

Looking at Participatory Planning in Cuba... through an Art Deco Window

By Marie Kennedy, Lorna Rivera and Chris Tilly

Last January we sat with about thirty Cubans in a community arts center in Boyeros, on the outskirts of Havana, Cuba. The group included artists, teachers, social workers, government officials, architects, engineers and health professionals, all working in Boyeros. We were leading a three-day participatory planning workshop to

ety of socialism has featured both large-scale planning (physical, economic, social) and massive popular participation through active mass organizations and frequent mobilizations. Participatory planning, however, has remained more elusive. Experiments in participatory planning finally began to emerge and then multiply in the late 1980s and 1990s, spurred by the disappearance of Soviet influence and by the economic crisis that paralyzed standard planning methodologies predicated on plentiful resources. Given the country's high level of collective consciousness and organization, participatory planning would seem like a natural approach for planning in Cuba. Nonetheless, serious obstacles to participatory planning remain, including the veneration of "expertise," which took us by surprise at the end of the first day of our workshop. Our January workshop can serve as a useful window through which to look back at the uneven history of participatory planning in Cuba, and forward to future possibilities.

A Brief History of Community Planning in Cuba

Every socialist country has had to manage a set of tensions surrounding popular participation: How to balance local initiative with a set of national priorities? How to reconcile goals of equality with opportunities for communities to shape their own development? How to facilitate widespread participation without opening the door for internal and external foes of the revolution? Cuba, along with the other countries of the former Soviet bloc, resolved these tensions by leaning toward centralization and top-down planning. But over time, Cuba has incorporated more decentralization, consultation with ever larger numbers of people and channels for bottom-up influence.

On the whole, the Cuban state tends to operate in the advocacy rather than transformative planning paradigm—that is, it acts for the people rather than empowering the people to act for themselves. Many good things have happened as a result: excellent schools; a health care system that is the envy of much of the world; and widespread distribution of benefits like adequate and affordable housing. But there have also been negative results: slum clearance and the dispersal of resi-

help this group identify ways that the 1930s Art Deco arts center, currently under renovation, could be used to spark broader community development.

As the first day drew to a close, we felt good about the day's work. We had turned the Cubans loose in a small group exercise that used art to explore community problems and possible solutions. When the small groups presented their skits, poems and drawings, they yielded laughter along with acute insights on life in Boyeros. Following time-honored popular education principles, we kept the focus on the Boyeros community and left our Boston planning experiences off the table. But when it came to evaluating the day's work, the recurring comment was, "We would like the compañeros from Boston to tell us how they do planning at home."

Since shortly after its 1959 revolution, Cuba's vari-

Photo by Marie Kennedy



dents with no regard to the social networks destroyed in the process; universal policies applied regardless of cultural and historical differences; mandated “color- and gender-blind” equality that doesn’t touch the complex roots of racism and sexism.

Mass organizations such as the network of neighborhood-based Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs) and the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) also operate in a top-down manner, primarily mobilizing people for campaigns in order to carry out centrally determined objectives. Rarely have these organizations employed methods to empower their membership to craft the program of action.

In 1976 *Poder Popular* (Popular Power) was introduced, creating 169 local government authorities. For the first time, individual citizens were allowed to nominate candidates for public office and elect representatives—by direct secret ballot—to a government body, the municipal councils. As with the mass organizations, however, the primary role of the municipal councils, which lack budgetary control, has been to carry out decisions made centrally and to communicate between their constituents and the central organs of the state.

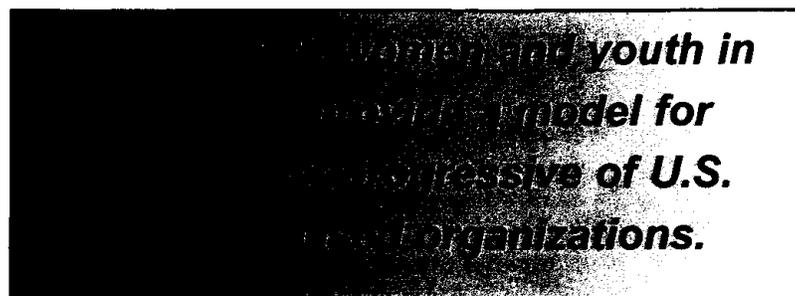
In the last decade-and-a-half, several factors have influenced the development of participatory democracy in Cuba: the economic crisis that resulted from the collapse of the Soviet bloc; the reforms of the 1990s to confront that crisis; and renewed US hostility toward Cuba. In general, the reforms have provided openings for more participation in local decision-making and to some extent have geographically decentralized power within a system that is still highly centralized.

