

# Housing and Cultural Identity in Havana

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Havana is, undoubtedly, a beautiful city, characterised by the high quality of its architectural and urban design. However, the good examples almost always referred correspond to realisations until the decade of the '50s in the 20th Century and in a very few occasions, to further solutions.

Nevertheless, Havana is an alive city, despite it has almost not been transformed during the last four decades. It is the physical background of a particular social process, and its people continue living, acting and transforming the city, generating and enriching a culture of deep roots and traditions. Why, then, the expressions of the architectural culture developed on the last forty years are not valid enough to figure on critical studies beside its antecedents?

Residential architecture is majority in the city, from the quantitative point of view. Besides architects, people, creating their own habitat, also make city. The present paper intends to explore the continuity of cultural identity in Havana's architecture through housing.

## ANTECEDENTS

The most authentic values of the originally Cuban architecture can be found on that one developed by the aborigine population, which, despite being essentially rural, gave good answer to its context.

The Mediterranean model, imposed by the colonisers, was gradually adapted to the contextual requirements and it became the basis of the traditional housing with lateral courtyard predominant in the consolidated urban areas during the firsts decades of the 20th century.

The new urban models developed with the extension of the city to the west established new ways in the relationship between indoors and outdoors and new patterns of land use, despite of the architectural style. The common walls ("medianeras")

disappeared and with them, also the internal courtyard stopped being necessary. It was initially replaced in the high class residences by the hall and the stairs. Relationships between interior and exterior were produced by the external building perimeter and its quality depended on the housing standard and the land use imposed by speculation on each urban area: from narrow corridors to huge surrounded gardens.

## THE ARRIVAL OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT

The beginning of the Modern Movement promoted the development of tall multifamily buildings as well as new spatial housing solutions, in addition to the formal renovation that it constituted. The so called "Barrio Obrero" in Guanabacoa is an example of the application of the most classic conceptions of the Modern Movement.

During the '50s some searches driven towards the adaptation of modern codes to the particular Cuban climate and traditions were developed, with very good results in many cases (residences as well as flat buildings). Mario Románach's architecture is a good example of that.

The high social class was always on the head in applying the Modern Movement codes. Their privileged cultural vision allowed them to produce important Architectural works, today recognised as valuable exponents of the International Modern Movement.<sup>1</sup> Most of them consist on isolated residences located on the western part of the city.

Those cultural and architectural patterns were also assimilated by the mid social class in a logic imitative attempt, but the copy, in a general way, was never so valuable as the original.<sup>2</sup> The lower social classes also tended to imitate the social level immediate higher which represented their nearest aspirations and, as it happens according to the "rumour theory", the level of distortion was increasing with the distance from the original source.

In this way, the Modern Movement was progressively diffused, extended and popularised, not in its most pure way, but reinterpreted and mixed with the popular "not cult" taste. The final result at the end of the '50s and the beginning of the '60s was expressed by the generalisation of some codes as the horizontal thin concrete slab, the simulated stone finishing, the almost crazy shape of columns and the double "miami" window, all of them used in the isolated individual housing.

These codes continue being recurrent in housing built by people themselves and then constitute, even today, the maximum aspiration of most of the population.<sup>3</sup>

## SOCIAL HOUSING DURING THE REVOLUTION

### The Beginings

The first actions carried out by the Revolutionary Government in urban housing were driven to eradicate slums. The new houses built to relocate the inhabitants of these marginal settlements were placed on urban zones previously urbanised and subdivided into plots, but not developed yet before 1959.

Architectural typologies mostly used on those projects were isolated or twin houses, one or two stories with light concrete slabs in a vaulted or folded shape, looking for economy, possibilities to be prefabricated (even in site) or typical solutions. Also three and four stories buildings were built.

The projects developed at the beginning of the Revolution, in the '60s, used to have a good spatial, constructive and design quality, despite sometimes it was hard to the inhabitants to assimilate de new (better) living conditions, to which they were not accustomed. Many of these projects offer still today a good visual aspect, despite the lack of maintenance and continue being the best exponents of the Cuban social housing. That's the case of "La Habana del Este", where tall buildings were exceptionally located.

### Types Repetition

Most of the social housing built during the '70s were located in the so called "new development" areas, outside of the traditional existing city. The urban model of the Modern Movement was taken as a basis to locate prismatic buildings in an open urbanisation, according to the "block soup" style.

The philosophy of typical and repetitive solutions was an answer to the intention to industrialise housing construction in order to solve the massive necessities of people, but in fact, most of the building constructed then in Havana were not totally prefab.<sup>4</sup>

This architectural typology, which was originally born in cold climate countries,<sup>5</sup> made difficult to achieve adequate indoor environmental conditions in the warm and humid Cuban climate, despite the attempts to lessen this difficulty by the orientation of the buildings, what, contradictorily, increased the monotony in these urban areas. On the other hand, in order to built more economic housing to increase the quantity with the same resources, the minimum space admitted by the housing standards<sup>6</sup> was reduced, bringing about solutions which indoor spatial quality was lower than those built in the former decade.

All these conditions gave as a result extent monotonous and anodyne housing areas, with huge open and disqualified outdoor spaces, and where indoor spatial quality was unsatisfactory as well.<sup>7</sup> This fact could help in explaining the rejection of the population to this architecture and the persistence of the mid social class housing model of the '50s as a paradigm in their aspirations and taste.

