Besides its valuable Spanish Colonial built heritage covering from mid-16th century up to the end on the 19th, Cuba has an important 20th century stock that amounts for most of the urban fabric in its cities. This built mass comes basically from two large construction booms: the first dating from First World War up to the Depression, the second since the end of Second World War till late 1960s. Architecture was later turned into sheer construction and lost its cultural component, except for a few special works conceived as showcases and generally placed outside the central city.

European eclecticism—most of all through its generalized minor trend widely used in the lower-middle class and even working class dwellings—had stamped the first construction boom in that century and still makes up for most of the built fabric in Cuban inner cities, European influence had already been substituted in the 1930s with an American Art Deco influence. The massive urban growth from the end of the 1940s through the whole 1950s consolidated that American influence; and the architecture of the Modern Movement became widespread, especially in the capital city, Havana. Bypassing the original radical approach of Modern architecture in Europe, the best examples in Cuba were able to incorporate respect for the surroundings, the climate and national identity. Good quality Modern architecture in Cuba extended well into late 1960s, often with an almost obsessive experimentation with structural expressionism and brutalism. Social housing complexes like La Habana del Este (1961), Tallapiedra and La Campana (1963); Pabellón Cuba in La Rampa (1963) and the Medical School at Santiago de Cuba (1964), the Schools of Arts at Cubanacán (1965), Coppelia ice cream parlor (1966) or the monument to the Students Martyrs (1967) were good examples of that period.

Scores of new housing subdivisions promoted by real estate speculation in the 1950s created a suburban ring of one-story single-family houses with Modern architecture. In-fill interventions in vacant lots were mostly apartment buildings. That included the high-rise condos in El Vedado that began to break with the scale of the waterfront, but also created in a very short time the most alive, mixed-use modern city center, La Rampa. The building boom at that time included some substitutions with Modern architecture at the central business district in Habana Vieja, and in the main commercial district at Centro Habana, but growth was mainly by addition, not substitution. New construction in the capital city was cut short when the 1959 Revolution stopped real estate speculation and shifted priority to improve the living conditions in the countryside and smaller cities. This increased a deficit in maintenance but stopped the inner migration flow into Havana and spared most of the built heritage in Havana and other main Cuban cities.
Modern architecture after World War II addressed utilitarian programs such as factories, office buildings or department stores; but it was also extended into housing for all social layers including the upper class. This boom was supported with the availability of good building materials and high skills in construction workers and techniques. Happily, the widespread use of monolithic reinforced concrete proved adequate for the Cuban weather and patterns of use.

Nevertheless, the sheer massiveness of this construction boom plus the negative impact of speculation and the accumulated deficit in maintenance has worsened the technical condition of the Modern stock, which is now more than half a century old. Some landmark buildings from the 1950s such as the FOCSA (1956), Retiro Médico (1958), Retiro Odontológico (1953), or 23rd and 26th (1953) – just to mention some in Havana – already show significant deterioration. The problem becomes more complicated since there is no public awareness about the need to preserve this recent heritage, compared to the already widespread perception about the values of the old historic core in Habana Vieja, as part of the successful rehabilitation and restoration program led by the City Historian Office.

On the other hand, the relatively better physical condition and good location in once-privileged neighborhoods, with good access for cars and less congestion and social problems than in the central districts, brought these areas (where Modern architecture has very good examples) into the focus of new investments in tourism and condominiums seeking for badly needed foreign currency. The search for maximum profit in these investments inevitably places a stress which often results in programs, building heights, mass and architectural expression that tend to break with the built and social context.

Another widespread threat, even worst, comes from makeshift additions, the elimination of front gardens and porches, the construction of high fences and other distortions done by the residents themselves. Negative effects are more striking in former elegant neighborhoods, which are often those in which Modern architecture predominates. Enforcement of the building regulations has almost totally relaxed since early 1990s, both for State or private interventions. The quality of design and construction has suffered, and the crisis that hit Cuba after the fall of the Soviet Union also affected quantity. Compared to the 1960s there is a striking loss of imagination and experimentation as a result of the weakening role of architects.

Facing these problems demand several parallel ways: a systematic mass-media campaign about the values of the Modern heritage, finding ways to promote interventions that would be sensitive to the preservation of the Modern heritage, intelligent adaptive reuse of Modern buildings and the recovery of the endangered built heritage by finding a productive use for them, or writing new building codes and city regulations more adequate to the new context, including more effective incentive and dissuasion means. Finally, competitions should be promoted to highlight careful
interventions on the Modern heritage, and to identify its essential patterns that can be used in new interventions.

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/