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The building of the former United States Consulate in Santiago de Cuba. Proposals for its preservation

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Abstract: The building where the former United States Consulate in Santiago de Cuba held its sessions, a representative work of the local Modern Movement, is located in one of the main urban complexes of the 1950s in the city and has had different uses over time, currently being the headquarters of the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design. This work aims to define the characteristics and values of the building and propose design solutions for conservation. Methods of historical research and the analysis of various source documents, are combined with empirical methods of observation and constructive technical diagnosis. The evolution, characteristics, and relevance of the building for the Modern Movement in Santiago are presented, placing it in its historical context, taking into account the different functions it served. Guidelines to follow in intervention actions for its conservation are also outlined.

Key words: modern movement; Santiago de Cuba; former United States Consulate; heritage architecture

1 Introduction

The Modern Movement (MoMo) marked a milestone in the architectural and urban evolution of numerous Cuban cities, with Santiago de Cuba standing out as a clear example of this transformation.

In the second decade of the 20th century, a group of Cuban architects, trained at the School of Architecture in Havana, adopted the principles of MoMo, merging the austerity and slenderness characteristic of this style with the local context. This fusion not only enriched the urban landscape but also left a lasting legacy in the architectural identity of the region. The functional and aesthetic solutions that emerged during this period reflect the potential of new technologies and their integration with indigenous cultural elements.

In Santiago de Cuba, notable examples of this architectural style can be found, including the former Vista Alegre Tennis Club, now Club Santiago, designed by Celestino Sarille, which took on a formal expression in line with the principles of MoMo, and the condominium located on the outskirts of the Vista Alegre neighborhood, designed by architect Alberto Ramírez León for the López-Lageyre and López-Vázquez families, currently known as Seguridad Personal [1]. Another notable example is the former United States Consulate, now the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design, which benefited from the valuable consultation of architect Norma del Mazo.

This article presents the progress of research aimed at revealing the historical evolution of the former United States Consulate building, its distinctive characteristics and heritage values, as a unique example of the Cuban Modern Movement.

It also presents design guidelines for its conservation, based on field studies, which include a technical, construction, and environmental assessment of the building, as well as interventions aimed at its current cultural use.

2 Development

2.1 Current developments in the conservation of modern heritage

Organizations such as UNESCO recognize the importance of modern heritage and its conservation. Numerous buildings, structures, monuments, and even cities have been inscribed on the *World Heritage List*, some of them very young, such as the city of Brasilia, designed by Lucio Costa and Oscar Niemeyer, which was registered in 1987, only twenty-seven years after its inauguration [2]. This demonstrates the exceptional quality of the design and construction of modernist works. The International Committee for Documentation and Conservation of Buildings, Sites and Neighbourhoods of the Modern Movement (Docomomo), founded in 1988, has further advanced the cause of modern heritage conservation.

A notable example of modern heritage conservation is the comprehensive restoration of Casa del Puente, also known as Casa sobre el Arroyo, designed by architects Amancio Williams and Delfina Gálvez. The various restoration works carried out for its conservation were honored with the 2023 Gubbio Award, which included a major restoration project for the building, for which research was conducted on the existing documentation in the Williams archive and historical photographs were compiled. The intervention measures carried out respected the original identity, materials, and technologies so as not to affect its historical authenticity and heritage value [3].

The Bauhaus building, designed by Walter Gropius and built between 1925 and 1926, is not exempt from conservation work. This splendid example of the revolution in thinking and architecture in the 20th century was first restored in 1976, and then, with its inscription on the *World Heritage List* in 1996, more extensive restoration work was carried out, which was completed ten years later [4].

The creation in Cuba in 1997 of the Docomomo management group and its reaffirmation as such in 2002 at the 7th International Docomomo Congress has been of great importance in the urgent task of achieving public and institutional recognition of its work in order to obtain protection for works of the Cuban Modern Movement, as well as in the necessary completion of inventories and cataloging of modern works at the country level, a task in which Docomomo's provincial groups play an important role, as evidenced by the publication of the book *La Arquitectura del Movimiento Moderno. Selección de Obras del Registro Nacional* [5].

