

Identity Crisis – Las Escuelas Nacionales de Arte and the Cuban Revolution

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Today the ever expanding globalization of culture has provoked a reaction in emerging politics of identity and discourse of difference. This concern for what makes the identity of a people and a historic moment unique was shared over thirty years ago by a group of architects during the first years of the Cuban Revolution, for constructing a revolutionary identity was one of its cultural goals. Yet the first work of architecture, Las Escuelas Nacionales de Arte (National Art Schools, 1961-65), that sought to develop a critical architectural expression of identity, generated a level of controversy that contributed to the project's repudiation, partial abandonment and the redirection of architecture in revolutionary Cuba.

The intellectual discourse that provides a framework for the definition of identity in Cuba – *cubanidad* – predates the Cuban Revolution. It actually has 19th century origins in the writings of José Martí whose progressive view of race relations recognized African as well as Spanish contributions to Cuban culture. In the 1930's two schools of thought emerged in the pursuit of defining a Cuban identity. One, *negrismo*, looked to Afro-Cuban culture. The other looked to Spanish creole culture. While the *negristas* emphasized the African component, they were not Afro-centric, in that they gave equal value to Spanish influence. Their contemporaries, the Hispanicists, however, gave preference to the island's Spanish culture, while acknowledging, nevertheless, African contributions to *cubanidad*. The debate was whether Cuban culture was *mulata* or *criolla*. *Negrismo* played an important part in Cuban intellectual life of the 1930s and 1940s. Historian Fernando Ortiz Fernández and poet Nicolás Guillén were both important proponents of the value of Afro-Cuban culture. On the other hand, intellectuals such as Alberto Arredondo, regarded the interest in black culture as a passing European fad, like the Parisian infatuation with jazz and Josephine Baker, that had little to do with the reality of the Caribbean. To these Hispanicists "Afro-Cuban" was an irrelevant concept since they believed that slavery had essentially erased African culture, and that focusing on racial issues would be counterproductive to the task of nation building. While acknowledging to some extent African cultural influences on Cuban culture, Hispanicists rejected *mulatidad* in favor of *criollidad*, advocating a process of *blanqueamiento* towards achieving a unified national identity.¹

Identity as it pertains to architecture and the history of the National Art Schools must also be considered within the context of the architectural discourse on *cubanidad* that took place in the 1950's before the Cuban Revolution. While International Style modernism was well entrenched in architectural practice in Cuba prior to the revolution, there were distinct efforts among the more progressive Cuban modernists to address the cultural specificity of the island. As early as 1941 the Agrupación Técnica de Estudios Contemporáneos had been founded to pursue the discussion of contemporary issues of architecture and urbanism, with the specific mission to engage these

issues with Cuba's environmental and cultural context. After the *quema de los Viñola*² in 1947, the faculty of architecture at the Universidad de La Habana departed from its Beaux-Arts origins to embrace a more modernist doctrine, while at the same time consciously seeking to integrate values from the island's own *arquitectura criolla*. Parallel to the regionalist and vernacular interests that were emerging in CIAM in the mid 1950s were similar pursuits in Cuba that resulted in two seminal studies: *Los bateyes de los centrales azucareros* (1951) by Alberto Beale and Eugenio Batista; and *Las villas pesqueras* (1953) by Frank Martínez, Ricardo Porro and others. The terms of the debate on *cubanidad* in architecture were essentially framed by the Hispanicist tendency of the preceding decades. Unlike music or religion which had undeniable African influence, Cuban architecture was harder to characterize as having a concrete African typological, tectonic or spatial presence. In 1957 an article "El sentido de la tradición,"³ written by Ricardo Porro, explored the meaning of *cubanidad* in architecture and rejected historicism as a method while proposing a nonliteral and interpretive incorporation of history and tradition into Cuban architecture. This position advocating a nonhistoricist respect for historical continuity, bears correspondence to the writings of Ernesto Rogers, and it is interesting to note that Porro had followed a course of study with Rogers during the C.I.A.M. meeting in Venice of 1951. Moreover, in his article Porro went on to acknowledge the African influence on the Cuban character, in concert with the Spanish, but in a few years he would adopt an even more *negrista* position declaring, "Cuba es una mulata."

Little of the lively discourse that explored the issues of *cubanidad* was reflected, however, in the projects shown in MOMA's 1955 exhibit and catalogue, *Latin American Architecture Since 1945*, curated and written by Henry-Russell Hitchcock,⁴ with one notable exception, the Club Tropicana (1952) by Max Borges Jr. The design of this nightclub transcended rationalism and explored a modernity informed by the tropics. Here the organic, episodic nature of the plan, the filtered light and the layered arches of the thin shell construction would be reference points for the National Art Schools to be built a decade later.

With the New Year's victory of the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the terms of discourse on *cubanidad* would change with the departure of almost all of the architects who had been active in the 1950s. The class interests for which they had served placed most of them in conflict with the revolutionary agenda. *Cubanidad* now would come to include the universalist values of socialism and the creation of the "new man." Fundamental to this task would be the role of education. The first efforts of the new government were marked by the expansion of accessibility to education as well as by a highly successful literacy campaign. It was against this unfolding success that in January 1961, Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, after a game of golf

and drinks at the bar, surveyed the verdant grounds of the Country Club at Cubanacán, former playground of Havana's elite, and decided that it would be the perfect site for an experimental school of the arts that would contribute to the forming of a "new culture" for the "new man."

