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Ricardo Porro, Exiled Cuban Architect, Dies at 89

By DAVID W. DUNLAP DEC. 29, 2014



Ricardo Porro, in 2007 in Havana at the School of Plastic Arts, which he designed in 1961. Credit "Unfinished Spaces" by Alys Nahmias and Benjamin Murray

Ricardo Porro, an architect who gave lyrical expression to a hopeful young Cuban revolution in the early 1960s before he himself fell victim to its ideological hardening, died on Thursday in Paris, where he had spent nearly half a century in exile. He was 89.

His death was confirmed by friends and associates, including John Loomis, the author of "Revolution of Forms: Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools."

Mr. Porro lived long enough to see his two National Art Schools — begun during a utopian moment in the Cuban revolution, then abandoned as counterrevolutionary — newly embraced around the world as the crown jewels of modern Cuban architecture.

His School of Modern Dance and School of Plastic Arts erupt from the verdant landscape of what had been the Havana Country Club, in Cubanacán, a suburb of Havana. Premier Fidel Castro nationalized the course in 1961 to create a campus of five art schools. He all but ordered Mr. Porro to take on the design job. In turn, Mr. Porro recruited Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti.

Together, working feverishly, they created serpentine little villages of brick and terra cotta, meandering organically through dense acreage and embodying an Afro-Caribbean quality of “cubanidad” — buildings that could be nowhere else but Cuba.

Mr. Porro’s two schools have voluptuous brick domes and vaults, built by hand in the Catalan style reminiscent of Antoni Gaudí, that are almost bodily in their gentle embrace. Supporting them, and contrasting with their soft curves, are angular columns and buttresses that speak of the shattering force of revolution.

“In Cuba, Porro took the Catalan vault and made it dance,” said Warren James, a New York architect who represents the City Council speaker, Melissa Mark-Viverito, on the Museum of Modern Art board. “He painted and sculpted with it. In a Caribbean context, with a tropical exuberant landscape, his architecture remains revolutionary.”

That was exactly his intent, Mr. Porro recalled in a 2011 interview with *The Atlantic*. “When I received this commission, I thought there had not been a good expression of revolution in architecture,” he said. “I wanted to create in that school the expression of revolution. What I felt at that moment was an emotional explosion.”



Mr. Porro also designed the School of Modern Dance in Cuba, with brick domes and vaults built by hand in the Catalan style. Credit "Unfinished Spaces" by Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray

Before the schools were completed, however, artistic expression was stifled as Cuba moved into the Soviet orbit. Mr. Castro had famously answered his own rhetorical question in 1961 about the rights of writers and artists: "Within the revolution, everything. Against the revolution, no rights at all."

Almost overnight, the art schools' distinctive style was officially anathema. "You realize that you've been accused of something," Mr. Porro recalled in "Unfinished Spaces," a 2011 documentary directed by Alysa Nahmias and Benjamin Murray. "And then you realize that you have been judged. And then you realize you are guilty. And nobody tells you."

That was when he left for France, where he continued to practice architecture, most recently in association with Renaud de La Noue in Paris. In the breathtaking Collège les Explorateurs of 1996, in Cergy-le-Haut, northwest of Paris, they seemed to channel cubanidad, Gaudí and Le Corbusier simultaneously — if such a thing can be imagined.

Mr. Porro was invited back to Cuba for the first time in 1996 and joined Mr. Gottardi and Mr. Garatti to restore and complete the National Art School. The process is "slowly moving forward," Mr. Loomis said.

Ricardo Porro Hidalgo was born in 1925 in Camaguëy. He studied architecture at the University of Havana, from which he graduated in 1949. He met Mr. Castro through the brother of his fiancée, Elena Freyre de Andrade, Mr. Loomis wrote in an obituary on the Repeating Islands website.

Mr. Porro's survivors include his wife and their daughter, Gabriela Porro.

After graduation, Mr. Porro traveled to Paris, where he met the Cuban painter Wifredo Lam, whose embrace of cross-cultural references would greatly influence him.

In 1957, Mr. Porro's clandestine opposition to the regime of President Fulgencio Batista placed him in imminent danger of arrest. He fled with his wife to Venezuela. There he met another great influence on his practice, the architect Carlos Raúl Villanueva, as well as Mr. Gottardi and Mr. Garatti.

Mr. Porro first visited New York as a teenager, when his parents expected him to be a lawyer, said Josef Asteinza, who is working on a documentary about the Modern movement in Cuba and who visited Mr. Porro last month in Paris.

On a ferry to Manhattan, the young man could not disguise his excitement about the city and all its buildings. Mr. Porro recalled his father as saying, "Ricardo, I don't know the future but I know two things: One, you will not study law; and two, you will not die in Cuba."

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