

The National Art Schools of Havana

MARÍA ELENA MARTÍN ZEQUEIRA

RESTORATION OF AN ARCHITECTURAL LANDMARK

*Supported by the arts, the Earth is saved.**

The National Art Schools of Cubanacán, Havana, feature among Cuba's most important academic and cultural institutions. They are also outstanding on the international level, thanks to the innovative concept of organic architecture incorporating buildings, city and landscape altogether in one unique ensemble. Moreover, these schools represent the masterly culmination of the efforts developed in the country during decades to merge tradition and modernity in a creative way.

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THIS REALIZATION, the most publicized on the island after the 'Revolution's triumph,' was part of the romantic effort undertaken by the new government after it came to power in 1959. Afterwards, the general lack of upkeep, the site's natural conditions and the absence of protection against vandalism, among others, caused the buildings'

gradual deterioration. In 2000, in parallel with the intellectual community's reprobation, which underlined the unaccountable degradation of such an invaluable architectural ensemble, the World Monuments Fund program, also known as the World Monument Watch,

* José Martí, *Obras completas* (Havana: Editorial Trópico, 1950), tome 20, 43.

Fig. 1. Ricardo Porro, National Plastic Arts School, Havana, 1961–1965



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Fig. 2. **Ricardo Porro**, National Plastic Arts School, Havana, 1961–1965



Fig. 3. **Ricardo Porro**, National School of Modern Dance, Havana, 1961–1965

endorsed its listing on the biannual register of the world's 100 most threatened monuments. In 2002, the World Monuments Fund program also granted a 'Certificate of exceptional accomplishment' for the first restoration works undertaken on the schools. The previous year, during a meeting between the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba and the country's foremost authorities, the schools' critical situation had been the subject of analysis and debates, which led the Cuban state to adopt a plan of action to curb the architectural ensemble's deterioration.

THE ARCHITECTURAL ENSEMBLE

The schools are located on 66-hectare grounds, formerly used as a golf course by the Havana Country Club, and surrounded by an exclusive housing development, a great favorite of the capital's upper class before the Revolution. The initial brief required the construction of five schools intended for the teaching of plastic arts, modern dance, ballet dancing, music and dramatic arts. The schools were exclusively meant for students from Cuba and other developing countries. In the first place, Cuban architect Ricardo Porro was chosen to design the



Figs. 4 & 5. **Vittorio Garatti**, National Ballet School, Havana, 1961–1965

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schools; he then proceeded to invite two Italian colleagues living in Venezuela, Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti, to take part in the project.

THE TEAM SET DOWN the common premises for the schools' conception, but each architect was free to independently develop the project he was assigned. Porro was entrusted with the plastic arts and modern dance projects, Garatti with projects for the Ballet and Music Schools, and Gottardi took on the dramatic arts project. One of the project's major premises was to alter the former golf's beautiful landscape as little as possible, by scattering the schools on the course's perimeter, whilst also having the buildings communicate with nature as if they emerged from it. Another major rule consisted in using low-cost—and, in these difficult times, easily supplied—building materials, such as brick and red ceramic tiles. More costly materials, such as steel and concrete, were used only when absolutely necessary. Each school was designed not as a self-enclosing edifice but as a city fragment. Classrooms and workshops were interwoven with galleries and articulated by interior courtyards, making the progress between various spaces very appealing.

THE CONDITIONS shaping the project, together with the professional value and artistic sense of its authors, yielded an exceptional work where architecture and nature are equally present.

The schools were officially inaugurated in 1965, although two of these only—plastic arts and modern dance—were actually finished. The other institutions' construction was interrupted that same year; three schools therefore have stayed unfinished and are used in that state. The Plastic Arts, Modern Dance, Dramatic Arts and Music Schools currently remain devoted to the activities initially planned, although only half of the construction works for the two latter was ever completed. The building designed for the Ballet School was never used as such, but for a time accommodated the National School of Circus Arts, a development that entailed drastic alterations due to the incompatibility between its new requirements and the magnificent architecture. Later and without explanation the building was totally forsaken. The complex's administration and direction were housed in the former clubhouse, placed at the center of the grounds. For several years, students were lodged in the plush houses located around the complex, which became state property following the political change and the ensuing mass exodus of the former owners towards other countries. In 1979, owing to the celebration at Havana of the 6th Summit of the Non Aligned Countries, the houses were refitted to serve as residences for the presidential guests and students were consequently transferred to a rigid prefabricated building block erected right in the middle of the campus grounds. This

dreadfully injured the landscape that the project's three authors had so well treated a few years earlier.

