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Calle Ocho

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Background: Festival on Calle Ocho, with downtown Miami in background. **Inset:** Brigade 2506 Memorial Plaza.

Opening photos

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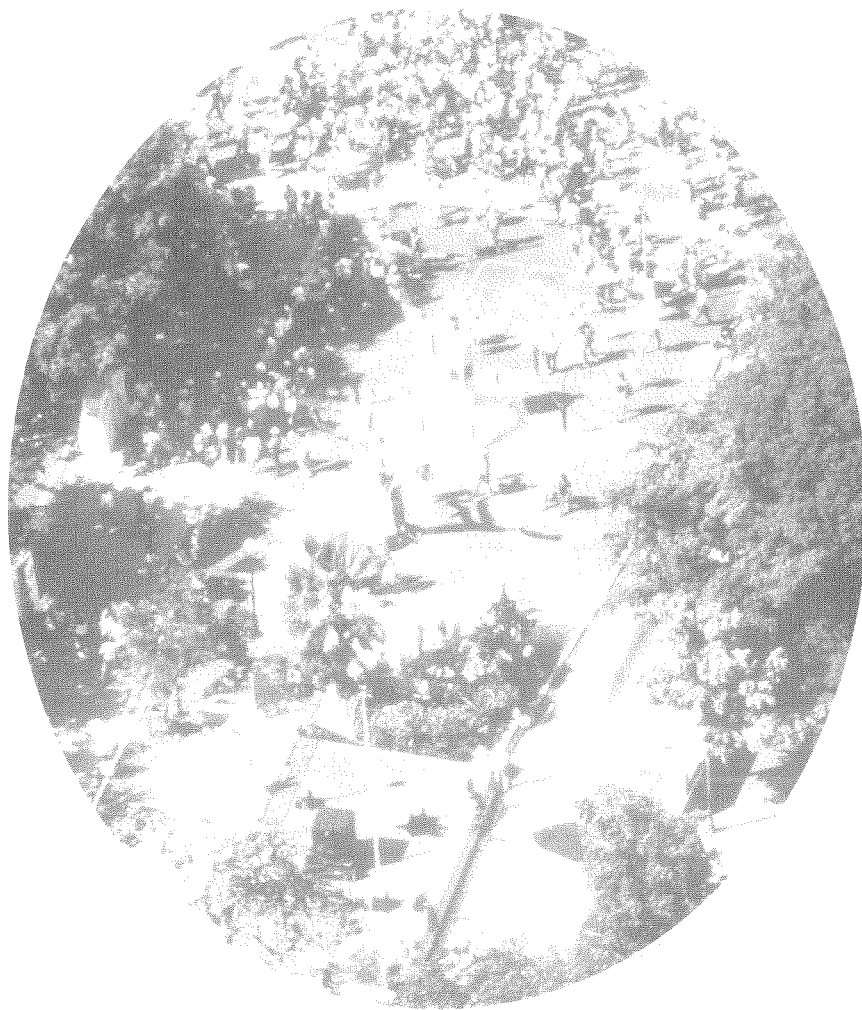
Other photos courtesy

Ramon Trias.

New forms of urbanity, such as those associated with recent commercial developments and new town centers, are no longer produced as the result of a layering through time (urbanity as we know it in historic centers). In fact, as Rodolfo Machado has pointed out, “. . . in the very near future, and more often than not, urbanity will be produced ‘artificially’ rather than . . . as the ‘natural’ result of a culture at work, as it has normally been produced . . .”¹ At the same time, the role of architecture in the making of public spaces has become increasingly limited, if not eclipsed, by private land developers, zoning officials and traffic engineers, depleting the profession of its traditional civic dimension.

This essay presents a general diagnosis of the public spaces thus produced as an attempt to lay the basis for redefining the relationship between architecture and city-making. Through the specific analysis of Miami’s Calle Ocho, an existing alternative to this prevailing condition, this essay seeks to put forth a general theoretical proposition by which architectural practice can effect the production of public spaces today.

