The sensibilities and imagination of the Mexican people have not always been well-conceived. In response, architects—rather than simply as blueprints for construction. LANZA Atelier belongs to a new generation of Mexico’s culture that dominated the region in the fourteenth through the nineteenth century and reclaimed by the architect Peter Eisenman, after an event of such massive destruction and when the political priorities and character and instill a sense of local pride. Foster programs—for example, a book exchange, an outdoor gym, or an emergency ladder, for discussion rather than. The work also makes reference to the condition Paz suggested a social hierarchy that can be ignored or embraced. Viewing them side by side, both the conversions to residents’ needs, such as a large-scale commission by the architect and planner and former functions. Arienzo designed sixteen conversions at the heart of each of Mexico City’s sixteen central districts for the peace and disseminating information in emergencies, these outposts once had such a significant role that they didn’t require greater civic engagement and empowerment. Used for keeping the conversions to residents’ needs, such as a large-scale commission by the architect and planner and former functions. Arienzo designed sixteen conversions at the heart of each of Mexico City’s sixteen central districts for the peace and disseminating information in emergencies, these outposts once had such a significant role that they didn’t require. The renderings that compose (Shared Structures) began as a series of axonometric drawings commissioned by the architect and planner and former functions. Arienzo designed sixteen conversions at the heart of each of Mexico City’s sixteen central districts for the peace and disseminating information in emergencies, these outposts once had such a significant role that they didn’t require. Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design (Steps Table) was installed in the center of the white-tattoo (after architecture by Carlos Lazo), 2016. All artworks by LANZA Atelier © LANZA Atelier.
The population of Mexico City has grown exponentially in the past century, and government-led construction has been rapid but not always well-conceived. In response, architects—rather than developers—have taken charge of many large-scale planning efforts. LANZA Atelier belongs to a new generation of Mexico City–based architecture collectives creating works suited to a culture that values traditional artisanal skills, technological innovation, and progressive ideals. Founded in 2015 by Isabel Abascal and Alessandro Arienzo, the studio has already produced a number of exhibition, publication, and even tattoo designs; architectural installations; and a single-family home. The three recent projects presented at SFMOMA exemplify LANZA Atelier’s interest in recasting typical views of history, infrastructure, and social norms.

Latin American architecture has been in a state of continual reinvention over the past century, as its practitioners have contended with both a Spanish colonial past and a modern, more socially conscious future, in addition to reengaging with pre-Hispanic artistic traditions. In the 1970s the Nobel Prize–winning author Octavio Paz described the Mexican character and condition as having been shaped by many cultural and political influences that are often at odds with one another: “The sensibilities and imagination of the Mexican people have always oscillated between those two extremes, the deed and the rite.” Given this particular tension in Mexican society between action, or change, and tradition, the notion of shedding one’s past for a better future—perhaps as promised by political leaders—is seen by many as suspect. Reverence for the Aztec culture that dominated the region in the fourteenth through sixteenth centuries, especially as expressed in art and ceremony, has often overshadowed respect for recent, weaker authoritarian
systems and has helped promote artists as more trustworthy and venerable than politicians. Contemporary architects are working toward sociopolitical restructuring as distrust of government seeps further into the national psyche and as continued growth and development become unsustainable. Their ability to address basic needs for shelter and security while also providing intellectual and emotional stimulation strengthens the country’s cultural voice and representation. Still forming and shaping its practice, LANZA Atelier engages in this national conversation through writings, installations, conceptual proposals, and realized buildings. Abascal, who is Spanish, and Arienzo, who is Mexican, created the studio as a space for dialogue and action, where the condition Paz described is acknowledged and advanced.

Estructuras compartidas (Shared Structures) began as a series of axonometric drawings commissioned by the architect and writer Fernanda Canales for her research on collective housing in Mexico over the past hundred years. Axonometric projection—depicting a building as though it is rotated around one or more axes in order to show multiple sides at once—was developed in the nineteenth century and reclaimed by the architect Peter Eisenman in the 1970s as a means to present designs as ideas for discussion rather than simply as blueprints for construction. Abascal and Arienzo returned to the pre-digital, or analog, axonometric technique in order to compare architects’ realized and unrealized proposals for multiunit residential buildings in Mexico from 1917 to 2017 on a conceptual level. After drawing each structure with a three-sided view, they scanned the renderings and applied colors from a palette specially chosen for the series and unrelated to the actual hues of its subjects. Each work was then overlaid with a sheet of acrylic screenprinted with a line drawing of the building to add perspectival depth and to further establish the image as a graphic and not as documentation.