At the beginning of the “Special Period” (as the period of economic crisis from 1989 through the 1990s was termed), Popular Power was augmented by the establishment of neighborhood-based and elected Popular Councils. These councils are made up of volunteer delegates elected in each neighborhood and representatives of the main economic, social and service institutions, such as the CDRs and the FMC. These neighborhood-based councils support the work of their delegate to the Municipal Council, working closely with residents to identify and advocate for local issues. In 1992, constitutional reforms also established a more direct electoral system for the National Assembly, although candidates for the Assembly are still nominated through a process largely controlled by the Cuban Communist Party.

Meanwhile, new institutions were promoting par-

ticipatory community development strategies. The first government-linked source of such activity was the *Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital* (GDIC, Group for the Comprehensive Development of the Capital). In 1988, the GDIC was created and charged with improving life in Havana. GDIC immediately established Neighborhood Transformation Workshops in three neighborhoods, focusing primarily on physical improvements. With the onset of the Special Period and the related scarcity of building materials, attention shifted to the social needs of communities. The goal of the workshops became the integration of social and physical planning with broad participation in decision-making. Staff of the workshops was broadened to include sociologists and community organizers in addition to architects and engineers.

A major campaign to develop effective participatory community planning methods was launched. Marie, along with planner/activists Merri Ansara and Mel King, facilitated an early two-week seminar with about forty staff mem-



bers from the twelve workshops operating in 1993. They found that the main barriers to participatory planning were essentially two sides of the same coin: residents expected to have their needs met on the basis of decisions made by experts and professionals who were educated to fix problems for people. But in the Special Period, experts could no longer fix things, given the sudden and drastic reduction of resources. Marie introduced her seminar by saying: “You’re going to love this, because it gets you off the hook. Your role will be to help people to set priorities and design strategies, not to solve problems for them.”

Because of the basic values of Cuba’s socialist political culture (social justice, equality, freedom), many of the workshops (of which there are now twenty) have far outstripped similar efforts in the US to put decision-making power in the hands of those most affected by the problems being addressed. For example, the work with women and youth in Atarés could provide a model for ⇨

even the most progressive of US community-based organizations.

Another well-spring of bottom-up participation is the Havana-based Martin Luther King Center, founded in 1987 by Cuban evangelical Baptists who supported the revolution. Fueled in part by international donations from groups like Pastors for Peace, the Center has trained thousands in popular education techniques, and currently works with nine local groups in Havana and the neighboring province of Matanzas. Projects focus on what the Center calls socio-cultural community transformation, for example, organizing dance troupes, baseball teams, community newspapers and groups to advocate for women's issues.

**... greatest strength
... community-based
... collective spirit that**

The examples of the GDIC and the MLK Center have spilled over to some Popular Councils and other sectors and the Boyeros Workshop is another outgrowth. But while sociologist Miren Uriarte reports that hundreds of other participatory community development projects are currently underway, bottom-up participation remains the exception rather than the rule.

The Boyeros Workshop: A Window on Participatory Planning Today

We ended up in the high-ceilinged, airy Art Deco meeting room in Boyeros through a collaboration between Common Ground, a US-Cuba solidarity and exchange organization; Alberto Faya, the municipal coordinator of the Cuban Writers' and Artists' Union (UNEAC) in Boyeros; and architect/planner Gina Rey, former director of the GDIC. Also helping to pull together the meeting were Juan Puentes, director of the art gallery located in the Center, and Carmen Monteagudo of the Center for Exchange and Reference on Community Initiatives (CIERIC), a Cuban NGO linked to UNEAC that supports arts-based community work.

