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VISITING WITH CUBANS: RENOVATION AND TRANSITION IN A NEIGHBORHOOD OF HAVANA

Louise Dunlap

The last afternoon in Cuba, our group* splits into several contingents. After a morning with the Architecture faculty at the University, a few are enjoying an official luncheon with the Mayor of Havana, while most are mustering for the final official group interview -- this time at the Ministry of Housing. I am going off on my own to visit with Cubans and observe housing unofficially: my friend Isa wants to show me the house her neighbors are renovating -- "Very unusual. People haven't been able to do this kind of thing for 25 years."

I am drawn to her neighborhood, which I visited at night earlier in the trip. It's in Playa, a fifteen-minute (five-cent) bus ride from downtown. I remember a lively, friendly darkness -- people of all ages and colors talking and moving easily through nearly car-less streets. No neon, few street lights, some occasional bright windows from a milk store or barbershop open for late-working customers. An infinite variety of porches loom beside us and lights from windows show peeling paint of many hues and an appealing diversity of life within.

By day -- and it is a gray one -- the neighborhood still appeals. One- and two-storey houses close to each other have intriguing shapes. Some are high and open, with second-storey porches; others hide from the street behind low roofs. Except for the ubiquitous louvered windows (to harness the breeze in this hot climate), details are rarely similar from house to house. Each structure seems unique, standing for its own way of life. For instance, the faded white columns of a massive two-storey house make a colonnade along the sidewalk where a cluster of older men -- of all colors -- are having a Saturday afternoon card game.

Before the revolution, Isa tells me, this was already an unusually mixed neighborhood ethnically and culturally. Factory workers and highly educated professionals lived side by side, some owning, some renting. Under the revolutionary housing policy, formerly poor families moved in to rent from the state at 10 percent of their income. Now, with incomes relatively equal, most rent, while a few, whose roots go way back, still own.

It's hard to imagine what it must feel like to live here: so much that we take for granted is missing. For instance, there is no formal market for exchange of either owned or rented housing, so most are still living in whatever they were allotted 25 years ago.

*In January 1985, 18 students and three faculty traveled to Cuba for nine days to study Planning. See description of trip under DCRP News.

For Isa this is inconvenient: her parents have died, leaving her in a much larger flat than she needs. Others' families have, of course, expanded. Until the new housing law went into effect six months after our visit, the only way to ease these imbalances was informal and cumbersome. People looking to trade an outgrown small living space for an outgrown large one -- or the reverse -- posted individual notices around the city. The chanciness of this system becomes high comedy in a recent popular film about apartment switching, *Se Permute (To Exchange)*, which Cubans kept telling us about.

And then there is the peeling paint. In Havana, neither owners nor renters have had anything renovated for the past 25 years. Scarce building materials are allocated to provincial cities and rural areas to reinforce policies preventing overdevelopment of the capital. Householders in Playa seem to have borne this deprivation with considerable spirit; in the two other homes I'd visited, posters, oil paintings, and thriving houseplants had more than made up for worn paint and plaster. And people always spoke with pride of their country's accomplishment. "We may not have a lot," one boasted, "but we all have the same amount." Always there is the sound of personal commitment and hard work in their voices -- as though they were responsible for this miracle, which in fact they are.

All the same, fresh paint must feel very good after twenty-five years. Isa took me down the street to the house of Enriqueta and her husband. It is a one-storey, one-family house built on an irregularly shaped piece of land predating the surrounding lots and using every bit of that land in its design. From the street, you see an inviting porch, in fresh cement-colored cement, stretching across the whole front of the house and a three-foot brick wall bordering the sidewalk. To the left, behind this wall, is a small paved area where extra cement and used building materials, presumably from the deconstruction of the older parts of the house, are stored. A flowered shower curtain covers a neat stack of old bricks. Tools are clustered neatly, and begonias and other small potted plants adorn corners and angles of the piles. This little courtyard looks like a still life honoring the precious building materials.

"Was it difficult to get these things?" I ask. Enriqueta nods vehemently. Apparently, as the crunch has eased, it has become possible to get building supplies if you are willing to track them down. Working members of a family accumulate credits with the government which enable them to buy materials. Enriqueta's husband, a beer factory worker, and her daughter, an architect, got the credits. Her own work as a housewife does not count for this purpose. Her daughter designed the renovations as part of her job with the Ministry of Housing. The technical assistance and access to materials which the 1985 Housing Ordinance provides have

apparently been available in the last year or so on a trial basis.