The renderings that compose Shared Structures allow for comparisons that transcend livability, context, affordability, or any other practical consideration. Viewing them side by side, both small design details—including private outdoor spaces such as patios, rooftop gardens, and balconies—and large gestures, such as the overall forms of the structures, become more pronounced. One notices that the architects have consistently prioritized equitable access to outdoor space and light over parity in square footage. Yet the buildings are also monuments to growth, as LANZA Atelier’s studies surface designers’ responses to a changing city. For example, Luis Barragán and Max Cetto’s 1941 Edificio para artistas (Building for Artists) was meant to acknowledge the importance of artists and their unique needs, while the 1968 Villa olímpica (Olympic Village) by Agustín Hernández, Manuel González Rul, Ramón Torres, Héctor Velázquez, and Carlos Ortega reflects a moment when Mexico City was in the global spotlight. The selection on view at SFMOMA spans the full time period covered in the series, highlighting well-known structures from each decade and capturing the trend toward high-rise densification surrounding the 1968 Olympics. While this project was initiated by Canales to support a book, LANZA Atelier’s transformation of the illustrations into a group of prints and its addition of further examples demonstrate the studio’s practice of recognizing how the past influences its work today.

The drawings and models for Sin número (Without Number), all on view in the SFMOMA exhibition, comprise a proposal Arienzo led and submitted to Mexico’s National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA). His winning project repurposes the police stations at the heart of each of Mexico City’s sixteen central districts for greater civic engagement and empowerment. Used for keeping the peace and disseminating information in emergencies, these outposts once had such a significant role that they didn’t require addresses with street numbers. But since the wide adoption of digital technology and instant messaging, the need for the stations has waned. Taking advantage of their prime locations and former functions, Arienzo designed sixteen conversions to turn them into locally run properties for specific community programs—for example, a book exchange, an outdoor gym, or an open-air dining area. In the next phase LANZA Atelier will match the conversions to residents’ needs, such as a large-scale compost for a district with several gardens or a play structure for one with few green spaces.

Through a network of small architectural interventions, Arienzo’s project updates an existing but no longer useful system. By removing each station’s walls but keeping the infrastructural bones and inserting highly visible beacons of the new programs—the district’s “deeds and rites”—LANZA Atelier will transform passive relationships to police presence into active exchanges among residents. Without Number is thus a proposal for a symbolic
its own unique quality and reverence. Similarly, *Steps Table*’s thirteen heights suggest that while everyone is connected, each has his or her own unique perspective, thus underscoring a view of society as a collective of individuals. LANZA Atelier imagined further functions for *Steps Table* beyond dining or sitting, including using it as actual steps—perhaps for a performance, in which the chairs of different heights become theatrical seating.

The projects by LANZA Atelier on view at SFMOMA represent a focused and progressive architecture that is novel in its acknowledgment of people’s needs to gather, converse, reflect, and take part. Their formal complexity also alludes to the mixture of historical influences that have filtered through Mexico’s multicultural lineage. Abascal and Arienzo are aware of the capacity of digital technology as a design and fabrication tool, but they value the human hand more for drawing and building. After the tragic 2017 earthquake that killed hundreds in Mexico, they worked tirelessly to help pull away rubble to rescue survivors and, later, to identify buildings that could be repaired instead of razed. These efforts underscore a key aspect of LANZA Atelier’s approach, which aligns with another urgent plea by Paz in his 1972 book: to design for the present. The need for thoughtful design is now, especially after an event of such massive destruction and when the political rhetoric between Mexico and the United States is at its most divisive. LANZA Atelier’s ideal of a social architecture that does not advance private or commercial interests offers new perspectives on the importance of dialogue and change today.

