Summary

Cuban architects have often sought inspiration from the past. Some succeeded. Fewer looked into vernacular architecture, with its associated stigma of poverty and backwardness. Young architects were able to maintain good quality architecture when the Modern masters left Cuba after the 1959 revolution. Since then, architects work for a salary from the government—not enough to make a living, but safely tenured. Experimentation and creativity were severely handicapped in the 1970s and 1980s by strong centralization resulting in repetitive projects with heavy prefabrication. Priority was taken away from Havana to favor the rest of the country. This stopped internal migrations to the capital but increased its disrepair to its present critical point. Most of the few new investments are meant to capture hard currency. They usually have bland, kitschy architecture. The cityscape has been distorted since the 1990s by a myriad of makeshift interventions that reflect the loss of models and values. A recent official statement estimated that 1.3 million state workers are not needed—around one-fifth of the country's labor force. This calls for an opening for self-employment and small businesses, which in turn may increase private construction and create real jobs for thousands of architects.

Learning from the past is not new in art. Architects have always done so, even the more extreme iconoclasts. Most never went beyond servile copies, and books have been written to legitimize this necrophagous but safe approach with a neo-traditionalist viewpoint. Some toyed with the past, as postmodernists did, using irony to protect themselves from criticism of their more or less disguised failures. Others were able to penetrate the essence and create new projects with subtle ties to the past, whether cultivated or vernacular. If the models were carefully chosen, this last approach could also celebrate the environment and that elusive abstraction, cultural identity. The very best examples might then achieve a balanced mixture of the universal with local and national, while leaving a personal imprint of its designers.

Successful artists tend to repeat themselves, creating a visually recognizable brand that sells well but can become a treacherous trap. In a presentation in Havana in late 2000, Frank Gehry acknowledged he was fed up with titanium and longed to do social housing. Architects demand total freedom, but they are more limited by economic restraints, politics, ideology and whimsical patrons than most other creative professionals. Unpretentious but adequate architecture is seldom covered in the media,
though it is more important in the shaping of the built environment and the taste of the wider public. Many architects still keep waiting for a Revolution through Design, ignoring the fact that most worldwide construction is built without professional advice.

Some leading architects in the USA like Andrés Duany or Thom Mayne have recently produced interesting sustainable dwelling solutions after disasters like the Haitian earthquake or the Katrina hurricane in New Orleans. Others, like Hassan Fathy in Egypt, Charles Correa in India or Bruno Stagno in Costa Rica, have been experimenting their whole lives with ecologically-friendly vernacular designs, filtered and polished by their talents. Architects like these erased the stigma of poverty and ugliness that many associate with social and ecological responsibility. Beauty has to be reconsidered, no longer as a luxury but as an asset, like an added value. But this awareness probably depends on the existence of a market and enlightened clients.

Meanwhile, in Cuba we keep struggling to ban asbestos-cement roofs, which have poor thermal insulation and are a serious threat to health, but are blown away by hurricanes, again and again.

The global economic and environmental crisis has created more awareness of insensitive, inappropriate megaprojects and sculptural architecture, but we still need enlightened giants that can lead the crowd, without turning architecture into fashion. They perform as architects for architects. Thoughtful reviews in the mass media are needed in order to explain to large audiences the difference between good architecture and placebos. But critics should avoid the temptation of doing literature. We must keep trying to foresee what will happen, even if history is full of failed attempts of architects turned gurus imagining the future. If think globally, act locally is a good slogan, we might add think far ahead but act now! New solutions to old problems will appear, but new problems still unknown to us will arise. At least, this can make life less boring for our children.

Cuba

The 1959 Cuban revolution is half a century old, which can seem an oxymoron, since a revolution is always about deep structural changes in a very short time. Most of the leading architects moved abroad shortly after, but architecture during the 1960s kept the high level of design from the previous decade, when the Modern Movement was skillfully Cubanized. Good design was spread all over the country and to new programs. This task was achieved by young architects and even students who had worked in the 1950s at the masters’ studios. They had been not only in the architectural avant-garde, but also in the political one, opposing Batista’s dictatorship. The Modern Movement was followed by Brutalism, which was supported by widespread structural experimentation, always safe from ideological objections that quickly started to put dangerous elitist labels on architects seeking beauty.
Towards the end of that decade a strong centralization process started, led by a powerful Ministry of Construction. As a result, construction overwhelmed design and the final product became less important than all the political rituals attached to the process. Heavy prefabrication was seen as the only way to match the enormous accumulated needs. This resulted in repetitive buildings, usually in large developments, placed at random and without respect to their surroundings. Luckily, they were mostly built on the outskirts, preserving the existing urban fabric. Meanwhile the existing built stock in the cities fell into serious disrepair. Many new rural small towns were built hoping to stabilize the labor force for agriculture. The goal of urbanizing the countryside finally had a backlash with an unwanted ruralization of Havana.

