

Suggestions: For a future Habana

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A concern of many contemporary Cuban writers, intellectuals, poets, architects and artists living in exile in North America and abroad, is the reintegration of their respective artistic endeavors in a post-revolutionary Cuba. Equally, La Habana already holds pre-revolutionary treasures from foreign architects as significant as McKim, Mead and White, Bertram Goodhue, Barclay, Parsons and Klapp, Kenneth Murchison and equally attributable works of art.

The identity crisis of Cubans extends through the Florida straits to citizens beyond international waters of this small island. For writers, academics, architects and artists alike, the Diaspora has been felt for over 40 years. While the consideration of globalization is met with criticism, the availability and return to these exiled persons' Habana, seems within reach with this new international structure. The migration of these people and their attributed influences suggest the emergence of fruitful collaborative efforts with Cubans on the island. The ideas formulated can evolve into a new culture, a new architectural/artistic community and a suggestion for contemporary life on the island.

This study is based on the description of La Habana currently as an architecturally dormant city, with little to no significant intervention over the past 40 years. The problem lies in how one engages a culture, a city, an environment that throughout the years has evolved within the confines of one (if not many) different countries? How do architects/artists create associations for the evolution of the future of La Habana? How does the design of the architectural future of the city, including restoration and renovation happen from miles away and simultaneously from within? How do young (foreign) designers study a context they have not known, or literally visited? The process initiated here allows the evolution of a methodology by which to generate particular programs in La Habana, a city with the need for catalysts for change and a historical context that allows one to read the city through constructed itineraries, if not through maps and images, through memory and tale.

The idea that Cuban culture has thrived throughout many centuries on the enduring, poetic qualities of storytelling is evident in my own past. Originally used as a form of communication, the descriptive, detailed narrative serves as an itinerary, and when digested through an architect's vision, can describe a site, a place, a spatial condition. Maria Luisa Lobo Montalvo in her very aptly titled *Havana, History and Architecture of a Romantic City, My Faraway, Lost World* suggests: "my vital Havana, the boisterous Havana of the republic, committed to its ideals and to the pleasure of its spaces . . ." is the very way most young Cuban Americans (as an example) were introduced and continue to contemplate the place they have yet to call home. Lobo's recent publication is the most conspicuous volume of where storytelling emerges in real images. What marked these places for her, as she shares in this volume: "My romantic vision of Cuba and of Havana in particular, is marked by memory, by the distance that separated us for many years, by the yearning for childhood and youth and, of course, the nostalgia that clings to any world so abruptly abolished."²

As she was, I am also: "homesick for my childhood and for a faraway world, lost in the distance"³, except my *childhood* was in Miami and although the invigorating aspects of Cuban culture were omnipresent, the spaces and places were only conceived through my imagination by means of interpretative tools of constructing architectural spaces through itinerary and narrative.

My interest is to author a narrative for insertions (i.e. program spaces), by describing their occupation within the city, and describe how these spaces may be engaged. These spaces develop through the reading of narratives which describe certain conditions within the city. Chosen primarily for this purpose are narratives authored by Alejo Carpentier who, ironically or not, was the son of a French architect. Each describes a particular site within La Habana. What are the generators for the ideas of how these sites are occupied, how

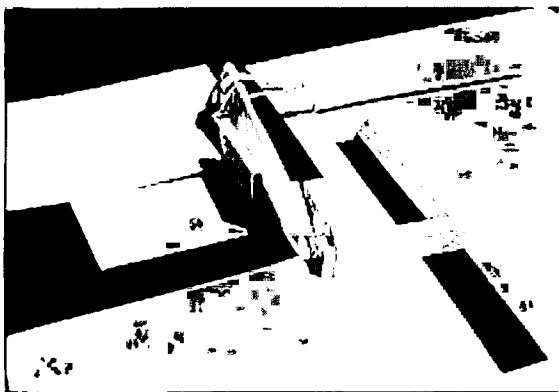
these spaces evolve? What emerges is a group of conditions within the city. The insertions will be categorized as three basic architectural spaces: **EDGES**, **CONTAINERS** and **THRESHOLDS**, simultaneously occupying the space of the city and a particular site condition.

