

A JOURNEY INTO THE LOST PARTS OF HAVANA (FEBRUARY 2007)

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NATIONAL ARTS SCHOOLS The taxi driver hardly knew about the Art Schools of Cuba located in Cubanacan. He asked us what is so important to see in this area and kept on insisting to take us to some stonington-pristine beaches close to Playa del Este. We explained him that this complex is to be considered “the most representative example of Cuban revolutionary architecture”. We got to know about the beauty of these buildings through a few publications concerned about the decay status of them. Constructed at the beginning of the revolution, somewhere between 1961 and 1965, the National Arts School Complex was one of the first and most symbolic decisions of the young revolution. After playing golf in the abandoned Havana Country Club Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara decided the faith of the elitarian golf club: In order to establish a focus for the development of the Cuban culture across the country and to promote the optimism and success of the revolution to other Latin cultures an educational complex should be erected on that very right spot. Very fast this optimism came to an end. By 1965 the project commissioned to Cuban architect Ricardo Porro and two Italian-born architects Roberto Gottardi and Vitorio Garatti were stopped and the construction abandoned. Harsh criticism about the individual expression of the buildings, bourgeoisie-foreign backgrounds of leading architects and the growing pressure of the USSR to pursue a prefab style condemned the buildings to forgetfulness.

We approached the former garden city suburb expecting the morbid fascination of the revolutionary ruins. Surprisingly we found a neat and renovated School of Modern Dance. The friendly guardian of the place gave us a little “unofficial tour” and recommended us to avoid the next building, “the School of Drama is still a ruin”, instead we should better spend our time in the almost finished School of Plastic Arts. So we did encountering what he described before. After not finding his colleague who was supposed to show us around we continued our journey towards the revolutionary housing developments at the other side of the city in Habana del Este.

CIUDAD CAMILO CIEN FUEGOS, COJIMAR AND ALAMAR In 1965 the revolutionary government approved a project for the construction of 100,000 new tenements per year. Two years before the USSR had donated a fabrication plant to produce prefab houses with big prefab panels (Gran Panel Soviético) as a support for the victims of the cyclone Flora. The big construction machine was about to solve what the revolution considered the most urgent problem: housing for the masses.

A big propaganda slang painted on a wall along the road displaying the text “Revolución es Construir” (revolution is to build), seemed to be right quote before entering Alamar, Guiteras, Peñas Altas (1971) and later on Cojimar where housing projects were built by enthusiastic Micro-brigades. We wanted to see one of these housing developments that were built based on this famous collective effort. What we found was the obvious consequences of a satellite city without any service or facilities, pretentious pragmatism and the effects that time and salty wind had onto the buildings of the revolutionary dream; the antithesis in such an extend that some habaneros prefer to live in collapsing buildings, barbacoas or cuarterias in the city centre rather than in one of this housing projects.

HABANA VIEJA

Back in the taxi we drove through the tunnel that connects both sides of the bay. Once more the contrast was dramatic. The World Heritage Site Habana Vieja was initiated during

the “periodo especial”, while other projects like the reconstruction of the Schools of Arts were again cancelled, a dramatic reconstruction of this overpopulated and decadent city center. Here architecture and especially colonial architecture played a protagonist role. Buildings that previously were representations of the imposition of another culture onto Cuba were now repackaged as magnificent examples of civil and domestic architecture on the island. Even the strategy used for the reconstruction implemented a capitalistic model with a strong marketing campaign form books to documentaries targeting specific tourist groups. European tourists are preferred, as an important Cuban architect explained to us, “our intention is to attract educated tourism with a higher level of culture like the Europeans.”

There was always an ideology, a continuous revolution, as Castro kept on proclaiming it. But this political conviction never found its physical representation, laid out in a kind of – ideological - masterplan or displayed through an ideological iconographic. Furthermore it always was a very opportunistic approach to the implications that were performed from outside to the capital of Cuba. First the wish to give a optimistic image to the Latin neighbours (National Arts Schools), secondly the response and dependency to the big brother Soviet Union (prefab satellite towns), third the pragmatic exploitation of the status to be a World Heritage in case of Old Havana in order to trigger foreign currency from tourism.

This reacting through architecture without a masterplan is a type of amnesia that actually does not include or rely on destruction of former ideologies. It rather follows the motto “out of sight, out of mind”. This type of amnesia seems to be a soft one, yet it is very deliberate, even meant to react to the immediate needs of a nation state like Cuba.

Back to the Capitol, the place where we started our journey into the revolutionary architecture of Cuba the Taxi driver joked about us with its colleges: “I made a Varadero in the lost sides of the city”, he said laughing with them poking about the easy money he had made with us. A trip to Varadero would have made his money day completed, instead of that he spent a half day with us on board earning more than that driving at a high speed into the forgotten areas of the city.

1 The National Arts School of Cuba was divided into five buildings, each one supposed to accommodate different disciplines: modern dance, dramatic arts, plastic arts, music & ballet.

2 Rosenau P. & Proff Joanne. Necessary ruins: Cuba's National Art Schools. UBC 2007. www.scarp.ubc.ca

3 The Microbrigadas or Micro brigades were organized groups of people that after their working hours voluntary enacted into the construction of housing. The revolutionary government donated land and materials. The result became communal property. Alamar is one of the most famous ambitions of these Microbrigadas.

4 Soon after the revolution there was a discussion between architects concerning beauty on one hand and quantity and construction on the other: the utopians versus the technocrats, self-realization and continuous change versus prefabrication and repetition. Remedies against repetition of old mistakes. Mario Coyula interview in Havana by Aleksandra Wagner in “The Havana Project”, Peter Noever, Prestel, 1997

5 Barbacoas are mezzanines to cope with the need of accommodation in the city center. The extended use of this practice generated an overpopulated city center and consequently structural fatigue to the historical buildings

6 Old subdivided houses

7 In 1982 the status of a World Heritage was awarded to the area of Old Havana. 8 After the collapse of the USSR Cuba took strong measures to alleviate the economical crisis. 9 D. Medina Lasansky. Geografías turísticas: Remodelación de La Habana Vieja. Arquitectura y turismo. Percepción, representación y lugar. GG Mixta

[a1] School of Drama
[b] School of Fine Arts
[c] Billboard “revolution is to build”
[d][e] Satellite town of Cojimar
[f] Plaza Vieja in Old Havana



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