

# THE CARIBBEAN'S AGONIZING SEASHORES

Tourism resorts, art, and the future  
of the region's coastlines

*Lizabeth Paravisini-Gebert*

Those wishing to understand the growing impact of tourism development and climate change on the islands and populations of the Caribbean region could find no better starting point than the tiny island of Petite Martinique, a dependency of the nation of Grenada. A territory of a mere 2.37 square kilometers with a local population of approximately nine hundred, it has been losing one and a half to two meters yearly from portions of its seashore over the last two decades. This territorial loss has resulted from erosion caused by the ceaseless pounding of the Atlantic's waves, which remove the sands from the seashore just as quickly as they deposit them, exposing the soft ash-cinder layers of rock underneath and threatening the island's precarious infrastructure, from its single coastal road to its handful of failing retaining walls (Richards). The once-protective coral reefs have been bleached and are now dead or dying, no longer able to protect the seashore from the ocean's relentless buffeting.

The crisis facing Petite Martinique is a harbinger of things to come for the extended Caribbean region as it faces the compounding effects of climate change—impacts worsened by decades of seashore development as tourism dollars replaced the dwindling profits of the sugar plantation as the source of precarious incomes. The Caribbean is one of the most tourist-dependent regions in the world, its coastal zones threatened by “hotel and resort construction, beach sand mining, marina channel development, waste disposal from yachts and shipping, non-indigenous factory fishing vessels” and now the potentially disastrous effects of climate change (Pulwarty et al. 16). The first line of defense, the ailing coral reefs, had already sustained devastating bleaching events long before the rising temperatures produced by climate change led to coral die-offs that have now reached epidemic levels; thousands of acres of mangrove forests, the second line of defense against pounding waves, have been sacrificed in the name of tourism jobs.

The coastlines of the Caribbean region, as Brian Fagan argues for island chains around the world in *The Attacking Ocean*, find themselves acutely “vulnerable to the ocean and its whims in ways unimaginable even one or two centuries ago” (126) and are facing chronic issues like coastal erosion and persistent flooding “not as an abstract problem for the future, but as a sobering reality” (163). In “Sea Trash, Dark Pools, and the Tragedy of the Commons,”

Patricia Yaeger writes of the crisis that has emerged through the transformation of oceans—and I would add, seashores—into capital, calling for an “oceanic ecocriticism\$ [sic]” that can draw on “narratives in a state of emergency, a crisis that demands unnatural histories written by unnaturalists who limn the fleshy entanglements of sea creatures, sea trash, and machines” (529). In the Caribbean, a geography that encompasses both the largest number of small island states and the highest number of maritime borders in the world (Pulwarty), this crisis plays out in the spaces where the sea and the shore meet, where oceanic resources have been marshaled in the name of tourism development, destroying, in the process, the natural features that provided a defense against violence from the sea. Caribbean tourism relies on the sea—as aesthetic background and space for recreation—but imposes measures that contribute to the degradation of its coasts, the “watery realm where exploitation and overconsumption” converge (Yaeger 532). It should not surprise, then, to find that the creation of textual and visual “narratives in a state of emergency” about the plight of the coasts has become a central concern of Caribbean writers and artists. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey argues, “we are on the cusp of an entirely new development in this oceanic imaginary in work that is specifically responding to the threat of sea-level rise, adding a new dimension to how we might theorize our relationship to the largest space on earth, which until recently for most, was imagined as always external, which is to say outside of ordinary terrestrial orbits until it comes to flood our cities and homes.”

