

# UNFINISHED SPACES

DISCUSSION GUIDE

# CUBA, REVOLUTION, and POLITICS

1. How does watching *Unfinished Spaces* affect your understanding of Fidel Castro's Cuban Revolution?
2. Vittorio Garatti explains that the Revolution had a "guerilla-like spirit of adventure." Do you think this spirit was captured in the design and construction of the National Art Schools? Why or why not? What about the buildings is "revolutionary" in your opinion?
3. How do you think the story of the National Art Schools reflects the larger history of the Cuban Revolution? What do the Art Schools help us understand about the influence of the Revolution on Cuban society? Art? Architecture?
4. Vittorio Garatti remarks toward the end of the film that he would like to explain to Fidel Castro that, "A closed system dies." What do you think Garatti means? Do you think the Schools are the product of a "closed system"?
5. Do you perceive Fidel Castro's vision for the National Art Schools as a manifestation of an altruistic or creative idea? A political statement about the role of art in society? A "megalomaniacal dream" of a powerful political leader? Why?
6. The National Art Schools were "built for the people." What do you think it means for a work of art or architecture to be "public"? Do you think this aspiration was realized in the Art Schools?
7. Is there a building (or a set of buildings) in your own country that has come to symbolize a special moment in your nation's history? What makes that building important to the people in your country?
8. Do you think that political conflicts or disagreements over architecture weaken or strengthen its importance to a society? Think about public celebrations of a work of architecture in your country. Now think about public arguments about its creation, preservation or demolition. How does each affect the way your society values the original work?



## ART and SOCIETY

1. What place do national art and cultural projects have in our society? Why are they important? Whom do they benefit?
2. Do you think that visionary national projects like the Cuban National Art Schools are expressions of the heights of human creativity or excesses funded at the expense of the people?
3. The story begins with art and creativity being desired and highly valued. As the film progresses, art is seen as a threat. What consequences does a society face when creativity loses its value or becomes dangerous?
4. How can architecture represent and preserve the heritage of a country? Is it possible for architecture to influence the broader culture?
5. Can a building influence the ideas and feelings of the people who use it? If so, how? To whom do the National Art Schools belong? The architects? The students? The government?
6. Several people in the film explain that the National Art Schools supported the artistic community in Cuba. In what ways can a building enhance or even legitimize an artistic community?
7. Do you believe that architecture can be revolutionary? Progressive? Subversive?
8. A former student of the National Art Schools explains that while attending the Schools in the 1980s, he felt he had “restrictions and freedom at the same time.” To what is he referring? Do you think this feeling applied to the architects as well? How can freedom and restrictions coexist? How does architectural space support or generate these feelings?



## PRESERVATION and RUIN

1. Is it important to preserve architecture? What makes a building worthy of preservation? Its aesthetic beauty? The events that took place within the building? The building's significance in its time?
2. The Schools are described in the film as a "modern day ruin." What makes something a ruin? Do you think the National Art Schools are ruins? As unfinished buildings, have they always been ruins? If not, when did they become ruins?
3. Does society have a responsibility to preserve the legacy of certain artists? Is completing the National Art Schools necessary to honor or recognize its architects?
4. What do you think the original artists are hoping for in a potential restoration? What do you think the Schools' students are hoping for? What would you hope for?
5. In November of 2010, the Cuban Government officially recognized the National Art Schools as national monuments, and they are now being considered for inclusion on the United Nations UNESCO World Heritage list of sites that have "outstanding universal value to the world." What do you think should constitute "outstanding universal value"? Why do you think the National Art Schools were included on the list? Do you agree with the selection?
6. Do you think a work of art or architecture can evolve fifty years after it was first created? When does a piece of art stop evolving? Does completed art have the capacity to change?
7. Does the fact that all three architects of the National Art Schools are still alive influence your ideas about whether or how the Schools should be preserved?
8. Think of a building in your own country that would not exist today if it had not been deliberately restored or preserved. Do you think the restoration was important? Why or why not?



## DESIGN

1. Discuss the relationship between form and function in the design for the National Art Schools. Do the Schools prioritize form over function, or vice versa?
2. After construction on the Schools ended, the buildings were sometimes used for classes, and at other times by squatters, looters, circus performers, and as the set for a science fiction TV series. How do these other uses fit into the original purpose of the buildings?
3. Due to the U.S. trade embargo, the architects of the National Art Schools were limited to using only those building materials that were locally available. How do you think this affected their plans, both practically and symbolically?
4. The School of Dramatic Arts was said to “evoke the experience of the process of entering the theater.” Do you think the design accomplishes this? Why or why not?
5. Is there an inevitable conflict between the role of architecture as an emblem of a nation and its role as a practical, useful space?
6. Garatti explains that his architecture “cannot represent power. It has to represent integration. It has to represent total freedom.” What does this statement mean to you? Do you agree with Garatti?
7. What did it mean for Cuba to have had Italian architects design an important building? Do you think the nationality of an architect or artist influences his or her work? Do you think the buildings would have been the same had they been designed only by Cubans?
8. The architects are frequently described as visionaries. What makes an artist a visionary?

