

Rebuilt Indigeneity: Architectural Transformations in El Alto

Juliane Müller

The colorful façades are best seen from the Blue Line of Mi Teleférico, the aerial cable-car network that has been the backbone of urban transport in the metropolitan area of La Paz and El Alto since 2014. From above, the multistory buildings internationally known as Neo-Andean Architecture can be admired in their distinctive splendor, rising over the sober and nearly treeless landscape of El Alto, Bolivia's youngest and Latin America's foremost indigenous city. Populated through rural–urban migration since the early twentieth century, but only founded as an independent municipality in 1985, El Alto has been devoid of monumental sites. These buildings and the new cable-car system are the first structures with sufficient aesthetic and symbolic qualities to evoke positive reactions from residents and tourists alike. In this essay, I approach them through an architectural lens. The cable-car infrastructure is not primarily conceptualized as a network but rather analyzed through its historically informed symbolism and as a series of distinctive material forms with specific social and political effects (Seewang 2013). I show that the Neo-Andean Architecture and the cable-car station buildings not only reshape the city's landscape but are themselves materializations of an urban understanding of indigeneity that embraces infrastructural development and accommodates social difference.

Neo-Andean Architecture

Regardless of its broad denomination, Neo-Andean Architecture originated in El Alto and is associated with a single name, the Aymara Freddy Mamani. Aymara is one of the thirty-six Indigenous nations and native peoples defined as such in Bolivia's Constitution of 2009.¹ Mamani makes use of a wide array of influences, mainly patterns and geometric forms borrowed from precolonial ceramics, weavings, and the archeological complex at Tiwanaku, located halfway between El Alto and Lago Titicaca,² but also from contemporary Bolivian popular culture, mass-media figures, and Chinese decorative elements (Salazar Molina 2016: 68ff.). He self-identifies as an architect-artist who works as a craftsman to satisfy the taste of his affluent private clientele: upwardly mobile entrepreneurial families and import/wholesale traders. The buildings in question are part and parcel of their business model. The first two or three floors are usually packed with stores, goods depots, sports facilities, and fiesta venues, followed by rented apartments. The owners live at the top in a separate area, in chalet-like duplexes which usually follow a European style. Construction materials are non-traditional. As with wealthy Indigenous houses in other parts of the Andes (Colloredo-Mansfeld 1994; Leinaweaver 2009), these buildings incorporate foreign influences and materials even as they enact native symbols and relational forms.

Neo-Andean building with a decorative mask of the Diablada (devil-dance), an allegory of the riches and dangers of Bolivian mines.

Photo: Herland Jarro Arteaga, El Alto, August 2020.



Between 2014 and 2016, Neo-Andean Architecture featured in South American mass media and in major North American and European newspapers and magazines. Numerous short videos (e.g. *New Andean: a new indigenous architecture* by *Architectural Review*) and at least one full-length documentary have been made about Mamani. Another wave of international reporting on Mamani and the Neo-Andean accompanied the 2018/2019 exhibition *Southern Geometries* in Paris.

From an architectural perspective centered on boundaries, form, and symbolism (Seewang 2013), the edge – where the façade meets its less conspicuous surroundings – could not be more salient. These buildings stand out in a sea of unpainted red brick and simple concrete. The façades look all the more futurist as they protrude above the dry topography of the Altiplano against the backdrop of high mountain peaks and amid a grid of fan-shaped asphalted avenues that lead into and out of the city. In terms of form, each house is a replicated singularity: different from all the others but similar enough to be decipherable as part of a cogent overarching style, multiplied through the narrow space of one city. Read as a symbolic statement of new Indigenous pride and wealth, Neo-Andean Architecture is a materialization of the persistent economic growth experienced under President Evo Morales. It is also an architectural expression of the changing language of indigeneity in contemporary Bolivia.

