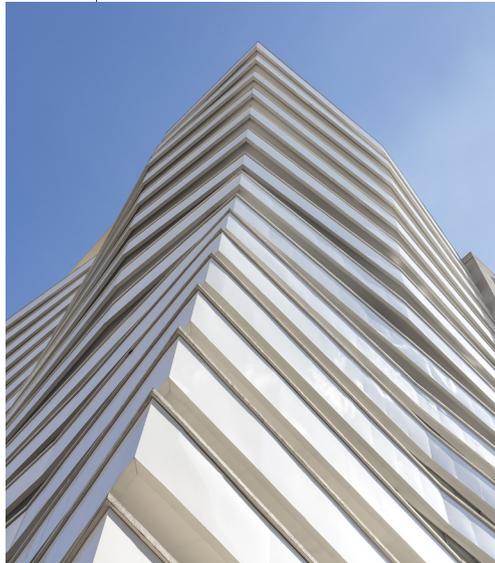


Sky's the Limit

Ecuador's quiet capital is getting a whole new skyline—thanks to some of the world's top architects.

by Tom Vanderbilt. Photographs by JAG Studio



Clockwise from far left: Oh Residences by Arquitectonica with Marcel Wanders and Yoo; One Quito by Leppanen + Anker; Yoo Quito by Arquitectonica with Philippe Starck and Yoo; Metropolitan by Christian Wiese.

center—or a budget-friendly way station on the backpacker trail.

Quito, the world's second-highest capital city (after La Paz, Bolivia), for a long time felt more like a large town than a city—a bit isolated, a bit conservative, with short commutes and single-family houses. But that's changing, and fast. As a measure of the speed, the contractor building the city's new Metro dug the first line's 13-mile tunnel underneath Quito's densely packed streets in just 16 months. In 2018, Quito eclipsed coastal Guayaquil as Ecuador's largest city, a move driven largely by interior migration and inflows from Colombia and Venezuela.

It's the skyline that has been morphing the most visibly and dramatically, and no single entity has had a larger hand in that change than the father-and-son-led firm U&S.

In the past few years, largely in the city's center, the firm has unveiled a series of eye-catching mixed-use high-rises, bristling with amenities and staggering views, designed by a pantheon of heavyweight architects and designers: Jean Nouvel, Moshe Safdie, Arquitectonica, Carlos Zapata, Marcel Wanders, and Philippe Starck, not to mention acclaimed younger talents like BIG's Bjarke Ingels and Tatiana Bilbao. These buildings, collectively, are bringing bold new façades as well as new ways of living. The sense of change is palpable not just in the skyline but also in the U&S billboards that blanket the city and rather make it seem like the company is trying to sell the future of Quito to Quito itself.

ON A BRIGHT MORNING in Quito, Ecuador, that high, seasonless equatorial city where there are always 12 hours and six minutes of daylight, Joseph Schwarzkopf, like the good former marketing man that he is, is working hard to sell me his city.

"We feel Quito is an untold story," he says, in the offices of Uribe & Schwarzkopf, the development firm cofounded by his architect father nearly five decades ago.

"There are things to see, there's a good climate, it's a cheap place to live in, it's the same time zone as the eastern U.S." For too long, he says, this Andean redoubt, nestled among volcanoes, stretched long and thin in the Guayllabamba River valley, has been treated as a perfunctory stopover on the way to the Galápagos—a night's hotel stay and a quick spin through the exquisitely preserved, UNESCO-designated historic



This building boom was galvanized by several large-scale changes sweeping through the city. The first, and most fundamental, was the country's economic turnaround. "We started building 47 years ago," as cofounder and president Tommy Schwarzkopf explains to me, "and we've built the most in the last 15 years." That period came in the wake of the 2000 economic crisis that resulted in a mass exodus from the country (some million Ecuadorans emigrated to Spain) and spurred the dollarization of the economy—a move, notes Joseph, that helped bring stability and long-term mortgages to the market.

The next key piece, as Jacobo Herdoiza, a U&S project coordinator, notes, was the completion of the city's new airport. The old airport, hemmed in by mountains and the city itself, was home to many close calls—and more than a few crashes. "Its history is folkloric and tragic at the

same time," he says as we tour the Parque Bicentenario, which now occupies the spot, as cyclists and children on Rollerblades whoosh down the former runway. With the airport gone, height restrictions on buildings were loosened. Developers could also build higher on projects that are close to the new Metro line—part of the planning approach known as "transit-oriented development"—provided they followed the strictures of a new building green initiative, developed in part by Herdoiza himself in his former role as the city's top urban planner.

