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Havana's Parque Coppelia: Public Space Traditions in Socialist Cuba

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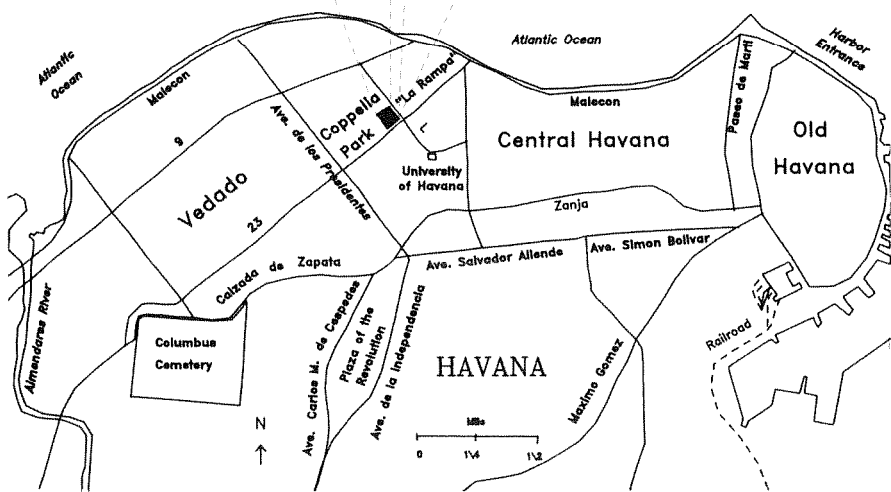
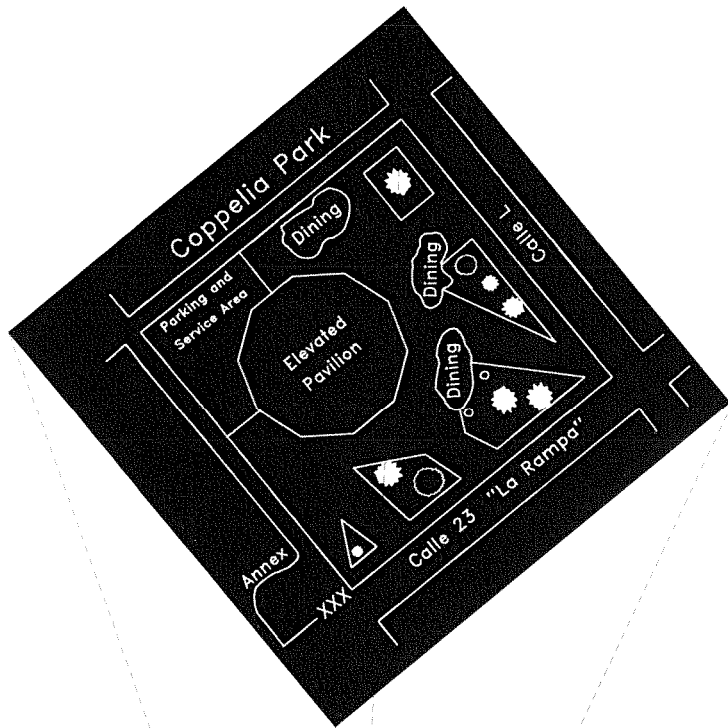
Throughout urban Cuba, one of the most popular informal gathering places is the local outlet of the state-run ice cream chain, Coppelia. The flagship is a square-block parlor/park located in the commercial core of Havana's modern and formerly elite El Vedado section. This tropical park features lush groundcover, a canopy of towering banyon trees that shade open-air dining areas, and intricately designed paths that lead to a large, elevated, circular pavilion with indoor seating. The park, parlor and ice cream are all called Coppelia (a name chosen by Cecilia Sanchez, Fidel Castro's long-time private secretary and confidante, after her favorite ballet).