I focus here on how Caribbean art speaks to the plight of coastal spaces in the region—more concretely in Cuba—through a discussion of *Adrift Patrimony: The Baths (A Tribute to Frédéric Mialhe)*, a 2007 photographic series by Atelier Morales, Cuban architects Juan Luis Morales and Teresa Ayuso. The photographs address the Caribbean seashore as a site where tourism, degraded coastal ecologies, politics, and ideology confront the violent force that is the sea. The artwork engages with the loss of portions of Cuba’s architectural patrimony to institutional neglect and coastal degradation in the region’s most environmentally resilient island-state—the “ecological crown jewel of the Caribbean” (Whittle 74)—the nation best suited to propose and enact appropriate remediation. In the work of Atelier Morales, imagination, memory, and ideology mediate the artists’ representation of Cuba’s coastal deterioration. This work, although avowedly environmentally focused, prompts questions about whether its engagement with material conditions responds to an informed environmental aesthetic. Marcia Muelder Eaton has argued that the development of an environmental aesthetics requires “ways of using the delight that human beings take in flights of imagination, connect it to solid cognitive understanding of what makes for sustainable environments, and thus produce the kind of attitudes and preferences that will generate the kind of care we hope for” (180). *Adrift Patrimony: The Baths*, in privileging historical memory and nostalgia for a past of seashore recreation enjoyed amidst iconic coastal architecture, clashes with urgent calls for science-driven environmental remediation measures adopted by the Cuban government—measures that in some cases call for the removal of the very iconic seashore resorts “mourned” in these photographs. As a result, reading Atelier Morales’s photographs against the aggressive measures for coastal conservation developed by the Cuban government unveils the complex dichotomies that control environmental action in Cuba and throughout the Caribbean.

During the first decades of the twentieth century, a number of seaside resorts were built throughout Cuba in spaces that had earlier become known for their beauty, healing waters, or provincial charm after being featured in nineteenth-century prints and photographs—early examples of Cuban landscape representation that had fostered the incipient tourism industry on the island. These privately built resorts or *balnearios*, which in many cases

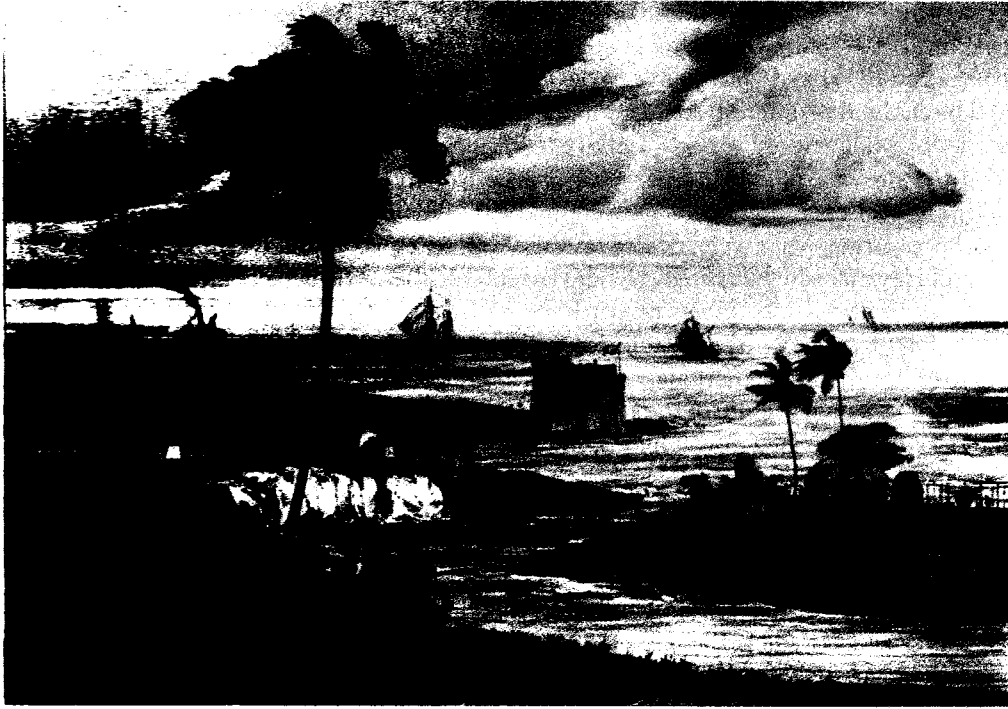


Figure 28.1 Frédéric Mialhe, *Cojimar, Cerca de La Habana* (Cojimar, Near Havana, 1839–1842).