That urbanity is “no longer the ‘natural’ result of a culture at work” could be illustrated by the



conspicuous similarities among residential and commercial developments throughout the U.S., despite the variety of the landscape and the richness of its people's cultural and ethnic backgrounds. This condition is exacerbated in cities like Miami, which have no pre-twentieth century history and know no traditional urbanity. The city's center, which covers less than a square mile, by no means holds the density associated with the downtown of cities like Boston, Philadelphia, Chicago and New York, whose historical contingencies have given them a particular character. Around this nucleus Miami displays only the suburban configurations found elsewhere — shopping centers, office parks, highways, condominiums, commercial strips and square mile after square mile of single family homes.

At the same time, the predominance of the automobile has given privilege to long-range rather than short-range circulation, resulting in the fragmentation and discontinuity of public access at the local level, where emphasis is placed on singular and centralized connections

over multiple and dispersed ones. This has led to the production of localized enclaves rather than spaces that serve the city at large, and, conversely, spaces that serve the city at large but disregard the local. Miami's highways, for instance, effectively connect the city at large, in turn acting as physical barriers and often dividing neighborhoods. The city's square-mile grid constitutes its system of collector roads, facilitating circulation at large but impeding connections at the local scale.

For the most part, Miami's public interventions have been limited to its infrastructure while the rest of the landscape has been left to private enterprise. As a result, the public spaces produced today are epitomized by the interior street of the mall and the covered courtyard of the office park, which are, in fact, "privatized" commercial spaces masquerading as "public." Such models are public insofar as they are available to the public, but they are owned, operated and controlled by private enterprise.

Furthermore, the real estate ventures that shape our environment tend

to be single, large-scale interventions that are produced over a short period of time because they respond and belong to a particular market. The city can no longer be understood only as a place that provides the setting for consumption to take place; it also is an object of consumption, becoming a commodity itself.

In this respect, Miami displays public life no different from that of other U.S. cities, despite its particular climate and geography and the presence of different multicultural groups, which give the city a unique character and way of life. This "sameness" of public spaces makes us question their "publicness."² Contrarily, it might be argued that such sameness is in fact "culture at work"; as Rafael Moneo has pointed out, despite the common pluralistic image of the U.S., a certain homogeneity prevails, supported by an all-encompassing media.³ I would argue, nevertheless, that a closer look at how spaces are occupied differently from place to place might indicate otherwise.



Calle Ocho is a regional traffic artery that connects downtown Miami to a highway crossing the Everglades.

U.S. 41 and Little Havana

The American typology of the strip has led to places that look the same in Boston and Miami — low-scale commercial buildings set back from the street by a sea of parking. The food franchises found in both might be the same: Denny's, Burger King, or Sizzler; and the prevailing stores will not be different: supermarkets, lumber stores, pharmacies, video stores, liquor stores, and the like. In Miami, however, Calle Ocho (Eighth Street) has developed alternative typologies that conform to the strip configuration but activate it quite differently.

Eighth Street evolved into a strip in the early 1920s, when it was extended through the Everglades to connect Miami to Fort Myers and then up to Tampa (it was officially designated U.S. 41 and acquired the name "Tamiami Trail").⁴ During this time, the city's small Latin population was located elsewhere, along a tangential strip of north-west Miami. This group was composed largely of middle-class Cubans interspersed with a few wealthy Cubans who placed their large homes amid the modest, framed bungalows of the area.

In the late thirties, "... as the downtown Black population was expanding into the Latin neighborhood, Cubans started moving south, eventually establishing a neighborhood around Eighth Street."⁵ Before the immigration wave of "anti-Castroites" began populating Miami in the 1960s, the area was already well on the way to becoming Miami's Latin district.

