

**The National Schools of Art of Cuba**  
***Conservation Management Plan***



— **The National Schools of Art of Cuba**  
*Conservation Management Plan*

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Photographs by Osmara Alberteris Cañizares

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## FOREWORD

### *Respecting the vision, changing perspective. A Conservation Management Plan for the National Art Schools of Cuba*

I had the privilege of visiting the National Art Schools with Vittorio Garatti in April 2017. At the time I knew little about the complex, the architects and their adventurous story. I knew John Loomis, but I hadn't read his book. Entering from a secondary passage, I took a few steps on the green lawn and slowly proceeded down the stair towards the School of Ballet, offering my arm to the old master. I listened to him telling the hundred details of that long story, he explained the almost primordial meaning of his decision to hide the building right in the bend of the river, I saw the domes emerging from the tropical foliage.

### *History, restoration, conservation and management*

Most of the essays about the National Art Schools of Cuba represent the outcome of quick visit like the one I had, widely insufficient to get in touch with such a vast site. However, that brief contact is enough to make the visitor aware of standing in front of an absolute masterpiece. A mixed feeling of enthusiasm and pity takes over, almost a sense of duty to write a paper capable of raising public awareness and helping to save the National Art Schools from that decadent oblivion. More than 150 books and papers were published mostly after 1999, basing on that emotional thrust. However, that feeling has rarely translated into a research able to mature into an original criticism on this twentieth-century architecture's complex story and to draft a perspective for protecting and restoring it.

This path unfolded along four steps. The first coincides with the original design and construction. Its narration is entrusted above all to oral memory, with typical flaws in perspective and great emphasis on the revolutionary season, when Fidel Castro and Ernesto Che Guevara decided to turn the Havana Country Club into a school to teach the arts to any poor students of Latin America. Three young architects were appointed to put that dream into architecture. The second phase testifies to the failure to complete the buildings and to the rough start of the teaching activity. It was a painful moment although necessary from a historiographical perspective, as it laid the foundations for the subsequent consecration. In a third phase, international criticism discovered the complex. John Loomis's "Revolution of Forms" made "Cuba's forgotten art schools" emerge from the thick of tropical vegetation, like an architectural treasure sunk in the Caribbean. Loomis reconstructed the story of the project, describing that historical and cultural context. "Revolution of forms" is the first scientific essay based on a documentary and comparative research that is typical of the history of architecture. Loomis' research positioned the National Art Schools of Cuba within the international perspective of modernism and assigned them a place in the history of twentieth-century architecture. A fourth phase began in 2000: the schools were recognized as historical heritage and listed in the register of national monuments on November 8<sup>th</sup>, 2010, and the time of protection began. After fifty years, architecture stopped looking at the forms of the revolution to criticize or celebrate them, and finally started looking towards the future, asking how to preserve such buildings and restore their remains. Unfortunately, the restorations occurred in the early 2000s were not accompanied by scientific research or by an open debate, as the fame of the

buildings would otherwise have asked. Today, ten years after that statement and twenty years after Loomis's book, the National Schools of Art in Cuba are in a poor state of repair.

The National Art Schools represent the architectural outcome of the early Cuban revolution. Preserving and restoring them means translating the historical criticism of that season into real actions. It is not always a benevolent story that has generated a heritage of great formal quality but in precarious health conditions and towards which historical judgment has matured in the short span of the last two generations. This is evident in Europe, where the architecture of Fascisms or the former Soviet bloc is currently undergoing a renewed critical evaluation, thanks to a more detached approach towards the political season that produced it. The heritage-related activity contains an eminently political meaning because it tackles the buildings of the past and determines the permanence or suppression of parts of the city. The political value of heritage management was the basis of most national protection laws between the 1800s and 1900s, and it is nowadays one of the pillars for the EU. When Winfried Speitkamp reconstructed the relationship between German society and cultural heritage between 1870 and 1933, he rightly called heritage protection "die Verwaltung der Geschichte" (the administration of history). He, in fact, stressed the political value of architectural restoration and the public character of memory. This is still evident in many examples, from the Berliner Schloss to the Moskow Narkomfin.

