

Reflections on Identity and the Margins of Practice: The Case of Walter Betancourt

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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... [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...¹

- bell hooks

The protagonist of this paper, Walter Betancourt, is a hyphenated American, a Cuban-American. His practice in the U.S. was brief, occupying just the years 1957-60 in Los Angeles. As an architect, he left no discernible mark on the city. He was a marginal character, who through choice, would become even more marginal. This paper seeks to explore the nature of the margin as a creative locus of identification and to raise issues concerning identity that might provide other perspectives from which to regard the way we frame issues of identity today. For Walter Betancourt's creative life and work were inextricably caught up in issues of identity and marginality long before identity and marginality became issues.

Walter Betancourt was born July 18, 1932 in New York City. His grandparents, people of very modest means, had emigrated from Cuba to Tampa at the time of the Cuban War for Independence, and through their hard work, and that of his parents, the family had risen up the economic ladder and achieved the American Dream by the time of his birth. Walter grew up in the cosmopolitan comfort of a solid urban middle class family. Family vacations to Cuba served to connect him to his heritage, but by and large he lived a very "American" existence. He studied architecture at the University of Virginia, bastion of Anglo-American identity, graduating in 1956. In that same year he served a brief tour of duty in the U.S. Navy, stationed at Guantanamo, where he witnessed from afar the Moncada Uprising of the July 26th Movement, the beginnings of the Cuban Revolution. The following year he moved to Los Angeles to work for Richard Neutra, whom

he admired as both a designer and as a person of progressive social commitment. But the reality of Neutra's office, where he worked without pay, did not meet his idealistic expectations, and he left after six months. Betancourt stayed on in Los Angeles with his young wife Leonor, while in Cuba the revolution gained momentum. It also gained support from abroad and Betancourt participated in solidarity committees as he continued to develop his professional skills in the offices of John Lautner, Harold Leavitt, and others, and take post graduate courses at UCLA. The events in Cuba and his growing disenchantment with Los Angeles, and the U.S., were having a profound effect upon his own sense of identity when in 1959, he interviewed with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin and turned down what he otherwise would have considered an ideal opportunity, an offer to work under Wright himself. Instead he made a critical decision — to go to Cuba and dedicate his design skills to the newborn Cuban Revolution.

Walter Betancourt arrived in Havana August 8, 1961, when the young revolution was still in a state of euphoric bacchanal. The victory over the U.S. sponsored invasion at Playa Giron in the Bay of Pigs just four months earlier engendered a sense of moral vindication and omnipotence on the part of the population that supported the revolution. The arts were experiencing a rebirth in a burst of revolutionary creativity. On the western edge of Havana's suburbs, on the site of a former country club, the architects Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garatti, and Roberto Gottardi were realizing an innovative project for five arts schools that were employing a radical organic approach to form-making, rejecting the tenets of International Style modernism. However, Betancourt sensed that forthcoming doctrinaire tendencies of the revolution would soon come to restrict architectural practice, so he decided to move far from Havana's ideological center and to other margins, Holguín and Santiago de Cuba in the eastern provinces (Oriente) of the island. And indeed Betancourt's instincts proved to be correct. By 1963 private architectural practice was abolished and the Colegio de Arquitectos was closed. By 1965 the arts schools project had officially come to a halt, having fallen out of step

ideologically with the revolution that was increasingly embracing Soviet models. Architects were now perceived primarily as technicians, part of a team of engineers, who were charged with resolving Cuba's many building needs through massive industrialized solutions. However, by locating himself in Oriente, which has historically maintained a certain independence in relation to Havana, Betancourt was able to significantly distance himself from the ideological forces that were defining architecture in Cuba.

In Betancourt's relatively short productive life in Cuba (he died at 46 in 1978) he is credited with 15 built works and over 30 unbuilt projects. This is a remarkable achievement when one considers both the material and political conditions under which he worked. Betancourt's works stand as examples of an architecture of resistance and of a multi-layered approach toward constructing identity that relies on cultural hybrids and syncretism. Wedded to this cultural hybridity and syncretism were strong references to and reliance on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright's appeal to Betancourt is evident not only stylistically, but also understandable operationally when one considers Wright's own position as a perpetual marginal character.

