



Planning for Permanence: the Speeches of J.C. Nichols
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South America

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South America is composed of many countries of various races and immense contrasts in methods of living, occupations and habits, which makes it a difficult country to tell about in a short statement. Brazil, alone, is larger than the United States, counting Texas twice, Argentine, if placed on the United States, would reach from San Diego, California, to Nome, Alaska. Chile is as long as from New York to San Francisco. You can readily understand that my four months' tour of South America, necessarily, only covered a small portion of this great Country.

I never saw cities building as rapidly as the larger cities throughout that Country. Apartment buildings, homes, business structures, street widening, parks, plazas, fountains and statues are being erected each year. On the West Coast, where there is constant fear of earthquakes, structures are not so high. Many of them have corrugated iron roofs and few have fireplaces on account of earthquakes. Over on the East Coast in Buenos Aires, I found a thirty-two story air-cooled apartment building, built entirely of re-enforced concrete with no steel frame, and is considered the highest building in the World that is so built.

Driving through South America, you find every imaginable use of material – from little thatched huts to up-to-the-minute modernistic concrete houses. In fact, modernistic architecture has taken a very strong hold in much of the modern buildings. I was particularly impressed with the use of concrete balconies, which are cantilevered out ten, fifteen and twenty feet with concrete slabs much thinner than we feel we could use in this country. The absence of great extremes in temperature may justify much of this, but in my opinion, they know much more about the use of concrete than we do in this country.

The roof of the pavilion at the racetrack in Rio de Janeiro was cantilevered out seventy feet with no support and I was told that such a structure was being planned in Sao Paulo which would extend out one hundred ten feet.

You will find very fine structures of excellent Spanish Architecture, built several centuries ago, that are extremely interesting. Many of the fine old homes, built fifty and seventy-five years ago, are of excellent taste and of good design. Many of the gardens and the homes in Rio and Buenos Aires are laid out under the direction of able French Landscape Architects. However, the architecture of recent times is not so commendable. As a matter of fact, we rode over some of these cities with a camera, endeavoring to find outstanding homes and buildings of which we wished to take pictures and it was difficult to select what we thought would be of value or inspiration to builders in the United States. There is a decided lack of harmony and continuity in the development of most of these cities. In one block, they may have ten or twelve homes, all of entirely different

types of design and of every kind of material known to man. It presents a very conflicting scene. Occasionally you find a very beautiful constructed building of recent times, but as a rule, it seems to me that there has been a great degradation in their design in recent years. This is not at all true of their public buildings or of their large office buildings.

South American Countries present great contrasts. You find the peons out using old wooden plows driven by oxen and nearby others are using modern tractors. In some of the large country villas, you find many people who have never visited a large city and work for a very low wage scale, as low as 20¢ per day and are housed in very meager homes.

In many of the large cities of South America, such as Santiago, Chile, Lima Peru, Buenos Aires, Argentina, and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, you will find parks that are the envy of the cities of our country. You will find parks with as many as five parallel drives, handling their immense traffic, divided one from the other with tree planting and park areas. In Santiago and Buenos Aires, I found great free parking stations built under park areas which were made bomb proof in case of aerial attack. Some of the most stupendous street widenings that I have ever seen are taking place in many of the cities, carving right through large districts of the cities, although some of the streets are so narrow that two cars cannot pass and they have set back some of the curbs in these streets so that not more than two feet of the side walk space remains. Frequently, streetlights are hung in the center of the streets from brackets extending from one building to an other. In many of their central streets they have trees on both sides, as well as trees down the center of the streets.

You don't find many large stores in any of those cities. Merchandising is generally done in small special shops. There seems to be a fairly good grouping of shops. I saw several shoe stores on one side of the block. In Rio, dry goods stores frequently hang unsold merchandise up and down the front of the building. Hundreds of pairs of shoes may be displayed out on the sidewalk, and yet you find Paris Gowns which they claim reach South America before they do New York.

In most South American Cities, the stores close for siesta from about twelve to three. At twelve, the iron shutters are rolled down in front of the store and it takes on a very dead appearance.

In many of the apartment buildings on the West Coast, I found the stairways absolutely open to the sky and extending up five or six floors.

Building costs, I estimated, are about half what they are in the United States. All of these cities claim that they have no unemployed, yet their income taxes are only about half what they are in this country. Living costs while traveling through South America certainly are not more than half what they are in our own country. The people are genial and hospitable and I believe they are much more friendly to the United States than they are to Europe. Yet today, Germany and Italy are making a great successful effort to dominate this trade. In my opinion, it offers the greatest future outlet for future manufacturers of this country.

