Growing Inward:
On Lofts and Barbacoas

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> "In which direction is the city growing?" I asked him over the din. "Inward, into lofts."
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> He stood up to scan the people passing by.
>
> "It's growing inward."
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> Antonio José Ponte, "A Knack for Making Ruins"[1]

Self-building is a practice that exists across cultures, but has played a particularly vital role in developing nations in Latin America and the Global South, where economic conditions and access to resources in growing cities has made housing a major issue. The issue of housing and resulting spontaneous settlements have existed in Havana, Cuba, for more than a century and, despite the intentions of the revolution, continue to be a problem. One form of self-building which has arisen in La Habana Vieja in response to these housing demands is the barbacoa. The barbacoa, which receives its name from a humorous visual comparison to barbecue spits, is a loft or mezzanine level built within existing structures to divide the house vertically to either provide more space for the family or owner, or to produce a second unit.

As informal and illicit self-built structures, barbacoas are the result of discreet social networks. Dependent on whatever resources the builder is able to acquire, a typical barbacoa is initially made of wood, although it may be fortified or rebuilt over time using steel and concrete (Fig. 1). The acquisition of materials may take months or even years, as most building materials are scarce and cannot be found in state-authorized markets. Thus, the building of a barbacoa often requires the builder to be able to find such materials in grey or black markets. Social networks can also be invaluable in providing technical assistance. As self-built structures, ninety percent of barbacoas have no official technical assistance, and less than ten percent are permitted.[2] Having access to someone who has either already built a barbacoa or has the technical knowledge to build one properly may not only spare the owner from spending costly materials to build a strong yet inefficient structure, but also may avoid collapse in the case of overloading the existing building's structure. This and other legitimate concerns for safety, as

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[1] Antonio José Ponte, "A Knack for Making Ruins," in *Tales from the Cuban Empire*, trans. Cola Franzen (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 2002), 24.

[2] Madelin Chinea Hernandez, "Ideas para un modelo de intervención en la vivienda de interés social," *Planificación Física*, (La Habana, Cuba: 2003), 3, quoted in Patricio del Real, "Building the *barbacoas* in Havana, Cuba," *Encounters/Encuentros/Recontres*, ed. David Covo and Gabriel Mérigo Basurto (ACSA, 2005), 12.

well as the less rational but commonly oppositional attitudes against self-building and spontaneous settlement, have resulted in the illegality of such construction. Despite this illegality, housing demands continue to exist, and in order to meet these demands so have the barbacoas.

Fig. 1 — A barbacoa under construction. (Photo collage by Patricio del Real)

The barbacoa has existed in some form in Havana for as long as housing has been an issue. According to the research of Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, the oldest use of the term *barbacoa* to refer to lofts in an official context was within the *Ordenanzas Sanitarias para el Régimen de los Municipios de la Republica*, passed in 1914.[3] Within this ordinance, the minimum legally required height of rooms was established and the subdivision of rooms such as

[3] Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, "Barbacoas: Havana's New Inward Frontier," *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989*, ed. Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 58.

with barbacoas was expressly prohibited. Notably, the term *barbacoa* is used specifically and without definition, suggesting a much older and widespread practice.[4] While the use of the barbacoa in this context served a much different purpose than barbacoas of today—essentially to provide property owners more rental space rather than the expansion of personal households—it refers to the same architectural intervention and was apparently just as illicit.

In any case, the barbacoa is a construction with a clear functional purpose meant to address a lack of housing, an issue that has concerned the Cuban government at least since the beginning of the Republic and continues into the present, and was a major focus of the new revolutionary government. At the time of the revolution in 1959, the capital contained about 20% of the island's population, with a significant percentage of people living in barrios, crowded apartments called *ciudadelas*, or in subdivided mansions called *cuarterías*.[5] The existence of spontaneous settlements or barrios in Havana reinforced its perception during the revolution as a capital of inequality, and therefore could not be allowed to continue. In the years immediately following the revolution, the new government reduced rents by half, forbade evictions, demolished the largest barrios, and relocated their populations to newly-constructed modern housing projects.[6] In 1976, housing was included in the Socialist Constitution alongside healthcare and education as a fundamental right.[7]

Efforts to tackle housing have proven difficult, however, causing the Cuban government to shift its approach through a variety of policies of differing priorities, resources, and bureaucratic involvement. Despite state-sponsored efforts of the "Heroic Period," the 1970 Population and Housing Census revealed that self-building had provided more than double the amount of housing units as the state, leading the government to form the *microbrigadas* under the Ministry of Construction. The microbrigadas shifted the approach to housing from large projects for the general population toward smaller projects for more specific social groups, and

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[4] Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, "Barbacoas," 58.

