projection screen on the rear, visible from the nearby highway.

When I look at Buenos Aires today, I see a place that is finally realising that while it may have to leave behind its European dream, in doing so it can achieve something better: fame for the curious mix that it is. The city – and its artists – is embracing itself. It’s people like local musician Gaby Kerpel, who penned the music for acrobatic theatre events Fuerzabruta and De La Guarda, who are redefining Argentina’s identity. He fuses Euro-style electronica with local cumbia and folklore music at local nightclub events. It’s a sign of the new Buenos Aires, a place that inspires artists and designers to join together in building a cultural powerhouse. “We are truly far from the rest of the world,” Kerpel says. “But artists are coming here to investigate and do things now – and that’s a change. You don’t have to go to Europe or New York any more. And that makes me want to stay.”

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Right, clockwise from top left: View of the Obelisko; wicker seat by Patricio Lix Klett; *Acoustic Mass 1 (Covent Garden)*, 2005, mixed media on paper, by Guillermo Kuitca; the Palermo district, colourful buildings in La Boca; and leather stork by vacaValiente



ACOUSTIC MASS 1 (COVENT GARDEN), COURTESY OF THE ARTIST AND SPERONE WESTWATER, NEW YORK; PABLO ABULIAK, GETTY IMAGES

