



The photographic arrangement grabs the instance when Sixta Núñez cuts through the ribbon to leave the park open to the public.



One of the masterminds of the project, Dr. Baudilio Castellanos, right after the inauguration ceremony

Longing for the Park

Nostalgia for the 8 000 cubicles. (8 000 taquillas). Combining the wisdom of the elder generation and the enthusiasm of the young age, a party of men and women from Varadero have committed themselves to rescue an genuine oeuvre of the Cuban revolution.

by Sonia Bueno and Luis Ubedas
fotos Courtesy of the authoress

It happened as in many other cases. I turned around and found myself face-to-face with that tall man, wearing the olive uniform as usual, who put his huge hand upon my shoulder and asked:

- How much is the entrance?
- 50 cents, Commander.
- Let's lower it to 30 cents...

Those occurrences date from more than 40 years ago, just when a beautiful ensemble, created by the talented architect Mario Girona, had come into existence, an oeuvre that should become emblematic for the city and beach resort of Varadero, the Park of the 8 000 Cubicles (Parque de la 8 000 taquillas).

Today, Sixta Núñez is 85 years old, but among the innumerable remembrances she hoards, she never could forget the sudden appearance of the Commander in Chief, Fidel Castro, and the words interchanged with him. "I likewise remember that day, when I was chosen to cut the ribbon at the inauguration ceremony of the Park. I felt deeply moved. You simply might imagine, a lowborn woman like me, and Dr. Baudilio Castellanos, the defence attorney of the Moncada combatants¹, who came and asked me to do it. It was incredible to me and so it was to my friend Gladis, when he asked her to hoist the flag. Well, Gladis isn't any more among us, but let me say something: If the Park is going to become what it was in those times, I'd like to be the one to cut the ribbon again!"

Particularities of a park

During a long time the park was the mandatory destination for thousands of summer visitors or those who liked to come to Varadero at any other time. Just remember that in Cuba the entire year is a never ending summer time. Having left your belongings in one of the cubicles (taquillas), you could count with the park's sanitary services, enjoy the cafeteria-restaurant that was replaced later on by the very popular Coppelia ice cream parlour, always surrounded by an natural environment

composed of kapok, hicosos, and sea grape trees, altogether very propitious for the recreation of children, adolescents, adults, and the elder age.

The first construction on those grounds dates from 1915. It was the Hotel Varadero, an exclusive site for the upper class of that era. Forty five years later the Park of the 8 000 Cubicles would come to replace that installation, an ensemble made for the whole people, built in the heart of what was to become Cuba's principal tourist pole, and in perfect harmony with the body of ideas of the recently triumphant revolution.

From that time the park became a centre for sporting, recreative and cultural events, and worked as a nautical point, where the rowing club had its grounds. Nevertheless during the final eighties, first signs of neglect could be observed around the installation, symptoms that even worsened as a consequence of the "special period" suffered during the following decade.

Grandfathers to the rescue?

Among those who intend to recover this place, many of them are elder people, next to them however there are persons of the so called "second age" who back them with love and enthusiasm. In conclusion there is a melody: "Young should be the one who wants to be...". Members of the University of the Elder Generation (Universidad del Adulto Mayor) and from the Club of 120 Years (Club de los 120 Años) of the City of Varadero decided on not to permit the disappearance of this architectural ensemble, thought and executed not just

² The so called "Special Period" (Período Especial) was declared in Cuba as a consequence of the breakdown of the Soviet Union and the Socialist Block, when the country lost most of its foreign commercial relations and the supply chain to the island nearly stopped. Even if this period came to its end in 2005, Cuba is - beside the effects from the U.S. blockade - still suffering very much under the economical consequences from those years.

³ The University of the Elder Generation (Universidad del Adulto Mayor) offer further education to pensioners and senior citizens, whereas the Club of 120 Years (Club de los 120 Años) is dedicated to social integration and health promotion among the elder part of the population (How to reach an age of 120 years while remaining healthy and active).

as a symbol of the beach resort but especially built for the practice of an integrated tourism for Cubans and foreign visitors, using a typical construction style from the Adriatic Sea.

Idelisa Pujol is the vice-director of the University of the Elder Generation of Varadero (CUAMV) with 212 active members, most of them organized in the Club of 120 Years, too. She also has been awarded "vanguardia"⁴ by the Public Health Union, and what she explains is: "The Park has been the meeting point for the community of Varadero and point of reference for the visitors, the place where the pensioners committee used to come together for its gymnastic practice. The construction of the park completely changed the social structure of the city. The female population for the first time got a participation in the labour activities and much of them worked even voluntarily using their proper means for the cleaning and maintenance of the cubicles."

"Regarding the economic aspects, it contributed a considerable benefit and prosperity to the community. The long time the park remained in service was an example for a sustainable investment."

