1958
Architecture, sex and revolution

by Mario Coyula

That would be the last year in office for Fulgencio Batista, but neither he nor I knew it. The University was closed for good after the assault on the Presidential Palace in March 1957, and I could devote myself more to work with an architect friend of mine. Oscar Fernández Tauler was a few years older than me, and he was nicknamed El Oso (The Bear) for his hairy corpulence. His most important project was the design of a 17-floor building on 23rd Street between D and E, in El Vedado. We had developed an elongated hexagonal plan, protected from the afternoon sun by vertical rough concrete screens showing the texture of the wooden forms. The influence of Frank Lloyd Wright was evident, but our Price Tower was finally distorted by the owner's demands. Looking for more profits, he asked for one extra garage floor, shrinking the scale of the lobby required by a building that size. The interior geometry of the apartments was also tamed to lose the most innovative angles, so as to better assimilate conventional furniture.

During the excavations for the foundation, the operator of the pneumatic hammer fell suddenly, hammer included, in a hidden cavern under the seemingly firm rock. Scary, but he was unhurt. Yet at the end of that same year, while I was abroad, there was another accident: a worker fell from one of the highest floors during the pouring of a concrete slab—a dizzy spell, probably from hunger, that took his life. There is a touching song by Chico Buarque about a similar dramatic issue. This may have influenced my early aversion for high-rise buildings, though I accept that the aversion to lock myself into an elevator has been a stronger reason. The building was finished after the triumph of the Revolution by INAV, directed by Pastorita Núñez, and named Hermanas Giralt.

Oscar studied at the Faculty of Architecture from Havana University while playing professional baseball in the United States. He was also a catcher for the Almendares Cuban ball team. Once I saw him hit a straight-line home run over the left field fence of El Cerro ball park. That fascinated me. I had been a lousy outfielder in the Inter-Faculty tournaments, and an average back-stroke swimmer with the Havana University team, where I was practically the only Habanero in a Santiaguero microcosm—they had already begun to infect me with their typical accent. In baseball I had a beautiful swing, but didn’t hit the ball. In swimming, my style was perfect, but I never arrived first. The obsessive drive for Good Form extended from Architecture into sports; and the horror of making a fool finally made me leave them. The same thing happened with the fleeting love for painting, after a creative crisis that lasted several days in front of a white canvas; and with dancing in parties, when I discovered that there were other less
hypocritical forms of hugging a girl, without having to wear a tuxedo and punish her with my clumsy steps.

I lived in the western Havana suburb of La Sierra, Oscar’s same neighborhood; and we worked in an old house three blocks away from mine, in the northeastern border with Miramar. It was funny to see how local residents whimsically tilted the edge of their neighborhood toward the Northeast, to elegant Miramar, away from the also adjacent but plebeian Buenavista. Still more curious was to check how the quality of the houses also changed as they came closer to both borders, and that pattern was even repeated in each block. Emilio Escobar, my childhood friend and schoolmate at the University also worked with Oscar for a time. He was a thin guy with a suicidal vocation who played on the University team of American college football, clashing with guys at least a hundred pounds heavier. Emilio was always very creative, and although he was not naturally gifted for drawing, he knew how to find alternatives with a very strong personal expression, especially appropriate to represent his visions.

That fantasy was also applied to other innovative proposals, like flying a small remote-control model airplane loaded with explosives through the windows of Batista’s office at the Presidential Palace. The attempt was never tried. Another idea that never came true was to shoot the dictator from the water tank tower at Las Mercedes property, during the December 7th commemoration at General Antonio Maceo’s mausoleum in Cacahual. The property belonged to the parents of my brother-in-law, and the weapon to be used was an impressive Weatherby 300 Magnum hunting rifle with a telescopic sight, using bullets almost five inches long. The rifle belonged to my other brother-in-law, which he had bought for a projected African safari. The manual guaranteed to stop on the spot the charge of an infuriated rhinoceros. Neither of them knew about that plan, which we soon abandoned because of the many unsolved technical issues involving accurately shooting from a long distance—and, mainly, as is always the weak point in any sniper killing attack, when authors start to care about surviving.

