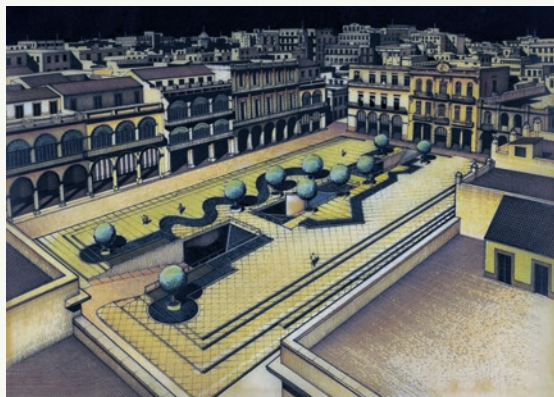


THE PARALLEL UTOPIA

16.04–26.09.2021



DREAMT
CITIES
IN CUBA
(1980–1993)

A project by Iván de la Nuez with Atelier Morales

Participant artists: Ramón Enrique Alonso, Teresa Ayuso, Nury Bacallao, Juan Blanco, Francisco Bedoya, Daniel Bejerano, Inés Benítez, Emilio Castro, Felicia Chateloin, Orestes del Castillo Jr., Adrián Fernández, José Fernández, Rafael Fornés, María Eugenia Fornés, Eduardo Rubén García, Óscar García, Universo Francisco García, Florencio Gelabert, Hedel Góngora, Alejandro González, Juan-Si González, Gilberto Gutiérrez, Héctor Laguna, Lourdes León, Teresa Luis, Jorge Luis Marrero, Rosendo Mesías, Juan Luis Morales, Hubert Moreno, Rolando Paniel, Enrique Pupo, Ricardo Reboledo, Carlos Ríos, Patricia Rodríguez, Abel Rodríguez, Alfredo Ros, Gilberto Seguí, Regis Soler, Antonio Eligio Tonel, Eliseo Valdés and Taller Le Parc (II Havana Biennial).

Design Project: Felicia Chateloin and Patricia Rodríguez,
Renovation of the Plaza Vieja, 1986. Francisco Bedoya:
drawing on tracing paper, 28.3 × 41.9 cm

THE PARALLEL UTOPIA DREAMT CITIES IN CUBA (1980-1993)

Iván de la Nuez

An unusual and contradictory project took place in Cuba between 1980 and 1993: the creation of a Western architecture without a market, the launching into orbit of a collective utopia ignored by the socialist State, the activation of a movement that began as criticism of the official urban planning of the time. And it is back in the spotlight today like the sword of Damocles hanging over the constructions of State capitalism in sight. (With the potential “Shanghaisation” of Havana around the corner, and that drive to build colossal, totemic tower blocks—mostly hotels—with no empathy for the neighbourhoods in which they are located).

Among other things, “The Parallel Utopia” is an archaeology that digs through several projects designed by the generation of architects born into the Cuban Revolution and who intellectually blossomed in the 1980s. The 1980s were dubbed by the architect and author Emma Álvarez Tabío Albo as the “citizens’ decade” of the Revolution, and by Gerardo Mosquera as the “prodigious decade”. Furthermore, that generation was referred to by the poet Osvaldo Sánchez as the “children of utopia”, by the troubadour Carlos Varela as “the children of William Tell”, and by Iván de la Nuez as the lead player in a “dissonant culture”.

Long before that, Che Guevara had defined them as the “New Man”: a subject not sullied by capitalism or the old regime, the Antillean Frankenstein destined to grow up in a classless society.

Through seven chapters—Prologue City, Monuments in the Present, A Room in Tomorrow’s Future, Instant Utopias, Guantanamo: Final Frontier of the Cold

War, Rebuilding the Malecón to Break Down the Wall and The Invisible City—, we shall retrace a speculative programme (not in the economic sense, but in the philosophical one) whose journey goes from *solares* (shanty towns) to *barbacoas* (a vernacular form to gain space in buildings using tall props); from the art deco that has survived along Havana's Malecón to the retro kitsch of the 1950s; from Italo Calvino to the Guantanamo Bay Naval Base; from the colonial city to the bicentenary of the French Revolution, taking in or dodging all sorts of monuments.

That is not to forget the commitment to street corners or the revival of popular alternatives, to which the necessary infrastructure is offered so that attitudes can be legitimised and everyday needs accommodated.

