Tina Bucuvalas

Little Havana

The Cubanization of Miami's Cultural Heritage

Florida's settlement history and natural resources have fostered a wide variety of distinct folk architectural forms and environments—Seminole ***chickees,*** Cracker houses, Bahamian style buildings, and ethnic districts such as Miami's Little Havana, to name a few. To folklorists, folk architecture associated with Cubans is of great ethnographic interest. Folk architecture, including Cuban, has recently become a topic of research interest at the Florida State Historic Preservation Office.

In 1995, the Florida Folklife Program was incorporated into the State Historic Preservation Office. The first two years of this marriage have been happy ones, as program staff have discovered a variety of ways in which folklife and historic preservation concerns overlap. Among the most obvious common ground is traditional architecture and its relationship to communities. While folklorists and historic preservationists have historically viewed traditional architecture somewhat differently, in recent years, the gap has been closing. Folklorists have been able to contribute an ethnographic viewpoint on traditional architecture and traditional cultural properties. On a practical level, this has resulted in the incorporation of a traditional cultural properties perspective in a recent National Register nomination for an African American community.

In folk architecture, there are no blueprints. Instead, builders rely upon traditional forms and techniques that are part of their cultural heritage. Folk architecture addresses the specific needs of an environment through the use of available resources and application of builders' traditional knowledge to residences, outbuildings, and other structures. It also deals with materials, techniques, built environments (e.g., communities with consistent decorative and spatial architectural features), communal areas, landscaping, and decorative or utilitarian elements added to buildings. While some traditional buildings or districts that incorporate traditional architectural elements may be less than 50 years old, both the longevity of traditions to which they belong and the historical importance of the folk groups that built them would argue for their recognition by historic preservationists.

Florida and Cuba have a long, intertwined history. From the early period of European contact to the present day, their peoples have moved back and forth across the narrow passage as the tides of history have turned—profoundly changing and influencing each other in the process. The earliest Cuban architectural influences came to Florida during the colonial period, when Cuba was served as the Spanish administrative center for Florida. Although that heritage was lost, the 1920s Mediterranean Revival style favored by South Florida developers utilized such Cuban architectural elements as tiles and certain landscape plants.

In the last 40 years, Miami's demographic balance has shifted radically due to an unprecedented influx of immigrants from the Caribbean and Latin America. Between 1959 and 1980, over 625,000 Cubans fled into exile in Miami. In the 1980s, hundreds of thousands of Haitians, Nicaraguans, Jamaicans, Columbians, and others from Caribbean and Latin American nations streamed into the area. The 1990 census revealed that, of the 2 million persons residing in Dade County, 21% were black, 30% were non-Hispanic white, and 49% Hispanic.

These figures add up to a remarkable sum. Forty years ago, Miami was a small, relaxed resort city with a blend of residents primarily from the Northeast, South, and the Midwest. Today, it has been transformed into one of the most cosmopolitan and multilingual cities in the hemisphere. With more than 800,000 residents from the Caribbean, Miami must be considered the area's capital. And with a Spanish-speaking majority, Miami is one of the most influential Latin American cities.

Today, the majority of Miami's Hispanic population is Cuban and Cuban American. Cubans have established new homes and businesses, and in doing so, they created powerful commercial institutions with links to Latin American and Caribbean countries. Although integrated in the American economic mainstream, they have not abandoned many of the traditions that make their folklife unique. Many elements of Cuban architectural construction, materials, styles, and environments are now common in Miami, due both to the

environmental similarities and to the dominant Cuban community. Moreover, a wide variety of other traditional cultural elements are integrated into Cuban districts.

The Cubanization of the Miami environment did not truly get underway until the mid-1960s, when Cuban immigrants gradually transformed the Riverside area near Flagler and SW Eighth Streets into a markedly Cuban residential and commercial area. The transformation of Riverside started with applied ornamentation such as murals, signs, and decoration. Signs displayed numerous references to national heroes or other famous people, places in Havana, landscape traits such as royal poinciana trees or rural scenes with bohios, and religious trappings. As they became more economically stable, Cubans started to purchase ornamentation that was typical of or made reference to Cuba. For example, they planted tropical fruits trees such as the guava, anon, or caimito in yards. They expanded porches to allow enough space for two Cuban-style rocking chairs and for increased social interaction.

The commercial areas, in particular, were profoundly transformed. In addition to applying architectural details such as imitation tiled roofs and eaves, small businesses employed Cuban advertising techniques. For example, many businesses featured large, bright signs painted directly on the wall, and the sidewalk became an integral extension of many commercial establishments. Open-air markets stocked tropical fruits and vegetables in bins facing the sidewalk, and cafes placed tables and chairs outside. Markets frequently opened counters to the sidewalk to offer ***cafe cubano, pastelitos,*** cigars, and other sundries to passersby. Small-scale street vendors also utilized sidewalk and parking spaces to sell from brightly painted trucks or carts piled with tropical fruits or sweets.

Finally, the immigrants established a wide variety of larger establishments named or modeled after places and things in Cuba: La Floridita Restaurant, Mi Bohio Restaurant, Veradero Supermarket, and others. The transformation was remarkable—Riverside became Little Havana. As Cubans have gradually become more affluent and moved to newer areas in western Dade County, they have created places that combine Latin American and American traits from their inception.

