

CASTRO'S

by JOHN A. LOOMIS

photographs by HAZEL HANKIN

Architecture has the power to do more than provide shelter for human activities and everyday life—it has the power to embody the highest values of our culture. It can also express the ethos of a particular historical moment and provide inspiration for the generations that follow. The National Art Schools (Escuelas Nacionales de Arte) in Havana fulfill all these criteria and are works of architecture in the profoundest sense of the discipline.

The now-famous golf game of January 1961, after which Fidel Castro and Che Guevara decided to build Cuba's National Art Schools on the manicured grounds of Havana's famed Country Club—once the exclusive preserve of the city's elite—has by now entered into the mythology of the Cuban Revolution.

Three architects—one Cuban, Ricardo Porro, and two Italians, Vittorio Garatti and Roberto Gottardi—were charged with the creation of five schools, one each for modern dance, plastic arts, drama, music, and ballet. So innovative were their designs that the suite of buildings was declared by Castro himself “la mas bella academia de artes en el mundo,” before ground for their construction had even been broken. Yet the sinuous structures that epitomized the utopian aspirations of the revolution were soon repudiated by the very institution they sought to celebrate, and left to languish unfinished for nearly four decades. How these buildings were conceived and why they were orphaned was, until recently, one of the great lost chapters in architectural history.

Three principles guided the architects' designs. The first was a profound respect for the extraordinary landscape of the country club grounds. The second, prompted by a U.S. embargo that prevented the importation of steel and cement, was to employ locally produced brick and terra cotta tiles as the primary construction material. And out of the latter grew the third principle, a utilization of the Catalan vault throughout as the structural system. This building technique had been employed by Antoni Gaudí in the fluid forms of his architecture in Barcelona, which spoke boldly of Catalan regional identity. For Porro, Garatti, and Gottardi, the Catalan vault would serve as a refutation of the then-dominant International Style Modernism and result in an organic spatial and formal expression unique to these projects, expressing their own revolutionary identity.

Each school was a one-of-a-kind achievement, conceived within a common material and structural language. Porro's School of Modern Dance, sited at the edge of a steep escarpment, is an angular, kinetic composition in plan that is softened in volume by the curving vaults. His School of Plastic Arts celebrated the country's Afro-Cuban heritage through a collection of pavilions that read as an archetypal African village connected by undulating, covered passageways, the whole interpreting negritude in an entirely Cuban context.

Gottardi's School of Dramatic Arts, like the social construct of a theater company, looks inward, creating an intimate, interiorized environment, concentrically organized and connected by narrow alleyways. Garatti's School of Music is a 330-meter-long serpentine structure that winds its

way through the landscape, culminating in an embrace of a monumental jaguey tree, resplendent in roots that hang from its branches. The School of Ballet, also by Garatti, is a composition of terra cotta pavilions and magnificent spaces that seem to float in the dense, verdant landscape.

The enthusiasm with which the design of the schools was initially received had significantly dissipated by 1963 as Cuba, influenced by its new ally, the Soviet Union, moved away from utopian schemes to pragmatically driven solutions in its architecture. Suddenly, the schools' sinuous forms seemed out of sync with newly adopted industrialized models, which yielded the repetitive rectilinear forms that soon proliferated across the Cuban landscape.

A disdain for the schools was further compounded by a harsh economic climate that followed the October (Missile) Crisis. By 1965, work on the National Art Schools officially came to a halt despite their various stages of completion. Porro's School of Modern Dance and School of Plastic Arts were nearly complete; Gottardi's School of Dramatic Arts had half its program dropped. Likewise, the concert halls of Garatti's School of Music were cut, and construction on his School of Ballet was terminated, though the project was nearly 95 percent complete.

