

THE PARALLEL UTOPIA

**Dreamt Cities in Cuba
(1980-1993)**

An unusual and contradictory project took place in Cuba between the Mariel boatlift and the legalisation of the US dollar: the creation of a Western architecture without a market, the launching into orbit of a utopia ignored by the Socialist State, and the activation of a movement that began as criticism of the official urban planning of the time. And it has now become the sword of Damocles hanging over the constructions of the coming capitalism.

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One

An unusual and contradictory project took place in Cuba between 1980 and 1993: the inception of Western urban planning without a market or developers, a collective utopia ignored by the Socialist State, and the activation of a movement that began as criticism of the official urban planning of the time. And it is back in the spotlight today like the sword of Damocles hanging over the constructions of State capitalism in sight. (With the plausible “Shanghaisation” of Havana around the corner, and that drive to build colossal, totemic tower blocks—mostly hotels—with hardly any empathy for the areas they are located in).

The Parallel Utopia gives an account of that unique movement. An archaeology that salvages various projects for cities and urban strategies, designed by the generation of architects born into the Cuban Revolution and who came to public light in the 1980s.

The 1980s were dubbed by the architect and author Emma Álvarez Tabío Albo as the “citizens’ decade”, and by the critic Gerardo Mosquera as the “prodigious decade”. Furthermore, that generation was defined by the poet, writer and curator Osvaldo Sánchez as the “children of utopia”, by the troubadour Carlos Varela as “the children of William Tell”, and by Iván de la Nuez as the lead player in a “dissonant culture”.

Long before that, Che Guevara had defined them as the “New Man”: a subject not sullied by capitalism or the old regime, the Frankenstein programmed to grow up in a classless society.

Through eight chapters—“Prologue City”, “Monuments in the Present”, “A Room in Tomorrow’s Future”, “Guantánamo: Final Frontier of the Cold War”, “Rebuilding the Malecón to Break Down the Wall”, “Instant Utopias”, “The Invisible City” and “City Lights”—, we shall move through a speculative architecture (not in the economic sense, but in the philosophical one) whose journey goes from the *solar* (a kind of Cuban shanty town) to the *barbacoa* (a floor or mezzanine added inside homes with high ceilings); from the Art Deco

that has survived along Havana's Malecón to the retro kitsch of the 1950s; from Italo Calvino to the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base; from rooftops to corners; from colonial tradition to the bicentenary of the French Revolution.

And all this without forgetting certain popular alternatives, to which the necessary infrastructure was offered to enable their habits to be legitimised and their housing needs to be met.

The Parallel Utopia is not an exhibition about specific buildings; it is about urban dreams. About understanding the city as a give and take between building and imagining, heritage and futurism, urban planning and popular invention, architecture and urban scale. Consequently, these projects radically shunned the recurrent stereotype of Cuban cities—and of Havana in particular—and trawled through the possibilities of a kind of *architettura povera* that would enable advancement towards the future.

Two

Fidel Castro had attested to the generational dynamics of the Revolution right from the start, while leaving a message for its children born at that time: “We are not making a Revolution for future generations. We are making a Revolution with this generation and for this generation.”

Imbued with extraordinary political pragmatism, he spoke those words at the Biblioteca Nacional; they were part of that monologue which, years later, became known as *Palabras a los intelectuales* (Words to Intellectuals). In April 1961, both the speaker and the Revolution—the one made *with* and *for* its contemporaries—were still young.

Twenty years later, the sons and daughters of those who made the Revolution—or for whom the Revolution was made—wanted to leave their own mark on Cuban culture. It was precisely at that moment when the “New Man” envisaged by Che Guevara had come of age and had burst onto the scene, ready to bestow upon itself a cultural contemporaneity in a country where political contemporaneity had already been won by their parents.

That Eighties Generation threw down two successive challenges: the first one was *aesthetic*, which predominated throughout the first half of the decade. The second one was *ideological*, which began to leave its mark on Cuban culture from 1986 onwards. As a result of these two challenges, the contradictory relationship between emerging culture and official policy at those times became increasingly strained.

