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### UNFINISHED SPACES



★★★★★  
Year Released: 2011  
MPAA Rating: Unrated  
Running Time: 85 minutes  
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This isn't a documentary about architecture as much as it is an exploration of the promise and freedom of a revolution embodied by the creation, abandonment and possible resurrection of the National Art Schools of Cuba.

Commissioned in 1961 after Fidel Castro's regime comes to power in Cuba, the National Art Schools were to be the created as a grand celebration of freedom and revolution, to be monuments to the rest of the world. A small crew of artists and architects takes on the task, and their buildings go from simple teaching institutions to artistic statements on the greatest scale. Before the buildings can be finished, however, Cuba's increasing adoption of Soviet Union processes and ideology forces a wedge between artistic freedom and plain functionality. The buildings are labeled as signs of bourgeois elitist ideas, and condemned in the public for their subversive nature (even everyone's favorite revolutionary, college poster boy Che Guevara, comes down on the opposing side; easily the strongest blow to the buildings, as public opinion turns rapidly away). Architecture in Cuba becomes rigid and prefabricated, and the National Art Schools sit forgotten... except for the students who still attend and learn there, despite their yearly decline and neglect (one building winds up being a new kink in a river's course, with water flowing through the middle of it, while another gets converted into a circus arena).

If this was simply a history lesson, it'd be an entertaining one, but it's what the buildings represent that truly elevates. These buildings are revolution incarnate, conceived with all the artistic freedom and promise inherent in an uncertain world where seemingly anything can happen. There was an exuberance and happiness at the success of Castro's rise to power, and the nation truly believed that all would be roses, and even as that spirit changes, and the rules become more rigid and the freedom suddenly defined as just a different type of cage, the buildings remain, defiant in their survival and majesty, reminding anyone willing to contemplate their existence of the spirit behind their creation and design.

For the all the freedom in the United States, I even doubt if something like Ricardo Porro's School of Plastic Arts, designed to resemble a giant African goddess of fertility, with buildings shaped to look like breasts and buttocks and a fountain resembling a vagina, would fly here. And while public discourse was eventually unkind to it in Cuba, that building still got the greenlight, and eventually found itself as the only one completed prior to the building stoppage (mainly due to Porro's seemingly prophetic knowledge that things can change fast, so better finish it as quickly as possible).

Again, there's more here than just some gorgeous buildings to look at (but they sure are amazing), and this documentary manages to mix revolution, art, architecture and the hopes and dreams of a nation in a potent mix for all to enjoy and learn from.

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