Beyond mere abandonment of the project, the issue of the art schools took on an absurd tone. The three architects suddenly found themselves charged with the ideological crime of promoting "idealism, deviationism, individualism, monumentalism, historicism, and a formalism driven by aesthetic criteria rather than socialist rigor." Moreover, they were personally accused of being "elitists" and "cultural aristocrats," whose work exhibited

DREAM

THE REDISCOVERY OF CUBA'S NATIONAL ART SCHOOLS

RICARDO PORRO
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ALBERTO KORDA

“narcissistic” and “egocentric, bourgeois formations.” Cuban professors of architecture were forbidden to mention the schools, and students were discouraged from visiting them as the faculty at the Ciudad Universitaria José Antonio Echevarría adopted a technically oriented curriculum imposed by the Ministry of Construction.

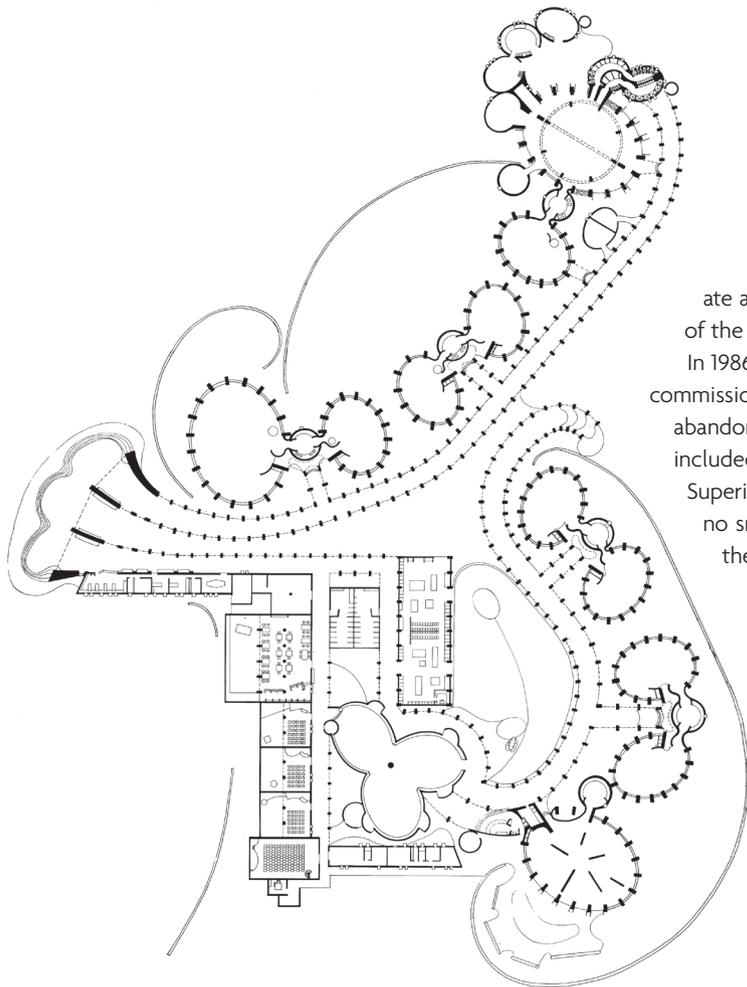
In the decades that followed, the art schools fell into various states of decay, succumbing to neglect and outright vandalism. Squatters on the grounds have left few traces of the once exquisitely maintained landscape, which became home to plots of plantains and corn, and herds of goats. What was not outright desecrated fell victim to exuberant vegetation. By the 1980s, the National Art Schools had reached a truly deplorable state when an interesting series of events began to unfold.

There had always been voices of support for the architecture of the schools within Cuba, but they were restrained voices. The cultural climate of the mid-1980s, however, created a foundation for change within Cuba. During these years, young artists and architects, disillusioned with many aspects of Cuba’s socialist experiment, began to cre-

FIDEL CASTRO AND CHE GUEVARA PLAY A ROUND OF GOLF ON THE MANICURED GROUNDS OF HAVANA’S FAMED COUNTRY CLUB IN JANUARY 1961. ONCE THE EXCLUSIVE PRESERVE OF THE CITY’S ELITE, THE GROUNDS WOULD BE TAKEN OVER FOR THE BUILDING OF CUBA’S NATIONAL ART SCHOOLS.



