

## THE SOUL OF CUBAN ARCHITECTURE: IN SEARCH OF ITS ROOTS

Alfredo D. Echeverría

The Cuban philosopher Humberto Piñera once said that “history is a system of discontinuities tied together by inevitable continuities.” This paper is a succinct walk through the inevitable continuities of history in an effort to uncover the spiritual phenomena, the primo-phenomena, as Nicolai Berdyaev would have said, through which we can pierce onto the essence of the evolution of history and how it relates to architecture. This selective walk is an essential effort to discern those intellectual roots that translate into architectural manifestations through history and how they relate to Cuba.

I am not offering stylistic solutions to the Cuban architectural crisis. Rather, I am posing a question as to what is the inspiring “soul” of Cuban architecture. To achieve that objective we have to travel to the past and bind those philosophical trends which eventually had an impact on architectural styles.

An erudite exponent of the relationship between philosophy and architecture is Catalanian professor José Ferrater Mora, whose docent work brought him to the University of Havana. In his essay “Philosophy and Architecture” he states that the work of the architect is not a direct translation of philosophical ideas or vice versa. However, he observes that through history there is an intriguing parallelism between architectural vocabularies and the quest for a comprehensive understanding of human existence. While taking gigantic historical jumps and limiting himself to western civilization, Ferrater identified five clear and distinct architectural movements tightly related to prevailing philosophies. They are the Hellen-

ic classic, the Medieval Gothic, the Humanistic Renaissance of the Quattrocento, the Baroque of the Seicento and the Contemporary. Our effort is a further distillation of Ferrater’s thesis in an effort to seek similarities with the Cuban milieu.

### GREEK PHILOSOPHY AND THE HELLENIC ARCHITECTURE

Plato and Aristotle’s “Theory of Forms” is tightly manifested by a strong sculptural architecture. For the Hellenic philosophers the tendency was to consider “Forms” as models to be followed in all artistic manifestations. That is, the tendency of visualizing ideas through “Forms.”

According to Ferrater, Greek classical architects tended to produce art work extremely locked onto a space of its own, and “consequently conceived as possessors of a space instead of simply being sited on a space” [José Ferrater Mora, “Filosofía y Arquitectura. Cuestiones disputadas. Ensayos de Filosofía,” *Revista Occidente*, 1955].

### SCHOLASTICISM AND THE ARCHITECTURAL GOTHIC

The relationship of formal thoughts and architecture is also reflected in the relationship between Gothic architecture and the canons of Scholasticism. This is affirmed by the professor and art historian Edwin Panofsky in his lecture titled “Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism.” He tells us that the Gothic cathedral responds to a “Sum” of knowledge with a common mental structure which constitutes an intelligible aggregate. The Gothic space is a space

hierarchically established according to a Divine order, which finally maximized the “principle of transparency” during the High Gothic architecture.

Panofsky indicates that it is not very probable that the builders of Gothic structures read Aquinas or other scholastic thinkers. Nonetheless, they were exposed to scholastic thinking in innumerable other ways. Their immersion in the tenets of scholasticism created a “mental habit” which instinctively transformed the architectural Gothic [Edwin Panofsky, *Gothic Architecture and Scholasticism*, Meridian Books, New York, 1957].

### HUMANISM AND RENAISSANCE ARCHITECTURE

Scholasticism was substituted two centuries after by the Humanism of the Quattrocento, a Humanism that according to Berdyaev, “has not strengthened, but weakened Men.” Its anthropocentric thesis affirmed that the “human reason acquires a supreme value” [Nicolás Berdiaeff, *Una Nueva Edad Media. Reflexiones acerca de los Destinos de Rusia y de Europa*, Editorial Apolo, Barcelona, 1951]. Humanism represents the rupture of men with the innermost depth of his spirit. It pretends to build a “regnum hominis” detached from its ontological base.