Although a small, urban place, Parque Coppelia is a signal setting that conveys in microcosm two major public space traditions in contemporary Cuba. It both evokes elements of the traditional Latin American plaza and illustrates ways in which socialist ideology and orientations help shape the design and use of public spaces.

Before the revolution, Cuba imported most of its ice cream from Florida, with Howard Johnson's 28 flavors the undisputed brand of choice.¹ In the wake of the U.S. trade embargo, the government committed

Parque Coppelia viewed from the Hotel Habana Libre, across the street. Courtesy James R. Curtis.





Central Havana and Parque Coppelía. Courtesy James R. Curtis.

resources to increasing the domestic production of dairy products, including ice cream. The rich and creamy delicacy that ultimately was produced comes in a myriad of flavors from nuts and tropical fruits to even grains, such as rice and wheat. Helado Coppelía has won international acclaim and is considered by food critics to be on par with Italian gelati and the renowned ice cream made in the Philippines.² It is one of the few commercially prepared Cuban foods that sends foreign tourists raving; among Cubans, who routinely endure food rationing and scarcity, it is a culinary treat worth waiting in line for.

Perhaps nowhere on the island is the wait longer or more engaging than at Parque Coppelía. Daily, it attracts thousands of visitors and *habaneros*, especially youths, who may snake along a series of lines for two hours or more to indulge in the prize-winning *helado*. Reportedly the park, which is open from 10:45 in the morning until 1:45 a.m. and employs more than 400 workers, serves some 4,250 gallons of ice cream to 35,000 customers each day.³ A great deal of socializing, which may be more important than the ice cream itself, occurs in the process. Opposite the park, the Yara Cine nightly entertains those waiting in line and generally hanging out with films projected alfresco against the 26-story Hotel Habana Libre, built in the 1950s by the Hilton chain.

The park, founded in the summer of 1966 on the site of an abandoned hospital, commands a prime spot at the busy intersection and public transit node of L and Twenty-third streets. The latter, known as “La Rampa,” is a major commercial thoroughfare that sweeps down to the Malecón seawall and esplanade; it is lined with shops, cafes, cinemas, hotels, airline offices

and government agencies. This is the heart of El Vedado, Havana's trendiest (if now aging) quarter, which supports a vital and boisterous streetlife and, because of its attractions and proximity to the university, affects a decidedly youthful aspect.

Seen from above, say from an upper floor of the Habana Libre, Parque Coppelia appears as a cool green square against a backdrop of white buildings and blue sky and sea; only the parlor's circular dome protrudes from the oasis. Although open on all sides, the park is most accessible from commercial L and Twenty-third streets; a parking lot and service area partially restrict access from the two residential streets that also bound it.

A series of shaded walkways, sharply defined by ornate wrought iron fences or tall, curvilinear retaining walls, lead into the park's lush, airy interior. The waist-high barriers effectively cordon off the spaces around the massive trunks and spindly air roots of the banyan trees, where a thick understory of ivy, philodendron and small palms flourishes. These deep, verdant plots not only create a sense of restfulness but also give the park an impression of spaciousness, even though space is at a premium.

The park's design is clearly meant to facilitate circulation. The barriers, in a passive and aesthetically pleasing manner, contain and manipulate people's movement. Fenced as well are the out-of-doors dining areas, which serve as hard edges that unobtrusively direct the long queues that wind along the interconnected pathways. Except for the designated dining areas, there is no formal seating; the fences' pointed tips preclude anybody from sitting on them.

The park's circulatory focus and visual magnet is the *torre*, or elevated

parlor. The clean lines, unadorned white exterior facade and large arching supports of this modernist structure are reminiscent of the futuristic theme restaurant at Los Angeles International Airport. Overall the park is a pleasant, intimate place of a human scale that is enhanced by the tropical sunlight that filters diffusely through the dense foliage, the muted lights that are strung amongst the tree branches and the infectious rhythms of Afro-Cuban music that issue from the park's loud-speaker system.