THE ENTRY COURTYARD OF THE SCHOOL OF MODERN DANCE FORMS A HINGE AROUND WHICH THE LIBRARY AND ADMINISTRATION OFFICES WERE CONSTRUCTED. THE COURTYARD CONTINUES TO SERVE AS A GATHERING PLACE FOR STUDENTS.



ate a more critically discursive environment that opened up paths for a re-evaluation of the art schools.

In 1986, Roberto Gottardi, the only one of the original three architects still in Cuba, was commissioned to draw up plans for the completion of the schools, but this project was soon abandoned. Three years later, Elmer López, a professor on the faculty of architecture, included the art schools in a retrospective exhibit of Cuban architecture at the Instituto Superior Politecnico José Antonio Echevarría. At that time, this was an act that required no small amount of courage, since there were many faculty who still disapproved of the schools.

In 1995, the National Union of Cuban Architects and Engineers hosted a photography exhibit of the schools, featuring work by New York photographer Hazel Hankin. The following year, Ricardo Porro, who had been living in exile in Paris, was invited back to Cuba to give a series of lectures. A similar invitation was tendered in 1997 to Vittorio Garatti, who had been forced to leave the country in 1974. That same year, the National Conservation Center conducted a preliminary study for the preservation and restoration of the schools. A few months later, Cuba's National Commission on Monuments declared the schools a protected zone, though they rejected an initiative to designate them national monuments.

Events reached a crescendo at the beginning of 1999, when my book, *Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools* (Princeton Architectural Press), was published. At the same time, the MAK Center in Los Angeles, with