boasted striking art deco architecture, were the foundation of local and international seaside tourism. Initially privately owned, they fell under state control following the Cuban Revolution (1959) and were subsequently (and in some cases, controversially) neglected or abandoned to the power of the sea, which over the decades that have elapsed since the 1959 Cuban Revolution has brought these neglected structures to ruin. Built originally right on the sandbank, they were extremely vulnerable to the pounding waves as well as contributors to the vulnerability of the shore—both victims of and collaborators with the sea. The series consists of twenty-five lenticular photographs of the ruined resorts interlaced with poignant images of cemetery sculpture to underscore the mourning for these once beautiful spaces. (Lenticular printing produces images with an illusion of depth and the ability to change or move as the image is viewed from different angles.) The series was conceived by Atelier Morales as a dialogue with the iconic engravings of the baths' settings created between 1838 and 1842 by French lithographer Frédéric Mialhe (Figure 28.1). Using the camera as a “technology of memory,” these images emerge as “visual monuments to vanishing places” that engage the island’s cultural, political, and economic history (Dunaway xviii).

*The Baths* is the third iteration of a project the artists have titled *Adrift Patrimony*, which included an earlier series called *Bohíos* (2003) that addressed the disappearance of the traditional peasant huts that had dotted the Cuban countryside and had roots in Amerindian culture, and *The Sugar Mills* (2004), which focused on the decline of Cuba’s once prosperous sugar industry. All three series open a visual dialogue with nineteenth-century French artists who produced work—primarily prints—of Cuban landscapes. Atelier Morales’s working method has been to revisit the spaces illustrated by these earlier artists to capture their

present ruined, deplorable state. In the case of *The Baths*, Atelier Morales's interlocutor is Mialhe (1810–1868), the author of dozens of prints collected in two volumes, *La isla de Cuba pintoresca* (1838) and *Viaje pintoresco por la isla de Cuba* (1842).

The baths that interest Atelier Morales had been built in many of the places painted earlier by Mialhe (see Figure 28.1 above, a fragment of Mialhe's *Cojimar* depicting the area near the site of Atelier Morales's *Guanabo Désolé I*, Figure 28.4). They were small baths with regional charm, built for pleasure and curative purposes primarily for the use of the local population. Most were located on the seashore, especially along the coastline east and west of Havana, which boasted splendid natural beaches. The development of seaside baths in these locations was driven primarily by a plethora of social clubs (the Havana Yacht Club, foremost among them) and was followed after the Revolution by the construction of resort hotels for international travelers. Here I focus particularly on two of these seaside locales: Marianao, the site of the Havana Yacht Club, then about six miles west of the center of Havana (an area now fully integrated into the city), and Guanabo (Cojimar), about three times that distance to the east of the capital. I will specifically highlight the buildings photographed by Atelier Morales: the Havana Yacht Club and the Syndicate of Telephone Worker's Club. The Yacht Club presided over a number of exclusive clubs built in the Miramar and Marianao stretch of coast west of Havana, while the Sindicato Telefónico did the honors for the working and lower middle-class club sprawl along the beaches of Guanabo, which included a number of seaside clubs belonging to various workers' guilds and syndicates, among them those for news reporters, electrical and telephone workers, health-care labor unions, and bank clerks.

In their work, Atelier Morales prioritize what they call the "provincial allure" of these clubs and resorts over the clear class differences that separated them, finding them to be unified first through their local origins and construction and second by suffering the same neglect under the Cuban Revolution. Nationalized after the Revolution, they were later abandoned and left to be ruined by nature while the government concentrated on the building of what Atelier Morales describe as "massive and impersonal tourist complexes" intended to bring much-needed foreign currency into the island. Hence their representation of these spaces in their work as being "in agony": "Sculptures of angels and figures found in the cemeteries of the world are incorporated in all their pictures, creating a dialogue with space and the lost patrimony. Death has taken over to give lieu to the gross and global tourism industry" (Menocal).

