



Indigenous Group Gains Unique Language

The “New Andean Architecture” of Freddy Mamani has shaped the identity of El Alto in Bolivia, where the former bricklayer has fashioned over 60 buildings. Mamani’s “cholets” (a name combining “chalet” with “cholo,” a derogatory term for an indigenous person) are vibrantly colored edifices decorated in geometric acrylic paneling, glossy chrome, and reflective glass. They are an exuberant response to the social and economic power gained by the previously marginalized indigenous community in the region. A renaissance in native culture swept the country in 2005, when the first president from an indigenous population was elected.

In a city dominated by bland brick structures, the cholets are architectural emblems for the local Aymara people, the group to which Mamani belongs. “I did it as a cultural, economic, and social assertion through architecture,” he explains, linking the paneled patterns inserted on the structures to the iconography found in the pre-Hispanic Tiwanaku ruins. “We’re not afraid of showing our colors,” he says of the Aymara people. He explains that his choice of bold shades—from fuchsia and sunset orange to cobalt and apple green—is inspired by the *aguayos* cloths used by Bolivian women to carry items on their backs.

The interiors are equally eclectic, with columns painted in an array of hues. Hand-sculpted and painted plaster-molded ceilings, neon LEDs, mirror paneling, and spectacular chandeliers add to the radical maximalism. These multi-use buildings often hold a retail space at street level, with a ballroom above for hosting events, and higher levels usually contain apartments.

The cholets have become symbols of cultural pride for a community once oppressed and persecuted. “This is a form of protest,” explains Mamani, “because through architecture, we’re showing who we are, what we want, what we like, and what we have.” In addition to their unique dances, music, dress, and language, the Aymara now possess a distinct architectural style.

Architect Freddy Mamani
Project Neo-Andina
Location El Alto/Bolivia



Mamani’s designs incorporate recognizable motifs and colors from historic and archaeological sites, reviving them on a scale—and with a flair—never seen before.