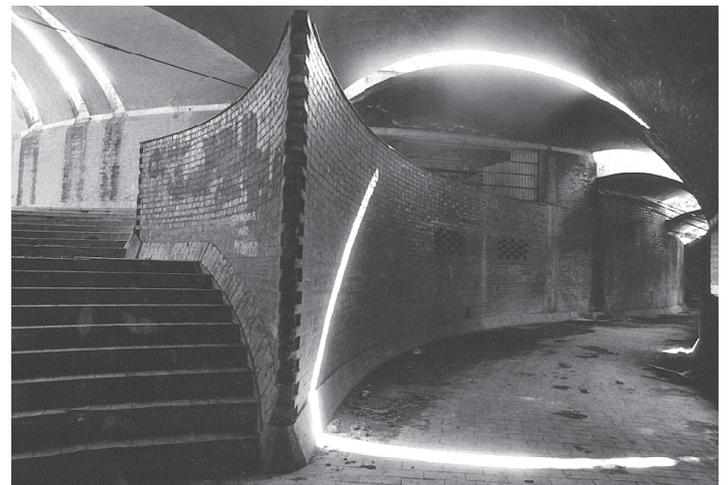


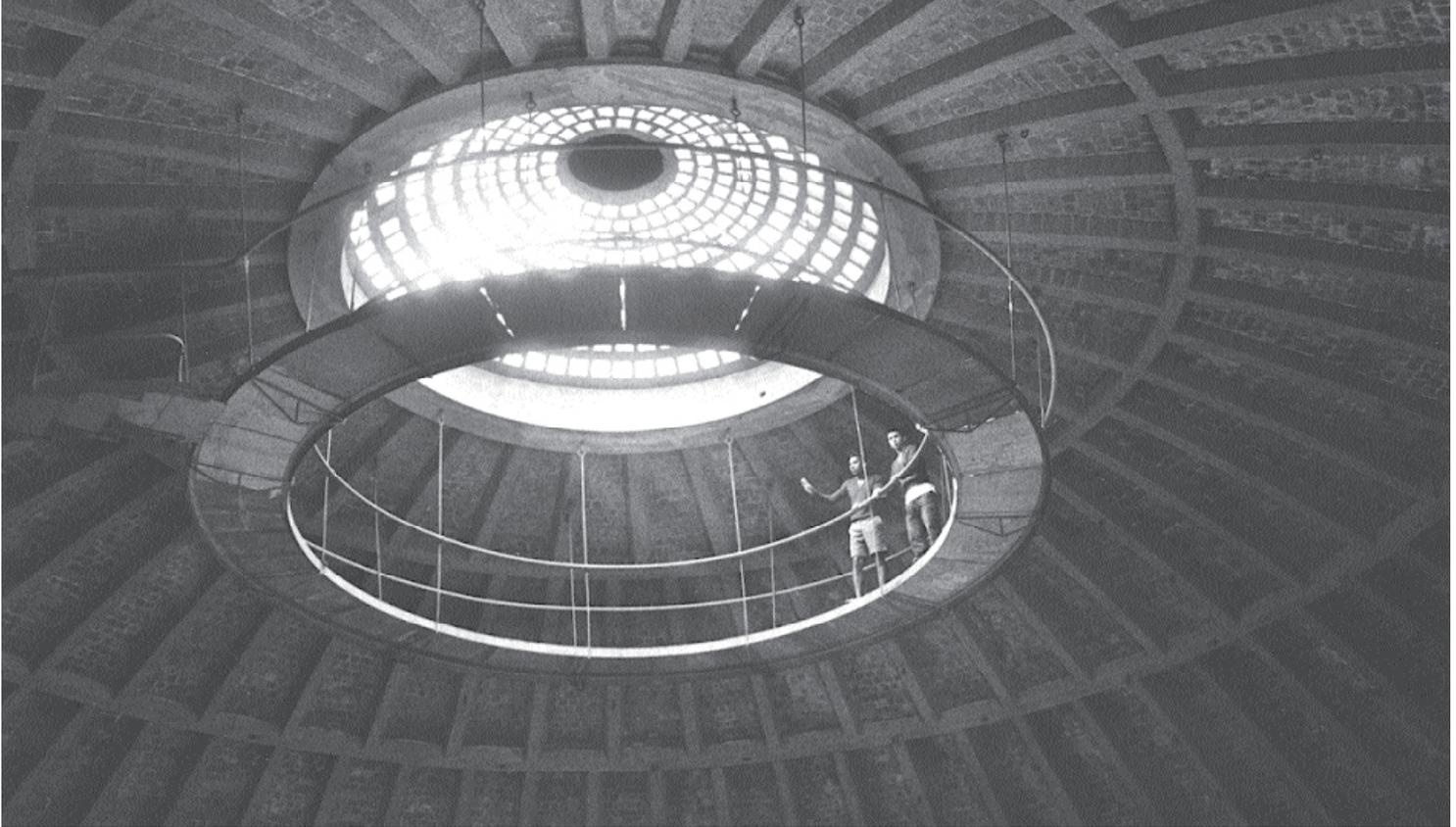
support of the Austrian Ministry of Culture, produced an exhibit on the schools that opened both in Los Angeles and New York. To inaugurate it, a symposium, sponsored in part by Columbia University and the Cooper-Hewitt Museum, brought together Porro, Garatti, and Gottardi for the first time since 1965. Not only was there a significant buzz about the schools in the media, with numerous articles appearing in international papers and magazines, but the sites were included on the World Monuments Fund's 2000 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites*. These efforts yielded the international support necessary to ensure their further international attention, making them eligible for support for their preservation, though the U.S. government has, lamentably, placed restrictions on funding their restoration.

The year 1999 was also significant within Cuba itself. In November, the national council of the National Union of Cuban Writers and Artists (UNEAC) took up the cause of the National Art Schools. The year before, architecture had been an important topic of discussion at the national convention, with important figures such as Mario Coyula, Graziella Pogolotti, and Alfredo Guevara arguing that Cuban architecture and the Cuban city were the most important vehicles of Cuban cultural value. As such, they deserved special attention and protection, especially in light of growing foreign investment interests. At a subsequent meeting in November, a discussion about the importance of Cuban architectural culture prompted José Villa, chair of UNEAC's Association of Plastic Arts, to highlight the importance of the National Art Schools.