South America as a whole is economically about what the United States was fifty to seventy-five years ago. They have great areas of undeveloped and unoccupied land. It is sadly in need of transportation. They need industry. I found towns of five or six thousand people where there was not a single home two years ago. Sao Paulo with 1,200,000 population has quadrupled its population in forty years. Greater Buenos Aires is nearly 4,000,000 population and Rio nearly 2,000,000 population. Most of these cities are cognizant of the need of careful planning and cities with a waterfront or a riverfront take advantage of reclaiming land and making beautiful park areas and providing wide traffic ways. They adorn their cities much more than we do with statues, plazas, and developed areas. I found many instances in Rio where land values increased 1000% in ten years. Most of these cities have done little zoning and their municipal authorities are greatly concerned about the hodgepodge method of development and the extremely rapid growth of their cities and nearly all of them have set up large city planning organizations and are beginning to tackle their problems in a very scientific manner. In Rio, they are considering a plan of putting on rail planes. These will be cars carrying a hundred passengers or more, supported on a rail and the cars will be driven by propellers with a possible speed of 200 miles per hour or more than a hundred miles per hour. Rio is a city built in the mountains and its most difficult problem is reaching one part of the city from another and they calculate that these rail planes can swing around the sides of the mountains.

There are many cities in South America with 300,000 to 500,000 population of which I had never heard. They have the same problem in that country that we do in ours as to the constant tendency of the population to center in large cities. They are trying to encourage the cultivation of their farmland.

In Uruguay, I traveled on a highway 93 miles long without a grade crossing.

They have the finest racetracks that I have ever seen. The downtown Jockey Clubs only compare with the finest Clubs in America.

Flowers grow more profusely there than they do even in California and Florida and it is not uncommon to see hedges between homes with a height of forty feet or more. Poinsettias grow twenty-five to thirty feet high. You frequently see telephone poles entwined with blooming flowers up to the top.

In Santiago you will find a home one story high on the street and four or five stories high in the rear on account of the steep terrain.

When you think of South America, you must realize that in Peru for instance, they have fine universities, libraries and cathedrals which were built one hundred years before the Pilgrim Fathers landed in our Country. They have found evidence of civilization dating back 30,000 years. It may have been the cradle of human history. They have walls of cusco in Peru which are of immense stones weighing 170 tons each, and it remains a mystery to engineers as to what means of transportation they could have used to handle such heavy blocks of material.

In Buenos Aires, to me, the subways are more clean, orderly and well kept than you find in New York City. Many cities are being laid out on well-laid plans with driveways, parks, plazas, and careful zoning. In many of the cities, they grind their

brick when they tear down an old building to use in the new buildings. Many of their homes are built of stucco material and have very striking scenes painted on the front of the homes. Frequently in these homes the first floor is given over to a garage and servants quarters and you go up steps to reach the living quarters. They seem to realize the value of closet space more than we do in this country. The kitchens and servants quarters are ample because servant labor is very low and many homes of considerable size have from five to ten servants.

Of course, there is considerable question as to the future stability of the Governments of South America, but I believe they are solving their problems in a conservative and scientific manner and if I were a young man and wanted to start in the real estate business today, I would not hesitate to go to South America.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) – Speech JCN052

Arguably Jesse Clyde Nichols (1880-1950) was the single most influential individual to the development of metropolitan Kansas City. Moreover his work, ideas, and philosophy of city planning and development had far-reaching impact nationally – so much so that the Urban Land Institute has established the J.C. Nichols Prize for Visionary Urban Development to recognize a person or a person representing an institution whose career demonstrates a commitment to the highest standards of responsible development.

Nichols' objective was to “develop whole residential neighborhoods that would attract an element of people who desired a better way of life, a nicer place to live and would be willing to work in order to keep it better.” The Company under Nichols and his son, Miller Nichols (1911-), undertook such ventures as rental housing, industrial parks, hotels, and shopping centers. Perhaps the most widely recognized Nichols Company developments are the Country Club District and the Country Club Plaza Shopping Center, reportedly the first shopping area in the United States planned to serve those arriving by automobile rather than trolley car.

The J.C. Nichols Company Records (KC106) contains both personal and business files concerning J.C. Nichols' private and business life. Included are personal correspondence, family related material, and speeches and articles written by him. Business and financial files pertain to actions of the Company, including information about different developments and the securing of art objects; and printed materials produced by and about the Company.