In any event, "The Parallel Utopia" is not about specific buildings; it is about urban dreams. About understanding the city as a give and take between building and imagining, heritage and futurism, architecture and human scale. These projects shrug off the stereotypical and infinitely repeated image of Cuban cities—and, in particular, of Old Havana—and offer us one that extends out to traditional villages like Cojímar, disastrous areas on the periphery of Havana like the Alamar district, or the impact of the fall of the Berlin Wall on Guantanamo in 1989. From reclaiming Italo Calvino as "Cuban" or recycling arte povera as a useful device for advancing towards the future.

The exhibition begins with the Mariel boatlift (1980) and ends in 1993, the year when the US dollar was legalised on the island and presaged the "rafters crisis" a year later. This critical architecture was activated between one exodus and the other. And, paradoxically, it could only have existed within a socialist model.

A collective utopia that grew on the slopes of a State utopia, guided by the unwavering commitment to turn architecture into city.

And the city into citizenry.

Prologue City

To imagine its cities, the generation of "The Parallel Utopia" threw itself into retrieving previous dreams. To invent the future, it carefully selected the past. Although this may seem an odd choice, not everything was deemed worthwhile. Based on that strategy, it assumed as its own the Brasilia of Oscar Niemeyer, the Sert plan for Havana, the Aztec constructions of Tenochtitlán or Teotihuacán, and other Latin American cities. In many ways, they were familiar and, above all, functional for its projects.

That utopian past had deep roots in Cuba too. That of Walter Betancourt and Gilberto Seguí (who continued the work of the former) provided them with a kind of Socialist *Fitzcarraldo* that managed to locate an opera house and an entire city of culture in Velazco, a village in the eastern zone of the island marked by the guerrilla warfare of Sierra Maestra. The University City José Antonio Echevarría (CUJAE, as abbreviated in Spanish) made them closely examine the space in which they were studying for their degrees in Architecture. Prior buildings in Habana del Este led them to become suspicious of the triumphant urban massification, basically consisting of Soviet-style prefabricated modules. From the failed Master Plan for Havana, they learnt to address the needs of neighbourhood dwellers. The restorations of Plaza Vieja and the battle for a botanical garden or a zoo showed them the path they needed to follow to cope with a bureaucratic structure that had closed down the Colegio de Arquitectos (professional association of architects) and banned architecture from being practised individually.

At the core of those influences were the art schools located where the exclusive Country Club had once been. Created by Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garatti and Roberto Gottardi, they had sites for degrees in Ballet, Music, Plastic Arts, Modern Dance and Performing Arts. And it was in those unfinished schools that the first artists of the Socialist teaching model were educated, with whom that generation

of architects formed a common front in their desire for a critical reconstruction of the city and of Cuban culture.

All these examples had a decisive impact on salvaging a social projection that would not bend in the face of massification, would retrieve the Latin American tradition, or would claim that those models of the past were not the result of an innocent intellectual exercise: they simply involved a decision to propose a different present for Cuban cities.

Projects by Walter Betancourt and Gilberto Seguí. Drawings by Rafael Fornés, Daniel Bejerano, Carlos Ríos, Eduardo Rubén García, Adrián Fernández and Francisco Bedoya.

Monuments in the Present

There is a part of Havana that quite literally disappeared without trace. Not a single plan, drawing or photograph. Only the technical texts at the Archivo Nacional (Cuba's national archive) remained, with the measurements and locations of the floors, and the verbal description of the constructions. These documents were enough for Francisco Bedoya to be able to draw some of the lost squares, fortresses and buildings (which were potentially as monumental in scale as the Espada cemetery or the Teatro Principal). Or to trace the evolution of some buildings that have been preserved and are now acclaimed (such as the Castillo de la Real Fuerza or the Plaza de Armas). Through his extraordinary architectural imagination, Bedoya brought urban enigmas to light, highlighted the impact of centuries of indolence or overcrowding, and filled in the voids that were veritable symbolic holes within the city's history. And, in short, he showed that originality sometimes consisted in salvaging the origins; that continuing to push history forwards against winds and tides might be the only way of changing it.

