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Architectural Ruins and Urban Imaginaries Carlos Garaicoa's Images of Havana

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Abstract

Contemporary Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa juxtaposes photographic images of Havana's architectural ruins with timidly articulated drawings that trace the outlines of the dilapidated buildings in empty urbanscapes. Each of these fragile drawings, often composed of delicate threads adhered to a photograph of a site after demolition, serves as a vestige of the sagging structure that the artist photographed prior to destruction. The dialogue that emerges from these photograph/drawing diptychs implies the unmooring of the radical utopian underpinnings of revolutionary ideology that persisted in the policies of Cuba's *Período especial* (Special Period) of the 1990s, and suggests a more complicated narrative of Cuba's modernity, in which the ambiguous drawings—which could indicate construction plans or function as mnemonic images—represent empty promises of economic growth that must negotiate the real socio-economic crises of the present. This article proposes that Garaicoa's critique of the goals and outcomes of the Special Period through Havana's ruins suggests a new articulation of the baroque expression—one that calls to mind the anti-authoritative strategies of twentieth-century Neo-Baroque literature and criticism. The artist historically grounds the legacy of the Cuban Revolution's modernizing project in the country's real economic decline in the post-Soviet era, but he also takes this approach to representing cities beyond Cuba's borders, thereby posing broader questions about the architectural symbolism of the 21st-century city in the ideological construction of modern globalizing society.

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Architectural Ruins and Urban Imaginaries

Carlos Garaicoa's Images of Havana

Jodi Kovach

Contemporary Cuban artist Carlos Garaicoa takes the architectural ruins of Havana as a point of departure for imagining new urban landscapes in Cuba's post-Soviet era. For example, his photograph/drawing diptych, *El sueño de algunas ciudades es llegar a convertirse en otras* (*The Dream of Some Cities is to Become Another*) (2001), shows pedestrians passing through a narrow city street in the heart of Havana's historic district, unencumbered by abandoned sewage trenches and rubble scattered through the passageway (fig. 1). They seem unconscious of

the crumbling buildings that are literally collapsing around them—as if they are acquiescent to time's degenerative process, which has not only taken form in the architecture, but has also shaped their everyday existence.¹ This atrophic ethos conveyed through the photograph has a strange, insidious vitality as nature overtakes the remaining fragments of architecture, creating a mass of wooden beams that look more like malignant outgrowths of the languishing buildings than structural supports. In his photograph of the site, Garaicoa highlights this corrosive dynamic by framing the image to focus on a makeshift arch of wooden scaffolding that braces the sagging structure against the building directly across from it in a desperate attempt to salvage the remains of the drooping edifice. Ironically, he then pairs this photograph with a small pencil sketch of the same scene in which he tamed the ungainly architectural forms by straightening lines and smoothing surfaces, by replacing the wooden buttresses with delicate bridges connecting the buildings, and by drawing a set of stairs leading up to an entryway in place of the beams that prop up the façade.

El sueño de algunas ciudades es llegar a convertirse en otras highlights the conceptual underpinnings of a series of photographs for which Garaicoa used the deteriorating sectors of Havana as a touchstone in his practice of representing and imagining urban architecture through the lens of the ruin. In his depictions, the improvisational construction and persistent decay of these architectural relics culminate in a clichéd baroque tragic beauty that he overwrites with provisional models and modifiable architectural plans. He pairs photographs of dilapidated architecture with drawings of imagined construction to examine the interplay between concepts of ruin and utopia, which have long figured differently in local and foreign perceptions of Cuba. Intertwined in tourists' exotic imaginings of Cuba's tragic baroque beauty, and enveloping the historical narratives of oppression and dreams of modern progress that together fueled revolutionary ideology, the ruin/utopia metaphor romanticizes the link between poverty and creativity, mythologizes metaphors of Cuban resilience, and destabilizes the historicity of Cuban modernity.² In the 1990s, however, utopia—the Revolution's ideological dream of a unified, pan-Latin American socialist society—

¹ Benjamin describes the experience of space through architecture—it organizes experience, its presence is received collectively, unconsciously. The relationship is reciprocal: architecture shapes experience but also arises out of it. See Walter Benjamin, *The Arcades Project*, trans. Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, Mass. & London: Belknap Press, 1999).

² Lucia M. Suarez, "Ruin Memory: Havana Beyond the Revolution," *Canadian Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Studies* 39, no. 1 (2014): 38-55.