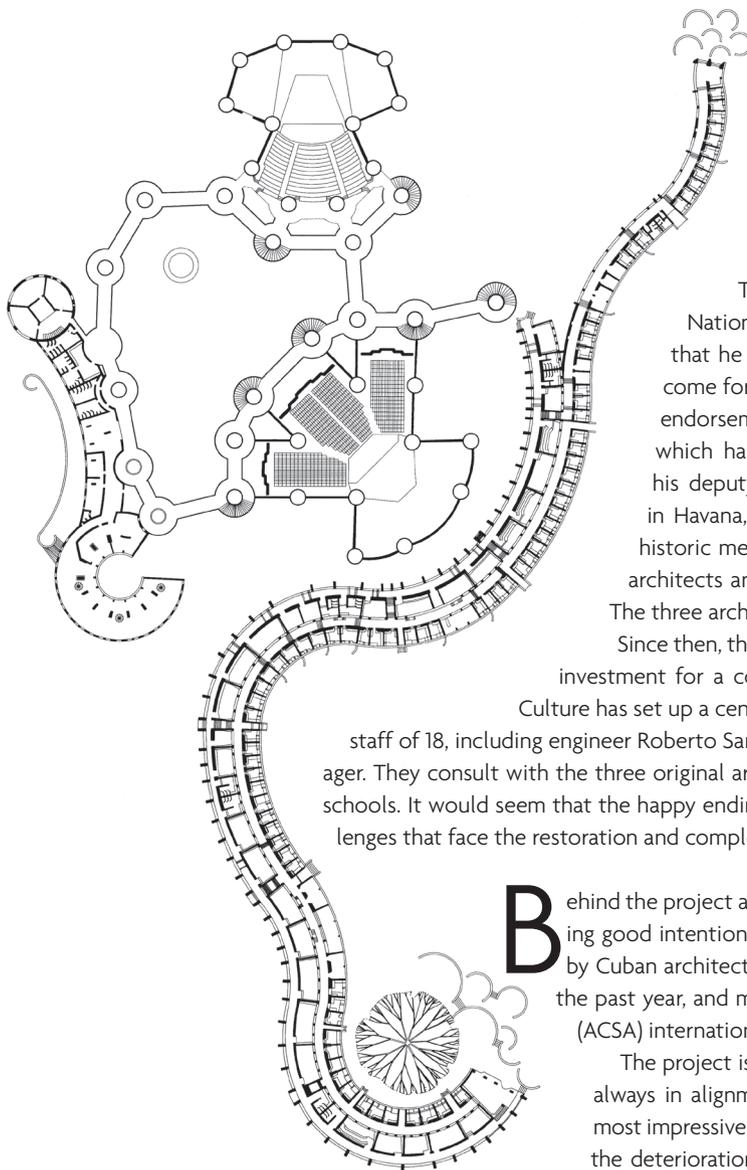
Architect José Antonio Choy declared that the National Art Schools were the most important architectural work of the Cuban Revolution. Furthermore, he stated that the schools represented the best of the creative forces of the Revolution and, that with recent international attention, had become the most renowned work of Cuban architecture abroad. Moreover, he noted that there was growing concern internationally about the declining state of the schools. Eusebio Leal, Historian of the City of Havana—known for his successful restoration of much of the historic core—confirmed Choy's position and declared his support for the restoration of the art schools.

THE CURVING, COLONNADED PATHS OF PORRO'S SCHOOL OF PLASTIC ARTS, LEFT, WERE DESIGNED TO EVOKE THE SENSUAL AND EROTIC NATURE OF THE TROPICS. BELOW, SLICES OF BRILLIANT SUNLIGHT ILLUMINATE ABANDONED UNDERGROUND CORRIDORS OF VITTORIO GARATTI'S SCHOOL OF BALLET.





