



Contemporary Cuban Photography: Architecture and the City

The first in a two-part series by one of the island's leading photo historians

By Grethel Morell Otero (July 30, 2013)



Ramón Martínez (Grandal), *The City of Columns*

Toward the end of the 1980s, the representation of the city and Cuban architecture gathered momentum in Cuban photography. With the end of a decade and the emergence of new artists, architecture, cities—especially Havana—and the urban landscape in general became sources of inspiration and a recurring motif.

Since that time we've come to recognize a certain privileged tendency, a hegemonic thematic in the contemporary visual framework. Urban spaces have become objects to exploit, pretexts for a largely subjective discourse and a marked shift in avant-garde practices. The photographer "undresses" the city to enter a dialogue about diverse realities, using linguistic transgressions and unorthodox images.

Between 1988 and 1990 various photographers, both emerging and established, opted to explore urban areas of habitation to establish a more conceptual relationship between man (the maker) and his immediate environment, motivated perhaps by the search for external recognition or a need to refresh the focus. The individual (whether male or female) in a social context or in relation to the built environment began to command attention, paradoxically, in the most interesting photodocumentation of the period.

During the “classic” period of the 1960s or the less well-known 1970s, photographic reportage came to the fore: photo essays or pure documentation, with limited incursions into the subversion of symbols or experiments with the discourse of realism. In the transitional 1980s and 1990s, some of the more restless lenses focused on individuals and investigations of their living spaces.

Both the intimate (the home), as well as the collective and plural (the city in its many facets), were recurring motifs in the images of many of the so-called New Photographers of the Revolution: Juan Carlos Alom, Katia Garcia, Pedro Abascal, René Peña, Manuel Piña, Nelson Alfonso (Pinty), Juan Carlos Borjas, Carlos Mayol, and Joseph Ney; or the New Generation of Cuban Photographers, which included—according to critic and historian Juan Antonio Molina—Eduardo Munoz Ordoqui, Marta María Pérez, René Peña, and Juan Carlos Alom.

The new vision offered new opportunities, including the emergence of personal poetry. Previously ignored issues and visions began to surface: old age, the human body (nude, naked, male, female, fragmented, group, black, white, mixed-race, or self-portrait), existential precariousness, immigration, homosexuality, religion, marginalization, everyday customs and popular beliefs. The trace of the individual in social spaces and the glorification of subjectivity, or the so-called visual parable, were among the principal directions of the new photography. From a similar angle the city, architecture, and the home itself appeared as relevant themes.

So urban space gives rise to *una mirada doble*—a double gaze. One is attuned to the introspective: a coupling of intimate, private space with shared or public space. The other opens to the built environment in search of allegories, meanings, and architectural details on which to hang fragments of a personal testimony.



René Peña, From the series *Hacia adentro*, 1991
Courtesy CubanGallery.net

Examples of the first line of interpretation include the early works of René Peña (for instance, the *Hacia Adentro* series, begun in 1989) and the promising Matanzas photojournalist Ramón Pacheco (the *Coexistence* series, 1991–1996). Both depict the micro-world of the everyday and the marginal (a precariously rigged provisional home, empty building lots). The second way of looking is reflected in the works of Manuel Piña (the *Aguas Baldías* series, conceived in the early 1990s and exhibited in 1994) and Carlos Garaicoa's *Tribute to the San Carlos Hotel* (1991), in which the capital—or its urban landscape—becomes the protagonist.

These perspectives on shared space are not confined to basic classifications of interior and exterior. Since the 1990s, we can draw a dividing line between the images that depict the city in its older or colonial aspect, and those that capture the modern city exclusively. Also, we can distinguish between works that approach Havana architecture as the actual subject and others that use it as a themed pretext, a living source for diverse notations on Cuban society.

In these heterogeneous modes of interpretation, we can distinguish four ways of addressing this theme. The first views the city directly: unadorned metaphorically, with an undivided sensibility, whether aesthetic or conceptual. This is formally expressed through architectural views, partial views, signs, or façades. A second strategy objectifies the city or its civic spaces in images that offer ample scope to the idealization of what is portrayed—what we might also call “fictionalizing the document.” A third uses architecture as a reference to shape a discourse that is not necessarily related to architecture. And a fourth model presents architecture as a means of cultural enlightenment and reflection of identity—such as the magnificent images made for *Guide to Havana's Architecture* (Andalusian and Spanish Agency for International Cooperation, 1998). In contemporary Cuban photography, these four approaches coexist in complete harmony.

The City and the Columns



Lissette Solorzano
Courtesy Havana Cultura

Although they belong to different generations, photographers like Ramón Martínez (Grandal), Enrique de la Uz, and Lissette Solórzano share common ground in their

treatment of Cuban colonial architecture and the splendor of its fragments, in their artful manipulation of framing and lighting. Grandal began working in the early 1970s, using the documentary aesthetic of the fragment to portray the richness of volume and atmosphere found in traditional parts of Habana Vieja. (His 1974 photos illustrate the 1982 edition of Alejo Carpentier's essay "La Ciudad de las Columnas," published by Editorial Letras Cubanas.) Grandal worked with natural light to capture the mannerist, sharply contrasting shadows of columns and arches, depicting the Havana of Carpentier in one of the finest series of classic black-and-white images in the history of Cuban art.

Images by Enrique de la Uz glorify the document and the angle. They return to visually evocative fragments of colonial architectural styles. Shots that depict sections of the façade of the Havana Cathedral, emphasizing their jagged borders, are some of his most memorable images.



Lisette Solorzano
Courtesy Havana Cultura

On another textual level, Lisette Solórzano conceived a tribute to the subtle charms still present in colonial buildings in the historic center of the city. Titled *La Pátina del Tiempo* (The Patina of Time), it's a series of monochrome works on manipulated paper that the artist started creating in the late 1990s and exhibited in 2000 in Spain. It's a true photographic essay of juxtaposition in which, through technical manipulation and careful focusing and composition, Solórzano achieves symbolic evocations in a photo documentary comprised of details and random chance. What stands out in these works is the artist's appreciation of the elements, both functional and aesthetic, of colonial houses and their small sculpted forms—latches, locks, handles, and more.

Since the 1990s, the architecture of Havana's Cerro district has been a frequent theme in Cuban photography. The Teodoro Ramos Blancos Municipal Art Gallery stimulated the production of images focused on the culture and identity of the area, as part of the Fotobienal (Photo Biennial) "La Llave del Cerro" (the Key to the Cerro). Architecture was one of the most frequent themes. The grand prize in the third Fotobienal (1997) was awarded to *Rejas del Cerro* (Window Grilles of the Cerro) by José Castañeda—a comprehensive essay on the ironworks adorning the residences in this part of the capital, which dates from the early 19th century.