2.2 The past as prologue: the building's background

The advent of the 20th century brought with it a significant transformation in the urban fabric of the city of Santiago de Cuba. Unlike the ring-shaped growth of the colonial city, the republican city expanded beyond its limits into peripheral areas, leading to the emergence of new, previously planned neighborhoods: Fomento and Vista Alegre, developments with a nascent modernity. These developments paved the way for the subsequent proliferation of neighborhoods on the outskirts of the colonial city [6].

Towards the end of 1952, the Terrazas de Vista Alegre Development Company carried out a project to develop a new neighborhood, Ampliación de Terrazas (Figure 1), located between the Vista Alegre and Fomento neighborhoods. MoMo had a strong influence on the image of the neighborhood, which can be seen in the geometric shapes of its blocks, its road layout, the regularity of its lots or plots, and compliance with the urban regulations established for this neighborhood, such as 7-meter-wide roads with flower beds on both sides, mandatory garden space, and the limitation of vertical growth of buildings to two levels. It was further enriched by the insertion of rationalist constructions designed by Cuban architects of the stature of Rodulfo Ibarra, Margarita Egaña, Ricardo Eguilior, Ermina Odoardo, Félix Antonio Muñoz Cusiné, and

Enrique de Jongh Caula, among others [7].

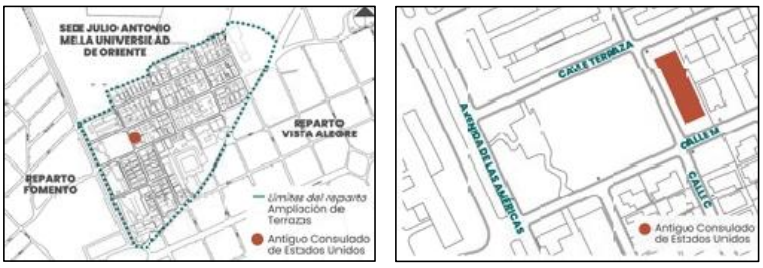

Figure 1. Left: Location of the former United States Consulate in the Ampliación de Terrazas neighborhood. Right: Detailed enlargement of the property's location within the neighborhood. Source: Authors, 2023

In 1957, this neighborhood was chosen as the site for a new building, owned by the Compañía Urbanizadora Terrazas de Vista Alegre, to house the offices of the United States Consulate (Figure 2), which it did until 1961. The design was carried out by American architects Rogers, Taliaferro, and Lamb[1] with the participation of Cuban architect Norma del Mazo Almeida[2] . The documentation supporting this significant decision can be found in the Saturday, February 1 edition from 1958, from the Diario de Cuba newspaper, which explains the reasons, attributed to the cordial diplomatic relations between the governments of Cuba and the United States during the republican period.

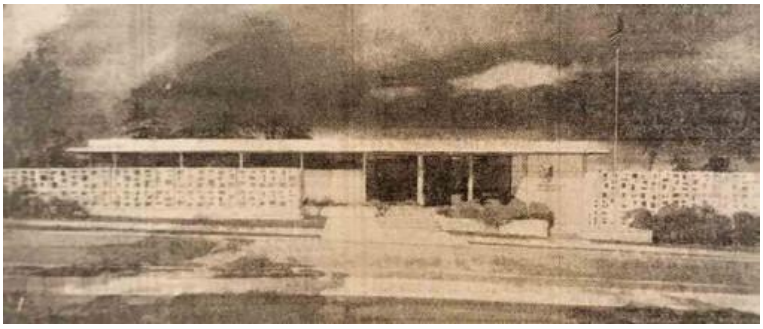

Figure 2. Image of the building. Source: Diario de Cuba, February 1, 1958

Among the main reasons are the significant increase in the flow of people between the two countries and the construction of the highway connecting the current provinces of Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo, including its extension to the US naval base in Guantánamo Bay. Also noteworthy are the economic progress of the former province of Oriente and, in particular, the growing importance of the city of Santiago de Cuba, the second largest in the Republic. The establishment of new industries, driven by US capital investment, contributed significantly to this growth. In addition, the Consulate's activity increased with the completion of the roads on the north coast of the eastern part of the country, which gave the eastern regions easy access to the provincial capital [8].

For a period of time, the building remained closed and unused until, in the 1970s, as a result of the opening of offices of interest between Cuba and the United States, the decision was made to reassign its function, and it was transferred to the Provincial Electoral Court. At the end of that decade, the building was transferred to the Ministry of Culture and renovated to serve as the Universal Art Gallery [9]. Architects Raúl Oliva and Fernando O'Reilly, who worked at the Ministry, as well as designers Hugo Galano and Adolfo Escalona [10], participated in the renovation.