The architect chosen to be in charge of the project was Ricardo Porro who, because of his involvement in the failed general strike of April 1958, was forced to flee into exile to Venezuela where he taught and practiced architecture until his return to Cuba in August 1960 at the urging of Osmany Cienfuegos, the new Minister of Construction. He invited Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti, two Italian architects with whom he had collaborated in Venezuela, to join him. It was an inspired moment in which the schools were conceived. Porro recalls it almost in terms of magic realism as "the moment, common to every revolution, during which the marvelous becomes the everyday and the revolution appeared – *mas surrealista que socialista*."⁵

Porro would be responsible for the School of Modern Dance and the School of Plastic Arts. Gottardi would design the School of Dramatic Arts, while the School of Music and the School of Ballet would be Garatti's projects. Together the architects agreed on three common principles that would guide and unify their individual projects. The first was to respect the unique landscape of the former country club and locate the schools at strategic places along the periphery. The second principle was to build primarily with brick and terra cotta tiles. This was a decision based primarily on necessity. Cuba produced no steel or Portland cement, and the newly imposed U.S. embargo hindered their importation. The third and most significant principle, formally and tectonically, was the decision to employ the Catalan vault as the primary structural system. Fortuitously, there was in Porro's hometown of Camagüey, a mason, known simply as Gumersindo, who had learned the craft from his father who had been one of Gaudí's builders in Barcelona. The Catalan vault would prove to be the defining formal signature in constructing identity for the National Art Schools. Moreover, it was a Hispanic artisan tradition, with ancient origins probably in north Africa, that served as a distinct cultural reference point and an implicit challenge to the universalist technologically oriented values of modernism.

Design of the schools began in earnest in April 1961, shortly after the defeat of the U.S. supported invasion at Playa Girón in the Bay of Pigs (April 17-20). Work proceeded on a fast track basis, with Gumersindo training masons on site. By September foundations had been laid and walls were rising in the transformed landscape of the former Country Club Park. By the autumn of 1963, when work began to stall due to the redistribution of workers to other projects, Gottardi's School of Dramatic Arts was about half complete. Likewise Garatti's School of Music was about half constructed. His School of Ballet was much farther along however, and Porro's schools were essentially complete, minus some woodwork and other details. Nevertheless, work became more or less paralyzed, with the diminishing labor force and in 1965 the schools were declared finished, inaugurated and opened in their incomplete state, which would later be allowed to deteriorate.

In the School of Dramatic Arts by Roberto Gottardi, a former student of Carlo Scarpa, issues of identity are found most rooted in program and process. He conceived the school as a response to Antonin Artaud's concept of the "theater and its double," with the complex integrating the experience of learning and performing in through an architectural whole. This school turns its back to the landscape and looks inward to an interiorized environment that is evocative of a north African or Mediterranean urban vernacular. The School of Dramatic Arts is organized as a very compact, axial, cellular plan. The amphitheater, fronting the unbuilt theater, at what now is the entrance, is the focal point of all the subsidiary functions, which are grouped around it. Circulation, takes place in the shady leftover negative interstices between the positive volumes of the



Fig. 1. School of Dramatic Arts, aerial view. Photo: Paolo Gasparini.

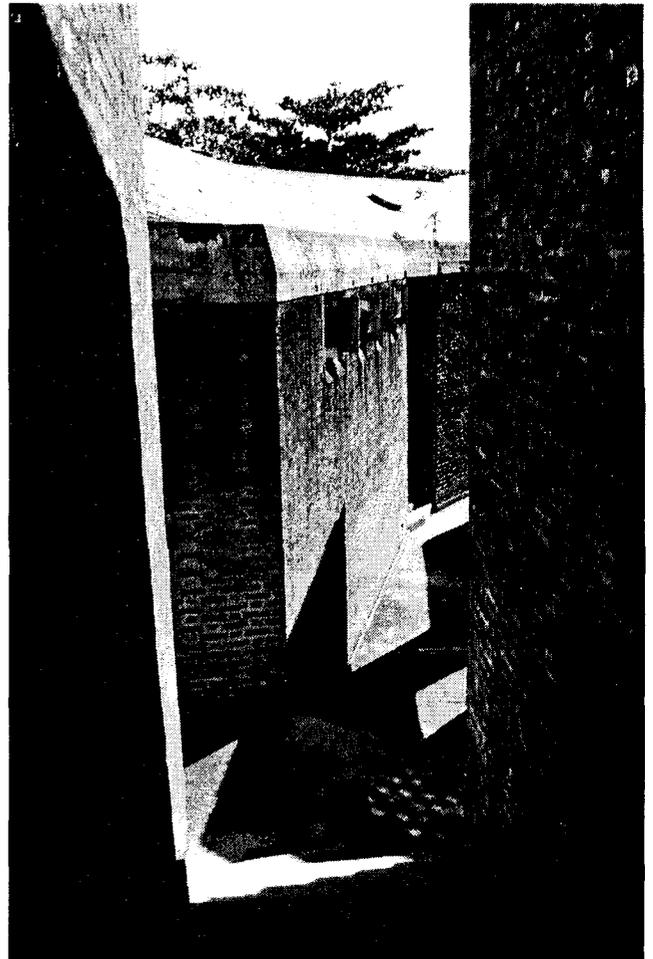


Fig. 2. School of Dramatic Arts, interior calle. Photo: John Loomis.

masonry cells. Winding more or less concentrically through the complex, it experientially negates the axiality and generalized symmetry that organize the plan. The project holds together as a complex even though only half of its original scheme was completed. Of the large theater only pylons exist. The school is partially used today and suffers from poor maintenance.

