

Reflections on Identity and a Sometime Angeleño: The Case of Walter Betancourt

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OUR LIVING DEPENDS ON OUR ABILITY TO CONCEPTUALIZE ALTERNATIVES, OFTEN IMPOVERISHED. THEORIZING ABOUT THIS EXPERIENCE AESTHETICALLY, CRITICALLY IS AN AGENDA FOR RADICAL CULTURAL PRACTICE. FOR ME THIS SPACE OF RADICAL OPENNESS IS A MARGIN— A PROFOUND EDGE. LOCATING ONESELF THERE IS DIFFICULT YET NECESSARY... [M]ARGINALITY NOURISHES ONE'S CAPACITY TO RESIST. IT OFFERS THE POSSIBILITY OF RADICAL PERSPECTIVES FROM WHICH TO SEE AND CREATE. TO IMAGINE ALTERNATIVES, NEW WORLDS...¹

— bell hooks

The protagonist of this paper, Walter Betancourt, lived briefly here in Los Angeles during the period from 1957- 60. As an architect, he left no discernible mark in Los Angeles and it is unclear what mark the city left on him. But this paper seeks to explore the nature of the margin as the creative locus of identification and to raise issues concerning identity that might provide other perspectives to regard the way we frame issues of identity today. For Walter Betancourt's creative life and work were inextricably caught up in issues of identity long before identity became an issue.

Walter Betancourt was born July 18, 1932 in New York City. His grandparents, people of very modest means, had emigrated from Cuba to Tampa at the time of the Cuban War for Independence, and through their hard work, and that of his parents, the family had risen up the economic ladder and achieved the American Dream by the time of his birth. Walter grew up in the cosmopolitan comfort of a solid urban middle class family. Family vacations to Cuba served to connect him to his heritage, but by and large he lived a very "American" existence. He studied architecture at the University of Virginia, bastion of Anglo-American identity, graduating in 1956. In that same year he served a brief tour of duty in the U.S. Navy, stationed at Guantanamo, where he witnessed from afar the Moncada Uprising of the July 26th Movement, the beginnings of the Cuban Revolution. The following year he moved to Los Angeles to work for Richard Neutra, whom he admired as both a designer and as a person of progressive social commitment. But the reality of Neutra's office, where he worked without pay, did not meet his expectations or ideals, and he left after six months. Betancourt stayed on in Los Angeles with his young wife Leonor, while in Cuba the revolution gained momentum. It also gained support from abroad and Betancourt participated in solidarity committees as he continued to develop his professional skills in the offices of John Lautner and others, and take post graduate courses at

UCLA. It is clear that the events in Cuba and his growing disenchantment with Los Angeles, and the U.S., were having a profound effect upon his own sense of identity when in 1959, he interviewed with Frank Lloyd Wright at Taliesin and turned down what he otherwise would have considered an ideal opportunity, an offer to work under Wright himself. Instead he made a critical decision— to go to Cuba and dedicate his design skills to the newborn Cuban Revolution.

What did this act mean and what are we to make of Betancourt's few years in Los Angeles? The city was a place where people came to create and recreate their identities. This was standard fare in the film industry but it was true in other fields as well. Both Rudolf Schindler and Richard Neutra left the formally restrictive society of Vienna to re-identify themselves and their talents in the artistic freedom that was Los Angeles. Frank Lloyd Wright turned a new stylistic chapter in his work with his exploration of pre-Colombian identities in the work of his Los Angeles period. Later the identities of an influx of intellectual émigrés fleeing Nazism would be marked and would leave their mark on the culture of Los Angeles. But that was a different era. When Walter Betancourt arrived, Los Angeles was no longer the bohemian avant gardist environment it had been in the pre-war era. It had itself gone from being a margin to a center. Several things happened to Betancourt during the late fifties in Los Angeles. He grew and gained experience as a professional and became more confident of his design abilities. His professional idealism convinced him of the value of the art of architecture and of the responsibility of the architect as primary guarantor of a work's cultural value. But he became profoundly disillusioned with architecture as practiced under capitalism. He experienced a political awakening that coincided with soul searching concerning his own identity and ethnicity. This identity, as it were, as an American became challenged and began to deconstruct and reconstruct itself. The Cuban Revolution was the catalyst that brought this about. Walter Betancourt's move to Cuba was a primary act of identification.