In the manner of other "ethnic" quarters in the U.S., Little Havana provides Latin immigrants with the safety of a neighborhood in which everyone shares a similar history, parallel customs and the same language. In turn, Little Havana enables "Americans" to experi-



Calle Ocho also serves as the heart of Miami's "Little Havana" neighborhood.

ence a taste of the "foreign" through its array of Cuban restaurants, stores that specialize in Hispanic books, Latin music and Santeria artifacts — as well as the annual Calle Ocho Festival.⁶

Ironically, the Latin community has given Eighth St. or U.S. 41 yet another alias, "Main Street of Little Havana."⁷ even though Calle Ocho does not look like Main Street and Little Havana in no way resembles Habana. Instead, it is surprising how any photograph of Calle Ocho could illustrate the descriptions in *Learning from Las Vegas*, which describes how vehicular traffic determines the morphology of the spaces: The curbing allows frequent right turns for commercial enterprises and eases the difficult transition from highway to parking; the regularity of form and position of the streetlights identify the continuous space of the strip; and the parking lot is treated as a symbol as well as a convenience. Cuban specialty shops, gas stations, used-furniture stores, porn shops, gun shops, fast-food franchises, big Winn-Dixies and little motels are close

enough to the roadway to be seen yet far enough back to accommodate drive-ways, turnarounds and parking.⁸

The big sign and the little building are the rule along Calle Ocho. Symbol dominates space; architecture defines very little. Calle Ocho's most prominent Cuban restaurants, La Carreta and Versailles, exemplify what *Learning from Las Vegas* defines as the two main manifestations of automobile-oriented commercial architecture in the United States. For La Carreta, the architectural systems of space, structure and program are submerged and distorted by an overall symbolic form (what *Learning from Las Vegas* defines as the "duck"). At Versailles, the systems of space and structure are directly at the service of program, and ornament is applied independently of them (what *Learning from Las Vegas* refers to as the "decorated shed").⁹

In keeping with the restaurant's name, the building for La Carreta takes the shape of a giant cart seemingly standing in a thicket. This effect is



Buildings and signs along auto-oriented Calle Ocho seek the attention of people in passing cars.

achieved by the building's oversized parapet and the clever concealment of all its windows behind landscaping. Across the street, Versailles displays decorative motifs consistent with its name. The building's cornice is a wooden replica of the French original; the green geometrical patterns along its walls recall the window frames of Versailles, while its mirrored interiors are but a distant memory of the original *Gallerie des Glaces*. *La Carreta* is a symbol; Versailles applies symbols. As in any American strip configuration, the buildings alongside Calle Ocho reinforce the signage system of vehicular spaces, whether they are "Cuban" or not.

On the other hand, Calle Ocho differs from the traditional morphology of the strip in that vehicular and pedestrian activities are coordinated, maximizing public access. While the high-speed circulation along a strip usually acts as a physical barrier for local traffic, Calle Ocho serves regional through traffic as well as the immediate neighborhood. Whereas big signs connect the drivers to the stores, supermarket windows do contain merchandise and stores do open directly onto the street. This juxtaposition of pedestrian and automobile uses is mediated by a scale

that is neither that of the conventional strip nor that of a traditional urban fabric. In this U.S. 41, the residents of the surrounding neighborhood can walk from their homes to the commerce along the strip; in turn, drivers can be catered to by street vendors while stopping at a traffic light. The roadway, which potentially could divide Little Havana, instead constitutes its vital center.

The new sets of relations between vehicular and pedestrian modes of occupation are orchestrated in Calle Ocho through the formation of spaces that account for local characteristics. On the surface Calle Ocho's architecture seems merely to conform to the demands of automobile-oriented urban sprawl; in actuality, the configuration of buildings and spaces along Calle Ocho promotes a particular way of living that differentiates it from other parts of the city and the United States.

For example, despite the fact that a Cuban restaurant looks like any other restaurant along a strip, it attracts an unexpected mix of people. On any given day one might see the mayor of the city of Miami on a family meal, a banker with an out-of-town client and construction workers on lunch break. Although the clientele is predominant-

ly Latin-American, the restaurants also are used frequently by corporations for power lunches and by community groups for after-meeting meals. This mix is promoted by a menu that carries an incredible variety, accompanied by an extreme price range; one can have a Cuban sandwich or an "Elena Ruth" for \$2.50, while your dinner companion can have a steak for \$14.75.

