

Born Again

After stumbling onto a neglected Modern chapel, architect William Rey Ashfield is leading the effort to restore it.

Last year, Uruguay's cultural heritage day was dedicated to Modern architect Eladio Dieste—a remarkable fact for a nation focused on promoting its colonial architecture. Few in this tiny country—whose 10.6 million cattle outnumber its people three to one—had heard of the civil engineer, best known for his splendid curving brick church Atlántida. And now a virtually unknown Brutalist masterpiece by the exiled Spanish architect Antoni Bonet i Castellana, nearby in the dusty cow town of Soca, is being rescued from obscurity.

When architect William Rey Ashfield first visited the Soca church, in 1989, he was surprised to find it being used for storage on a horse farm. “Nobody really knew about it, not even in Spain,” he says. “It is important historically because of its original shape and innovative structural solutions. It is also very different from Bonet's other buildings, which have organic lines.” Based in Buenos Aires, Bonet designed several residences on the coast near Soca, along with the Solana del Mar resort—operating continuously since 1946 with its original furniture, including the “Butterfly” chair he designed with his partners in the firm BKF.

The 1963 chapel is based on two basic ideas: the trinity, expressed through three levels of triangles, and a plan in the form of



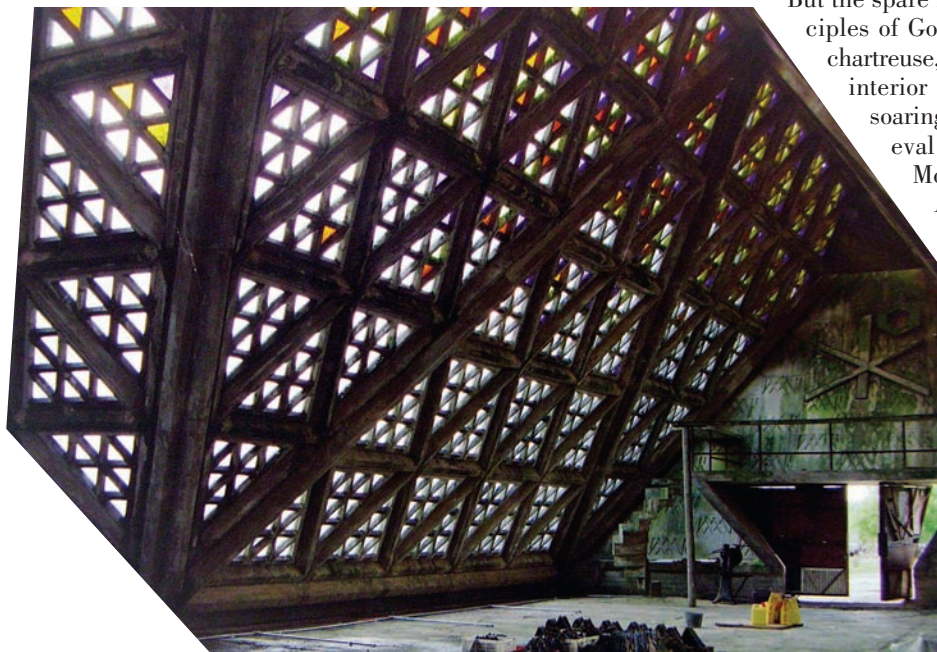
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a cross. It was assembled with prefab concrete modules, then an avant-garde method, perhaps inspired by Bonet's training under Le Corbusier. But the spare Modern sensibility may actually derive more from the principles of Gothic cathedral design: the triangular framing of the amber, chartreuse, and violet stained glass suggests rib vaults, while the sloped interior walls culminate in pointed apexes that give the illusion of soaring Gothic arches. “It recalls the transcendent luminosity of medieval religious architecture, but also the geometry and abstraction of Modern rationalism,” says Uruguayan Minister of Housing Mariano Arana, a former architecture professor.

Mario Ortolani, a businessman, bought the property in 1997 after discovering it while taking a detour because of a fire on the main coastal road. “I was very interested in the chapel and found out that the land was for sale,” he says. “My wife happened to be looking for a farm, so we bought both things.” Ortolani has been working to restore the structure with Ashfield, who located the original plans in archives in Barcelona. However, it's still unclear how the building—which they plan to have land-marked—will be used and maintained. The local diocese, for instance, prefers the traditional colonial church on the piazza to its radical younger stepsister down on the farm. “We are thinking of some cultural uses: theater, opera, art exhibitions,” Ashfield says, “but we have to study issues such as lighting.” This spring the chapel was cleaned up to make way for the inaugural exhibition, *Susana Soca and Her Constellation: Photographs of Giselle Freund*, dedicated to the poet to whom the building was a memorial.

“Modern architecture is increasingly being recognized as a valuable legacy in Uruguay despite some lingering cultural prejudices,” Arana notes, adding that a clear preservation commitment is still needed. “It is absolutely incredible that this magnificent work has not been considered in Uruguayan architecture publications,” he says. “If it had been built in Europe or the United States, it would probably be widely published and esteemed.” —Cathryn Drake



From outside, the concrete Soca church, in Uruguay, looks imposing, but stained-glass panes make the interiors transcendent.