EDGES, **CONTAINERS** and **THRESHOLDS** are chosen as conditions rich in materiality, a foreshadowing to the ultimate desire of this process: finding a material of place and executing physical suggestions.

Site from Alejo Carpentier's *Amor a la Ciudad*
Tiempo, La Habana, 10 December 1940

"And let us not speak of our friend the pothole that awaits us everywhere, giving samples of monumental icons of ubiquity. All of us, who have been unfortunate enough to have to navigate an automobile through the streets of our Havana, habitually stray lovingly from certain potholes, as if trying to preserve them, out of pity. According to journeys imposed by obligation or places of residency, these potholes are analogous to old family members, who we don't mind seeing once in a while but we treat with affection when destiny places them in our path. There is a pothole on my street, round, that is marvelous!

Do you know of the deep, circular pothole that you find as you are going up between El Vedado Tennis and Las Culebrinas . . . and the one at the mouth of First Avenue, it is like a bathtub when it rains . . ."



First insertion:
from *Tiempo*, La Habana, 10 December 2002
Container for Relics:

My mother hid her relics in the ground before she left Cuba. Of course she did not know at the time that her watch, rings and bracelets were going to be *survivors* of an extinct culture or bygone period. As we passed the familiar monuments through the streets of La Habana, she pointed out each one, with the same familiarity as the corners of one's home. The earth had been undisturbed at the spot where we estimated the container was buried. The grass had grown over it, the roots of the

adjacent banyans had lay claim to the earth around it. The location was serene; the scarred, sacred ground had been mended by the memories buried with those relics. The container remained undisturbed, enjoying the sacredness of its burial place. Every layer reminiscent of the repair it had made on the ground, a reminder of every bygone year.

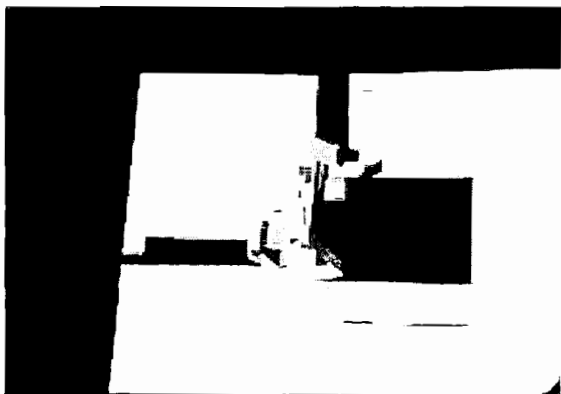
Second site from Alejo Carpentier's *Amor a la Ciudad*:
About La Habana (1912-1930), La Habana, 1973

"There were many inadequately hygienic habits in the old days in La Habana. One of those was public dairies. People wanted to be served warm milk from the belly of the cow. There were many dairies on corners of La Habana, one of the most important, on the corner of *Virtudes y Consulado*. Cows were brought in at 6 am, tied up; there was an incredible amount of flies, manure and hay on the ground. And then the people would come with their jugs and ask for a full jug of milk, a half, and it would be extracted directly from the udder. Late in the afternoon, the cowbells would be hung, and at 5 or 5:30 in the afternoon the caravan of cows would begin their journey beyond *Calle Belascoain* to spend the night in the pasture . . ."



Second and third insertion:
About La Habana (1990-1994), U.S., 2001
Street Edge/ Container for Jugs:

My great uncle set out early every morning, his burlap sack held by his arm and torso. During the revolution this daily scavenger hunt for food was a ritual, now it is more of a pleasure. He passed the dairy, his first pause of the day, to reclaim his jug. The familiarity of it had not eluded him after 30 years. After all, it was his grandson who had chipped the glass edge. It belonged to him, the second jug, top shelf, blue filter. Through the glass, through the wall, he could view the rest of the city. The new filter of light, the seldom open dairy, the foul smell of the cows inside: all part of his familiar itinerary.