The Park as Plaza

Comparisons between Parque Coppelia and traditional Latin American plazas are obvious and compelling. In characteristic plaza fashion, the park encompasses a city block, although it has expanded to a small adjacent annex and parking area. Likewise, the park's internal layout (crisscrossing paths that focus on a central node) is reminiscent of the garden-park plaza design that originated in Mexico during the reign of Emperor Maximilian (1864-67) and has evolved throughout Latin America since then.

Parque Coppelia's center pavilion is the design equivalent of the *kiosco* (or bandstand) and circular fountain, which are widely popular features of garden-park plaza design. The park's emphasis on nature (albeit a highly cultivated, idealized representation) serves, like the plaza, as an emotional and aesthetic complement and counterpoint to the urbanity and verve of the surrounding human-made environment.

Having been inserted into an existing urban fabric, the park has had a minimal influence on the surrounding physical framework. Unlike the traditional centrally placed Spanish-American plaza, Parque Coppelia is

not the focal point of the street network, nor is it flanked by the dominant structures of church and state, which served historically to reinforce the plazas roles as civic symbol and course of social interaction.

Nonetheless, Parque Coppelia's design and function relate to and integrate with the prevailing character of El Vedado. The district is laced with busy commercial arteries lined by modernist buildings and with tree-lined residential streets of Mediterranean-style villas and *palacios* that exude a beguilingly faded, genteel personality (many have been subdivided into apartments or converted to government use and are in obvious need of fresh plaster and paint). And Parque Coppelia is more than just a community resource; it is a social nexus and public gathering place of metropolitan importance that reflects the traditional plaza's role as the hub of civic life and as a spontaneous urban theater that lures and entertains people from all over the city.

Yet in this peculiar milieu, where ideology creates or alters forms that do not always follow function, the traditional Latin America plaza may not be a politically appropriate model. While it certainly provides an enduring frame of reference (and the city has its share of ancient and beloved squares, such as the classic sixteenth-century Plaza de Armas), the plaza is also symbolic of colonialism and a heritage of dependency and exploitation. Inextricably linked with the dominant and repressive colonial institutions of church and state as well as the socioeconomic elite, the plaza could scarcely be held up as a form to emulate in a socialist society.

This may explain why Parque Coppelia lacks the formal and often imposing commemorative patriotic features or religious icons common to traditional plazas. This might also shed



The queues in Parque Coppelia. Courtesy Rob Crandall.



light on why, in a regime that trumpets the virtues of individual labor and sacrifice for the common good, the park's design precludes virtually any activity besides waiting for, buying and eating ice cream. Presumably, Parque Coppelia was intended as a place for *el hombre integrado* (the new, integrated person) to enjoy a brief respite.

This intention of strict functionality stands in stark contrast to the diversity of uses characterizing large Latin America plazas, which historically have been popular and convenient venues for informal and formal activities and for celebrations of both a religious and secular nature. But, in fact, Parque Coppelia is a very interactive place that supports a varied daily social life with lots of *movimiento* that is, perhaps, no less engrossing than that of a traditional plaza.

The Park as Socialist Space

While it may be difficult to isolate unique features in the cultural landscape that have sprung from socialism, it seems clear that there are distinctive patterns and imprints.⁴ One characteristic — observed in Soviet and Eastern European cities and true of urban Cuba also — is the comparatively greater importance placed on providing and maintaining public spaces rather than private ones.⁵ Public places, not only *calles*, *parques* and plazas but also museums, concert halls and education and health facilities, are better endowed in terms of both financial and emotional commitments than elements of the private sector that cater to the individual.

This favored status mirrors the operative ideology of providing for group needs and amenities before providing for personal ones. It may also serve as a form of institutional com-

compensation for the chronic shortages and inadequacies of housing as well as the paucity of consumer goods and services. Consequently, public spaces like Coppelia are not only generally attractive in appearance but also conspicuously clean; in fact, the park has a Disneyland-like tidiness to it.

