Reclaiming Identity: White Street Pier, Key West

Adam H. Richards

University of Tennessee - Knoxville, aricha22@utk.edu

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White Street Pier, Key West

Adam Richards
College of Architecture and Design
Advisor: Professor Tricia Stuth
I came to the conclusion that whatever space and time mean, place and occasion mean more, for space in the image of man is place, and time in the image of man is occasion.

Aldo van Eyck, “The Medicine of Reciprocity, Tentatively Illustrated”

Identity: For architecture, significance can come through its relationship with its inhabitants, through their attempt to establish a feeling of home and of permanence. Past memories and histories bring definition and significance to a place. Man’s persistence there over time establishes a sense of home and identity.

Exile: The thesis explores the link between identity and architecture and the intimate connection between memories and the places in which they are created. If man’s relationship to architecture is often to establish a sense of home, to carve memories into a place, what happens when this link to the past is severed? Separation from an architecture of home can endanger identity. This separation is the essential struggle of the exile. In this struggle, architecture can become a catalyst in the reclamation of identity.

Threshold: In the attempt to establish ownership, we begin to draw boundaries on land to demarcate territory, in some cases even the sea. For the exile, boundaries become loaded with meaning. It is a threshold that, once crossed, establishes a disconnect from home. For the Cuban exile, this boundary is the ocean: the Straits of Florida.

The Cuban-American: The plight of Cuban exiles is a living history, spanning more than sixty years to date. Reasons for leaving may vary, though each resonates with enough desperation to leave one’s homeland. The project seeks to create an architectural identity for the Cuban-American, the self-imposed exile: a person who does not consider himself an immigrant to the U.S. but living in exile from Cuba, a person who is neither here nor there.
Prior to Fidel Castro’s rise to power, the stretch of ocean between the U.S. and Cuba could be characterized by times of commerce and travel: a cultural exchange in which Havana, Key West, and Miami took on identities of each other. Key West rests at the center of much of the history of U.S.-Cuba relations, especially in travel.

Following the Revolution, Key West, because of its proximity to the isle of Cuba, became (and remains today) the landing point for many refugees. The most significant event is perhaps the Mariel Boatlifts in 1980 during which more than 125,000 refugees fled Cuba over in the span of six months, landing on Key West’s shores.

Today, Miami has become the cultural epicenter of Cuban-Americans, and Havana, having slowed significantly in economic growth, is often seen as a place of memory. Key West is primarily characterized as a tourist destination, a place of transience. In many ways the project seeks to recapture the spirit of travel and exchange for city of Key West that has subsided over time.
White Street Pier reaches out over the water, extending man’s reach across the ocean. Built in 1960, the pier caps a main avenue of the city. Its unofficial moniker, according to locals, is the “unfinished highway to Havana.”
The architecture is a mediation of the past and the future. The marketplace along the pier recalls memories of Old Havana, through textures, smells, and sounds. The terminal evokes both a longing for home and a hope to return some day. The promenade bridge connects the pier and the terminal linking the past to the future.

Leaving home and going home are often difficult matters; to go in or out, to enter, leave, or stay, are sometimes painful alternatives. Though architecture cannot do away with this truth it can still counteract it by mitigating instead of aggravating its effects. It is human to tarry. Architecture should, I think, take more account of this. The job of the planner is to provide a built homecoming for all; to sustain a feeling of belonging - hence, to evolve an architecture of place - a setting for each subsequent occasion, determined or spontaneous.

Aldo van Eyck, "The Medicine of Reciprocity, Tentatively Illustrated"
I cultivate a white rose
In July as in January
For the sincere friend
Who gives me his hand frankly
And for the cruel person who tears
out the heart with which I live
I cultivate neither nettles not thorns:
I cultivate a white rose.

José Martí, “Cultivo una Rosa Blanca”

01: the marketplace

The marketplace along the pier taps into stories of Old Havana, capturing the smells, textures, and colors of memory.

:: Market kiosks stand along the northeastern edge, catching the morning light. The sun rises and the business day begins. Textures of canvas and wood wrap the kiosks, as artisans and craftsmen lift the rolled doors and display their goods. Smells of fruit, flowers, and fresh food fill the air.