That spirit of continuity was also a component of other projects involving both the Discoverer and the Liberator of America. A Christopher Columbus placed in Bariay, the

exact site where he landed, and even a Simón Bolívar, who was given quarter in an updated setting. Along similar lines, the team formed by Patricia Rodríguez and Felicia Chateloin gave another turn of the screw on the place of urban heritage in the contemporary city. Their proposal for retrieving that heritage was ahead of its time; it was based on a restrained yet incisive heresy for a historic place like the Plaza Vieja, which Bedoya often pondered in his hypothetical city.

The coming together of architects and artists marked the approach to these and other monuments, which often blended continuity of direction with formal rupture. (And vice versa).

They all repudiated those totems, which were arranged to ensure that political designs could inoculate their repertoire of taboos. And, rather than sweetening the present based on that narcissism with which cities usually project their posterity, they all went in the opposite direction by offering the present to diminish the mythological aspects of monuments. To simply expel them from their thrones in the pantheon of modern animisms.

Projects by Patricia Rodríguez, Felicia Chateloin, Rolando Paciel, Enrique Pupo, Alejandro González, Alfredo Ros, Jorge Luis Marrero, Regis Soler, Rafael Fornés, Emilio Castro, Orestes del Castillo Jr., Juan Blanco and Francisco Bedoya.

A Room in Tomorrow's Future

What if rooftops became another city connected by previously unseen aerial links? And if factories had museum spaces in which art were incorporated into an interchangeable collection? And if the corners regained their function as preferred meeting points in Cuban neighbourhoods? And if Robert Venturi had to give an egg shape to a street stall selling omelette sandwiches, or Portuguese were compelled to topologically resolve beer dispensing in a pipe? And if Habana del Este regained its position on the shores of the Caribbean Sea, in contrast to the anti-oceanic Sovietisation imposed in the

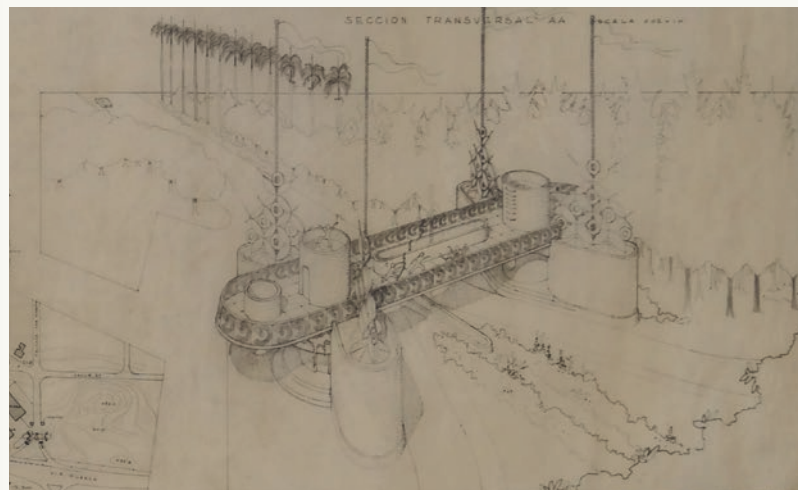
zone? And if the neighbourhood dwellers took the reins of the architects' work? And if the city tackled its political democratisation alongside that urban democracy? And if, one fine day, the State were to understand that the city actually belongs to its inhabitants? And if, besides *urbe*, architecture offered *agora*? And if the word "citizen" no longer had the pejorative meaning it had in the 1980s?

And if...?

All these questions held sway over those utopias, which sought to transfer leadership for urban decisions to the very people forming part of the city, who had come to have a passive and almost fatal relationship with their environment. Hence that social responsibility projected *from* architecture, whose intention, however, was never limited to remaining within its boundaries. Those utopias never ceased to wonder about the place of the architect in Cuban life, and their goal was always to work on the city by assuming the greatest possible plurality of universes.

At the same time, those projects embodied an alternative, a complement and a criticism of the restoration of Old Havana, amidst the euphoria resulting from the city being declared a World Heritage site. Hence a historical rank being awarded to popular alternatives—from the *solar* (a kind of Cuban shanty town) to the *barbacoa* (a floor or mezzanine added inside homes with high ceilings), from the corner to the rooftop, from inland areas to coastal areas—offering the citizenry the necessary infrastructure to legitimise their everyday attitudes. In other words, changing the established hierarchy and showing that growing upwards—just slightly—could be the most effective way of achieving a horizontal approach to a policy that refused to abandon its vertical dimension.

