

RENEWING MODERNITY THROUGH **TRADITION**

At the turn of the twentieth century, after four hundred years of Spanish dominion, the process of modernization significantly accelerated in Cuba. Since the second half of the nineteenth century Cuban society had shown a keen interest in being up to date in all fields, including architecture and urbanism. But it is at the beginning of the twentieth century that a combination of different factors allowed the country to fully open to modernity. The withdrawal of the Spanish government and the founding of the Republic in 1902 contributed to the creation of a collective state of mind which was very favorable to the rapid introduction of radical changes.

In formal, functional and conceptual terms, the island of Cuba raised itself to the level of other, more developed, continental countries thanks to the modern movement whose ideas started spreading during the second half of the 1920s and whose first significant works were built at the beginning of the 1930s. New shapes appeared, at first influenced by rationalist orthodoxy and subsequently following local variations that unquestionably provided more appropriate architectural solutions. These new ways—which could be regarded as “Other Modernisms”—asserted themselves during the 1940s and reached their climax in the 1950s, a period of surprising brilliance and creativity for Cuban architecture. Adapting works to the local physical and cultural context was a major concern for many Cuban architects from the mid-1930s to the mid-1960s. During that period certain elements and solutions prevailed, such as interior patios and porticoes, balconies, terraces and bay windows to capture winds at best; the balanced integration of indoors and outdoors; vertically proportioned windows with adjustable louvers, protected by wide eaves; brise-soleils; jalousies in various materials and the use of geometric and abstract patterns in vividly colored glass to soften the natural light. The exuberant sensuality generally associated with the tropics was also present, played up by the dense vegetation of patios and gardens, the intense colors and rough textures of the walls as well as the bold and sinuous curves of slabs and planters. Many realizations creatively combined collective memory and local tradition on one hand with modern requirements and international avant-garde on the other hand, as represented by the five selected works of “Other Modernisms” in Cuba.

BY  
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## House

of Jose Noval Cueto  
Cubanacan, Playa, Havana  
**1949**

MARIO ROMAÑACH  
(1917–1984)

The Noval Cueto House is laid out in two blocks: one contains a double height living room and the other, set apart from the first by a courtyard, contains the rest of the program.

Both sections are connected by circulation galleries at different levels, dramatically suspended over the courtyard. A fairly hermetic front façade conveys a sense of monumentality while the garden façade is open and transparent.

The composition incorporates some of the most advanced postulates of the international modern movement's architecture at the time of its construction, with adequate solutions well-adjusted to the local physical and cultural context. Are noteworthy among these features: the wise adaptation to the hot and humid climate, the well-considered orientation on the spacious lot and the use of long overhanging eaves for protection against sun and rain. To ensure natural ventilation the house is built on stilts and the adjacent terraces, gardens, a water basin and a pool impart a sensation of freshness to the ambient tropical atmosphere.



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## Tropicana Cabaret

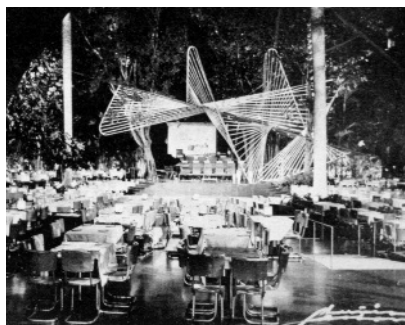
Mariano, Havana

**1951 (Crystal Arches Hall),**  
**1952 (Under the Stars Salon),**  
**1954 (Casino)**

MAX BORGES RECIO (b. 1918)

The Tropicana Cabaret was built in three stages. The Crystal Arches Hall is composed of five slender concrete vaults placed off-center in a decreasing order of height, thus producing a telescopic effect that channels the perspective towards the orchestra's platform. The lush trees of the garden participate in the Cabaret's appealing atmosphere; they can be glimpsed through the glass arches that seal the gaps between the vaults. The open air 'Under the Stars' Salon boasts a bandstand covered by a sculpture designed by Borges himself. The Casino

embodies the ultimate integration of architecture and nature: its walls and ceilings are made of glass to convey the feeling of being outdoors. The whole design's essence is defined by the constant presence of the exuberant outdoors vegetation, which is visible from the interior through skylights and wide glass panels. It is one of the few Cuban buildings included by Henry Russell Hitchcock in the exhibition *Latin American Architecture Since 1945*, held at New York's Museum of Modern Art in 1955. It was awarded the Gold Medal Prize by the National College of Architects in 1953 and granted a National Landmark status in 2002.