To adapt the building's functionality to its new use as a gallery, a double wall was installed using a material more suitable for installing the hooks and supports needed to hang the paintings in the exhibition areas. The year 1987 marked a change in the building, as it became the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design (Figure 3). This change represents an

evolution in the function and focus of the institution, consolidating it as a center dedicated to the promotion and development of the arts and the artistic growth of the city of Santiago de Cuba.

Figure 3. Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design, current image. Source: D. Cruz, 2023

2.3 Architectural characterization

The building occupies four plots and is located on Calle C, between Calle Terraza and Calle M, close to Avenida de Las Américas, Avenida Manduley, and the El Caney highway (on the section currently occupied by Avenida General Cebreco). This building was erected at an approximate height of 1.45 meters above the average slope of Calle C, which borders its main facade, which was designed with the purpose of ensuring an optimal perspective and facilitating the drainage of rainwater in its surroundings. On the other hand, the area designated for the carport was built at a lower level in order to ensure vehicle access with a gentle slope from Calle M. The building in its original function has a single rectangular floor plan (Figure 4), where the various rooms are distributed for offices, lobbies, waiting rooms, and restrooms [11].

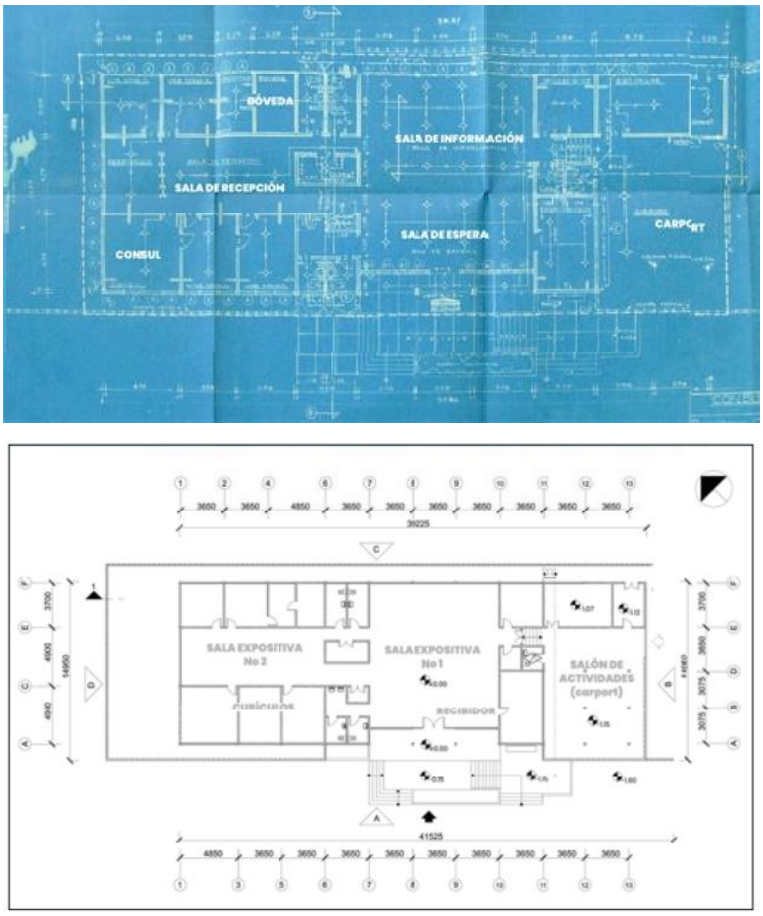

Figure 4. Above: floor plan of the project designed by architects Rogers, Taliaferro, Lamb, and del Mazo. Source: Historical Archive of the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design, 1957. Below: current floor plan. Source: authors, 2023

Currently, the uses of some premises have changed to meet the needs of the new functions being carried out, although their original rectangular layout remains, with a length of approximately 39 meters and a width of 15 meters.

The main facade (Figure 5) runs parallel to Calle C and is characterized by its horizontal shape, with the main entrance highlighted by a staircase in the central area, forming a stepped protruding volume. The lattice walls on both sides of the main entrance protect the interior of the building from the sun and provide greater privacy to its premises, accentuating its relationship with the modern architecture of the Latin American avant-garde. The composition of this facade is enhanced by a wall clad with Cuban marble slabs. In general, its sober and elegant style recalls the phrase attributed to architect Mies van der Rohe, "less is more."