Projects by Rafael Fornés, Ricardo Reboredo, Patricia Rodríguez, Emilio Castro, Eliseo Valdés, Rosendo Mesías, Juan Luis Morales, Teresa Ayuso, Lourdes León, Florencio Gelabert and Rolando Paciel. Video by Jorge Luis Sánchez.



Design project: Gilberto Seguí, *Provincial pioneers camp in Tarará, Havana. Preliminary design of the entrance*, 1974 (fragment). Ink on tracing paper, 55.5 × 118.2 cm

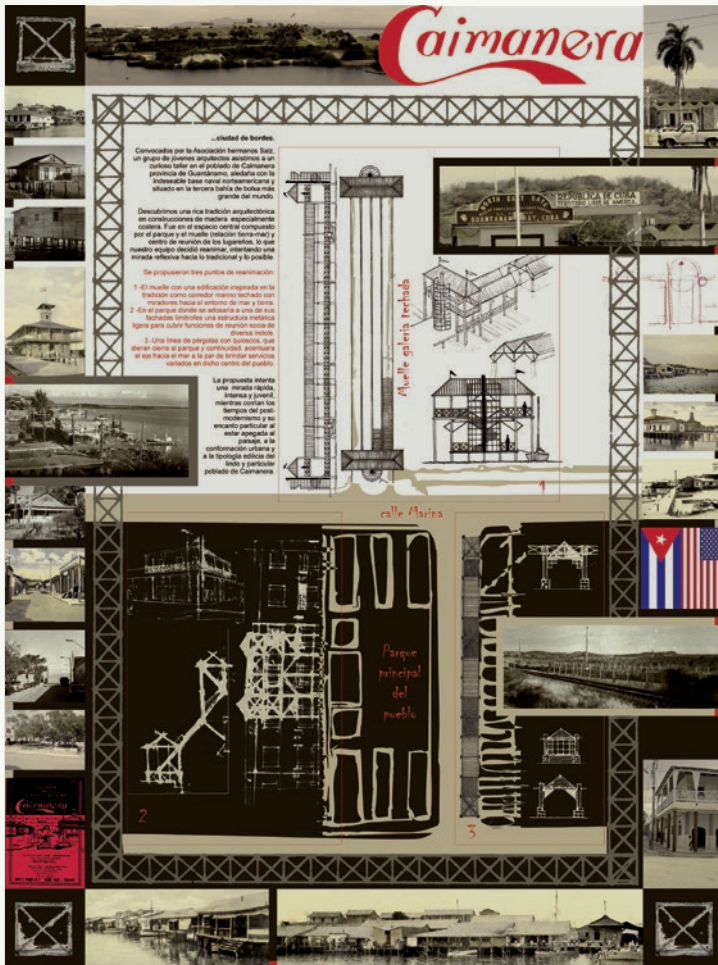
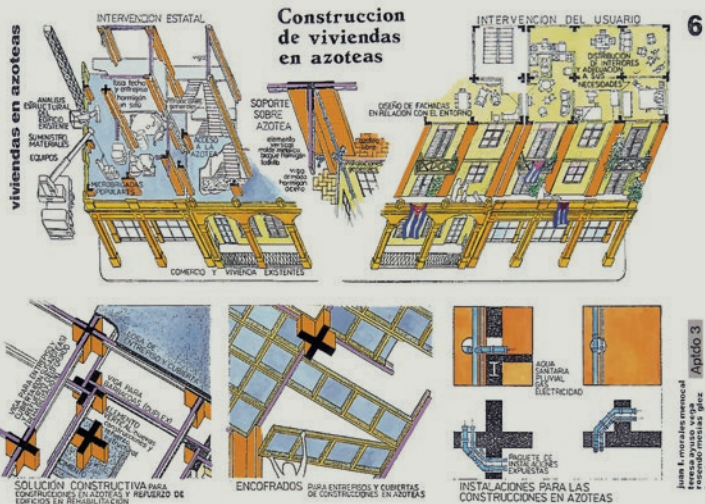


Design project: Emilio Castro, Orestes del Castillo Jr., Juan Blanco,
Monument for the Bicentennial of the death of Simón Bolívar,
Miramar, Havana, 1983. Print on bristol board, 58.5 × 84 cm