[5] Ronaldo Ramírez, "Integrated Informality in the Barrios of Havana," *Rethinking the Informal City: Critical Perspectives from Latin America*, ed. Felipe Hernández, Peter Kellet and Lea K. Allen (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 140.

[6] Ibid., 140.

[7] Patricio del Real and Anna Cristina Pertierra, "Inventar: Recent Struggles and Inventions in Housing in Two Cuban Cities," *Buildings & Landscapes: Journal of the Vernacular Architecture Forum*, vol. 15 (Fall 2008), 79.

would continue until inefficiency brought about their decline in the 1980s.[8] Inefficiencies of the earlier housing projects and the later shift in focus away from housing as a general issue meant that self-building continued in Havana, commonly occurring in the form of barbacoas.

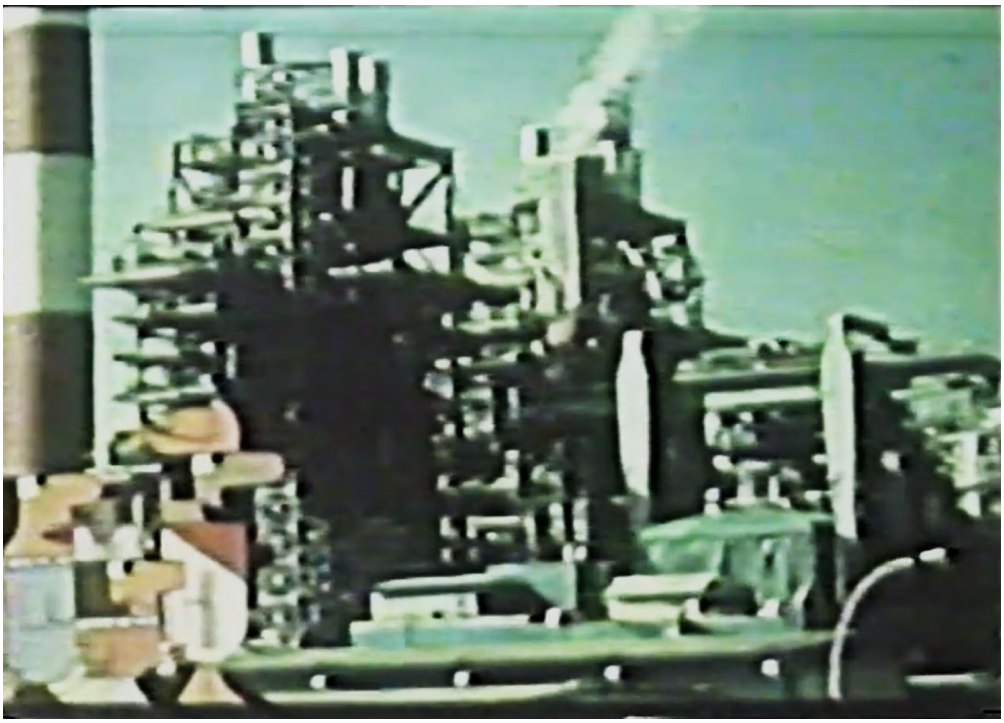

Fig. 2 — Still from *El Bohío* (1984)

In the animated short *El Bohío* (1984), the history of Cuba is framed as a continuous fight for housing.[9] Beginning with the destruction of an indigenous family's *bohío*, or hut, by Spanish colonizers, the film depicts a series of battles: against the Spanish in the war for independence, against American companies during the U.S. occupation, and eventually against the Republic in the revolution. After all these battles for the simple bohío have been fought, the family celebrates against photographs of Cuban housing projects (Fig. 2). The story of the bohío presented here to children suggests just how prominent the issue of housing was within the cultural narratives of the revolutionary government. And the message is clear: under the revolutionary government, the struggle for housing has at last been won.

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[8] For a more thorough summary of the history of housing after the revolution, see Patricio del Real and Anna Cristina Pertierra, "Inventar," 79-81.

[9] *El Bohío*, directed by Mario Rivas (1984), video.

