Politics, Self-Help and Social Policy: The Shape of Housing in Revolutionary Cuba

MICHAELE PRIDE-WELLS
University of Kentucky

Fig. 1. Microbrigade workers.

INTRODUCTION

The Microbrigade Movement is a housing production and distribution program sponsored and initiated by the Cuban Revolutionary Government, introduced by Fidel Castro in 1970 – eleven years after the Triumph of the Revolution. The products and process outcomes of the Microbrigade Movement present a vivid example of the nexus between design, public policy, social ideology and culture in Cuba.

The evolution of the Microbrigade housing movement in Cuba reflects the evolution of the Revolution itself, from a highly centralized, autocratic system at the advent of the Revolution to a decentralized, almost grassroots, popular movement today. Throughout their history, both the Microbrigade Movement and the political framework that supports it have struggled to maintain a strong socialist ideology while addressing the ever-changing realities of limited and variable resources. This paper discusses the emergence of participation, self-help and populist democracy in Revolutionary Cuba, as embodied in the evolution of housing production and design after 1970.

Significant literature has been published about Cuba's commitment to housing and the impressive rates of production realized during the first decade of the Revolution (much of it written by Cubans and in Spanish). Images of large scale, Soviet-style developments have come to represent the ambitious undertakings of a fledging government infused with socialist idealism. What is less known, however, is that these images represent less than half of all housing production achieved after the Triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959. Of the 1,770,000 new units constructed in Cuba from 1959 to 1990, less than 30% was produced by the state. Over 70% of all new dwellings were produced by informal and/or self-help activities.

Furthermore, Cuban Revolutionary politics are characterized as highly centralized, autocratic and dictatorial, even as it seems that democracy abounds in contemporary Cuba and is increasing at every juncture. In a cyclical process of crisis, re-evaluation and correction, Cuba's housing and economic programs clearly illustrate the postmodern condition that Ed Soja refers to as "crisis-generated restructuring and restructuring-generated crisis" (1995).

The latest stage of the Microbrigades program represents the fusing of egalitarian and communitarian aspirations with a unique and important element of participation that integrates the popular and cultural practices of the Cuban people with the symbols of an industrialized, socialist society. Procedures and aesthetics (for better or worse) combine with varying impacts to assert socialist principles. The evolution of the program – its mix of procedures and aesthetics – also reflects the ongoing, dialectic nature of the revolution in Cuba.[1]

Fig. 2. Example of the E 14 prefabricated system, as used at Alamar, 1970. Source: Segre 1970.

In this milieu, Cuban architects have struggled to establish and re-establish the position of architecture and design in the Revolution. Many architects were literally soldiers of the Revolution and ideological partners throughout the 40+ years of Revolutionary rule. Their role has shifted from visionary to technocrat, to manager and facilitator, and back to visionary. Each stage in the Microbrigade movement has presented challenges and opportunities for architects in Cuba. It is in the current period, however, that architects and design have found a renewed role in shaping and facilitating the next phase of Cuban socialism and democracy, perhaps for the first time since the early days of the Revolution. Much like in the US today, Cuban architects are expanding their practices beyond building design to include design and implementation of participatory development processes.

THE MICROBRIGADE MOVEMENT IN CUBA

Throughout Latin America, governments and professionals have grappled with the problem of housing huge numbers of citizens with very few resources. Approaches to the problem, and the substance of the debate, have focused on two extremes: mass public housing production sponsored by the state and small-scale, self-building programs, generally self-organized, to produce single units. In Cuba, however, the Microbrigades present a hybrid solution: government-sponsored self-building for multifamily housing (Segre, Coyula and Scarpaci 1997).

Immediately after the Triumph of the Revolution on January 1, 1959, Fidel Castro and his Revolutionary government set out to change the nature of housing in Cuba, completely upsetting the notion of housing and real estate as private commodities. Their long-term goal was to provide housing – like education and health care – as a free social service. Implicit in this goal was the creation – political, social and physical – of asocialist state. Armed with ample ideology but few precedents, the Revolutionary government began a process of restructuring everything from the economy to land markets. At the time of the Revolution, housing conditions were dismal for a majority of Cubans – a visible symbol of the disparity between wealth and poverty that increased under the Batista regime. The Castro regime set upon a series of experiments in housing policy and production that continues to this day.