Geographically, Quito may lie at the "middle of the world," as an equatorial monument just north of the city trumpets, but it's hardly been the center of the world, architecturally or otherwise. "Today, for the first time, we're generating a new architectonic ethos," argues Rómulo Moya Peralta, editor of the design journal *Trama*.



Left: A view of Yoo Quito. Above: Joseph (left) and Tommy Schwarzkopf at Oh Residences.

For most of its history, he says, the city has lacked a "modern counterpoint" to the symbolic power of the historic center, stocked with grand administrative buildings and resplendent churches. He tells me this in the lobby of the Hilton Colón, one of three Brutalist towers, each designed by Ovidio Wappenstein and dating back to the 1960s, that are among Quito's few noteworthy modern buildings. "We're now living in an extraordinary moment in the development of Ecuadoran architecture in the last 50 years," he says, thanks, in essence, "to the vision of Tommy Schwarzkopf."

Like Wappenstein, Schwarzkopf is partially of Czech heritage—his Jewish parents both fled Europe for Ecuador in the 1930s, met and married in Quito, and established a textile business there. Tommy seemed destined for that enterprise, even taking some textile courses at the University of Rhode Island, but he soon returned to his first love, architecture, which eventually segued into property development. He built some 200 projects over the next few decades. "They were great, but most of them look the same," he told me. "Why don't we put new ideas into projects?"

An inspiration came from Miami, which, for the Schwarzkopfs, like many well-to-do Latin American families, was a second home of sorts. "I began seeing how Miami was bringing in all these



Clockwise from top left: The rooftop of Yoo Quito; the pool at Oh Residences; the lobby of Yoo Quito.

architects from around the world and changing the shape of the city. There I got the idea: Let's make Quito an architectural hub." Early on, he says, "people said I was crazy—they'll never come to Quito. They don't even know where Quito is."

But through persistence, and a bit of chutzpah, Schwarzkopf started getting people to listen. "I bothered Philippe Starck so much he invited me to breakfast in Paris," he jokes. "He came to Quito, loved it, did two projects, and now wants to do another." The French designer worked with Arquitectonica to create the residential Yoo Quito. A mutual friend introduced Schwarzkopf to Moshe Safdie, the Israeli-Canadian architect known for Habitat 67 in Montreal and Singapore's Marina Bay Sands, among other works; Schwarzkopf invited him to Quito, offering his home after Safdie told him he didn't stay in hotels. (A U&S staffer showed me a picture of

the octogenarian nimbly scaling the vertiginous cupola of the city's famed Iglesia de la Compañía de Jesús.)

And so a building like BIG's Iqon—several of U&S's new projects have a *q*, for Quito, in the title—will become, at 32 stories high, the city's tallest. (Ingels suggests that, because of the city's elevation, it may be the highest building in the world.) "We really want to make a change in Quito," says Joseph Schwarzkopf. "It's not just a romantic thought." The firm seems uniquely positioned as an agent of that change. It not only builds and manages and essentially owns the projects (typically with partners)—"we're vertically integrated," he notes—but has also started the country's first real estate investment trust.

"Governmental entities aren't the ones that are making the city in terms of public spaces," suggests Quito architect Gonzalo Diez. "It's pretty much developers

who are changing the city." And while U&S "is there for the business, certainly," he argues that the firm "has a conscience that very few developers have."

This manifests in different ways, from the public-space allotments that are afforded in projects like Iqon and a program that aims to bring women into the construction industry to its sponsorship of Impaqto, a coworking company that's rapidly expanding across the city. And it's giving a boost to entrepreneurs like Nicolas Salmon, a French expat who's developing, as he explained to me at a chic café in the suburb of Cumbayá, a sustainable home-insulation product made from waste vegetation left by Ecuador's rice production, which is usually burned.

Challenges loom for the city. "The problem with Quito is it doesn't have a plan," argues Tommy Schwarzkopf. "Every time the mayor changes, the planning of the city changes." Some 60 percent of the city's building stock, he notes, is informal, built outside of zoning and other regulations. A team of architects (including, sometimes, him) is now working on a strategic long-term plan. In the meantime, he'll just keep trying to convince people—and not just top architects—to give his city a try. "We have to show the world what Quito is."