As a barometer of the permanence of humanism through hundreds of years, the British biologist Sir Julian Huxley in 1965 maintained that: “Now we must be readied to abandon the hypothesis of god and its corollary as divine revelation or the inalterable truth, and to change a supernatural position by a naturalistic position” [Julian Huxley, quote from article in *Fortune Magazine*, 1965].

It was during the Renaissance that architecture abandoned the scholastic tenor, adopting the Pythagorean thesis that the structure of the universe was arithmetic and geometric. Such a theoretical affirmation inspired the Renaissance movement and a return to paganism, to the classic orders and to a renewed admiration for the human body as the Greeks once did.

During that period geometry was used to describe the work of God: “... a God who has ordered the universe according to immutable mathematical laws,

who has created a uniform and beautifully proportioned world” [Rudolf Wittkover, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, W.W. Norton & Co. NY, 1971].

As defined by Ferrater Mora, the floor plan of a church follows the structure of the human body; the microcosm, which correlates “simultaneously the mystic and mathematics, between the visible and the invisible world, between the macrocosm and the microcosm...” [Ferrater Mora, *Op. Cit.*]. Upon such a philosophical foundation, Antonio di Pietro Averlino (Filarete) [1400–1469] designed the ideal city, Sforzinda, with distinct geometrical traces. This concept of human mediation is also offered in Leonardo da Vinci’s drawing [1452–1519] known as the “Vitruvian Man.” Yet another example of the human mediation on architectural design is provided as an illustration on Francisco di Giorgio’s “Trattato di architettura, ingegneria e arte militare” [Giacomo da Vignola, *Regola delli cinque ordini d’architettura*, first published in 1562, probably in Rome].

### THE COUNTER-REFORMATION AND THE BAROQUE

Later on, jolted by the Council of Trent [1545–1583], the Counter Reformation framed the Baroque’s thoughts of the Seicento which, among others were influenced by Gottfried Wilhelm Leibnitz’s [1646–1716] metaphysics. Leibnitz affirms that there is no absolute correlation in “space and time.” He maintains that space is nothing more than the “order of co-existing objects; time is only the sequence of events.” The Baroque turns back to the spatial tension of the interior of the Gothic structure and is expressive of the deliverance from the geometric and arithmetic constrictions of the Renaissance.

Baroque façades are delineated by sensuous curves that generate a playful game of hide and seek between shadows and light, as Alejo Carpentier once described La Habana [Alejo Carpentier, *La Ciudad de las Columnas*, Editorial Lumen, Barcelona, 1970]. The Baroque columns twist like giant vines seeking to reach an irradiance haven. Impressive cupolas were erected allegorically depicting paradise. It was the Baroque movement which inspired the first “architectural” manifestations in Cuba.

## THE ROOTS OF MODERNISM

Regarding the contemporary period, Ferrater Mora indicates: “Just like architecture is viewed as a way to organize spaces in order to make them habitable, we can also frequently view philosophy like a ‘habit’.” [Ferrater Mora, *Op. Cit.*]. Emmanuel Kant’s [1724–1804] rationalism postulates that reason is not something impose over the human spirit, but the core of such spirit. Reason is universally accepted as the only valid method to think. Subjectivity is supplanted by objectivity.

Kant’s ideas were significantly expanded by Friedrich Wilhelm Nietzsche [1856–1900], who proffered the thesis that God was dead. His atheism translated into the affirmation of an increasing secularization of the European society; a society that has been capable of “killing” the Christian God who has been the foundation of Western values for thousands of years.

While originally the concept of the dead God denoted the loss of significance and values of the Western world, no intrinsic value replaced God. The death of God results in absolute nihilism. According to Martin Heidegger [1889–1976], “Modernity overturns the ideas and values of the traditional (Christian and classical) culture of the West. ... Only a God can still save us, but not that of the Christians or of any contemporary religion” [W. J. Karpowicz, *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Anglo-American University of Prague, Czech Republic, 2009]. If not a God of the Christians or of any contemporary religion, which God will replace it?

