Havana’s Parque Coppelía: 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, Coppelía. 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 Coppelía (a name chosen by Cecilia Sánchez, Fidel Castro’s long-time private secretary and confidante, after her favorite ballet).

Although a small, urban place, Parque Coppelía 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. In the wake of the U.S. trade embargo, the government committed
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 Coppelia 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. 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 Coppelia. Daily, it attracts thousands of visitors and homosexuals, 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 3:45 p.m. and employs more than 400 workers, serves some 4,250 gallons of ice cream to 35,000 customers each day. 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 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 11th 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
sanctuary 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 wire-high barriers effec-
tively confine off the spaces around the
massive trunks and spindly air roots of the
banian trees, where a thick under-
story of ivy, philodendron and small
palms flourishes. These sleep, verdant
plots not only create a sense of rooted-
ness but also give the park an impres-
sion 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 peo-
ples' 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' point-
et tips preclude anybody from sitting
on them.

The park's circulatory focus and
visual magnet is the nursery, or elevated
parlor. The clean lines, unadorned
white exterior facade and large arched
support columns of this modernist structure
are reminiscent of the futuristic theme
restaurant at Los Angeles International
Airport: Overall the park is a pleasant,
immediate expression 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
infused rhythms of Afro-Cuban
music that issues from the park's loud
speaker system.

The Park as Plaza

Comparisons between Parque
Coppelia and traditional Latin
American plazas are obvious and com-
pelling. In characteristic plaza fashion,
the park encompases a city block,
although it has expanded to a small
adjacent area and parking area.
Likewise, the park's internal layout
crossing 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 kiosko (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 exist-
ing urban fabric, the park has had a
minimal influence on the surrounding
physical framework. Unlike the tradi-
tional centrally placed Spanish-
American plaza, Parque Coppelia is
not the focal point of the street net-
work, nor is it flanked by the dominant
structures of church and state, which
served historically to reinforce the
plazas roles as civic symbol and con-
course of social interaction.

Nevertheless, Parque Coppelia's
design and function relate to and inte-
grate with the prevailing character of
El Vedado. The district is laced with
busy commercial arteries lined by mod-
ernize buildings and with tree-lined
residential streets of Mediterranean
style villas and palacios that exude a
beguilingly lived, genteel personality
(many have been subdivided into apart-
ments 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 sponta-
neous 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 tradi-
tional 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 depen-
dency and exploitation. Inextricably
linked with the dominant and repres-
sive 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
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 cf bunti integrates (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 American 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 movements 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. 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. Public places, not only cafes, parque 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-
pensation 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 as a place 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,”16 does attract a rather heterogenous collection of computeros (computer users), 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 pentlers. The park is also frequently visited by pintores (“black marketers”), 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 government20 and acts as a kind of social leveller in that everyone must wait his or her respective turn in the ice cream lines. The aro, 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, sundae, or mixed into an esqualea, 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 planes. As Jacobo Timerman has recently observed, “waiting constitutes the inner dynamism of Cuba.”21

A Convergence of Traditions

Various public space traditions converge in Parque Coppelia. At the very core of this 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 towns 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 place 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 reason 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

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. Hie Awards (eds.), The Socialist City (Oxford: John Wiley & Sons, 1979).