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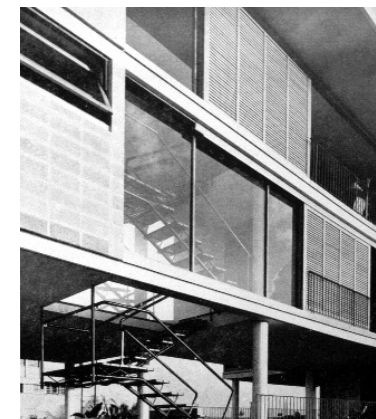
## Double House of Isabel and Olga Perez Farfante

Nuevo Vedado, Plaza, Havana

**1955**

FRANK MARTINEZ (b. 1923)

The cliff edge location of the twin houses—built for two sisters—persuaded the architect to lift the building over the grounds on stilts to avoid blocking the view and to create a large porch at ground level. Below are the service areas, and above are two identical apartments, capped by a spreading eave. The building's main facade looks like two blocks linked by a central space, part terrace and part empty space. Like a patio, the terrace can open on either side, making this space totally transparent. This building is one of the most significant residential works of the 1950s in Cuba, a creative combination of the international style vocabulary with materials and solutions well-suited to the local context. It has a modern appearance and simultaneously evokes traditional solutions of the colonial past, such as the vertical windows with louvers.



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## University City

Jose Antonio Echeverria

(School of Technology, CUJAE)

Marianao, Havana

**1961-1964**

HUMBERTO ALONSO (b. 1924)

AND OTHERS

The layout of the School of Technology's campus is based on a powerful unifying concept according to which covered pedestrian circulations throughout the original center were created. Instead of conventional isolated blocks, all buildings are connected by wide passages that make the whole coherent and functional. Buildings are up to nine stories high and the ground floor is always free. Corridors are surrounded by courtyards, terraces and gardens; the ground's unevenness is exploited to create more complex and spatially more interesting areas. The buildings, built with pre-fabricated lift slabs, have an unabashed and openly technological look. Walls are dominated by strong horizontal lines while the glass paneling reveals the diagonal staircases running throughout the facades. The University City's greatest accomplishments are its spatial achievements, its flexibility to grow and the successful use of an advanced building system.



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## National Art Schools

Cubanacán, Playa, Havana

**1961-1965**

RICARDO PORRO (b. 1925)

VITTORIO GARATTI (b. 1927)

AND ROBERTO GOTTARDI (b. 1927)

Owing to their layout, these five schools for Modern Dance (R. Porro), Fine Arts<sup>1</sup> (R. Porro), Ballet<sup>2</sup> (V. Garatti), Music (V. Garatti) and Dramatic Arts<sup>3</sup> (R. Gottardi) resemble small hamlets or villages; all have streets and squares that articulate the premises around open spaces. The main elements of the Cuban building tradition (porticoes, porches, galleries, courtyards and squares) are present in the compound (which was declared a Protected Zone in 1997).

The project's major accomplishment lies in its ability to incorporate the best of local traditions—material, functional and spiritual—to the best of world architecture, not just from the time of its construction, but from previous periods as well. The result of this synthesis is unique, original and forward-looking. The School buildings have a pioneering nature and a prophetic approach stemming from an unusual coincidence of visionary talent and historical circumstances. They represent one of the highlights of modern architecture in Cuba as well as the culmination of the search for a creative integration of tradition and modernity that had begun decades earlier.



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