

## INTRODUCTION

**A revolution of forms is  
a revolution of essentials.**

**José Martí**

Nearly forty years since the advent of the Cuban Revolution, one complex of buildings stands out as its most compelling work of architecture—the Escuelas Nacionales de Arte (National Art Schools). Constructed in a commandeered country club between 1961 and 1965 and then partially abandoned, they occupy an ambiguous and, even today, controversial place in the architectural canon of the Cuban Revolution. The complex is virtually unknown among works of contemporary architecture, its story buried in history just as some of its buildings lie buried in the verdant landscape. Created by one Cuban architect, Ricardo Porro, and two Italians, Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti, the schools express the revolutionary passion and utopian optimism of a unique moment when the Cuban Revolution appeared, as Ricardo Porro has described it, “*más surrealista que socialista.*”

Despite their various states of deterioration today, the evocative and poetic qualities of the schools are nevertheless still apparent in their expressive forms. Moreover, the story behind the schools provides insights into the relationships among politics, culture and power in a small, insular Marxist-Leninist state struggling to reconcile conflicting realities. Cuba may appear from the outside to be a monolithic Marxist-Leninist construct, but in reality it is a permeable assemblage of competing and often conflicting political, economic and—class—interests that present a range of complexities and contradictions. The architects of the National Art Schools came out on the losing end of a drama framed by those particular contradictions of the early years of the Cuban Revolution. The values that they chose to represent Cuban socialism proved not to be in accordance with those later promoted by the Soviet Union. Nevertheless, through their expressive independence, Porro, Gottardi and Garatti created the works of architecture that most successfully embody the hopes and aspirations of the young Cuban Revolution.

In addition to representing a unique revolutionary political and cultural environment, the National Art Schools also very much engaged in the