In the description of their work, Atelier Morales focus on their assessment of Mialhe as the "discoverer" of Cuba as a touristic and therapeutic space, and on these early resorts as offering an organic connection between nature and tourist—direct, personal, and potentially healing. Hence their objective of "bringing attention to the deplorable state of such an important architectural patrimony." As Juan Luis Morales writes:

Given the state of abandon we witnessed during our return visits to Cuba, Teresa and I felt like those sculptures that cry at the feet of tombs in European cemeteries, only that instead of crying over a loved one, these sculptures placed in these old tourist baths were crying for the irremediable death of such an important patrimony. These sculptures represent those travelers responsible and sensitive to local patrimonies and ecosystems whose visits are in counterpoint to the irresponsible, insensitive and consumerist tourist of "groups" and "package tours" of the "all-inclusive" type of globalized tourism. (Morales and Morales)

The work evolved in two parallel voyages, their return to Cuba to photograph the Cuban baths, and various trips to museums and cemeteries in the places that supply tourists to Cuba, such as Spain, France, Italy, Germany, and England, to photograph funerary sculpture. "Our work," Juan Luis Morales concludes, "is a double reflection about a nation's responsibility to safeguard its patrimony and that of tourists in respecting it" (Morales and Morales). In their concept of "patrimony," the artists conflate natural and architectural "landscapes," naturalizing the built environment and equating it with the nation's communal "natural" inheritance.

Through this method, Atelier Morales underscore the dialogic nature of their work and their travels between Europe and Cuba, both in its "conversation" with Mialhe's earlier work and in the "doubling" or layering necessary for the creation of lenticular images. Echoing the objective of Mialhe's influential images, which had been to celebrate the natural beauty of Cuba and its "picturesque" quality, the photographs focus on the forlorn quality of the now abandoned infrastructure, simultaneously aestheticizing the ruins and critiquing the loss they represent. The superimposition of the funerary sculpture accentuates the sense of loss.

At the center of Atelier Morales' concerns with Cuba's disappearing patrimony is a deep preoccupation with the integrity of the island nation, founded on their assessment that the island's iconic architectural legacy is central to national identification or *cubanía*. Their work, therefore, by showcasing pre-revolutionary iconic buildings as national heritage, expresses their unease about how to address creatively the problematic legacy of the foreign tourism economy in Cuba, which has led Cuba's revolutionary government to replace earlier iconic buildings with architecturally insignificant hotels and other mass tourism facilities. Moreover, in reading the island's architectural heritage as emblematic of the power of past and present political regimes, they extend this concern with the destruction of the earlier resorts to their home island's relationship with what is in their view an unsympathetic state. This discourse of power also embraces the not-always-benign sea that has shaped their nation's destinies. Atelier Morales, in *The Baths*, address both their anxieties about governmental neglect of architectural patrimony and speak to the Cuban coast as a site of aggressive erosion.

In 2013, Cuba's Center for Coastal Ecosystems Research announced the imminent demolition of thousands of structures built on the island's sandbanks—among them most of the structures photographed by Atelier Morales. The plan calls for the removal of "some 900 coastal structures [that] have been contributing to an average 4 feet (1.2 meters) of annual coastal erosion" on the Varadero peninsula alone, and thousands of similar structures throughout Cuba (Rodríguez). Inspectors and demolition crews are well on their way to razing thousands of houses, restaurants, and improvised docks "in a race to restore much of the coast to something approaching its natural state" (Rodríguez). This decision is the result of scientific projections that rising sea levels will seriously damage or altogether destroy 122 coastal Cuban towns, submerging beaches, tainting freshwater sources, and rendering croplands infertile. The research has projected that seawater will penetrate up to 1.2 miles inland as oceans rise three feet by 2100. As a result, Cuba has moved to undo decades of haphazard coastal development threatening sand dunes and mangrove swamps that protect Cuban shores against rising seas.

What sets Cuba and its coasts apart from other Caribbean islands under comparable environmental threats is its access to substantial expertise and technical resources that the Cuban government makes available to its communities. The product of significant state investments in education and training, environmental policy in Cuba is supported

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Figure 28.2 Atelier Morales, *Havana Yacht Club Blessure* (2007).

by an impressive array of governmental and nongovernmental agencies unlike any others in the Caribbean region. As a result, decisions concerning environmental protection are founded on substantial data gathered from many studies that record coastal archeology, economy, history, culture, fisheries, and ecology. These studies form the basis of a plan of action to address the impact of climate change on Cuba's 3,500 miles of coasts. Areas like Havana and Guanabo, sites of significant tourism development and the focus of Atelier Morales' work, have received intensive attention, most recently in the form of a *Plan de Ordenamiento* (Organizing Plan) to monitor development that included local and national government, business and commercial agents, and representatives from civil society.