Drawing came to me too easily, and I had to struggle to avoid the trap of a shallow beauty and search for the real one without being distracted by prettiness. I partly learned that by practicing on perspective paintings of other students that asked for my help with watercolor renderings. I tested everything to break the rules: superimposing different layers and techniques, using a very wet or very dry brush, painting with fingers, spitting on the colors. Sometimes it turned out well, sometimes not; but I cynically thought that it would always be better than they could expect. It often happened that when the moment arrived of doing my own work I was already bored by so much practice. This way I started to learn that excellence always requires hard work, and that you cannot delegate it: you have to do it yourself. But all my skills with the crayon, charcoal and watercolor disappeared when it was necessary to build scale
models. I believe that it was a genetically implanted resistance toward manual work, extended to an impressive clumsiness for mechanics that has always haunted me.

Oscar didn’t pay us much, at most a peso per hour, but he allowed us a lot of freedom to design. Sometimes we may have abused this by experimenting. I remember a beach house in Boca Ciega where we tried to put everything: thin double-curved concrete shells for the roofs (in that office, the first hyperbolic paraboloids were designed and calculated in Cuba), Catalan vaults of red clay tiles or rasilla, stained-glass windows with wooden partitions or bellotes, textured external plaster with the tip of a bricklayer’s trowel—there were ideas for a house three times bigger, or even for three different houses. In the front garden, there also was a concrete sculpture by Rolando López Dirube, El Sordo (The Deaf).

Rolando’s studio used the ground floor of the same eclectic large house where Oscar had his office above. Almost all the houses that were designed there had murals or sculptures by him, following the wave in fashion during the fifties of integrating the visual arts with architecture. Much later, this integration has required a lot of coordination and definition of the institutional and legal framework, but then and there it just happened naturally: simply because we worked under the same roof, lived in the same neighborhood, had similar family backgrounds and were about the same age.

El Sordo was an indefatigable, obsessive worker who was skilled in many techniques and personally executed his own projects. For me, he was The Artist: deviant, bohemian, smelling of rancid perspiration, always searching the essences and the whys, and testing all techniques. He was very good at lip-reading and I took advantage of that to speak with him without any sounds; but he became exasperated with his old toothless assistant, always sucking the end of a cigar. We all sometimes ate in the patio, which was almost totally full with big chunks of hard wood timber, oxygen and acetylene tanks, crates of hand-broken tiles, and an endless menagerie of diverse metals scraps. The menu was simple, invariable but pleasant: an omelet with salami and sausage cooked by us, bread and a bottle of Spanish tintos wine then costing $1.10.

Right in front of the house was a school of Catholic nuns, The Sacred Heart of Mary, where my two sisters had once studied. In the afternoons, after classes ended, a young janitor began to clean the classrooms of the upper floor. She always stared intently into our office, where we used to work shirtless on hot days. She also made some funny movements, until one day we discovered that she was actually masturbating. In the background, beyond the closed doors of frosted glass, we could see from time to time the black shadow of a nun walking along the gallery. She ended by climbing over the desks, holding the skirt under her chin, wisely manipulating her feather duster. Little by little the news spread, and the salesmen of construction materials all began to arrive at the same time to watch the show. One day I crossed the street and called her from the sidewalk. She spoke funny and was ugly, with that kind of plain ugliness that is worse than the aggressive kind. I felt embarrassed and quickly cut
the unlikely conversation. There I began to understand the advantages of a poetic detachment, and the importance of the observer's point of view in the urban scene.

My philosophical and political readings were then limited to the History of Western Philosophy by García Morente, Homage to Catalonia and other George Orwell essays, texts by Bertrand Russell and Herbert Read. I considered myself an anarchist, and had read Bakunin but not Marx. The links between economy and social status reached me in an intuitive way from my high school days at Colegio de Belén, run by the Jesuits, where most of the boys came from affluent families. During my random visits to the still elegant but already decadent Vedado Tennis Club, my time was mainly devoted to swimming and sunbathing. It happened—at least twice—that I would meet a girl and feel she was initially attracted, only to politely disconnect later when she probably was informed that behind respected last names there was no money—only expectations for a professional career still to be seen.