Faya's energetic organizing brought more than forty people to the workshop over the three half-day sessions, twenty-five to thirty each day. Based on discussion with Faya and Rey, we set our main goals as helping to build the group (only a dozen of this group had met together before) and to

teach participatory techniques by example. We did lots of small group work, including groups defined by sector (teachers, artists) and mixed groups. We also used plenary presentations, report-backs and discussions. We incorporated arts-based activities (such as role-playing and a wall-sized participatory mural depicting the community people would like to see), both to link the activities to the arts-based development strategy and simply to keep the sessions lively. We used daily evaluations (primarily via post-its distributed to participants) to guide planning for the following day's activities. For instance, we set up the mural in response to a request that there be graphic illustration of the workshop's ideas. And yes, we did end up talking about our own planning work in Boston.

The three days spotlighted some of the strengths that Cuban socialism brings to community-based planning and also some of the obstacles. Perhaps the greatest strength is the collective spirit that Cuba has cultivated through decades of education, exhortation and collective activity. The prospect of planning for Boyeros was daunting, given the fact that the area is diverse, dispersed and largely rural, and especially given the continuing resource constraints of the Special Period. But the workshop participants eagerly tackled the work, generating creative ideas for using the arts to bring people in the community together to improve their lives. An initial brainstorm on this topic came up with suggestions including the promotion of arts-based tourism (though opinions differed on whether tourism would be a positive); using the arts in mental health therapy and smoking prevention; artisan fairs; street theater; concerts; and special activities directed at youth and seniors, including a *discotemba* (*temba* is Cuban slang for an old person). The group's seriousness in searching for solutions to problems facing all parts of the community was indeed impressive.

A second strength was the organizational base that participants brought to the undertaking. Cubans are highly organized—as students, workers, farmers, women, neighborhood residents. For instance, young people with artistic talents receive state-sponsored training and then a salary, and become members of UNEAC. The workshop participants were connected to each other and to a broader set of people in the community through well-established organizations, and in many cases were there as official representatives of these organizations. We exploited this fact on the second day of the workshop, when we first mixed up people from different sectors in small groups to brainstorm links between the arts and their com-

munity work, and then regrouped them by sector to choose one of the brainstormed ideas and suggest an implementation strategy.

Another very encouraging sign was the active participation of Popular Power—the local government—in this explicitly bottom-up workshop. Corinthia Estrada, a Popular Council representative, summarized the government group's strategy suggestions. To our surprise, she identified the main obstacle as bureaucracy, and declared that the challenge was to "break with the organizational and administrative systems that prevent the sustainability of this community art project." The group suggested that the entire art center be placed under one administration (it is currently divided). "Put the artists in charge!" Estrada concluded.

Finally, groups already active in participatory planning and popular education brought energy and ideas to the workshop. We have already mentioned that Gina Rey, the founding director of Havana's GDIC, was one of the collaborators. The Writers' and Artists' Union has also launched a community work initiative, and that initiative's head, Rogelio Rivero, gave a presentation as part of the workshop. CIERIC, the NGO co-sponsoring the meeting, is a new and interesting type of animal for Cuba. As an NGO, it has flexibility and the ability to raise money from abroad (in CIERIC's case, primarily from the European Union). But unlike the MLK Center, it also has direct ties to an official mass organization, the Writers' and Artists' Union.

But some of the weaknesses of Cuban planning—weaknesses shared with planning in the United States and other countries—were also on display. The cult of expertise shaped our interaction with the Boyeros group. The large turnout was due, in part, to the expectation that the *académicos norteamericanos* would bring answers with them. The tug-of-war over whether we would discuss Boston reflected the differing assumptions that we and they brought to the meeting. When evaluations of the first day revealed that many wanted us to talk about our work in Boston, we carefully explained that we thought it most important to learn from the circumstances of Boyeros. But when second-day evaluations included at least as many requests for us to share Boston experiences, we finally broke down and did it. After we told about organizing around welfare, homelessness and the living wage, the first response was, "Ah, so there is an economic crisis in the United States as well." A fruitful exchange resulted, and we concluded that refusing to talk about our experiences had flowed from an overly rigid interpretation of popular education methodology. In avoiding the cult of the

expert perhaps we had fallen into the cult of the community.