More significant to this argument is the way in which the organization of the spaces in the Cuban restaurants encourages and supports this mix of people. In fact, one can see physical differences between restaurants such as Versailles, *La Carreta* and *Casablanca* and the non-Cuban restaurants along a strip. Because of the Cuban restaurants' typological configuration, one finds all varieties of seating arrangements, which from long tables for group occasions to diner counters for quick meals, and allow the assemblage of a variety of people simultaneously.

The most significant alteration to the type is the incorporation of an outdoor "coffee counter," at which coffee, cigarettes, magazines, sweets and other items are sold directly to the outside. One can park the car, get out and have a coffee standing by these counters. These are extremely popular for people on the way to work in the morning, coming back at night from the movies, or after particular events, when the crowd in the parking lot can number up to 50 people. Ironically, it is here where the Cuban community exchanges discussions about Castro, recounts old times in Cuba, or maps out its role in Miami's political life. More importantly, it is here where one sees signs of an urbanity that differs from that of the conventional strip.

Another example is the neighborhood laundromat, which also makes use of a mix of programs whose formal

arrangement results in a complex set of relationships. These types combine a self-serve coin laundry with a grocery/-flower shop, a coffee counter and a small video arcade. The coffee counter opens simultaneously to the inside the laundry room and the street outside so it can serve both customers waiting for their laundry and the passing public. Similarly, the video machines stand between the washer/dryer areas and the street, entertaining those who are waiting while attracting other people from the street.

Such typological configurations promote interaction between the private and the public realms because they might bring out the latent public characteristics of certain private activities and, in turn, enrich our experience of urban life. This differs greatly from the traditional commercial architecture of the strip, where the program is often



Nevertheless, some buildings also respond to the pedestrian scale.

internalized and mediated to the exterior street only by the big sign.

The presence of a pedestrian scale along Calle Ocho was formalized by the construction of two small plazas, the Brigade 2506 Memorial Plaza and Maximo Gomez Park. Whereas the conventional strip promotes a singular mode of occupation throughout, Calle Ocho also incorporates spaces that clearly belong to a pedestrian tradition, urbanizing the strip through heterogeneous uses and modes of occupation.

In the first place, these two plazas are invested with a certain “officialness” that sets them apart from the commercial, vehicular strip. The Brigade 2506 Memorial Plaza, for instance, commemorates the most significant event in Cuban-American history by honoring the heroes of the

1961 Bay of Pigs invasion. The space does not have the scale usually associated with ceremonial plazas, but the intervention (a truncated obelisk that supports a permanent flame) does belong to a tradition of commemorative monuments. The “officialness” is further supported by the obelisk’s formal inscription, militaristic detailing and durable materials, foreign to the prevailing character of the strip.

