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# Unfinished Spaces: Film Review

3:32 PM 6/20/2011 by Todd McCarthy

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## The Bottom Line

An excellent documentary about a spectacular but unfinished architectural project that strongly reflects the arc of the Cuban experience of the past 60 years.

## Venue

Los Angeles Film Festival

## Cast

Robert Gottardi,  
Ricardo Porro, Vittorio  
Garratti

## Directors-producers

Alysa Nahmias,  
Benjamin Murray

The documentary, from Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray, centers on an unfinished architectural project that reflects the Cuban experience of the past 60 years.

An apt and unstressed metaphor for the history of the Cuban revolution itself, *Unfinished Spaces* is a stirring study of the euphoric creation and complex, unfortunate aftermath of an ambitious cultural project initiated in Havana in 1961. In a sympathetic but unblinking manner that imposes no overt agenda on the story other than to tell it as fully and personally as possible, this documentary by **Alysa Nahmias** and **Benjamin Murray** is also welcome in that it brings to light a striking architectural project that continues to evolve fifty years after its conception. The topical intersection of aesthetics, politics, history and Hispanic culture should afford plenty of venues across the media spectrum for this absorbing film.

It took the co-directors 10 years to assemble this ambitious look at the birth and subsequent troubled life of Cuba's National Art Schools, a complex on the edge of Havana that was seemingly conceived on a whim by Fidel Castro when he played a round of golf with Che Guevara in revolutionary fatigues at a posh country club and remarked that the beautiful grounds would make an ideal home for a comprehensive arts complex.

At once, three young architects and ardent revolutionaries were recruited and given two months to plan five schools of distinct design for the sprawling property and to begin construction immediately thereafter. Because of the U.S. trade embargo, materials were limited to what was on hand locally and there was a desire to make the buildings harmonize with the undulating contours of the landscape, factors that make the resulting low-lying structures especially appealing to modern sensibilities attuned to so-called organic and environmental architecture that, at the time, was meant to reflect not centralized power but of openness and freedom.

In all events, the creations of **Roberto Gottardi**, **Ricardo Porro** and **Vittorio Garatti** were stunning, at once both excitingly modernistic and redolent of old influences, particularly the repetitions of Catalanian vaults. The anticipation of the opening of art schools devoted to music,

dance (ballet and modern), theater and the plastic arts to the general public in a society where "culture" had largely been the province of the elite was a heady thing well communicated by the many articulate interview subjects. Extensive newsreel-style footage and still photos amply illustrate the construction process as it quickly proceeded.

World events quickly overtook the enterprise, however. As Cuba became more umbilically linked to the USSR, the dreary functionalism of pre-fab Soviet architecture became not only an economic necessity but an ideological requirement. Che led the way in attacking in schools, only two of which had been finished, for their alleged decadent aestheticism, after which Cuba's official state architecture critic upped the ante by attaching to them the deadly label "pharaonic." Further construction was halted, the schools went into disrepute (the largest open space was turned into a circus venue) and the three architects, whose designs had been enthusiastically been endorsed by Castro himself, were disenfranchised and worse: Porro, an engagingly owlish figure, managed to get out and settle in Paris; the constantly gesticulating Garratti, after a prison stretch on trumped-up spying charges, eventually returned to Italy, where he had worked before the revolution, while the more sober Gottardi remained in the country but was marginalized and mostly taught thereafter.

That is hardly the end of the story however, as the film itself becomes part on an international effort to rehabilitate and restore a facility that, merely three or four decades after its construction, became so overrun by jungle and water that it hauntingly began to resemble an ancient ruin. All still alive and expressive, the three old colleagues reunite to traverse their spectacular creation, ruminate on what became of their youthful dreams and contribute to the schools' restoration, which has been partially effected. An aged Castro is glimpsed in a relatively recent video insisting that the schools should be finished, while one of the architects remarks that, if he had just a moment with the former Maximum Leader, he would remind him that, "A closed system dies."

Lucidly filmed so as to strongly capture the rapturously creative and varied styles of the schools, the prolonged gestation period of which can modestly but plausibly be compared to that of Gaudi's Sagrada Familia in Barcelona, *Unfinished Spaces* is an excellent example of the specific used to illustrate a wider truth, in this case about unfulfilled dreams, both artistic and political.






Venue: Los Angeles Film Festival  
Production/sales: Ajna Films  
Cast: Robert Gottardi, Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garratti  
Directors-producers: Alysa Nahmias, Benjamin Murray  
Director of photography: Benjamin Murray  
Editors: Kristen Nutile, Alex Minnick  
Music: Giancarlo Vulcano  
86 minutes

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