Like Gottardi's School of Dramatic Arts, Vittorio Garatti's School of Music and School of Ballet, even in their ruinous state, are still



Fig. 3. School of Music (top) and School of Ballet (center), aerial view. Photo: Vittorio Garatti.

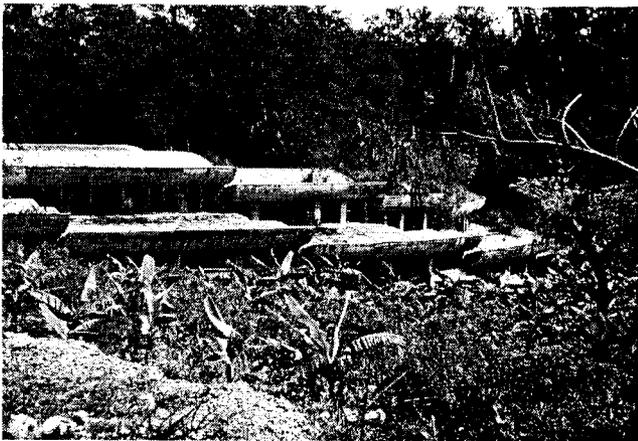


Fig. 4. School of Music, classrooms. Photo: John Loomis.

impressive architectural works. Unlike the School of Dramatic Arts, these schools do not turn inward, but instead are engaged in building the site, involving an intimate embrace with the landscape, forming the core of their identity.

The School of Music as constructed is a serpentine ribbon 330 meters long. Attendant concert halls and an opera house were never built. In plan it gives the appearance of a simple linear development. However, a series of vertical displacements serve to introduce a sectional complexity. Transversally the 15m-wide "tube" is broken into two levels and covered by undulating Catalan vaults. These layered vaults emerge organically from the landscape, hugging the contours of the ground plane. Garatti's meandering *paseo arquitectónico* is an ever changing contrast of light and shadow, of dark subterranean and brilliant tropical environments. The functional organization along the path proceeds programmatically in scale from individual practice rooms to group performance rooms and classrooms, culminating in a concert hall that wraps around an monumental ancient jaguey tree. After construction was halted in 1965, use of the school declined to where today only about one third is functioning.

The School of Ballet lies today completely abandoned and in ruins, engulfed by the jungle in a lush ravine. From the top of a ravine one looks down upon the complex, nestled into the descending gorge. In plan the school is articulated as a cluster of domed volumes, the larger ones were to serve as practice spaces and performance spaces. The smaller ones housed administration and a library. An



Fig. 5. School of Ballet, roovescape. Photo: John Loomis.

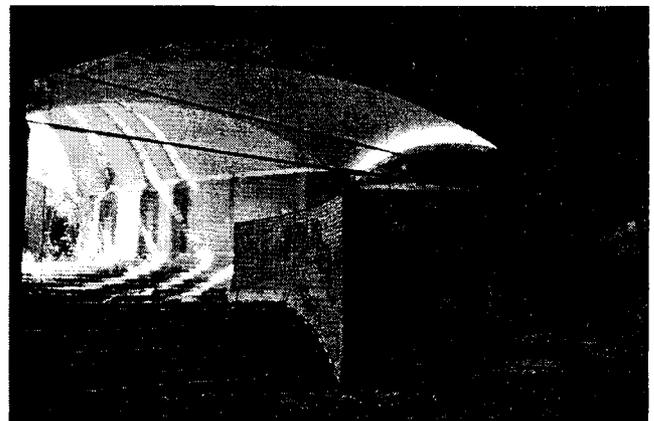


Fig. 6. School of Ballet, entry. Photo: John Loomis.

interpenetrating, partially buried arc contains classrooms. At the entrance on the upper edge of the ravine, the *paseo arquitectónico* begins as a simple notch in the ground for rainwater runoff. It descends downward into a series of organic volumes linking the dance pavilions. The path leads not only into the complex, but also up onto its roofs which are intentionally an integral part of the *paseo arquitectónico*. The essence of the design is not to be found so much in the plan but in the spatial experience of the school's choreographed volumes that move with the descending ravine. In creating these volumes, Garatti pushed the structural potential of the Catalan vault to its limit. In none of the other schools are they as thin or as audacious in the apparent act of defying gravity. The Ballet School was ninety per cent complete when it was abandoned. Time, neglect and mother nature have ironically enhanced Garatti's fusion of architecture and landscape into a neo-Piranesian ruin.