A DOMED ROOF WITH A CENTRAL OCULUS CROWNS THE MAIN PERFORMANCE PAVILION OF THE SCHOOL OF BALLET. IN 1994, WHEN THIS PHOTOGRAPH WAS TAKEN, CUBANS WERE SCRAMBLING FOR THE MOST BASIC OF NECESSITIES. THESE ENTERPRISING YOUNG MEN ATTEMPTED TO CATCH BATS, WHICH TOOK UP RESIDENCE IN THE ABANDONED SPACE, TO SELL TO A BIOTECHNOLOGY RESEARCH CENTER.

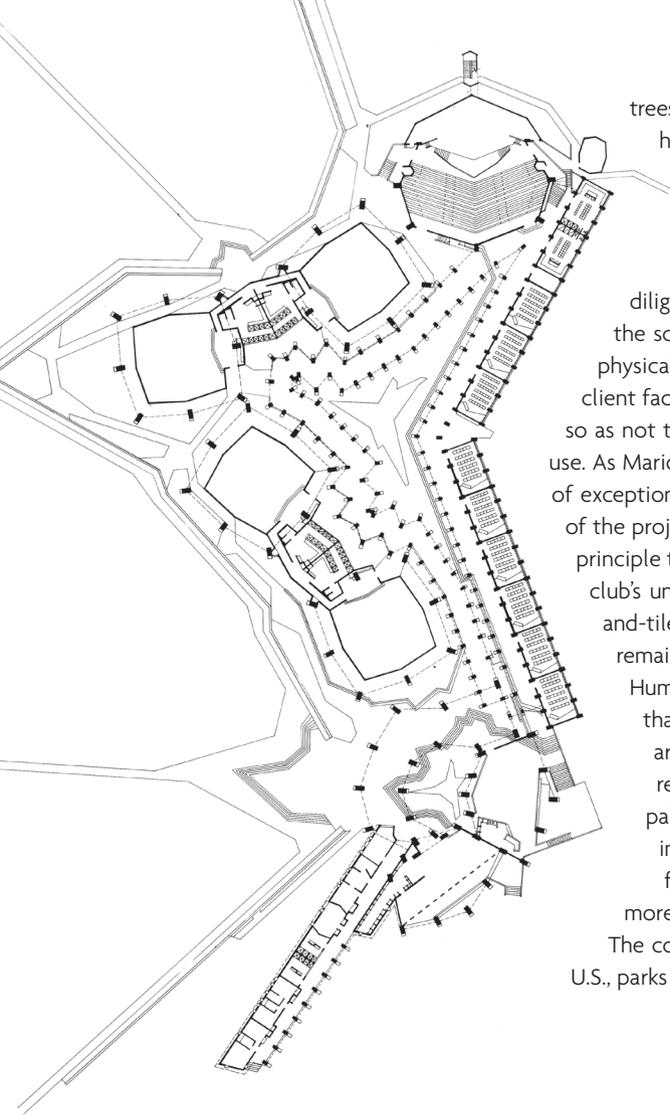


This piqued the interest of Fidel Castro, who joined in saying that the National Art Schools had been a much-beloved project from his youth, and that he had lamented their decline. Moreover, he declared that the time had come for the restoration and completion of the schools. Since Castro's personal endorsement, the Ministry of Culture assumed responsibility for the project, which has been strongly supported by the minister himself, Abel Prieto, and his deputy, Carlos Martí. In December 1999, Porro and Garatti joined Gottardi in Havana, where they participated in the preliminary planning process. At this historic meeting, it was decided that they would still be considered the principal architects and would have full authority over all decisions affecting their projects. The three architects dedicated themselves to the project for no compensation.

Since then, the Cuban government has committed \$20 million to the project, no small investment for a country struggling with difficult economic conditions. The Ministry of Culture has set up a center for project development and management (CIMC), with a dedicated staff of 18, including engineer Roberto Sanchez Lagarza as director, and architect Universo García as project manager. They consult with the three original architects, who have the final decision-making authority in each of their schools. It would seem that the happy ending to their story is just around the corner. However, there are still challenges that face the restoration and completion process.