Figure 1

Carlos Garaicoa, *El sueño de algunas ciudades es llegar a convertirse en otras (The Dream of Some Cities Is to Become Another)*, 2001. Left, Duraflex color photograph, 80 x 60 cm. Right, ink and graphite on board, 100 x 70 cm. Copyright Carlos Garaicoa.

became the catalyst of ruin in Cuba.³ The Revolution, already defeated following the dissolution of Soviet-led economic structure Comecon, represented nothing more than the desperate effort on the part of the Cuban government to continue its socialist agenda, isolating Cuba from the modern globalizing community. The policies of what is known as the *Período especial* (Special Period) ushered in a devastating economic crisis that crippled the country in the 1990s and into this millennium. The galvanizing political slogan of the Special Period, *¡Socialismo o muerte!*, in fact turned out to be a grim omen portending the ruin of the Cuban economy and its society.⁴ During this time Garaicoa made artwork that critically engages his city in ruins: his work appropriates the nostalgia of allegorical ruins to criticize the Cuban government's blind commitment to a defunct ideology, presenting photographic snapshots of contemporary architecture in disrepute alongside hesitantly executed drawings of the same buildings. Together, the images that comprise his diptychs suggest the

³ Luis Suárez Salazar and Carlos Perez, "The Cuban Revolution and the New Latin American Leadership: A View from Its Utopias," in "Cuba: Interpreting a Half Century of Revolution and Resistance, Part 2," special issue, *Latin American Perspectives* 36, no. 2 (March 2009): 114-127.

⁴ Geraldine Lievesley, *Cuban Revolution: Past, Present and Future Perspectives* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 4; 161-168.

unmooring of the radical utopian underpinnings of revolutionary ideology, and suggest a more complicated narrative of Cuba's modernity, in which tentative construction plans represent empty promises of economic growth that must negotiate the real socio-economic crises of the present.

This paper explores how Garaicoa intervenes in images of Havana's ruins through diptych photograph/drawings of dilapidated architecture before and after buildings were demolished. In the diptychs of urban scenes in Havana discussed here, I investigate Garaicoa's method of writing over the image of a site after a building's removal. Using delicate pencil or thread, he creates ghostly mirages of the demolished structures, thus reimagining what once existed rather than envisioning something new. These timidly articulated visions of reconstruction bear the persistence of Havana's present state of poverty, decay, and disrepair, which Garaicoa attributes to blind faith in the goals of the Cuban Revolution and the collapse of Eastern European communism. I propose that this strategy for critiquing the goals and outcomes of the Special Period through Havana's ruins suggests a new articulation of the baroque expression— one that calls to mind the anti-authoritative strategies of twentieth-century Neo-Baroque literature and criticism. I then show how the lens of Havana's failed modernity has shaped Garaicoa's perception of urban landscapes beyond Cuba, particularly in a photograph/drawing diptych in which he features the destruction/imaginary reconstruction of an unremarkable site in Los Angeles. A comparison of these two works demonstrates how the artist historically grounds the legacy of the Cuban Revolution's modernizing project in the country's real economic decline in the post-Soviet era, but also poses broader questions about the architectural symbolism of the 21st-century city in the ideological construction of modern globalizing society.⁵

Garaicoa's interpretations of ruins share affinities with the work of other contemporary international artists like Cyprien Gaillard and Tacita Dean, for example, who represent Eastern European modernist architecture in its present dilapidated state to reveal the failure of its ideological underpinnings and to provoke consideration of what these ruins convey about the changes taking place in post-communist European societies.⁶ Garaicoa's ruins likewise criticize the fallacies of the Revolution and its promise of improving Cuban society, but his artwork also ironically reconstructs his downtrodden city. This seemingly paradoxical gesture is underscored by a sentiment of ambivalence about the future that has distinguished the work of his contemporaries in Cuba since the early 1990s. Specifically in Garaicoa's work, it is driven by the concern that development will not happen unless plans for social and economic progress are grounded in Cuba's material reality.⁷

⁵ Anthony D. King, *Writing the Global City: Globalisation, Postcolonialism and the Urban* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 75-79.

⁶ See Francesca Picchi, "Modern Ruins: Intervista con Cyprien Gaillard/Interview with Cyprien Gaillard," *Domus* 926 (June 2009), 70-73; P. Ardenne, "La terre est ronde – nouvelle narration," *Art Press* 238 (Sept. 1998): 72-73; and Susan Stewart, "Tacita Dean," in *The Open Studio: Essays on Art and Aesthetics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁷ Enwezor explains how contemporary artists working in Cuba, while not conforming to a specific style or conceptual practice, subvert the rhetoric of the State without completely assimilating to contemporary "Western" art. See Okwui Enwezor, "Between Apparatus and Subjectivity: Carlos Garaicoa's Post-Utopian Architecture," in *Carlos Garaicoa: Overlapping*, ed. Enrique Juncosa (Dublin, Ireland: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010), 16-21. See also Abelardo Mena Chicuri, *Cuba Avant-Garde: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Farber Collection* (Gainesville: University of Florida, 2007), 21-23. This exhibition suggested that the juxtaposition of utopia with dystopian realities and ironic humor often found in contemporary Cuban art suggests a potential for new beginnings in the troubled post-Communist era.