Despite the victories claimed by the film, housing continued to be a concern, and in Havana barbacoas continued to be built. By 1982, two years prior to the film, more than half of the housing stock in La Habana Vieja contained barbacoas, totaling more than 17,000 units.[10] Additionally, according to the Housing and Population Census of 1995, 44.5% of barbacoas identified in the historic center up to this point had been built after 1980, suggesting an acceleration of self-building not easily reconciled with the proud achievements displayed in *El Bohío*.[11] As Cuba entered the Special Period of the 1990s following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the construction of barbacoas continued to address the problem of housing during a period of economic struggle and the resulting increased immigration into the city.

With the inefficiency of top-down government-led approaches to housing, self-building has maintained an ambivalent status, explicitly illegal yet somehow perpetuated with an implicit understanding of its necessity—tolerated if not sanctioned. In her book *Pure Spaces*, Elisa Silva notes that in many Latin American nations, the "population living in spontaneous settlements is so substantial that sheer number crunching has led urban designers and city officials to consider self-built homes part of the solution to continued housing deficits. As such they become a permanent part of the city."[12] This seems to be consistent with initiatives in Havana beginning in the late 1980s and persisting through the Special Period, such as the formation of the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital (GDIC) in 1987, which in turn developed the Talleres para la Transformación Integral de los Barrios.[13] The purpose of these *talleres*, or workshops, was to establish groups from within the barrios that would work with greater autonomy towards the needs of those communities.

A similar attitude has been extended to barbacoas which, as fairly invisible constructions within the formal urban fabric, are given some tolerance. While regulations legally require the demolition of any structure that has not been officially authorized, construction that is deemed

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[10] Patricio del Real, "Building the *barbacoas*," 12.

[11] It should be noted that a study by the Havana School of Architecture dates these a decade earlier. Regardless, these self-built barbacoas existed simultaneously with the projects celebrated within the film. See Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, "Barbacoas," 62.

[12] Elisa Silva, *Pure Spaces: Expanding the Public Sphere through Public Space Transformations in Latin American Spontaneous Settlements* (New York: Actar Publishers, 2020), 13.

[13] Ronaldo Ramírez, "Integrated Informality," 143.

well-built and non-threatening might often be allowed to remain with only a fine.[14] This degree of tolerance for barbacoas is an example of a pragmatic change in attitudes towards self-building, as in the case of the GDIC and talleres, but it also demonstrates a value judgement that has given the barbacoa some sort of legitimacy despite its illegality. As Mario Coyula and Jill Hamberg put it in "The Case of Havana," "People are not trying to get rich but to solve real family problems."[15] If *El Bohío* considers the history of Cuba as a struggle for the house, the barbacoa might simply be recognized as a part of this struggle.

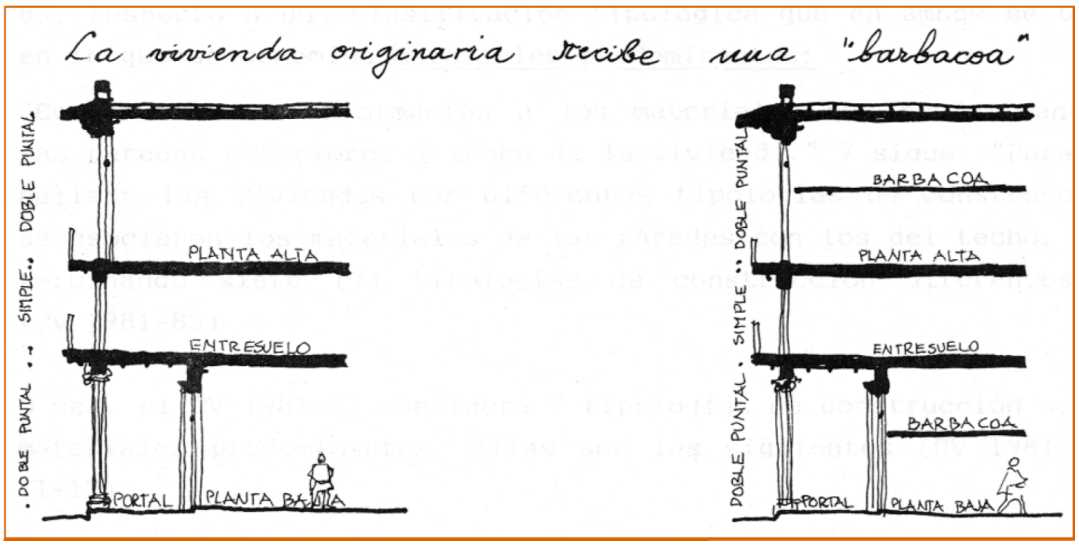

Fig. 3 — Barbacoas dividing the basic colonial mansion type (diagram from Coyula and Hamberg)