THE RESTORATION

Following the Cuban authorities' decision to preserve and complete the National Art Schools, a project team was created and its technical direction entrusted to Universo García, a 1988 architecture school graduate from the University of Alma Ata (Kazakhstan, former USSR). Universo's team, which frequently communicates with the three initial architects, realizes the constructional drawings and leads the construction works for the five schools and the clubhouse that is also in a terrible state. Likewise, works are also carried out in the areas outside the complex, on various buildings administratively linked to the campus.



Fig. 6. **Vittorio Garatti**, National Music School, Havana, 1961–1965

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THE RESTORATION PROJECT, which seeks to preserve the architectural value of the complex, must also contend with the country's current economic capacities. The plan is to preserve the buildings' architectural image; to restore or rebuild, depending on their state, the damaged parts, using materials and construction techniques similar to those originally used; to fit out the buildings' interiors to current needs; to complete the unfinished construction if possible and to enlarge the complex in order to fulfill new requirements.

FROM 1999 UNTIL NOW, exchanges with the architects of the initial project have kept up; only Roberto Gottardi still lives at Havana, while Garatti and Porro reside respectively in Milan and Paris. Based on these exchanges, solutions to the various problems are found, although distance makes frequent and fluid communications difficult.

A crucial stage was the minute exploration of the jobsite, providing measured drawings of the buildings' architectural features, structure and implementation, whose purpose was to know exactly what had been

carried out originally. During the first years, the schools were built in such a frenzy that construction occurred without always taking much heed of the project's specific plans: detailed plans were actually realized during the construction, and even then not necessarily respected.

As of today, some work has already been done on the five schools, administration building and outdoor spaces. Plants that had grown out of control, sometimes even on rooftops, were removed because they were a hindrance to the full appreciation of the buildings' state and also a hazard to the buildings. Concrete paths, pedestrian and automobile bridges were built to connect the complex's different functions; to monitor access to the campus, an enclosing hedge/wall was implemented, incorporating a keeper's hut at every school entry. A project for the extensive lighting of the exterior areas was also carried out. The Quibú, a low-flow river that cuts through the grounds and represents a real danger of contamination and flooding during the rainy season, will soon be the subject of a development plan implementing safety and security measures.

THE CONSTRUCTION WORKS realized for the Plastic Arts and Modern Dance Schools were executed in agreement with Ricardo Porro, the original project's architect. Due to the poor quality of materials used and to the humidity drained by capillarity, several elements of the Plastic Arts building were in a dire state. In the long circulation galleries, there were no expansion joints, which, combined to the moisture accumulated in the roofing vaults by lack of upkeep, was the source of progressive deterioration. In addition to the cleaning up and removal of fungus and of other agents damaging the building materials, the general repair jobs included rebuilding damaged water sprouts and joints between bricks or pavements, and replacing terra cotta floor and roof tiles. Special products were used to treat the terra cotta, allowing the tiles to recover their initial characteristics while also protecting them. Expansion joints were implemented on the buildings' roofs and in the vaulted galleries. All the roof structures, originally timber frames, were replaced with aluminum frames, also built according to the initial design.

IN THE MODERN DANCE SCHOOL, whose state is critical, damaged materials are currently being replaced with other similar materials, and, as in the plastic arts building, identically designed steel frames replace the original timber frame. The library will be converted into a student cafeteria, and the theater's acoustics, which had not been realized during its construction, are currently being implemented. The four large rehearsal rooms are carefully restored and the result is already highly satisfactory.

AS FOR THE MUSIC SCHOOL's built part, designed by Garatti and known as the 'worm' owing to its 330-meter

length and sinuous shape, it has also been affected by the moisture due to the river Quibú. The project's conception, based on exposed materials and on a vaulted roofing, makes the acoustic treatment of rehearsal rooms difficult. Today, the current requirements for music studies make the two theaters initially planned, respectively for symphonic and chamber music, redundant. Therefore, and despite the awesome beauty of the school's architectural design, some specialists insist on the fact that it is impossible to use the building as primarily intended. Nowadays, the prevailing stance of the rehabilitation team's Cuban part is to restore only the covering vaults, greatly damaged in several places, and to adjust the building's layout to the requirements (classrooms and dormitories) of the National Center of Advanced Artistic Studies (Centro Nacional de Superación de la Enseñanza Artística). According to this proposition, the prefabricated block erected in the 1960s to accommodate students would be permanently transformed and turned into a music school, and a new residence housing between 200 and 300 students should be built.