The initiative has approached various instances at local, provincial and national level in order to avoid the disappearance of the Park and it's original concept, what they consider to result in an irreparable damage to the city's traditions and community.

Those, who committed themselves to rescue the place, claim that the Park of the 8 000 Cubicles shall be maintained as a social and communitarian meeting point and be reconstructed according to it's initial form and historical function on behalf of the social service and benefit.

The members of the CUAMV and the Club of 120 Years as conservators and watchpersons of the communitarian traditions are willing and prepared to participate in the organization, reconstruction and posterior operation dedicated to the Park's preservation. They also aim to have the Park included in the national heritage.

Worries and remembrances

For 69 years old Margarita Herrera, who lives in 52^o Street, Tibol district, the concept of the Park was

something magnificent. People came from far away and found a place where to leave their belongings, water, food and sanitary services. "Thereby the beach remained unpopulated and people did not wander around carrying all their things with them. My husband and me used to take our children to the Park where they could run around and ride the bicycle..."

Now as pensioners - Margarita confirms - we do not have a place where we could come together, with benches and shade. In my opinion they should never have permitted the park's decline. If the creators could see it now, they wouldn't even believe it..."

At his age of 82 with 8 children and 23 grandchildren, Juan Torres (Fisherman, living in 53^o Street) reminds when he worked as a driver at the construction side for the Italian chief engineer: "I also remember Celia Sanchez⁵ to examine the construction progress frequently, and, of course the aquatic marathons that were organized at the Park. The "Zafiros"⁶ used to give concerts there and I also remember a show of Danny Rivera... Among other reasons the Park went out of service for obstructions in the waste water system. To my mind it would be beneficial to recover the it..."

The people of Varadero speak about a projected shopping complex at the park's grounds. In their opinion such a project does not further the values mentioned before, on the contrary, it just promotes the consumerism. In addition they consider that complex to be less profitable than a project based on the Park's original concept.

They affirm that the rescue initiative so far counts on the support of organisations like the National Association of Architects and Engineers (UNAIAC)⁷, the EMPAI No. 8⁸, and especially the

⁵ Celia Sanchez Manduley, a famous heroine of the guerrilla war against the Batista tyranny. Well known and beloved for her social commitment. Even more than two decades after her death she remains very much on the minds of Cuban people.

⁶ Famous Cuban band "Unión Nacional de Arquitectos e Ingenieros de la Construcción de Cuba. The association is a non-governmental organization under the auspices of the Ministry of Construction

⁷ Empresa de Proyectos de Arquitectura e Ingeniería. The leading project engineering company in Matanzas, the province Varadero belongs to.

architect of the original project, Mario Girona.

"I was lucky to live close to the Park, so my friends and me used to go there with our children where they could mount the goat drawn cart for 20 cents or ride velocipede and bicycle. We were four mothers with our children and sometimes we remained there until 10 p.m. When we were in love in our younger days we used to meet at the park, too. So, in some sense, our children are children of the Park", relates Nidia Teresa Herrera, age 65, five children, and living in 44^o Street.

Moreover, Ángela Hernández Sotolongo, 75 years old, who live in 45^o Street, Cayo Confites district, remember with certain nostalgia that the very best and most delicious food of the town was served at Park's restaurant, "Shark and turtle steak for 1.50 Pesos... My mother was a laundress and worked at the cubicles Her name was Tomasa Sotolongo. Arriving to Varadero you could immediately hear the music. Very often I danced there with the rhythm of Benny's Santa Isabel de las Lajas... I can clearly affirm: It was the Park that made this town be alive..."

People who never spared an effort to be useful to the society during their whole life, and founded decorous families, have the right to solicit the rescue of a place that belongs to them. Even more when they still play an important role in education or the Club of 120 years.

There couldn't be a more appropriate conclusion than those words Idelisa Pujol chose in the name of her colleagues to finish the missive sending to different state instances: "The completion of the Park was an humanitarian gesture and contributed very much to our community's social development. We are ready to contribute with our knowledge and experiences and the old age is no obstacle to make available again a place in the heart of our city, that will continue to cultivate human generations."

⁸ Benny Moré, 1919 - 1963. Cuban singer, song writer and band leader. Often considered the most famous musician of Cuban history. From 1959 until his death he spent very much time working and living in Varadero and performed also during the opening ceremony of the Park. Varadero is among the merely four cities "El Benny" has dedicated a song to: "Cuando a Varadero llegué..." ("When I came to Varadero...").

¹ Miscreant assault by a revolutionary group, led by Fidel Castro, on the Moncada barracks at Santiago de Cuba on July 26^o 1953. Several combatants were killed during the assault. Most of them however were caught and condemned to prison sentences during a trial.