Figure 5. Elevation A of the main facade. Source: authors, 2023

The environmental aspects originally considered condition the use of its corner position, with adequate natural lighting, and the creation of light and shadow effects provided by the latticework, which are transferred to the interior spaces.

From a technical construction standpoint, reinforced concrete was used in the raft foundation that supports the building, as well as in the mixed system of columns, load-bearing walls, and beams, which provided an avant-garde response to the functional and formal design of the building [11].

The building is considered a landmark of modern architecture in Santiago de Cuba, as its architects achieved a revolutionary design based on the codes of rationalism, which can be seen in the simplification of its lines and the absence of unnecessary decorative elements, while the transparent carpentry provides a harmonious relationship with nature. The former Consulate has been recognized as one of the most important works of Norma del Mazo, who, according to architect Marta Lora, who was one of the most prominent designers of the 1950s in Santiago de Cuba [7].

2.4 Heritage values

From a heritage perspective, the characteristics identified in the property suggest that it has the following values:

- Historical value, in that it reflects functions associated with events that took place during the republican and revolutionary eras.
- Artistic value, as its formal features, composition, expressiveness, and technical skill are associated with the aesthetic conception of the MoMo.
- Environmental value, as it forms part of the environment inherent to a modernist neighborhood in Santiago de Cuba.
- Social value, as it responds to local traditions and ways of life, and to the development of cultural activities of the population of Santiago and the community in which it is located.

All of the above shows that this is a high-value property, so any conservation work carried out must take into account functional modernization and adaptation to new needs, provided that activities aimed at maintaining its valuable attributes take precedence [12].

2.5 Results of the technical, structural, and environmental assessment of the building

The architectural survey and technical-structural diagnosis made it possible to identify the various types of damage

present in the building. These actions included observing the actual situation, creating files for visualization and location (Figure 6), describing the damage and its possible causes, and determining the area and type of intervention to be carried out. Non-destructive testing equipment, such as a rebar detector and a moisture meter, was also used to facilitate the detection of damage and understanding of the structural functioning of the building.

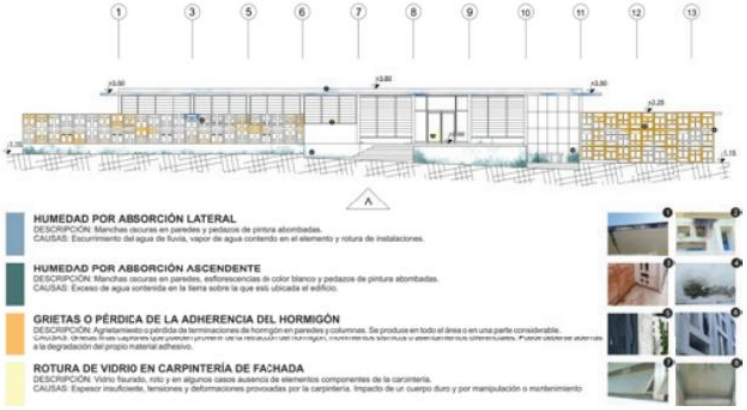

Figure 6. Damage report for elevation A. Source: authors, 2023

The damage observed is mainly related to moisture, with stains visible on the false ceiling, walls, and floors, indicating the presence of leaks. This type of damage may be indicative of sealing problems or poor-quality technical solutions, lack of maintenance, aging materials, leaks through the structure, or deficiencies in the building's storm drainage system.

There is also other specific damage to the structure of the building that may have been caused by concrete shrinkage, a phenomenon that can cause cracks and deterioration in structural elements, or by seismic movements, considering the geographical location of the building. Differential settlement caused by differences in soil compaction, which can generate stresses in the building's structure, is also observed.

Due to the visible climate problems occurring in today's world, caused mainly by greenhouse gas emissions into the atmosphere, the international community is paying special attention to low-energy buildings. Heritage buildings, as an important part of the culture and history of nations, must also direct their rehabilitation and conservation efforts towards environmental and energy benefits. Consultation of the current Cuban standard NC 220-1 [13] made it possible to evaluate the energy performance of the building envelope and propose recommendations for its sustainability.