Walter Betancourt arrived in Havana August 8, 1961, when the young revolution was still in a state of euphoric bacchanal. However, Betancourt sensed the forthcoming doctrinaire tendencies of the revolution that would soon come to restrict architectural development, so he decided to move far from Havana's ideological center.² He practiced a politics of location that took him to Cuba's eastern provinces, Holguín and finally Santiago where he discovered the importance of being *oriente*. Santiago and eastern Cuba have historically been resistant to Havana's center, and have had a certain degree of political and cultural

independence, something that the revolutionary government also respected. So in terms of marginality, Betancourt sought out margins within margins within which to conduct a critical counter-hegemonic discourse through architecture. Cuba was marginal to the United States and the rest of the developed world. Santiago was marginal to Havana. And the deeply rural locus of his two most important works would be marginal to Santiago itself. The counter-hegemonic practice Betancourt established was counter to architecture as practiced under capitalism in general and counter to the hegemony of its practice in the United States in particular. However, ironically, it was also counter to the hegemony of the prevailing norms of architectural practice in Cuba too. And for this reason, despite its significance, Betancourt's work has lacked recognition by the architectural establishment of his adopted country. By 1963 private architectural practice was abolished in Cuba and the Colegio de Arquitectos was closed. Architects were now perceived primarily as technicians, part of a team of engineers, who would resolve Cuba's many building needs through massive industrialized solutions based on Soviet models. That Walter Betancourt was able to survive and thrive under this condition is truly remarkable, a testament to both the power of marginality to nourish the capacity for creative resistance and Betancourt's own charmingly forceful personality that would not take no for an answer. Moreover, idealist that he was, he chose to live an ascetic existence, a true communist, marked by sacrifice and self-denial that placed him personally beyond criticism.

In Betancourt's relatively short productive life in Cuba (he died at forty-six in 1978) he is credited with 15 built works and over 30 unbuilt projects. These works stand as examples of an architecture of critical resistance and a multi-layered approach toward constructing identity that relies on a process of cultural hybridity and syncretism. Wedded to this process was a strong reference and reliance on the work of Frank Lloyd Wright. Wright's appeal to Betancourt is evident not only stylistically, but also understandable operationally when one considers Wright's own position as a perpetual anti-centrist. In his chapter on critical regionalism, Kenneth Frampton notes a parallel development of a similar Wrightian tendency in the Italian Alps of Ticino in the mid 1950s when there was a conscious attempt to establish an organic regional alternative to rationalist modernism.³ Betancourt's primary homage to Wright is the Forestry Research Laboratory at Guisa (1970). High on a mountainous site, this Taliesin-like complex arranges itself across the topography, accommodating the contours to avoid any cut and fill, and embracing the vegetation so that no trees were removed. The project affirms his strong conviction in building the site as the prerequisite for constructing identity, and no site could have been more marginal, located as it is in the remote reaches of the Sierra Maestra.

Part of Betancourt's identification through hybridization drew also from the vernacular. He had a great respect for both vernacular form and constructive tradition. Both these positions ran counter to the tenets of the centralized Ministry of Con-

struction which regarded vernacular gestures as "romantic, folkloric and derivative of residual bourgeois ideology," and looked upon traditional building techniques as "backward holdovers from underdevelopment." The assimilated and interpreted form of the *bohio*, the typical hut of the Cuban peasant, is evident in the pavilions of the otherwise Wrightian Forestry Laboratory at Guisa. Yet Betancourt's position regarding this architecture of everyday life was not populist, for he believed in not merely the appropriation, but in the transformation and reinterpretation of vernacular from through the hands of the architect. Also worth noting are the expressive wood framing and rafters that delineate the walkways and the heavily articulated brick walls of the complex. This love for the expressive nature of brick, which has deep Spanish origins, is evident also in the restaurant, Las Piramides (1966), in a modest residential neighborhood in Santiago. Here the brickwork presents multiple readings that recall both pre-Colombian monumental form and Mies van der Rohe's monument to communist martyrs Rosa Luxembourg and Karl Liebnicht. The "tactile and tectonic" qualities of Betancourt's work often dominate over the "visual and graphic"⁴

