

# To the Mario Coyula who accompanies me Lucía López Coll

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I would not like this article to be read as an obituary. Obituaries speak of the outstanding professional career of the deceased person, of his fundamental achievements or greatest successes, and at times they forget the man who dreamed, worked and even suffered for those achievements. Tributes are generally contaminated by the cold formality of official ceremonies, and I don't want this article to be read only as a tribute. Right now, while we still feel him to be so close to us, I would simply like to remember Mario Coyula Cowley as the intellectual who has left his undeniable imprint on Cuba's culture, the professional of renowned talent whom we admire so much and the man embodying truly humane values whom we respect even more.

Just a few months ago Mario Coyula was awarded the National Cultural Heritage Award for Lifetime Achievement, the second time it was granted. Prior to that he received the National Architecture Award from the National Union of Architects and Construction Engineers of Cuba (UNAIACC) and the National Habitat Award, both for lifetime achievement as well. He held the title of Doctor in Technical Sciences and an honorary doctorate, and was designated a Distinguished Academic by the Cuban Academy of Sciences and Distinguished Professor by the José Antonio Echeverría Higher Polytechnic Institute (CUJAE), where he excelled in the field of teaching. He was a Visiting Professor at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies of Harvard University and Guest Professor in the postgraduate course Urban Strategies at Vienna's Institute of Architecture in the University of Applied Arts. He was a Fellow of the SIGUS program at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1990, and since 2001 belonged to the International Research Group on Architecture and Infrastructure, currently the Research Laboratory on Infrastructure, Architecture and Territory, based in Paris.

But all these honors awarded on and outside the island only meant more effort, more time devoted to research and a greater desire to "continue fighting," especially in Cuba, where perhaps he at times felt like Don Quixote, tilting at windmills and giants.

Today it is almost impossible to speak of Havana without recognizing Coyula's work on behalf of the city. Ever since those days in which he won an award as co-designer of the University Martyrs Park at Infanta and San Lázaro, or for the Heroes of March 13

Pantheon in Colón Cemetery, his commitment as an architect to intervene creatively in the urban fabric – while still respecting the existing context – could already be glimpsed.

From 1987 to 1999 he was deputy director of the Group for the Comprehensive Development of the Capital, and then he served as director from 1999 to 2001. He was also director of Havana's Architecture and Urbanism Department and president of the city's Landmarks Commission. Perhaps it was during these years of continual contact with the city's historical and contemporary problems that this architect reached his full awareness of Havana as an architectural treasure chest, and of the complexity of the solutions required for its proper preservation and future development.

At the same time, he shared his capacity for research and theoretical analysis through a variety of publications: he was the editor of the magazine *Arquitectura-Cuba*, and member of the editorial boards of the magazines *Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, *Temas* and *Revista Bimestre Cubana*. He published more than 200 articles and essays about historic preservation, architecture and urbanism, subjects on which he is considered an authority. Part of his bibliographical contribution may be found in the books he authored or co-authored, including *Diseño Urbano, Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis, Fundamentos de la arquitectura, Introducción a la historia de la arquitectura y el urbanismo contemporáneos, Teoría del urbanismo, La política cultural del período revolucionario: memoria y reflexión, ¿Quiénes hacen ciudad?* and *Participación ciudadana para el urbanismo del siglo XXI*.

He used such platforms to do well-informed battle against city-planning absurdities, shoddy work, whether by institutions or individuals, and bad taste that became generalized, imitated, and permitted even by the institutions charged with regulating construction and laying out sustainable and harmonic strategies for the city's development. Unluckily for us, his voice was at times drowned out amid the lack of resources and the negligence, ignorance or incompetence that have allowed the deterioration and even the loss of historic values and structures that we should have preserved.

Coyula also headed the School of Architecture at CUJAE. Those of us who have had good teachers recognize what a privilege this can be as well as its importance in the education of young people in the fullest sense, which extends well beyond academics. Perhaps this is why, when I think of Coyula as a professor, I cannot imagine him surrounded by piles of useless forms like a run-of-the-mill administrator, or as a bland academic who is satisfied simply with delivering a good lecture. Instead I envision his combination of unhurried speech and passionate expression, trying to imbue his young students with his passion for learning, his refusal to accept what is badly done, or his love of art in all its manifestations.

When I read *Catalina*, Coyula's first and only incursion into the genre of the novel, more than the love story of the beautiful and daring Catalina Lasa, I enjoyed the profound knowledge of Havana the author offers us as a gift. His knowledge, not just of the city's architecture but also of its history, was an intimate journey on which he could lead both beginners and experts. I even imagined him outfitted with walking stick and bowler hat, in the simple elegance that was natural to him – a truly fine-looking gentleman, as his beloved wife Marta called him – seeking out the secret nooks of the city, dazzled by the magnificent mansions of El Vedado, but equally by the ways of life and the customs of its inhabitants, the Havanans, Cubans who are both islanders and cosmopolitans, the fruit of a magical hybridization that still survives in the midst of the ruins and filth that suffocate the city.

I remember him as the determined promoter of the wonderful lecture series, "The Havana that accompanies me," in which numerous Cuban cultural figures were invited to share their memories in public at the large-scale model of Havana that the Group for Comprehensive Development of the Capital pioneered. A selection of these talks was compiled by Coyula himself and later published by the Letras Cubanas publishing house. In his introduction to the book, also titled *La Habana que va conmigo*, Coyula emphasized the need to preserve those memories because "understanding a city is achieved not only through logical reasoning and specialized studies, but also through tapping personal experiences, which must be dispensed and transmitted repeatedly, so as to nurture collective consciousness and be archived in historical memory."

I repeat that the modest intention of this article is not to be an obituary, nor even a tribute. What I want is to preserve in my memory that image of apparent serenity behind which one could see his clear intelligence but also his readiness to enjoy the simplest pleasures of life: a good book, a woman's beauty, a city's mysteries. He was Cuban to his bones but free of outmoded provincialisms. One could always learn from him and he was always ready to teach. He was engaged in a crusade for the future that was not always fully appreciated, but he never lost his characteristic and refined Cuban sense of humor. Above all, he never disappointed his loved ones and remained faithful to his own essences. I prefer to remember him this way, as a great man in love with life. The man with whom, among friends, I shared bottles of wine and afternoons at the beach, and whose wisdom and humor I enjoyed so much. . . . No cold tributes, no sad obituaries. Not for Mario Coyula Cowley. Not for Mayito.

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