Kant is accompanied by the controversial Sigmund Freud [1856–1939], who proposed a radical change of a “reprobate” society and the urgent need to change it entirely; a need for a revolution; paralleling Marx’s “historical inevitability of a proletarian revolution.” In 1923, Freud founded in Frankfurt the Institute for Social Investigation linked to the University of Frankfurt. The Institute was considered as the corner stone of the Frankfurt School. With meager resources through the initial years, in 1931 it leaped towards investigations of greater significance attracting several prominent intellectuals from diverse thinking trends, aesthetics, arts, anthropology, sociology and specially philosophy.

It is interesting to note that the desire to imbricate various disciplines was a cultural integrative tendency also expressed through the prolific writings of Richard Wagner [1813–1883] and later adopted by the educational principles of the Bauhaus.

The initial project of the Frankfurt School was defined as a Heterodox Marxism, which tended to develop theories focusing on existing inequalities, not only socially but also philosophical. The objective was to combine Marx [1819–1833] with Freud, “repairing on the sub-conscience deeper emotions.” To achieve this radical transformational goal the critical theory had to focus on how to “transform the world rather than how to interpret it.”

During that period of time the lack of transcendental and unifying spiritual values prompted a blind search for social solutions with no clear or precise objectives. But, what all of this has to do with architecture? As discussed above, the preceding discussion showed that there is a remarkable parallelism between architecture and philosophy. Such an ideological push to transform the world also framed new architectural manifestations. The goal was more clearly manifested during the Bolshevik revolution and through the Weimar Republic [1919–1933]. Their common objective was the achievement of an agnostic society which, predictably has culminated in an irresistible social distraught and anxiety.

Like a moth trapped by a fatuous light, architecture did not escape such volcanic turmoil. Fascinated by something that was different, many blindly followed the “revolutionary tenets” with an apparent lack of understanding of their roots or their potential consequences. Architectural solutions were designed to “transform” the world according to revolutionary postulates; an apocalyptic fallacy lacking spiritual values. The lack of transcendental and unifying values resulted in architectural languages which were as varied as short-lived. Permanence yielded to the transitory. Eternity became only a meaningless poetical expression. Architectural movements from the early years of the XX Century proclaimed the radical transformation of the reprobate society. The current man is the center of the universe. With an elitist attitude and total insensitivity, convoluted solutions

were offered as the entire world presented the same social, ecological, idiosyncratic and economic conditions.

Dostoyevsky said that the Russian revolution “was not political but religious; it was the quest of atheism and the salvation of humanity with no God.” Cuba was not vaccinated against this phenomenon. If today we measure the overwhelming universal secularism we can conclude that such religion and its ideas appeared to have been successful.

It was in Germany that the revolutionary enthusiasm was undertaken by the Weimar Republic. Barbara Miller Lane tells us that from the Weimar Republic emerged the Bauhaus, inspired by a “group of radical architects under the direction of Walter Gropius who declared that they were preparing a new and socially conscious architecture which must play an important role in the political revolution of Germany” [Barbara Miller Lane, *Architecture and Politics in Germany, 1918–1945*, Harvard University Press, Cambridge, MA, 1985].

Furthermore, the architect and urban planner Bruno Taut was a strong advocate of the Weimar’s ideas through architecture. According to Miller Lane, “Taut argued that the form of the new architecture, in addition to inspiring the creative process in designing a home must become the basis for the spiritual revolution.” Perhaps the political orientation of the Bauhaus was more clearly defined by its second director, Hans Meyer. Meyer indicated that “...the activities of a militant group of students’ sympathizers with communism blended the school with such radical politics.” Ratifying Meyer’s assertion, Miller Lane quotes a local newspaper that proclaimed that, “The Bauhaus in Weimar has unfortunately taken on a bright political color from the beginning, and in various cases has been a particularly strong supporter of Communism” [Miller Lane, *Ibid.*]. The new architecture was clearly expressive of the canons of a new revolutionary era. “Modern” architecture became a vehicle to advocate the revolutionary ideas of the Weimar Republic.

