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Unfinished Spaces explores the heritage of Cuba's lost modernism.

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PORRO'S SCHOOL OF PLASTIC ARTS.
ALYSA NAHMIAS

Unfinished Spaces: Cuba's Architecture of Revolution

Directed by Alysa Nahmias and Ben Murray, 86 minutes
Architecture and Design Film Festival,
Tribeca Cinemas, New York, October 19

So close to our shores, yet so off limits, Cuba has long been forbidden fruit; the place we're not supposed to go, but that has wowed a steady trickle of adventurous travelers. In recent years, photographers and now filmmakers are bringing back images of a place lost to time: a land of old cars and decaying buildings, and people living as they did in the 1950s. But beyond these first impressions, fraught with clichéd vignettes, there are so many more reasons to take a closer look.

Among them is a chance to explore Cuba's National Schools of Art, incredible buildings that I had never heard of before watching the new documentary *Unfinished Spaces*, by directors Alysa Nahmias and Ben Murray. The film charts the buildings' rise, fall, and subsequent re-emergence years later, a chronicle that also happens to mirror the initial thrills and subsequent disappointments of Cuba's communist revolution.

Commissioned in 1961, shortly after the revolution, by Fidel Castro himself, the schools were built on the site of a former golf course near Havana by architects Ricardo Porro, Roberto Gottardi, and Vittorio Garatti. The fluid, highly expressive structures, made mostly of layered and vaulted concrete and terra cotta tiles, were an example of visionary modern architecture and engineering. They embodied a nation's striving to provide an arts education for all social classes. The film records how when they first opened—and even before construction was completed—they were celebrated as perfect examples of a merging of cultures and artistic talents, from music to dance to visual arts. Apparently, they were also havens of free expression where free love thrived under the excitement of

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early revolutionary times.



LEFT TO RIGHT: INTERIOR OF GARATTI'S BALLET AUDITORIUM, GARATTI'S SCHOOL OF BALLET, AND PORRO'S SCHOOL OF MODERN DANCE.

"It was a beautiful experiment," says Manuel Lopez Oliva, an artist who studied at the schools, and is interviewed in the film. "Like a great structure that unleashed our dreams and visions."

The film goes on to describe the fall from grace. Once the Castro government wearied of creative, free expression and embraced Soviet-style building, the once-lauded schools were no longer favored. By the mid 1960s, construction was shut down altogether. The government's sad change of heart is mirrored all too graphically in the fate of these lovely buildings, once scenes of so much life and promise, but ultimately abandoned to the jungle. And then finally, as communism itself becomes a global afterthought years later, we see the country, and Castro, doing yet another about-face, hoping to save the buildings—and save face—but staring down a severe lack of government funding to do so.

What's amazing about this movie is first how it so lovingly and viscerally documents these modernist treasures that few outside Cuba (besides those who have seen John Loomis' 1998 book *Revolution of Forms*) have ever heard of before—sinuous, organic, and sometimes even anatomical forms that grew out of the explosive energy of the revolution. The buildings, clustered as mini-cities that at times look like something out of a dream, were first put on a hyper-fast track and were literally built, as Gottardi puts it, "to the rhythm of music" by workers and even students. We see the buildings full of happy, inspired young pupils, and later we see them as otherworldly ruins, covered in weeds and vines with light streaming through their glass-less windows, as if they're the haunting remains of a lost civilization.



THE DOME OF GARATTI'S BALLET AUDITORIUM.

But perhaps more importantly the film documents a story of these architects and their struggles to keep their dream project alive. The most compelling is Porro, architect of the School of Plastic Arts and the School of Modern Dance. He is a natural showman who delivers entertaining and incisive commentary about the realities of the revolution and of architecture itself. Fighting with the impossible Ministry of Construction that saw architecture as a bourgeois pursuit, Porro fled to Paris in 1966, where he had a moderately successful career designing social housing. Garatti was exiled and left for Italy, where he was less successful but also designed social housing. These architects still maintained their goal of working for the under-classes, just not under communism. Gottardi alone stayed behind,

professing his love for an imperfect place whose people are constantly lifting each other up. Through him, we see issues like poverty and decaying infrastructure first hand.

From looking at the schools you get the feeling that their stories reflect a larger tragedy. This beautiful place seems too good to be true, and, thanks to human failings, perhaps it is. *Unfinished Spaces*, which purports to be about architecture, in fact sheds light on Cuba's people and their struggles in a way that few movies about Cuba have been able to do.

Sam Lubell

Sam Lubell is *The Architect's Newspaper's* West Coast editor.



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