Growing up in Havana during the Cold War, Garaicoa saw the stagnancy of modernization in Cuba as a unique moment for critical reflection on the myth of progress that undergirds the country's modernist plans for societal reconstruction. Garaicoa explained:

After the fall of European socialism, many Cuban construction and architectonic projects were halted or abandoned. In Havana, as well as in other Cuban cities, idyllic and nostalgic ruins from the colonial and first republic periods coexist with the ruin of a frustrated political and social project. Unfinished buildings abound, neglected and in a sort of momentary oblivion. The encounter with these buildings produces a strange sensation; the issue is not the ruin of a luminous past but a present of incapacity. We face a never-consummated architecture, impoverished in its lack of conclusion, where ruins are proclaimed before they even get to exist. I call these the Ruins of the Future.⁸

In this statement, Garaicoa describes Havana's ruins as the material embodiment of Cuba's inability to fully realize its socialist goals for implementing modernizing processes. He explained that as a child he found that the baroque aura of Old Havana's ruins, the palpable and material aesthetic of its decay, emanated a gritty authenticity that disclosed real existing conditions under Communism: "It was a very intense part of the city, a very poor area, dangerous in some places, but rich in its architecture and people...We would go walking in the streets competing to discover places none of us had ever noticed before."⁹ Garaicoa's depictions of Old Havana's ruins do not aestheticize poverty and human suffering, nor do his images convey an exotic escape from modern life or express nostalgia for the greatness of a past era. In his work, decay disrupts the utopian imaginings of a society beyond the here and now; it is material, tangible, and present. Furthermore, the city is a metaphor for society's potential and, by contrast, the ruin is a device Garaicoa uses to represent the passage of modern time as fragmented and non-linear. This depiction of modern temporality through Havana's deteriorating urban landscape undermines the future-gazing of utopian imaginings.

Architectural ruins hold particular significance in urban imaginaries, both historical and modern. As a visual form, the ruin expresses the seventeenth-century Baroque fascination with decay and destruction. Using it to give form to his modernist conception of temporality, Walter Benjamin explained that the ruin in Baroque allegorical expressions concretizes the fragmentary movement of time and gives a layered picture of history.¹⁰ The ruin complicates notions of historical time as linear and evolutionary and for this reason is used in postmodern

⁸ Carlos Garaicoa in "Carlos Garaicoa by Holly Block," *BOMB* 82 (Winter 2003), <http://bombmagazine.org/article/2523/carlos-garaicoa>

⁹ Carlos Garaicoa quoted in Marc Spiegler, "City Lights," in *Trans (ient) City* (Barcelona: Bom Publishers, 2008), 204.

¹⁰ The ruin represents the allegorical structure, which Benjamin contrasts against the "symbol," which embodies "momentary totality," as it is "self-contained, concentrated, steadfastly remaining itself." Benjamin's thesis on Baroque allegory criticized affirmative tendencies in the tradition of idealist philosophy and laid the groundwork for what evolved into his modernist sensibility: the allegorical perspective, or a way of describing nature through the fragment as opposed to a unified whole. For Benjamin allegory is dialectical, "a successively progressing, dramatic and mobile, dynamic representation of ideas which has acquired the very fluidity of time." See Walter Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. John Osborne (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 1963), 165. For Benjamin's ideas on historical materialism, see also "Theses on the Philosophy of History," *Illuminations*, 262-263. As Benjamin suggests, "[a] historical materialist approaches a historical subject only where he encounters it as a monad. In this structure he recognizes the sign of a Messianic cessation of happening, or, put differently, a revolutionary chance in the fight for the oppressed past."

art to question the teleology of modernism. It figured in Robert Smithson's critique of modernism in the 1960s and seventies when he depicted the architecture of suburban New Jersey as "ruins in reverse," or monuments to banality that rise, rather than fall into ruin, thus making visual the condition of entropy that Smithson believed characterized modern society.¹¹ In postmodern expressions, the ruin is often viewed as the antithesis of utopia; it emphasizes the inescapability of a present state of dystopia with the same intensity that utopia reaches toward an unattainably perfect future. While utopia is pristine, intangible, and untouched by time, the ruin is concrete, worldly, and fragmented by time's ravages.¹²