Bolstered by revolutionary fervor, Urban Reform Laws and innovative building strategies, 40 squatter settlements were demolished and their residents relocated to new units. By 1970, the state had constructed an impressive 99,600 units in the eleven years following the Triumph of the Revolution, compared to just 1,400 units produced by the Batista government in the 12 prior years (Hamberg 1985). The Revolution's egalitarian goals were aided by the bourgeoisie who left the country, abandoning their homes. These units were reallocated to remaining family members, servants and squatters.[2]

The government's housing production faltered by 1970, however, and review of the situation led to Castro's declaration of the new Microbrigade Movement on July 26, 1970. The Microbrigades in Cuba proceeded in three phases:

PHASE 1: Centralized system of mass production for new neighborhoods and towns, with voluntary participation organized through the work place, based on worker deliberation.

PHASE 2: Decentralized system, organized through provincial and municipal governments to build social and public works projects. The *Contingentes* were administered under *Poder Popular*, or the People's Power, introduced in 1976.

PHASE 3: Multi-disciplinary, neighborhood-level system, organized through Popular Councils; the *talleres barriales* feature a high level of participation in all phases, from planning and construction to maintenance and management.

How did policy, process and design evolve and intersect through the three periods of the Microbrigades in Cuba? How did these changes reflect or support political ideology and social change?

FIRST MICROBRIGADE PHASE, 1970-80

The biggest obstacle to expanding housing production was what appeared to be an acute labor shortage – a shortage that was due more to the sharp drop in productivity and increased worker absenteeism in the 1960s.

One of the Microbrigades' explicit purposes was to tap a new source of labor by recruiting former construction workers and training new ones. Another, less explicit, goal was to foster greater workplace productivity. . . . Most government-built urban housing in the 1970s was distributed through work-

places, at least in part based on production performance. (Hamberg 1986)

The Microbrigade Movement seemed to embody the new socialist order in Cuba. In both process and product, the Microbrigades enforced communitarian objectives:

> To **reduce the disparity** between city and countryside by developing the countryside and ignoring the city, especially Havana.
>
> To create a **socialist landscape**, primarily in new towns of "instant community," with an aesthetic of efficiency. Standardization and a mono-aesthetic level the difference between social classes and locations; a disparity historically expressed through architecture.
>
> To build a collective, interdependent spirit by building collective housing and services, through **Mutual self-help construction programs** – "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need."

The predominant image of both state-built and Microbrigade housing projects represented the Revolution's goal to create an egalitarian, socialist state-expressed both visually, through design; verbally, in official pronouncements; and through the writing (and education) of architects and planners.

Importantly, the Microbrigades enlisted the quasi-volunteer labor of those who might later occupy the housing they built. Furthermore, Microbrigade teams were organized at the workplace. Individual firms were allocated land, material and technical assistance by the state for housing development. Microbrigade workers were selected from within the firm, by the workers themselves, shifting their productivity to construction sites.

The process of organizing the Microbrigade and building housing fostered a sense of interdependence among the workers. Construction crews were selected based on their previous experience or their interest, and continued to be paid their regular salary. Those left at the workplace commit themselves to maintaining levels of productivity achieved *with* the Microbrigade workers, thus increasing overall productivity. Both industrial and housing sectors benefited from this arrangement – both had suffered problematic inefficiency and low-productivity, possibly related to lack of motivation.

In terms of *production*, the Microbrigades operated like government-assisted, community-based projects. But housing *design* came from central authorities (MICONS), based on Soviet models and relying on industrial production techniques, leading to a single solution for all applications. As noted by Segre, et al, innovation was not an option:

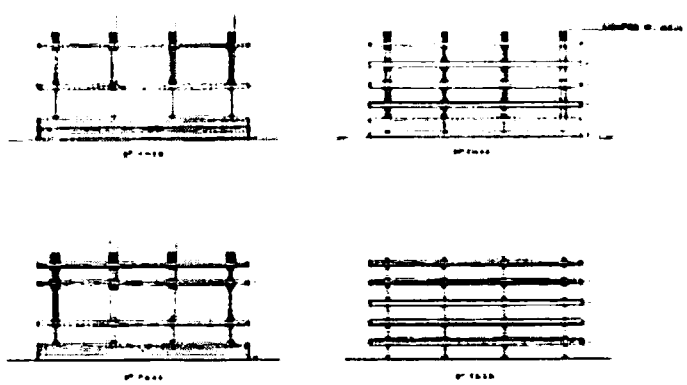
> The Revolutionary government employed rigid institutional structures in architectural projects and cultural life. Varying from the norms or otherwise reinterpreting orders from centralized authority were not permitted. An abstract sense of importance was given to collective interests, which made it nearly impossible to present alternative ideas (Segre, Coyula and Scarpaci 1997).[3]

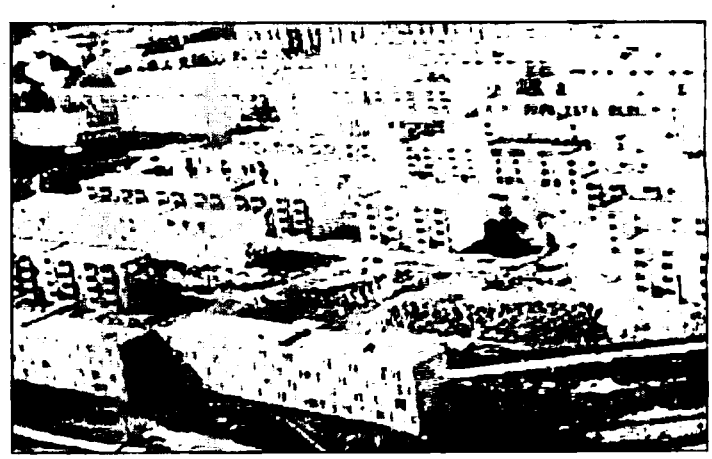
Furthermore, the Soviet housing technology dictated both building and urban design. Efficient, large-scale lift slab construction, in particular, resulted in unvarying rows of simple housing blocks, such as those seen in Santiago's Jose Marti and East Havana's Alamar projects.

THE SECOND PHASE

However, "just as in the 1960's, the majority of new units continued to be self-built with little or no government aid . . ." (Hamberg 1986)

With varying labor skills and dedication on new industrial technologies, the quality of early Microbrigade construction was





Figs. 3, 4. Lift Slab construction with prefabricated components; as used in the Jose Marti development in Santiago de Cuba, above. Source: Arquitectura Cuba, *1960.*

irregular, at best. Furthermore, many of the new communities were dreary and lacked spaces that supported Cubans' vibrant cultural and social life. They were also poorly served by commercial and community functions and far removed from those traditional spaces within the city centers that the residents had left behind. These problems and others revealed in the first decade led to re-evaluation and changes in policy, process and design. A lot of housing units had been produced, but urban areas continued to deteriorate.

The Microbrigades also had a decided impact on the landscape. Even today, it is possible to see evidence of their presence throughout the country. Much like public housing in the US, their form is unmistakable and in sharp contrast to conventional forms of building that surround them. A socialist landscape had taken shape, and it was a box. Projects like Alamar, built to house over 100,000 people, inspired a Cuban artist to create a sculpture titled *El Bloqueo*, or 'the block' (Segre, Coyula and Scarpaci 1997).

Despite a dramatic drop in production and criticism of the results, the Microbrigade Movement refused to die, however. After a decade of building, the movement had cultivated a new, expanded workforce of skilled construction workers. Firms insisted that workplace-allocated housing was a necessary component to industrial expansion and productivity (Hamberg 1986).

Changes in public policy impacted the process of housing production that demanded changes in construction methods and housing design. While many workers returned to their former occupations and settled in new units they helped construct, others remained in the movement and were assigned to new brigades, called *Contingentes*, or 'contingents.' These new brigades were dedicated to building social and recreational facilities, including those planned to support tourism. They also produced *La Villa Panamericana*, the sports venues and residential community built to support the Pan-American Games, which Cuba hosted in 1991.