Let's consider those circumstances: that Institution of Culture—Communist and Western at one and the same time—could have unceremoniously shrunk, obliged as it was to follow the governing foundation of cultural policy arising from those *Palabras a los intelectuales* of 1961: “[...] within the Revolution, everything goes; against the Revolution, nothing.”

Rather than a law, this dictum was a foundation: the cultural authorities had to *apply it* but, at the same time, they could *interpret it*. And it is fair to acknowledge that, in the 1980s, some institutions favoured an open reading that led to that paradoxical, almost “social democratic” institutional model—

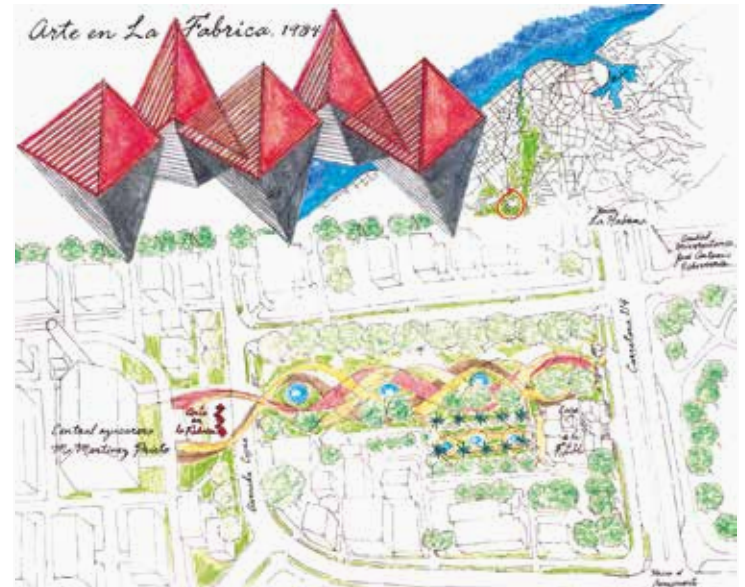
Biennials, Centres for Art and Culture, project grants—governed by the political, ideological and economic directives of a Communist State. It was asymmetry at its finest.

That Institution had urgent needs, among which were the reintroduction of Cuban culture into the West (something that the Stalinist policy of the 1970s had interrupted) or the closure of the wound inflicted by the traumatic impact of the Mariel boatlift at the very start of the decade (1980). It was also forced to face up to the coming of age of artists born during the baby boom of the 1970s, which doubled the population of Cuba. Every one of them was that “New Man” who had only lived under the Revolution, and they were all part of the first generation educated on programmes dedicated to the art teachings of Socialism.

Despite the many conflicts, all of this gave those creators an initial advantage: were the institutions going to censor the discourses and practices of those artists, intellectuals and architects they had educated?

Were they going to deny their assumptions? That is, the extension of the cultural assignment to other fields of society; the exposure of misinformation in the official press; the anthropological facet that drew on *arte povera* and was rooted in Artaud, Grotowski, early Eco or Beuys; the boom in avant-garde manifestos; the evocation of the non-institutionalised years of the Revolution; the blossoming of performance; the quest for collectivity as an alternative to massification; multidisciplinary deployments; openness to pagan forms of culture, and in particular to Afro-Cuban religions; the creation of an imaginary city by certain architects who had little chance of building a real city; the previously mentioned reintroduction of Cuban culture into the West; links with Eastern European underground movements; the questioning of national heroes and symbols; the use of irony and play; sexual open-mindedness; criticism of the packaged Marxism contained in the manuals; etc.

A notable characteristic of the time can be found in the shift from traditional centres of cultural stimulus and dynamisation towards the visual arts, something that had traditionally come from spheres that were more media driven, such as popular music.