Figure 28.3 Atelier Morales, *Havana Yacht Club Contusion* (2007).

Cuba's Socialist government also wields a unique advantage no other country in the region claims, since the government controls the island's entire hotel stock, owning at least 51 percent of all tourism facilities and sometimes teaming up with minority foreign partners for management agreements.

Atelier Morales' photographs of the ruins of the Havana Yacht Club and Guanabo evoke a sense of patrimonial and historical loss, especially through their depiction of the architecture's easy integration into the surrounding landscape. But they do not speak to the environmental science behind the Cuban government's abandonment (and planned destruction) of the architectural patrimony they so value. The stone foundations emerging from the deeply blue sea and the rigidity of the sculptures replacing the vibrant vulnerability of flesh force us to confront the poignancy of the decaying infrastructure of an abandoned and superseded way of life (see Figures 28.2 and 28.3). The ambivalent quality of this nostalgia—as Morales asserts—is clearly imprinted in the composition of images like that of the remains of the once powerful Yacht Club, the exclusive institution open only to whites which dared blackball the island's dictator, Fulgencio Batista, on the grounds of questionable racial origins. In *Havana Yacht Club Contusion* (Figure 28.3), the ruins point to loss and romantic regret, while the inclusion of the black youth responds to the former exclusion of blacks from the Club. The image also functions politically as a not-too-subtle critique of the Castro government for allowing this part of Cuba's historical legacy to go to ruin. The critique, Morales argues, is not centered on ideological concerns, but on a preoccupation with erasure and, concomitantly, with rescue. As he explained in an interview with Fabiola Santiago, speaking of the sugar cane series that preceded *The Baths*, whose interlocutor was nineteenth-century printmaker Edouard LaPlante, these images were meant “to rescue the romantic charge that [these earlier artists] had brought to their lithographs in the 19th century with illumination, composition and color,” elements of landscape representation that were part of the aesthetic of the sublime. This aesthetic quality lacks, however, the “narrativization of science” so necessary to the development of a modern environmental aesthetic, which Suzi Gablik proposes as a relational model of art practice based on a “participatory paradigm” in which “the world becomes a place of interaction and connection, and things derive their being by mutual dependence” (8). In a world defined as dynamically interconnected, in which art directly engages the environment, Gablik argues, “the old polarity between art and audience disappears” (8).

The photographs of the ruined resorts, with their brooding, poignant portrayal of the collapsed, waterlogged structures, on the other hand, come tantalizingly close to “ruin porn” with their aestheticization of the abandonment and decline of architectural and natural spaces that were once central to Cuba's national iconography (see Leary; Mullins). Their ghost-like appearance recalls figures associated with zombies or revenants from a forgotten past—the ruins also emerge from the sea as unfathomable, unnatural debris. The dialogue with the nineteenth-century images that precede them, however, allows Atelier Morales to transcend the simply maudlin and to transmute Mialhe's romanticized view of seaside leisure into a contemporary “tale of loss and an ode to poetic memory” (Santiago, “The Art”). As Morales and Ayuso described in an interview with Fabiola Santiago: “An entire industry destroyed, a way of life lost and no one thought to at least preserve some of these historical relics and turn them into museums for the generations” (“Artist Pair” 53). Stoler speaks of the trauma behind the treatment afforded to “sites of decomposition that fall outside historical interest and preservation” (13), a sentiment echoed in Atelier Morales' project to bring to the spaces they photograph the honor due to them as ruins of an earlier

and mourned (political) past. What perhaps separates Atelier Morales' work from the controversies surrounding "ruin porn" is twofold: both their chosen technique of lenticular photography, which superimposes the funereal sculpture and its political message on the visual field, and a third interlocutor always present although, unlike Mialhe, never explicitly acknowledged in the work. This interlocutor is the earlier occupant of the visualized space, the local and international tourist, whom we can attempt to recover through more traditional analyses of seaside photography. Atelier Morales' concern with social justice—with the exclusion of ordinary Cubans from the privileged spaces the Revolution has allocated to foreign tourists—is conceived here as environmental justice, to the extent that it redefines the environment "to mean not only wild places, but the environment of human bodies, especially in racialized communities, in cities, and through labor" (Ziser and Sze 401).