THE BALLET SCHOOL, also designed by Garatti and almost completely finished, was left vacant for a long time, no alternative use having been assigned to the building. The total lack of maintenance and the absence of supervision that facilitated vandalism and the loss of nearly all the carpentry and of most of the other materials, harmed the building to such an extent that it had become a real ruin, overcome by the exuberant vegetation that surrounded it. The plants were removed to avoid further damage on the remaining structural elements, joinery and other materials; the missing parts will be replaced; and studies will be led to determine a new proposition for its future function as a top level modern dance school.

THE INITIAL PROJECT for the Dramatic Arts School, used as planned since 1965, but only half constructed, allowed for a big central theater that was never built, around which classrooms should have gathered. During forty years there remained in its place fragments of cement, columns and other construction materials, silent evidence of the original project. Gottardi, the former jobsite's leader, is currently drawing the school's new layout with concepts and ideas that differ from his first project. According to him, given that many years have elapsed since the original concept, and that circumstances and requirements have changed, the project is necessarily different. Although complicated, a new brief was developed, but some disagreement remained between the designer and the building sponsors concerning the theater's size and nature, the budget needed to appropriately fulfill the brief's requirements, and the solutions and materials suggested



Figs. 7 & 8. **Roberto Gottardi**, National Dramatic Arts School, Havana, 1961–1965



by Gottardi in his new project. An agreement was nevertheless found, and hopefully, providing another forty years don't go by, the project will soon be carried out and the works to complete the school will commence. A multimillion budget and a period of ten years are planned to finish the restoration and re-fitting of the five schools.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The economic efforts carried out for the project's realization are remarkable. Another very positive aspect is that the initial project's architects are involved in the process of finding solutions adjusted to the national reality. Also praiseworthy are the patient search for skilled workers, of their special training to replicate a craftsmanship that had nearly disappeared from the country, and the efforts made to manufacture materials similar to those initially used. Moreover, the professionalism of the team led by Universo García, whose work is not confined to research and documentation, provides on a daily basis the elements required to solve the problems linked to the different stages of the jobsite.

HOWEVER, some aspects of the project's conception seem to differ from the complex's initial character and quality. This is for instance the case for the timber frame replaced by new structures, similar in sizing, but differing in material, namely aluminum, which conveys an atmosphere less congenial, and is not well suited to the warmth of the initial concept's organic architecture. What is one supposed to do when having to contend with, on the one hand, the wish to respect the initial plan, and on the other, the situation of a country that does not have the means required to find a suitable solution?

The landscape, on which the five schools are peripherally scattered, is cluttered with essentially functional elements such as lighting fixtures, automobile roads, huts and bridges, all of which are necessary but very conspicuous in such a well-balanced natural setting that it would deserve subtle and transparent, quasi invisible solutions to connect the complex's different areas and their monitored accesses.

IT ALSO SEEMS rather inappropriate to transform the ungainly and ill-placed prefabricated block that served as student housing into the new music school. When the required resources are available, it would be preferable to demolish the block, and to build a new student residence in areas located closer to the schools, which should also restore the spoiled landscape.

The new function suggested for the building originally designed as the music school does not seem very appropriate either. In this case, what is to be done with the building considering that the initial function is unsustainable with the project carried out?

Some questions remain, and many answers are still possible. But the project carried out for this masterpiece

emblematic of modern Cuban architecture is doubtless highly positive because it prevents its deterioration, even though some of its aspects and results are questionable. Perhaps several options should be considered, in case more significant resources should be made available. This would make a more detailed and accurate restoration possible, that would fully restore the initial value of such a momentous ensemble and, thus supported by the arts, save architecture.

MARÍA ELENA MARTÍN ZEQUEIRA, a member of Docomomo Cuba, is an architect and professor of architecture history at the Instituto Superior Politécnica de La Habana. She is the co-author with Eduardo Luis Rodríguez of *La Habana. Guía de Arquitectura* (Sevilla: Junta de Andalucía, 1998). She has published numerous articles in local and foreign specialized publications. She was head of the Department of Urban Design of the Provincial Office of Architecture and Urbanism of Havana for twenty years, and is a specialist in Cuban art deco architecture.

Translated by **Isabelle Kite**