Parque Coppelia also illustrates the inclusive nature of socialist public space. Based on socialism's egalitarian underpinnings, access to all is at least theoretically inherent. By local standards the park, which has been called "the ultimate democratic ice-cream emporium,"⁶ does attract a rather heterogeneous collection of *compañeros* (comrades), including even "anti-social" elements. It is used not only by squeaky-clean Communist youth, who constitute a majority of its patrons, but also by young people who have long hair and are dressed in "radical" 1960s-era hippie styles as well as contemporary punkers. The park is also frequented by *jinetes* ("black marketeers"), who engage in "economic crimes" by illegally exchanging pesos for dollars. Moreover, the area around the bus stop on La Rampa has a reputation as a hangout for homosexuals. The park is thus comparatively diverse and tolerant (although homosexuals especially have been greatly persecuted by the government)⁷ and acts as a kind of social leveler in that everyone must wait his or her respective turn in the ice cream lines.

The *cola*, or line, is itself a phenomenon that has come to be associated with the socialist urban experience. Queues that extend from bus stops, restaurants and food stores have become a common scene in the Havana streetscape. Ideologically, the orderliness of waiting in line reflects the power of the state and its ability to impose control. In Coppelia, a

microarena of urban life, one might stand in two or even three lines. One must first queue up to obtain a ticket, then wait in another for the ice cream (served in scoops, sundaes, or mixed into an *ensalada*, or salad), and perhaps wait in yet another for seating to become available. While all of this might be quite time-consuming, it is as good an excuse as any for hanging around, watching the slow-moving *paseo*. As Jacobo Timmerman has recently observed, "waiting constitutes the inner dynamic of Cuba."⁸

A Convergence of Traditions

Various public space traditions converge in Parque Coppelia. At the very core of these is the Mediterranean-based affinity for the open-air meeting place — a place simultaneously of activity and repose, of functionality and symbolism. In the New World, this tradition was institutionalized in the Spanish colonial town plan in the form of plazas — which were at first open and rather austere spaces intended essentially for military purposes and have since been transformed to a garden-park format meant to enhance their aesthetic and commemorative aspects and broaden their appeal.

The plaza as an urban form has always stood for the workings of a central authority. Ironically, while the traditional plaza has been rejected as a model in socialist Cuba because of its connotations of colonialism, socialist public space traditions are similarly intended to convey the power of the state. As Parque Coppelia evocatively illustrates, such power is reflected in the desire to bring order to both the landscape and human behavior; the dominant theme is the successful management of both humans and nature according to a reasoned plan. That the

ideology of centralized authority should emerge in a place ostensibly devoted to something as innocuous and apolitical as eating ice cream reminds us of the significance of ordinary features in the cultural landscape.

Notes

1. Medea Benjamin, Joseph Collins and Michael Scott, *No Free Lunch: Food & Revolution in Cuba Today* (San Francisco: Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1989), 53.
2. George Lang, "Castro Comestibles," *Esquire*, February 1978, 88-91.
3. Richard Boudreaux, "Castro's Revolutionary Cry: Let them Eat Ice Cream!" *Los Angeles Times*, 5 November 1991, p. H2.
4. That socialist ideology exerts an influence on the form and spatial character of the urban built environment has been addressed by others. See, for example, R.A. French and E.E. Ian Hamilton (eds.), *The Socialist City* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).
5. Kathryn H. Anthony, "Public and Private Spaces in Soviet Cities," *Landscape 23* (1979): 20-25; Dean S. Rugg, *Eastern Europe* (London: Longman, 1985), 346-353.
6. Enrique Fernandez, "Fidel's Limbo" *Condé Nast Traveler*, July 1991, 79.
7. Carlos Alberto Montaner, *Fidel Castro and the Cuban Revolution: Age, Position, Character, Destiny, Personality and Ambition* (New Brunswick: Transaction Publishers, 1989), 104-107.
8. Jacobo Timmerman, *Cuba: A Journey* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1990), 15.