In the years between 1995 and 2004, Garaicoa documented sites in Havana before and after abandoned or neglected architecture was torn down. From these he created a series of untitled diptychs, for which he then pinned red, green, or blue thread on the photographs taken after the demolition, outlining the razed buildings on the sites where they once stood. For example, *Sin título (Hotel San Carlos) (Untitled [San Carlos Hotel])* (1995-2004) includes two black-and-white photographs of the same site: a vacant and deteriorating seven-story building (fig. 2). The photograph on the right depicts the timeworn, hollowed-out encasement that was once the hotel. In the adjacent photo of the same site taken after the destruction, Garaicoa used red and blue thread to outline the geometric shapes of the slender windows, the superimposed pilasters ornamented with small scrolled capitals, and the carvings along some of the windowsills, all of which crumble and seem to fade into the surface of the façade. Both photographs were taken from the ground looking up, emphasizing the massiveness and verticality of the looming structure in spite of its state of decay. In the earlier photograph, the building hovers above this vantage point in the center of the composition and seems to force the smaller adjoining buildings to the edges of the frame. At the same time Garaicoa's oblique perspective emphasizes the building's vertical thrust, delineated by the narrow elongated windows and the lines of superimposed pediments that extend the entire length of the building, which nearly reaches the top of the frame. In contrast to this portrayed grandeur, the building's dark empty windows evidence its somber, haunting vacancy. Meanwhile a stray electrical wire extends from a streetlight and dramatically intersects the form of the hotel at a right angle, but this thin, tenuous line appears as useless and insignificant as the abandoned building in this completely uninhabited space.

Cuba's vernacular architecture, shown by Garaicoa in a state of disrepute, also expresses creative adaptation and inspires Garaicoa's ironic visions of reconstruction.¹³ The accumulation of multifarious styles, pulled together from European sources and modified for local purposes, is apparent in his diptych *Sin título (Hotel San Carlos)*. Here, Garaicoa animates this dynamic, showing Havana's architecture simultaneously decaying and

¹¹ Jennifer L. Roberts, "Smithson and Stephens in Yucatán," in *Mirror-Travels: Robert Smithson and History* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 2004), 110-112. See also Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatán [1969]," in *Robert Smithson: The Collected Writings*, ed. Jack Flam (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 119-133.

¹² Rahul Mehrotra, "Simultaneous Modernity: Negotiations and Resistances in Urban India," in *Ruins of Modernity*, ed. Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2010), 244-249. See also Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 66: "For as an antithesis to the historical ideal of restoration it is haunted by the idea of catastrophe."

¹³ Enwezor comments that, "[Garaicoa's] work is invested in the investigation of the different architectural discourses of colonial, modern, and socialist city-making practices. This analysis subtends the late baroque buildings and enormous squares of Spanish colonial urban planning to the modernist experience of twentieth-century architecture and the centralized planning that represents the socialist inheritance of Cuba's post-revolutionary period." See Enwezor, 18.

regenerating in a relentless cycle of ruin, particularly by confounding the order in which the viewer reads the process (did the plans for the building emerge before or after the blighted structure?). By portraying sites in Old Havana in this way, he reflects more broadly on the growth of Cuban vernacular architecture as the product of simultaneous additive and fragmenting processes that reproduce miscellaneous architectural fragments of the urban setting.¹⁴

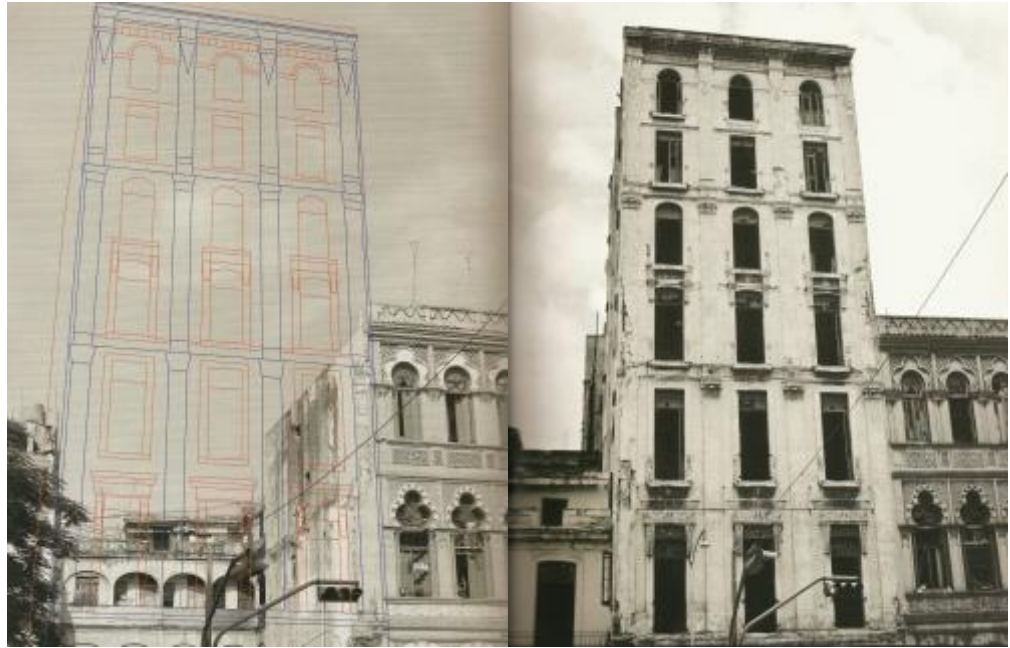


Figure 2

Carlos Garaicoa, *Sin título (Hotel San Carlos) [Untitled (San Carlos Hotel)]*, 1995-2004. Diptych. Photographs and drawing with thread. 123 x 100 cm each. Copyright Carlos Garaicoa.