Identity in Porro's schools was to be more consciously connected to cultural issues. His work would be less determined by place and more determined through spatialized symbolic representation, the iconography of which would engage issues of gender and culture that would prove to become controversial.

The inspiration for the School of Modern Dance was derived from a desire "to express two powerful sentiments produced by the first stage, the romantic stage of the Revolution: an explosive, collective, emotional feeling of euphoria and at the same time a sense of anguish and fear confronting an unknown future."⁶ Porro conceived the plan as a sheet of glass that had been violently smashed and fragmented into shifting shards, symbolic of the overthrow of the old order and of the dynamic condition of social transformation. Fragments gather around the locus of the "impact," the main plaza, and engage a

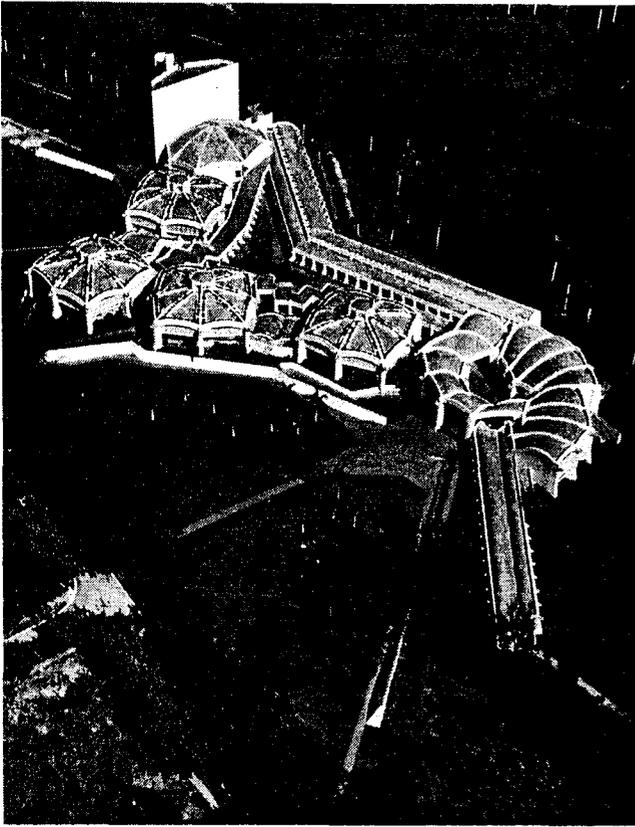


Fig. 7. School of Modern Dance, aerial view. Photo: Paolo Gasparini.



Fig. 8. School of Modern Dance, entry. Photo: John Loomis.

scheme of narrow, linear, though non rectilinear streets and courtyards. Three Catalan vaults celebrate a triumphal entry. Others form the enclosures for the studios, classrooms and administration buildings, softening in volume what is sharply skewed and angular in plan. The shifting geometries of the plan cause the exterior spaces and passageways to expand and contract in a dynamic construct, prefiguring nonrectilinear formal preoccupations of many designers today. Although its maintenance has been much neglected, the School of Modern Dance is active and fully used today.

Ricardo Porro's next undertaking was the School of Plastic Arts. The program for this school was to include studios for painting, sculpture & etchings, as well as classrooms and administrative offices. The most characteristic spaces were to be the studios, each one a small skylit "arena theater" where students would work from a live model. The formal origins of the School of Plastic Arts are both more diverse and more symbolically charged than those of the School of Modern Dance. Porro sought to create a synthesis of Cuba's multicultural heritage, which he defined as a hybrid of patriarchal Spanish baroque culture and nurturing matriarchal African culture. These were issues that he had first raised in his article "El sentido de la tradición," and now developed into a formal imagery layered with multiple readings. The plan evokes an archetypal African village, creating an organic complex of streets, buildings and open spaces. The Catalan vaulted cupolas over the studio pavilions bear reference to both Borromini and the female breast.

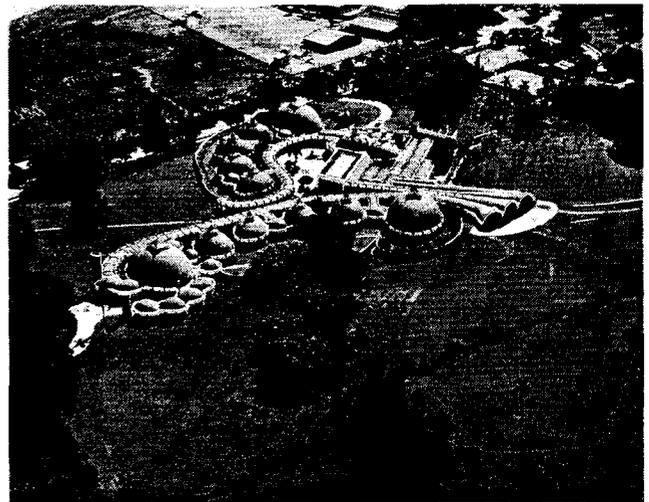


Fig. 9. School of Plastic Arts, aerial view. Photo: Paolo Gasparini.

