

**REVOLUTIONARY AMBITIONS: MODERNITY + UTOPIA IN THE CIUDAD
UNIVERSITARIA JOSÉ ANTONIO ECHEVERRÍA (CUJAE) AND PABELLÓN CUBA OF
1960S HAVANA**

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ABSTRACT

In his iconic 1970 survey of architecture during 1960s Cuba – *Diez Años de Arquitectura en Cuba Revolucionaria* - architectural historian Roberto Segre highlights both the concept of the “revolutionary process” and a “Third World” identity that became central to the high modernist project of the nascent Cuban government. Earlier, upon hosting the 7th annual World Congress of Architecture in Havana in 1963, Cuban officials promoted the island nation as a model for modernist architecture throughout the developing and under-developed world. The new ambitions of the government are perhaps most emphatically expressed in the massive *ciudad universitaria* projects that spoke to the aims of educating the masses. In my presentation I plan to focus on one of the most significant architectural projects of early to mid 1960s Cuba – the Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE) – and place it in dialogue with one of its contemporaneous brutalist companions, the Pabellón Cuba of 1963.

As the campus for the national Instituto Politécnico, CUJAE used prefabricated construction and incorporated the plastic arts within its campus, speaking to forebears such as the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) and the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas. Housing the schools of engineering and architecture, the role of technology and its synchronism with its tropical landscape are central to the utopic polytechnic university. Often placed in contrast with the now famous National Arts Schools, which utilize anthropomorphic organic form in a more expressionist manner, CUJAE serves as a pointed counterpoint for exploring the role of utopia in 1960s Cuba. The brutalist campus is today eulogized on the 50 peso bill as an iconic architectural achievement of the Cuban Revolution.

In my presentation I will explicate the role of the *ciudad universitaria* within broader historical contexts. First, I argue that such utopic architecture has a historical precedence in Havana, with the university campus being one example of how national identity was expressed via architecture and urban planning throughout the Republican era (1902-1958). I specifically draw from German philosopher Ernst Bloch’s notion of abstract and concrete utopia to differentiate the 1960s architecture from earlier examples in Cuba. Secondly, I plan to place CUJAE within a broader discourse regarding the role of the Revolution nationally and globally. That is, how educational policy and ideas regarding the “New Man” impacted the formation of these new projects, and how they were conceived as models for other “Third World” nations.

Discourses regarding the revolution and its ambitions are reverberated in congresses taking place throughout the 1960s, with the brutalist Pabellón Cuba serving as an ideal platform to express Cuba’s contribution to the greater world. In its inaugural exhibition *History and Architecture of Cuba*, taking place during the 1963 World Congress of Architecture, the massive pavilion served as a stage to present Cuba’s role in contemporary architecture. Built in a mere 72 days, the pavilion itself was an integral part of the exhibition, displaying Cuba’s technological and architectural prowess. Later exhibitions such as *El Tercer Mundo*, taking place in conjunction with Second Cultural Congress of 1968, speak to how intellectual and political discourse are reverberated within spatial and visual form. Drawing from the third and fourth chapter of my dissertation *Revolutionizing Modernities: Visualizing Utopia in 1960s Havana, Cuba*, these two icons of brutalist architecture in Cuba make explicit the island nation’s contribution to ideas regarding architecture and society at the height of the Cold War.

Keywords: Cuba ; Utopia ; Ciudad Universitaria

Revolutionary Ambitions: Modernity + Utopia in the Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE) and Pabellón Cuba of 1960s Havana

The 1967 *Edificio experimental* of architects Antonio Quintana and Alberto Rodríguez – today referred to as the Edificio Girón – looms over the ocean and city as a dually dystopic and futurist rendering of Cuban modernity. Two monumental towers rise above massive concrete pilotis, floating over an exterior plaza lobby. Facing diagonal to the curving Malecón, or sea wall boulevard, the two long towers are connected by a grid of stairwells and passage wells. Repetitive patterns, from the vertical concrete slabs defining the stairwells to a grid of concrete blocks embellishing the side facades, help elevate the concrete behemoth to the level of sculpture. Among the only major housing projects within the central part of Havana, the Edificio Girón was among the last buildings of its era to show the expressive gesture of modern architecture in Cuba.