On the edge of the swimming pool that once Pepe Gómez Mena threatened to fill with champagne—it seems that he only reached one-third—sometimes I crossed paths with a spectacular beauty a little older than me, Lydia Montiel. She was completely golden—hair, eyes, skin—as if she were bathed in honey, and maybe she was. She walked very sure of herself, navigating on a sea of drivel from her sweet-toothed admirers. I never looked at her, at least when she could realize. It was a silent sacrifice that nobody appreciated, but I gave myself that pleasure only to ruminate later with a kind of remake for strictly personal consumption of that good English film, "Brief Encounter". Frustration is always better than a humiliating refusal.

One day I took to the club an impressive bow clad in fiberglass that my brother-in-law had brought me from New York. Under the amused scrutiny of the regular patrons at the bar, I put the target in the baseball field and placed myself diagonally to it, in the softball field. I bent the 47 pound-bow, meant to hunt bears, pulled the string, pointed the arrow up in a parabola so as to cover the long distance, and nailed the first shot in the center. Then I dismounted the bow, picked up the target and left for the showers, leaving watchers speechless. I always felt comfortable with minimalism—maybe influenced by the magazine Arts & Architecture—and also with the ambiguity of interpretations, although I didn't care much to know which.

These frivolities in my personal life were more and more mixed with flashes of nostalgia for the interrupted career of Architecture, which I identified with Projects, Drawing and History. But this was blended with sheer terror for the subjects that made up the ominous chain of Statics, Resistance of Materials, Reinforced Concrete, Structures and Design of Structures. Long after graduating, with all the changes to the curriculum made after the triumph of the Revolution, I still woke up sometimes bathed in perspiration with the nightmare of a sudden call from the Faculty Secretary, reminding me about the need to be tested again on some of those subjects.
In 1958 I had already broken up with my formal girlfriend of several years, a member of the family of a *mambi* high rank officer, veteran of the Independence War and a member of the Conservative party, as was my grandfather. But by habit, I found myself sometimes stepping down at the bus stop next to her home. They lived in a very large Eclectic house in El Vedado, close to the writer Renée Méndez Capote, also of *mambi* lineage. The whole family was involved in the fight against Batista, including her mom, who also took care of 17 Pekinese dogs. They followed very seriously the rules of security, so that I should not be present in the visits made by their boss in the Movement of Civic Resistance, a mysterious Señor Prieto. One day I ran into him, and he turned out to be Gerardo Pérez-Puelles, my uncle Raúl Coyula's brother-in-law.

Something that then seemed to me just normal was that the political avant garde among the students of Architecture—José Antonio, Julio *El Grande*, Osmany Cienfuegos, Samuel Biniaikowski (*El Polaco*), Emilio Escobar and others were also the artistic avant garde, always looking for what was the newest and more experimental in Architecture. I don't know to what extent the divorce between artistic avant garde and politics in the old Soviet Union influenced the Stalinist aberration and finally the extinction of the system itself. Honesty and militancy, openness to criticism, rejection of concessions and transgression of conventions were equally applicable principles to politics and design. That brought me to break up my friendship with *El Sordo*. I violently confronted him for accepting an important commission for the Habana Riviera Hotel that meant much to him economically but collided with his artistic credo, which was also mine. The discussion ended in punches, breaking stools and drawing tables in Oscar's office. Although I was in good physical shape at that time, he was bigger and stronger, and I received more blows than those I gave. It took me forty years to forgive him: he was married, with a small daughter; and surely needed the money. Anyway, his work in the Riviera was much better than so much contemporary and later trash acclaimed as art. I never saw him again, and he died famous some years ago in Puerto Rico. At that time I learned another lesson: it is not enough to be right, you also need to be strong—but if you feel you are right, fight even if you don't have any hope of winning. Something I later learned from that episode is that extreme judgments springing from abstractions can be unjust when applied to human beings.