A terrible crisis, cryptically named the Special Period, hit Cuba in the 1990s after the fall of the Soviet Union, forcing a quick response to ensure survival. Some experiments were made in popular participation, grassroots planning, small projects in cooperation with foreign NGOs, urban organic agriculture, bicycling, water and energy saving, recycling, soft technologies, and production of building materials with local resources. Proposals for more decentralized local government were made, but postponed indefinitely. In short, it was a serious approach for a more sustainable conception of development and management, a need that the crisis made evident but should have always been a sound choice. Nevertheless, these solutions were seen by decision-makers as a short-term strategy just to cope with the worst of the crisis, while waiting for better times. When the macro-economy was officially perceived to improve toward the late 1990s, there was a retreat to the same old unsustainable ways, except for some small experimental projects on alternative energy, kept for the sake of prestige. The opportunities presented by the crisis were lost.

The Special Period crisis gave way to a suicidal laissez-faire that practically dismantled building and zoning code enforcement. The cityscape and patterns of behavior in public spaces are now dictated by a perverse mixture of uprooted rural migrants, combined with remaining urban marginals and poor-nouveau-riches with obscure access to hard currency and very bad taste; plus the influence of recent waves of Cuban emigrants who live in Hialeah near Miami. Original fine façades have been hidden by makeshift additions, and front yards and porches have almost disappeared.

Architects in Cuba can only work for a salary at state design or construction enterprises, or as investors for other state entities that sign contracts for construction projects, without having contact with or receiving feedback from the final users. Even worse, designers don’t have real full control of their projects during the construction process. In short, builders abducted architecture and turned it into construction, so it stopped being architecture. There are exceptions, of course: for high-profile projects, renowned architects have been given the privilege of picking a team of talented collaborators and creating a special separate office, usually in situ. The results were
always much better than average, which raises the question: why not extend this to all projects?

Another recurrent question is why the government does not use more competitions to choose the best projects. Initially, the official argument against competitions was that it didn’t make sense to spend the time and talent of several architects on the same project while they had so much pressing work to do. However, since the 1990s many architects have little or no work to do at the state design enterprises. Will they also be sent home, as part of the 1.3 million excess workforce? Moreover, will they be allowed to work as private architects, since the government can’t find a job for them? Opposition to competitions can simply be explained by decision-makers’ reluctance to yield to a jury their power to approve a project or not.

Historic preservation and restoration is one attractive field for Cuban architects, even if salaries are not higher than average. The Office of the City Historian in Havana has done a great job in putting back life into the old walled city, which is part of the 1982 designation by UNESCO as a World Heritage Site. Gradually, the Office has extended its scope. In 1993 they received the right to run their own businesses and use the profits to finance their projects, which later included not only the restoration of notable buildings but also improving the living conditions of local residents. The Office offers young architects opportunities for continuing education, including training abroad. Four other Cuban cities also have special offices for preservation and restoration of their historic districts, but they not nearly as powerful as the one in Havana.

Other architects prefer to work with Cuban-foreign joint ventures, where they can receive some income in hard currency and maybe have access to a car—currently a remote possibility for most Cuban professionals. At these joint ventures, they work hard for a small salary, and they know it. Sometimes they can even design, though usually the foreign partners impose their own designers, which are far from being international stars. Cuba has no need to import bad architects—we have lots, and much cheaper. Most of the recent important buildings are for tourism, a major source of income in Cuba after sugar became history. But the majority of the new hotels and condominiums for foreigners have a very bland or kitschy design, repeating the worst architecture found in resorts around the world.