Most notable is Edificio Girón's celebration of concrete, a strong gesture of brutalist architecture. Recalling Le Corbusier's regarded Unité d'Habitation, the building rises above its urban environs and provides a sculptural grid with its façade. Both long and tall towers are angled to maximize their visibility with an oddly configured pentagonal plot. The ground base of the building is slightly elevated, portraying the buildings prominence. The corridor connecting the buildings helps elongate it further, its concrete tubes contributing to the sculptural, expressive feel of the building. Other examples of housing throughout Cuba utilize prefabrication and a grid-base aesthetic (examples include the Distrito José Martí of Santiago de Cuba, 1964-7, Comunidad campesina Las Terrazas of 1968-1970, and the Unidad Vecinal of Habana del Este), but none to the scale and expressiveness of Edificio Girón, whose brut aesthetic and scale allowed the building to stand out even next the highrises of the Batista-era boom (1950s).

In this paper I explore prominent "brutalist" buildings within 1960s Havana – the Pabellón Cuba and the Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría (CUJAE) – to explore the role of brutalism as an expression of utopia. While no formal discussions regarding brutalism as a movement in Cuba came to fruition, various buildings capture both the ethos and aesthetic of brutalism, a movement that breached the Cold War era divide between communist and capitalist nations. A notion in of brutalism is evident in Cuba as early as the 1950s, where the work of architects such as Manuel Gutiérrez, Humberto Alonso, Antonio Quintana, Hugo Consuegra, and the much renown Mario Románach. A brutalist aesthetic speaks to practices of prefabrication developing during the emphatic real estate boom of the 1950s. But it also shows architects' concern with a building's given materiality. In his final home built in Cuba, House of Ernesto Suárez of 1959, Románach uses concrete, bricks, and wood to very clearly delineate space. The orthogonal beams provide a coffered effect on the ceiling, clearly emphasizing the rational organization of space.

As Cuban architect and scholar Mario Coyula has noted: “Modern architecture in Havana showed how original iconoclastic imported design principles could be adapted to a different context while keeping the basic grid, regulations and scale, contributing to diversity. Good quality Modern architecture in Cuba extended well into late 1960s, with structural expressionism and brutalism.”¹ By the 1960s open debates regarding the role of architecture on a national scale, as well as technological developments and international collaborations, gave brutalist architecture a deliberate purpose. Both case studies – Pabellón and CUJAE – display Cuba’s innovative, technological prowess while professing a certain purposiveness regarding architecture and its social imperatives. As I will outline, these buildings speak to the utopic aims of Cuba’s new government – both in their monumental and vanguardist gesture. With the notion of building a new society, architecture after the 1959 Revolution was geared both to agrarian reform and serving the needs of the masses.

Marxist philosopher Ernest Bloch discusses utopia extensively in his influential book *The Principle of Hope* (1938-1947), providing a blue print for considering the role of utopia in Cuba prior to and after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Distinguishing between abstract and concrete utopia, Bloch suggests that abstract utopia is fantastic and compensatory – that people aspire towards utopia regardless of the social and economic constraints. Concrete utopianism, on the other hand, impacts and changes economic and political realities in an aspirational manner. Bloch writes, “Marxism thus rescued the rational core of utopia and made it concrete as well as the core of the still idealistic tendency-dialects”.² While socialism in Cuba drew from the aesthetics of the island’s past, new utopias would be imagined around a discourse that claimed to directly impact social, economic and political relations on the island. While the teleological and progressivist nature of modernity in Cuba speaks to Bloch’s notions of utopia, they also developed within unique cultural contexts. This is made evident in Pabellón Cuba, an exhibition pavilion built in a mere 72 days for the World Congress of Architecture triennial meeting in 1963, the first to take place in the Western hemisphere.

