Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray, directors/producers

**Unfinished Spaces**


Early in the film *Unfinished Spaces* (Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray), we see the famous photograph by Korda of Che Guevara and Fidel Castro, young, long-haired, bearded, in their military fatigues, playing an ironic round of golf on the erstwhile-restricted course of the Country Club (it needed no more name than that) in 1961. Prior to the revolution, the Country Club was off limits to the vast majority of Cubans—although as the son of a wealthy landowner, it would not have been so for Fidel had he chosen to fulfill his expected role in society—and the near-exclusive domain of the legions of North American tourists whose expenditures on the island accounted for a significant portion of the GNP. Apparently it was on those links that Fidel had an epiphany and vowed to convert the golf course, a symbol of capitalist exploitation and exclusion, into a symbol of revolutionary humanism and freedom of expression: he wanted to build a symbol of revolutionary humanism and capitalist exploitation and exclusion, into the best art schools, not just in Latin America, but in the entire world.

Thus opens the fascinating journey of *Unfinished Spaces* as it reconstructs the dazzling moment of revolutionary, utopian vision and shows the political agendas that initially endorsed and later foreclosed on the dream. The enthusiasm with which the revolutionary leadership and ordinary citizens sought to remake Cuba found magnificent expression in this ambitious architectural project of a world-class complex of art schools, with separate schools for fine arts, drama, music, modern dance, and ballet. The film juxtaposes gorgeous if elegiac photography of the five schools in their present state—some nearly complete and some skeletal—with archival film footage, photographs, and interviews. While the contemporary photography captures the beauty and ingenuity of the original design along with the neglect and decay the buildings exhibit today, the archival footage of pre- and early revolutionary Cuba is especially remarkable, allowing us access to a world long gone and rarely glimpsed.

In addition to these images, interviews with architects, architectural historians, and others provide a rich narrative arc of the rise and fall of this heroic star-crossed project. Nahmias and Murray had the good fortune and prescience to conduct extensive interviews with the schools’ three principal architects, Ricardo Porro, Roberto Gottardi, and Vittorio Garatti, while they were still alive and able to tell their stories: these will be an invaluable resource for historians and students. In addition to these rare first-person accounts of the design and construction process and its subsequent history, the film also includes interviews with former students of the schools that capture the spirit of the project. Adding a crucial historical context, interviews with leading Cuban architectural historians Mario Coyula and Roberto Segre expose (if at times inadvertently) the ideologies and idiosyncrasies that contributed to the sad history of the schools. The film shows how personalities (Che Guevara, Alicia Alonso along with Segre) who were opposed to the schools influenced official support and effectively foreclosed on the project. Through these modalities, the film fleshes out the poignant history of the schools, and through them of the nation, along the trajectory from the utopian zeitgeist and spontaneity of the early revolutionary era in which they were conceived to the present ideological morass and uncertain future confronting the nation.

Through interviews and footage, *Unfinished Spaces* brings to life the inspiration that characterized the whirlwind design process (from project inception to ground breaking in two months) and sparked creative solutions to material and structural challenges (for example, the use of the Catalan vault construction with bricks of local clay in lieu of steel beams, unavailable because of the US blockade). The enthusiastic support and collaboration of workers, students, and volunteers coalesced to make a project that was revolutionary and utopian in both process and intention.

Tragically, the vicissitudes of politics interfered with the completion of the schools after Cuba entered the orbit of the Soviet Union in 1962. In short order, the government embraced the Soviet-approved style of prefab construction, choosing to build massive, monolithic apartment blocks (the dehumanizing and environmentally ill-adapted evidence of which still reproachfully dots the island) rather than more specialized projects like the schools. Artistic and architectural expressions of freedom and creativity, individuality and irregularity came to be seen as signs of bourgeois, counterrevolutionary values and were suppressed (except for cinema, which garnered great international prestige), and as it was nearing completion in 1965, the project was abandoned.