:: The trolley paces by in a rhythmic pattern, carrying people to and from the terminal offshore.

:: Vines of hibiscus and white roses climb metal latticework, providing a screened threshold between the commerce of the market and the leisure of the promenade.
The sunsets: forget it, no competition. Nothing could compare to the sight of that glowing red disk being swallowed by the turquoise sea and the tangerine light bathing everything, making all of creation glow as if from waves, splashing against the wall of the Malecón, splashing, leaping over it to wood the road, lapping, lapping, lapping endlessly, eternally. Even in the worst of storms the waves were always a lover’s caress, an untiring embrace, an endless shower of kisses.

Carlos Eire, Waiting for Snow in Havana

02: the view from shore

The promenade carves into the existing pier, marking the beginning of a curve that extends out to the terminal offshore.

:: Pieces of the existing pier have been carved out and extend the boundary of the space, recalling the monolithic Malecón sea wall of Havana. Rather than a boardwalk that hugs the shoreline, the promenade runs perpendicular away from shore, not only to connect to the terminal, but in a symbolic gesture of reaching.

:: The line of curved wooden boardwalk sweeps out to sea, creating a collective view to the west, sunset. It allows people to occupy the water’s edge, dangling feet over the edge or jumping into the waves.
03: a place for occasion

The café overlooking a plaza caps the pier. Architecture becomes a stage, a setting for occasions.

:: The café is about the everyday experience, for the morning espresso or the evening mojito. Situated on the elevated promenade, it acts as a walk up counter on the side of pedestrian movement. The other side attaches to an enclosed space, creating an environment of stasis that is about viewing the plaza below or looking out to sea.

:: The plaza is a setting for occasion—festivals and concerts—both planned and spontaneous. A ramp wraps the space allowing access to the promenade level but also serves to focus attention on the center, where anything from a formal quinceañera or an impromptu musical performance can take place.
A softly curving bridge stretches across the sea. The eye follows its sweeping arc as it leaves the pier and connects to the terminal in the distance.

:: The curve not only mediates the angle of the existing pier to a north-south orientation more appropriate for the airport runway, but its position begins to encapsulate views to the east and to the west, sunrise and sunset.

:: Built as an inhabitable truss, the trolley runs beneath the pedestrian path, which is covered in areas with bright canvas overhead and vine-covered metal work to shade the walkway.
The airport and ferry terminal longs to recapture the spirit of travel and exchange that once existed across the Straits of Florida.

Pulled away from shore to reach necessary water depths, the terminal and runway mark a significant trajectory across the ocean, extending man’s reach even further; a symbolic gesture of an attempt to re-link the two nations.

Passengers arrive and depart on airplanes and ferries, recognizing the connection of water and sky between the U.S. and Cuba. The departure lounges of the air terminal line the eastern edge, sharing a roof line that extends across the open-air plaza and ferry terminal.
A tension exists in the heart of the exile; he is longing to return home. His eyes are fixed on something that is far off in the distance.

:: The public plaza extends, reaching beyond the departure lounges and waiting gates of the terminal. Skeletal frames continue the line of the terminal, drawing one’s gaze further to the west, to Cuba.

:: What does it mean to sit and watch the sunset? For many Cuban-Americans, this is a connection to home, knowing that their relatives 90 miles across the ocean may be watching the same sun set.

:: The ethereal nature of sunrise and sunset evokes a sense of temporality about the present, a threshold marking the passing or the beginning of the day. If the sunrise is about the promise of a new day, then sunset captures a sense of longing for tomorrow: A hope for a brighter future.
How far we all come. How far we all come away from ourselves. So far, so much between, you can never go home again. You can go home, it’s good to go home, but you can never really get all the way home again in your life.

James Agee, *A Death in the Family*

Inevitably a return to Cuba, for the exile, can only reside in memory. The Cuba to which they long to return, is in many ways, gone. Instead, the exile is seeking freedom to own space, to act willfully and carve memories into it. In essence, the mark of exile, once overcome, may become simply a part of the past. As one Cuban exile eloquently writes, the mark of exile is nothing more than a “luminous scar.” (Learning to Die in Miami, Carlos Eire)