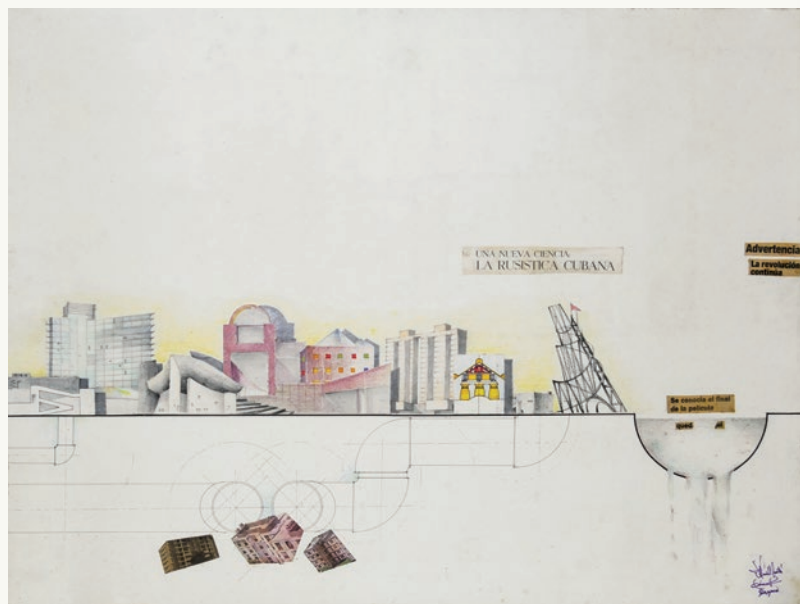
Design project: Patricia Rodríguez, Ricardo Reboredo,
 Rafael Fornés, Emilio Castro, Eliseo Valdés, *Development*
project for Cojimar village and the Alamar housing project,
Havana, 1984. Collage on cardboard, 99.5 × 70 cm



Design project: Lourdes León, Teresa Ayuso, Rosendo Mesías,
Juan Luis Morales, *Rooftop housing constructions*, 1988.
Colour pencils, watercolour and ink on bristol board,
59.9 × 84 cm



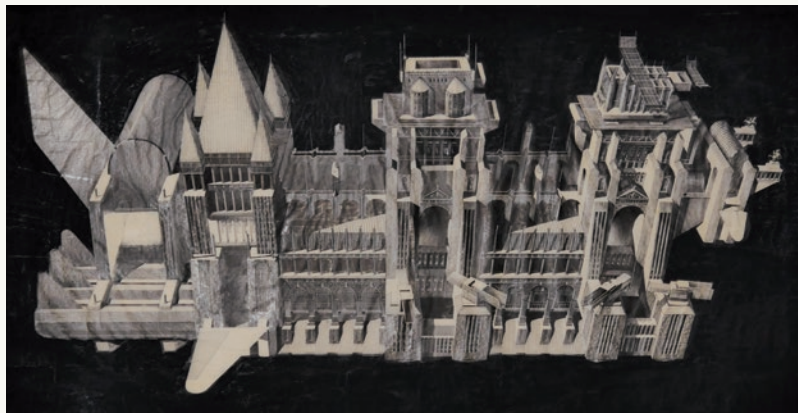
Design project: María Eugenia Fornés, Ramón Enrique
Alonso, *City of Edges, Caimanera, Guantánamo*, 1991.
Print on cardboard, 70.2 x 50.5 cm



Design project: Teresa Luis, Óscar García, Héctor Laguna,
Se formó el Cuchún. El Malecón, Havana, 1989. Ink, colour
pencils and collage on bristol board, 76.2 x 100.9 cm

Design project: Antonio Eligio Tonel, Rafael Fornés, Juan
Luis Morales, *Reinventing the 89. Bicentennial of the French
Revolution, Havana, 1987.* Mixed media and collage of drawings,
reproductions and photographs on bristol board, 120 x 70 cm





Design project: Francisco Bedoya, *Flying Ship City*, 1983.
Drawing on paper, 46.7 × 86.7 cm

Instant Utopias

From the second half of the 1980s, group projects, ephemeral actions, performances, graffiti, and community-based works multiplied, and there was even an art strike. While the new architecture radicalised their dreams of desired cities, several art groups chose to critically intervene in the undesirable city.

