

Cuban American Urban Expressions

RENE GONZALEZ

Florida International University

CECILIA HERNANDEZ

University of Virginia

Introduction

In looking around our city, Miami, Florida, and our own Cuban community there, we find many small cultural adaptations, hybridizations and transformations of the late 20th century American architecture of commerce. By this we mean architecture born from economic impulses rather than architectural vision which makes up the bulk of Miami's urban landscape. In our own backyard, we found evidence of a culture trying to re-create, if not directly at least in spirit, the places, landscapes and architectural elements of Cuba. This rarely manifests itself in the second type of architecture, that architecture with a vision or a capitol A. However, we feel that these moments in Miami's urban landscape are essential to understand if we are ever going to learn and to draw from context as designers in this young city.

Indeed the most important and elusive topic in Miami's architectural discourse centers on context. Marisa Bartolucci says, "Miami is a paradox. It is an intensely artificial city – what is climate, really, but air-conditioning?"¹ What then could possibly be considered context in a place that was built largely because of the invention of air-conditioning, an invention that made it possible to ignore the environmental factors of this place? It also made it possible to import suburban development strategies to this sub-tropical swamp and fostered the unfettered expansion of suburbia in ever increasing circles and ever decreasing densities from the center of the city. This, coupled with the fact that Miami was traditionally seen as a place for play and not for year round living or traditional industry, conspired to make Miami's urban landscape dismally discordant from its environment and actual culture.

Selling disposable "style" instead of designing lifestyle and environment, Miami grew a paper-thin veneer that is a pastiche of historical styles. This in itself could be a starting place for Miami's designers today. We could see this pastiche as our context. However, instead of drawing from the spirit of these follies and other legitimate sources to create a new, relevant architecture, Miami's contemporary architectural community tends to re-interpreted this past as stylistically serious often ignoring successful typological strategies and quirky cultural adaptations only to re-create style. These romantic notions of a past, drawn from what were imported follies, ring hollow in the urban landscape of today's Miami. All the while we are ignoring the fact that air-conditioning, the Disney-fied use of styles, malls and suburbia are Miami's context along with elements such as the

real climate, methods of construction, the tourist industry and a rich cultural mix. The Cuban American component of that cultural mix and its influence on this pastiche city are the subject of this paper. In our opinion, this context has been the least exploited and yet one of the most compelling. We hope to begin to unearth the treasures that lie in the backyard of Miami's Cuban cultural landscape.

Miami: "A Nice Piece of Swamp Land"

Miami's history is a short one. Founded a little over 100 years ago, it only became a viable town in the 1930's after the draining of the Everglades allowed the development of the land and after the area had begun to recover from a massive hurricane in 1926. Most Americans of a certain age will recall the saying, "And if you believe that one, I have a nice piece of swamp land I'd like to sell you in Florida." Indeed, the joke is not far from the truth. Land development has been a major force in the economic successes and downturns of Miami. The other major industry historically has been tourism. In the 1940s, Miami celebrated a hay day of sorts when the development of the tourist industry and Art Deco coincided in Miami Beach to create one of the best collections of art deco buildings anywhere in the world.

The Tequesta Indians, Miami's original settlers, were pushed out in the early part of this century by northerners searching for warmer climes, agricultural land and real estate development opportunities. In the 1940s Miami, primarily Miami Beach, became a retirement destination for Jewish couples. This community contributed heavily to the cultural growth of Miami. But it was the 1959 Cuban revolution that most changed Miami's cultural landscape. With the arrival of the Cuban exiles, the tenure of the cultural landscape was changed forever. Marisa Bartolucci writes of Miami, "It is a city largely built by exiles-the Cubans, who, though they have reshaped it in their image, insist it is not their real home."² This may be the reason for so fiercely hanging onto language and culture. Cubans have made Miami home and have taken prominent roles in all sectors of society but by both assimilating and adding to the American systems they found.

Today Greater Miami is home to more than six million inhabitants and has become, largely due to the pioneering cultural efforts of the Cubans, a destination for many other Latin Ameri-

can immigrants to the United States. Indeed, it is touted as the Capitol of Latin America because it has become the city where banking and other business is transacted between Latin America and the United States and between Latin Americans as well.

