

## Building the *barbacoas* in Havana, Cuba

### Informal construction sheds light on modernity in Latin America

PATRICIO DEL REAL  
Clemson University

On a recent research trip to study informal construction in Cuba I met Consuelo, a 57-year-old divorced and retired woman who, like many in Havana, had built her own home, a *barbacoa*, inside a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Colonial mansion. A *barbacoa* is a platform constructed in the interior of an existing space, more often in the interior of Colonial buildings (as well as buildings with similar spatial typologies) in the old city center. Throughout the years Consuelo had transformed the space she occupied, and now it was time for another change.

"I need to rebuild the *barbacoa*. It's all rotten. But this time I want it permanent."

Consuelo explained. I offered my help and, with the help of her son-in-law Gidalberto (Fig. 1), began the arduous job of mixing concrete by hand directly on the marble tile that covered her living room floor. The two steel I-beams that would support the thin concrete slab were brought in and installed five months earlier. "They were from a

building that collapsed. We had to carry them by hand, just imagine!" Gidalberto explained. Eight hours later, and what seemed to be an endless parade of carrying the bucket of concrete up a locally made spiral stair, Consuelo's *barbacoa* had a *placa* [a permanent floor].

Throughout the encounter I began to wonder: why do we as architects continue to be fascinated and seduced by the informal? What I was doing was not architecture; there was no design involved, just small decisions accompanied by heavy labor. Yet, at the same time, I glimpsed a connection to the overall processes of modernization that Consuelo, with her individual actions, unknowingly engaged. This building practice reveals the persistent complicity architecture continues to have with the dominant power structure and the possibilities inherent in the study of urban vernacular and its rise during modernization in a variety of Latin American nations.

The *favelas* of Rio, Caracas or Havana emerged from the great contradictions of industrialization; yet, they also materialize a lost significance. For many architects the social and formal *bricolage* of shantytowns reveal the organic production of pre-industrial communities. This aura of a lost past is expressed in their use of materials, in their dense urban forms, in their compact social structures, in their use of traditional techniques and collective endeavor. But, as my back ached and sweat covered my body, I questioned the enchanting descriptions of so many writings about informal constructions. This type of labor holds no romance, and even less charm is inherent in the economic pressure imposed on the inhabitants.

The project of modernity in Latin America launched through architecture intended to end all this. There would be no more shantytowns; no more need for people to scrape together materials to build their living space. But did the modern project intend to

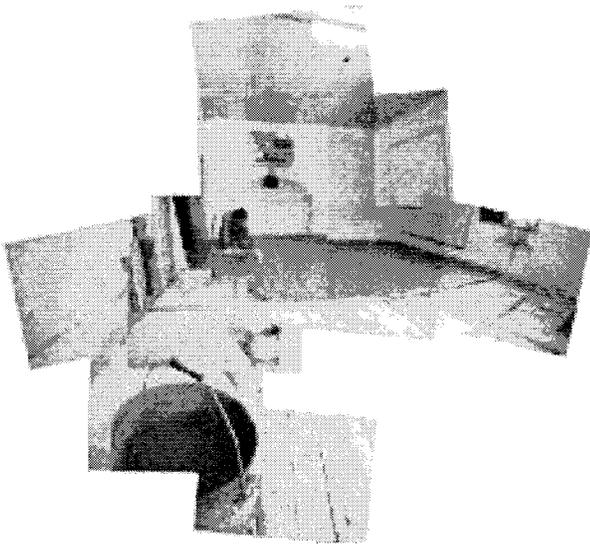


Fig. 1

end popular expressions as a whole, and with it self-determination, abolishing a key form of liberty? I continue to search for answers to these questions through my personal research into a variety of areas in Latin America.

