"The effect of the contraction of the economy was most sharply reflected in the eastern region of the country, where 30 percent of the urban population lived, of which 22 percent was at risk of not having its basic needs met" (Álvarez and Mattar 2004, 80).

Mercaditos were markets that in the 1980s sold food and other stuff, in local currency and without the regulation of the state ration book (libreta). On the Plaza de la Catedral a popular art market also sold handcrafted shoes, purses, clothes, and jewelry in local currency.

In the case of literature, for example, I refer to En el cielo con diamantes (In the sky with diamonds), the most recent novel by Senel Paz (2007), which narrates the city from the perspective of the candid surprise of students on scholarship in the 1960s; this is juxtaposed with the marginal subject of El Rey de La Habana (The king of Havana) or Animal tropical (Tropical animal) by Pedro Juan Gutiérrez, for whom Havana is the setting of physical catastrophe and moral ruin. In the case of film, I refer to Cuban and Spanish co-productions such as Hacerse el sueco (Playing Swede) by Daniel Díaz Torres or Cosas que dejé en La Habana (Things I left in Havana) by Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón, in which Havana and its residents show a sympathetic face, while independent shorts like Utopía (Utopia) or Buzos (Divers) show the new man in a much more somber light. Finally, in terms of the visual arts, there are celebratory projects such as the mural created at the National Museum of Fine Arts in 2006 and the work of other artists who maintain a critical stance on the current situation, a good selection of which was on display at the exhibition States of Exchange: Artists from Cuba, in London in the spring of 2008.

The Bitter Trinquennium and the Dystopian City: Autopsy of a Utopia

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Why a Name

With the term Gray Quinquennium (1971–1976), Ambrosio Fornet condensed not only a more expansive time period of sad memories but also a twisted conception of the world built upon intolerance, exclusion, and the rejection of everything new and different. For Cuban architecture, this period began earlier and some of its consequences continue today, totaling at least three quinquennia (a period of five years). Hence my use of the term trinquennium, as nonexistent as that place utopia, where we all want to go without knowing how. On the other hand, flavors can be more evocative than those deceptive colors, as a brilliant neurotic observed upon dipping a madeleine in his tea, and hence the bitter. Writing about urbanism and urban culture entails an ever-increasing component of imagination. Perhaps for this reason I have recently resorted to writing fiction, a novel where I am condemned to the frustration of pursuing the most beautiful woman in Cuba, who died before I was born.
In the Beginning Were the Principles

In contemporary cities, as well as Cuban architecture, there appeared—with some distinctive nuances—the effects of the same rigid and authoritative cultural politics that damaged thought, literature, theater, and other intellectual and artistic works in the 1970s. That persistence is largely due to the extent, cost, social repercussions, public placement, and lasting nature of the construction works, and above all to their ties to politics and politicians. This last point makes criticism and debate on the subject of construction particularly difficult. The 1970s began earlier for Cuban architecture, masked by the nostalgic charm of the Prodigious Decade of the 1960s, and still have not ended. The dogmatism denounced in 1962, as being consubstantial with a Sovietizing sectarian microfaction whose flame did not last long, turned out not to be exclusive to a determined generation or political militancy.1

That deviation had been dismantled by a genuine, young, and iconoclastic revolution, which had triumphed because of its transgressive and renewing nature that had allowed it to mobilize the expectation for change that had seemed dormant among Cubans. However, the Manichean dogmatism that systematically erases difference and suffocates individualism would continue to survive, scaled off like an opportunistic and recurring virus. It was associated with a mediocrity in ascent that crushed any manifestation of creativity for being suspicious. Just like herpes simplex, dogmatism has no definitive cure, but there are ways of keeping it in remission.

There are essential principles for the sustenance of ecosystems that are also valid for all human activities and institutions, such as tending to current needs without compromising the possibility that future generations might resolve their own, even those that are as yet unknown; remaining within the capacity of the system to allow for its self-regeneration; or the need for one element to be able to develop various functions, and for allowing the same function to be carried about by various different elements. All of this requires the preservation of diversity and plurality and that the population be allowed active and conscious participation in the identification and solution of its own problems. Curiously, these healthy principles awoke the distrust of those who were dogmatic.

Tolerance, that shameful variant of the recognition of diversity, was seen as a weakness inappropriate for revolutionaries, and intransigence came to be seen as a virtue instead of a defect. A provincial xenophobia rejected that which was different and that which came from outside the island, including fashions and tastes that were considered too "foreign" and penetrated culture-ally by the decadent capitalist world. Ironically, those who thought that way tried to impose models from a much more distant, cold world—both geographically and culturally—that lasted as long as the life of a person. That other cultural penetration, by a socialism that proclaimed itself real, has left some dusty manuals in Cuba, a collection of conventional, grotesque monuments that attempt to give homage to unconventional heroes, and many innocent Ivans and Tatianas, increasingly cornered by the later hemorrhage of Yosyvans and Yumisleidys, where the proliferation of the letter Y reveals an escapist air.