‘.... Even the Latinos who run the city joke that they like it “because it is so close to America.” It is perhaps precisely this attitude, a combination of pride and self determination, that can set Miami apart as a model for the development of American cities in the cultural landscape that faces so many of them in the 21st Century. The recent burst of interest in Latin American communities in the main stream American media are evidence that we as a country are beginning to recognize that it is time for a re-definition of the American dream and American cultural values. No longer is assimilation or the proverbial “melting pot” an assumed goal for all immigrants. Instead other cultures are making additions to the American cultural mix. As a recent Newsweek article states, Latinos’ ‘....aspirations, and their importance to American society, run much deeper than mere social acceptance. They are not “crossing over” into mainstream America; they are already here, getting more influential by the day, so the rest of America must learn to adapt as well.’³

Cuban Cities: *La patria* (homeland)

In order to understand the context from which Miami’s Cuban community came we find it necessary to discuss the Cuban City and the elements that are essential to Cuban architecture.

The Cuban writer, Alejo Carpentier, poetically describes Old Havana as a “tropical game of hide and seek”.⁴ He was describing the many layers of shade, shadow, views, intrigue and interaction that make up Cuban cities. These were built, for the most part, under the auspices of “*Las Nuevas Leyes de las Indias*,” or the Laws of the Indies established by the Spanish in 1573.⁵ They specifically defined the design, orientation and layout of all Spanish Colonial towns. Cities were organized in grids around central plazas that operate as the governmental, cultural and religious center of the city. The regulations specified dimensions and configuration of streets, city blocks, and plazas, organizing the political, social, cultural and religious aspects of the city through its physical structure. Although Havana and some of the older cities deviate in many ways from the Spanish model because they were founded before 1573, the norm is decidedly urban.

With independence from Spain and the establishment of the Cuban Republic at the turn of the century, Cuban cities continued to be developed with a strong appreciation for urbanity and a desire to maintain an urban social structure. In the first part of the 1900’s, major public works and grand public parks and boulevards were designed in Havana by urbanist Pedro Martinez Inclan and French landscape architect Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier. These developments enhanced the existing urban structure and provided a continuum to the previously developed urban strategies at a grander scale.⁶

Had the explosion of such urban planning and architectural trends of the past forty years as the international style and modern American suburban developing methods taken root in Cuba, evidence exists that these would have significantly altered the state of what continue to be very tight human scaled. Cubans continue to arrive with steady frequency and with memories of these relatively intact urban fabrics further adding to the nostalgia on the other side of the Florida Straights for these places.

Cuban Architect, Eugenio Batista wrote, “Making of their houses a defense against the torrid sun of our tropic, our ancestors found three splendid resources, a legacy we would be disingenuous not to use today: *patios* (courtyards), *portales* (porticos or porches) and *persianas* (louvers), the three P’s that constitute the ABC’s of our tropical architecture.”⁷ Other elements include *puntales* (stained glass transom windows), Cuban tiles and *rejas* (grillwork). To one extent or another these elements are all echoed in Miami’s architecture.

Mutations and Transformations

Lewis Mumford has said that, “....thanks to our symbols, we are nourished by other lives that have flourished and faded.”⁸ The “other life,” the life that was spent either in cities like Havana or in rural areas of Cuba many years ago, is no longer one that the majority of Cuban Americans will return to. This heightens memories of Cuba in the minds of Cuban Americans to a collection of hyper-romantic visions.

Translated into the context of Miami, a culture fundamentally dependent on the automobile and air conditioning, the attempt to re-create the spaces and the details of the Cuban city seems strange and perverse, but somehow also unique and humanizing. Our observations of these mutations and transformations in the urban landscape are organized around elements that are born of traits that we see as characteristic of Cuban culture. The elements that we discuss here are paved front yards, *patios* (courtyards), *portales* (porches), *ventanitas* (Cuban coffee windows), signage, over-scaled appliqué, *rejas* (ironwork) and urban walls. Cuban traits that we associate with these elements are cleanliness, control, order, territoriality, style/ostentation, informality, sentimentality/Cuba nostalgia, ambition and patriotism.

“Cubanness”

Cleanliness, control and order:

Que limpiesito ‘ta! (How clean it is!)

Zoe Valdes, the Cuban writer, describes humid Havana this way, “*La Habana, con sus cuerpos acabados de bañar, entalcados, perfumados, y sin embargo, grasientos.*” (“Havana with its recently bathed, talcumed perfumed bodies that are, nonetheless, greasy.”)⁹

On a tropical island, one moves slowly, bathes frequently, and uses scents to feel and smell fresh. Everything one touches wants to be a cool surface. For this reason, a Cuban household is almost clinically clean. Rarely are absorbing soft surfaces such as



Fig. 1. Little Havana front yard, Miami, 1999

carpeting used. Spaces are perceived as cleaner and able to be more thoroughly cleaned more often, when floors and other surfaces are hard. This practice extends to the outdoors where the full or partial paving of the front or the back yard is common in order to keep the outdoor spaces clean and free of bugs.