Ultimately, the barbacoa is a reflection of the changing lives of its inhabitants. As a family grows—by birth, marriage or the inclusion of relatives—so must the house, and if it cannot expand outward, it can only claim the space that already lies within. In La Habana Vieja, the barbacoa is an answer to this made possible by a common vernacular type: the colonial mansion. The historic center of Havana is populated with large houses built by wealthy families during the island's period as a Spanish colony. This type is characterized by two main levels occupied by the owners, and an in between level for servants (Fig. 3). While the two main levels

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[14] Mario Coyula and Jill Hamberg, "The Case of Havana, Cuba," *Working Papers* (Cambridge, MA: David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University, 2005), quoted in Ronaldo Ramírez, "Integrated Informality," 142.

[15] Ibid.

enjoyed tall ceilings, often as high as twenty feet, the *entresuelo* or servants' level was typically much shorter, itself more like a loft than a proper level. These houses, which were redistributed following the revolution, are now occupied by families for whom the entresuelo sets a useful precedent.[16] As owners face these "real family problems" and come to lack space for the people in their houses, they might take advantage of the ceiling height to build a barbacoa.

A barbacoa is often the first of a progression of interventions in the house, for the obvious reason that it creates more space. While this space is useful and often necessary for allowing a home to house more people, the kinds of spaces they offer is equally important. Del Real and Scarpaci note that rather than provide two floors for equal use, the barbacoa often divides a house into living or utility spaces (ie cooking and dining) and private spaces (ie bedroom).[17] This organization of space is partially the result of constraints, such as the location of water and gas services, which make creating equal spaces difficult, and is also quite typical for two-story residences generally. Even so, the significance of this organization should not be ignored. By building a barbacoa, the homeowner is claiming not only more space for living, but also new kinds of space—especially private space. Whether from neighbors or from the crowding of other family members, the barbacoa provides a space in which an individual can temporarily remove themselves from others. If, as the Ponte character suggests, the barbacoa can be understood architecturally and urbanistically as "growing inward," it also might provide the space for interiority on a personal level.

This idea of "growing inward" seems essential to the definition of the barbacoa, and what separates it from other kinds of lofts. My research has led me to at least one example of a similar loft in La Habana Vieja being rented as an Airbnb.[18] The practice of renting rooms in private homes, called *casas particulares*, has been allowed since 1997 as a means of providing additional income during the economic struggles of the Special Period. In the past, these rentals have been made over phone and in-person, but with the expansion of internet access since 2015,

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[16] Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, "Barbacoas," 68.

[17] Ibid., 66.

[18] "Loft la barbacoa 2," hosted by Alicia Maria, Airbnb. Accessed April 8, 2021. https://www.airbnb.com/rooms/22450440/

many casas particulares have shifted to Airbnb.[19] “Loft la barbacoa” is a colonial mansion which has been converted by the owner to host tourists at $91 per night. As the name suggests, the building has been fitted with lofts, taking advantage of the high ceilings in exactly the same way as the typical barbacoa.

Fig. 4 — Satellite view of Cuenca, Spain, as shown in the Media+Modernity lecture (Screenshot from Silva)

Loft la barbacoa presents important questions around what we consider formal and informal architecture. The barbacoa is typically considered illegal and informal—“illegal because the government does not officially recognize or sanction these constructions. They are informal because rarely do these enterprises get any form of technical or design assistance by professionals sanctioned by state institutions.”[20] With the allowance of casas particulares in 1997, the Airbnb is itself legal and it can be assumed that its lofts have been permitted, too. The formality of Loft la barbacoa is also easy to claim. Images of the rentals displayed on Airbnb

[19] David Nemer, “As Airbnb grows in Cuba, locals suffer the emotional burden of entitled tourists,” *Salon*, February 17, 2020. https://www.salon.com/2020/02/16/as-airbnb-grows-in-cuba-locals-suffer-the-emotional-burden-of-entitled-tourists/

[20] Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, “Barbacoas,” 69.

show rooms with a degree of material resources and craftsmanship not common of barbacoas and other self-built structures in Havana, suggesting the lofts' professional construction.