Although construction techniques and styles may differ from those in Cuba, an assortment of traditional architectural crafts still flourishes. For example, iron grillwork has become a common feature on houses and commercial establishments. Grillwork has both decorative and utilitarian functions: it provides an aesthetic dimension at the same time that it prevents burglaries. Due to the high cost of handmade wrought iron, most grillwork is assembled from pre-fabricated pieces to match the needs of the homeowner and the proportions of the house. However, a few traditional Cuban ironworkers continue to create distinctive gates, doors, fences, and window guards for customers who appreciate fine craftsmanship.

This small Cuban market with counter open to sidewalk customers on Calle Ocho (SW 8th Street) illustrates the transformation of Little Havana, Miami, by the many Cuban immigrants and Cuban Americans. Photo by Michele Edelson,courtesy the Historical Museum of Southern Florida.

In Cuba, most houses have clay tile roof and floors. Cubans have brought tile making skills to Miami, where they have adapted them to the local environment. Since South Florida has no native clays, roofs and floor tiles are made from cement. This development is highly functional because cement tiles last longer in the hot, moist climate. Roof tiles are molded by hand from cement that is left a natural gray or tinted red with iron oxide.

Cuban style floor tiles provide coolness and freshness in houses during the hot tropical days. Craftsmen create the floor tiles in variety of sizes, shapes, and textures. Surfaces can be made irregular, smooth, natural, or precise. Tiles may be gray, colored with pigments, or sometimes stenciled with designs after they dry. Colors vary from vivid to subtle and delicate. Shapes range from the simple square to hexagons, octagons, elongated hexagons, ***fleur de lis,*** and other shapes up to 24 square inches.

The hundreds of religious shrines in Cuban American neighborhood are distinctive features of

the Miami landscape. The statue of a saint is visible through a glass door or glass walls. While the statues are always of Catholic saints, they may actually represent either a Catholic saint or a Santeria deity. The difference may be discernible only through the type of offerings in and around the shrine. The shrines appear in a wide range of sizes, from 2' to 10' in height and 2' to 6' in width, and may be set directly on the ground or atop a pedestal. Craftspeople make shrines of many different materials in rectangular, circular, or octagonal shapes, while some garden shops in Hispanic areas offer commercially mass produced yardshrines without statues. Yardshrines seem to have become popular among Cubans after exile, and they may be erected in fulfillment of a vow or to express the owner's devotion to a particular saint or deity.

Although Cubans and Cuban Americans now make their homes in all parts of Miami, Little Havana has maintained a decidedly Cuban character. There are furniture stores that sell distinctive Cuban-style rocking chairs, food vendors offering tropical drinks and Cuban cuisine, and small cigar-making establishments. Then, of course, there is Domino Park—where older Cuban men gather daily to play passionate games of dominoes while they share cups of Cuban coffee and commentary on politics, passersby, and the world in general. At the Bay of Pigs Memorial, you can often glimpse teary-eyed family members as they cross themselves and reflects on their loss of both loved ones and county. Little Havana also hosts many widely attended annual community events, such as the Calle Ocho Festival, the Three Kings Day parade, and a Jose Martí birthday parade.

When I walk the streets of Little Havana, I am frequently reminded of the words of exiled Cuban poet Nestor Diaz Devillegas, ***"A veces me pregunto donde temina la verdad y donde comienza el folclor en esas Habanas imaginarias que nos inventarnos en las esquinas de Miami."*** [Sometimes I ask myself where the truth ends and where the folklore begins in these imaginary Havanas that we invent on the corners of Miami.]* Cuban Miami is now a part of Florida's cultural reality.

Note

* "Un portal fuera del tiempo," ***El Nuevo Herald,*** June 4, 1993, page 23D.

Tina Bucuvalas is a folklorist with the Bureau of Historic Preservation, Division of Historical Resources, Florida Department of State.

Hispanic Privateers and Ancestral Metallurgists in Hopewell Exhibit

In anticipation of National Hispanic Heritage Month from September 15 to October 15, the National Park Service has opened a temporary exhibit at the Hopewell Furnace National Historic Site visitor center called "Peruvians and Hidalgos—Potters and Privateers." This presentation deals with Spanish and Pre-Columbian metal smelting and metal working as well as the unusual story of a supposed pirate who was very likely the first Hispanic iron worker in Pennsylvania. The exhibit will be on display through the end of October.

"As it turns out, I'm not the first Fernandez related to the iron industry of Pennsylvania," said Hopewell Furnace Superintendent Josie Fernandez, who immigrated to the United States from Cuba in 1969. "I was particularly delighted to learn that another Fernandez may have made the same trip, if for different and somewhat dubious reasons, some 250 years ago."

"His role as both an iron worker and adventurer provides a focus for our exhibit," she said. "The exhibit explores the little publicized, yet extensive history of metal working in both Spain and Pre-Columbian America."

Hopewell Furnace is located five miles south of Birdsboro, Pennsylvania, on Route 345. For more information, call 610-582-8773 (Voice); 610-582-2093 (TDD).

—Jeffrey Collins