The French tradition of gardening is one that Cubans have looked to this century. This sensibility which calls for the utter de-naturalization of nature, the clinical cleanliness of the man-made and the perfect geometry of hard-edged sculpture suits the Cuban aesthetic very well. Topiary work and formal gardens are abundant in Havana. “*La Quinta Avenida*,” a main boulevard of the Miramar district in Havana, is one of the precursors to the many examples of symmetrical and formal conditions which are interpreted throughout Little Havana in Miami. These formal gardens and parks have instilled in the Cuban collective memory a vocabulary of forms and order used in many front yards. These Miami suburban yards that were planned with the models of Romantic English Landscapes in mind are instead treated like Versailles in many cases as they are sectioned off into orderly geometric planting zones. This element often seen in gardens is the *cantero* or planting strip where bugs can be kept in check and controlled.

Hardscape: Paved front yards, *patios*, *portales* and parking lots

One of the most noticeable architectural elements in Miami neighborhoods is the fully paved suburban front yard. This form of urbanizing suburbia can be attributed to living in cities or towns where spaces were primarily paved. In Cuba these paved spaces in the form of a patio (an internal courtyard), plazas or urban parks, were continually occupied and were the primary spaces for informal interaction between family members, neighbors and strangers. La Plaza Vieja is one of many urban paved public spaces found throughout Havana. It served as playground, meeting place for business associates, and marketplace and, later in the day, as a place to stroll and to sit with your spouse, date or family members.

In Miami, these semi-private parks are the parking lots both in their residential and commercial applications. Often a porch where the family gathers to socialize is one step away from the front bumper of their car. Many Cuban-Americans are perfectly at ease drinking their *café Cubano* while sitting on the porch and leaning on the hood of the car or playing dominos in the middle of the night with their neighbors in paved parking spaces. These are not typical American suburban activities, but rather, are closer to the urban condition that often occurs in city sidewalk cafes where tables are placed a few steps away from the street.

Imported from the Islamic world through Andalusia, the *patios* served in Cuba in a makeshift way as exterior living or dining rooms. These were interior spaces in the same way a plaza is a room in the city. Because buildings surrounded these spaces, they were generally in the shade. In Miami, however, it is the paved front yard, given some sense of enclosure by the extent of the paving, the planting or the walls around it, that functions most as the *patios* of Cuba. However, these spaces do not help to mitigate the heat and tend to be used far less and later in the day. Also, the seamless transitions from inside to outside through transitional spaces of the Cuban homes is broken in Miami by the need to hermetically seal the house with air conditioning.

Another element transplanted to Miami from Cuba is the *portal* or porch defined by columns and a roof. Alejo Carpentier describes the column as one of the most important singular constants found in Havana. In his book, *La Ciudad de las Columnas*, he describes how one can walk anywhere in Havana without having to leave the shade and protection that the colonnades provide. In private Cuban homes, the *portales* were also used as more public living rooms than the patios. They are places to greet acquaintances passing by or to sit and enjoy a *cafecito* with the neighbors. In places such as Pinar del Rio and Trinidad (smaller Cuban cities) streets or plazas are lined with private *patios* that are constantly swept and are elevated a few feet from street level. In Miami, the function of the *portal* is often stripped from the form to become solely a decorative element. Often too narrow to fit a seat, these *portales* are outfitted with massively over-scaled columns and roof tiles. Cuban tiles, Mexican tiles



Fig. 2. Little Havana streetscape, Miami, 1999

or terrazzo are mopped daily with hot water and soap as in Cuban small towns where the dust of the unpaved streets makes cleaning the *portal* necessary more than once daily. In other Miami examples, the *portal* is habitable. But usually it is associated with the interior space of the house through the use of mosquito screens and doors than as a middle ground between street and house.

Territoriality: Urban walls

Another noticeable transformation is the further definition of the street and sidewalks in suburbia through the building of walls and fences at the edges of properties. The use of low walls and gates in urban areas of Cuba was useful to define property lines and to establish clear boundaries between public and private realms. The English idea of a shared pseudo-rural landscape was not the model for the typical garden. Instead, Cubans espoused more Mediterranean models where each family was protected from the outside world and built an inner world for itself. The Vedado neighborhood of Havana, developed in 1859, makes extensive use of walls that are interlaced with ironwork to define the extent of properties. Another model common in the colonial parts of cities is to have the building up to the edge of the street with large full height windows that have wrought iron *rejas* (iron grillwork) to separate indoor from outdoor.