Betancourt's primary homage to Wright is the Forestry Research Laboratory at Guisa (1970). High on a mountainous site, this Taliesin-like complex arranges itself across the topography, accommodating the contours to avoid any cut and fill, and embracing the vegetation so that no trees were removed. The project affirms his strong conviction in building the site as the prerequisite for constructing identity, and no site could have been more marginal, located as it is in the remote reaches of the Sierra Maestra. Part of Betancourt's means of identification also comes by way of a hybridization that drew from the vernacular. He had a great respect for both vernacular form and constructive tradition. Both these positions ran counter to the tenets of the centralized Ministry of Construction which regarded vernacular gestures as "romantic, folkloric and derivative of residual bourgeois ideology," and looked upon traditional building techniques as "backward holdovers from underdevelopment." The assimilated and interpreted form of the *bohío*, the typical hut of the Cuban peasant, is evident in the pavilions of the otherwise Wrightian Forestry Laboratory at Guisa. Yet Betancourt's position regarding this architecture of everyday life was not populist, for he believed in not merely the appropriation, but in the transformation and reinterpretation of vernacular through the hands of the architect. Worth noting are the expressive wood framing and rafters that delineate the walkways and the heavily articulated brick walls of the complex. This affinity for the expressive nature of brick, has deep Spanish origins. The "tactile and tectonic" qualities of Betancourt's work often dominate over the "visual and graphic."

These qualities are no where more valid than in the Cultural Center of Velasco (1964-1991) where brick, concrete panel, terra-cotta tile, plaster, iron and wood combine in the highly sensory composition and expression of cultural iden-

tity in a remote provincial farming village. In no other project of Betancourt's is the expressive potential of brick construction as a generator of form more evident than here. Part of the credit goes to the remarkable partnership Betancourt struck with an Spanish master mason, Nicasio Santana who had fled Spain for Cuba in the early years of the civil war, having refused to serve in Franco's army in Morocco. Together, the architect and the master builder created a complex that departed radically from Betancourt's Wrightian inclinations. At Velasco the derivation of form from the constructive process results in a project of great episodic poetry evocative of both Hispanic masonry tradition and Caribbean spirit. This was a project that took 27 years and was finished long after the deaths of both Betancourt and Santana thanks to the perseverance of Betancourt's associate architect Gilberto Seguí Divinó. The project was also identified by the enthusiastic support of this community of farmers and artisans. Yet it would be a mistake to say that the design process was participatory in the sense that we define it. Betancourt, with Santana, maintained a firm hand on the formal development of the complex, while nevertheless responding to the community's needs and desires. The Cultural Center of Velasco provides a formal and symbolic identity that has become a source of local pride to this otherwise typical poor rural Cuban village. In a country where so many of the public works suffer from neglect and a lack of maintenance, the Cultural Center of Velasco is always kept tidy and in good repair by the volunteer efforts of a community who identify with its well being.

Despite local appreciation of his work, Walter Betancourt's architecture has been virtually unknown in Cuba up until 1992 when a small exhibit of his work was organized to coincide with the Biennial in Havana. While the exhibit received support from the Ministry of Culture, support from the Ministry of Construction and the Union of Architects and Engineers was notably absent. For these central authorities, charged with overseeing the country's construction needs, Cuban revolutionary identity was embodied by functionally and technically determined projects that were repeated on a massive scale with little or no consideration to site and local conditions. The quality and marginality of Betancourt's architecture presented an uncomfortable challenge to the "one correct line" official mentality.

What are we to make of Walter Betancourt's architecture in the context of his emigration and the remaking of his identity, both personal and professional? We might first look to Los Angeles for clues. Los Angeles has long been a place where people came to create and recreate their identities. This was standard fare in the film industry but it was true in other fields as well. Both Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra left the formally restrictive society of Vienna to re-identify themselves and their talents in the artistic freedom that was Los Angeles. Frank Lloyd Wright turned a new stylistic chapter in his work with his exploration of pre-Colombian identities in the work of his Los Angeles period. Later the identities of an influx of intellectual émigrés

fleeing Nazism would be marked and would leave their mark on the culture of Los Angeles. But that was a different era. When Walter Betancourt arrived, Los Angeles was no longer the bohemian, socialist, avant gardist environment it had been in the pre-war era. Moreover, the city had transformed from a margin to a center.