A related issue was participants' habituation to a particular style of teaching—lecturing rather than popular education. We were asked repeatedly, "Tell us your techniques," and had to reply repeatedly, "These *are* our techniques. We prefer to demonstrate them rather than talk about them."

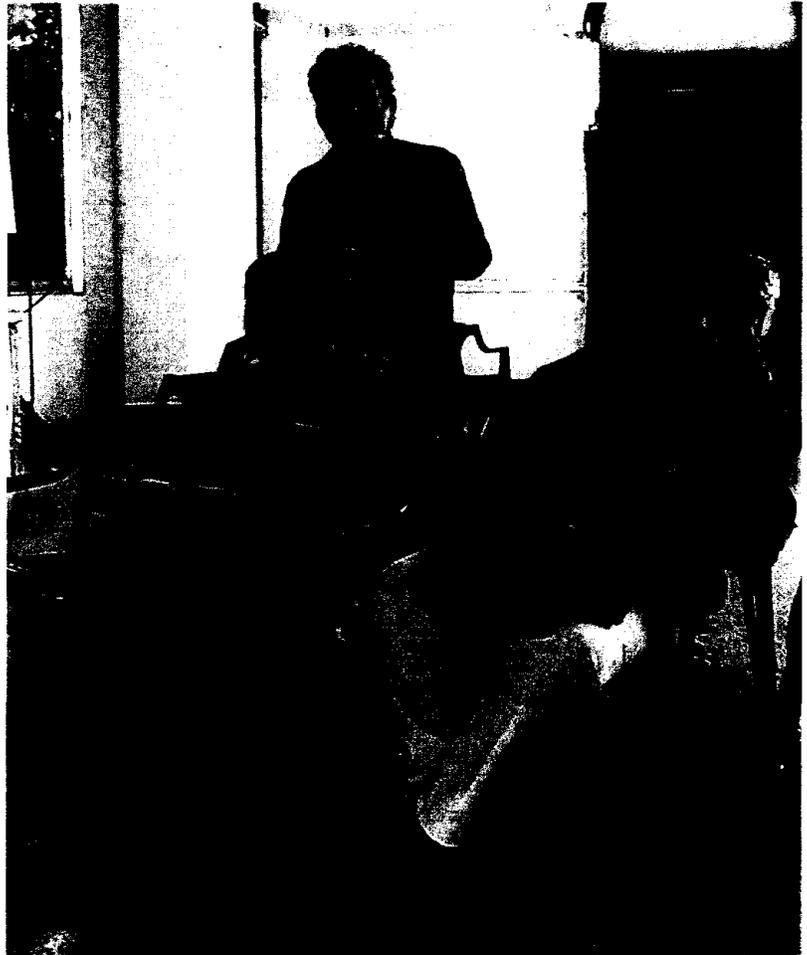


Photo by Marie Kennedy

The Cubans in the workshop were deeply immersed in an approach based on service rather than organizing, perceiving their role as serving people rather than mobilizing or empowering them. This was obvious from the outset in who was invited to the workshop. The room was full of people-serving professionals. Artists, teachers, doctors and social workers were there; housewives, industrial workers, students and farmers were not. The representatives of the mass organizations, such as the women's federation, were paid staff members who defined themselves as social workers. In discussions of disadvantaged populations, these professionals sometimes slipped into stereotyping and blaming the victim, as when a social worker acting out a cigar-puffing, willfully unemployed, unwed pregnant teen drew guffaws from the assembly. ⇨

Reflecting on how all of this limited the discussion, we devoted a portion of the final day to an exercise on "who's not in the room." We facilitated a brainstorm of social categories not represented in the room, followed by a vote to choose

ing industrial workers proposed that the workers help with the rehabilitation of the arts center and the production of art materials, and that the artists help decorate the factories to make them more pleasant work environments.