When visiting the Museum of Fine Arts of Havana accompanied by director Jorge Fernandez, I was struck by the painting *Rectificaciones a la obra de Armando Menocal "La muerte de Maceo"* from 2017. The Cuban painter José Manuel Mesías corrects a previous work dating back to 1908, depicting the same episode of the war of independence: the killing of the lieutenant-general of the liberation army. Moving from a renewed historical perspective, Mesías has painted the same scene but has "purified" it from the figurative emphasis and the characters which were artificially added. He places the point of view very close to the wounded hero lying on the ground, unlike the previous painting where his companions support him at the center of the scene. The result is a less rigid composition suggesting the immediacy and neutrality of a photographic shot. A grid is artificially applied to the surface of the canvas and seems to suggest the idea of a photographic or even photogrammetric image. As further proof that this pictorial-historiographic revision work is based on the scientific method, Mesías completes the picture with a series of secondary canvases where he performs a taxonomic and botanical examination of the tropical prairie in which the main scene takes place, which had been simplified in the 1908 painting to give space to the image of the wounded hero. Each blade of grass was accurately painted, down to details in double or triple size compared to the real one, simulating the zoom effect of a naturalist photo documentary and obtaining a surprising chromatic and compositional result.

The Conservation Management Plan means to continue that critical updating begun with "Revolution of forms", overcoming the idea of a never-ended project and accepting the outcome of that adventure as it is today, without acquittals or convictions. Like Mesías's work, the CMP is not just about preserving the memory of utopia, keeping the ruins of an unfinished dream. On the contrary, the CMP intends to scientifically assess the present state of the buildings and site and – on that basis - to design different scenarios of development. More than 70 people involved,

810 days of work, 50 days on field in Havana. The CMP operated in direct contact with the complex of buildings internationally known as National Art Schools of Cuba and with the community of students and teachers who daily study and work in this place they simply call ISA - Universidad de las Artes.

***5 points (for the conservation) of modern architecture***

The CMP consists of five actions that today are fundamental for an updated conservation and management of the twentieth century architecture:

1. Documentation
2. Physical conservation and restoration
3. Assessment of hydrogeological risk and landscape protection
4. Environmental sustainability and energy efficiency
5. Integrated information management and adaptation strategy

Action 1 aims at documenting the history of the complex and at taking an updated photograph of it. In fact, five decades of school use and exposure to tropical climate, repairs, and restorations have heavily transformed the iconic buildings designed in the early 1960s. The first goal of the CMP is to evaluate the results of such transformations and illustrate the current as-built situation. We investigated the historical archive comprising drawings and photographs of the construction site. In fact, to design a strategy for the restoration and reuse of spaces, it is firstly necessary to portrait the current state of use and repair, repeating the functional analysis that inspired the 1960s design. Therefore, we visited the whole complex, room by room, and recorded the state of conservation and use.

Action 2 dealt with the physical preservation of materials and structures. We assessed the structural safety of the domes, since they are the most characterizing architectural elements of the entire complex. We visited each dome and topographically recorded the information on a risk map. We focused our attention on the Ballet School's large domes because they are incomplete and lacking in maintenance, and today at risk of collapsing. This research has allowed us to uncover some surprising aspects, e.g., that the complex was entirely built using reinforced concrete instead of plain bricks as the architects always declared. In parallel, thanks to the collaboration of Assorestauero, we carried out three on-site workshops, sharing with Cuban colleagues some innovative techniques in the field of architectural conservation: laser scanner survey, humidity diagnosis in wall structures, diagnosis of pathologies of reinforced concrete. A fourth workshop featured a small pilot site, where some restoration techniques for reinforced concrete were tested.

Action 3 dealt with hydraulic risk assessment and its mitigation, given the global climate change scenario. In fact, the schools are exposed to the risk of flooding due to the presence of the Rio Quibù, which in its final stretch forms a double loop, determining a maximum risk in the depression that houses the Ballet School. Between 2018 and 2020, the School was flooded four times, confirming that the risk is even greater than climate models predict. To address this issue it is necessary to increase protection, both to continue to imagine how to reuse the buildings and

to ensure their own stability. Again, we need to reconsider the original design, asking if some of those choices have contributed to mark these buildings' destiny. We also investigated the amazing resilience of this architecture, which proved able to withstand the tropical climate and the complete lack of maintenance for over half a century.