Thus, the Paideia project created a space for theoretical debate and distributed a democratic manifesto. Another group penetrated Pílon, in the east of the country, with the aim of inserting itself into the local community. The Castillo de la Fuerza project scheduled a season of exhibitions that went far beyond political and audience expectations. The project was based on a previously unseen mediation between emerging art and the institution. The Arte Calle group deployed their graffiti or invaded the urban space over and over again, like a cultural guerrilla that was both rebellious and unpredictable. From Ar-De or G y 23, interventions were triggered that had closer connections with the Arbat in Moscow than with the Thatcher-era punk London (and with the Gorbachev of Perestroika than with the Fidel Castro of the Rectification Process). Groups like La Campana—in the middle of the island—or Nada—in Santiago de Cuba—set themselves up in a church or went outside their usual spheres to organise talks and exhibitions...

In every case, social contagion was as high as an official repression that would move to “safeguard” the public at large from infection and from the very artists who had deviated from the “good path”.

In light of the failed entente between the new trends and the authorities, an action called *El arte joven se dedica al béisbol* (1989) took place, in which the artists declared a strike to close the decade. The exhibition entitled “El objeto esculturado” (1990), which was shut down within 24 hours at the Centro de Desarrollo de las Artes Visuales, and in

which the artist Ángel Delgado defecated during the opening, served as an afterword to it.

Under this atmosphere, the new architecture shared different proposals with some of those artists and, at the same time, it functioned as a refuge for intellectuals whose ideas had hardly any coverage in the media. It was not hard to find a dissertation on philosophy in an art catalogue, a criticism of postmodernism in a concert programme, essayists commissioned by architects, or artists having debates in literary circles.

It was a parallel cultural system, a collective consciousness in which there was no room for institutions, though their impact remained in their mindsets.

Performances by Juan-Si González, Jorge Crespo and others.
Projects by Emilio Castro, Rafael Fornés, Antonio Eligio Tonel,
Juan Luis Morales and Taller Le Parc (II Havana Biennial).

Guantanamo: Final Frontier of the Cold War

In April 1980, Cuba made the headlines worldwide because of a mass exodus from Mariel Harbour of 125,000 people who had been expelled from the country. Six months later, it was in the spotlight again because of the first space flight manned by a cosmonaut from the third world. That flight was launched from the Baikonur Cosmodrome, some 2,500 kilometres to the east of Moscow. The first news story was about one of the most traumatic failures of the Socialist model. The second was about one of its successes. Both represented the two sides of the Cold War, which, in the island of Cuba, had its launchpad to Latin America.

The forced exodus and the cosmonaut flight formed part of a geopolitical scenario, which was seen as extreme by other parts of the world. In Cuba, however, it has been an everyday experience since 1959. If we take the 1980s as an example, it suffices to mention the Sandinista Revolution, the low-intensity war in Central America, the Iran-Contra

scandal during the Reagan Administration, the space race between the Soviet Union and the United States, the wars in Angola and Ethiopia, the rise of the New Right and the ageing of the New Left.

A detail: the above-mentioned cosmonaut, Arnaldo Tamayo Méndez, was from Baracoa in Guantanamo Province. And his space voyage confirmed the global drive that territory had already attained thanks to that piece of music that, today, is even played in football stadiums: *Guantanamera*. A song that has been remade by Pete Seeger, Julio Iglesias, Los Lobos, José Feliciano, Los Olimareños, Celia Cruz, Pérez Prado, Joan Baez, The Weavers, Nana Mouskouri and Wyclef Jean, to name but a few.

A story: when, at the end of the decade, Berliners demolished their famous Wall and put an end to that Cold War that refused to abandon Cuba, several young architecture groups actually went to Guantanamo and Caimanera, a municipality of the Naval Base that the United States has had on Cuban soil since 1899. There, they proposed what we could indeed call an urban planning of the thaw. Determined to assume the uniqueness of hostile territory in which two economies, two political systems, two languages and two irreconcilable enemies confront and connect with each other at one and the same time.

A logic: if the final frontier of the Cold War in the West is in Guantanamo, then the thaw should start there. If the Soviet Union collapses, what sense is there in typologically copying its architectural standardisation? If politics remains immovable, why not promote, by way of culture, an easing of tension that other spheres do not allow?

Projects by María Eugenia Fornés, Ramón Enrique Alonso, Rafael Fornés, Emilio Castro, Eliseo Valdés, Nury Bacallao, Universo Francisco García, Francisco Bedoya, Teresa Luis, Hedel Góngora, Inés Benítez, José Fernández and Juan Luis Morales.