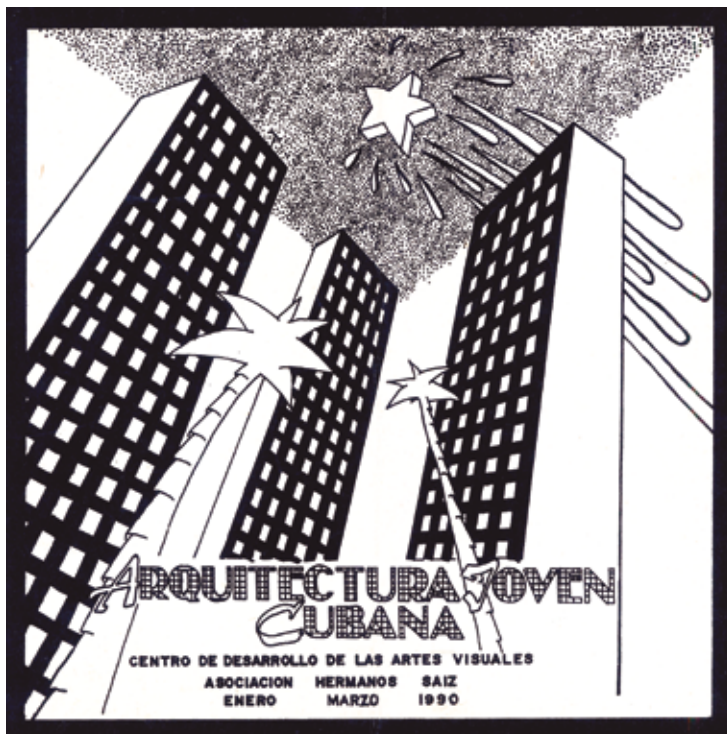
Florencio Gelabert, Juan Luis Morales and Rosendo Mesías, “Arte en la Fábrica” (Art in the Factory), Central Martínez Prieto, Marianao, Havana, 1984



Felicia Chateloin and Patricia Rodríguez,
renovation of Plaza Vieja project, 1986

Francisco Bedoya, Havana Harbour entrance
and Avenida del Puerto, 1982-1994





Arquitectura Joven Cubana (Young Cuban Architecture)
exhibition catalogue, 1990. Havana
Desing Juan Luis Morales and Teresa Ayuso

Cuban art of the 1980s—and, to a large extent, young architecture—managed to impose fashions, lead aesthetic trends, and bring about a considerable transformation of the ways in which cultural messages were generated and conveyed. It was a time when young people unabashedly stormed the sacred sites of culture, and often went beyond them. It made no difference if it was the Havana Biennial, a Robert Rauschenberg exhibition at the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes or their continual off-programme invasion of urban spaces.

This might be the time to remind everyone that culture in Socialist Cuba has historically manifested itself as a bubble in relation to other spheres of societal life such as ideology, politics or economics, which are integrated in a much more controlled manner in day-to-day practice. In the years covered by the project, a dissolution of culture in politics did not happen (as it had in the United States in 1970s, much to the alarm of the neo-conservatives). On the contrary, the practical and rhetorical modes of operation of the political world inundated the cultural movement as much as it did other areas of society. Thus, despite all the efforts made to prevent it, political art was ultimately defeated by the art policy at the end of that decade.

A number of very important peculiarities had led young Cuban artists of those times to distinguish themselves from their Communist-world colleagues, though there were various points of contact and coincidence in their hopes for opening up the system from within. Consequently, when it was made official that the Cuban government would not follow the steps of Perestroika, the contemporary art world—which had been bent on implementing its own glasnost—was left, as Heberto Padilla said in his famous poem, “out of the game”.

All of this was affected by the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe and of Sandinism in Central America, the rise of the New Right in the United States and the ageing of the New Left in Cuba. While the world considered the global era open, the island went into a survival phase, which was later called the ‘Special Period in Times of Peace’.

Neither culture nor the country would be like it had been.

Three

Those were the circumstances under which that parallel utopia unfurled; even though it had arisen from architecture, acting within the limits thereof was not deemed to be the ultimate goal. These projects can therefore be read as *studies*, sketches of a future city that, with no cement or contracts in sight, preferred to take refuge in irony rather than in bitterness. And, almost agonisingly, at that point it called for cultural plurality instead of a State of unambiguous ideological oneness.

Coinciding with the early stages of the restoration of Old Havana, that movement challenged some of the purposes thereof. It was prepared to acknowledge the contributions made to the recovery and conservation of the city, which was declared a World Heritage site in 1982, yet it was also determined to give a prominent role to subaltern manifestations while repudiating a palatial, authoritarian reconstruction that, time and again, replicated the old colonial power.