It should also be recognized that even if Loft la barbacoa was actually constructed outside of formal means, its construction would still probably be considered formal by occupants and observers, if not law enforcement, due to its physical appearance and use. In a lecture for Princeton University's Program in Media and Modernity, Silva compares the urbanism of European cities such as Amalfi, Italy, or Cuenca, Spain—in which self-built historic districts not only coexist with the modern, planned city, but are often considered more valuable—with the spontaneous settlements of Latin America that are considered slums (Fig. 4).[21] While these two urban fabrics are comparable architecturally through their bottom-up development, there is a cultural context which deems one legitimate and formal while the other is illegitimate and informal. In both Cuenca and Loft la barbacoa, economic and material conditions are primary factors which influence our understanding of formality v. informality; put simply, informality is not ascribed to things that look nice.

The barbacoa, at least for the purposes of this research, has referred to self-built, informal lofts, and so it seems appropriate to distinguish Loft la barbacoa, despite its name, as only lofts and not barbacoas. Yet at least architecturally, the Airbnb unit functions identically to the barbacoa. As mentioned earlier, these lofted units have been created through the opportunities presented in the same colonial type as other barbacoas; photographs of the interior courtyard clearly display not only the two main levels which have been divided, but also the entresuelo between them (Fig. 5). They also share similar organizational schemes. Photographs of the units show that the first floor of the loft is primarily a living space, including a kitchenette and bathroom, while the upper floor is reserved more or less exclusively for a bedroom in a distribution of space similar to the barbacoa (Fig. 6).

To understand the distinction between lofts and barbacoas—and thereby expand the understanding of formality v. informality—the barbacoa cannot only be defined architecturally, or rather, there must be an understanding of architecture outside of its form and legality. Michael Waldrep has researched the extent to which lofts in New York City, which began to be

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[21] Elisa Silva, "Pure Space: Expanding the Public Sphere through Public Space Transformations in Latin American Spontaneous Settlements" (virtual presentation, Program in Media and Modernity, Princeton University, March 9, 2021). https://fb.watch/5pivOoH8Cx/

Fig. 5 — Photo of the upper level. In the courtyard, the smaller entresuelo is visible. (Photo from Airbnb)

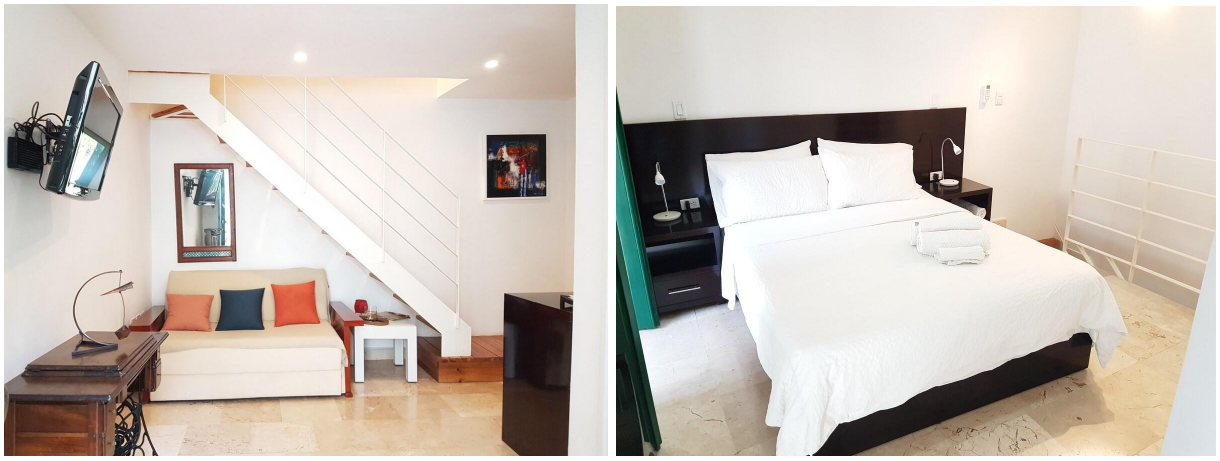

Fig. 6 — Living space on the lower level (left) and bedroom in the loft (right). (Photos from Airbnb)

constructed illegally and informally in the mid-20th century, might be considered as spontaneous settlements.[22] Yet, geographic and linguistic context aside, these lofts would not be considered barbacoas even for any similarities in informality or architecture. Similarly, the Airbnb loft which occupies a similar architecture as the barbacoa is not necessarily a barbacoa. Returning to the idea of "growing inward" presents a definition of the barbacoa that is responsive not only to its architectural or legal contexts, but also to its urban, cultural, and domestic contexts.