### PHILOSOPHICAL DECONSTRUCTIVISM

The culmination of the spiritual decay into a state of terrible vacuity and chaos is expressed by Jacques

Derrida (1930–2004), a French educated Algerian. During the mid-1960s, Derrida developed a strategy known as “Deconstruction,” which essentially was a critique of all traditional western philosophies. According to him, all previous philosophical tenets were false, intrinsically contradictory, all proposals had multiple meanings. Nothing is certain nor valid. Derrida’s ideas were said to be full of trickery and deceptions, very close to an anarchical hypothesis of the Dadaists, which was described by Fred Kleiner and Christian Mamiya as the “Madness of a Collective Homicide.”

Professor John Searle frequently criticized Derrida, indicating that his pronouncements were pseudophilosophical or plainly sophisms. In 1984 Searle wrote in *The New York Review of Books*, “... the obscure deliberation of his prose, the exaggerated affirmations which seem to be paradoxical, under an analysis are silly or trivial.” Others were also critical of Derrida. A friend of Derrida’s, Michel Foucault expressed his dissatisfaction, accusing him of practicing a method which he called “Obscurantist Terrorism.” Foucault describes this categorization as follows: “Obscurantism results from his convoluted and obscure writings. Terrorism jumps at you when you criticize him as he responds in an accusatory violence saying—you are an idiot, you do not understand me” [John Searle, “Foucault on Derrida” Reason Interview, October 14, 2004].

Like previous formal thoughts affected architectural manifestations, Derrida’s sophisms seemed to have impacted some architectural vocabulary. This new architectural vocabulary has also been accepted by some with professional adulation, like once the “Unité d’ Habitation” was accepted more because of the “fear of being branded ignorant” than because of having a full understanding of its roots” [Malcolm Gladwell, “Modernism,” *New Yorker Magazine*, 2006]. The absurd exaggerations of the Dadaism accompanied by Derrida’s postulates are now translated into what is known as “Architectural Deconstructivism,” which could easily be called Architectural Anarchism.

Within the context of the present secularism, all transcendental thoughts are missing. Without the

forces of spiritual asceticism, we pretend to find multiple and often contradictory answers to hold the vertiginous devastation resulting from the present anarchic dilemma. Current anarchism influences the cultural framework and social behaviour of any nation.

The above examples illustrate the strong reciprocity between philosophical propositions and architecture in the western world. From those influences architecture extracted the creative invisible nutrient which shaped its language. It is important to understand that such reciprocity is unambiguously manifested through the architecture of Asia and the Middle East for thousands of years. Within the historic “inevitable continuities,” the Cuban philosophical ideas were developed.

### THE CUBAN PHILOSOPHICAL MILIEU

This rapid stroll through history sketches the relationship between formal thoughts and their parallel architectural expressions. That is, first the definition of the guiding idea, then the artistic articulation. Or, as expressed by Berdyaev, “Acts are performed in the reality of the spirit before they manifest in the external reality of history” [Berdyaev, *Op. Cit.*]. But, how does all of that relate to Cuba? Which are the historical conditions which best illustrate the short, but intense evolution of architectural vocabulary in Cuba based on the prevailing ethical and cultural values of the nation? The answer to such question could assist us in identifying the true roots of Cuban architecture and suggest what is needed to discover its “Soul.” A better understanding of those formal thoughts could also aid in identifying and recuperating Cuban lasting ethical values while creating a legitimate Cuban architecture.

If we follow the same logic discussed above regarding the relationship between philosophy and architecture, we must first obtain a general conception of a relative short Cuban philosophical background and, only then, identify the corresponding architectural expressions. In so doing, as expressed by Ivette Fuentes de la Paz [1953 -]: “We cannot talk concerning the (Cuban) philosophers of the XVII and XIX Century without thinking about the anticolonial civic and political posture, promulgator of the best patri-

otic values and education of the youth, beyond the writings of theoretical speculations” [Ivette Fuentes de la Paz, *Filosofía, teología, literatura: aportes cubanos en los últimos 50 años*, Wissenschaftsverlag Mainz, Aachen, 1999]. Cuban thinkers were mainly concerned with independence; matters of faith appeared to be treated with less urgency.