### **PRODUCT VS. TACTICS: THE VERNACULAR IN LATIN AMERICA**

By focusing on the grand narratives, scholars of Latin American Modern architecture lose sight of less unilateral postures that, in the beginning, permeated the entire modern project. This projected viewpoint, elaborated through black and white photography – the preferred and selective form of representation of the buildings of the period – attempts to lock the interpretation of the Modern project to a singular epic and monumental stance. The juxtaposition of the heroic subject newly completed, unoccupied and in black and white, as in the case of the *Pedregulho* (1947-1952) by architect Affonso Reidy (or any other example of the period) against the colorful yet neglected ruin of the lived reality of the everyday, exemplifies the ideological manipulation of the Modern project. The extraction of the everyday from the study of modernity opens the door to its mystification, establishing an ideology that perceives in these forms the failure of modernity itself. For some, this ideology of failure has erased the belief in collective improvement, the prime objective of the modernist project. Yet, in examples like the one of Consuelo (one of thousands in Havana alone), we encounter again this collective force that remained buried in the images of the modern period. Its abstract persona materializes only through the reflection of the idea of the nation.

Perhaps nowhere else than in Latin America did this fusion between modern architecture and the state become so complete. The project of modernization that gave us the mammoth *23 de Enero* housing complex designed by Carlos Raúl Villanueva, in Caracas, Venezuela, is tied to this idea of “nation” carried by the dictatorship of Pérez Giménez. Governments may have failed to forward an industrialization process that mimicked those of Europe or the United States; yet, society did not fail in constructing a collective and modern praxis that would give expressions to its needs.

Marginal classes participate in society. The process

of nation building is centered on the idea of the citizen – a status acquired “magically” by all those born on national soil. It is this abstract idea, built and supported through complex cultural processes, that generates that cohesive participation not given by the economy. It is the idea of nation, so manipulated by the state, that maintains the marginal sector within society. As sufferers and none beneficiaries of the economic development and policies of the nation or the city, informal settlers become a vibrant and important cultural force in society. Yet, this force is recognized only as an individual’s separation from the mass that generated it. It is only when inserted within bourgeois individuality that the creative cultural forces generated by informality are accepted.

The creation of a better world through the exposure of historical deficiencies and the building of a new society remains the idea and virtue of Modernity. In Latin America we can experience, even today, the glow of this utopic dream. Centered on products like the *Unidad 1* in La Habana del Este, Cuba (1959-1961), the University City in Mexico City, Mexico (1950-1956) or the *Unidad Vecinal Portales* in Santiago, Chile (1954-1965), modern architecture constructed and propositioned the image of a new collective. Yet, these successful projects opened the door to the transference of utopia into images, forwarding clichés that produce nostalgia for the future. As Toni Negri has so elegantly pointed out, utopia is not consumed in its realization; it suffocates only by the abandonment of the fight that calls it forth.

The study of the rise of informality in Latin American architecture during the period centered around 1950 is one that must receive attention if we are to ever fully understand the Modern Project. By informality, I mean the production of illegal settlements that grew out of the process of industrialization around most capital cities in Latin America and the “Third World.” The dialectic between informal settlements and the officially sanctioned constructions of the Modern – centered on formal architectural discourse – demonstrates that the project of modernity was always accompanied by informality, by all those productions (spatial and economic) that escaped the regulation of central governments and institutions. Already in the early stages of economic modernization (for example, that of Bogotá in the 1920’s) we encounter the migration processes that segregated, fragmented and dispersed cities in Latin America.

Informality is therefore a product of modernization, and the dialectic between these two forms and forces is of extreme importance if modernity is to be understood. The *favelas* propose an alternative Modern project. Their study shines light on alternative processes and on the ideological manipulation of the project of modernity as a whole.

The issue of informality is cloaked or renewed in architecture through the notion of the vernacular. By vernacular I refer to pre-industrial forms and processes that are outside the formal discourse of architecture but are nonetheless captured through ideological concepts to recall an eternal and natural order. This pre-industrial informality, summarized in the seminal work of Bernard Rudofsky's *Architecture without Architects*, attempts to present a clear reference from which to understand the Modern project. For Rudofsky, processes that resemble or recall this past are seen as outside the Modern; and he is not alone in this interpretation. The notion of organic architecture that developed after World War II in Europe as it was exposed in the Italian journal *Metron*, firmly develops the exclusion of the informal from the Modern project.