### Recovering the Traditional City

The firsts interventions in the traditional urban grid at the end of the '70s were destructive. There was not then, the consciousness about what was demonstrated afterwards: the superiority of the urban environment in the traditional city respect to the open urban areas according to the Modern Movement style.

Thanks to the "revitalisation" of the Micro-brigades<sup>8</sup> in the '80s, new "atypical" buildings started being located on empty plots inside the existing city. Many of these buildings – which were not really atypical, since they were repeated afterwards in different locations – copied the architectural codes of their neighbours in the context, mainly built in the '50s.<sup>9</sup> One possible explanation to this phenomena could be the intention of the architects to be "integrated" to the context – what would be a mistake in this so mimetic way, – but the original cause could also be that even for the architects, the architectural codes of the '50s constituted – in a conscious or unconscious way – the model to be followed as an alternative to the anonymous and disqualified environment of the massive architecture.

### The New Ways

Two housing projects developed in Havana during the '80s constitute examples of the search of new alternative ways: "Las Arboledas" and "La Villa Panamericana."

"Las Arboledas" project was started at the end of the '70s by a team of American and Cuban professionals<sup>10</sup> intending to improve the mentioned results in the urban housing areas developed up to that moment. Among the main positive

achievements of the project could be mentioned: to be adequate and subordinate to the existing vegetation (trees); to brake up the classic block by displacement and height variations; to use typical modules instead of typical buildings; the appropriation of urban land beside the buildings by the families living on the ground floor to develop gardens and yards; to recover traditional elements, materials and technologies and the importance of the labour hand and skill in construction; to improve the variety of designs by the participation of many architects projecting different buildings.

This project also coincided with more flexible and "generous" housing area standards<sup>11</sup> which helped to achieve a slightly higher indoor quality. Nevertheless the external design quality is not uniform and if it is true that the architects didn't recurred this time to the models of the '50s. on the other hand, some designs result excessively "overcharged." It might be an answer to the accumulated unsatisfied desires of the architects to make "different things."

The project of the Village for the Panamerican Games held in Cuba in 1991<sup>12</sup> proposed another new alternative. Departing from a general plan which recovered the traditional urban block (super-block in this case) introduced open spaces to the interior of the block, keeping at the same time, the continuity of the facade, and established a land subdivision in plots which allowed several architects to project different buildings.

This is a guarantee of the variety, but not necessarily of the architectural design quality, that is neither uniform in this case. Some architects couldn't resist the influence of the later Post-Modernism arriving by the International Magazines of Architecture, and also the unsatisfied desires to do "different designs" went up again.

### Self Constructed housing

The "self-help housing" has also been built since the triumph of the Revolution, in a parallel way, by those families who having resources for that, can afford the housing construction by themselves or with less help from the State.

Independently of the major or minor degree of professional intervention (architects and or engineers) the model followed during these 40 years (with few exceptions) corresponds to the mid social class housing paradigm of the '50s, which is still an unavoidable reference for people and also for some professionals.

### CONCLUSIONS

The exposed synthesis about the main housing realisations in Havana during these 40 years has the intention to offer a basis

to analyse the probable causes which determine, on one hand, the decreasing quality in results and on the other hand, the persistence of referent models corresponding to 50 years ago.

The lack of good contemporary referents could be one important reason (surely not the only one) that motivate the population as well as the professionals to look for "new models" into the architecture produced before 1959.

On the other hand, important opportunities to offer these good and qualified contemporary referents have been lost by the professionals, when, instead of looking for proper answers based on own particular conditions, they have copied foreign current models or old national ones. Other negative "ingredient" has undoubtedly been the interest of some architects to be successful making "different projects", but without a former solid experience in designing without prefab and typicality restrictions.

### REFERENCES

- <sup>1</sup> See publications by Luis Eduardo Rodríguez about modern architecture in Cuba.
- <sup>2</sup> This can be seen in mid social class neighbourhood such as "Nuevo Vedado."
- <sup>3</sup> What is said has been confirmed in researches carried out by the author, which results have been divulged in several articles published in "Arquitectura y Urbanismo" magazine.
- <sup>4</sup> The buildings "E" type (mainly "E 14", the most repeated all over the city) were built by traditional block or brick walls and only the slabs were prefab in site, contrarily to what happened in the rest of the Country, where most of the housing were built by prefab heavy big panel systems.
- <sup>5</sup> See "Un hilo dorado" by Perlin and Butty, Editorial Blume, 1985, pp.58-171.
- <sup>6</sup> The Urban Housing Standard of 1979 established the smallest area indicators for social housing in Cuba.
- <sup>7</sup> This affirmation is based on the book published by the autor: "Economía y Calidad en la Vivienda. Un enfoque cubano", Editorial Científico Técnica, Havana, 1997.
- <sup>8</sup> Micro-brigades were born in 1970 as a solution to find labour to built housing in the "new development" areas of the city. They were integrated by workers coming from the same labour centre. In 1986, they were "revitalised", to built "atypical" buildings in the consolidated city.
- <sup>9</sup> See the Catalogue of Projects edited by the Project Group of the Micro-brigades in "Plaza de la Revolución" municipality in 1987.
- <sup>10</sup> This project was initially leaded by the American architect Hook Rorick and continued by a project team belonging to the "Empresa Provincial de Proyectos de Ciudad del Poder Popular de Ciudad de la Habana", today "DCH." It got the Urbanism Award of the City in 1997.
- <sup>11</sup> This project was also made by DCH and leaded by Arch. Roberto Caballero.

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