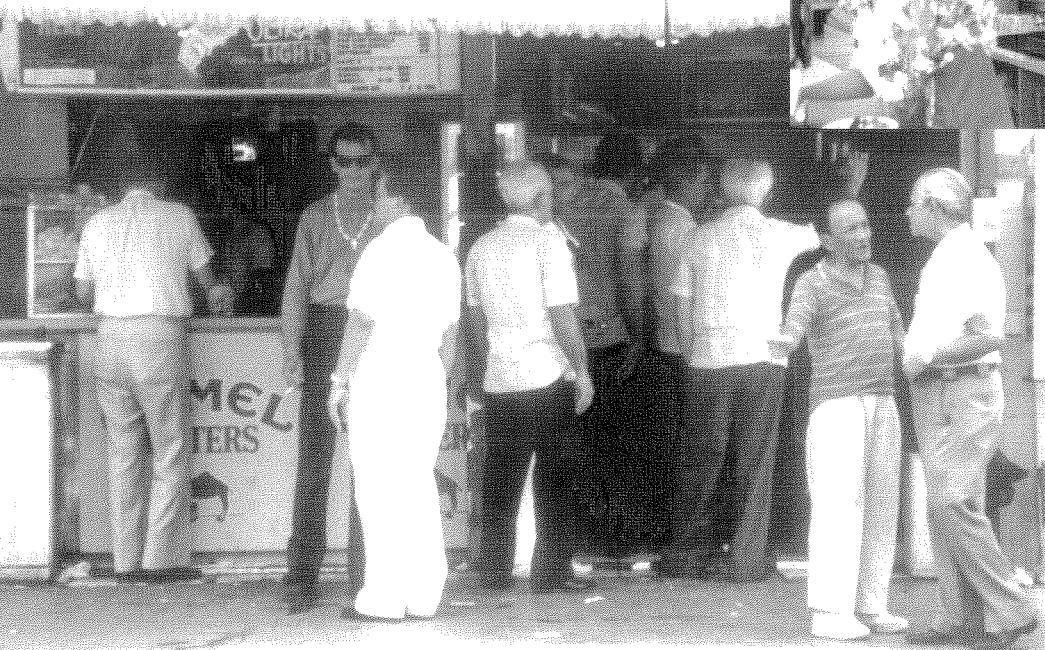
Similarly, Maximo Gomez Park, named after one of the greatest figures in the Cuban Independence War of the late 1890s, is designated as the only visitor center outside downtown Miami. Situated at the corner of a traffic intersection, the plaza is surrounded by a low, metal fence that protects the park from passing vehicles. Even though this configuration would tend

to isolate the space from the public, the permanent presence of a large tourist information booth here ensures the plaza’s publicness.

This tendency towards intrinsically public programming is reinforced by the way both plazas engage the strip. The Brigade 2506 Memorial Plaza marks the beginning of 13th Avenue, which also is known as Cuban Memorial Boulevard (a street of exceptional beauty, lined with trees along its center). Such a privileged location makes this plaza the key link of a well-traveled circulation network, serving as a formal entrance from the strip to the adjacent residential area.

Likewise, Maximo Gomez Park is also known as “Domino Club” because it provides permanent tables and seat

Calle Ocho’s restaurants include a range of dining settings that encourage the mixing of professions and classes.



ing, covered and uncovered, where Latin men engage in public games of dominoes or chess — activities that are reminiscent of the public urban lifestyle Cubans left behind. Ultimately, both plazas attain a public life relatively independent of commercial development because they materialize fragments of Cuba's history and mythology.

It is clear that the life of Cuban immigrants (among others) in Little Havana has altered the experience and meaning of the public spaces along this strip. Nevertheless, the presence of a particular group of people did not entail a literal return to the urban forms specific to their culture because the historic and cultural conditions that generated Havana are foreign to Miami. As a result, Calle Ocho still operates in the manner of a strip, and its public characteristics are still far from the esplanades of a Cuban boulevard. Instead, the Latin community retrieved from its traditional urbanity that which was positive: heterogeneous uses, various modes of occupation and specific notions of monumentality. Therefore, existing types were altered and traditional spaces were re-invented in order to produce a particular effect of urbanity.

Learning from *Learning from Las Vegas*

In *Learning from Las Vegas*, Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour urged architects and urbanists to gain insight from common places, to learn from the existing landscape in the same manner that fine art often follows folk art. In their view, the subject of architectural inquiry is not limited to the history of the discipline itself; rather it includes the study of all cultural artifacts.