Roberto Agramonte tells us that, “The history of the Cuban philosophical thinking is a double quest of the spirit towards the auto realization of the idea of freedom and the replacement of a dead faith by a living faith” [Héctor Manuel Pupo y Bertha Alarcón, *José de la Luz y Caballero: La gran síntesis conceptual de la ilustración cubana*, Universidad de Holguín, Cuba].

As in other Hispano-American countries during the colonial area, the Cuban ethical environment was introduced by religious congregations closely tied to, and indebted to, the Spanish crown; an ethical framework compromised by the economic interests of the crown.

According to Humberto Piñera [1911–1986], Félix Varela Morales [1788–1853] was an outstanding precursor of the Cuban philosophical thought and a principal founder of a Cuban consciousness. Varela was imbued by the prevailing tenets of humanism and Cartesian ideas. Piñera indicates that: “This individual criteria means that Varela is a strong defender of an active and experimentalist education against the verbalism of the Scholasticism” [Humberto Piñera, “Cuba: Filosofía e Independencia,” *Revista Círculo*, Vol. VIII, año 1979].

Varela affirmed the supremacy of the individual over all other social or collective aspects: “a citizen engaged with society, God and himself.” Through two of his manifestos, *Lecciones de Filosofía y Cartas a Elpidio*, Varela presented a singular intellectual position which defended philosophical freedom while protecting divine matters through faith. He established a clear separation between philosophy and theology. Varela once expressed that the church has competence on matter related to theology but not on philosophy. It was Varela who plowed the seed of independence and national identity which eventually

evolved into the struggle to separate the island from colonial control.

The other significant philosopher contributor to “cubanidad” was José de la Luz y Caballero [1800–1862]. Caballero also opposed the tenets of the prevailing Scholasticism. His thoughts were decisively of an empiricist character, pointing to the importance of philosophy in the analysis of values. Like Varela, Caballero asserted that religious truth and philosophical truth were not incompatible and fought “against the ethical-philosophical system of the time.” His deep knowledge regarding theology and religious life propitiated his repeated accusations against the compromised Spanish clerics living in Cuba. “Freedom of thought” is the essence of Caballero’s posture.

In a study submitted to the Panamerican Cultural Circle for Philosophy and Independence, Caballero expressed: “Autonomy is a reflection and creative capacity, without which the spirit does not practically exist. And what could such liberty of thought be but the starting point towards a total independence for the individual as well as society?” As Varela, Caballero made a clear separation between matters of the faith and philosophy.

Varela and Caballero’s distinction between philosophy and theology influenced the thinking of Enrique José Varona [1849–1933] discarding theological considerations. Varona represents a strong Positivist tendency. That is, “knowledge as a tool to discard mystical traits of reality.” Varona’s atheistic and anti-clerical thesis advocated for a secular education in Cuba: “Let our educational work be founded on strict scientific base ... the active competition required by the multiplicity of modern life, and not on spirits for fantastic speculations” [Pablo Guadarrama González, *El pensamiento latinoamericano del siglo XX ante la condición humana*, versión digital iniciada en febrero de 2003, a cargo de José Luis Gómez-Martínez]. Guided by this thesis, Varona implanted and re-structured public education in Cuba. Cuban education became agnostic, if not openly anti-clerical. The evolutionary result of his social and secular conceptions caused him to assert that “...man is an incomplete being, to feel complete needs of men.” This affirmation coincides with Berdyaev who also indi-

cates that because man has travelled the road of Humanism to its end “now seeks refuge in any form of collectivism” [Nicolas Berdyaev, *Op. Cit.*].