Today, *La Villa Panamericana* is considered the best example of urban design to grow out of the Microbrigade Movement. Public areas include broad boulevards with landscaped plazas that mark the town center; much like those introduced by Forrestier in the 1920s. The boulevards are lined with shops and restaurants that support both the tourist resort hotel and Cuban residents that now occupy the development. In Cuba, there is a clear (even policed) separation between the space of tourists (i.e., hotels) and the space of Cubans (i.e., neighborhoods). But they share the streets, and in *La Villa Panamericana*, they share an enriched public realm.

THE THIRD PHASE — *LOS TALLERES BARRIALES*

The third and current phase of the Microbrigade Movement appears to carry forward the communitarian characteristics of the earlier phases, while adding a political (change) dimension. The system takes a populist turn, with grassroots action.

Implementation of the Third Five-Year Plan had been postponed for lack of resources after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The Soviet Block collapsed and with it, the Cuban economy. By 1989, almost 90 percent of all Cuba's trade was with Soviet Block countries and included hefty subsidies designed to prop the Cuban national budget in the face of falling sugar prices. Cuba had become almost completely dependent upon support from the Soviet Union and its oil. With dwindling reserves and severely devalued currency, large construction projects were abandoned. In eastern Havana today, there are miles of empty Microbrigade structures lining the highway. Additionally, the earlier-built projects were showing their age and inconsistent quality; many units had to be abandoned for lack of maintenance or integrity. In 1987, 357,000 people still lived in housing deemed substandard.

Architects had seen the problems of poor planning and urban neglect and in 1987, several of them, including Gina Rey and Mario Coyula, petitioned Castro to form multi-disciplinary firms on a local scale. With support of the new GDIC3 in Havana, the *talleres barriales* program of neighborhood workshops evolved. The most recent restructuring of the Microbrigade system parallels this development. New minibrigades and social brigades are organized at the neighborhood level through the popular councils, *consejos populares*, which were also created in 1987. The process is similar to that of the workplace Microbrigades, but the content and emphasis are significantly different for four reasons.

First, these Microbrigades would pursue infill development within existing, largely urban neighborhoods – shifting the focus from the countryside and periphery back to cities, where conditions had dangerously deteriorated. Second, the focus on neighborhood appears to eliminate the problems that arise in workplace-dedicated housing as workers retired or changed jobs. Third, the popular councils are not restricted to housing production alone, nor to the highly standardized designs of the earlier Microbrigades. Program and design are determined by the councils, along with architects, according to the needs and contextual conditions of the neighborhood and site. Finally, the popular councils are assisted from within, by architects and other professionals who live within the neighborhood. Additional support comes through the *talleres*, facilitated by newly created design and planning firms at the municipal level. Local professionals – including architects, social scientists, engineers, etc. – are part of the community, part of the process, part of the solution.

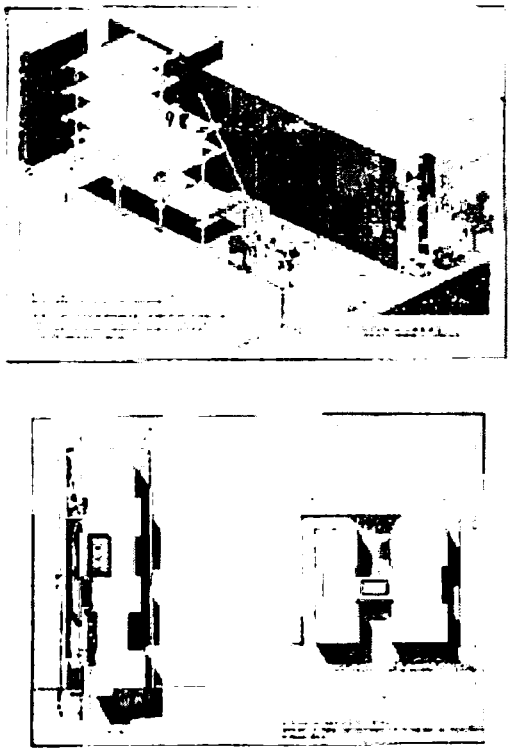


Fig. 5. Modular system with prefabricated components proposed with variations for infill sites. Source: Seleccion de Articulos II, May 1990.