Long Die the Difference

In the second half of the 1960s, the Art Schools of Cubanacán were collectively demonized, their creators labeled as elitist pseudo intellectuals, and their influence considered pernicious for young students of architecture. This great construction site, the most publicized of the revolutionary period, was crucified precisely for carrying out what had initially been asked of its architects: to make the most beautiful art schools of Latin America. Its opponents, aligned with a technocratic pragmatism, were inclined to sacrifice beauty to achieve technically impeccable buildings in the large quantity needed by the country. Those people, perhaps unimaginative but technically qualified, were later replaced by improvised builders, who were congratulated for "taking a step forward" without having command of the profession. Thus, the cult of improvisation had begun. Those who celebrated the obedient disposition of inept subordinates in carrying out goals and directives without questioning them, of course, were careful to seek the very best doctors when faced with the slightest problem in personal health.

The youth who dared to wear beards, long hair, blouses, and necklaces of seeds were criticized as extravagant, without the understanding that while the hippie wave—a word that some, stuck in time, still use today—was associated with soft drugs, it also upheld a pacifistic humanism that made them travelling companions with our social project. In fact, that fashion had been imposed on the world by the Cuban rebels of the Sierra, and the failure to recognize it was a marketing oversight that the most obtuse capitalist entrepreneur would not have wasted. That opposition to new fashions was part of a growing static and curiously antidialectic mentality among some decision makers, prejudiced against anything new and, above all, against anything they didn't understand. Curiously, that rejection always occurred from the point of view of a determined trend that the implacable censors had uncritically assumed in their own
youth, as if ways of dressing, combing one’s hair, or socializing in the 1940s or 1950s were somehow, by definition, more healthy than those of the 1960s or 1970s. Those criticisms came from people who generally had a political position that was more advanced than their cultural standards and were marked by a provincial petit-bourgeois, machista, anti-intellectual, uninformed mentality with a genetically encoded prejudice against the great capital city that had humiliated them with its cosmopolitanism.

Up La Rampa, Down La Rampa

The creative spirit of the 1960s was condensed in La Rampa. As some contemporary—Paolo Gasparini, perhaps—said, “more than a place, La Rampa was a state of mind.” Those few, sloped blocks formed the still brand-new physical frame, with a vivid urban image, for a rich mixture of happenings, buildings, and people. There impressive cultural interventions produced accompanying events such as the Seventh Congress of the International Union of Architects, the Cuban Cultural Exhibition, the May Salon, the World Chess Championships, or the Third World Expo. Some of the most important works of modern Cuban architecture were built in La Rampa at the time, such as the Cuba Pavilion (Juan Campos, 1963), with a perfect urban scale, or the Coppelia ice cream parlor (Mario Girona, 1966). Nearby in the central corner of Infanta and San Lázaro, the first important commemorative monument since 1959 and the first abstract one (Emilio Escobar, Mario Coyula, Sonia Domínguez, and Armando Hernández) was built in 1965–1967, dedicated to the university martyrs; some found it too radical and hermetic.

Part of the awakening of La Rampa was also the remodeling of the old Caballero Funeral Home in 1967 (Joaquín Rallo, Roberto Gottardi, and Mario Coyula), turning it into a multipurpose cultural center. The work was met with immediate success, especially among youths, and became a meeting center for the enfermitos of La Rampa. Following the old method of “getting rid of the couch and the lover,” the place was closed down and turned into the animation workshop of the Instituto Cubano de Radio y Televisión, which was closed to the public. The “undesirables” could only cross the street and stand on the sidewalk in front. Some blocks of pressed scrap metal that formed the piece donated by the great sculptor from Marseilles, César, at the end of the May Salon, ended up as anchors for the chains that served to enclose the parking lot. For me, that closure symbolically marked the beginning of the Bitter Trinquennium in architecture, already foreshadowed by the paralysis of the art schools.

The following year brought the student protests of May in France, the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia, and the Revolutionary Offensive in Cuba, which liquidated what had remained of small private businesses. However, transitions are never black and white, nor can they be defined by exact dates. Together with backward steps in culture, there were also good works other than those already mentioned: 1968 was also the year of Gutiérrez Alea’s Memories of Underdevelopment and the Command Posts of Agriculture, of which those of Nazareno (Raúl González Romero, with Sonia Domínguez, Rosalía Fernández, and others) and Menocal (Roberto Gottardi) in Havana and that of Yarey (Sergio Baroni) in Granma stood out for their good architecture; while the previous year had seen the inauguration of the famous Cuba Pavilion for Expo ’67 in Montreal (Vittorio Garatti and Sergio Baroni). In the second half of that decade, the National Center of Scientific Investigation (Joaquín Galván, Sonia Domínguez, and others) was built, the projects of Lenin Park (Antonio Quintana, with Juan Tosca, Mario Girona, and others) were also begun, while the Medical School of Santiago de Cuba (Rodrigo Tascon) was built, and the town of Velasco appeared on the map with its emblematic House of Culture, finished after the early death of its creator, Walter Betancourt.