Ultimately, when it came to dreaming those cities, nothing was off limits in terms of urban design. Robert Venturi learning from everything? Of course. Aldo Rossi and his pleasant journey through history? Indeed. Philip Johnson and the potential hi-tech landing place right in the middle of Havana's Malecón? Naturally. Denise Scott Brown and her "socially responsible architecture"? How could such a commitment possibly be dodged? Charles Jencks giving quarter to the language of post-modern architecture? To be discussed without hesitating for a second. Habraken legitimising the population's decision-making on its own housing? Set it as a priority objective! Understanding the city as a mysterious wrapper yet to be unravelled, as Prat Puig had advised? Without the slightest doubt. The "anything goes" of the postmodernism that was contaminating everything happening on the shores around the island? That too, if necessary. Giving the constantly evoked yet never realised Sert plan another go? Who doesn't like what's good...

In short, that movement "learnt from everything". Not, however, from books by Venturi and Scott Brown, which

they would get hold of by any means, but instead from an urban reality that was both chaotic and mysterious. Without forgetting the masters who had previously dreamt and tried to build other utopias for the country: Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garatti, Roberto Gottardi, Walter Betancourt and Gilberto Seguí.

Like any true cultural rupture, that of the new architecture's internal logic was heterogeneous and controversial. Nevertheless, it was consistent in terms of its purposes and of addressing the obstacles that had to be overcome on a daily basis. The same could be said of its revindication of the city's own urban history, or the recovery of structural and cultural elements that had been downgraded by official history.

This was not passive urban planning. Rather, it was cutting-edge and ready to imagine the Cuban city without prejudice of any kind. From a *Congódromo* (in honour of Chano Pozo) to a proposal for celebrating the bicentenary of the French revolution, incorporating the vernacular language of carnival. From the eschatological city that, in Havana's Malecón, engulfs the universal architectural milestones (as depicted in the project entitled *Se formó el Cuchún*) to the *Fitzcarraldo*-like location of an opera house in a village (Velazco) in the eastern zone of the island. From the drawing of a city from which all visual memory has disappeared to the way in which several projects imagined Guantanamo during the thaw in Eastern Bloc-Western Bloc relations in the days around the fall of the Berlin Wall some 30 years ago. From the overlapping architecture of a few words emerging from the heat of Playa Girón to the design of a possible beach resort (Tará) that would later accommodate the children of the Chernobyl nuclear disaster. So much anticipation!

After the collapse of Communism in Eastern Europe, and after attesting to the crisis of modernity, the lead players of that parallel utopia never envisaged themselves—as asserted by Lyotard—living in a post-industrial world where knowledge had replaced progress as its emblem. Nor could they identify themselves—from their peripheral modernity—with Habermas's "grand project of Reason".

But they were able to understand that an element of the Big Bang that had exploded in Berlin would resonate on the island and that the tremor thereof would affect them forever. Furthermore, as Havana had just reached its 500th anniversary, that the most precious aspect of its heritage would precisely be its resistance.

If an architecture was capable of mixing styles and periods, then it would logically be able to accommodate the diversity of ideas of its inhabitants. An “urban democracy” of this calibre could not fail to affect the political intolerance of its governments (and its captains general, its generals, its commanders and its presidents).

Actually, the word “citizen” was used in Cuba for several decades in a pejorative way to describe delinquents or “deviants” from the Socialist project. (That too had to be drained via Havana’s Malecón in some of these projects). And, as far as the present day is concerned, that is where the message of these imaginary cities lies. In the fact that knowing that, when we dream cities, what we are really seeking is the possibility of building a human conglomeration for ourselves.

The Parallel Utopia spans 13 years of that dream. It begins with the Mariel boatlift in 1980, and ends in 1993, the year when the US dollar was legalised on the island and presaged the “rafters crisis”. This critical architecture was activated between one exodus and the other. And, paradoxically, it could only have existed within a Socialist model. A collective utopia obsessed with turning architecture into a city. And the city into citizenry.

A project by Iván de la Nuez, in collaboration with Atelier Morales

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With the special collaboration of the Cifo-Veigas Archive, Havana

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