Agnosticism influenced all facets of Cuban life. In the absence of the millenary parallelism with a spiritual trace, Cuban architecture showed a disconsolate search for its own vocabulary. Only during the first half of the fifties did Cuba enjoy the glimpse of an architectural Pentecost. This trend lasted into the latter years of 1950s, when an incipient spiritual resurrection was replaced by pseudo dialectical materialism. Events of the late 1950s are the culmination of the philosophical evolution which originally started by the scission with the lasting things of the spirit. The cacophonous language of Cuban architecture will continue until the guidance of a unifying spiritual asceticism is recovered.

#### ABOUT CUBAN ARCHITECTURE

Architecture would take many years to reflect the preoccupation for the Cuban identity expressed by Varela and Caballero. Nonetheless, it is necessary to mention that the nature of most of the architectural work of the XVIII and early XIX century in Cuba was of civic or religious nature. It was not financed by the “criollos” defenders of the independence. It was an architecture strongly influenced by the baroque emanating predominantly from Seville and Cadiz, a synthetically Andalusian Baroque.

As mentioned above, there is a parallelism between architecture and formal thoughts. In Cuba during the epoch of Varela and Caballero, the architecture was Baroque—a Baroque sublimely diluted because of the economics of the island and the poor quality of its local materials. This architecture was skillfully adapted to the Cuban lush environment with no frills or artificial mannerisms. The inherent sensual poetry of the Baroque architecture in Cuba is emblematic of the latent “cubanidad.”

Most of the sumptuous residential works were built for the Spanish nobility in Cuba. Some examples are provided by the historian Marco Antonio Ramos [Marco A. Ramos, et. al., *Cuba, Arquitectura y Urbanismo*, Ediciones Universal, Miami FL, 1995]. A magnificent example of domestic Baroque architecture is offered by the Casa de la Obrapia. According

to the Cuban Architect Evelio Govantes, the Casa de la Obrapía “is the boldest Baroque domestic architecture example that Spain left us” [Marco A. Ramos, *Op. Cit.*].

During the early years of the new republic, the Baroque tradition was abandoned. It was supplanted by “systematically copying architectural styles of the past, pretending that through architectural falsifications escape an uncertain present while reacting to a cultural inferiority complex, or better yet feigning a different historical path” [Bruno Stagno, *Tropicalidad y Arquitectura*, Instituto de Arquitectura Tropical, San José, Costa Rica, 2003].

In almost all nations, the conquest of its liberties is accompanied by the rapid abandonment of its traditional artistic manifestations. According to professor and historian Joaquín Weiss, unfortunately in Cuba, “...to the colonial follows the worst of North American architecture: the so called ‘chalets’ with their feeble and rigid forms, and their details and functions proper to other customs and climate, consequently rendering them unacceptable to our environment” [Joaquín Weiss, *La Arquitectura Colonial en Cuba*, La Habana, Cultural S.A., 1936].

After Varona, Cuban architecture lost any trace of national identity. It was an architecture deprived of a mystical and transcendental value. Until the “Orígenes” group questioned the definition of *cubanidad*, the architectural language in Cuba wondered like the Flying Dutchman attracted by the gleam of foreign architecture. Not only were those euphemistic expressions a rebellion against the classic Spanish canons, but also a frivolous effort to brag about political independence and economic achievements. Diverse and foreign architectural styles were imported to Cuba. With the exception of the vernacular architecture, all proved to have a silent contempt for the social, historic or environmental conditions of the island.

In contrast with other Hispano-American countries, Cuba did not have a vernacular architecture of significant value. The vernacular Cuban architecture was adapted according to ease of construction and labor skills. As with buildings in other cultures, the Cuban *bohío* took its own characteristics because of the use of autochthonous materials obtained mostly from the

palm tree. The architecture of the *bohío* has not experienced significant changes for many decades. This vulnerable architecture maintains relevancy due to an oral tradition and the slow socio-economic development of the Cuban countryside.

