WHAT CAN BE LEARNED FROM HAVANA´S MODERN HERITAGE

By Mario Coyula

Cuba has an important 20th century built stock that amounts for most of the urban fabric in its cities. The massive urban growth from the end of the 1940s through the whole 1950s consolidated the architecture of the Modern Movement after a delayed arrival. Modern architecture in Havana showed how original iconoclastic imported design principles could be adapted to a different context while keeping the basic grid, regulations and scale, contributing to diversity. Good quality Modern architecture in Cuba extended well into late 1960s, with structural expressionism and brutalism.

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 Modern apartment buildings. High-rise condos 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. With its concentration of Modern architecture, La Rampa demonstrated that some original regulations could be successfully violated, a strange case of consented rape...

Modern architecture addressed utilitarian programs such as factories, office buildings or department stores; but it was mainly employed into housing for all social layers including the upper-class. This boom was supported with good building materials and high skills in construction workers and techniques. Monolithic reinforced concrete proved adequate for the Cuban weather and patterns of use. But the Modern stock is now more than half a century old. Some landmark buildings from the 1950s already show significant deterioration. There is no public awareness about the need to preserve this recent heritage, compared to the old historic core in Habana Vieja, a World Heritage site.

Once-privileged neighborhoods where Modern architecture has very good examples are currently favored by investments in tourism and condominiums seeking for badly needed hard currency. The search for maximum profit often results in programs, building heights, massing and architectural expression that clash with the built and social context. Another even worst aggression comes from makeshift additions, the elimination of front gardens and porches, or the construction of high fences. Negative effects are more striking in former elegant neighborhoods, which are often those in which Modern architecture is predominant. Enforcement of the building regulations has almost totally relaxed since early 1990s. Compared to the 1960s there is a striking loss of imagination and experimentation.

Facing the challenge of how to preserve, use and make a reinterpretation of the values of the Modern heritage demands a systematic mass-media campaign to
build public awareness, demonstration projects that would be profitable but also sensitive; intelligent adaptive reuse of Modern buildings, while writing new building codes and urban regulations more adequate to the new context, including more effective incentive and dissuasion means. Competitions should highlight careful interventions on the Modern heritage, and identify essential patterns that can be used in new interventions. Architect’s creative role has to be recovered, as well as urban authority. Public control over imposing or careless investments will only be part of a civil society that needs to be created as a reaction to conventional vertical decision-making.

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/