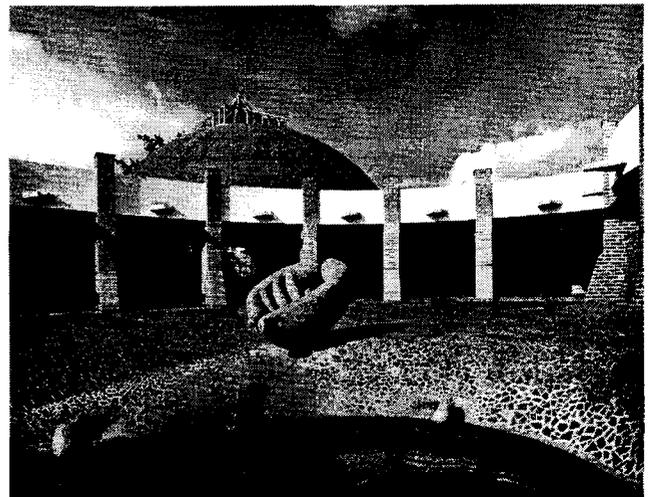


Fig. 10. School of Plastic Arts, plaza. Photo: Paolo Gasparini.

The curvilinear forms and paths are intended to be evocative of both *negritud* and female sensuality. But for Porro sensuality was not just a condition of *negritud* or gender but also of the erotic nature of the tropics that invited open expression of sexuality. "La Escuela de Artes Plásticas es la ciudad que se convierte en Eros."⁷

Moving through the School of Plastic Arts invites discovery that begins at the entry with three vaults enclosing three diverging curvilinear paths. The nature of the curving paths denies the possibility of visual orientation common to linear perspectival organization. Following this *paseo arquitectónico* is a disorienting experience. Upon the arrival at the main plaza, one encounters Porro's most overt and literal reference to the body and sexuality, a fountain in the form of a papaya, a fruit with distinct sexual connotations in the Caribbean, filling a pool surrounded by limp phalluslike drains. But ultimately it is not these erotic episodes, but the spatial experience of Porro's choreographed *paseo arquitectónico* and organic volumes formed through inventive manipulation of Catalan vault that make this complex distinctive.

The National Art Schools sought to construct identity by engaging several critical issues. First they sought to define an identity of place, taking their cues from the specifics of the tropical environment of the site at Cubanacán. This place derived identity is most strongly expressed in Garatti's work. Secondly, while they eschewed any overt formal historicism, they did establish a continuity with tradition through the use of brick, terra cotta tile and the construction of Catalan vaults, constructive traditions deeply rooted in Spain and the Mediterranean. Gottardi had worked for Ernesto Rogers who had argued for a progressive integration of history and a respect for the continuity of *preesistenze ambientali*⁸ in architecture. The School of Dramatic Arts conveys archetypal Mediterranean qualities that are rooted in history. Porro's School of Plastic Arts further raised the stakes when it sought to contribute readings of ethnicity and gender. This school responded to Afro-centric impulses that were both typological, the arrangement as a village of pavilions, and formally interpretive, the use of curvilinear organic forms. There was also a correspondence to the baroque, but a Cuban creole baroque that, according to Porro, had been softened by African culture and the tropical environment. At the same time the curvilinear forms were identified with female nurturing and sensuality. Finally, all five schools were the product and expression of a very unique utopian moment and they identify very much with the optimistic exuberant spirit that characterized the early years of the Cuban Revolution:

We began the schools with the belief that all was possible. There was so much faith in the future at that time. Euphoria, enthusiasm, unbounded happiness . . . that is what I believe is most reflected in the schools. That is their greatest message.⁹

The context of these early years rapidly changed and the initial official support for the schools eroded as they became objects of an intense ideological debate and criticism:

In [the schools] there was present an idealist ideology that still was conserving the attributes of an autonomous [capitalist] superstructure, elaborated by an intellectual elite, without direct contact with the base conditions and the social transformation carried forward by the revolutionary process.¹⁰

From this generalized criticism followed a series of specific accusations. The architects were accused of valuing personal design statements above the collective needs of the program and the users, errors of individualism that were inherited from capitalism and incompatible with the socialist principle of collectivity. The schools were faulted for being "submerged in Arcadia," far from the activity of Havana "contrary to the communal sense of work and the enrichment of collective life." The architects were criticized for having sited them separately and not having created a unified complex. The employment of the Catalan vault and the use of brick and tile, "the glorification of traditional materials," were criticized

as errors that relied on backward artisan techniques instead of advanced industrialized systems. Moreover, the architects were accused of "monumentalism," and "historicism." Gottardi and Garatti, it was further charged "could not liberate themselves from Italian heritage, its medieval legacy, artisan tradition and Neo-liberty [influence]."¹¹

It was indeed odd to criticize the architects for the location of the schools in suburban Havana, since that had been the original proposal of Fidel Castro and Che Guevara. Also, the architects had originally proposed a unified complex that was rejected by the board of directors of the schools who preferred separate entities for each discipline. Likewise, the decision to use masonry construction and the Catalan vault were decisions made in agreement with the Ministry of Construction. As for historicism, with the recent experience of post-modernism, it is hard to regard the school's interpretive use of history as in any sense historicist. Yet the architects were blamed for all this and more.