In Latin America, the vernacular is always present in Modern architecture. It is either a sounding board or a brick wall; it is either a space of questioning or a static force that blocks progress. Already in the mid 1930s we encounter an official position that attempts to balance and synthesize the vernacular and the modern. The realization of the exhibition *Brazil Builds*, at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, in 1943 with its juxtaposition of vernacular Colonial architecture and Modern architecture of Brazil posits a synthetic proposition and interpretation of modernity for architects in Europe and the United States. The restoration work of Lucio Costa, mainly that of the Baroque architecture of Minas Gerais as well as his work with Luso-Brazilian Colonial furniture, exemplifies the synthesis that was demanded by Modern architects in Latin America. Similar work, although later, by architect Eugenio Batista in Cuba or art historian Mario Buschiazzi in Argentina, exemplify the importance that the vernacular had for the construction of the modern subject in Latin America.

Yet, for architecture, the vernacular was always an elusive subject. The tradition of the vernacular and its influence on modernity has customarily been downplayed. Centered on products rather

than on tactics, scholars of modern architecture in Latin America seem to forget the process of the dialectic at hand, the principals that in its origin tie the modern project to the collective, its reliance on forms of the vernacular. That "core" which CIAM 8 so desperately tried to identify and capture, elusively translated by Josep Lluís Sert as *centro*, remained intangible, mysterious and obscure. Framed only through architectural discourse, the vernacular became available for consumption by political and economic interests. One only has to see the Master Plan for Havana, realized by Town Planning Associates (Josep Lluís Sert and Paul Lester Wiener) in 1956 to understand the deep roots of the heroic within all modern projects. The insistence by Sert and Wiener to monumentalize the vernacular, through a double utilization of history – preservation and transformative replication – compromised their proposal for the city and singularized the forms of inhabiting it. Their use of the patio, the core of vernacular colonial forms, to solve the new infrastructure and circulation demands imposed on the historic city, exemplifies this dual approximation.

The study of the informal as presented in illegal settlements is not a typical subject of inquiry for architects. The examination of these forms and practices that developed because of modernity are generally relegated to planning and development fields. I believe that the *favelas*, the *ranchos*, the shantytowns, the *tapancos*, the *chabolas*, the *callampas*, the *barbacoas* are an architectural challenge; they are a question rooted in modernity. How the black and white pictures of the heroic subject have been colored remains unexamined. How this formal and social *bricolage* responds to legal and economic codes that carve space is disregarded. How self-management (*autogestión*) disarticulates the official process of building, central to all architectural practice, remains distrusted. Because of the fundamental opposition between formal and informal productions – an opposition that strikes at the core of the modern city – architects refuse the significance of contemporary forms of the vernacular.

### **BARBACOAS: SITES OF INDEPENDENCE**

Over the past years I have been researching the *barbacoas* in Havana, Cuba (the reason for my participation in one's construction) in an attempt

to understand their connection to the process of modernization in Latin America. These lesser gestures, trapped within a heroic subject or free in the everyday, capture the fascinating complexity of the project of modernity in Latin America.

*Barbacoas* can be as simple as mezzanines or as complex as independent structures with multiple rooms and levels wedged in residual spaces, patios or staircases. A *barbacoa* is built to gain more space, in almost all cases, more living space. Composed of beams and planks, these structures are traditionally built out of wood, although other materials that can serve as structure and surface are also employed. They reflect a dense urban inhabitation performing an intense use of existing space that alters or reconfigures its social composition and dynamics by adding yet another layer to the idea of the city. The *barbacoas* unleash a succession of transformations of space organized around techniques and methods that fall outside the control of experts.

*Barbacoas* gain their full potentiality in single room homes. The platform becomes a living unit; very much like Girolamo Bezoni's illustration of the living habits of pre-conquest American natives. The transformation is prompted by necessity, as it manifests through the need to incorporate the different functions of a home (generally captured in living, eating, services and sleeping) in one room. Here the existing space clearly imposes its limits, limits that serve for transgression and transformation. The general disposition of a small home is for all public activities (kitchen, eating and living) to be in the lower level. The more private activity of sleeping and retreat is in the upper level provided by the *barbacoa*. In this sense the *barbacoas* are built to provide a space for sleeping, and for a retreat from the public world. Services, highly dependent on infrastructure (such as water, waste and gas), usually remain in the lower level. These of course are general rules for the reality is that one encounters just about any possible arrangement.