Like many contemporary Cuban artists who emerged on the international art scene in the 1990s, Garaicoa critiques his country's communist revolutionary ideology through a specifically Cuban artistic voice that he draws from his country's rich "unofficial" aesthetic history, which emerges from Havana's architectural landscape.¹⁵ Baroque influences have shaped this aesthetic history from the colonial period to the present day. Modernist and postmodernist appropriations of baroque aesthetics informed an insurgent modernist perspective in Cuba the fifties, sixties, and seventies through Neo-Baroque literature and critical theory, while more recent iterations—in the work of Garaicoa, for example—enable

¹⁴ Rachel Carley, *Cuba: 400 Years of Architectural Heritage* (New York: Whitney Library of Design, 1997).

¹⁵ Kerry Oliver-Smith, "Globalization and the Vanguard," in *Cuba Avant-Garde: Contemporary Cuban Art from the Farber Collection* (Gainesville: Samuel P. Harn Museum of Art, University of Florida), 21-23.

the subversive critique of the official culture and politics of Cuba.¹⁶ Neo-Baroque literary theory composed in these decades by Cuban writers and scholars José Lezama Lima (1910-76), Alejo Carpentier (1904-80), and Severo Sarduy (1936-93) spearheaded notions of the New World Baroque as evidence of a period of artistic “invigoration” in Cuba, and of the origins of peculiarly Latin American and Cuban modernist sensibilities. As scholar of Spanish literature César Augusto Salgado has demonstrated, the positive formulation of the New World Baroque as a regeneration of the European aesthetic model was augmented by Neo-Baroque theorists in considering how this mutation functioned as a form of resistance within the oppressive regimes of colonialism.¹⁷

In the 1950s, Lezama Lima wrote about the broader significance of the New World Baroque and its revival to a pan-Latin American modernism. According to Lezama Lima, baroque expressions created in Latin America represented a form of resistance—a counter-conquest culture that signaled the onset of a new modern sensibility. In other words, the New World Baroque was a collection of cultures operating outside of tradition, and which was concerned with the secular and the present, rather than with the theatrical styles and mystical content that characterize Spanish Baroque art. The New World Baroque aesthetics of rupture that Lezama Lima identified could then be used as a springboard for formulating a peculiarly Latin American modernist expression. According to Lezama Lima in his essay “La curiosidad barroca,” the “barroco americano” is underscored by *plutonismo*, which he defined as an eruption of a deep-seated, subterranean creative impulse within an assimilated European style. The metaphor of a volcanic eruption, evoked to describe the productive, as opposed to the destructive, power of the baroque, connotes a resurgence of hidden grotesque impulses that break apart a unified, closed, balanced aesthetic and give way to open and inclusive forms.¹⁸

Alejo Carpentier saw the radical aesthetic qualities of the Cuban baroque in temporal terms: he discovered the modern baroque expression in the rhythms of New World

¹⁶ On this topic, Monika Kaup argues for a transhistorical and transnational conception of the baroque, suggesting that “we need to replace the notion of a single baroque—usually identified with the European baroque of the Counter-Reformation and absolutism, masterfully analyzed in José Antonio Maravall’s *Culture of the Baroque*—with that of multiple baroques.” See Kaup, “The Future is Entirely Fabulous’: The Baroque Genealogy of Latin America’s Modernity,” in “Globalism on the Move,” ed. Marshall Brown, special issue, *MLQ* 68, no. 2 (June 2007): 233.

¹⁷ César Augusto Salgado, “Hybridity in New World Baroque Theory,” in “Theorizing the Hybrid,” eds. Deborah A. Kapchan and Pauline Turner Strong, special issue, *The Journal of American Folklore* 112, no. 445 (Summer, 1999): 316-331. Salgado notes that although New World baroque “often stands as a formula for a utopian ethnic integration, the neobaroque theorist also reminds us that this ‘positive’ mongrelization of European high styles resulted from the painful and incongruous overlapping of foreign and native morphologies in conflict.”