My mother, Dolores Cowley, told me many stories about her family. The first Cowley born in Cuba at the end of the 18th century, Angel, had been vice-rector of the University of Havana. The Cuban branch produced several other outstanding physicians, one of the first historians, officers from the Cuban Liberation Army, judges

---

1 José Antonio Echevarría, a Cuban revolutionary and student leader, was President of the Federation of University Students (*Federación Estudiantil Universitaria* - FEU) and a founding member of the Directorio Revolucionario Estudiantil (DRE), a militant organisation that played an important role in the Cuban Revolution to oust President Fulgencio Batista. He was killed on March 13, 1957, during an assault at the National Radio Station of Cuba. [editor’s note]
and a justice of the Supreme Court. Mom told me how two of them had been gentlemen of the Orders of Carlos III and Isabel la Católica; and she went back as far as Ireland and England, telling about other illustrious Cowleys, among them, naturally, Arthur Cowley-Wellesley, the Duke of Wellington. From another side, the Cuban Cowleys were related to the brother of the man who led the Conquest, Diego Velázquez de Cuéllar.

In the so-called Bloody Christmas of 1956, an Army Colonel Fermín Cowley became sinisterly notorious in the eastern city of Holguín for his cruel repression of revolutionaries. I had never heard about him before. Looking cautiously for a possible safe exit in the event of being imprisoned, I asked to mom if he was our relative: I don't know, she answered, but I don't think so, because in the pictures he seems to have Black blood... he must descend from a slave that took the family name. Mom had a very open spirit and had suffered economic hardships as a child after her father, a Cuban diplomat in France, died on his return trip to Cuba and his body was tossed into the Atlantic. That expression shocked me, because it seemed that her first concern should be the possible relation with an assassin. I then understood that prejudices are deeper inside than what one would think, even in people irreproachably good. That year 1958 would be the last one for Fermín, killed in a revolutionary hit attack.

During my first university years I felt a certain precaution against those who were prone to violence. Some seemed to me like possible gangsters as those from the old Bonche Universitario, and maybe they were. But it was almost impossible in that environment to avoid confrontation with the de facto régime, as the dictatorship was euphemistically called. Nevertheless, some managed to do so with discreet elegance. Some years after the triumph of the Revolution I ran into one of them studying in the recently inaugurated University City, the CUJAE, where Emilio and I were already teaching. He walked around dressed in green olive fatigue uniform, with an enormous Colt 45 automatic and four magazines hanging from his belt; and he was the leading candidate for the position of president of the FEU in the School of Architecture. Emilio and I protested, totally opposed to have that fake sitting on José Antonio's seat. We went to several meetings with the student organizations, and the candidacy was withdrawn. I never saw the guy again, or even heard about him. Maybe he decided to start anew a political career abroad.

During my days at the university, I had taken part in the Association of Students of Architecture. After vegetating in some organizations opposing Batista that I ended up finding too tame, I came closer to the Revolutionary Directory through Emilio, Julio, Armando Hernández and other fellow students whom I trusted. José Antonio impressed me a lot with his detachment and courage, but mainly for the width of his aims. He didn't seem to resent me for having opposed his candidacy for President of Architecture,
supporting that of Osmany Cienfuegos. José Antonio was a born leader who united instead of separating; but his tragic destiny wrapped him subtly like the tunic of a Classic goddess. Regrettably, the unhealthy habit of simplifying history stamped him with the image of a hefty and reckless youth of blushing cheeks, ignoring his national and international political renown, recognized by Fidel when they both signed the Pact of Mexico.

Already before the Assault on the Palace, I had vanquished my initial rejection of weapons, remembering my grandfather Miguel, the civic man par excellence in the so mistreated and schematized Republic, who went to fight for independence in the manigua when he was eighteen years old. One day I started to doubt whether those scruples didn't simply hide fear. Really, it was very hard to overcome the idea of dying, but even more possible imprisonment and torture. Still more difficult was to assimilate the idea of killing.