Ironically, Mialhe's prints were always full of details of those enjoying the seaside. These former deeply racialized "uses" of the landscape are behind Atelier Morales' sense of nostalgia, although perhaps they are more clearly articulated through numerous examples of seaside photography still barely examined in Cuba—or indeed anywhere else in the Caribbean. Poorly catalogued and inconsistently available to researchers, this photographic archive illustrates not only the nature of the patrimony whose loss is regretted so poignantly in Atelier Morales' work but also the richness of its earlier print and photographic representations, as we can ascertain through postcards of the Havana Yacht Club before its slow demolition by the sea, or through numerous photographs of the club in its elegant heyday of racial exclusivity.

It is in this still unexamined photography that we can see clearly the ambiguous, and perhaps problematic, lack of explicit emphasis on race and class in Atelier Morales' project, as well as the absence of an engagement with the ways in which the spaces they photograph contributed to the deterioration of the Cuban coastline. In *Havana: Two Faces of an Antillean Metropolis*, Joe Scarpaci and Roberto Segre show how the segregation that structured Cuba's development of its seashore clubs and resorts reflects the island's intense class and race divisions. We can see it in the relative class discord between the photographs of those enjoying the yacht club and the more modest entertainments and amenities of the clubs of Guanabo, particularly in a series of family photographs from Jaime Leygonier, whose father worked for the telephone company and whose family enjoyed yearly stays at the facilities of the Sindicato Telefónico during the 1950s.

In the 1950s, Leygonier writes, the "home" of the "telephone family" was the Club on the beach of Guanabo:

a two story building in the shape of a C built on the natural sand, some 100 meters from the sea, a strong structure with more windows and jalousies than walls, a restaurant, changing rooms for men and women, a bar, a clinic, a playground, a gym and small rooms with bunk beds for four people that a family could rent for \$3 Cuban pesos a night and was affordable. In summer, or Saturdays and Sundays, the syndicate made available a bus service that departed from Aguila street, although many workers drove their own car.

Michael Ziser and Julie Sze have argued that an effective approach to "tell[ing] the climate story in its historical complexity" can be found "in narrative forms that combine individual biography with environmental history in order to provide concrete examples of environmental damage that can become the basis for redress and reform" (404). Leygonier stresses



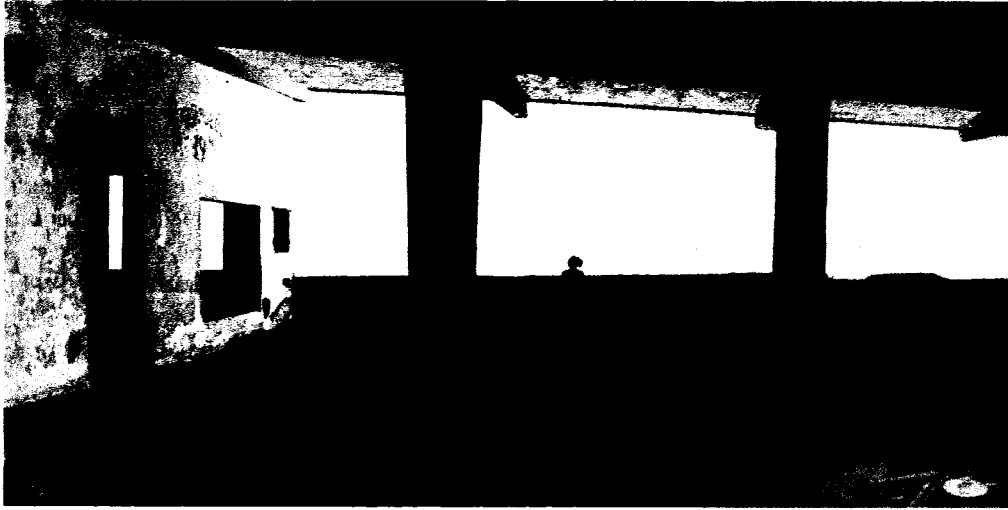


Figure 28.4 Atelier Morales, *Guanabo Desolé I* (Sindicato Telefónico, Guanabo, 2007).

