



The Neighborhood As Workshop

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The Neighborhood as Workshop

by

Mario Coyula

Translated by John F. Uggen

Introduction by Thomas Angotti

INTRODUCTION

Mario Coyula's award-winning article "The Neighborhood as Workshop" is a reflection of the fresh thinking confronting new realities in Cuba today. Honored by the Cuban chapter of the International Association of Art Critics, the article is both a subtle critique of conventional thinking about urban planning and development in Cuba and an outline of a bold new approach now taking shape there. It lays the philosophical groundwork for new Cuban initiatives in decentralized, sustainable community planning and development in which Coyula has been a key player. It includes a description of, and provides a rationale for, the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital (Group for the Integral Development of the Capital), an interdisciplinary group of professionals engaged in neighborhood planning and development projects in Havana. The group is a product of the Cuban Revolution and has official support, and it is forging new social relations between neighborhoods and government and among government agencies. In today's severe economic crisis, it offers hope for salvaging some of the social accomplishments of the Revolution while undertaking changes dictated by the harsh realities of the post-Soviet era.

The group focuses on the physical, social, and economic aspects of urban development, and its work with neighborhoods follows a comprehensive multisectoral approach. The interdisciplinary staff and a team of allied consultants include architects, sociologists, economists, and social workers. The group has created eight neighborhood centers in Havana that engage

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residents in a wide range of projects designed to rehabilitate housing, stimulate local artisan production, and develop cultural activities that reinforce a sense of community and place. The centers work closely with construction microbrigades in the development of housing and community facilities using low-cost, sustainable technology. They promote local enterprises and seek to strengthen links between firms and local consumers. They assist local food production by providing technical assistance—serving as a kind of agricultural extension service in the city. Their work is closely bound up with attempts to recapture cultural traditions, through music and dance, that have strong roots in Havana's older neighborhoods. They coordinate their educational and cultural work with family doctors, neighborhood councils, and other institutions that have a presence at the neighborhood level. The group has also completed a scale model of Havana that it uses in educational programs aimed at expanding awareness of the history of the city and its neighborhoods, and it works closely with citywide and national-level agencies in the formulation of urban policies, which are increasingly influenced by its grass-roots experience.

The group has worked to promote a new approach to the built environment that is more decentralized, ecologically sound, and economically feasible. The model attempts to meet cultural, social, and economic needs and seeks to affirm the identity and historical continuity of neighborhoods by preserving the built environment and reformulating traditional planning models. In short, the group stands for a sustainable model of urban development that is deeply rooted in the local and the national context and therefore less vulnerable to dependency on foreign financing, energy, technology, politics, and culture.

With the onset of the special period in 1990 and the collapse of the Soviet Union, the approach and work of the group have achieved prominence within Cuba. There is no longer any material basis for the mammoth urban development schemes of the past, ambitious utopias that contrast with the group's modest and more practical objectives. Giant apartment complexes such as Alamar in Havana, built in the 1970s and 1980s, have become the target of criticism and scorn. They are seen as too massive, lacking in services, and based on technologies that cannot be economically sustained by Cuba's production system. And with the virtual halt in new construction, the myth that the problems of the older neighborhoods of Havana will be solved by new apartment blocks can no longer be sustained.

Shortages of construction materials and energy have forced Cuban planners to rethink the entire approach to urban development. As Cuba's foreign exchange diminished, new emphasis had to be placed on traditional technologies that used local materials and conserved energy. As petroleum imports

plunged, there was planning for the bicycle. As factories closed down, new locally based enterprises were started. The group has been in the forefront of these initiatives.

In sum, the group has come to be identified with a new emphasis on urban preservation and sustainable urban development that contrasts significantly with the approach characteristic of the past 30 years. It has established a base in the older neighborhoods of Havana, which have improved very little in recent decades as priority was given to investments in rural areas and new modern housing developments, but it also reflects a shift in policy taking place in local and national governments.