Plans and resources flow vertically in Cuba, without proper horizontal co-ordination. This is a result of an extremely centralized government, supported by the belief that when there are few resources you have to be very careful about how to spend them. This apparent logic collapses if you reverse that conservative thinking and realize that maybe there are few resources because of too much centralization. One interesting Cuban experiment was to create a Family Doctor network as the first level of the Public Health system, each doctor covering 120 families. A similar approach was used by a Cuban NGO, Habitat-Cuba, which in 1994 created the Community Architect
program as a way to give professional advice to the population. In 2000 that NGO was closed, and the architects were sent to the Housing Institute and assigned bureaucratic work. This is one sad example about how to kill good ideas.

A future for architects?

The Cuban government has recently acknowledged that 1.3 million state employees are not needed – the result of a wishful-thinking past policy of zero unemployment. These people will have to become self-employed. How far and complex this can reach is still uncertain, because one small opening requires another step, and so on. But it is reasonable to think that some initially small private building cooperatives or enterprises will appear, and that more people will become able to pay for the improvements in their dwellings, or even for new dwellings. This will open working possibilities for thousands of young or retired architects.

But right now both the state and the vast majority of the population lack funds. The built stock, especially in central Havana, is in very bad condition because of accumulated neglect, abuse and overcrowding as well as corrosion, high humidity, leaks, and termites. Many buildings are on the verge of collapse – and some have done so. State design and building enterprises cannot face this challenge: they were meant for doing large projects – of which there will be few – and mass-produced prefabricated blocks of social dwellings, which will no longer be built. On the other hand, thousands of architects and civil engineers will be needed to deal personally on a one-on-one basis with the needs of residents.

So where will the money come from? A possible source could be the opening of land and housing markets, which have been banned for five decades. But this can increase social and physical segregation. Capital needs to come from abroad, but it is unlikely that foreign investors would be interested in basic repairs in poor dwellings and poor neighborhoods. Of course, taxes – or even better, linkage of for-profit investments with specific social projects – are a fair way to redistribute wealth. Investors in Blue Havana might contribute to improve the conditions in the Deep South.¹

Looking into a blurry future, the only real solution can come from a thorough empowerment of the best resource Cuba has: its educated population. This resource is not being properly used to generate wealth. Incentives are needed to attract and keep professionals and skilled workers. Right now, Cuba is constantly losing young talent that moves abroad to find better jobs and live a better life. The country is losing a key resource after training them for free. The Special Period demonstrated that current

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¹ In several of Mario Coyula’s writings, "Blue Havana" refers to the city's more upscale, whiter neighborhoods along the coast, while the "Deep South" refers to inland areas where poorer, often darker-skinned Cubans live in slum housing.
salaries in regular Cuban money are not enough to make a living. That gave rise to a generalized loss of moral values. How can people used to stealing or buying goods stolen from the government fit into a different society and economy?

But giving more people access to higher incomes in real money is not enough. If people who grew up in a poor family and a squalid urban environment that stamped them with a culture of poverty become richer quickly, their capacity to damage the cityscape and their patterns of behavior in public spaces will increase. On the other hand, there are few good examples to follow. The triumph of the revolution suddenly erased the previous models of success imposed by the former ruling classes, so people now seeking to move upward have no valid references. This threat is not just for the future: it is already happening now as new coarse, loud characters rise to the top of a dysfunctional social pyramid. Demonstration examples are needed to show good designs versus the prevailing junk. To recover civic values, tangible values must be visible. Most of Havana was shaped by a very widespread and influential lower-middle class. What still undefined social stratum will put life back into it?

Fixing old buildings is not enough. The infrastructure that allowed incredible urban growth in the early 20th century is now outdated and not sufficient for the present 2.14 million population, which is shrinking and getting older. This will demand more but smaller dwellings for partially handicapped persons. These dwellings require simple, well-designed furniture; architects can also help in that field. Cuban architects and planners must find sustainable alternatives for construction that are adequate for our hot, humid climate and can save energy and water, use renewable or recyclable materials, resist strong hurricanes and – in some parts of the Island – even mild earthquakes.

The most important issue for Cuban architects is to recover the authority and prestige this profession used to have. The cult of improvisation, the pressure to complete projects on time and the interference by administrative or political decision makers destroyed this authority. If the quality of design and construction finally becomes important again, architects might concentrate on their work and be held truly responsible for its successes and flaws without blaming the institutional establishment.

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: Mario prepared this presentation for the October 2010 Alternative Initiatives Cuba Conference in London, which explored the impact of Cuba’s political and economic conditions on its architecture and speculated on the future of Cuban architecture and development. He never delivered the speech because of health problems.]