They accept the city in its present condition and use it as empirical evi-



Brigade 2506 Memorial Plaza, a monument that addresses both pedestrian and automobile scales.

dence for the formulation of architectural discourse, grounding the pursuits of architecture and urbanism in “realism.” Even the auto-oriented architecture of urban sprawl, the skyline of signs on the strip and the methods of commercial persuasion can “serve the

purpose of civic and cultural enhancement,” they contend.¹⁰ Basic to their argument is the assumption that symbolism is essential in architecture; the model from a previous time or from the existing city is part of their source material, and the replication of ele-

ments is part of their design method. For them, “architecture that depends on association for its perception depends on association in its creation.”¹¹

As Jorge Silvetti has stated, although Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour do not explicitly base their arguments on typology, theirs is a “purely iconographic interpretation and use of the idea of type.” While for the orthodox Modern movement function provided meaning, in *Learning from Las Vegas*, the “[type] is the cultural icon that appears and circulates in society that is made identifiable, and becomes, in turn, the represented symbol.”¹²

The intentions in *Learning from Las Vegas* are explicit: “we shall emphasize image — image over process or form — in asserting that architecture depends in its perception and creation on past experience and emotional association and that these symbolic and representational elements may often be contradictory to the form, structure and program with which they combine in the same building.”¹³

While Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour’s iconographic interpretation of typology is at the center of the arguments put forth here, their emphasis on imagery leaves out of the discourse the very means by which we occupy the city. Their position disregards many of the cultural conventions that generate urban life and, consequently, give meaning to the city’s artifacts.

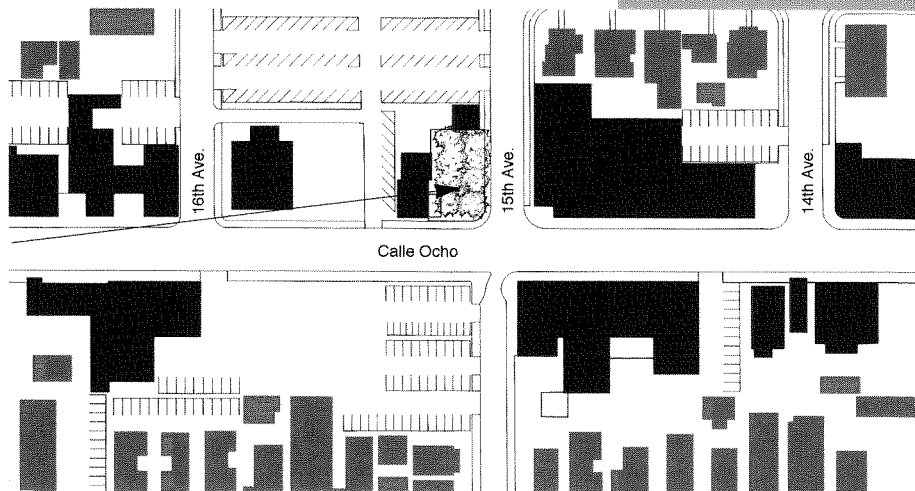
Although Calle Ocho looks like any strip in America, I would argue that its symbolic and representational elements (types) also derive their meaning from the ways in which they promote a particular way of life:

- coordination of vehicular and pedestrian activities, maximizing public access,
- formulation of spaces that account for local characteristics, taking



Maximo Gomez Park.

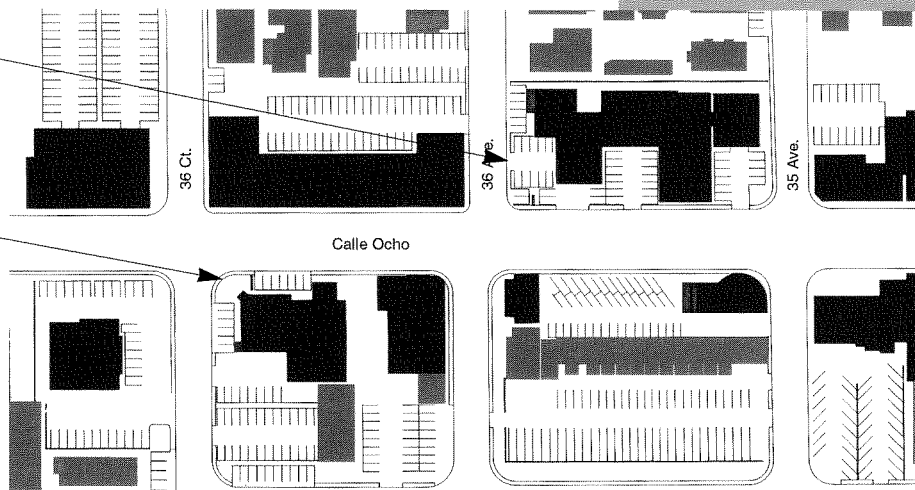
Maximo Gomez Park
(Domino Club)



Drawings courtesy
Monica Ponce de Leon.