Cuban Socialism and Participatory Planning

In summary, thanks to the strengths in the Cuban planning tradition and in spite of its weaknesses, we and the other participants counted the workshop a success. Everybody came away energized and with new ideas. A sizable planning group for the arts center project was solidified, expanding well beyond the small core of artists that had met previously. And the outputs of the meeting, carefully typed up from flip charts and post-its and circulated among all participants, constitute a rich lode of possible priorities and strategies for the planning group to mine.

This kind of experience is being repeated all over Havana, and increasingly in other parts of Cuba. In the best cases, such as the Atarés Neighborhood Transformation Workshop, community-based planning has become institutionalized and is taking on one tough issue after another. But even these best cases are limited by the fact that decision-making above the local level is still tightly controlled. And in too many neighborhoods, officials use the rhetoric of participation while maintaining traditional, top-down planning practice.

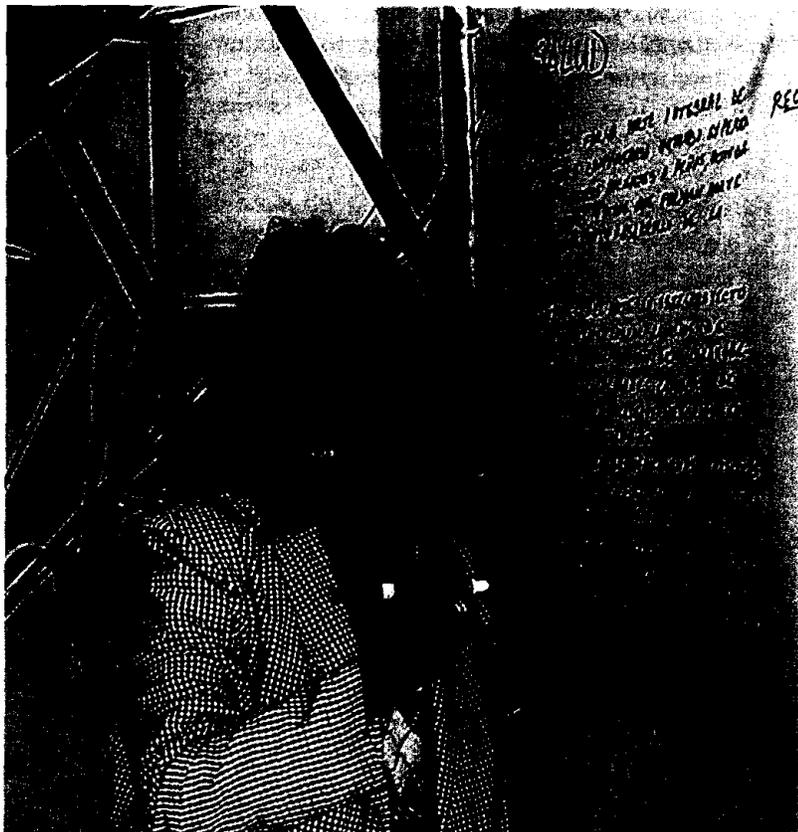
Despite the difficulties, we came away convinced of two things. First, participatory planning has much to offer to Cuban socialism. And second, Cuban socialism, with its long collective tradition and strong infrastructure of mass organizations, has much to offer to participatory planning.

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Photo by Marie Kennedy



the five most important (the results included farm workers, industrial workers and young people who were neither working nor in school). Then we formed five breakout groups corresponding to these categories, instructing them to role play members of the category discussing how they would like to relate to the arts in general and the art center in particular.

The results were fascinating and ultimately quite powerful. Despite their deference to our expertise, the participants were unable or unwilling to do the role-play, and instead talked about these groups in the third person. Thinking empathetically about what those absent might want was a stretch. One art teacher told us later, "That was the hardest part of the entire workshop!" But stretch they did. For example, the farm workers' group suggested bringing arts activities out into the countryside; linking the arts center to the annual agricultural fair that takes place a short distance away; promoting the revitalization of rural cultural traditions such as folk music, wearing the *guayabera* and cooking traditional foods; and bringing a representative of farm workers onto the planning group. The people represent-