Latin American dream

From his office high in the architecture building at the University of Sydney, Dr Rafael Pizarro is helping to shape the future of Latin America. A Colombian national who obtained his masters and PhD in America, Dr Pizarro has become a leader in the fast-emerging field of sustainable urban planning and development. Dr Pizarro has maintained a strong allegiance to his homeland since arriving as a lecturer in the University’s Faculty of Architecture, Design and Planning. He is passionate about shaping the future development of Latin America in a way which preserves the region’s rich architectural history and traditional charm.

"Latin American cities have a very different history of urban development to North America because our influences came from Spanish urbanism," he says. "It’s a compact, dense, more pedestrian type of environment. The urban

By Rachel Olding

Desde las oficinas ubicadas en lo alto de la Facultad de Arquitectura de la Universidad de Sidney, el doctor Rafael Pizarro contribuye a moldear el futuro de Latinoamérica. El doctor Pizarro, colombiano de nacimiento, obtuvo su maestría y doctorado en los Estados Unidos, y hoy es líder en el campo emergente y veloz de la planificación y el desarrollo urbano sostenible.

Desde que llegó como profesor a la Facultad de Arquitectura, Diseño y Planificación, de la Universidad de Sidney, el académico se mantiene leal a su patria. Cree apasionadamente en moldear el futuro desarrollo de Latinoamérica, de manera que preserve su rica arquitectura histórica y tradicional encanto.

"Las ciudades latinoamericanas tienen una historia de urbanización muy diferente a la de Norteamérica, porque nuestras influencias provienen del urbanismo hispánico," dice. "El ambiente es compacto, denso y más peatonal, mientras que la forma urbana es congestionada, desorganizada, desordenada..."
form is congested, disorganised, messy and sometimes very dangerous.”

He is currently processing the results of a three-year research project which found that the American-style suburban model of spread-out, low-rise, free-standing houses is rapidly spreading through Colombia and the rest of Latin America.

“My hunch was that this phenomenon had something to do with the image of American suburbs shown in the entertainment media,” he said. “Latin Americans see this as the ideal way to live and raise a family. They want the white picket fence and green lawn and ranch-style housing. They want to live the ‘American dream’.

During the course of his research he visited three Colombian cities and interviewed more than one hundred people including architects, home buyers, town planners, urban theorists and movie directors. It became clear that Dr Pizarro’s hunch was true.

“The developers, real estate agents, urban designers and everyone have picked up on this interest and are putting similar developments on the market,” he says. “And they’re selling like hot cakes.”

The consequences, however, are both environmental and social. Public transport rarely services suburbs that lie outside of compact Latin American cities, leading to a greater reliance on cars and higher greenhouse gas emissions. Many suburban dwellers are also living lonely lives and rejecting opportunities to socialise with their community.

“It’s worrisome for countries in Latin America that have societies in which people are very fond of mingling with each other. It’s fostering a different kind of Latin American society – a more Americanised society where people live in a more isolated way and depend on their cars and live very insulated lives.”

He hopes his research will open the eyes of policy makers and urban planners to the consequences of the ‘paradise’ they are creating.

Dr Pizarro is also using his expertise to help impoverished slum communities in Latin America. He hopes that by helping leaders of squatter settlements to produce proper urban development plans, they can demand more attention from local authorities.

“If you provide the villagers with a plan, they will have a tool to go to the government and say ‘We are viable, we need resources and funding to develop our plans’,” he says.

The project has shown some initial successes with two slum communities placing their projects with local governments. The next step will be to secure funding to start various building projects.

“If you ask government to do anything in a Third World country it can take a while, especially if the project concerns an impoverished segment of society,” he says. “So I am very keen to keep the ball rolling and monitor the development of these projects and make sure the slum communities are not stuck because they don’t have the know-how.”

He hopes to take a group of Sydney students to visit the slums for themselves and contribute towards the long-term success of the project.

In what promises to be a very busy year for Dr Pizarro, he plans to begin another research project on the spread of American-style suburbia in Sydney, while continuing to strengthen the University’s links to Latin America.

“There is great academic interest and moral and intellectual support for research into Latin America here at Sydney University,” he says.