Action 4 investigated the energy behavior of the Schools. Taking into account the sustainable development in the country, we must ask ourselves how to meet the requirements of such an energy-demanding setting of buildings. Indeed, the schools were built before the oil shock and featured energy-intensive air conditioning systems such as the one designed for the School of Music. The results of this analysis will allow us to develop sustainable solutions to reduce energy demand while increasing efficiency, using low-impact solutions such as geocooling, natural ventilation, and passive protection from solar radiation. In the future, it will be necessary to further investigate the possibility of gain energy from sustainable sources, for example, by installing a micro-hydroelectric power station in the Rio Quibù river. These items will necessarily become part of the complex's conservation and management strategy in the next future. It is a crucial issue for Cuba, which must increase its energy independence and develop renewable energy sources and the energy efficiency of the building stock.

Action 5 collected the whole data within a GIS system to manage them easily and keep them up to date. We then drafted a set of guidelines to manage the complex and administer future transformations. The starting point is that today, in 2020, after sixty years and two education reforms, the teaching model is very different from the sixties, when the buildings were designed. Ballet teaching is not part of the offer. Some dance lessons are held in the remains of the unfinished Music School and other buildings off-campus. Drama lessons take place in the dormitory designed by José Mosquera. The students of Music lack a usable seat. They occupy the rectorate building (where a construction site has been ongoing for years) or scatter around the park, seeking a calm place to rehearse. It is easy to meet them playing the trumpet or the violin in the midst of the ruins of that modern architecture that should have welcomed them. Two new faculties keep attracting more and more students: the Facultad de Artes de la Conservación del Patrimonio Cultural and the Facultad de Medios de Comunicación Audiovisual.

Basically, school activity continues according to the vitality that only Cuba is capable of offering. However, the scarcity and lack of security of these buildings is hardly compatible with the purposes and ambitions of an art university. After analyzing the current demand for space and equipment, we were able to write, together with the ISA teachers, a list of the priorities for improving the Schools' activity.

### ***A 2-scale approach to the CMP***

600,000 sq m (park), 40,000 sq m (buildings), over 500 rooms and 40 domes investigated. Given the massive dimension of the complex, the five actions of the conservation and management plan were developed according to two levels or scales of investigation. At a general level, we can observe a well-integrated system that includes the park, the river, the connections to the city, and a system of buildings with different degrees of interest and historical value, partly used for teaching activities at ISA and ENA. At the scale of the single building, the five pavilions designed by architects Garatti, Gottardi, and Porro, due to their particular interest and different level of use and

state of conservation, require a more detailed scale of analysis. Each of the five actions was first implemented on a large scale, evaluating the entire complex's problems. Subsequently, a specific aspect was chosen as the subject of in-depth analyses, testing the hypotheses directly on the field. This continuous dialectic between the two scales allowed us to reconcile the overall strategic vision with the concrete problems that emerged during the field activities, also thanks to our Cuban partners' collaboration.

During that walk throughout the Ballet School, Vittorio Garatti told me about the years he spent in Cuba when he worked following the vision of a more equitable world, the fulfillment of which did not allow anyone to waste time in personalism or small disagreements. I really thought that "the last architect" of the story was talking to me. No one today has the ambition of solving the problems of the complex known as National Art Schools of Cuba all at once. Architecture is called to transform an already built world, limit soil consumption, and discuss the significance of the buildings conceived in the twentieth century. It is worth remembering the comparison between the architect-conservator and the physician, which Renzo Piano has recently updated, when evoking the task of mending the architectural heritage of the twentieth century, such as urban suburbs. Similarly, Alfredo Brillembourg, recalling Yona Friedman, stated that "(...) architecture must no longer be that of the great utopian projects of the 1960s, the years of megastructures, or Superstudio's dreams. Today only what is interesting is possible, [...] the model, fundamental for us, of the architect no longer understood as a great author of visionary drawings, but as a mediator, a figure able to relate to both those who are below both with whoever is at the top. The time of the charismatic architects as in the Renaissance is really over. Today we need a role that has greater social legitimacy if we want to change things."

Even with the National Art Schools of Cuba, we can continue to study and investigate, nourish our intelligence with positive images, which we would certainly be induced to reproduce. This does not mean to copy or indefinitely prolong a season experienced by someone else, but to keep cultivating an idea of progress to face the future.

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