

**THE MODERN
MOVEMENT
IN THE CARIBBEAN
ISLANDS**

GUEST EDITORS

Eduardo Luis Rodríguez
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The Regional Service of Cultural Affairs (*Direction régionale des affaires culturelles, DRAC*) of Guadeloupe is proud and happy of its partnership with Docomomo for this publication which pays tribute to modern architecture in the Caribbean.

Architect Ali Tur lastingly marked Guadeloupe's landscape by rebuilding a large number of public facilities during the 1930s. The French Minister of Culture and Communication recognizes his work's significance and protects five of his realizations listed as historical monuments. Other architects or contractors, trained or inspired by Ali Tur, also deserve to have some of their buildings protected: it is in fact one of the DRAC's projects for the future.

For six years, the DRAC has carried out registration actions that have allowed it to gather a unique stock of documents, entirely digitalized, on the local heritage. These studies have led to several publications on the Côte-sous-le-vent and of the Gourbeyre town among others. A book on the city of Basse-Terre will also be published in the near future.

Another vast project is already underway: the implementation of a PNR, national center of resources (*pôle national de ressources*), on architecture, whose theme is "Living in one's territory." This structure is under the double administrative supervision of the Ministries of Culture and of Education, and its partners are the *Maison de l'architecture* and the *Institut universitaire de formation des maîtres*. This PNR's operator is the Regional Center of Educational Documentation (*Centre régional de documentation pédagogique*) located in the Abymes town. Its mission is to organize events, implement educational tools and establish a documentation stock.

Studying the production of 'modern' architects must allow us to fuel the debate on what the architecture in the Caribbean should be today, given this contrasting territory's specific features. Docomomo's publication is for us an encouragement to participate in these exchanges that I hope will be profitable to the future of our regions.

LAURENT HEULOT, *Regional Director of Cultural Affairs of Guadeloupe*



The publication of this special issue of *Docomomo Journal* entirely dedicated to modern architecture in the Caribbean islands rewards the efforts of several of our network's members. In fact, it is the first time that the journal is published simultaneously in three languages: English, French and Spanish.

The decision to explore this topic came to us quite naturally.

A matchless testing ground for architectural and urban experiments, a field of analysis as yet hardly investigated as a whole, a set of complex relationships with the European and American continents, a sustained reflection on the themes of local adaptation and modern regionalism, the Caribbean islands also present the characteristic feature of embracing three linguistic areas within a single geographic region. For Docomomo International, it was therefore the perfect opportunity to lead this first trilingual publishing experiment.

The determination and persistence of a great number of Docomomo members was crucial to carry out this vast editorial endeavor, complex in terms of implementation, translation and publication. In the first place, let us acknowledge our guest editors, Eduardo Luis Rodríguez (Docomomo Cuba) and Gustavo Luis Moré (Docomomo Dominican Republic) who devoted an unlimited amount of time to the preparation and editing of this issue. Furthermore, their work would not have been possible without the effective collaboration of all the Spanish language Docomomo countries—Argentina, Chile, Cuba, the Dominican Republic, Mexico, Panama and Spain—that took an active part in the Spanish version's realization.

This issue also owes a great deal to the enthusiasm and support of our cultural partners from continental and overseas France, the Department of Architecture and Heritage, the Institut français d'architecture, the Cité de l'architecture et du patrimoine, the regional cultural Services of Martinique and Guadeloupe, as well the Groupe Bernard Hayot. The French version was published thanks to their contribution.

This threefold publication, which at some point may have seemed hazardous, turned out to be a surprising catalyst of energies, exchanges and cohesion. This highly stimulating human and intellectual experience provides evidence of the Docomomo network's efficiency and vitality.

Further initiatives are now eagerly expected.

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THE **SINUOUS** **PATH OF** THE **MODERN** **MOVEMENT** IN THE **CARIBBEAN ISLANDS**

EDUARDO LUIS **RODRÍGUEZ** AND GUSTAVO LUIS **MORÉ**, guest editors

ON A GENTLE SLOPE west of Havana is one of the most singular buildings in the Caribbean: the National School of Music designed and built by Vittorio Garatti between 1961 and 1965 (*fig. 6, p. 23*). Only about half of the initial project was realized. It is a long building that extends along 330 meters and follows the undulations of the land until it bifurcates. One section ends abruptly while the other extends to the bank of a small stream where it breaks up into successive big, semi-circular planters that evoke successive spasmodic movements, death rattles that seem to announce a precipitous end.

NO OTHER WORK is more appropriate to symbolize—and even to cover, if only in theoretical terms—the path taken and to be taken by the modern movement in the islands of the Caribbean, the subject of the present issue of *Docomomo Journal*. The trajectory of modern architecture and urbanism in the Antilles, which, like the School of Music in Havana, is long and uneven, is richly detailed and complexly nuanced. After lackluster, obscure periods, others, dazzling with light, follow and ascend before sinking back into darkness only to rise up once again. In this way, between successes and mistakes, a serpentine route was traced that shaped a significant architecture whose contribution, like that of the school of music, is unique and not simply confined to being an example of the diffusion and assimilation of the international style vocabulary in regions distinct and distant from its origin.