The notable emphasis on research and experimentation in building materials and technologies during the 1960s translated into works of high quality affiliated with the brutalist aesthetic that was in vogue around the world at the time and that includes the master work of the Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAB), 1960–1964 (Humberto Alonso and others). This same time period also gave birth to a technocratic fetishism that always relied on the latest trendy building system to resolve problems as complex as housing. This simplistic focus obviated other urban, social, economic, organizational, and cultural components that come into play in creating a strategy, in the process of conceiving, producing, and consuming a manmade work; the user was almost never consulted by those who presumed to already know what was best for that unknown person. Within the state apparatus itself, the subsequent separation of enterprises into design firms and construction companies further interfered with the organic continuity between the process and the final product. Taking the supervision of the project away from the architect is like stealing a newborn away from its mother and giving it to another person; and supervising it only if one is hired for that purpose is like putting a price on that maternity.

In the first half of the 1960s, the average production had reached a high level of architectural quality that extended to new programs and spread throughout
the country. In reality, it was the golden age of modern architecture in Cuba,
topping the mythical level of the previous decade. It is useful to underscore that
this was achieved at a national juncture even more difficult than the current
one, with great consciousness-raising strains and siding with political parties,
and the consequent personal and collective splits and ruptures. Along with
that came the stampede of the majority of the most renowned architects, the
widespread scarcity of materials, and an internal destabilization that included
armed aggression supported from abroad. The natural question is: if great
things were achieved then, what went wrong later? The other concomitant
question is: what can be done to regain that level of construction?

By the mid-1960s, the Ministry of Construction had absorbed other com-
peting building entities such as the National Institute of Housing and Savings
(NINAY) and the Department of Rural Housing of the Institute for Agrarian
Reform (INRA), both having high-quality designs and execution. This process
of centralization increased with the subsequent transfer of the building appa-
ratus of the local governments (Coordination, Operations, and Inspection
Boards, jucelu) and of the maintenance and construction equipment of dif-
f erent ministries. In parallel, the classification of projects into fewer building
types increased, and norms proliferated that sought standardization at the
national level as the supposed only way to industrialize construction, making
it cheaper, and achieve mass production. The authority of the architect began
to migrate from the project planner to the builders and the investors. This
shift in decision making is equivalent to letting printers determine how books
should be written.

The Arrival of the 1970s

Apart from a few good works, design in the 1970s began to lose its earlier high
standard, and the quality of construction got worse without it reaching the
quantity required. The individual authorship of projects was silenced, a cus-
tom that continues today in the mass media when they mention workers and
administrators but not the architect of a work. In this way, not only is the
creator of a project not given credit for achieving an elegant solution, he or
she is also relieved of responsibility for anything that turns out badly.

On occasion the supposed beauty and fine execution of frankly bad works
were praised publicly, which disoriented the population. This, together with
the influence of South American telenovelas and kitsch Miami architecture,
can explain the appearance of ridiculous styles that deform the urban land-
scape and distort its identities, as occurs with façades and high garden walls
touched up with criollo tiles, low semicircular arches, and the large doors
made of nice, varnished wood that have now become a status symbol. Some-
ting similar happens with the architecture for tourism, where there is often a
vague "Cubanness" that fails to transcend falsified folklore to give the western
part of the country a Caribbean flavor it never had but that tourists expect and
receive.

The problems that appeared in architectural production were, at the same
time, the cause and effect of an excessive centralization that eliminated alter-
 natives and nullified criticism and praise of the merits and defects of a work,
confusing social value with cultural significance. Fleeing this claustrophobic
framework, many good architectural designers took refuge in physical plan-
ing, the restoration and conservation of historical monuments, criticism,
and teaching. That escape changed in the 1990s, when several talents crossed
over to the better-compensated world of the hard-cash economy, while other
younger architects opted to leave the country.

More important than the individual misfortune of "conflictive" architects,
humiliated and pushed to the side or else given banal tasks, were the conse-
quences on contemporary Cuban architecture. With few exceptions, it has not
been possible to match the high level of quality found in the buildings that are
part of the valuable patrimony found in Cuban cities, including that of the first
years after the revolutionary triumph. The principal cause should not be
sought in the professional qualifications of Cuban architects but rather in the
conditions in which they work and especially in their loss of authority over
projects and their execution. There was even a stage during the Bitter Trin-
quennium in which the very title of architect acquired a pejorative connotation
in the jargon of camaraderie within the establishment, inserted in the tradit-
ional machista joking that classified architects as weak and untrustworthy.