Behind the project are many good intentions. However, Cuba is by no means immune to having good intentions thwarted by misguided execution. A number of concerns were raised by Cuban architects and cultural figures at various meetings of UNEAC over the course of the past year, and more recently at the Association of Collegiate Schools of Architecture's (ACSA) international conference held in Havana in June 2002.

The project is very complex, with many components and client interests that are not always in alignment. CIMC's expertise in materials research and technical processes is most impressive, and significant progress has been made in stabilizing the schools. Halting the deterioration of the buildings, however, is far from complete. Selective removal of

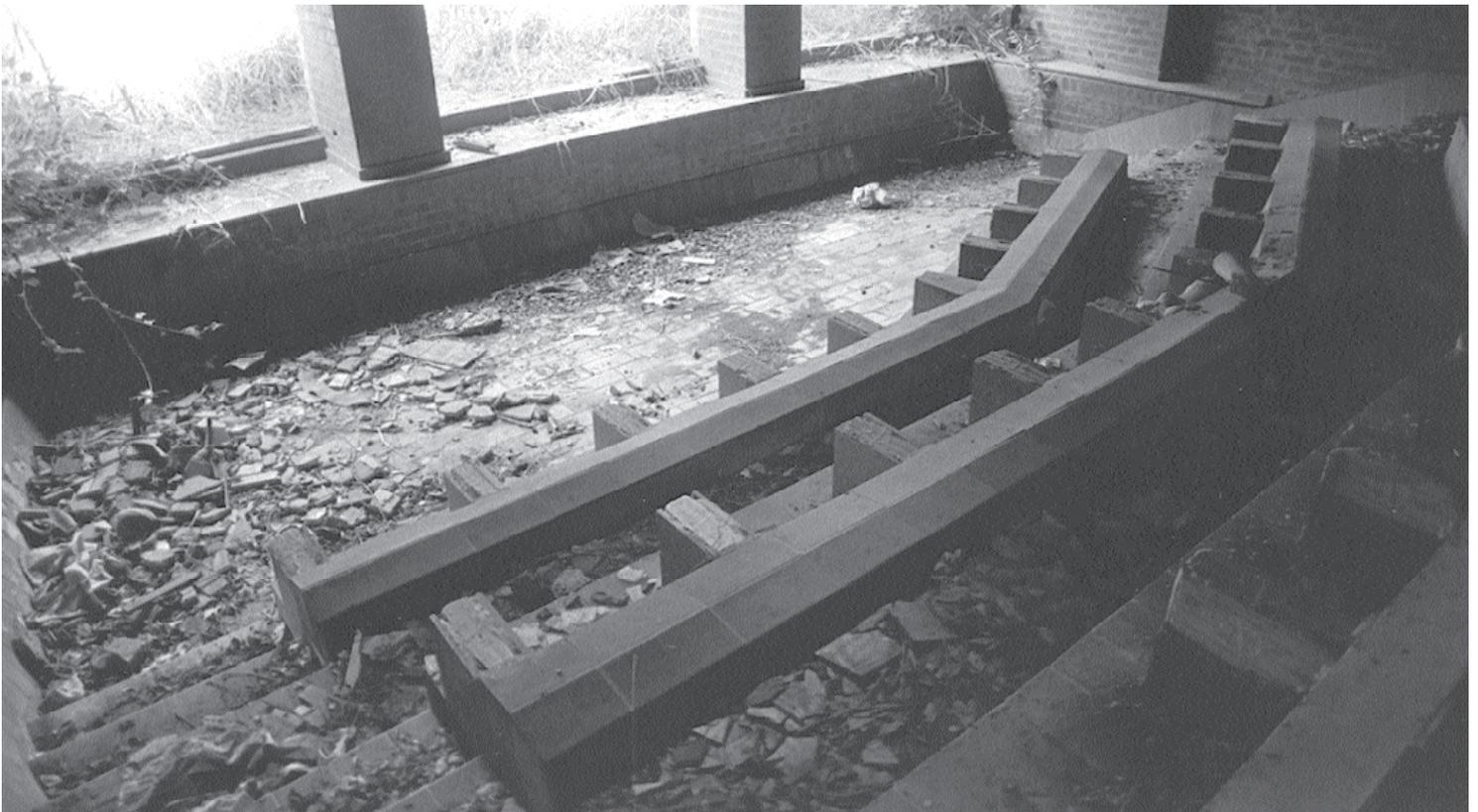


trees and clearing of the grounds have opened up vistas obscured for years, and have reduced damaging humidity generated by the overgrowth, although not all the architects agree over the extent of vegetation removal. A road is being constructed through the site to connect the schools, even though peripheral roads, which do not intrude on the landscape, already exist. These interventions appear to be guided more by engineering pragmatics than by principles of landscape design.

Another concern is that of the final form of the rehabilitated campus. The CIMC team has worked diligently to address the many pragmatic and functional issues presented by the current condition of the schools. Their process, by necessity, has been more reactive than proactive—reactive both to actual physical conditions and to the desires of multiple clients, not at all an easy task. In some cases, the individual client faculties have requested programmatic and use changes. These considerations must be taken with care so as not to violate the original architecture through attempts to accommodate an inappropriate program or use. As Mario Coyula has aptly stated, “In most cases, architecture must adapt itself to human need, but in cases of exceptional works of architecture, human need should adapt itself to architecture.” Many fear that because of the project team’s careful focus on all the individual parts, the whole might be lost in the process. The first principle the three original architects established for the design of the art schools was respect for the country club’s unique landscape. That landscape was to be the great unifier, along with the common use of brick-and-tile Catalan vault construction. Because of years of neglect, only traces of the original landscape now remain. Nature has intervened spontaneously—often in very beautiful