As opposed to the Cuban precedent, the walls in Miami are often interlaced with chain link and other more commonly available and affordable materials. Many of the Miami streets have no sidewalks and contain ambiguous grass areas between the walls and the streets. Examples of these walls in more lofty materials such as brick, coral rock, masonry and stucco, and elaborate *rejas* can be seen in Coral Gables, a neighborhood where many Cubans aspire to live.

Rejas were so commonly used in Cuba that Carpentier compared their abundance to lush vegetation and describes their elaborate designs at length. With a different quality of craft, *rejas* also abound in Miami where they are used everywhere including to protect statues of saints in the *urnas* (small sanctuaries)

found in front yards.

In Cuba *rejas* were also used in large openings to demarcate inside and outside while taking advantage of breezes as well as for safety and to distinguish boundaries. The hierarchy of the Cuban window allows a myriad of possibilities to enjoy and modify light, wind and access to the outdoors, a connection to the environment lost in the Miami iteration.

Ambition: Ventanitas, Fruterias, and Street Vendors

“Cuando ven a un puerco, ya lo quieren asado” (Cuban saying: “When they see a pig they already want it to be roasted.”)

Cubans are known throughout the Latin American world as merchants. Perhaps this is because of the island’s history as the point of transaction between Spain and its colonies in the New World. This mercantile spirit found fertile ground in the United States and manifests itself in architectonic commercial techniques such as the *ventanita*.

Ventanitas or walk-up coffee counters are a recognizable vernacular expression of Cuban culture in Miami. Here, Miamians step up to a small window on the side of a restaurant, order a *cafecito*, *colada*, *cortadito*, or *pastelito* (a small espresso coffee, a large espresso coffee, a small espresso coffee with a dash of milk or a pastry) and socialize in a public outdoor space, a paved area that is either a sidewalk or an extension of a parking lot. It is interesting that more and more one sees special care is taken to shape the space outside *ventanitas* as new ones are built and old ones are renovated.

Ventanitas do not seem to have existed in Cuba in the same form as they exist in Miami. Instead these seem to be transformations of a type of commercial model. The corner *bodeguita* or little store did not have a *ventanita*. It usually opened up completely to the sidewalk with large overhead roll-up doors and often opened to a corner. In Miami, *ventanitas* are small for climatic reasons. There is a need to keep the air-conditioning from leaking out too quickly.



Fig. 3. Ventanita on Calle Ocho, Miami

Ventanitas also recall the long tradition of selling through windows. Since the typical Cuban window did not have glass panes but instead was a wooden assembly made up of *perchianas* (wooden louvers) and a wooden frame with *rejas*, these were usually fully open when there was no direct sun. This meant that one could hear the activity of the street from inside and could tell when the street vendors were walking by. One would purchase fruits, vegetables and other goods, pay and receive the goods through the *rejas*. In the case of the apartment houses or *solares* the residents would shout down an order and lower a basket on a string where there would be money to pay for the goods. These were then hoisted back up to the window or balcony.

The most mobile of the retailers, *los maniseros* and in general *los vendedores ambulantes* or street vendors, occupy the streets of Miami and work in parking lots, at exits to mega-superstores or while dodging automobiles on busy street intersections. In these places, space is negotiated between the vendors and the cars while in Cuba the vendors moved amongst people to sell *granizados*, *maní*, and *tabacos* (ice cones, roasted corn kernels and cigars). In Miami, the *vendedores* stay in one place while the cars drive by and the merchandise and money is exchanged *rapidamente* before the traffic light turns green.

The custom of having commerce spill out onto the sidewalks as was the case for the *puestos de frutas* or fruit stands in Cuba; did not include, as they do in Miami, the convenience of a parking space one step away from the entry. Accommodating the automobile and the American standard of living while Cubanizing Miami has resulted in flamboyant urban expressions full of irony, and *sabor Cubano*. One such example is the quick sales pitch now necessitated by the time it takes a light to turn green versus the songs and long melodic pitches that the vendors in Cuba would pitch at bus stops, in buses, at events and

walking along the streets. These new versions can be seen as the MTV model of advertising-drive-by, milli-second sales pitches.