Compounding the separation between the pragmatic and any mystical allusion, an unfortunate event occurred during the mid of 1940s at the University of Havana’s School of Architecture. A group of young students rejecting all canons of classical architecture and dazzled by the mirage of the Bauhaus, proceeded with the so-called “Burning of the Vignola.” The halls of the School of Architecture were transformed into the dreadful Vieux Marché Plaza at Rouen, immolating the books of Giacomo Vignola [Giacomo Vignola, *Rules of the Five Architectural Orders*, 1562, probably in Rome]. Springing from such event, the School of Architecture was predisposed towards the German socialist movement of the Bauhaus.

The unfounded idolatry for the Bauhaus became an educational religion. The influence of the Bauhaus School had far reaching consequences on Cuban architecture. Foreign architects were brought to expand on the teachings of the Bauhaus, many capriciously imposing foreign criteria with total disregard for the Cuban social, economic or environmental conditions. Cuban architecture, shaded by such a School, discarded the opportunity to develop a genuine Cuban architecture capable of responding to the animistic values present in the formal thinking of Varela, Caballero, Fuentes de la Paz and Agramonte. That is, an architecture capable of conveying the “...double quest of the spirit towards the auto realization of the idea of freedom and the replacement of a dead faith by a living faith” [Ivette Fuentes de la Paz, *Op. Cit.*].

## AN INSPIRATIONAL PHOENIX

However, as a phoenix rising from the chaotic ashes of the philosophical haze, emerged “Orígenes,” whose dearest goals focused on reaching through the branches of the Cuban origins an understanding of *cubanidad*. Fuentes de la Paz tells us that, in so doing, the travelling is very troublesome and subtle. Perfection in this quest will take us beyond intimacy searching for its origins: “It will be a discovery of

oneself, a rediscovery of God.” There lies in a new, renovated effort needed to redefine our understanding of what *cubanidad* is. She affirms that “the configurative dynamic of the cultural structure, and hence of the world, obeys to a mission of human perfection towards a communion with the ‘Absolute,’ in this case God” [Ivette Fuentes de la Paz, *Op. Cit.*].

In the midst of such architectural cacophony surged precursors of what could have become a genuine Cuban architecture. Because of the initiatives of a few Cassandras, Cuban architecture began to develop its own identity—a rhythmic architecture respectful of its morphological tradition, a reflection of the warmth and exuberant joy of its people, its prodigious geomorphic cadence, its sensuous climate full of incomparable fragrances which impregnate the environment. These few architects were conscious of the need to create a Cuban vocabulary. With time there were examples of the renewed concern for developing a Cuban architecture. Unfortunately, shortly after their intellectual seed began to spring, it was retrenched by political events. However, was that architecture a new wholistic vision of *cubanidad* “obeying to a mission of human perfection towards a communion with the Absolute,” as Fuentes de la Paz affirms? Imbued onto a generalized spiritual vacuity, those efforts still were not the vehicle to sufficiently assist man in his road of ascension towards transcendental values.

### THE RAPE OF HOPE

Even while weak on its animistic expression, the incipient Cuban architectural heritage insensibly began to disappear as documented by Florian Borchmeyer and Mathias Hechtscher on a DVD titled “The New Art of Making Ruins.” Discouraging factors accumulated during the last 50 years rendered the task of developing a genuine Cuban architecture difficult. Especially since such architecture should redefine not only its form but also should inspire the spiritual values that Cuba should enjoyed.

The events of 1959 resulted in a radical abandonment of Cuban architecture despite clamors of a nationalistic revolution. The hopefulness of the prior years was abruptly truncated by the architectural “descubanization.” During these fatidic years rarely

do we find initiatives designed to define and strengthen Cuban architecture. Current miniscule attempts to salvage “the old” do not imply a serious search for a Cuban architecture. While there is merit in preserving the Cuban architectural patrimony, its destiny has been translated into empty buildings occupied by decrepit phantoms to impress foreigners.