¹⁸ José Lezama Lima, “La Curiosidad Barroca,” en *La Expresión Americana* (Santiago de Chile: Talleres de Editorial Universitaria, S. A., 1969), 34. Lezama Lima portrayed the Baroque era as the explosive origination of modern Latin American culture, having stated that, “...we can say that among us the Baroque was an art of counter-conquest.” He described the Baroque expression as “el fuego originario,” or the creative force that dismantled decadent European traditions and opened art to creative input from many different cultural backgrounds. Lezama Lima’s essay *La curiosidad barroca*, which he presented at the National Institute at Havana in January 1957 and published in his book of essays entitled *La expresión americana* that same year, describes the impact of Baroque culture on Latin American modernism. His theses on Neo-Baroque aesthetics explore how rupture within an assimilated European artistic language was expressed through heteroglossic forms and poverty, means that opened onto new opportunities for artistic invention.

improvisational forms like jazz. He believed that jazz gave form to variegated temporalities, which undercut the universal concept of time that buttressed power relations between the Old and New Worlds. As scholar Monica Kaup has discussed, Carpentier focused on a specifically Cuban Baroque that exemplified the dynamic processes observed by Lezama Lima in his theorizing of a broader, New World Baroque.¹⁹ Carpentier's version of an improvised, adaptive art form created by colonized subjects figures in Havana's unwieldy urban landscape in his 1964 text "La ciudad de las columnas" ("City of Columns"), in which he vividly describes an unsystematic, profuse accumulation of eclectic columns that line the streets of the city.²⁰

The spontaneous character of Old Havana's vernacular architecture that intrigued Carpentier also captivates Garaicoa. The artist's decision to include in the compositions of both photographs for *Sin título (Hotel San Carlos)*, the Mudéjar-style façade of the building next to the hotel points to the conspicuous presence of Moorish influences in Havana's colonial architecture which contributed to the unwieldy eclecticism of the Cuban Baroque style. Complete with trefoil window arches and elaborate geometric-patterned carvings, this building, juxtaposed with the less-embellished façade of the hotel, the street light, and the layers of sagging structures with arched porticos and awnings, hints at the multifariousness of Cuban vernacular architecture that resonates in the diverse architectural styles brought together in Havana's contemporary urban landscape. In photographs such as these, Garaicoa reveals Havana's architectural vista as the product of an erratic outgrowth of disparate stylistic fragments that have been modified, adapted, and cobbled together. In his images of architecture, baroque elements, as popular expressions of the Cuban people, reside within and beneath the ostentatious, yet crumbling, symbols of the colonial and communist authorities.²¹

Neo-Baroque theorists qualified Cuban Baroque forms as the subversive, creative means for breaking through the voice of authority to express multiple, marginalized perspectives. They developed a concept of the baroque expression in New World contexts to encompass new models of temporality and spatiality in order to represent modern experience in frameworks pertinent to everyday, vernacular experience. Severo Sarduy expanded on these notions in the 1970s when he conceived the Neo-Baroque modality as a de-centering force in art and literature that served to critique modernist spatial organizations based on unity and centrality.²² In Sarduy's work, the Neo-Baroque expression is a form of postmodern intertextuality that cuts through unitary languages. Inspired by what he identified in New World Baroque art as modalities of cultural assimilation, transformation, and demystification,

¹⁹ Monika Kaup, "¡Vaya Papaya!": Cuban Baroque and Visual Culture in Alejo Carpentier, Ricardo Porro, and Ramón Alejandro," *PMLA* 124, no. 1 (Jan. 2009):156-171.

²⁰ See Alejo Carpentier, "La ciudad de las columnas," in *Tientos y diferencias y otro ensayos* (Barcelona: Plaza, [1964] 1987), 40-48. See also Kaup, "¡Vaya Papaya!," 159.

²¹ "However, he does not view the phenomenon of abandonment of the old and the enthusiasm provoked by the new socialist form as separate entities...[He analyzes] how the architecture of the past and that of the present are both symbols of the imagination of other empire-builders at the expense of the Cuban people." Enwezor, 18.

²² Severo Sarduy, *Barroco* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, c. 1974). See also Sarduy "Dispersión (Falsas notas/Homenaje a Lezama Lima)," and "Sobre Góngora: la metáfora al cuadrado," in *Escritos sobre un cuerpo: Ensayos de crítica* (Buenos Aires: Sudamericana, 1969). Sarduy draws influence from Hispanic Baroque literature and neo-Baroque tendencies in Latin American post-Boom literature. Sarduy's novels are labeled postmodernist, while his critical writings fit into discussions on poststructuralism.