In his short story "A Knack for Making Ruins," Antonio José Ponte approaches the barbacoa within these different contexts. The main character, a student of architecture or urban planning, takes interest in the barbacoa as an urban phenomenon, but as his research progresses he begins to see them within the more malicious context of "tugurization." The so-called tugurs are people who inhabit these buildings, subdivide them, and continue to purposefully crowd them until the building itself collapses. Rather than as responding to "real family problems" as Coyula and Hamberg suggest, Ponte presents the barbacoa in a more cynical view as ruining the city, a reality that can only be imagined as the action of villainous immigrants and not by the lives of families. In comparison, del Real and Scarpaci read Ponte much more generously. Despite his cynicism, Ponte also presents the barbacoa as "the image of another possible city. Those whom Ponte calls 'Tugures' or slum builders remake Havana. These builders, nomads who inhabit the city, seek the horizon. In a small island like Cuba such a quest has to be internalized."[23] Thus, "growing inward" can be extended from urban self-building practices to the provision of private, domestic spaces, but also even further to the cultural narratives of people who struggle for comfort in their city.

This understanding of the barbacoa as part of a new frontier, as del Real and Scarpaci present it, should not be taken as glorified or heroic. In *Pure Spaces*, Silva warns that the "creative capabilities of spontaneous settlement inhabitants are often touted as evidence of self-improvement, but such a perspective fails to acknowledge the structural limitations imposed by their surroundings."[24] At the center of much of the research presented here, and del Real in

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[22] Michael Waldrep, "Informal Housing in New York City: A Spatial History of Squats, Lofts, and Illegal Conversions" (master's thesis, Cambridge, MA: Department of Urban Studies and Planning, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2014), 59-100.

[23] Patricio del Real and Joseph Scarpaci, "Barbacoas," 70.

[24] Elisa Silva, *Pure Spaces*, 17.

particular, is the understanding of the barbacoa as the product of problems such as scarcity and bureaucracy which are widespread in Havana, and as an attempt by homeowners not to necessarily overcome these issues but live comfortably in their reality.

It's within this context that the barbacoa receives better definition. The Airbnb Loft la barbacoa is as much a barbacoa as the tenement version outlawed by the *Ordenanzas Sanitarias para el Régimen de los Municipios de la Republica* in 1914: architecturally similar, but built for the provision of rental income rather than a more comfortable household. This is not to place judgement on Cubans who supplement their income through the use of casas particulares and Airbnb, but only to distinguish them as serving different purposes within the culture of the city. More research needs to be done on the presence of lofts in casas particulares—especially those which are not responsible to the Airbnb rating system—their legality, and their technical or professional formality, but with the research so far, it seems reasonable to separate these lofts from the barbacoa.

The barbacoa is not only a loft which claims physical space but a technology by which other spaces may be claimed for the family and the self. Michel Foucault defines technologies of the self as those "which permit individuals to effect by their own means or with the help of others a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immortality."[25] Admittedly a broad definition, within the context of the barbacoa it seems to align with the ideas of frontier mentioned by del Real and others. What separates the barbacoa from other lofts, formal or informal, is the unique role which it plays in providing a greater degree of comfort and accommodation for the changing lives of the habaneros who build them. Silva argues that "self-built homes represent an option for people who, not having the resources to buy a formal home, can invest their earnings over months and years into a progressively built structure."[26] As the first of these progressive interventions, and one with a particular suitability for providing much-needed space, the barbacoa holds particular value.

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[25] Michel Foucault, "Technologies of the Self," (lecture, University of Vermont Oct. 1982), in *Technologies of the Self* (Univ. of Massachusetts Press, 1988), 16-49. https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.technologiesOfSelf.en/

[26] Elisa Silva, *Pure Spaces*, 22.

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