It can be affirmed that despite patriotic clamors, Cuba has lost the desire to blend architecture with the essence of *cubanidad*. Outside the island, nonsensical efforts to imitate the past can never generate truthfulness. However, while those efforts are intellectually faulty, it is not a distinct phenomenon of the Cuban emigrants. As María Rosa Menocal rightfully describes it, the efforts of Cuban emigrants “like other exiles in every generation and from every culture yearned for a small token of the old world” [María Rosa Menocal, *The Ornament of the World*, Little, Brown and Company, Boston, May 2002]. Multiple examples of Cuban work in South Florida ratify this assertion.

Cuban architecture is not done anymore. Copying patios, roof tiles, high ceilings and arches with stained glass is not doing Cuban architecture. In Cuba, the current ethical vacuity gave way to the ruling of a materialist and an intellectually incoherent pragmatism. The careless exploitation of natural resources is accompanied by a pernicious and disrespectful architecture.

### THE UNCERTAIN FUTURE

The foregoing comments succinctly tell us how through centuries, the architectural language has correlated with philosophical ideas. The slow but implacable decaying process of the anthropocentric Humanism has resulted in replacing the permanent with the transitory. We cannot expect that a rupture with things of the spirit would yield anything else but the chaotic results of Dadaism and Deconstructivism. Cuban architecture does not escape such dictum.

Unless we search for the soul of *cubanidad*, as defined by Fuentes de la Paz, Cuban architecture will continue to offer an uncertain future. For decades Cubans have suffered from eroded ethical standards which affects *las dos orillas*. It has been said that the Cuban people have suffered from a prevailing agnosticism

and pragmatism shaded by big lies and spiritual hypocrisy. However, what makes it worse is the fact that such pervasive conditions are not exclusive to Cuba.

The search for an architectural Cuban identity cannot depend on stylistic solutions. The foundation of its identity rests on a clear metaphysical enunciation of the relation form-message, like the corresponding offerings of the Hellenic, Gothic and Baroque architecture with their respective philosophical environment.

### THE CUBAN ARCHITECTURAL PENTECOST

From the past hundreds of years, Cuban architecture can extract valuable and applicable lessons. However, to become a vehicle carrying a transcendental moral force first it needs to discern new ethical standards. Basketball Coach Jim Valvano [1946–1993] said that, “Once ideologies are dead, the world is left on the hand of practical people who annul the intellect under mountains of emptiness.” Because of circumstances which have transformed the nation, are Cubans forever condemned to be buried under mountains of emptiness?

If “history is a system of discontinuities tied together by inevitable continuities,” it is necessary to trace the historic evolution of Cuban philosophical thinking and identify those thoughts which might engender a new Cuban “mental habit.” From *Origenes*, the Cuban architect could look into José Lezama Lima’s “religious anthropological philosophy which guides the

‘ascensional road’ of man towards the most transcendental sight which moves the spirit: God.” Therein may lay the Cuban Architectural Pentecost. Therein may be hidden the “Cuban Architectural Soul.”

But any attempt to seek an answer requires a conscious effort to free ourselves from the tumultuous invasion of agnosticism. This quest is extremely difficult, because it is difficult to understand the necessity for such effort. It is difficult to plow a new path free of the impediments of a vicious circle of a spiritual vacuum. It is difficult to understand the urgency of becoming the vanguard of the resurrection of an architecture which would forge a distinct language consequent with the real “Soul of the Cubanidad Arquitectónica.”

However, we must understand that architecture is not, nor should it be, an evangelical crusade. Neither was the work of Johann Sebastian Bach. As history tells us, architecture is only the interpreter of transcendental ideas and formal thoughts. Architecture is poetry translated into stone, and poetry is the language of the spirit.

The future of Cuban architecture rests on the discovery of those formal thoughts which will take us to the transcendental roots of what the Nation could be, while awakening the ethical responsibility of the architect. All of this is possible as Winston Churchill once said: “We shape our buildings and then they shape us.”

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