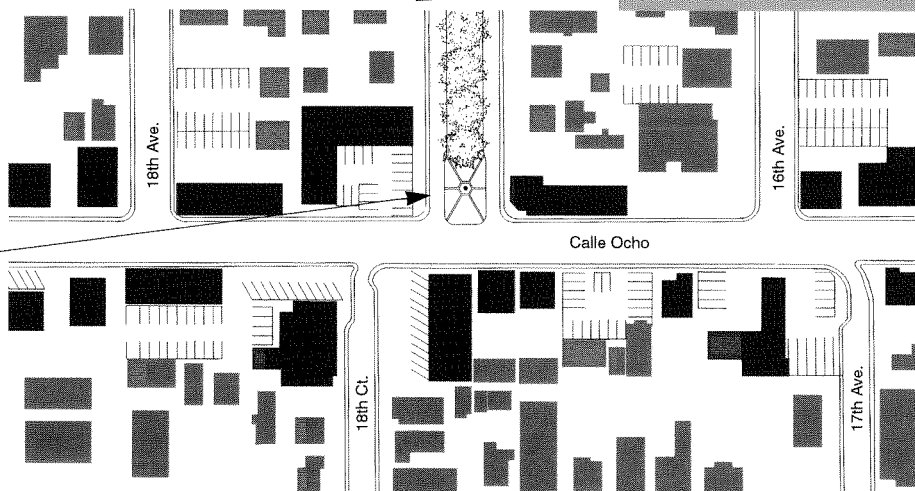
Versailles

La Carreta



Cuban Memorial
Boulevard

Brigade 2506
Memorial Plaza



advantage of Miami's particular climate and culture,

- configuration of buildings and spaces so they can be occupied in a variety of ways,

- types that promote interaction between the private and public realms.

These modes of occupation, together with the images along the strip, generate the powerful cultural associations that have made Calle Ocho the symbol of Latin culture in the United States. For instance, while the Cuban restaurants' decorative motifs give them a particular character, the opportunity to gather outdoors around the coffee counters makes them meaningful. Similarly, although the Mediterranean-style canopies of Maximo Gomez Park give this plaza an image characteristic of Latin public spaces, the possibility of sitting at the tables to play dominoes or chess is what makes the space significant. In their mix of Spanish and English words, the signs along Calle Ocho indicate to drivers the presence of a Latin context, but the street vendors at traffic intersections are what really makes the drive memorable. The signage system effectively provides identifiable images for the elements along Calle Ocho.

The implications of these typological assertions provides us with the *modus operandi* to effect change within the prevailing means of urban production. I do not propose a break with the typologies that have generated urban places in the past or a rejection of types that characterize public life today. As Alan Colquhoun argues, it would be impossible to operate outside existing typological models:

If, as Gombrich suggests, forms by themselves are relatively empty of meaning, it follows that the forms which we intuit will, in the unconscious mind, tend

*to attract themselves to certain associations of meaning. This could mean not only that we are not free from the forms of the past and from the availability of these forms as typological models but that, if we assume we are free, we have lost control over a very active sector of our imagination and of our power to communicate with others. It would seem that we ought to try to establish a value system which takes account of the forms and solutions of the past if we are to gain control over concepts which will obtrude themselves into the creative process, whether we like it or not.*¹⁴

Colquhoun postulates that the meaning assigned to types is not fixed but is the result of cultural convention, thereby invalidating the legitimacy of function as the main instigator in the making of forms. Therefore, while programming can play an important role in the formation of public life (as is the case of Maximo Gomez Park) function per se does not inevitably produce meaningful public spaces.