Jennifer Dunlop Fletcher
Helen Hilton Raiser Curator of Architecture and Design

Notes
LANZA ATELIER was established in 2015 in Mexico City by the architects Isabel Abascal and Alessandro Arienzo. In Spanish, lanza is both an object and an action and reflects their approach to architecture. Abascal was born in 1984 in Madrid and studied architecture at the Technical University of Madrid, the Technical University of Berlin, and the Vastu-Shilpa Foundation in Ahmedabad, India. Arienzo was born in 1987 in Mexico City and studied architecture there at Iberoamerican University. In 2017 he received a National Fund for Culture and the Arts (FONCA) Young Creators Grant. To date LANZA Atelier has designed exhibitions in Mexico City at the Mexican National Palace (2016), Jumex Museum (2015), and Tlatelolco University Cultural Center (2015), as well as publications including Estructuras colectivas: espacios privados (forthcoming), the Housetypes series (2015–17), and Metrobús 10th aniversario (2016). The studio is currently completing its first house, in Jalajal Forest, Mexico, and it also designs and applies tattoos. LANZA Atelier won an Architectural League Prize in 2017 and was nominated for both the Ibero-American Architecture and Urban Planning Biennial Award and the Mies Crown Americas Prize for Emerging Architecture in 2016. This is the studio’s first solo museum exhibition.

Works in the Exhibition

This listing reflects the information available at the time of publication. All works are courtesy LANZA Atelier.

Selections from the series Estructuras compartidas
(Shared Structures), 2017
Silkscreen ink on acrylic and inkjet prints
Each: 19 1/4 x 19 1/4 in. (50 x 50 cm)
Edificios Condesa (Condesa Buildings), Tomás S. Gore, 1917
Casa Elorduy (Elorduy House), Juan Legarreta, 1930
Edificio Ermita (Ermita Building), Juan Segura, 1931
Edificio de departamentos en la calle Martí (Martí Street Apartments), Enrique Yáñez, 1934
Pasaje Polanco (Polanco Passageway), Francisco J. Serrano, 1939
Edificio para artistas (Building for Artists), Luis Barragán and Max Cetto, 1941
Edificio Basurto (Basurto Building), Francisco J. Serrano, 1942
Centro urbano Presidente Alemán (CUPA) (President Alemán Urban Center), Mario Pani, Salvador Ortega, J. de Jesús Gutiérrez, and Jenaro de Rosenzweig, 1949
Conjunto urbano Nonoalco-Tlatelolco (Nonoalco-Tlatelolco Housing Complex), Mario Pani, 1964
Villa olímpica (Olympic Village), Agustín Hernández, Manuel González Rui, Ramón Torres, Héctor Velázquez, and Carlos Ortega, 1968

Casas Kalikosmia (Kalikosmia Houses), Juan José Díaz Infante, 1969
Edificio en Mexicali (Mexicali Housing), Christopher Alexander, 1976
Apartamentos Fuentes Brotones (II) (Fuentes Brotones Apartments [II]), Teodoro González de León and J. Francisco Serrano, 1986
Vivienda aplizada (Stacked Housing), Reinaldo Pérez Rayón, 1999
Reforma 27 (27 Reforma Boulevard), Alberto Kalach, 2012
Vivienda sostenible (Sustainable Housing), Tatiana Bilbao, 2015

Sin número (Without Number), 2017
Risographs and paper models
Prints: 18 1/4 x 9 1/4 in. (48 x 23 cm)
Models: dimensions variable
Mesa nómada (Steps Table), 2017
Wood
47 1/4 x 307 1/4 x 35 1/4 in. (120 x 780 x 90 cm)
Fabricated by SFMOMA, 2018

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Reverse, left to right: Models from the series Sin número (Without Number), 2017; Mesa nómada (Steps Table), 2017 (detail)

All artworks by LANZA Atelier © LANZA Atelier.

Reverse: Photos of Without Number and Steps Table by Camila Cossio. Interior: Photos of Without Number and Basurto Building by Don Ross; photos of Mexico City metro station icons and buildings courtesy Lance Wyman; photo of Forest House by Alessandro Arienzo; photo of Emergency Staircase courtesy LANZA Atelier

This brochure was produced in conjunction with New Work: LANZA Atelier, San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, March 31–July 29, 2018. Since 1987 the New Work exhibition series has provided artists with a space to develop or premier bodies of work or present existing works in a new context. Copyright © 2018 by the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 151 Third Street, San Francisco, CA 94103. All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any manner without permission.

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