This is no where more valid than in the Cultural Center of Velasco (1964-1991) where brick, concrete panel, terra-cotta tile, plaster, iron and wood combine in the highly sensory composition and expression of cultural identity. Up until the establishment of this arts center, this small provincial town, was known for little more than the beans produced in its nearby fields. In no other project of Betancourt's is the expressive potential of brick construction as a generator of form more evident than here. Part of the credit goes to the remarkable partnership Betancourt struck with an Spanish master mason, Nicasio Santana who had fled Spain for Cuba in the early years of the civil war, having refused to serve in Franco's army in Morocco. Together, the architect and the master builder created a complex that departed radically from Betancourt's Wrightian inclinations. At Velasco the derivation of form from the constructive process results in a project of great episodic poetry evocative of Spanish tradition and Caribbean spirit. It was a project that took 27 years and was finished long after the deaths of both Betancourt and Santana thanks to the perseverance of Betancourt's associate architect Gilberto Seguí Divinó. The project was also identified by the enthusiastic support of this community of farmers and artisans. Yet it would be a mistake to say that the design process was participatory in the sense that we define it. Betancourt, with Santana, maintained a firm hand on the formal development of the complex, while nevertheless responding to the community's needs and desires. The Cultural Center of Velasco provides a formal and symbolic identity to this otherwise typical poor rural Cuban village that has become a source of local pride. In a country where so many of the public works suffer from neglect and a lack of maintenance, the Cultural Center of Velasco is always kept tidy and in good repair by the volunteer efforts of a community who identify with its well being.

But despite local appreciation of his work, Walter Betancourt's architecture has been virtually unknown in Cuba up until 1992

when through the efforts Gilberto Seguí Divinó, Eduardo Luis Rodríguez, Rosendo Mesías González and others, a small exhibit of his work was organized to coincide with the Bienal in Havana. While the exhibit received support from the Ministry of Culture, the Ministry of Construction and the Union of Architects and Engineers were decidedly absent in their support. For these central authorities, charged with overseeing the country's construction needs, Cuban revolutionary identity was embodied by functionally and technically determined projects that were repeated on a massive scale with little or no consideration to site and local conditions. The quality and marginality of Betancourt's architecture presented an uncomfortable challenge to the "one correct line" official mentality.

Ultimately Walter Betancourt's example, as an individual, is a rather compelling, perhaps even disturbing, challenge to those of us who write articles, participate in conferences, design projects, scramble to get them published and are dependent on this existing system of rewards and recognition. His example suggests that one might just take leave of it all, retreat to an isolated margin, turn inwards and quietly make one's mark, disregarding the rest of the world, not caring for recognition, confident in only the nature of the concrete creative act of— identification.

THIS IS AN INTERVENTION. A MESSAGE FROM THAT SPACE IN THE MARGIN THAT IS A SITE OF CREATIVITY AND POWER, THAT INCLUSIVE SPACE WHERE WE RECOVER OURSELVES... MARGINALITY IS THE SPACE OF RESISTANCE. ENTER THAT SPACE. LET US MEET THERE.⁵

– BELL HOOKS

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NOTES:

- ¹ hooks, bell, *Yearnings: Race, Gender, and Cultural Politics*, (London, Turnaround, 1991), 149.
- ² For a further discussion of architecture under the Cuban Revolution see John A. Loomis, "Architecture or Revolution ? - The Cuban Experiment," *Design Book Review*, (summer 1994): 71-80. For further information about Walter Betancourt see: John A. Loomis, "The Architecture of Walter Betancourt's Quiet Revolution," *Progressive Architecture*, (April 1995): 41-44.
- ³ Frampton, Kenneth, *Modern Architecture, A Critical History*, (New York, Thames & Hudson, 1992): 322.
- ⁴ Frampton, K., op. cit.: 317-318, for a discussion on the presence of the "tactile and tectonic" in the architecture of critical regionalism.
- ⁵ hooks, b., op. cit.: 152.