It was Porro's references to Africa and his expressive formal sensuality in the School of Plastic Arts that drew the most criticism in ideological terms. Afro-Cuban imagery richly inhabits the paintings of Wifredo Lam and the poetry of Nicolás Guillén, artists very much celebrated by the Cuban Revolution. The medium of architecture here seems to have been regarded differently and the use of African references was derided as "folkloric." The political meaning of this censuring of Afro-Cuban imagery is not easy to completely understand. Afro-Cubans make up a significant part of the population, maybe as much as sixty-five percent, though the precise demographics are classified information. The Cuban Revolution did much legislatively to end discrimination in the country and improve the lot of the poor who accounted for much of the Afro-Cuban population. Moreover, apart from the comparatively privileged *apparat*, Cuban society was becoming decisively more egalitarian. However, structural vestiges of racism persisted within the new institution whose leadership was, and still is, predominantly white and whose vision of *cubanidad* seems to be rooted more in the *Hispanicist* tradition which regarded *blanqueamiento* as the solution to racial disparities, not to mention to the creation of the "new man." Afro-Cuban leaders and intellectuals who within the context of the Cuban Revolution tried to promote racial issues and criticize racial inequities were often treated harshly, as the cases of Walterio Carbonell, Dr. Eudaldo Gutiérrez Paula, Juan Betancourt Bencomo, Manuel Granados and others bear out. They either lost their jobs, had publications withdrawn from circulation, were imprisoned, forced into exile or a combination of these things. *Negrismo* was tolerated as long as it assumed its proper place within the orthodoxy of Marxist-Leninist doctrine and remained subservient to the class struggle.¹² This may or may not shed light on the criticism the Afro-Cuban imagery of the School of Plastic Arts, but it was part of the context of the times. Remarkably, some critics of the School of Plastic Arts' "hypothetical Afro-Cuban origins" claimed that much of the memory of Africa had been "erased by slavery," so any architectural representation thereof was artificial. This is a bias primarily rooted in the traditional *criollista* prejudice against Afro-Cuban culture but, nevertheless, supported by orthodox Marxist ideology.

As for the reaction against the architectural expression of sensuality, it must be noted that there was puritanical tendency among some Cuban Communists. Havana had been a "sin city" for tourists prior to the revolution, and its civic sexuality of brothels and sex shows represented a decadent capitalist past to be permanently buried. On the other hand, the victory of the revolution was a catharsis of sorts that released the tensions and fears under which many had been living during the final years of the armed struggle, resulting in a sexual revolution that some of the leaders thought was getting out of hand. Moreover, for the former combatants, the libertine city life contrasted sharply with the austerity of their former guerrilla existence. Che Guevara, ever the moralist, finding himself

helpless to prevent his men from sneaking out of their barracks at night for a romp with girlfriends, sought to remedy the situation by imposing a mass wedding for his troops in the futile hope that this might curb the boys from being boys. It is amusing to note that water was banned for a period from Porro's suggestive fountain on Party orders. These conditions account for part of the context for criticism of the schools' "sensuality." Nevertheless, instead of demonstrating intellectual rigor, such criticism, more often than not, was just a vehicle for triumphalist rhetoric:

[S]ensuality – whether originating in Africa or in the tropics – corresponds to the erotic world that comes from leisure, he contemplative life, and coincides with thoughtless impulse, irrationalism. The representative spirit of the Revolution is the total antithesis: rigor imposed by the struggle against the enemy, hard and tenacious work necessary to rise from underdevelopment, scientific education necessary to dominate available resources and to design the society of the future – these require active social integration and not individual contemplative isolation.¹³

The close of the preceding statement begins to address the values considered appropriate in constructing the identity of a revolutionary architecture. These values should reflect: the future (not the past), collective process (not individual artistry), and employ open transformable structures that can change as society's needs change. However, as to precisely what form this architecture was to take there is much ambiguity in the official position as the following statements illustrate:

Each creative act must be born from rigor, from a rational foundation of correct acts, produced in a constant dialectic between the individual and the community. Within this driving functionalist character, the specific mission of the [architect] consists of the visual exteriorization of the content of the Revolution. . . . [The architectural] project should be an open form, transformable and additive, functionally and technically. The work must not represent merely one historic moment. [It must reflect] the process of adapting itself to other alternatives, in the progressive use of its forms. . . the Revolution is a collective fact, whose end is the creation of a new society. It constitutes a dynamic, vigorous process, impossible to crystallize in formal symbols. . . .¹⁴