Despite these important adjustments in the form and content of the Microbrigade, at a higher level, the communitarian function remains largely intact. Projects are still the result of collective deliberation with an objective of creating collective identity and fulfilling collective, along with individual, needs. Multifamily is emphasized over single-family housing – to achieve 'maximum utility' and, perhaps more importantly, as an instrument and symbol of collective ownership over individual ownership. Speculation is prohibited and gains are shared. Furthermore, the socialist ideal, "from each according to his ability, to each according to his need" is still a primary principle of the decision-making process. The post-Soviet phase of the Microbrigades appears to combine the best of the former communitarian principles with an important overlay of populism and grassroots agency. Over time, the state 'learned' from the people and their everyday practices. Despite enormous investment in construction technology and an aggressive housing campaign, over 70 percent of new housing units were still created by some type of self-building.

Political Change through Community Building

Populist objectives and features

Populist processes toward communitarian goals and results

Devolution of authority and responsibility, from regional, to workplace, to neighborhood levels

Re-introduction (or appropriation) of self-building techniques (and resources, energy), traditional methods and traditional materials into community-building projects

Projects are largely self-directed, self-built, self-maintained; but the 'self' is a community unit, organized through the popular councils

The creation of the *Consejos Populares* in 1987 marks an important milestone in the history of the Revolution. For the first time, the concept of decentralization had reached the street, the neighborhoods where Cubans lived. This also changed the nature of decentralization, from a distribution concept, to a political framework. More importantly, in contrast to the Revolutionary Defense Councils (CDR's), the popular councils are not just political and social watchdog organizations, they have real authority and responsibility for development within their neighborhoods. Furthermore, the councils are given real resources-materials, land and technical assistance for building.

Some have compared the nature and work of the councils to community development corporations (CDC's) in the United States. Indeed, they have finite geographical boundaries, are 'governed' by community-based leadership, are committed to making neighborhood improvements, and do so primarily by building homes for those most in need. A significant difference, however, is that Popular Councils are elected by the community at large. They are an important element in creating and cultivating democracy and meaningful political participation, along with collective self-determination.

THE POTENTIAL

But as usual, crisis is filled with both dangers and opportunities, and much can be said of the more positive side of the crisis of postmodernity. . . . Postmodern urbanization has significantly raised popular consciousness . . . at the local and regional level, over the very nature of the urbanization process itself, over who controls and benefits from the social production-and restructuring-of urban space. (Soja 1995)

Today, Cuba is staking its future – and its present – on attracting international markets for tourism, investment. Priorities have once again shifted, focusing on cultivating and preserving its culture, especially in the architecturally rich city of Havana. As Cuba compromises (understandably) its nationalized economy in favor of US dollars, can the social advances of the revolution be sustained? One answer to Cuba's economic and social survival may come from the bottom, as the people of Cuba are gaining authority and capacity at a grassroots level. They have not lost their historical spirit, nor have they stopped building for themselves.

Cuban architects find themselves in perhaps their most creative period since the early years of the Revolution, faced with a new set of economic, social and spatial challenges and armed with new social and political tools. The early design experiments in Revolutionary Cuba exhibited enthusiasm for design as cultural and political expression; the present condition similarly presents this opportunity. Already, architects like Segre and Coyula are looking back to Fernando Salinas' experiments with prefabricated components for flexible self-building, with regional style. Both architects and the Cuban government seem to be embracing, at last, the culture that distinguishes Cuban cities and public life and the motivation for self-building that it supports.

New community-based structures (both governmental and architectural) offer a vehicle through which a socialist democracy is forged and the Cuban culture is recuperated and sustained. In a delicate balance between state-controlled land and global land markets, community-based planning strategies can help direct the character of foreign investment in ways that benefit both investor and local resident, while bolstering the national economy.

NOTES

[1] The term "dialectics" is used here as the Cuban architects use it, to describe an iterative and deliberative process.

[2] Segre, et al, refer here to a speech delivered by Fidel Castro on December 4, 1984.

[3] Grupo para el Dessarollo Integral del la Ciudad, GDIC, or Group for the Comprehensive Development of the City, was founded in xxx; Gina Rey was the founding director and was succeeded by Mario Coyula. The author has worked with the GDIC as part of an urban design studio at the Harvard Graduate School of Design.

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