Criticism of the monotonous industrial production of housing began during the rectification campaign launched by the Cuban Communist party in the mid-1980s. The design of mega-projects located on rigid superblocks was criticized as bearing little relation to rural, urban, or cultural traditions in Cuba. There was criticism of the highly centralized and bureaucratic mechanisms for construction set up in the mid-1970s following models from Eastern Europe. At the same time, the microbrigade system, begun in 1970, was increasingly seen as a uniquely Cuban form of self-help organization aimed at building new housing and community facilities that was being strangled by bureaucratic mismanagement in government ministries. (In this system the government provides building materials and technical assistance and individuals volunteer to work on construction crews for a period of time while their co-workers take up the slack in their regular workplaces.) After the institutionalization of central planning mechanisms in the 1970s, microbrigades gradually fell into disuse; they began to revive with the rectification process and took new forms, including "social microbrigades" that undertook rehabilitation of existing housing in central city neighborhoods instead of new construction in outlying areas.

Although the criticisms that emerged in the rectification process pointed to the problems of top-down organization of planning, the responses to the problems continued to focus on large-scale construction projects, most of them built by microbrigades. It was not until the severe economic crisis of the special period that serious questions arose in the government about the overwhelming priority given to new construction over preservation of existing housing and neighborhoods.

The Group for the Integral Development of the Capital was founded in the midst of the rectification process, in late 1987. One of its major objectives was to improve the design of new planned developments, and for that reason Mario Coyula, a distinguished professor of architecture, was a logical choice as one of its leaders. The group was also to encourage a more comprehensive approach to planning and resolve the many inefficiencies due to poor coor-

dination among agencies. For example, many sites for doctors' offices had been selected by the health agency without adequate consideration of the total community environment.

As the economic crisis progressed, the capacity of the central government to build new housing and community facilities and to resolve many local problems dwindled. The objectives of the group shifted to the promotion of bottom-up community development as opposed to state-directed planning and preservation instead of new construction.

Mario Coyula has been in the midst of these initiatives and one of the main advocates of the new way of thinking about the city. For decades he was a quiet critic of monumental superblock construction. His prior responsibility for overseeing historic preservation in Havana had honed his appreciation for the value of Havana's rich architectural heritage. Many of the views he advanced over the years have now gained currency in Cuba, even as they have matured in the process.

Coyula is an architect by training but has made significant contributions in art and planning. Visitors to Havana may recall his moving monuments to revolutionary students near the University of Havana and in the Cementerio de Colón, collaborative works that depart from the dreariness of official symbolism. His article is filled with the same refreshing vision, subtle irony, and revolutionary simplicity that may be found in his work. His analysis of architecture and design trends in Cuba is ornamented with many double entendres and sophisticated political and cultural commentaries, not all of which can be captured in even the best translation. His assessments transcend Cuba, however, in the current search for alternatives to monumental modernism and irrelevant postmodern faddism.

— Thomas Angotti

HAVANA WINS AND LOSES

It is a commonplace that Havana has benefited since the triumph of the revolution by the country's focus on improving the physical infrastructure and living conditions in rural areas, small towns, and other cities and metropolitan areas. This policy, undertaken more for reasons of social justice than for intentional planning purposes that had not yet been formulated, limited migration to the capital. It is recognized as having spared the city the fate of so many other metropolitan areas of the Third World at the not insignificant price of decades of progressive deterioration in the preservation of the physical and technical infrastructure.

The current image presented by the city, in spite of various programs designed primarily for new construction but lacking territorial integration and coherent criteria of development and design, is a cruel mirror that inexorably reflects this deterioration—physical but also functional and social—in the lack of paint and the excess of showy and strident colors, buildings endlessly propped up in the expectation of repairs that are always inadequate to the increasing need, trees sadly mutilated, streets made almost impassable by refuse, and distortions due to changes in use and other inappropriate undertakings. All this combines to produce a squalid streetscape of old shops either vacant or precariously adapted for substandard housing, closed-off arcades, and lofts and rooftop shacks generally built without even a modicum of quality in design, construction, or materials.

