

The American Way: IBEC Housing Projects in Latin America

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Following his service as the Coordinator of Inter-American Affairs for President Franklin D. Roosevelt, Nelson A. Rockefeller left the government to continue efforts to improve the health, education, and infrastructure of Latin America through private means by creating the International Basic Economy Corporation (IBEC). IBEC was a private company, dedicated to the idea that capitalism--rather than government efforts--could profitably solve the socioeconomic needs of underdeveloped areas. A 1960s IBEC pamphlet described IBEC's mission: "In order to persuade other private companies in the developed world to contribute to this development role and thus achieve the 'multiplier' effect, IBEC designated profit-making as one of its chief objectives."^[1]

While IBEC became involved in a multitude of fields, from farming to medicine, my research focuses on IBEC's Housing Corporation, a company that built housing projects throughout Latin America and the Middle East and became a model for United States foreign housing aid in the 1960s. In post-World War II United States, the "American Dream" of the single-family home was not only a national desire but also a foreign policy objective. During the Cold War, U.S. government officials became increasingly concerned with the deplorable housing conditions of the developing world, afraid that their slums and squatter villages fomented radical politics.

To address this issue and show that the capitalist system could provide for the welfare of its population, housing assistance became a part of U.S. foreign aid programs. The State Department sent architects and housing experts -- so-called "shirt-sleeve diplomats" -- throughout the developing world to build housing projects and organize local housing industries. Policies promoted the international construction of the single-family home as a means to export the American way of life and in the words of one U.S. official, "strengthen the security of the U.S. by strengthening the security of the free world."^[2]

While initial efforts in this region were small in scale, housing programs drastically increased in size and scope after the 1959 Cuban Revolution, when President John F. Kennedy launched a massive development program aimed at asserting the U.S.'s presence. By the end of 1967, the United States had allocated or committed more than one billion dollars to Latin American housing. From the beginning, U.S. policymakers had felt uneasy about directly subsidizing

housing and had sought out ways to limit government intervention and increase private participation. Nelson Rockefeller spearheaded the effort towards corporate participation in Latin American housing development.

Rockefeller had hired architect Wallace K. Harrison to create the IBEC Housing Corporation in 1948. The company was often hired by the U.S. government to assist in State Department projects abroad, as it did in Ecuador in the early 1950s, but Rockefeller and Harrison were mostly interested in discovering a way to build profitable projects in Latin America. Building housing projects in the developing world was not a matter of simply exporting U.S. domestic housing programs. To address the significant financial and industrial limitations of "underdevelopment," radically new low-cost construction methods and materials needed to be implemented.

Harrison experimented with a variety of architectural solutions, but the winning idea came in the early 1950s, when Harrison and Rockefeller were in Venezuela together, overseeing the building of a highway from a port to Caracas. While discussing the low-cost housing needs of Latin America, they looked out the window and saw the heavy earth moving equipment laying down the road, and they realized that they could use it to build homes. The first machine would flatten the land and the next one would put down a concrete road in sections. They would put wall forms on top of one section, pick up the intermediate slab as a roof, and--voila--a mass-produced "sandwich" house.^[3]

Harrison returned to New York and immediately began working on the details. He designed a very simple box house and built a model in his own backyard. These experiments eventually became the "IBEC Method," and one of the first uses of the system was Villa Las Lomas, a project of 1500 houses in San Juan, Puerto Rico begun in 1954. The "IBEC Method" delivered the U.S. suburban ideal to low- and middle-class Puerto Ricans at a reduced cost and with less construction time. Using techniques designed for large-scale road building, a large, steel form, suspended from a World War II bomber crane, cast single-family homes, with inside and outside walls, within twenty-four hours, producing six homes a day.

The system did not allow for much variety: two basic models were combined with three different façades. All homes had three bedrooms, a kitchen, living room, bathroom and porch and were designed in a modern, white-cube idiom. It was important for the houses to create the image of a progressive, developed nation; that is, to replicate, albeit in cheaper form, a likeness of "modern 1950's America. Following the success of Las Lomas, IBEC built similar projects in Chile, Peru and Iran.

Following IBEC's success, other U.S. companies, such as Kansas World Homes and Luce Housing, expanded their operations into Latin America. In the early 1960s, the U.S. government,

prodded by Nelson Rockefeller, passed the Housing Investment Guaranty program, which financially guaranteed private housing projects built by U.S. developers in Latin America. The first housing development in this program was an IBEC project in Peru, Apollo, begun in 1963.

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ENDNOTES

1. "IBEC in Peru," Folder 1465, Box 81, RG IBEC.
2. James A. Moore, "HHFA's Role in International Housing," 15 Oct. 1963, Box 21, Folder, "HHFA-OA General," 1963, RG 207 International Affairs Subject Files, 1942-64, U.S. National Archives, College Park.
3. Ibid., 25-26