In that year, the sound of several nearby shots woke me up in the middle of the night. A route 30 bus had been sabotaged at the corner of my house a few days before, and the shots very probably meant a cruel police revenge. Indeed, they had taken a detainee and murdered him there, leaving the body in place. A little before dawn I went out with a nickel-plated Star 380 automatic with filigrees and mother-of-pearl grips—too feminine, but I could not choose—and walked toward the corner. The street was still void of people, and by the middle of the next block a bundle was spread out in the sidewalk. Standing to the side, the blue figure of a lonely policeman. I walked over while loading myself with rage so as to be able to kill. From a closer distance I could finally see him in full detail: he was a middle-aged, potbellied man, with leggings of black leather as those that only the foot policemen used, not the murderers of the patrol cars, and he was definitively scared. He looked me in the eyes like one who sees his end coming. I passed by.

The time and pain invested in conditioning myself mentally to kill or to be killed, without having ever being tested under fire, created a sense of frustration that lasted for a long time. That accumulated stress load can sometimes appear suddenly without warning. Thirty-five years later I once went to pick up my newlywed daughter and her husband in a country hotel where they had spent their honeymoon. An unpleasant doorman didn't allow me to enter or to call them, and we began to argue, more and more violently. He was a solid type with a brutal face, with a very tight and short guayabera that rode up over a prominent ass, and a walkie-talkie welded to his left hand.

For several days I mentally drafted a detailed plot to murder him—organizing the checkup of schedules and habits, choosing the most suitable weapon, the vehicle and the arrival and exit roads, the way to hide the body for a while, how to deal with the prints, prepare alibis. and the possible alternatives if problems appeared—a paranoid regression of the subconscious, obviously disproportionate. By the way, it seems that in
that hotel some shady things happened later and some characters were fired. I wonder what role the fat guy with the walkie-talkie might have had in that matter.

In autumn, 1958 Emilio talked to me about the need to travel to Miami to meet the exiled Directory people there and to take and bring information. We had planned to go with my brother-in-law's 1500 burgundy Carrera Porsche, and bring weapons concealed in the double lining of the body. Being a deluxe sports car it would arouse fewer suspicions from the Customs. Already since mid-year our small group made up of Emilio, José Ricardo Monreal—Cherri—and myself had asked to leave for the Escambray mountains. In my juvenile fantasies I saw me perforating the Army armored cars with the Weatherby Magnum; and in my nightmares I saw comandante Rolando Cubelas taking the weapon for himself. Julio García, who had returned in secret to lead the Directory in Havana from the underground, was of an implacable logic: we need people here as you who are not being hunted by the police; while in the mountains there are already more people than weapons.

Finally the Porsche plan was cancelled, but as my visa was already approved, I still made the trip. It was my first plane ride, a Viscount, and the first trip abroad. I arrived in Miami with 300 dollars—a small fortune for me then, and also later—and went straight to a small hotel in the Art Deco district of Miami Beach. I walked up to the room, left the suitcase and went down to the desk to find out how to get to the place where my friends Sonia Domínguez and Armando Hernández lived in the Southwest, the Cuban sagüesera. A blonde American hanging at the desk offered to take me there. She had an enormous white convertible Buick Limited of the year. While driving, her skirt rolled up high showing firm, sun-tanned thighs; and she spoke with an insinuating voice. I was 23 years old, supposedly attractive, and found the woman not especially good-looking and definitively old, though she probably would not be more than 35. I thought: if this happens to me fifteen minutes after arriving, why hurry? When we reached my destination I said goodbye without asking her phone number. Later on I told the story to other guys who had already been in Miami for a longer time. They jumped to choir: what a chance you missed, this town is a warehouse of retirees! They were right, but my love life there would still be stranger.