A WORTHY OLD LADY

In spite of everything, this enormous mass of buildings still stands, held together by the compact street grid and the implacable equality that time itself has imposed, layer by layer, on the city. It is sustained by the thick web of relationships and meanings that transcend the material plane of building facades and extend to the people who move through the streets without having to look up to recognize that the well-known old city is still there, maligned, vacillating, deformed by salt and seawater, marvelously and incredibly alive, still of use.

THE GOOD FORTUNE OF BEING POOR

Little has been said about the other indirect but positive effect of not giving priority to the capital city. If from the beginning of the 1960s the government had kept on building in Havana according to the iconoclastic criteria of that era—when the rest of the world was copying the closed model of the first generation of English “new towns” or the easy spectacle of a city based on the Brasília model or, in the best of cases, on the restructuring of Stockholm’s downtown core—the new generation of Cuban city planners would probably have surpassed the predatory scheme of Sert/Wiener/Schultze, and Old Havana would not have appeared on the list of world cities declared “cultural heritage sites.”

The urban renewal project for Cayo Hueso¹ during the first half of the 1970s reflected an incipient lag at the theoretical level because of the absence of debate and the slavish copying of imported models from countries that

were not exactly in the vanguard of the city-planning movement. This project, fortunately at a standstill—although not because of any recognition of its defects—was an example of an approach that might have been generalized if the confining logic of heavy prefabrication and standardized designs, so closely aligned with the huge apparatus of research design and construction, had not proven in practice to be inadequate from the broader point of view of the economic and social interests of the community and the nation.

THE ACCUSING FINGER

This experience should lead to a reconsideration of the development policies followed in many cities of the country, from Camaguey to Guantánamo, where, with a naiveté laden with provincialism, development became identified with the construction of tall buildings. But what was bad for Havana—in spite of its greater capacity of assimilation, the precedent of high-rise buildings from the 1950s, and the unifying presence of the Malecón (the seawall promenade)—proved even more unjustified in cities that had maintained a great deal of coherence in structure, texture, scale, character, and lifestyle besides having in almost all cases a patrimony built on cultural values that were very much their own and whose example could well have served as a model. The great accusing 18-story finger with the inevitable restaurant at the top must serve as a reminder; the economic difficulties and the oil shortage would take care of the rest.

A BURDEN THAT ISN'T

The early advocacy—at times almost masochistic—of a small group of defenders of landmarks and above all the recognition abroad of the cultural value of Old Havana and Trinidad finally brought acceptance of the need to preserve this heritage. This was limited, however, to the oldest and most singular structures, with only one type of building intervention—restoration—being contemplated and the basic aim being the promotion of tourism, overlooking the enormous cultural, social, and economic value of vast sectors of the capital and other cities and the value of other more widespread and recent architectural styles. This attitude was due to the very magnitude and relatively poor condition of the building stock, which made restoration for its purely cultural interest seem an impossible task. Perceived instead as a significant cultural legacy that is still useful, it becomes a national treasure.

TRANSFORMING AND PRESERVING CITIES

At times one hears talk of transforming the city, but why transform it if it is still useful and beautiful? It would be better to rehabilitate it, make what has stopped working function again, repair what has deteriorated, recover the good that has been lost and can realistically be recovered, and continue carefully integrating within the urban streetscape, a mixture of all the various epochs, new buildings that highlight and interpret in contemporary terms what is still valid of our heritage while at the same time bearing the imprint of these difficult and beautiful times and, almost unwillingly, the personal stamp of their creators.

LANDMARKS, BORN OR MADE?

Much has been said about the preservation of architectural and historic landmarks and somewhat less about preserving natural landmarks. Very little, since Sitte,² has been said about the urban role of commemorative monuments or, to be more exact, of large-scale commemorative and environmental sculptures that may eventually come to be recognized as monuments. Despite a few well-wrought examples, of which the new central plaza at Guantánamo is the most recent, there is concern about the prevalence in this field of a tendency toward a very clumsy and false realism that neither makes any creative contribution nor is well-suited to the task. If it could only copy Michaelangelo or Rodin, although out of phase with historical time—but it is more a matter of not even knowing how to copy the great masters such as those anonymous craftsmen who filled Columbus's cemetery³ with insipid but impeccably wrought statues.