On the other hand, Colquhoun does not advocate an unthinking acceptance of tradition; rather, he proposes "to investigate the part which modifications of type-solutions play in relation to problems, and solutions which are without precedent in any received tradition."¹⁵ This implies the possibility of manipulating existing typologies in order to provide alternatives to current commercial developments, not unlike the way in which the typologies along Calle Ocho represent an alternative to the traditional strip. More important, it is strategic to use known types in the production of new ones in order to make them culturally resonant and in that way ensure their production.¹⁶

By investigating the relationship between typology and the formation of public spaces, I have demonstrated typology's usefulness as a tool to pro-

duce urbanity. Although Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour's iconographic interpretation of typology is at the center of the argument, their emphasis on imagery leaves out of the discourse the means by which we occupy the city, in turn disregarding many of the cultural conventions that generate urban life and subsequently give meaning to the city's artifacts.

If urban artifacts also obtain their meaning by the very means in which they promote a particular way of life, and if this meaning is not fixed, architecture can effect change through the manipulation of "cultural conventions." This is not to say that the production of urbanity will or can overdetermine our way of life, nor does it imply the reduction of the architectural discipline to the realm of social engineering. Instead, it demonstrates that architecture can promote public alternatives through mechanisms specific to its own medium and discipline, revitalizing the city while redefining its role and potential within both private and public spheres of the political process.

Notes

1. Rodolfo Machado, Course Description, Department of Urban Planning and Design, Spring 1990.

2. See Kenneth Frampton's "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," in Hal Foster (ed.), *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (Seattle: Bay Press, 1983), 16-30.

3. Rafael Moneo, "Reflecting on Two Concert Halls: Gehry vs. Venturi," Walter Gropius Lecture; Harvard University Graduate School of Design; 25 April 1990.

4. For a concise history of the American strip and of the prevailing typologies along it see Chester H. Liebs, *Main Street to Miracle Mile: American Roadside Architecture* (Boston, Toronto, London: Bullfinch Press,

Little Brown and Company, 1985). For a chronological account of Calle Ocho, see "Changing Personality Lends Eighth Street Charm, From One End to the Other Trail Has Many Names, Many Faces," *The Miami Herald*, 16 August 1990, 18-20.

5. Terry Johnson King, "Little Havana Develops Spread — and It's Not from Middle Age," *The Miami News*, 14 April 1969, 1C.

6. Traditionally such Latin festivals are staged just before the pre-Eastern Lenten fasting begins. But the Calle Ocho festival, unlike Carnivale in Rio and Mardi Gras in New Orleans, is held in the middle of Lent, at a time when Cubans are supposed to do penance. As T. D. Allman argues in *Miami, City of the Future* (New York: The Atlantic Monthly Press, 1987), such dating seems to indicate that the festival is geared more towards an American public rather than the continuance of a Latin American tradition *per se*.

7. This reference is a gesture to the "American" tradition of Main Street, rather than the boulevard of "Latin" tradition (El Prado Boulevard in Cuba, for instance).

8. Robert Venturi, Denise Scott-Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning from Las Vegas* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1977), 20.

9. Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour, 87 - 90.

10. See Jorge Silveti's arguments about verisimilitude and persuasion in "On Realism in Architecture," *Harvard Architecture Review* 1 (Spring, 1980).

11. Venturi, Scott-Brown and Izenour, 131.

12. Silveti, 25.

13. Venturi, Scott-Brown, Izenour, 87.

14. Alan Colquhoun, "Typology and Design Method," in *Essays in Architectural Criticism: Modern Architecture and Historical Change* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 48

15. *Ibid.*, 48.

16. Silveti, 25.

Street vendors tailor their wares and selling techniques to take advantage of a captive market: People in cars stopped at traffic signals.