Sarduy sought to destabilize authoritative meaning in literature. This, in theory, could open a space for writers and readers to dissent from the patriarchal tone that the Cuban Revolution was taking on in the seventies.²³

Garaicoa taps into the insurgent strategies of the Neo-Baroque, but moves beyond these authors' de-colonizing objectives.²⁴ His ruin-gazing complicates a stereotypically baroque fascination with decay and destruction, along with a fragmented version of history and temporality, and with this he confronts Cuba's incapacity to realize its revolutionary goals for social progress by incorporating this history, through images of the ruination of its urban landscape, into depictions of Cuba's current reality. In this way he eclipses the utopian visions of the Cuban Revolution by refusing to look directly to the future and leave his country's current state of socio-economic crisis behind. With the image of the ruin, as Walter Benjamin explained, "History merges into the setting...history is scattered like seeds over the ground."²⁵ More precisely, the thread drawings Garaicoa adds overtop the photographs frame a history lying in rubble.²⁶ The building's destruction is transformed in his work—it becomes the impetus to rebuild. Still, the architectural plans merely repeat the form of the pre-existing structure, and thereby serve as a bleak reminder of this part of the city that was destroyed. Garaicoa's architectural imaginaries focus on an absence that, for him, provides a possible framework for invention—yet one that must account for previous attempts at modernization and the problematic outcomes.²⁷

Garaicoa explained that the juxtaposition of ruin/utopia in his art should "be understood not as a dream for the future but rather as an immediate action on reality—a lucid and conscious gesture concerning the collapsed present and the urban and political fabric of contemporary society."²⁸ His work shifts between depictions of presence and absence, decay and regeneration, making the concepts of ruin and utopia a provocative pair: because they are intertwined, the images of decay and the architectural plans for the future always beg for more description, complicating notions of real and imaginary, as well as how the city exists in the past, present, and future. As a result, ruin/utopia becomes a format for thinking of the city historically, and for inspiring the imagination to explore ways of changing what exists—not for envisioning what lies beyond it.

Garaicoa's imaginary of ruins therefore opens onto a revolutionary way of thinking about the present historically; in other words, of thinking of the present as part of a continuum of social, political, and cultural change. His historical perspective reflects on Cuba's position in

²³ Carlos Garaicoa quoted in Inge Ruigrok "Cuba: Cultural Policy of Non-Western Countries," *The Power of Culture*, June 2006, <http://www.krachtvancultuur.nl/en/policy/cuba.html>.

²⁴ Severo Sarduy and Roberto González Echevarría, "Interview: Severo Sarduy," trans. Jane E. French, *Diacritics* 2, no. 2 (Summer 1972), 41-45.

²⁵ Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, 92.

²⁶ Previous exhibitions of Garaicoa's work have addressed the incipient utopian dimensions of his representations of Havana's visual decline, in which are also embedded dreams of transformation and redemption. See *Carlos Garaicoa: Overlapping* (Dublin: Irish Museum of Modern Art, 2010); *Carlos Garaicoa: Capablanca's Real Passion* (Prato: Gli Ori, 2005); and *Carlos Garaicoa: La ruina la utopia* (Bronx Museum of Art Bogota: Biblioteca Luis Ángel Arango Casa de Moneda, 2000).

²⁷ Andreas Huyssen, "Authentic Ruins: Products of Modernity," in *Ruins of Modernity*, 17-28. Huyssen discusses "absence" as understood by Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Theodor Adorno, and Albert Speer.

²⁸ Garaicoa in "Carlos Garaicoa by Holly Block."

the postmodern world: Cuba is slowly emerging from what was formerly known as the Third World—the underdeveloped regions of the world that today produce political voices and cultural expressions that stand outside of, and contradict, what are often perceived as the homogenizing processes of globalization. Literary critic and Marxist political theorist Fredric Jameson, in considering the continued discrepancies of uneven development around the world, proposed that late capitalism could only come into being fully with the disappearance of the Third World. Within his theory, however, the Third World also provides a historical lens, or a chance to gain a historical foothold in the drive for attaining global modernization. Without this foothold we lose the capability to understand the conditions that have created real economic disparities, and therefore are unable to bring about sustainable social and economic development on a global scale.²⁹

Garaicoa provides this historical lens when he focuses on isolated areas of major cities in the United States that remind him of Havana's decay. In fact, he admits he is incapable of seeing the world through any lens other than that of his lived experience in Havana.³⁰ For example, a work he created similar to *Sin título (Hotel San Carlos)*, entitled *Sin título, L.A. (Untitled, L.A.)* from 2004 is a diptych of a condemned office building in Los Angeles pictured before and after its demolition (fig. 3).



Figure 3

Carlos Garaicoa, *Sin título, L.A. [Untitled, L.A.]*, 2004. Diptych. Photographs and drawing with thread, mounted and laminated on black gator board. 125 x 175 cm each. Copyright Carlos Garaicoa.