From an environmental perspective, energy benefits were identified in the building in question, such as the use of natural light through large glass windows and the control of direct solar radiation by means of 1.20-meter eaves and lattices, elements that help reduce heat gain inside. In addition to this, there are large trees that act as solar screens. On the other hand, energy problems were detected, such as large glazed surfaces that remain closed due to the deterioration of the metal joinery and the use of double walls, which prevents natural ventilation. Likewise, the windows do not have adequate insulation, resulting in loss of air conditioning.

2.6 Guidelines for intervention in the building

The proposed intervention in the building primarily includes actions aimed at reversing the damage observed in the diagnosis, focusing mainly on the watertightness of the roof. To this end, it is proposed to replace the current waterproofing (asphalt felt) with a grid and welding, rectifying the slopes, which should range from a minimum of 2% to a maximum of 4%, and ensuring access to the roof by installing a spiral metal staircase anchored to the exterior of the building for the purpose of carrying out periodic maintenance or possible repairs.

Structural components found to be damaged during the building diagnosis, such as vertical and horizontal elements and marble pieces attached to the main facade, will be treated with materials that do not pose a risk to the integrity of the building. The carpentry and flooring will be preserved in their entirety, with work only being carried out on areas that show some type of damage.

The proposed architectural intervention seeks to respect and highlight the original characteristics of the building, preserving its identity and heritage value by removing unnecessary elements and restoring structural components. Likewise, special attention is paid to adapting the space to the current needs of the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design, creating environments that promote a sense of well-being and vitality.

Given that the current function of the building must be maintained, it is proposed to adapt the administrative areas to the storage requirements of plastic arts, taking into account humidity and temperature control, among other factors, as well as improving the working environment. Similarly, it is proposed to incorporate light catering services in the outdoor area adjacent to the old carport as a way of enhancing the economic sustainability of the institution.

The interior design of this building follows a minimalist approach, characterized by simplicity, visual cleanliness, reduction of ornamental elements, and prioritization of the art experience.

In the main exhibition hall, the walls will be light and neutral colors (white, cream, and light gray) to accentuate the visual contrast with the works of art (Figure 7). Direct, adjustable lighting is recommended to highlight the works of art in a focal manner. The transition from one area to another should be achieved through subtle changes in lighting that visually mark the different sections, or through flexible furniture, without the need for dividing walls. On the other hand, office areas will be implemented with functional furniture, with a clean design, in light wood or metal (Figure 8).

Figure 7. Interior design proposal. Source: authors and N. Romero, 2024

Figure 8. Interior design proposal. Source: authors and N. Romero, 2024

The implementation of conservation measures that eliminate the causes of damage to the building, both exterior and interior, should contribute to preserving its heritage value, ensuring its mark on the immediate context (Figure 9) as a legacy of the Modern Movement for future generations. Similarly, the proposed interior design guidelines should allow the Provincial Center for Plastic Arts and Design to convey a balanced atmosphere between the way the works are displayed and the modernity(exhibited by the building).

Figure 9. Proposed conservation design for the building, showing the relationship between the building and the urban components. Source: authors, 2023

3 Conclusion

This paper presents arguments demonstrating that the building that housed the offices of the United States Consulate in Santiago de Cuba retains the qualities that place it among the best examples of Modern Movement architecture in the city, standing out for its close relationship with its context in an organic way, despite its formal simplicity due to its construction and the symbolic-expressive and technical-constructive resources used.

The analysis of the historical evolution of the former United States Consulate in Santiago de Cuba provided an understanding of the context in which the building was erected, revealing how it has been adapted to various uses over time.

Defining its characteristics and heritage values has been essential in identifying the elements that contribute to its uniqueness and relevance in the built heritage.

The proposed intervention should contribute to recovering, enhancing, and preserving its heritage values, while seeking to integrate new interior design trends to give the building renewed vitality and adaptability while respecting its original essence.

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Conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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Notes

[1] As mentioned in *Linear City and Cross-Brooklyn Expressway*, Rogers, Taliaferro, and Lamb, these American architects have an extensive portfolio of urban projects, buildings of various types such as housing, commercial, and office buildings, as well as proposals for the rehabilitation of buildings, work that can be traced back to the 1960s.

[2] Norma del Mazo Almeida, an architect born in Havana, who carried out prolific work in Santiago de Cuba, participating in more than 50 projects within the rationalist architecture of the city and surrounding areas.