

Remarks by Merri Ansara

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The first time I met Mayito I don't know if I was charmed most by the man or by the vision, but I was charmed. Totally charmed. It was 1988 or '89 in the old mansion on Avenida de los Presidentes. I was in Cuba with a Center for Cuban Studies board trip and Howard Glazer from Seattle said: You have to meet this man. So we went.

Up in the attic of this old moldering mansion, Mayito laid out a vision of the city, a vision of planning and sustaining a city, of how communities could come together and, through organization, address the issues that plagued them, that kept them apart, that isolated them and so could address decay as well as scale and visual empathy. I was hooked.

I was equally hooked and charmed the next time I met Mayito, in the new headquarters for the GDIC¹ on 28th Street where he brought out the first few pieces of the scale model and told that story we all know of the King Kong development behind Revolution Square and how he and Gina and the rest of the team at the Grupo defeated it simply by showing the planners and developers what they were contemplating in its physical context.

I was so hooked and charmed, not just by Mayito but by Gina Rey, Mario Gonzalez, Elio Guevara, Rosa Oliveras and all of the group that I began, like Howard Glazer had, to take and to send people to meet him and them, and to invite Mayito when he was in the U.S. to meet others: architects, planners, community organizers.

It is worth noting, in case we have not elsewhere in this tribute, the vision that Gina Rey, Mario Coyula and the others brought to the city when they set up the Group for the Comprehensive Development of the Capital. The GDIC was a purely advisory body with no power to build anything, and it was set up expressly at the request to them from Fidel, who thought that the city was losing its integrity as an urban entity along with losing its valued buildings while new monstrosities were built.

The GDIC took on 3 tasks:

- To build a scale model of the entire City of Havana where each resident could find his or her own house as well as developers and would-be developers would be able to see their own plans in context.

¹ Group for the Comprehensive Development of the Capital (Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital)

- To visit the great cities of the world with video and still cameras to see what had and had not succeeded in cities in the great building booms, especially of the mid- and late 20th century. Mayito commented: *We realized that we had actually saved Havana through our neglect.*
- To build a series of community organizing workshops that would involve the local leaders, local professionals and local residents in identifying and solving the problems of even the worst and most run down of communities. (20 of the Cuban-style CDCs exist today, grown from the initial 3.)

It was not part of the plan to attract the world to their vision and support one of the world's great cities, but that is precisely what happened – as all of us in this room know. We all came.

Every time I saw Mayito there was something new he was thinking about. Tomato plants hanging like trellises from the walls and patios of houses. The role of the bodega in the life of the community. His vision, his empathetic vision of how cities live and breathe with the cells that are their components made up of living humanity, brick, mortar, trees, songs.

As most of you know, not only was Mayito in charge of Havana's monuments, he built a number of them. One of my favorites was at the corner of Infanta and San Lazaro, in many ways an unremarkable park at first sight but with comfortable benches and towering blocks of cement that somehow block the sun. I first went in the early '70s before I knew Mayito or what the park was. If one sits quietly for awhile, the burlap figures pressed into the cement blocks seem to spring into action and one is surrounded by a howling, protesting mob – a tribute to the student marches that protested and eventually helped to overthrow the Batista dictatorship. One of the most brilliant sculptures I know. I went time and again.

And, oh, yes, I can't leave out of my reminisces of Mayito the stories of the little red sports car that he drove around Florida collecting arms for his comrades back home during the years of the armed Revolution.

I can't forget his love and concern for his three children, Xabier, who died heart-breakingly young, Mariana, and Miguel. I can never forget wonderful dinners and lunches with Marta and Mayito in their leafy great apartment in Vedado, or just sitting around with them talking. The last time I did so together with Gina was in late May of 2014, just 2 months before he died. He was pale, he was recovering from a fall but as we sat and talked of nothing too terribly important, his pallor changed to some semblance of color and I was very glad to be there with him.

I am still with him, and he is still with all of us.