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The "Unfinished Spaces" of Cuba

Following the revolution in 1959, Fidel Castro stood on the grounds of a country club known to be the stomping grounds of the rich and decreed that in place of its golf course, a school dedicated to the arts be built. In a new documentary called *Unfinished Spaces* (<http://www.unfinishedspaces.com/>), directors [Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray](#) (<http://www.unfinishedspaces.com/about.html>) explore one of the great architectural gestures of the Cuban Revolution: a marked commitment to foster and nurture a generation of creatives and give them an outlet to hone their craft. Yes, the film is interesting from a historical perspective—it's also one of the most engrossing architecture documentaries I've seen both in of the personal stories of the individual architects as well as the structures they designed. Moreover, it shows a bygone interest in a civic investment in the artistic education of a nation, an interest that should be rekindled and not relegated to history books.

By: [Diana Budds](#)**Published on:** 09/01/2011

The National Art Schools included schools for modern dance, plastic arts, dramatic arts, music and ballet built by three architects, Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garratti, and Roberto Gottardi, each eager to contribute their part to the revolution by building these bastions of creativity. The projects became a paean to the newfound creative freedom in the country. Garatti planned grandiose Catalan vaults made from locally sourced materials to span great widths for the School of Ballet; Porro imbued his campus design with sculptural features inspired by organic forms.

"The school was emblematic of modern architecture—it's utopian in its vision and it's also grounded in practicality," says Nahmias, who has spent nearly a decade working on the film. "It's about architecture and it's also more than that—it's a human story." In 2001, she traveled to Cuba to investigate colonial architecture when she met Gottardi, who gave her a first-hand tour of the site. "I just thought, 'there has to be a film,'" she says. "And Roberto turned to me and said 'you should do it.'" In the years that followed, Nahimas worked on the film while pursuing an M.Arch degree at Princeton and working as a designer at [RMJM](http://www.rmjm.com/) (<http://www.rmjm.com/>) in New York before

receiving a grant from the Graham Foundation in 2007.



Garratti stands inside of his unfinished School of Ballet. "You did not have to come from an important town or province. You could come from the mountains, the middle of the country, anywhere," he says in the documentary.

Though the history of the school from an architectural standpoint is the main focus, its story mirrors the history of the nation. "It's a metaphor for the revolution, its ups and downs, and its multi-faceted characteristics. It shows an aspect of Cuba that defies categorizations," says Nahmias. "How many chances do you have to marry a moment of political revolution with the construction of something that's a cultural building? It's one of the more noble ambitions of the movement—it sought to advance the culture in a positive way and build a space for it to happen."

But symbolic it was. As the prefab in the Soviet style became the style du jour of the revolution advocated by Osmany Cienfuegos, head of the Ministry of Construction, the sprawling, organic, native forms of Porro, Garrati, and Gottardi fell out of favor with Castro, the idea being that prefab imported from the Soviet Union was more revolutionary since it was a "nameless" thing—you didn't have a single artist and his vision attached to it. By 1965, construction of the schools halted and they have remained unfinished, falling victim to decay.

[Unfinished Spaces - official trailer\(http://vimeo.com/19665915\)](http://vimeo.com/19665915) from [Alysa Nahmias\(http://vimeo.com/ajna\)](http://vimeo.com/ajna) on [Vimeo\(http://vimeo.com\)](http://vimeo.com) .

Though the capacity for a structure to stand for a broader social concern and its propensity to further cultural capital was the most important message I took from the film, I asked Nahmias for her take. "It transcends these particular buildings," she says. "It's about the pursuit of one's creative mission. When you have a vision, there will be obstacles. You should stick with it and not loose sight, even if it takes 50 years...the three architects in the film had a vision and carried it out against all odds."

I tried to think about projects built in recent years that accomplished the spirit of the National Art Schools, but couldn't think of one. There are grand museums (which likely have steep admission fees), the rare university campus (even steeper admission fees), and the occasional library (let's not get started on arts education in public schools), but none are linked to a widespread civic program. More often than not, the projects that come close remain conceptual exercises rather than in-situ.



The School of Dance designed by Porro.

"There is nothing at all that I've seen in the history of modern and contemporary architecture which is quite like the Cuban National Art Schools," says Nahmias. There are visionary works such as Tatlin's Monument or even more recently, Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt, which yoke new spaces to an historical moment or a revolutionary educational proposition, but I think most such projects are unbuilt."



The School of Plastic Arts features swooping Catalan vaults, which are constructed from local brick.

That's not to say that built "revolutionary" architecture is long gone.

"One project here in my hometown of New York comes to mind as a softer sort of 'revolutionary' architecture, and that is the High Line by Diller, Scofidio + Renfro and Field Operations," says Nahmias. "I could compare this to the Cuban National Art Schools for a few reasons. First, it is the closest thing we have today to architecture that is 'for the people.'"

"The High Line project began with a grassroots campaign that sought to revitalize a space that was, like the Cuban Golf Course, irrelevant

to the contemporary new culture, but still fascinating and with potential for adaptation. It is a public space that is constructed and maintained at the highest level for all New Yorkers to enjoy. Second, both projects integrate building and landscape in innovative ways so that people can move between inside/outside and be inspired by landscape's integration with large-scale architecture. The High Line, while not a 'school,' does provide a special kind of 'creative' space for a new generation of New Yorkers, as the Cuban National Art Schools have always done for young Cuban artists."

Now imagine what could happen if projects like the art school or High Line were implemented across the country. I recently attended the "Architecture of Consequence" exhibition as part of this year's Architecture and the City festival and came across this passage: "Architecture has the potential to encourage social cohesion, promote cultural vitality, and improve quality of life, but is often viewed only through an economic lens." It's high time policymakers adopt a stronger cultural lens and fully realize what can be accomplished by investing in the artistic needs of their constituents.

"Unfinished Spaces" screens at the Architecture and the City festival in San Francisco on September 21st at 5:30 P.M.. A Q&A session with filmmakers Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray follows.

The World Monuments Fund(<http://www.wmf.org/project/national-art-schools>) listed the National Art Schools on their watch list in 2000 and 2002. Due to the United States trade embargo against Cuba, they were unable to fund restoration projects and await an international organization to become a conduit for funding.

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