

# Remarks by Leland Cott

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Hello everyone, my name is Leland Cott.

Mario Coyula was a very special person who touched all of us in different ways. While we did spend some very wonderful times together as friends and with family, my relationship with Mario was also centered on our common academic pursuits, and it is in that vein that I've chosen to concentrate my remarks this afternoon.

I first met Mario 15 years ago when I began researching the possibilities of directing a series of design studios in the urban design and planning program at Harvard. Mario had come to Harvard in the late 1990s, when I first heard him talk about Havana. While I was struck by his intellect, his sincerity and by the way he considered urban design and planning, which was so obviously informed by his Havana experiences beginning in 1959, what struck me most was his passion about what was right for Havana and its people. Mario cared deeply about his city and his fellow citizens.

My first email to Mario about that design studio class was in March 1999. His immediate response to me was enthusiastic and brimming with ideas. Of course at the time I had no idea where the site might be for this class but Mario was already being helpful by suggesting a site, not in Old Colonial Havana, but rather in Centro Havana, a part of the city that badly needed attention.

That studio class was so oversubscribed that it was clear to us that this might just be the beginning of something pretty special. Mario and I got on well and I found him to be one of the best collaborators with whom I've ever worked.

Over the course of the next few years we developed four more Havana studio classes, each tackling different areas within the city but always focused on urban design and planning related thinking with community development and housing at the core. In my mind, the two most successful of these classes engaged areas of Havana well known to everyone here.

The 2002 studio class investigated sites along the entire length of the Malecón, Havana's iconic waterfront boulevard. Our students contributed inspirational design thinking. Seth Riseman, who is here today, was in that studio and in fact went on to do his thesis design about housing in Havana. Mario's involvement touched us all that year and his passion and his intelligent thinking, not only about design and construction but also about the socio-economic aspects of planning, as evidenced in his own words in his closing paragraph from the studio publication from that year:

*Havana's impressive historic built heritage reflects the existence of a very large and evenly disseminated lower and middle class. What equivalent social group is needed in order to preserve that huge stock and add good contemporary examples? Can a careful, partial gentrification and commodification process raise money to put permanent, real economic life into the Malecón strip? Is this only possible at the expense of bringing in unprecedented social exclusion and growing inequality? The Malecón can provide a turf for experiments that might gradually irradiate the rest of the city. Someone will do it, sometime, hopefully through a combination of preservation, infill and adaptive reuse, with mixed functions, shapes and populations.*

Our next studio collaboration occurred the following year when Mario was invited to Harvard's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies as the first Cuban to be named a Robert Kennedy Fellow. The irony of a Cuban being a Kennedy Fellow at Harvard was not lost on Mario and we joked about it a lot that year.

The premise of the La Rampa design studio was to envision a 20th Century Modern Preservation District along the 23rd Street corridor. It is there that many of Havana's premier buildings of the 1940s, 50s and 60s still exist, but in various states of disrepair. The studio was intellectually charged with many inspired student proposals for how to treat this modern district in a way that would be a compliment to the historic district in Old Havana. Again, here are Mario's words from that studio publication:

*What makes La Rampa great is its diversity, resilience and vitality. It presents lessons for urban designers and planners, not only for historians. Designating La Rampa as a preservation district shall not mean to freeze it between 1955-1965, but to learn lessons from that, and use its recent history as a resource to produce a careful mixture of preservation, rehabilitation, development, redevelopment and cultural reanimation. So it is not about nostalgia – even if we would be able to recuperate the look, its contents will never be the same.*

At the end of our La Rampa studio Mario and I exchanged many thoughts and ideas about our work that semester. It was the kind of dialog that we each found to be inspirational.

In one email he wrote:

*The city and its inhabitants should eventually become able to look for themselves, turning into a resource a built and human capital that is usually perceived as a burden. This calls for a change in the government's role; instead of doing things, having them done. Fast, uncontrolled changes can quickly*

*destroy the delicate urban and human fabric of Havana, but no changes can be equally dangerous. After all, revolutions are about change.*

Mario cared a great deal about the future of Havana and I am hopeful that his life's work, a portion of which I was lucky enough to share in, will be an inspiration to new generations, here and in Cuba.