Ninety percent (90%) of these constructions have no official technical assistance and only five to 10% have building permits (Chinea, 3). Technical assistance comes unofficially, in the form of conversations with family and friends, or through paid, yet illegal, services. Personal experience is vital for their construction, since all the cases involve self-construction devoid of any formal training. The capacity of the *barbacoas* to build and transform

the city should not go unnoticed. From the Housing and Population Census of 1995 of the historic center 51.4% of buildings have been transformed with *barbacoas*, a total of approximately 10,813. (Mesías, *La Habana desde dentro*, 37). But in 1982 there were *barbacoas* in 52% of all housing stock in the municipality of La Habana Vieja, a total of 17,074. (Mesías, *La Habana desde dentro*, 37). As Mesías states this represents 7,580 housing units of 45m<sup>2</sup> or 37,942 rooms of 9m<sup>2</sup>. The 1995 census of just the historic center detected that 44.5% of these transformations occurred between 1981 and 1995.

Space records the life of the family, its history. The need for more living space, the need for a new form of privacy (because of a marriage, a new daughter or son) makes the *barbacoas*, and all these forms of transformations, a diary of the family's history. It is the response of a specific need, and its materialization in space. Stories abound: Yolanda lives with her daughter, her father and mother in an 2.8m x 7m two-story structure, in a street near the *Cristo del Buen Viaje* church, in old Havana.

She was very open and talkative when I interviewed her and showed me nearly all aspects of her home. The former single family mansion they occupy (which now has 22 rooms with multiple families) was once a very elegant building with a marble staircase, cast-iron ornamental details and stained glass covered archways. Yolanda's family, like countless others, is having problems with humidity and with rain. Their "house" is built halfway between the archway and the patio of the mid 18<sup>th</sup> Century *casa alta con zaguán*. It used to stop short of the patio, being two small rooms (a lower level with the kitchen and bathroom and an upper level with one bedroom) within the covered archway. The stained glass arch was "her window;" she slept facing it, sharing her parents' bedroom. She confessed how her parents couldn't have sex because they all shared the same cramped quarters. So, eight years ago, they made the expansion that created the living room and her bedroom, destroying the stained glass window in the process. The arch forms a door now (Fig. 2) to the room she shares with her three-year-old daughter.

Yolanda is not married and is presently unemployed since she had to stop working to take care of her mother when she was diagnosed with a spinal tumor. Despite the new family developments, the

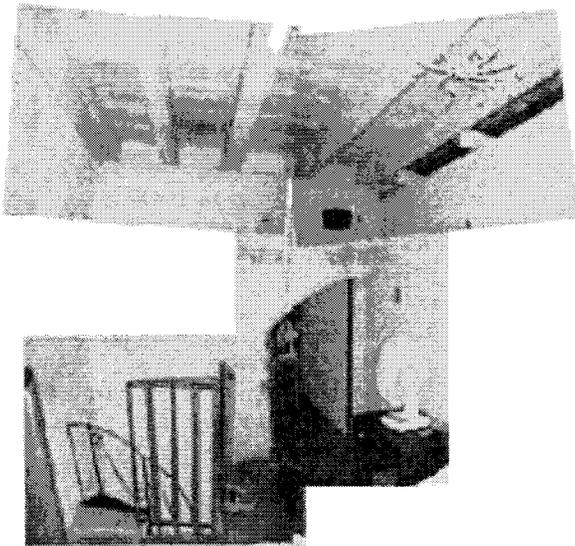


Fig. 2

state of the structure is excellent, made with good quality materials (considering what is available) and is kept clean and ordered. They are Christians, Yolanda told me. "My daughter goes to the archbishop's Catholic school. But," she added: "I am also a member of the Communist party."

Occurring in and within the traditional city, the *barbacoas* act directly on the built heritage of the urban fabric. In this way, they manage and manipulate a system of values (economic, social, cultural, historical) that is absent in other forms of informality. By occupying the center of the city and acting on and from it, these constructions propose a different centrality, one based on physicality and action. The centrality of history ceases to be a discursive abstract formulation used to capture international capital (for example, with tourism), and becomes an active occupation that uses the works of history.