ways, often in very destructive ways. Humans have intervened less gracefully with ill-conceived agricultural cultivation and ancillary buildings that have nothing to do with the original concept. In the new plans, many of these subsidiary buildings are being given more consideration than they deserve. A truly bold masterplan might even call for removal of ill-conceived buildings. The dormitory, constructed in the 1970s of prefabricated concrete panels and sited without any regard for its relationship to anything, is particularly offensive. There are immediate concerns as to the placement, design, and integration of roads, parking, paths, lighting, and flood control interventions that are now occurring on the site. These interventions seem to respond more to immediate pragmatics than to any overall design concept.

The country club site is no longer a golf course. It must now be thought of as a park. As we know in the U.S., parks are commonly contested landscapes with many interests desiring to make their mark, and it is often

AN ABANDONED CLASSROOM IN GARATTI'S SCHOOL OF MUSIC WAS DESIGNED WITH BUILT-IN SEATING.





STUDENTS REHEARSE IN ROBERTO GOTTARDI'S SCHOOL OF DRAMATIC ARTS, ABOVE. A GRAFFITO IN THE SCHOOL OF MUSIC, BELOW, ASKS, "GOD, WHERE ARE YOU?"

a constant struggle on the part of conservancy organizations to maintain the integrity of the landscape. The site faces similar challenges. Without a unified vision for the art school landscape, and with the many—and sometimes competing—interests of the various parties involved, the project for restoration and completion of the art schools could result in an unfortunate and ill-conceived accumulation of accommodations to each group that feels that it has a stake in the site, at the expense of the whole.



In a few, short years, the National Art Schools have gone from being “forgotten” to being the best-known works of architecture of the Cuban Revolution. They are not only an important part of Cuba’s architectural patrimony, they are also a part of an international patrimony. The National Art Schools have many friends throughout the world, and it might be time to unite these interests to provide needed support for their restoration. The Italian government and others have offered financial and technical assistance, but the Ministry of Culture has been slow to respond.

There is a work of graffiti inscribed in Vittorio Garatti’s abandoned Ballet School that says, “Amo todo q’tengo. Pero no tengo todo q’amo,” or “I love all that I have. But I do not have all that I love,” a fitting epigram for this stage in the life of Cuba’s National Art Schools. ■