A CONTEST TO AVOID ERRORS

Some truly horrible monuments have been erected, really very bad and completely useless ones, and there is no reason to build a monument that serves no purpose. An ugly and conventional cracker factory can at least produce crackers, although it should also be well built from an architectural standpoint. But an ugly monument that doesn't say anything, doesn't inspire us or help to define or characterize a section of the city, has no reason whatsoever to exist. If those who select them were able to choose among different ideas and be advised by experts, many mistakes could be avoided. That is the advantage of architectural competitions, though they do force one

to abide by the decision of the jury, and that would seem to be more than some can tolerate. Perhaps, then, there are worthy winning projects still waiting to be built while other abominations keep getting built in their place.

THAT NECESSARY LUXURY

This leads us naturally to another topic: beauty in revolutionary architecture. The notion that beauty could be something unnecessary or postponable led in practice to the idea that socialist architecture had to be ugly by definition and that any other criterion would be tantamount to opposing the idea that the masses can quickly meet their own needs. But life has demonstrated that when we renounce beauty we give in to monotony and triviality. Moreover, relatively little got built, and what did was invariably bad. Ultimately one is forced to conclude that quality and beauty are not abstract constructs but rather the natural state of things and that one cannot do without one to concentrate on the other any more than one can say, "I am going to concentrate on breathing and not focus on keeping my blood circulating."

UGLINESS COSTS MORE

For this we will surely have to pay a high price not only on the cultural level, in terms of the obvious decadence of Cuban architecture of the 1970s and 1980s, but also in that many buildings are very poorly constructed, crooked, and cracked, function poorly, and deteriorate rapidly—and besides, no one likes them, neither the aesthetes nor the people who have to live in them. Fortunately, there are now appearing some good examples that put mediocrity on trial and demonstrate that even with a shortage of building materials and without skilled workers good architecture can be achieved when the builder and the user do without intermediaries and come together naturally within a manageable framework that is at once physically and socially coherent, in a return to the neighborhood and a return to the source.

TOWARD A DIFFERENT KIND OF BEAUTY

This could also involve a search for a different kind of beauty that distances itself from the canons of the petit-bourgeois apartment of the 1950s and from the later shrunken version that might be described as petit-proletarian. The goal, perhaps, is to rely neither on the doubtful precision of high technology that

dazzles the large construction companies nor on a perfectly skilled craftsmanship that generally cannot be achieved with the microbrigades. Once again, models can be found in the historical and vernacular architecture that by its very simplicity has withstood the test of time. The use of local materials and traditional technologies achieved interesting physical effects in the controlled irregularity of the exteriors, dispensing with edges and detail to project the essence of space and volume. Here also one has to guard against the danger of forced generalizations, and in many contexts this has not been possible. At any rate, it is necessary to remember those excellent examples of harmonious coexistence between the intense ingenuity of the pre-Baroque, the cool elegance of neoclassicism, the relaxed curve of Catalan modernism, the more or less tempered or restrained exuberance of eclecticism, the geometric decoration of Art Deco, the smooth surfaces of functionalism, the textures and form of the organic current, and the aggressive expressiveness of brutalism, at times juxtaposed on the same street.

A NECESSARY LEARNING EXPERIENCE

The need to build on vacant lots within the compact city forces us to preserve certain morphological values in order to achieve the visual integration of new designs with the existing environment. It also requires that we find processes of management, planning, construction, and logistical support that are flexible and disturb the context as little as possible. If this can be achieved for the central city, and if this city can demonstrate that it can function well and can adapt to change and to people's tastes, the next step is to try out these new approaches and processes in new suburban developments. There streets can be configured in blocks with well-defined lots and lower, more compact buildings oriented toward the street. The street can be a vital spine of multiple activities superimposed on each other, not simply an avenue for increasingly fewer vehicles, and we can turn our attention to sidewalk trees, low fences, gardens, and porches with small shops on the corners and mixed-use tree-lined plazas and the traditional republican park serving as focal points for the block and the neighborhood.