It is helpful in understanding the critical drama surrounding the National Art Schools to consider the international context as well as the specific context of Cuba in the early 1960's. Part of the critique of the schools mirrors the "process vs. form" debate that was occurring often in very politicized terms in the West. The issue of collective work, expressed in Marxist terms, was really a rearticulation of Gropius' position that architecture should be the product of teamwork, not of individual talent, a position disparagingly described by Aldo van Eyck as "dear industry, happy future, teamwork, no art, no prima donnas, kind or cruel."¹⁵ The criticism of traditional building methods must be seen also in terms of the larger argument for industrialized systems. While this tendency was dominant in the Soviet Union and the Eastern Bloc countries, where close to seventy percent of construction now utilized prefabricated components, it also had strong supporters in the West. Some architecture schools such as the Hochschule für Gestaltung at Ulm, under the influence of Tomás Maldonado, favored technology driven programs, informed by social and economic considerations that ultimately promoted industrialized building. It was during these same years that Moishe Safdie won the competition for the Montreal Habitat '67 with his prefabricated system. At the UIA Congress held in Havana in September 1963, the subject of industrialized forms of construction was of primary importance. With Cuba's growing alignment with the Soviet Union, it was not surprising, that industrialized building systems, with their optimistic promises of efficiency,

quality and quantity, would in short time come to dominate Cuba's building policy. But it must be born in mind that the National Art Schools were conceived and for the most part constructed before any such system appeared upon the island and before a truly intimate relationship with the USSR had developed. Moreover, the profession of architecture was to change radically. In 1963 private architectural practice was abolished, and the Colegio de Arquitectos ceased to exist, its functions now absorbed into the Centro Técnica Superior de Construcción. Architects came to be regarded as technicians, part of a team of engineers, who would resolve Cuba's many building needs through massive industrialized solutions that too often ignored the specifics of site and context, not to mention aesthetics.

In June 1961, Fidel Castro himself had praised the National Art Schools as "the most beautiful academy of arts in the whole world," and had praised the architects themselves as "artists."¹⁶ But in a general address to the country's architects in 1964, the year after Cuba received its first prefabricated building system, the *Gran Panel*, from the Soviet Union, Castro called for standardized, repeatable solutions and criticized "individualistic designers who saw each project as an opportunity for self expression."¹⁷ Now in 1964 his words echoed those of Nikita Khrushchev who one decade earlier criticized Soviet architects who "follow the example of masters of architecture and wish to design only buildings of an individual character, and are in a hurry to build monuments to themselves."¹⁸

But there were more subjective issues too that contributed no small part to the stigmatization of the schools. Ricardo Porro was viewed by many as a member of the formerly privileged bourgeoisie, though this charge could be made of much of Cuba's revolutionary leadership. The fact that had spent much of the period of armed struggle in relative safety in Venezuela while others had carried out the dangerous tasks of resistance and insurrection may have contributed to resentment against him, though it must be pointed that other important artistic figures such as Roberto Retamar, Wifredo Lam, Alicia Alonso and Alejo Carpentier had also stayed abroad during the conflict with no apparent ill effects to their careers. Vittorio Garatti and Roberto Gottardi were of course Italian, not Cuban, and therefore easily regarded as outsiders in a country with strong nationalistic traditions. The three architects had enjoyed, especially in the beginning, a privileged position, working directly under the minister, bypassing the intervening layers of bureaucracy. The first opposition to the schools was technical, not ideological. The engineers in the Ministry distrusted the Catalan vault system and lacked the experience to quantifiably check it. But gradually the technical concerns were replaced by ones that were framed as ideological ones. Antonio Quintana, the only prominent architect who had remained in Cuba after the revolution, was a convinced modernist and felt threatened by the organic heresy occurring in the former country club. He, along with mid level functionaries at the Ministry turned against the schools, leveling a steady barrage of attacks fueled more by professional envy than by any objective architectural or ideological issue. The relatively academic discourse found in Roberto Segre's written account belies the often strident and vicious nature of the day-to-day persecution suffered by all the three architects, especially Ricardo Porro, on behalf of their work. The persecution could sometimes achieve an almost comic character. Ricardo Porro would often wake up in the morning to find decapitated chickens and other objects of *santería* left in his garden the night before to intimidate him, certainly not a very scientific form of Marxist criticism. Another example of the absurd was the accusation that the curvilinear forms of the schools were indicative of homosexual tendencies of the three architects!¹⁹ A true debate concerning the constructed identity of an Afro-Hispanic, Caribbean, socialist society would have been of great value; but an open debate on these issues was suppressed, replaced by a "one correct line" position.

In her writings, bell hooks notes the importance of the margin as

a "site of creativity and resistance":

Our living depends on our ability to conceptualize alternatives, often impoverished. Theorizing about this experience aesthetically, critically is an agenda for radical cultural practice. For me this space of radical openness is a margin – a profound edge. Locating oneself there is difficult yet necessary. It is not a "safe" place. One is always at risk... [M]arginality nourishes one's capacity to resist. It offers the possibility of radical perspectives from which to see and create, to imagine alternatives, new worlds...²⁰

The National Art Schools engage in both the real and metaphorical sense of marginality of which hooks theorizes and in more than one way. They were geographically marginal, located in a small underdeveloped country ninety miles from the US. They were geopolitically marginal, that country having just declared itself socialist and Marxist-Leninist. Within that country's capital they were marginal, located far from the urban center on its suburban outskirts. Most importantly though, they were marginal in terms of architectural design, having rejected contemporary forms of linguistic expression in favor of an attempt to create a radical formal alternative that would engage the specific cultural, environmental and political ethos of what was optimistically envisioned as an emerging "utopia." The story of the National Art Schools demonstrates that constructing identity in any creative field is a complex undertaking. Identity is not a static condition but a dynamic and ever changing condition that must address both past tradition and the unfolding future. Constructing identity must accept contradictions and diverging positions, a precondition that encourages experimentation and the taking of risks. After almost forty years of the Cuban Revolution, its architecture has fallen short of its society's expectations both to meet everyday needs and to serve as a creative agent to embody its aspirations. The National Art Schools stand today as a testament to the importance of maintaining that diversity of discourse in constructing not only *cubanidad* but the cultural identity of any complex polycultural society.