Informality, Style and Ostentation: *De noche todos los gatos son pardos*. (Cuban saying: "At night all the cats are mutts.")

Along with incredible ambition, Cubans are always concerned about their outward appearance and yet, are very informal in any social situation. This also may stem from their role as the merchants of the New World. It is very important for example to be seen about town in fancy clothing and fancy cars. When most teenagers in the United States were expressing their individuality through the "grunge" culture, Cuban youths were more concerned with looking as if they came from wealth. One's home may be small but it will be decorated with items that are French and with classical, monumentally out of scale applique onto the architecture.

At the same time, the Cuban community has produced inconspicuous places for everyday informal interaction between classes. These are affectionately known as *cuchitriles* (diner like restaurants) and are undeniably low-brow. In a *cuchitril* one will find that everyone knows each other and each person is from a different background. A postman, an architect, a mayor and a mechanic may all have lunch together, enjoy the friendly banter of the *cuchitril* as friends in the most informal manner without ever mixing outside of these places. These are usually named after a Cuban city, place or restaurant in pre-revolutionary Cuba. The buildings that house them are humble and often difficult to find.

Memories of the Rural: Nostalgia “Yo Soy Un Hombre Sincero, De Donde Crece La Palma....” (from typical Cuban song, Guantanamera)

Miami’s landscape is thick with references to rural Cuba. *El campo* (the countryside) is engraved in the memory of all Cuban-Americans. This can be seen in such diverse circumstances as La Carreta Restaurant on *Calle Ocho* (8th Street) where the whole building is made to look like a carriage loaded with sugarcane or the treatment of *Palmas Reales* (Royal Palms) in front yards with painted white trunks. La Carreta capitalizes on the nostalgic desire to return to *las fincas* (farms) in the use of sugarcane planted in the *canteros* and in the uniforms worn by the waitresses. These *guayaberas* (white linen shirts with decorative pleats) with red bandana-like scarves remind Cuban-Americans of how the *guajiros* and *campesinos* (people from the countryside) used to dress.

Painting the base of trees white has become a decorative device and associated with a style or certain Cubanness. This was to prevent insects from climbing up. In Suburban and Urban Miami, however, it is used as a design feature. One can see rows of perfectly spaced and painted *Palmas Reales* lining a walk leading to a ranch style house or delineating the parking lot of a bank.

Cuban-Americans also have a fascination with growing fruit bearing trees. This also seems to come from the fact that even urban dwellers had family and close connections to *el campo* and would often come back from these trips loaded with anything that was growing that month. Even in pristine Coral Gables one can find Banana trees lurking over fences. And with closer inspection, Avocado, Papaya, Orange, Guava, Mango and Mamey trees can also be spotted in back yards.

Conclusion

This project fosters a dialogue about the nature of diverse cultural landscapes in the United States and about the potential of these landscapes to be seen as integral to our new urban contexts. It is important to continue to find the elements and the cultural impulses that drive the creation of these, in order to design more relevant spaces that speak to each city distinctly. This project intends to offer a new way in which to read the American City. Within this understanding of the city as a repository of culture waiting to be read is the cataloguing of the different cultural influences on the city and their corresponding historical place. This paper then begins to catalogue one of the many cultural influences in one American City. The next step then would be the layering of different cultural influences on the map of a city.