The very first exhibition hosted in the 1963 brutalist, Mies van der Rohe inspired Pabellón Cuba, titled the History of Architecture in Cuba, utilized video projections, graphic art, fine art, and photographic installations to provide a progressivist narrative regarding architectural production in Cuba. The intermedia spectacle curated by Enrique Fuentes complemented the architecture of Pabellón Cuba, as they both alluded to Cuba’s unique historical heritage while also promoting the island’s new technological advances in the realms of architecture and curatorial practice. Together they displayed to the viewer a utopic narrative regarding the promises of modernism and the future of socialist Cuba. Pabellón Cuba was not only a model for Cuba’s latest architectural ambitions and technological prowess; it was a new means to consider the spatiality of exhibition display in the tropics. Further, the pavilion was a direct expression of the importance of the visual in the Revolution, something emphasized by the extensive graphic campaign coordinated by graphic designer José Lucci for the purposes of the World Congress of Architecture.³

Pabellón Cuba utilized existing urban infrastructure and took advantage of open, urban space for its exterior porticos. One of the last major projects to contribute towards the urban development of La Rampa – the portion of Calle 23 that slopes down from Calle L to the Malecón, Havana’s grand promenade along its Northern coastline – Pabellón Cuba became a largely exterior and monumentally brutalist stage for a neighborhood that had become an influential cultural and entertainment center of Havana. In the 1950s La Rampa featured the city’s first Technicolor theatre, three theatre halls, and the more alternative Arte Cinema La Rampa.⁴ It also became Havana’s hot spot for high-rise development, with the 25-story Habana Libre Hotel (formerly the Habana Hilton) at the top of the slope.⁵ The newly minted Habana Libre Hotel would host participants of the World Congress of Architecture, its shops and casino converted into cultural and exhibition spaces conveniently adjacent to the University of Havana.⁶

Designed by Cuban architect Juan Campos Almanza, Pabellón Cuba infused Brutalist architecture and sensual, tropical landscaping. Located at the center of La Rampa, the massive structure appeared visible from numerous World Congress of Architecture sites (Figure 4). Its centrality and its architecture encourage a more public exhibition, as it is predominantly comprised of a terraced exterior. Nonetheless its massive prefabricated concrete grid ceiling upheld by repeating concrete columns or pilotis provide the building a sculptural, monumental appearance. The opening exhibition engaged the topic of architecture and culture throughout Cuban history, beginning with Precolumbian and Colonial Cuba at the pavilion’s front entrance. The front pavilion led into the pre-existing 14-story building, featuring exhibitions on Republican Cuba, and then extended outward to the spacious back pavilion, which engaged viewers with a teleological narrative regarding modernity and technology in Revolutionary Cuba. The exhibition pavilion became a venue for new vanguardist notions of urban design as well as the implementation of new technologies towards construction.

In his essay “Tropical Minimalism: Excellences and ambivalences of an exhibition pavilion,” architectural historian Eduardo Luis Rodríguez identifies two clear referents for the architecture of Pabellón Cuba. First, he discusses the Pabellón’s strategy of integrating tradition and modernity spatially through its referents to colonial Cuban architecture. Rodríguez insightfully comments that the two massive terraces form porticoes that directly recall the great mansions of the Havana’s Vedado neighborhood. New technology is used to recall the spatial grandiosity of a previous era, creating an urban continuity despite a brutalist aesthetic. Rodríguez writes:

In this way, Pabellón Cuba – at one and the same time building, portico and courtyard – incorporates strategies and elements that clearly refer to that tradition, such as the achievement of maximum interrelation between interior and exterior, crossed ventilation, noble proportions, large ceilings simultaneously covering ample salons, wide eaves, the orthogonal framework of beams that bring to mind the coffering typical of some colonial buildings, the constant repetitive rhythm

established by the columns, as well as the air of monumentality offered by the main façade, opposite 23rd Avenue (La Rampa).⁷

This sense of tradition, however, is counteracted with its radical gesture towards modernity – particularly in its use of material. Rodríguez cites Ludwig Mies van der Rohe as the second major referent for El Pabellón, particularly his never built design for Bacardi Rum Company office in Santiago de Cuba. Mies van der Rohe’s design complements Pabellón Cuba’s grid-like rationality; And Mies, taking into account the tropical climate, replaced his emblematic use of steel with reinforced concrete. The tension made apparent in the Pabellón regarding international influence and a nationalist drive towards exploring a “Cuban” spatiality arises in both public and private works of the 1950s, where the grid both proved to be a rationalizing, ordered element as well as a referent to urban form emanating from the colonial era. Pabellón Cuba became a radicalized, public stage to explore the meaning of modernity in a newly arising socialist era, and its minimalist forms were undoubtedly conceived alongside its tropical landscaping and its curatorial potential.