A combination of anonymous egalitarianism, technocratic bureaucracy,
and dogmatism in people who deemed themselves to be repositories of abso-
lute truth imposed rigid models copied from other climatic and cultural
contexts, undermined the authority and image of the architect as creator, and
killed conceptual and formal experimentation. A few special works, promoted
by very high-level authorities, rose above that amorphous mass, but they had
little weight in the image of the city because of their inaccessibility, due in part
to subjects and users who were also special. The best architects were sought for
those works. They left their usual work and chose their own collaborators to
work in small teams with a creative liberty that others did not enjoy. The
results demonstrated that that method works when quality is truly an interest.

At the beginning of the 1970s, the School of Architecture worked inten-
sively on projects built in conjunction with Desarrollo de Edificaciones Sociales y Agropecuarias (DESA), although some of these projects suffered from changes during the construction process that were imposed by the increasing power of the builder. Beginning in the middle of the decade, the city of Havana benefitted from the program of Urban Revival and supergraphics that rapidly improved, and with few resources, the image of important urban hubs that had seen better days. Two mayors with foresight supported this approach, but unfortunately, it would later be abandoned due to the increasing fatalism of the government.

Discrete but continuous achievements were also made in the conservation and restoration of historic monuments. This paved the way for the impressive work of the Office of the City Historian, especially beginning in 1993 when it was allowed to develop its own businesses as independent sources of income, reconciling cultural and economic interests. In that way, what some had earlier seen as a burden became valued resources. In earlier times, when money was not important, a group of good architects that worked for the Department of School Construction demonstrated that one could make good architecture even with an inflexible building system as long as there was architectural talent as well as an equally talented architect as head of the team. They were responsible for the whole process, from design to the supervision of works that they had planned. The paradox is that to receive support, one must first gain it or, rather, demonstrate that one doesn't need it.

City, Country, and Suburb

The small influence that the best works have had on the existing city was also determined by their almost always peripheral placement. This could have reflected a rejection, not necessarily explicit, of the traditional city—seen as a shiny, swindling parasite plagued with vice and bad habits, as opposed to the healthy rural world. The taste for the remote began very early on with the large construction sites, in part justified by the need for larger areas of land. So it was with the first apartment complex built by the revolutionary government, Unit No. 1 of East Havana, with the CUBAE and the Art Schools of Cubanacán, the Lenin Vocational School, Lenin Park, the Permanent Exhibition of the Economic and Social Development of the Republic of Cuba (EXPOCUBA), the Western Scientific Pole that started with the National Center for Scientific Research (CENIC), the Agricultural Command Posts, and more recently the University of Information Science (UCI). On the other hand, the plans for almost all of these installations were larger than necessary: since there was no price for the land, this nonrenewable resource was wasted. Actually, while midsize Cuban cities doubled in population, the urban surface area tripled.

The Monte Barreto complex in the western part of Havana has been a special case, with seven hotels, eighteen office buildings and stores, and a building of condominiums for tourists. Monte Barreto was based on a spread out model of suburban development, dependent on private cars, which has been highly criticized in the countries that went through this model first. This neighborhood is built for a single hard currency, and for a single type of people, those who have access to it. There is no housing for the regular population, nor the everyday services that complement it. All of this makes the development an enclave of wealth, cut off from the rest of the city, running the risk that one day someone will decide to fence it off.

One of the hotels in that subdivision has fixed windows that force the guest to pop his or her head halfway out of the only available opening to smell the ocean that faces the building. The mirrored glass façade—a fashion that has spread like a virus among architects working in State design enterprises—also turns the building into a huge solar heater. The same thing happened with the façade of the beautiful bank on Fifth Avenue and 112th Street by Max Borges, one of the best Cuban architects in the 1950s: The original large panels of transparent glass showed the graceful structure of the columns that open like mushrooms to form the ceiling. Those glass panes were needlessly replaced by reflective ones that no longer allow one to see the interior structure, all because of the same pathetic concept of prestige with which a masuta darkens the windows of his shiny car. At the same time, the concentration of investments in historically privileged zones reinforces the tendency toward a dual city, one geared toward visitors and the other toward the rest of the population.

The early policy of urbanizing the countryside translated into more than six hundred new rural towns, including the gem that is still Las Terrazas, inaugurated in 1968. However, that was not enough to stabilize the labor force required by agriculture. Migration was constant but no longer to the capital, but rather it was to provincial capitals and intermediate cities, stimulated by the erroneous strategy of building standard five-story buildings in the middle of the countryside. With this, rural residents encountered all the inconveniences of living on upper floors, quite different from what they were used to, and yet without any of the advantages of living in the city. As a result, they ended up moving to a real city. There has been, in fact, a reverse movement, as the capital has become ruralized with guano palm shacks in a vague neo-