Indigenous politics and economic development

During the leftist government of Aymara president Evo Morales from 2006 to 2019, Indigenous heritage-making was foregrounded. Like former presidents in the region, Morales strengthened his political authority through ancient cosmological rituals,³ but in addition he systematically deployed the language of indigeneity for strategic national purposes (Canessa 2006). This conflation of indigeneity and national economic development was not completely new in Bolivia. In the early 2000s, Indigenous legacies and telluric deities, such as Mother Earth (Pachamama), had been mobilized for protests not only against the privatization of water supplies but over gas exports to Chile during the so-called Gas War in El Alto in October 2003 (Canessa 2006; Lazar 2008). Protests were not directed against the extraction of gas per se but the construction of a pipeline toward Chile. This meant a resignification of highland Bolivian indigeneity, away from definitions focused solely on traditional identity, rural territorial autonomy, and the protection of natural resources and in the direction of broader issues such as resource nationalism and infrastructure development (Albro 2005). During the Morales government, state-owned enterprises for technology and network development have been making use of Indigenous terms. Quipus, the public enterprise for assembling laptops and mobile phones, for example, derived its name from a precolonial record-keeping device in the form of knotted strings. Mi Teleférico employs for its logo a stylized Tiwanaku stele placed in a circle of geometrical forms and its station names use Aymara toponyms along with Spanish names.

Mi Teleférico consists of eleven cable-car lines that connect El Alto and La Paz, surmounting nearly a thousand meters of altitude difference between the two cities.



El Alto street view with the station building of the Purple Line of Mi Teleférico and scattered Neo-Andean buildings.
Photo: Herland Jarro Arteaga, El Alto, August 2020.



Station building of the Yellow Line of Mi Teleférico.
Photo: Herland Jarro Arteaga, El Alto, August 2020.



Station building of the Yellow Line with taxi rank and a few vendors.
Photo: Herland Jarro Arteaga, El Alto, August 2020.

The system has been embraced enthusiastically by the population and is used for daily commuting. Apart from providing connectivity, the transport system of Mi Teleférico was a major architectural intervention: the eleven lines are sustained and interconnected by no less than thirty station buildings, all of them spacious and the busiest ones with commercial galleries, food plazas, and adjacent green areas. The stations all have a similar cubic form and prominently show the color of the line they sustain.

Two months after inauguration of the El Alto-based station building for the Yellow Line, called Mirador ('viewpoint' in Spanish) and Qhana Pata ('the true and honest high place' in Aymara) because of its view of La Paz, neighbors condemned the presence of street vendors in the immediate vicinity of the station. The process of removing these vendors, some of whom had been selling on this terrain for as long as three decades, seems to have been untypically harsh for El Alto, infamous for being a petty commercial city with strong street-vendor unions that protect traders' rights. Municipal officers confiscated stalls and items at short notice (Debric 2018). Meanwhile, local residents were concerned with the presence of rural-born vendors who apparently disrupt the newly achieved urban order, security, and hygiene.⁴ This is a manifestation of social stratification among El Alto residents (Debric 2018). Although replete with Indigenous symbols, the station building projects an idea and aesthetic flair of modernity that is at odds with the livelihoods of poorer Aymara. It is a formal architectural space with franchise shops and a taxi rank that is not totally displacing but gradually encroaching upon the adjacent streetscape.

Rebuilt indigeneity

Neo-Andean Architecture is part of wider social and material transformations currently underway in El Alto. Disparate elements make up these changing constellations. While the more consolidated neighborhoods receive Neo-Andean buildings and a cable-car connection, peripheral areas continue to have to mobilize for basic public buildings and infrastructural works. Disparities are not only communicated via ostentatious houses and expressed in conflicts over the use of restructured urban space, but actively created through such material forms. The novel buildings and spaces affect people's perceptions of the city and how they move through it, and will most likely have an impact on future urbanistic interventions. The cable-car system is less intrusive than terrestrial massive urban transport, but it engenders new visual corridors with a view from above that had been unknown to El Alto. All this is putting the city's central areas with their novel forms of Indigenous iconicity in plain sight. An outward-oriented image of the Aymara local elite, this is all the more powerful and authoritative as it is built into the urban environment and meant to endure.

Notes:

¹ Over a million people in Bolivia identify as Aymara.

² Tiwanaku was a political and religious center between approximately 600 and 1000 CE and is seen as a precursor of Aymara culture.

³ In 2001, Peruvian president Alejandro Toledo held an inauguration ceremony at the well-known Inca site Machu Picchu. Since the beginning of the twentieth century, Indigenous heritage has increasingly been used for purposes of nation-building in Mexico and the Andean countries, while Indigenous individuals and groups have continued to be marginalized in social, economic, and political terms.

⁴ The area had been rather unsafe at later hours of the day and during the night (oral communication, Herland Jarro Arteaga).

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