It is fitting that adjacent to the Pabellón Cuba during its inaugural exhibition was a large graphic sign of a note personally written by Le Corbusier for attendees of the conference. Located on the sidewalk on Calle N, the large sign was visible from La Rampa as well as several vantage points within the pavilion. The large sign was addressed to Cuban architects, and read “watch, look, observe, discern, invent, create”. The sign existed as a reminder of the international scope of modern architecture, and the CIAM ideals that influenced new architecture in Havana. Le Corbusier’s message served as an opening to an exhibition that highlighted three epochs of innovation, with the major focus on the Revolution and new, experimental approaches to architecture, art and design.

Curated by Enrique Fuentes, the front pavilion displayed very briefly the histories of “primitive” and colonial Cuba, with the porch’s abundant landscaping symbolizing the island’s tropical origins (Figure 6). With the entrance located at a lower elevation, the ceilings extend horizontally towards Calle L and Calle N from the central building, creating an illusion of greater height towards the front entrance. With the front concrete columns reaching 14 meters, the concocted tropical landscaping includes a spiraling ramp that brings the visitor up towards the center building’s 3rd floor entrance.⁸ Hanging at front center from the coffered concrete ceiling is a massive stained glass representation of a colonial ship, its back turned towards the viewer. The symbol of colonial invasion welcomes the viewer to an exhibition rich in ephemera yet clear in its historical narrative. Representations of colonial architecture are placed alongside a marble commemoration towards Cuba’s recent invasions as well as displays regarding the oppressive economies of the sugar industry. Utilizing graphic prints, videos and other forms of media, the exhibition focuses on the narrative of Cuban ingenuity amid massive oppression. Such a narrative continues into the third floor and surrounding areas of the Republican-era building that anchors Pabellón Cuba. Focusing on architecture from

1902-1958, the official description in the journal *Arquitectura Cuba* states: “During her [Cuba’s period of] foreign intervention, the frustration, the protests, the anguish, the dissatisfaction of her condition, take form in hybrid volumes with cinema, slide projections and photos that resemble reality”.⁹ Both the colonial and Republican pavilions provide a narrative emphasizing the struggle of the Cuban people for liberation, using photography as a means to represent “reality” in order to express the concrete goals of the Revolution.

This becomes most evident in the final part of the exhibition, an extensive and spectacular exploration of Revolutionary approaches to architecture and new construction technologies. While the tropical landscaping transformed the brutalism of the building’s façade, the rear of the pavilion relied on massive sculptural and architectonic displays of graphic art, text, large-print photographs and filmic projections to redefine the seemingly minimalist space of Pabellón Cuba. Stark black-and-white pictures stand next to colorful graphics, the two-dimensional media art forms transposed onto massive geometric sculptural forms, or held up by a long metal posts complementing the pavilion’s columns. The intermedia exhibition pushed beyond traditional boundaries between art, commercial design and architecture, placing the practices in dynamic unison with a proclaimed socialist ethos.

This radical transformation of the exhibition gallery was extended out towards the city, where a unified design campaign made apparent endeavors of the state-supported arts. La Rampa was given terrazzo tiles designed by Cuba’s most famed artist, the entire promenade was re-landscaped, and graphic designer José Lucci organized the design campaign for print materials, public posters, and other Congress-related material.¹⁰ The new terrazzo tiles featured the work of Cuban modern artists, and are placed approximately five feet from one another along the entire length of La Rampa. Examples by Wifredo Lam and Amelia Peláez display the means in which their painterly aesthetic becomes part of Havana’s everyday urban street life. The tiles complemented other graphic arts campaigns that drew from the painterly aesthetics of modern Cuban art to create a more populist, accessible form of visual communication. New technologies in the production of art began to redefine the aesthetics of the city, finding a dynamic place within Havana’s architectural milieu.