In that patient and useful urban fabric, natural variation contributed by time and people harmonized with the unity that was ensured by continuity. Relatively few regulations were accepted and complied with. This was a physical model that adapted itself well to different processes and lifestyles and that was translated into an image that continues to be—despite deterioration, congestion, and even loss of function—the very definition of a city par excellence.

An urban pattern of this type would continue to be filled in little by little with various small projects carried out by local teams of designers in close contact with the inhabitants of the neighborhoods, avoiding those grand monolithic intrusions that attempt to impose from the outside a final image that is necessarily schematic—generally or almost always incomplete and always deformed throughout the entire process. One attempts, in essence, to combine a very simple pattern—often considered rigid but in reality very adaptable—with processes that are quite flexible. This is the exact opposite of what has been done up to now through the use of amorphous site plans and a very rigid process.

SOLVING THE PROBLEM

Havana, like any other major city, exists as a unit only in the abstract. It is true that some components and problems must be approached on a metropolitan scale, but the form of the city itself and the everyday life of its inhabitants are closely linked to the neighborhoods. Neighborhoods are much smaller territorial units, coherent and identifiable, with their own image and identity, character, and scale and their own functions and patterns of using public places. There are problems that, when seen on a citywide scale, loom very large, and when a solution is sought for them from that perspective everything suddenly becomes very complex and costly. This could create a sense of impotence and discouragement. Nevertheless, if these problems are taken apart and addressed at the neighborhood level before they get out of hand, partial solutions may emerge that involve alternative technologies and local participation.

ALTERNATIVE CULTURE, LOCAL CULTURE

An important issue for neighborhoods is to involve local governmental agencies that can provide resources and volunteer labor and also local figures such as doctors, teachers, and artists who can support mass organizations in the mobilization of people and in the campaign to promote urban culture. For this, the smaller interior cities of the country can serve as an example. They show that a sense of community and commitment still exists and works very well. In the capital, there is a similar situation in the towns that were absorbed into the metropolitan fabric without losing their own physical and social identity.

People who live in Santa María del Rosario⁴ will quickly recognize the relevance of the Cathedral of Havana, but the local church is even more important, and it is also an architectural jewel. Those people need, as everyone does, a testament from the past that can help them to find their own role in history, a visual landmark that will help orient them in space—all this in a territory that they can identify as their own.

RETURN TO THE NEIGHBORHOOD

All this brings us, via different paths, to a reevaluation of the neighborhood as a territory in which, in direct contact with its residents, designers can find more appropriate solutions. In this way, long-standing aspirations that have often been seen as mere abstractions may materialize. These include the horizon for the preservation of the built environment in order to go beyond the limited approach of landmark preservation aimed at unique buildings; revising the notion of “potential for transformation” imposed by conventional methodologies of urban planning and replacing it with “potential for rehabilitation”; modifying the sectoral criteria of technical and economic rationality used by the huge state building and design enterprises to focus instead on the problem from the perspective of the interests of the people and the country as a whole, achieving variety in a natural way and developing new models and technological alternatives; stimulating and channeling people’s natural reserves of energy, inventiveness, and creativity without resorting to the extremes of populism so that they can participate more actively from the very beginning in the decisionmaking process that is going to affect their environment and the shape and quality of their lives, at the same time searching for a closer relation between the physical and the social context.

It is also possible to exploit the productive possibilities using local materials and talent, thereby reducing dependence on external sources of supply and gradually moving from a passive and consumerist attitude to a productive and creative one. All this would help to improve socialist democracy and take it to the level of the masses in order to rectify the country’s mistakes and support the very survival of the Revolution in these most difficult and trying times.