In reference to his earlier photographs of the Cuban hotel, Garaicoa shot the black-and-white photographs for this diptych from a low vantage point and filled the frame with, first, the structure, and in the second image, nearly the exact same site where it once stood. Also, he once again included signs of waning urban life: vacant lots, debris likely left from other demolition projects, and street lamps and telephone poles, anchoring electrical wires that indiscriminately traverse the space around the office building. Both photos show the site to be virtually uninhabited, with the exception of a few cars passing at the lower edge of the frame. Similar to Garaicoa's representation of the San Carlos Hotel, the Lyon building shown

²⁹ For more on this topic, see Santiago Colás, "The Third World in Jameson's *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*," in "Third World and Post-Colonial Issues," special issue, *Social Text*, no. 31/32 (1992): 258-270.

³⁰ See Lorenzo Fusi, "A Conversation with Carlos Garaicoa," in *Carlos Garaicoa: Capablanca's real passion* (Prato, Italy: Gli Ori, 2005), 106.

here was ultimately demolished, and the artist resurrects its image through a thread drawing. Furthermore, by exhibiting the two photographs of the L.A. site side-by-side, he makes it appear as if this building—and all of the stories contained within it—continues to haunt the city block on which it once stood.

Garaicoa does not forsake the disparities of modernity and inequities of globalization when using the same visual and conceptual strategies to represent Havana and Los Angeles in ruin/reconstruction.³¹ The ideological underpinnings of the ruinous site in L.A., however, are more ambiguous than those in his Havana diptych, and the convolution of history/present/future is more disorienting. The viewer, therefore, must interpret this work in dialogue with the artist's representations of sites in Havana. When comparing the two sets, the emptiness of these sites becomes apparent: closely framed and largely decontextualized from surroundings, and with little indication of human presence, Garaicoa directs our attention to the symbolic relationships among the urban architecture, in spite of their different social, political, and economic histories. Garaicoa employs the same visual vocabulary for both diptychs, presenting both structures in a perpetual cycle of ruin/re-imagination, apparently mirroring Cuba's decline in his response to L.A.'s urban landscape. With this in mind, could these diptychs serve to challenge ideological assumptions about capitalist progress and communist stagnancy that bolstered the U.S. assertion of power and authority during the Cold War and have continued, until very recently, to help justify the U.S. embargo on Cuba? Perhaps Garaicoa's representation of the L.A. ruins therefore suggests an effort to expose and undermine what art historian Okwui Enwezor describes as the "opposed logics of contemporaneity," or in other words, the illusion of capitalism's presumed benefits in contrast to the deficiencies of Cuban communism.³² According to these images, the legacy of the Cold War, underpinned by conflicting myths of progress, afflicts both countries—two countries that have only recently begun to normalize diplomatic relations.³³


Garaicoa reflects upon the ruins of his city as a starting point for envisioning societal renewal. His diptychs are not entirely dystopian; rather, in his work ruin is set against utopia, presence against absence, in ways that offer a layered conception of history. The concept of the ruin on which he expounds appropriates specifically baroque notions about time as a layered process, thus giving history an involuted rather than evolutionary movement. This historical perspective guides viewers to think critically about the economic,

³¹To nuance this relationship between the local and global, I am extrapolating from Ernesto Laclau, "Universalism, Particularism, and the Question of Identity," *October* vol. 61 (Summer 1992): 89. As Laclau says, "[t]he universal emerges out of the particular not as some principle underlying and explaining it, but as an incomplete horizon suturing a dislocated particular identity...the universal is the symbol of a missing fullness, and the particular exists only in the contradictory movement of asserting a differential identity and simultaneously canceling it through its subsumption into a nondifferential medium."

³²Enwezor, 16.

³³See David Hart, *Inside/Outside: Contemporary Cuban Art* (Winston-Salem, NC: Charlotte and Philip Hanes Art Gallery, Wake Forest University, 2003). See also William M. Leogrande and Julie M. Thomas, "Cuba's Quest for Economic Independence," *Journal of Latin American Studies* 34, no. 2 (May 2002): 325-363. Cuba's alterity to global power operations is unique, particularly within the varied geography of Latin American economic activity. Over the course of the past two and a half decades, global economic activity has transformed power structures and polarized national economies within Latin America, causing, in recent years, for example, São Paulo to emerge as major center of global finance while countries such as Bolivia and Venezuela continue to reinforce national boundaries and identities to protect their economies from liberalization. See also H. Michael Erisman and John M. Kirk, ed., *Redefining Cuban Foreign Policy: The Impact of the "Special Period"* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2006).

social, and ideological circumstances that put societies in ruin. Rather than simply forgetting the past to imagine utopias of the future, Garaicoa cast architectural plans and designs for urban living through the ruins of Havana to ground his visions for the city's regeneration in a concrete history and present socio-economic reality. Moreover, the fact that his sketches are easily modified, thus open to creative interpretation, may also suggest the potential to move beyond both the state of ruin and empty utopian promises.

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