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marco a castillo
the decorator's home:
the future is no longer
curated by livia debbane

são paulo
april 8– april 28, 2026

An underlying tension runs through the exhibition *The Decorator's House – The Future Is No More*: works by a Cuban artist critical of socialism inhabit the project of a Brazilian architect affiliated with communism.

Marco Castillo was born in Cuba in 1971. He had a happy childhood, surrounded by friends in the province of Camagüey. Nothing out of the ordinary drew his attention, except for his father's occasional mentions of surveillance and his insistence that family conversations should not leave the house. At 17, Castillo was summoned for an interview at a government office in his region. There, he was questioned about his aunt, who had left the country. Officials told him that his father was in contact with her and asked Marco to disclose the content of their conversations. Faced with his bewilderment, they concluded he was simply a young man in need of "reform" and enlisted him for military service. One of the officers, however—someone he had met before—later called him with unexpected advice: "Get out of here." Having just been accepted into the Higher Institute of Art (ISA) in Havana, Castillo decided to bring forward his move and camped on campus until classes began. It was the late 1980s; the Soviet bloc would soon collapse. Adrift, the Cuban government began to loosen its authoritarian grip, and Marco was never pursued again.

João Vilanova Artigas was born in 1915 in Curitiba. In 1945, already living in São Paulo, he joined the Brazilian Communist Party (PCB), recently legalized after the end of the Vargas era, and took part in founding the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at USP. In São Paulo, he designed his family's first house—nicknamed *casinha*—which became a meeting place for the party. After returning from a nearly two-month trip to the Soviet Union in 1953, Artigas entered a period of intense reflection on his social role as an architect and produced little in the following years. By the end of that decade, however, a series of public commissions—two schools and three recreational centers—set a new direction in his practice, laying the groundwork for what would become the Escola Paulista. The military coup, the subsequent police investigation at USP, and his ties to the PCB led to his imprisonment for 12 days, after which he took refuge in Uruguay. He later returned to Brazil but lived in hiding, still under compulsory retirement. He would only resume teaching years later. In 1974, he designed the Domschke House for an engineer friend and his family. There, he continued his mission to "morally re-educate the bourgeoisie."

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The Decorator's House brings together a body of work produced over the past seven years, sparked by Marco Castillo's rediscovery of the aesthetic that shaped his childhood. Through collecting, researching, and restoring furniture designed during a moment of historical transition in Cuba—the 1950s and 1960s, when Fulgencio Batista's pro-American dictatorship gave way to Fidel Castro's revolutionary government—a past to be revisited unfolded before the artist. These objects bear witness to years marked by optimism and cultural effervescence, when architecture and design were mobilized to construct a modern identity committed to a more egalitarian society.

more about
the exhibition

Figures such as Gonzalo Córdoba, María Victoria Caignet, and the internationally renowned Clara Porset were commissioned to design schools, hotels, and public and government buildings—such as the National Schools of Art and the Palace of the Revolution in Havana—encouraged by Celia Sánchez, one of the first women to join the guerrilla movement and a key figure in the new government. This fertile period—during which industries emerged and the country's first higher education institution for design was established—was cut short, coinciding with the tightening of Cuba's relationship with the Soviet Union during the Cold War (including the importation of prefabricated architectural systems), the death of Sánchez, and ultimately the dissolution of the USSR.

In his historical-aesthetic revisionism, Castillo appropriates symbols and modes of production from that era. Opening the exhibition, a concentric wall sculpture references a light fixture designed by Córdoba for young households, intended for mass production. It also alludes to equipment installed in Cuba to intercept data from U.S. satellites, such as the facility at the Lourdes intelligence base, which lends the work its title.