*Unfinished Spaces* is all the more essential as a historical document of this history.
since the schools were effectively written out of the leading architectural histories of twentieth-century Cuba. One of the most comprehensive histories of the Cuban built environment, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (2002), coauthored by Coyula, Segre, and the American Joseph Scarpaci, does not mention the schools at all; Scarpaci and Armando H. Portela’s *Cuban Landscapes: Heritage, Memory, and Place* (2009) notes them only in passing. Interest in the schools was awakened through the research of the American architect John Loomis in his book *Revolution of Forms: Cuba’s Forgotten Art Schools* (1999), and the attention of the World Monuments Fund, but there has yet to be a Cuban monograph on the schools. Only Eduardo Luis Rodríguez’s *The Havana Guide: Modern Architecture 1925–1965* (2000; first published in 1998 as *Habana: Arquitectura del siglo XX* in Spain) situates the schools within the history of Cuban modernism, recuperating the prerevolutionary and early revolutionary periods. This is a particularly significant volume and signals an encouraging trend. Prerevolutionary arts and culture were devalued and ignored in the decades following the revolution, and thus enabled greater international visibility for the nation. As a perhaps unacknowledged, but this is changing as interest in the repressed prerevolutionary past (no doubt inspired in part by the interest of tourists and other visitors) has risen.

In contrast to these earlier films, *Unfinished Spaces* focuses less on the use of the schools (which, despite their unfinished state, has been constant if ad hoc). Instead, it artfully weaves the history of the revolution—from its initial optimism through the debacle of subsequent ideological rigidity and on to the precarious present—through the story of the schools. Loomis’s work brought national and international attention to the plight of the buildings in the 1990s, after they had languished uncompleted and nearly forgotten for decades, and as a result of this interest the World Monuments Fund sought to fund their restoration and completion, but once again politics foreclosed on its fruition: the Cuban government did not want to accept foreign financial aid for the project, and although Cuban-funded restoration efforts began, they were later halted due to yet another economic downturn.

In a typically Cuban return of the repressed, golf courses, designed for the exclusive use of tourists, have been cropping up around the island in recent years. In 2009, in the wake of two powerful hurricanes and the global economic collapse, the Cuban government set aside its commitment to restore the National Schools of Art, and once more they remain unfinished, suspended between the overdetermined past and the uncertain future.

ALISON FRAUNHAR
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Rima Yamazaki, director
*Nakagin Capsule Tower: Japanese Metabolist Landmark on the Edge of Destruction*


Since the announcement of its impending demolition in 2007 (an act that has yet to be realized, though appears ever present on the horizon), Kisho Kurokawa’s Nakagin Capsule Tower has proved a conundrum. Is the building history, or theory? Postwar exemplar, or failed mission? Worth the expense of renovation, or long past its expiration date?

None of these questions allow for easy answers, and it is a credit to Rima Yamazaki’s short documentary film *Nagakini Capsule Tower: Japanese Metabolist Landmark on the Edge of Destruction* that it does not try to answer them. Not providing an answer, however, does not imply that the film remains unbiased in its assessment (as its subtitle clearly shows): we are meant to view this structure as a unique and irreplaceable piece of history. But is that enough to save it?

Yamazaki’s film operates primarily through interviews and quiet pan shots, interspersed with a select number of archival film clips detailing the tower’s construction and initial presentation. Completed in 1972, Kurokawa’s Nakagin Capsule Tower arrived in Tokyo on the wave of the enticing display, at Expo ’70 in Osaka, of Metabolism’s techno-utopianism and the capacities of a war-destroyed cityscape to envision not only a new future for itself but also a new future for architecture. Arata Isozaki, interviewed in the documentary, places Metabolism as the “first Japanese movement which succeeded [in showing] originality after the war,” as opposed to simply “absorbing and applying the concepts of Western architecture.” Hironuki Suzuki, an architectural historian also interviewed by Yamazaki in the film, posits Metabolism as a defining moment in postwar architectural thought and the space where Japanese architecture enters the international context on its own terms. Both Isozaki and Suzuki operate