Portions of this article have been excerpted from the forthcoming book *Revolution of Forms – Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools*, John A. Loomis, Princeton Architectural Press, © 1998 all rights reserved.

NOTES

¹ For a further discussion of race and identity in Cuba see Darién J. Davis, "¿Criollo o Mulato? Cultural Identity in Cuba, 1930-1960," in Juan Manuel Carrion, ed., *Ethnicity, Race and Nationality in the Caribbean: The African Impact on Latin America and the Caribbean* (San Juan: Institute of Caribbean Studies: 1997), p. 69-95.

² Students, lead by Frank Martínez, Ricardo Porro, and Nicolás Quintana, abducted Vignola's books from the library of the architecture school at the Universidad de La Habana and publicly burned them in the plaza, declaring their allegiance to modernism. This was a youthful act that they have all since disowned with no small amount of embarrassment. For a more complete survey of architecture in the decade prior to the Cuban Revolution see: Nicolás Quintana, "Evolución Histórica de la Arquitectura en Cuba- Época Republicana (1900-1959)," *La Enciclopedia de Cuba* (San Juan: Enciclopedia y Clásicos Cubanos, 1977); Eduardo

Luis Rodríguez, "La década incógnita, Los cincuenta," *Arquitectura Cuba*, no. 347 (1997): 36-43; and Roberto Segre, "As Formulações Teóricas na Década de 50," *América Latina Fim de Milênio* (São Paulo: Studio Nobel, 1991), pp. 24-36.

³ Ricardo Porro, "El sentido de la tradición," *Nuestro Tiempo* no. 16, año IV (1957). (author's translation)

⁴ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, *Latin American Architecture Since 1945* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1955), pp. 55, 72-75, 108-109, 194.

⁵ Ricardo Porro, "3Cinq Aspects du Contenu en Architecture," *2 PSICON – Rivista Internazionale de Architettura* no. 2/3, (January/June 1975): 165. (author's translation)

⁶ Ricardo Porro, interview with the author, July 1992. (author's translation)

⁷ Ricardo Porro, quoted in Patrice Goulet, *Ricardo Porro*, vol. 1 of *Partitions*, 2 vols. (Paris: Institut Français d'Architecture, 1993). (author's translation)

⁸ The Rogers connection is worth noting. As previously mentioned, Porro cites him as an influence on his own formation. Moreover, Garatti also states that Rogers was an important influence and presence during his studies at the Politécnico di Milano. In addition it should be noted that the Italian architectural environment in which both Garatti and Gottardi spent their formative years was very much influenced by other revisionists such as: Carlo Scarpa, Ludovico Quaroni, Giuseppe Samoná, Mario Ridolfi, and Bruno Zevi.

⁹ Roberto Gottardi, interview with the author (June 1992). (author's translation)

¹⁰ Roberto Segre and Rafael López Rangel, *Architettura e territorio nell'America Latina. Saggi & Documenti* (Milan: Electa Editrice, 1982), p. 224. (author's translation)

¹¹ Roberto Segre, *Diez Años de Arquitectura Revolucionaria en Cuba*, (Havana: Ediciones Union, 1969), p. 87. (author's translation). Much of what constituted the prosecutorial drama surrounding the schools went unrecorded. Segre's writings provide the only accessible sources of documented critique. He has since reassessed some of his former criticism.

¹² For an insightful examination of issues of race in Cuba since the revolution see Ronald Segal, "The Roads of Cuba," chapter 20 of *The Black Diaspora. Five Centuries of the Black Experience* (New York: Farrar, Strauss, and Giroux, 1995), pp. 224-243.

¹³ Roberto Segre, op. cit., p. 89.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 88-90.

¹⁵ Aldo Van Eyck, as quoted in Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture, 1993), p. 347.

¹⁶ Fidel Castro Ruz, quoted in "La mas hermosa academia de artes de todo el mundo," *Noticias de Hoy* (May 4, 1963). (author's translation)

¹⁷ Fidel Castro Ruz, "Closing speech to the First Congress of Cuban Builders," October 25, 1964. Note that by this time the proletarianization of the profession had devalued the status of the architect to that of merely a member of a team of "builders."

¹⁸ Nikita Khrushchev, "Remove Shortcomings in Design, Improve Work of Architects," in Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968* (New York: Columbia Books of Architecture), p. 185.

¹⁹ This was no casual accusation. The Cuban Revolution in those years was marked by machismo and intense homophobia that had more than once resulted in the police round-up of scores of gay Cubans who were sent off to re-education camps. Though this policy was later officially repudiated, it nevertheless formed a part of the context in which criticism of the schools developed.

²⁰ bell hooks, *Yearning: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics* (London: Turnaround, 1991), p. 149.