Several things happened to Betancourt during the late 1950s in Los Angeles. He grew and gained experience as a professional and became more confident of his design abilities. His architectural idealism became formed around the value of architecture as art and of the responsibility of the architect to be the primary guarantor of a work's cultural value. His political idealism became formed around the values of socialism. He became profoundly disillusioned with architecture as practiced under capitalism. Moreover, Betancourt experienced a political awakening that coincided with soul searching concerning his own identity and ethnicity. His identity as an American became challenged and began to unravel and reconstruct itself. The Cuban Revolution was the catalyst that brought this about. Walter Betancourt's move to Cuba was a primary act of identification. Like Schindler, Neutra and others who emigrated to Los Angeles to reconstruct their identities, Walter Betancourt, against the tide of Cubans fleeing for the U.S., left for Cuba to pursue that which he felt he could not pursue in the U.S., a politically and socially relevant architectural practice that engaged in the cultural specifics of place, or rather to pursue what the Cubans called - *cubanidad*.

Walter Betancourt went to great lengths to define himself as a Cuban and as a revolutionary. He served in the militia. He embraced the austere material values of the revolution, and lived his personal life as an exemplary communist. Nevertheless, in the context of redefining his identity, Betancourt also remained an immigrant, and like all immigrants he retained a certain amount of cultural baggage from the country of his birth. As he strove to become more Cuban and revolutionary, he also became more American and an individualist. He read and quoted Emerson and Thoreau as much, if not more, than Marx and Lenin. While conceptually embracing socialism and collectivism Betancourt practiced architecture in a very personal and individual manner. He refused to join the Union of Cuban Architects and Engineers. In terms of his architecture which did draw from the Cuban vernacular, the tropical environment and native constructive technique, it also had undeniable stylistic origins in the work the American iconoclasts Wright and Schindler. Walter Betancourt's architecture was a hybrid of Cuban and Ameri-

can experience, of constructive technique and formalist ideas, of collectivist and individualistic values, all informed by romantic notions of craft. This syncretic approach to architecture placed Betancourt well outside the mainstream of official Cuban architecture, on the margins.

Just to what extent was Walter Betancourt's act of constructing an architectural practice under such marginal conditions a conscious decision? Betancourt's practice is one that sought out margins within margins within which to conduct a critical counter-hegemonic architectural discourse. Cuba was marginal to the United States and the rest of the developed world. Santiago was marginal to Havana. And the deeply rural locus of his two most important works were be marginal to Santiago itself. The counter-hegemonic practice Betancourt established was counter to architecture as practiced under capitalism in general and counter to its practice in the United States in particular. However, ironically, it was also counter to the prevailing norms of architectural practice in Cuba. And for this reason, despite and because of its unique qualities, Betancourt's work has lacked recognition by the centralized architectural establishment of his adopted country. That Walter Betancourt was able to survive and thrive under the material and political constraints that existed in Cuba is truly remarkable, a testament on the one hand to his professional talents as well as to his personal powers of persuasion and charm, and a testament to the power of marginality to nourish the capacity for creativity.

This is an intervention. A message from that space in the margin that is a site of creativity and power, that inclusive space where we recover ourselves... Marginality is the space of resistance. Enter that space. Let us meet there.²

- bell hooks

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The author wishes to acknowledge the support of The Getty Research Institute, the Asociación Hermanos Saíz of the Cuban Ministry of Culture and the Union Juventud Comunista de Cuba. The author is also indebted to assistance of Gilberto Seguí Divinó, Rosendo Mesías, Eduardo Luis Rodríguez, the late Arturo Duque de Estrada y Riera, and the late Julia Maria Leonor Fernández Bulnes de Betancourt.

NOTES

- 1 hooks, bell, *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (London, Turnaround, 1991), 149.
- 2 hooks, b., *op. cit.*: 152.