When Consuelo, like Yolanda, removed the early 19<sup>th</sup> Century stained glass from the traditional colonial arch (called a *sol de medio punto*) on her home to communicate her *barbacoa* to the new expansion we built, she acted like her Colonial predecessors who would transform their homes to suit their needs. Consuelo saved the pieces, "for the future," she stated. "One never knows when these will come handy." Although Consuelo understands the historic value of the house she is occupying (she is most proud of one of the few remaining, perfectly preserved stained glass in her kitchen window), it doesn't keep her from making necessary adjustments. She acts

on her space, she owns it. This appropriation of the values of culture (its built heritage) challenges the institutionalized forms that crystallized around these values to promote capital ventures be it through tourism or speculative development.

The *barbacoas* perform a fragmentation of space that allows for its new assembly. The inhabitants of the *barbacoas* construct community through the act of building, and in doing so they change the general structure of society. The Revolutionary government's attempts to institutionalize, incorporate, eradicate and control self-construction exhibits the power that this activity has in building community. Yet these expressions remain under official views circumscribed to general planning and policy issues; they remain undervalued, distrusted and illegal. The interaction between this community (created through the occupation and the making of place) and the government (its organizational structures that reach deep into each city block) present a unique dialectic between formal and informal processes that reveal the way in which marginal communities in Cuba build place. The capacity of the *barbacoas* to create a new spatial grammar, a living spatial language, transforms them into sites of independence, into autonomous zones where the population creates an independent and self-realized community.

#### BIBLIOGRAPHY:

BENZONI, Girolamo. *La historia del mundo nuevo*, [trad. Carlos Radicati di Primeglio], Lima: Universidad de San Marcos, 1967

CHINEA HERNANDEZ, Madelín, "Ideas para un modelo de intervención en la vivienda de interés social," *Planificación Física*, La Habana: Cuba, 2003.

GOVERNEUR, David/ GRAUER, Oscar, "On informal settlements in the city: the barrios of Caracas," *Quaderns* no. 228, Enero, 2001.

GOODWIN, Philip. *Brazil builds; architecture new and old, 1652-1942*, [photographs by G.E. Kidder Smith], New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1943.

MORGIONI, Regina. "La Casa dell'uomo ovvero: Il paradigma della lumaca," *Arquitectura, ciudad e ideología antiurbana*, Pamplona: Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura, Universidad de Navarra, 2002.

MESIAS, Rosendo/ TAPIA, Ricardo Eds. *Habitat Popular Progresivo*, Santiago de Chile: CYTED, 2002

MESIAS, Rosendo/ SUAREZ, Alejandro. *Los Centros Vivos*, La Habana/México: CYTED, 2002.

MESIAS Rosendo, "La Habana desde el Centro. El hábitat en la zona antigua," *Los Centros Vivos*, La Habana/México: CYTED, 2002.

*Metron*. no. 1, Aug. 1945-no. 53-54, Sept.-Dec. 1954. Roma, Editrice Sandron.

NEGRI, Antonio/ GUATTARI, Felix, *La verdades nómadas & General Intellect*, Madrid: Akal, 1999.

REIDY, Affonso. *The works of Affonso Eduardo Reidy*. Introd. by S. Giedion. Text by Klaus Franck. [Introd. trans. by Mary Hottinger. Text trans. by D. Q. Stephenson], New York: Praeger, 1960.

RUDOLFSKY, Bernard. *Architecture without architects : a short introduction to non-pedigreed architecture*, New York: Museum of Modern Art ; Garden City, N.Y.:distributed by Doubleday, c1965.

SALAS SERRANO, *Contra el hambre de vivienda*, Bogotá: Scala, 1992.

SERT, José Luís/ ROGERS Ernesto/ TYRWHITT John, *The Heart of the city: towards the humanisation of urban life*, Nendeln, Liechtenstein: Kraus Reprint, 1979

SERT José Luís / WIENER, Paul Lester. "The work of Town Planning Associates in Latin America 1945-1956," *Architectural Design*, vol. 27:6, June 1957, p. 190-213.

Image Credits:

All images by the author.