Isa and Enriqueta show me through the house. A 14-x-20-foot living room lies just behind the porch windows. Walls are white; floor is cool tiles, real ones, the old kind. Every surface looks new, with holes for electrical fixtures still to come, and wires everywhere. A hallway leads back along the left-hand side of the house. Two bedrooms open off it to the right, both with louvered windows. One has a double bed; the other, three singles made up for friends who are staying for various reasons. There are hand-built shelves and dressers. Midway along the hall to the left (behind where the "still-life" courtyard is) is a blue-tiled bathroom with a pink shower curtain. Here is a brand-new bathtub with a tiled seat in it, blue-tiled walls with matching blue-tiled towel hooks. Enriqueta chuckles at how much effort it took to acquire these.

Beyond the bathroom, the left side of the hall is walled with small opaque glass panes filling the interior of the house with light. A glazier is working on final touches outside in a second, very small courtyard.

At the end of the hall, the house widens out into a friendly, warm space the full width of the lot. Enriqueta is eager to show me the kitchen proper, which is the small area to the left of where the hallway ends. Green-painted cupboards hang above and below ten feet of countertop that includes a steel sink. At the left is a four-burner gas stove about 18 inches wide with four aluminum pots on it. Two are boiling. At right angles, a grey louvered window with a shelf under it opens back out onto the second courtyard. Another window at the far end of the counter opens onto an irregularly shaped back (laundry) courtyard, allowing for a cross-draft directly through the hot part of the kitchen. A wide refrigerator stands facing where the hallway enters this final room. To its right is a pleasant wide space with a family dining table and bins for fruits and vegetables, and more cupboards. To the right of that is a storeroom that projects beyond the block filled by the rest of the house.

Isa thinks a wall is planned between the kitchen itself and the family space, so I ask about this. "No!" says Enriqueta emphatically. "There *was* a wall there, but now . . ." And with her hands she describes a waist-high counter to separate the cooking space from the common space, "so we can all talk and be together." I am beginning to understand her Spanish, and her animated gestures indicate her intense pleasure over this feature of her new space. I ask more. Did she design this integration of work and family space and is this concept common in Cuba now? Yes, it is becoming more common, but also she did have the idea herself. She and her daughter, the architect, thought of it. They are the ones who cook. She laughs at my question about her husband's cooking. (The Cuban Family Code says women can divorce their husbands for not doing their share of domestic work.) "He 'helps'

but I wish he wouldn't. He's all thumbs." "What about this one," I ask as she hugs her grandson. "Yes, he is learning," she says, "in school." She and her daughter love the new space arrangement and can hardly wait for the counter to be finished.

I'm puzzling over how many people live in the house. It used to be five -- more or less a nuclear family. The second daughter lives now with her grandmother, but both are here frequently. This boy is a grandson who was orphaned and stays partly with other relatives, partly with Enriqueta. He seems to be much loved and attended to -- not only by Enriqueta but by a stream of neighbors and relatives who pass through while I'm there. Isa tells me that the house is now the Grand Central Station of a somewhat dispersed family.

Out on the sidewalk to take a few pictures of the family with their house in the fading light, we are joined by other neighbors. Enriqueta's sidewalk strip is a topic for conversation. The strip is wider than her kitchen and edged with an ornate bit of well-trimmed lawn bordered by carefully raked bare soil and a row of delicate plain-flowered plants I don't recognize. Within this strip are two trees about the height of the house, one planted 80 years ago by the family and now resting its dense leafy top (with leaves resembling laurel) on a curved hollow trunk. The other is a younger tree of the same sort. A next-door neighbor's strip has the same unusual design, with palm trees instead of the laurels.

I remark that the whole street seems to take pride in its sidewalks, and ask whether this is due to a particularly active CDR. The CDRs, or Committees in Defense of the Revolution, are block-sized civic groups which are the most grass-roots level of the Cuban mass political organization and the primary force in helping people understand and "defend" the revolution and its accomplishments. Important measures such as the 1985 Housing Ordinance are debated in the CDRs, with feedback passed back up to policy-makers. CDRs also handle street clean-up. Sure enough, Enriqueta has been very active in her CDR, serving for a long time as its financial officer and, recently, turning down the presidency because "I'm getting too old and I'm too busy working on my house." What they have done so far has taken a year of constant attention.

Evening settles in as I walk back to the bus marveling at Enriqueta's spirited life and wondering whether the small piles of cement and bricks I see beside a few other houses mean they also may soon be renovated.