Rebuilding the Malecón to Break Down the Wall

Cuba has always had to hand an escape valve to drain its contradictions away: the shore. Consequently, it has always been able to get rid of its detritus by either “an ocean or a valet”, as Graham Greene understood it in *Our Man in Havana*.

Although it is unquestionably a gateway to Havana, the Malecón is also a perfect metaphor for any Cuban coastline. The most radical one for its borders and the most expedient one for its bridges. The barrier that separates the islanders from the world and the first watchtower that enables them to fantasise about it.

The Berliners dreamt of crossing *their* Wall, while Cubans have always imagined going beyond *their* Malecón to cross the sea to touch the other side. Or, at least, to reach that other Cuban side situated 90 miles away.

The Malecón is also the line that links three neighbourhoods of different architectural, economic and human personalities —Vedado, Central Havana and Old Havana—, the edge where major thoroughfares like Paseo del Prado or 23rd Street die and the open-air Art Deco “museum” is left in ruins. The Malecón is a kilometres-long sofa where almost every Cuban promiscuity is exchanged, and a barrier that the sea breaks every year to regain land that humans have stolen from it.

And all this without forgetting that the Malecón is also an urban planning challenge: the skyline should be more than a landscape seen from afar. It should be able to recover the inner life of Havana and become the stage for its urban customs.

That is why it is so pertinent to imagine a *Congódromo* (a place where conga is danced), or a mechanism through which the bad constructions are drained away whilst allowing Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, Gaudí or Michael Graves to be welcomed in. Along those lines, it is equally valid to use it as a place to bring together political and

architectural contradictions, propaganda and its criticism, art and advertising, the urban and the aquatic.

For this movement, “andar el malecón” means going for a walk through history, to seize the functional tradition that the Paseo del Prado or the Alameda de Paula once had, an open book of quotations and footnotes to the city’s history, a puzzle in which it is essential to take sides by opting for either an architecture for the buildings or an architecture for its inhabitants.

Projects by Teresa Ayuso, Teresa Luis, Óscar García, Gilberto Gutiérrez, Rolando Paciel, Hubert Moreno, Rosendo Mesías, Francisco Bedoya, Juan Luis Morales and drawing by Abel Rodríguez.

The Invisible City

It is anecdotal that Italo Calvino was born in Cuba in 1923 and spent the first two years of his childhood near Santiago de las Vegas, some 20 kilometres from Havana, and that his father left a certain mark on the area’s agriculture. (Being born in Cuba is “an unmentionable fiesta” according to the writer and poet Lezama Lima, and dying far away is quite common in this culture).

In contrast, it is not anecdotal that, when it came to setting off on its urban journeys, new architecture chose him as its travelling companion. Or that it sat him down on the Malecón to listen to its news of what the world was like beyond Havana, Guantanamo, the rooftops, the books of never-seen cities, the projects in factories or the utopian recoveries in the heart of the countryside. Nor is it anecdotal that, in real life, Calvino fleetingly returned to Cuba in 1964, visited the home where he was born, met Che Guevara and, in passing, got married to the Argentinean Esther Judit Singer there.

In any event, the writer appearing in this project is not exactly the one who describes his invisible cities to the

King of the Tartars, but instead the one who makes them visible to ordinary Cubans who are unaware of them. A Calvino who subverts the logic between power and architecture in the country where that movement conceived its impossible cities.

Calvino brought the world to the Cuban city, but it was Francisco Bedoya who took the Cuban city to the world. While the author describes a return, the architect outlines an escape.

His futuristic vessel is a floating city, possibly the island itself, that transports both its memory and its fiction.

Let's say that Calvino recounts what he saw, while Bedoya envisages what will be seen.

In Cuba, there is a saying that people often use to accept their fate: *Ese es tu maletín* [That suitcase is yours]. Bedoya's mobile city and Calvino's invisible city, as retrieved here, evoke that baggage. That mutant city that everyone hauls around like a package for nomads. The imaginary map that they have had to superimpose onto real territories. The parallel utopia determined to unblock the country.

Inwardly and outwardly.

Projects by Francisco Bedoya, Teresa Ayuso and Juan Luis Morales.

*The Parallel Utopia.
Dreamt Cities in Cuba
(1980-1993)*

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