Ernesto Che Guevara would close the 1963 World Congress of Architecture with an emphatic speech on the role of architecture in the postcolonial and socialist world. Guevara emphasized that Cuba was not taking the model of other communist nations of that era and was open to an influx of ideas geared towards the arts and architecture. At the same time, Guevara claimed that the architect was a man who existed “within the society,” and that architects cannot take an apolitical approach, given that a “man in modern society is by nature political.”¹¹ While the World Congress of Architecture became a means to express Cuba’s contribution to debates regarding architecture at large, it also emphasized the manner in which new construction directly impacted society at large. In his famed essay “Socialism and the New Man, Che suggests that vanguardia – or that

which is the avant-garde – moves from an artistic and intellectual movement to a political one, where the primary goal is education in order to incorporate the masses into the “vanguard”.¹²

This new vision of a vanguard was two-fold - located at the long-privileged urban scale while dually emphasizing agrarian reform. Through hosting the World Congress of Architecture officials were able to display the ingenuity of architecture within Cuba’s budding socialist regime, as well as emphasize new major projects that emphasized the goals of the revolution through culture and education. Within the suburbs of Havana two massive *ciudad universitarias* were being built, both providing participants the opportunity to see new architecture in construction. While the now acclaimed National Arts Schools would be abandoned due to ideological and economic reasons, CUJAE (or the *Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echeverría*) would be heralded on the new 50 peso bill as a symbol of post-Revolutionary progress. Both campus drew from models such as Universidad Nacional Autónoma de México (UNAM) of Mexico City and the Ciudad Universitaria de Caracas, but appear radically different by form. While the National Arts Schools would embrace red brick made of Cuban clay and an organic, surreal expressiveness, CUJAE became a symbol of modernist prowess. The brutalist campus artfully used methods of prefabrication to take advantage of its suburban campus setting.

Named in honor of famed student protester José Antonio Echeverría – the president of Cuba’s Federation of University Students who was massacred by Batista forces in 1957 – CUJAE was built to be Havana’s premier technological university, housing schools of engineering and architecture. Located in the periphery of the city, the campus was imagined as serving the new needs of the island nation. As a 1971 issue of *Arquitectura Cuba* on architecture and education emphasizes: "Urban and Agrarian reforms liberated the land of conflicting values between the countryside and the city center, as well as unfounded the argument that has prevailed in many countries in Latin America, to locate the University outside of the center to isolate to the student body and thus prevent concrete political action"¹³ Rather than seeing the creation of a campus at the outskirts of the city a drawing from a Latin American model of depoliticization of student masses, the new campus is perceived as a utopia where students solve the problem of the countryside at an equal or greater rate to that of the countryside.

Designed by several architects at different stages, the plan of CUJAE displays a network of buildings entirely rectilinear in orientation. While architects such as Humberto Alonso, José Fernández, Fernando Salinas and others would work collaboratively on the project, architects Juan Tosca and Selma Soto were integral in the creation of the SMAC structural system, which would allow the creation of emphatic spaces at a monumental, concrete scale. Architectural historian Roberto Segre writes:

According to the then current principles - the recreation of the city in new ways that keep traditional content, assumed the Team X and antagonistic to CIAM - apply the categories of flexibility, growth, hierarchy of spaces, without changing technological

components and structural principle: the CUJAE, lift-slab system makes possible the multiplication of slabs and spaces, while Tosca flexible designs that allow casting molds beams and columns of different size, without affecting the unity of the whole.¹⁴

Here Segre emphasizes how architects worked with structural engineers to rethink prefabricated architecture, and to give it “traditional content”, or more specifically to embed the concrete campus with a notion of *cubanidad*, or “Cuban-ness”. The national sentiment and local setting of a brutalist, prefabricated campus would make itself clear by its components that allowed circulation of air, open terraces, and the implementation of gardening and art within the campus.

This is identical to the architecture of Pabellón Cuba – both architectures express technological prowess through their unique use of reinforced steel and pre-cast concrete, while dually relying on landscaping and a spatiality that speak to its Cuban forbearance. Like the Pabellón and the Edificio Girón, CUJAE draws largely upon an aesthetic notion of the grid, making use of orthogonal beams in a manner that recalls the Pabellón’s coffered ceiling. Brutalism emerges as representing new revolutionary ambitions, both through its adoption of international construction technologies and the attempt to sculpt a nationalist or more Cuban spatiality, albeit at a massive scale. The use of scale (monumental) and material (concrete) display Havana’s dialogue with Brutalism trends developing abroad. At the same time the long-held concern of modern architecture in Cuba remained fervent – to deal with the chasm between the national and regional and the universal. The few brutalist buildings that do emerge in the 1960s take center stage in expressing *lo cubano*, and perhaps present more of an anomaly given their rarity and monumentality. They become icons of a more “romantic” period where utopia seemed notably more concrete.