A few steps ahead, on the ramp leading to the first floor, stands *Lam*; shortly after, in the dining room, three works from the *María Victoria* series hang from the double-height ceiling. This group pays homage to Cuban designers' intention to establish a local grounding within a modern and universal language—furniture adapted to the climate, using native woods and Afro-Caribbean and Indigenous vernacular techniques, such as woven wicker and straw. The spatial arrangement of the María Victoria components evokes an "exploded view," a type of technical drawing that details the parts of an assembly. In some sense, the composition can be read as a project that has imploded.

The "projectile" motif—so characteristic of Soviet graphic design and widely used in its propaganda—also informs the wall piece in the dining area from the Bas Reliefs series. In a poster-like format, the bas-reliefs construct topographies from stacked sheets of paper, pierced by a cut projecting from back to front. In this same area, on the small balcony flooded with light from floor-to-ceiling glass, stands *Gunstocks*, a work that draws on Latin American kinetic art through its identical, repeated, rhythmic elements, while concealing the gunstocks of the military arsenal from which it is composed. Like others of his generation, Castillo learned to handle weapons as a teenager, in what was known as "preparatory class."

Even at this early stage of the exhibition, much of the architecture championed by Artigas is already evident. One of the central tenets of the PCB's political project was the moral re-education of the bourgeoisie. In this sense, the single-family houses of the period—by Artigas, as well as Paulo Mendes da Rocha and Joaquim Guedes—incorporate elements of urban design, as if the domestic sphere could prepare the citizen for social life. In Artigas's houses, spaces influence one another through openings and split levels, as seen in the sequence connecting the entrance hall, dining room, terrace, pantry, and kitchen of the Domschke House. Circulation occurs via ramps and walkways, elements typical of public buildings. The kitchen, located at the front of the lot rather than the back, connects through a skylight to the office on the lower level. Anyone working there would hear the everyday activities that sustain domestic life, such as food preparation. These houses turn inward, creating within themselves a kind of micro-urban sphere. As a text inspired by Lina Bo Bardi notes: "The Artigas house, which a superficial observer might deem absurd, is the patient and courageous message of those who perceive the first glimmers of a new era: the era of human solidarity."

Entering the private quarters, beneath the waist-high bookshelf running along the bedroom corridor, Notebooks presents a series of books carved in bas-relief. At first glance, the forms appear abstract; viewed from the opposite direction, however, the sequence of back covers reveals letters spelling the word "Dictadura." Scattered and concealed among the volumes, the message evokes everything that is experienced internally without full awareness—whether a fictional narrative or an authoritarian regime—and that only distance allows us to grasp critically.

In the fireplace room, we encounter a similar interplay between front and back covers. Each letter inscribed on the back gradually projects and transforms, page by page, into another letter on the front, in a mirrored process. The words formed are not strict opposites but establish fields of tension and debate: Whites–Nation, Precolombino–Anthropocene, Same–Other, Paradox–Left, Palabras–Problem. They remind us how contradictions can coexist within a single body or ideology, and how ideal and reality are constantly entangled.

Two videos complete the exhibition. The fictional script of *Casa Negra* (2022) compiles real dialogues and situations the artist found in footage available on YouTube. In *Generación* (2019), Cuban curators, architects, writers, and artists reenact a gathering among friends in the 1970s, in a modernist house, to the melancholic voice of singer Beatriz Márquez.

Both Artigas and Castillo lived under authoritarian, surveillance-driven, and punitive regimes. While Cubans attempted to realize their utopia, in Brazil it never fully took root, remaining confined to isolated experiments. Artigas might well have been among the architects shaping a new way of life in Cuba. The question remains why such a project failed—whether due to internal political choices or external economic suffocation, which persists to this day. Marco has no doubt: "One must experience utopia and communal life to understand that, in practice, it is not viable—not even from the standpoint of human nature. The imposition of equality and economic persecution ultimately generate misery and empower only one segment of the population: the one that administers the common good." In a well-known line, Kafka writes: "There is hope, infinite hope—but not for us." Is modern Western man—caught between his imaginative capacity and his ability to act—capable of living in an egalitarian society?

– Livia Debbane