Threshold: Door

The keeper led the cows to the dairy daily. This huge wooden door, the threshold for so many: the cows entered the vastness of the space by the manual sliding of the suitably scaled frame. The keeper was responsible for sweeping out all the polluted hay and remnants of the previous morning, disposing of it through the slit at the bottom of the door. The foul smell escaped through the louvered openings that lined the top edge of the space. The people arrived, mostly older women, who had not succumbed to the powers of the supermarket, who were still the primary caretakers of generations of children in the neighborhood. They crossed into their familiar domain.

Third site from Alejo Carpentier's *Amor a la Ciudad*:

Información. La Habana. 22 July 1944

Reference: Whitman's love of ferry boats, invitation of a voyage Along the docks:

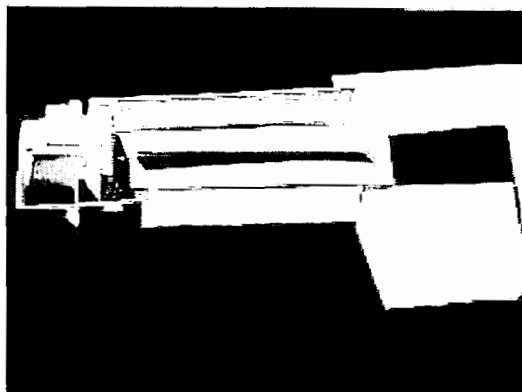
"Every night between 11 and 1, one could attend a delightful spectacle: the arrival of the fish to the dock at *Caballerías*. Slowly the boats are brought in close to the wood platform where the fisherman officiates, to the light of the lantern. The fish, alive still, are brought from the depths of the Gulf of Mexico and amassed in large baskets. 1 . . . 2 . . . 3 The baskets are hoisted onto the freight loader. There are 290 pounds, sometimes, 300. It doesn't matter. The loader moves ahead to the refrigerated truck that awaits him. The fish tails resonate in agony, making a sound that evokes, by its frantic and tight percussion, a distant machine gun."¹

Fourth insertion:

Información. La Habana. 2001

Water's Edge/Container: Theatre (aire libre):

They were all along *el malecón* early that summer. Walking along the water's edge, the kids could only dream of what lay beyond the horizon. The tension of the space was intensified by the crowds. You see, that is all there is to do in La Habana on a



sweaty, humid, Sunday afternoon: strolling, singing, listening along *el malecón*. The theatre provided live entertainment and the stage were immersed with legendary masters of Cuban jazz, blaring just east of the sunset. The path has been widened along *el malecón*: the street is alive with pedestrians, no longer a vehicular traffic area, but melding into the sea of transition.

The insertions of urbanity, into an already rich city fabric in La Habana offer a discourse for catalysts for change. The dismantling, building, preservation and other multiple contributions that will occur in a post-revolutionary condition are alluring to the rest of the world. The previous narratives are used, instead of photographs, to describe the sites and understand spatial conditions through time. Memory is used as a contemporary condition instead of as a reference to a historical past. La Habana is transformed then into a city of recollection, of precedent, where one can no longer travel and collect images but instead evolve a new vocabulary for future insertions. The premise of constructing a narrative for a future Habana emerges from understanding the analogy to Carpentier's Habana and how one might occupy a post-revolutionary Cuba. Throughout this process, the reader and author alike contribute to the imagery of the city that is implied in the imagination and unveil a new vocabulary of architecture that includes multiple disciplines.

NOTES

¹ Lobo Montalvo, María Luisa. *Havana. History and Architecture of a Romantic City*. New York: The Monacelli Press, Inc. and the Estate of María Luisa Lobo Montalvo, 2000.

² Lobo Montalvo

³ Lobo Montalvo

⁴ Carpentier, Alejo. *El Amor a la Ciudad*. Madrid: Santillana, S.A., 1996.

⁵ Carpentier

⁷ Carpentier

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