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Buena Vista Social Club All Over Again

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Art Mirrors Life.

Part I -- Idea. Birth. New life.

Part II -- Joy. Uncertainty. Upheaval. Hardship. Joy. Uncertainty...

Part III -- Politics. Its impact on the entity created, those it was meant to serve, and its creator.

I could be referring to Obama and the United States, but I'm not (that would be too boring and depressing). I could also be referring to the Cuban revolution and its leader, Fidel Castro; and I am, to a degree.

I am also referring to five spectacular art schools and architectural gems -- revolutionary in design back in 1960s Havana, as now; love children of three visionary architects. Imagined by Castro and realized with breathtaking speed by the architects. Built by the heady spirit of the revolution, these stunning buildings serve as a metaphor for Cuba itself and its journey of grand aspiration, descent into decay, and hope fueled by the winds of a shifting political landscape.

As ever, art mirrors life, which mirrors art and the lives affected by it. Nowhere is this interplay more effectively presented than in the new documentary feature *Unfinished Spaces* by Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray.

I got to see these magnificent buildings for myself while on an art trip to Cuba back in 2002. But whether you follow Cuban politics or not, this story tugs at the heartstrings. It has all the elements of a good movie. Visually striking, *Unfinished Spaces* presents a dramatic storyline, which follows three young architects whose lives are forever changed when the hero of Cuba's revolution comes calling.

While visiting a golf course, Castro is struck by a brilliant idea -- why not transform it into a site for the most fabulous art schools in the world? He gives architects Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garratti and Roberto Gottardi *two months* to come up with plans for the project. Not to be outdone by Castro's enthusiasm, the architects, buoyed by the free reins they've been granted and the help of a small army of excited volunteers, manage to accomplish the task in the time allotted.

And then comes the crippling U.S. embargo. Out of near zero access to building materials, a mix of desperation and ingenuity, the architects fall back on a 14th century formula known as the Catalan Arch, which uses bricks layered lengthwise over a wood surface to create curves. The resulting buildings are nothing short of an architectural phenomenon. But not so fast; there's more trouble afoot.

In the course of a speech, Che Guevara disparages the schools as bourgeois, and cites them as examples of non-productive architecture. The throwaway comment prompts the Ministry of Construction to begin an aggressive campaign against progressive design; it starts promoting the Soviet building model, which emphasizes function and pre-fabrication. In other words, *really, really ugly buildings*. The initiative pits the architectural community against itself, inciting heated critical debate for and against the structures. Construction comes to a jarring halt and the buildings -- most of them-half finished -- remain like spirits not quite ready to relinquish their attachment to the earth.

Much like the popular musician members of the [Buena Vista Social Club](#), who saw their music and careers sidelined by the government in favor of politically tinged music that spoke to colonialism, socialism and other more "relevant" issues, the art school architects find themselves swimming in similar waters. Ricardo Porro, a Cuban whose sexually suggestive designs generated controversy and outrage, leaves his native land for Paris, where he is able to thrive professionally. Vittorio Garratti eventually returns to his native Italy; Roberto Gottardi, another Italian once intoxicated with the promise of Cuba's renaissance, chooses to remain on the island and teach, but is never again given the opportunity to realize new projects.

Although they stand today as testament to the sound engineering principles of the Middle Ages, the buildings are left to decay, much as the island does once the Soviet Union falls apart, and support for Cuba vanishes. However, as vegetation grows around these haunting spaces, they take on an even more surreal and organic tropical beauty. Even as they fall apart, instruction in modern dance, ballet, the plastic and dramatic arts, and music thrives within its classroom walls, much as Cubans manage to live, love and survive while their island home wastes away under Castro's well-meaning but punishing policies. Makes you want to cry, or get up and scream, or do *something!*

But wait. All is not lost! Close to 40 years later, we're not sure why but Fidel Castro experiences a surge of regret, a change of mind or a guilty conscience over the stalled projects; he sanctions completion of one of the schools, which takes place in 2007. In the wake of his brother's failing health Raul Castro now reigns as the island's president. There is renewed hope in the air; new ideas are bubbling up everywhere in Cuba these days. An international movement to finish construction on all of these unfinished spaces is underway. There *is* something you can do. Go see this film and get inspired.

In order to qualify for Oscar® consideration, Unfinished Spaces is being screened during DocuWeeks™ at [IFC Center](#) in New York City (August 12-September 1), and at [Laemmle's Sunset 5](#) in Los Angeles (August 19-September 8).

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