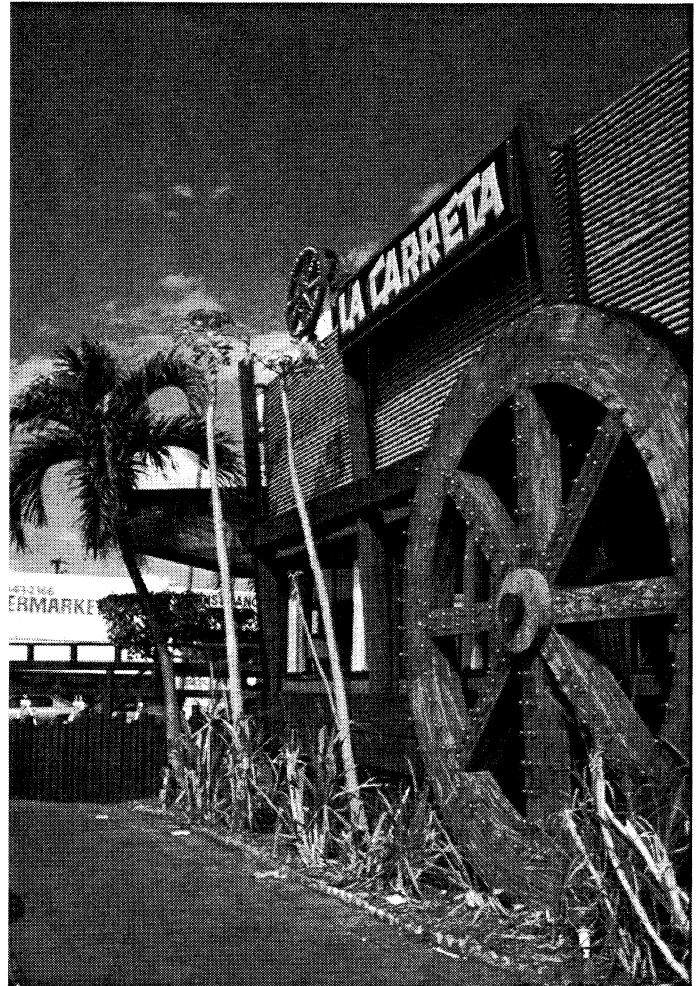


Fig. 4. La Carreta, Calle Ocho, Miami, 1999

ENDNOTES

- ¹ Marisa Bartolucci, "Welcome to Miami: a Short History of a Young City," Metropolis, New York, New York, December, 1995, Bellerophon Publications, Inc., p. 46.
- ² Marisa Bartolucci, "Welcome to Miami: a Short History of a Young City," Metropolis, New York, New York, December, 1995, Bellerophon Publications, Inc., p. 47.
- ³ Veronica Chambers, Ana Figueroa, Pat Wingert, Julie Weingarten, "Latino America: Identity," Newsweek, July 12, 1999, p. 51.
- ⁴ Alejo Carpentier, *La Ciudad de las Columnas*, Spain, 1970, Editorial Lumen, p. 4.
- ⁵ Rachel Carly, CUBA 400 Years of Architectural Heritage, New York, 1997, Whitney Library of Design, p. 53
- ⁶ Jean Francois LeJeune, "The City as Landscape: Jean Claude Nicolas Forestier and the Great Urban Works of Havana 1925-1930," The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, Cuba Theme Issue #22, Miami, Florida, 1996, The Wolfsonian Foundation of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, p. 151
- ⁷ Eugenio Batista, "La Casa Cubana," Artes Plasticas, Vol. 2, 1960
- ⁸ Peter Blake, God's Own Junkyard, New York, 1964, Holt, Rinehart and Winston, p. 53.
- ⁹ Zoe Valdes, *Te Di la Vida Entera*, Barcelona, 1998, Editorial Planeta, p. 32.s

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Rachel Carly, CUBA 400 Years of Architectural Heritage, New York, 1997, Whitney Library of Design
- Paul Goldberger, "Bringing Back Havana," The New Yorker, Volume LXXIII, Number 44, New York, New York, January 26, 1998, The New Yorker Magazine, Inc, pp. 50-61.
- Cathy Leff, (editor), The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, Cuba Theme Issue #22, 1996, Miami, Florida, The Wolfsonian Foundation of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, p. 151
- Miami: The Wolfsonian Foundation of Decorative and Propaganda Arts, Inc.
- Rosa Lowinger, "Old Havana Reborn," Preservation, Volume 49, Number 5, September/October 1997, National Trust for Historic Preservation: 41 - 51.
- Felipe J. Prestamo y Hernandez, (editor), *Cuba Arquitectura Y Urbanismo*, Miami, Florida, 1995, Ediciones Universal.
- Eduardo Luis Rodriquez, *La Habana Arquitectura del Siglo XX*, Barcelona, 1998, Art Blume.
- Joaquin E. Weiss, *La Arquitectura Colonial Cubana*,
- Marisa Bartolucci, "Welcome to Miami: a Short History of a Young City," Metropolis, New York, New York, December, 1995, Bellerophon Publications, Inc.
- Veronica Chambers, Ana Figueroa, Pat Wingert, Julie Weingarten, "Latino America: Identity," Newsweek, July 12, 1999.
- Alejo Carpentier, *La Ciudad de las Columnas*, Spain, 1970, Editorial Lumen.
- Eugenio Batista, "La Casa Cubana," *Artes Plasticas*, Vol. 2, 1960
- Peter Blake, God's Own Junkyard, New York, 1964, Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Zoe Valdes, *Te Di la Vida Entera*, Barcelona, 1998, Editorial Planeta.