A WORKSHOP FOR THE COMMUNITY

To take advantage of that potential and guide it from within, working simultaneously at the physical, social, cultural, and environmental levels,

workshops for comprehensive transformation were initiated in Havana in 1988 by the Group for the Integral Development of the Capital. The technical teams of the workshops are very small but include architects, engineers, sociologists, and social workers who preferably live in the same neighborhood. The team is headed by a natural leader, generally a person who is well known and respected in the neighborhood and whose authority arises from real support within the community.

EVERYTHING COUNTS

An example of this approach especially appropriate for suburban communities would be the development of local solutions for sewage treatment: for example, using an autonomous integrated system with a series of oxidation ponds that use the sun and aquatic plants for water purification, producing biogas in digesters, using solid wastes as organic fertilizer for local vegetable crops, and using the water for raising fish and ducks and irrigating vegetable gardens. The cycle continues with the use of the aquatic plants to make textiles and artisan products and as animal fodder. Finally, the land area needed for this system can be used as a forest reserve, and the last pond, the one with the cleanest water, can be used for community recreation. In this way, what had originally been seen conventionally as one more problem in the larger problem of the city's sewage system now becomes instead a local resource and no longer has an impact on the rest of the city. The energy savings that can be achieved with these local solutions is obvious, especially today, but the development of an ecological awareness and of a producer mentality among the residents is even more important.

WITH OUR FEET ON THE GROUND

The workshop teams, supported by the municipal offices of architectural design and by students and faculty from the school of architecture, have begun to promote new designs with functional and structural solutions closer to the scale, character, and basic forms common in these neighborhoods and adopted by use and tradition. These solutions almost always focus on a rectangular grid with low-rise buildings, although among some construction officials there is a tendency to retain the isolated five-story building because they are familiar with it and find it easier to build. In reality it is not a technical or economic problem but a curious resistance to changing organizational approaches that are very simple and inefficient and are set up to work with

standardized semiprefabricated designs. The bureaucrats also can do without their paperwork and instead go out and get their boots muddy.

The advantages of decentralization are well known, but in some countries the opinion is widely held that it can only be achieved by private initiative. The Cuban experience with municipal design groups and the comprehensive transformation workshops do not follow this model and are currently working quite well, despite all the problems that have already been pointed out. This clearly shows that if the work is interesting enough for the specialist, it doesn't matter whether he is paid by the state.

LONG LIVE DIFFERENCES!

Naturally, the members of these teams vary in skills and initiative, and the people providing guidance are therefore of prime importance. But here also the experience of the traditional city shows us that the urban quality of life does not demand that all buildings be architectural masterpieces. At the same time, the new suburban developments show that a good design based on a poorly chosen site plan and repeated ad infinitum is much worse. The problem is not so much that everything is the same as, to quote Orwell, that some are more equal than others.

LIKE LIFE ITSELF

In every city, as in every living organism, there will always be some very beautiful things, some very ugly ones, and many that are neutral. There will also be some that are being born and others that are maturing, aging, and dying. Some reach their full development and others begin to decay. These processes are natural and therefore inevitable, but one must confront them with dignity, without defeatism. It is unpleasant to see a degenerate, drunk, dirty, and impudent old man ignobly living out his last years. There are buildings and even whole areas of the city whose image has begun to deteriorate because of deformations, additions, demolition, and rubble. It is not only a problem of accumulated needs and the lack of resources but also one of a negative attitude regarding life itself. For this reason, along with the culture of the salon, we need the culture of the street.

A FINAL REASON FOR BEING ALIVE

When we stop to review all this, many truths learned by different paths are confirmed and enriched by creating a new landscape, both earthly and cosmic. The small becomes great, the humble becomes beautiful, and time itself is expanded so that the memory of the past resists the sweet pangs of nostalgia and commitment to the future wins out over disorder.

NOTES

1. Cayo Hueso was the first major urban renewal project in Havana after the revolution, replacing low-rise housing in poor condition with a modern high-rise tower, and it is now the object of significant criticism.
2. Camillo Sitte, a 19th-century Austrian architect/planner.
3. A historic cemetery in Havana with many notable monuments.
4. A small town southeast of Havana with a famous 18th-century baroque church that has been preserved with alterations.