THE BEST WORKS of the Caribbean modern movement are of more than anecdotal value; they are significant contributions not only on the local level but also relative to the most remarkable international production of the period between approximately 1930 and 1970. Many of these achievements—including, among others, the buildings for the



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Fair of Peace and Confraternity of the Free World, celebrated in 1955, in Santo Domingo, Dominican Republic; those designed by Henry Klumb for the University of Rio Peidras in San Juan, Puerto Rico, and in Havana, the Noval Cueto House by Mario Romañach (1949), the Nautical Club by Max Borges Recio (1953), the Medical Insurance Building by Antonio Quintana (1958) and the National Schools of Art by Ricardo Porro, Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti—could easily take their place in some proud history of modern architecture throughout the world, a work whose pages would be enriched by the presence of such examples. This could have been the case if the so-called classic historians of modern architecture had been more inquisitive, more inclusive, more truthful and less biased and manipulative. With few exceptions, the historiography of the modern movement has consistently ignored the vast majority of the works realized in the Caribbean islands. Although more attention has been paid to the achievements of Latin America over the last two decades, the islands of the Caribbean remain a terra incognita due to the lack of in-depth research. The book *Arquitectura antillana del siglo XX* by Roberto Segre (Havana: Arte y Literatura, 2003) is a praiseworthy but woefully isolated example of comprehensive approach to a subject that should be deepened by meticulous country-specific studies undertaken by local authors who can offer a complete and precise vision of all the contributions made and all the works built in the region by the architects of that period.

UPON READING ARTICLES published here, one can recognize specific issues that are considered relevant by the authors but whose criteria do not always coincide with those of the guest editors. Indeed, the editors themselves do not always share the same interpretations of specific aspects or events. In particular, it is evident that a more profound analysis of which period could be selected as the 'first modernity' in the Caribbean islands is advisable. This period is sometimes chronologically situated at the end of the nineteenth century, in accordance with the general history of the region, but is also occasionally dated to the 1930s when art deco and the first signs of the influence of European rationalism make their appearance. This disagreement is part of a diversity of criteria that reflects, in turn, the variety of achievements in a region that, although it can be treated as one entity on the basis of shared geographical and climatic criteria, can equally be split into smaller areas on the basis of cultural identities and particular histories.



THIS PUBLICATION does not aspire to present or embrace all the important issues related to the modern movement in the Caribbean islands. Many questions remain unanswered; many have not yet been posed. The articles published here emphasize recurrent issues such as factors in the appearance of a new architectural vocabulary, received influences, and the early developments and subsequent contributions of important works by distinguished professionals most of whom are virtually unknown at the international level. This is true, for instance, of Wilson Chong, the designer of the national stadium in Kingston, Jamaica, and of Marcel Salasc, the architect of the Richler building and of the Maison des Syndicats in Martinique. Other texts examine aspects of great significance such as the appearance of a modern regionalism that creatively integrates the universal language with local traditions and fosters the creation of avant garde works perfectly adapted to the physical and cultural conditions of the region. The œuvre of architects Colin Laird and Anthony Lewis in Trinidad is representative of this adaptation of the formal vocabulary of modernism to a local context. Finally, the work of important foreign architects like Richard Neutra, Antonin Nechodoma, Ali Tur, the architect of more than 100 buildings in Guadeloupe after the cyclone of September 1928, or Henry Klumb, creator of a remarkable œuvre in Puerto Rico, is also highlighted. Although care was taken to choose a local author for each article, out of the conviction that an insider's interpretation is always preferable to the view from outside, the journal ends with a text by a Spanish author. More than any other of the former home countries, Spain represents the greatest cultural influence in the region and it is to Spain that the architecture of the Greater Antilles owes the most. For this reason, we thought it useful to conclude this group of articles with an analysis by a Spanish specialist of the modern movement, something that might bring a fresh and dispassionate view to the controversial issues presented here. This publication is not an attempt to close off debate or eliminate doubts but rather a contribution, at the international level, to a greater knowledge of Caribbean modern architecture.

THE CONSTRUCTION of the National School of Music in Havana was interrupted in 1965 for objective reasons—economic problems—and subjective reasons related to the extreme political and ideological meanings attached to architecture by the new government after it took power in 1959. Similarly, the history of the architecture of the modern



movement in the Caribbean islands remains equally incomplete and marked by many vicissitudes: recurring hurricanes, implacable tyrants, and inevitable economic crises of great magnitude. Many of the suggested promises of the beginnings of the movement were never fulfilled or were distorted. Some of the foreseen trajectories were interrupted or branched off, and different courses that often remained inaccessible utopias were attempted. As for the task of undertaking specialized, in-depth studies that reveal fully and in detail the formal and conceptual richness of Caribbean architecture, this has always been deferred.

NEVERTHELESS, the surprising decisions taken by the Cuban government to restore and complete the five Art Schools in Havana and by the municipal government of Santo Domingo to launch an international competition for a master plan's project for the former Fair of Peace (today Centro de los Héroes) designed by Guillermo González in 1955, open a new chapter in the history of modern Caribbean architecture and could be seen as symbolic of a desire for continuity with the distinctive quality of past architectural experiments. It is a chapter full of hope that bespeaks a better understanding of the cultural significance of the modern movement and of the need to preserve its contributions, a chapter that makes explicit the need to reveal the roots and essentials in order to project them into the present and to extract the lessons that will promote a better design for the immediate future.

The guest editors thank Maristella Casciato and Émilie d'Orgeix, president and secretary general respectively of Docomomo International, for their interest in Caribbean architecture and for initiating the idea for this issue of the Docomomo Journal. Their understanding of this subject's significance set into motion the effort to bring this publication to light. We would also like to thank all those who collaborated on this issue, particularly Anne-Laure Guillet and Isabelle Kite, as well as the authors and translators of the articles.