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¹ Mario Coyula, "What can be learned from Havana's Modern Heritage". (no date, provided by author).

http://www.camden.rutgers.edu/Camden/CFSUCL/News/Cuban_Scholar_Mario_Coyula.html

² Bloch, Ernst. *The Principle of Hope Volume 1* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1986), 141

³ The ad campaign featured everything from cigarette and match boxes to postal stamps. Jorge Bermúdez. *La imagen constante: el cartel cubano del siglo XX*. (La Habana, Cuba: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2000). P. 94.

⁴ In an essay regarding personal recollections of La Rampa, self proclaimed "*Rampista*" Antón Arrufat discusses how, "By chance, La Rampa became kind of a cultural center," playing particular attention to the amount of theaters in the area. *Pabellón Cuba 4D: 4Dimensions 4Decades* (Berlin: B_Books, 2008) 40, 48.

⁵ Completed in 1958, the 25-story Habana Hilton was a collaboration between U.S. architect Welton Beckett and Cuban married couple Lin Arroyo and Gabriela Menendez, and infused turquoise ceramic and large murals with a more rational, international style of architecture. Upon entering Havana the revolutionaries claimed the Hilton as their headquarters, and began to redefine the rapidly developing area. It is hence unsurprising that the Hilton would be used to host major guests, including all the artists for the Salon de Mai as well as the World Congress of Architecture participants.

⁶ Interview with Lucila Uriarte Fernandez, December 20, 2009; Interview with Alejandro Alonso, former director of the Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes, January 11, 2010.

⁷ *Pabellón Cuba 4D* 51.

⁸ *Ibid.* 55.

⁹ "En ella la intervención extranjera, la frustración, las protestas, la anguista, la inconformidad de una suerte, toman formas en los volúmenes mezclados con cine, transparencias y fotos que ambientan realidad". *Arquitectura / Cuba*, Vol. 331 (1964) 40.

¹⁰ Bermúdez, *La Imagen Constante: El Cartel Cubano del Siglo XX* (La Habana: Editorial Letras Cubanas, 2000), 95.

¹¹ *Arquitectura / Cuba*. Vol. 331 (1964): p. 13.

¹² In the essay Guevara writes, "A school of artistic experimentation is invented, which is said to be the definition of freedom; but this 'experimentation' has its limits, imperceptible until there is a clash, that is, until the real problems of individual alienation arise. Meaningless anguish or vulgar amusement thus become convenient safety valves for human anxiety. The idea of using art as a weapon of protest is combated". Like architecture, art served as a means to express a vanguardia apriori to one at a broader societal level – both served as vessels towards educating the masses into a more political form of vanguard. David Deutschmann, Ed. *Che Guevara Reader: Writing on politics and revolution* (Melbourne: Ocean Press, 2004). P. 222

¹³ Translated by author: "las reformas Urbana y Agraria liberaron los terrenos de los valores contrapuestos entre el campo y el centro de la ciudad; así como carecía de fundamento la tesis que ha primado en muchos países de América Latina, de ubicar la Universidad fuera del centro urbano para aislar a las masa estudiantiles e impedir así la acción política concreta" *Arquitectura / Cuba*. Vol. 339 (1971): p. 46.

¹⁴ Translated by author: "Según los principios vigentes entonces – la recreación de la ciudad con formas nuevas que mantienen contenidos tradicionales, asumidos del *Team X* y antagónicos al CIAM –, se aplican las categorías de flexibilidad, crecimiento, jerarquización de los espacios, sin variar los componentes tecnológicos y el principio estructural: en la CUJAE, el sistema *lift-slab* hace posible la multiplicación de losas y espacios; mientras que Tosca diseña moldes flexibles que permiten fundir vigas y columnas de diverso tamaño, sin alterar la unidad del conjunto." Roberto Segre, *Arquitectura Antillana del Siglo XX*, (La Habana: Editorial Arte y Literatura, 2003). P. 364.