In Miami I met again with an old girlfriend who had been a backstroke swimmer, as I had been, but from a Big Five club. She lived and worked there. We began to meet almost every day. She took me in her car for rides, to the beach, to Crandon Park. I remember her at the beach, her very smooth skin dusted with sand, the eyes of a startling yellow where I couldn't guess betrayal, long waist and legs, small and swollen lips as a goldfish: Albertine Rediscovered, without the company—for the time being—of other jeunes filles en fleur. One day she called me to cancel our next appointment. Her friend, whom I will call Pachi, was arriving from Europe and she was going to meet her at the airport. From that point on the excuses followed, until I understood that it was not wise to insist.
I never saw her again, but a few years later I had an adventure with another beautiful girl, this time more intellectual than sporty. She liked to make love while listening to Wagner—*Tristam and Isolda*, of all things. Her astonishing flexibility, possibly trained in the ballet, allowed her to assume unusual positions that would turn puritan the imperturbable erotic clay statuettes of the Mochica culture. She had led an elegant promiscuous life, apparently always looking for men of my same biotype. She lived by herself in an apartment in El Vedado after her parents left Cuba, but when we started our relationship she had just quarreled with a girl that lived with her, whom I never met. I had the vague impression that she had driven her out because of me. So we went on like that for some time, until she presented me with an artificial sentimental crisis: I was *mean*, I made her suffer. After we broke up, I found out that she looked for comfort with another female friend, and connecting the dots, I could understand her special sentimental pattern, structured in alternating cycles: she finished with a male friend that supposedly had cheated her, and then searched consolation with a female friend; just to restart the cycle again—never repeating players. Among those changing partners, one however seemed fixed: she was called Pachi. I never came to know that woman who stole two lovers from me, but I picture her like a great spider waiting patiently in her cobweb for the visit of a maybe not so innocent fly. Of those experiences I didn't learn much, except to be thankful for what I had lived, without regretting what I lost.

Weeks went by in Miami, money came to an end and it was already time to return. My weak attempts to ignore Julio's instructions to try get hooked into an expedition had failed. The FBI had already taken control of the arms shipments and the exits, replacing the inefficient and corrupt Miami police. One day, while listening to the radio, the latest news arrived from Havana: a small group of revolutionaries was surrounded in a house at Goicuría Street by joint forces of the police and the Army, including tanks. They were fighting bravely, but the end was obviously doomed. We stayed glued to the radio, waiting for more news. When they ran out of bullets, they were killed in the spot. Finally the names of them were released, and I remember saying in relief: At least they were not somebody we knew! That apparent selfish insensitivity is an effective way to deceive fear when confronted by death. Fifteen years later I would marry Marta Aquino, my current wife, an Ameijeiras from her mother's side. One of those murdered had been her uncle Angel, *Machaco*, the third of three brothers killed in the fight against Batista—all brought up as if they were her older siblings.

By the end of November I returned legally by plane to Havana. I was lucky; no informer accused me of meeting in Miami with well-known revolutionaries. In despair to return to Cuba by any means, Armando had asked me to wait for him with arms at the Havana airport in case they tried to arrest him. Julio decided he shouldn't run the risk. I stayed at home on December 31st—no New Year's Eve party. At three or four o'clock AM Emilio called me with the news. The Man left, he said, the military are trying to hold
on and we are to take control of the University—and he came to pick me up in his silver gray 1953 Ford. Inside were Monreal, Zaida Trimiño and Gonzalo de Varona. Zaida especially impressed me in the ominous silence of that early hour: coming directly from the underground, disheveled, with eyeglasses and a fully automatic Star with an enormous magazine sticking out from the butt. On our way I stopped to pick up an automatic San Cristobal carbine, made in the Dominican Republic. At that time it seemed to me the most terrible weapon. Soon I would find out that it was more dangerous for the shooter than for the target: it went off by itself at the most minimum blow or shake. The sun was already beginning to rise when we entered the University campus from the gate at J Street. Very close, the brand-new Havana Hilton raised its great prism of Modern Architecture against the neighboring Art Deco buildings at L Street. We went by the Faculty of Architecture building, its enormous doors firmly closed, as if forever. We opened the car's trunk at Plaza Cadenas and took out the weapons. At that time I made a quick estimation of the number of bullets in the San Cristobal's two magazines. This is the end, I thought. I didn't have the least idea that it was only the beginning. A solitary mature man, clearly a professor, looked at us alarmed. “Be reasonable, boys!”—he screamed. I don't remember if we answered him. This way, without even realizing it, 1959 had begun.

Havana, April 2000

Mario Coyula Cowley (Havana 1935–2014) was a Cuban architect, urban designer, critic and professor. For full biography, see http://mariocoyula2014.wordpress.com/authored-publications/

[Editor's note: This essay was published as a chapter in Siglo Pasado, edited by Norberto Codina. 2003. Editorial Union (UNEAC).]