his own condemnation of the neglect of Cuba's architectural patrimony, but represents it through the loss of his family's personal and organized labor connections and through an understanding of that history's relationship to the environment. His personal narrative of dispossession encompasses not only the loss of a building and the vital connection it offered to the enjoyment of the seashore, but also an understanding of how that building was placed "on the natural sand" and designed to be as open as possible to the surrounding elements. From his own middle-class position, he reacts with irony to the Cuban government's stated reasons for neglecting the buildings that previously housed luxury clubs like the Havana Yacht Club, purportedly for its commitment to "return the beaches to the people and end the privileges of the bourgeoisie," as Fidel Castro proclaimed in the early 1960s. As symbols of capitalist excesses and privileges, buildings like the Havana Yacht Club exemplified the class and race structures that the Revolution sought to upend. Not so the neglect of the syndicates' beach clubs, which responded, in Leygonier's assessment, to an impulse to destroy a union movement that may have represented workers, but that ideologically had distanced itself from the aims of the revolution.

The Telephone's syndicate opted to preempt dispossession by giving their club voluntarily to the state, which nonetheless could not find a way to reuse or preserve what to the former members was an important institutional and personal space—an important part of Cuba's historical and architectural legacy. The structure of the building remains—perhaps still reparable—"strong against the sea and Castro," Leygonier claims, but windows, stained glass, doors, floor tiles, and bricks have been removed over time, "recycled" by those in need of hard-to-come-by construction materials (see Figure 28.4). In Leygonier's assessment, the building fell prey to the voraciousness of those needing scarce building supplies in Cuba and to the rapaciousness of the sea.

Leygonier, like Atelier Morales, notes the irony of some of these spaces becoming sites for all-inclusive resorts as the Castro government has sought foreign income through tourism, creating a particularly Cuban form of apartheid, where Cubans are kept from tourist beaches in the same way that blacks, mulattoes, and laborers were kept off the beaches of the Havana

Yacht Club and relegated to the beaches of Guanabo. When the spaces have not been reappropriated, Leygonier reminds us, indiscriminate mining for beach sand (a diminishing resource throughout the Caribbean) has destroyed the quality of the natural spaces, with a loss of fifty to sixty yards of sandy shore. Atelier Morales, echoing Leygonier, speak of their work as integrating an ecological dimension that stems from their admiration of Mialhe's attention to nature and its curative potential through healing waters and herbal treatments that are both an Amerindian and an African legacy. However, the ecological dimension of their work is still at odds with local environmental needs as defined by a revolutionary government, armed with scientific assessments, and bent on the erasure of buildings, and their history, from national territory in the name of environmental survival. As environmentally aware photographers and exiled Cubans, Morales and Ayuso have created an art stemming from a space of nostalgia, a space of in betweenness from which they address the Cuban regime's neglect of the island's historical and architectural patrimony while simultaneously capturing the environmental results of the systemic misuse of the land and the early indicators of climate change affecting Cuba. This nostalgia is clearly at odds with state decisions to curb the damage caused by climate change, bringing state goals and artistic project into ideological conflict: both claim an environmental foundation, yet only one acts with the authority of science and political might.

In Cuba, the history of coastal spaces has been reconstructed, archived, and, in the work of Atelier Morales, brought to the fore as an artistic tribute to an endangered patrimony that is both a symbol of loss and a statement of the perils of earlier coastal misuse. For the people of Cuba, the loss of these baths and multiple other structures built on precarious sandbanks represents a loss of architectural heritage, but may ultimately bring protection from the sea and the increased power it has been given by climate change and rising levels. The work of Atelier Morales memorializes the baths' role in an island imaginary as markers of history and of a superseded notion of the nation, ultimately destroyable (and destroyed) by climate change.

The possible fate of islands like Petite Martinique remains more poignantly precarious. Dependent on aid from the US Agency for International Development among other international organizations, Petite Martinique is struggling to put in place a plan to curb coastal erosion and reduce the compounding impacts of climate change. Climate adaptation interventions remain outside of their immediate control and depend on land reclamation, the placement of a 390-foot seawall to halt ongoing erosion, and the construction of a retaining wall on the northern headland to withstand storm surges and strong wave action. With no Atelier Morales to chronicle its endangered beauty, the image that remains is of a little island in battle gear, armored as best it can for its losing battle against an attacking sea.

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