



“¡Azúcar!”: Fragments from a Land of Sugar

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“¡Azúcar!”: FRAGMENTS FROM A LAND OF SUGAR

by Idael Cárdenas

advised by Lisa Haber-Thomson

A Thesis Submitted to the Department of Architecture Harvard University Graduate School of Design. In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of Master of Architecture. “The author hereby grants Harvard University permission to reproduce and distribute copies of this thesis, in whole or in part, for educational purposes.”



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A | Foreword: *Dedicado a...*

Este proyecto está dedicado a mi familia.



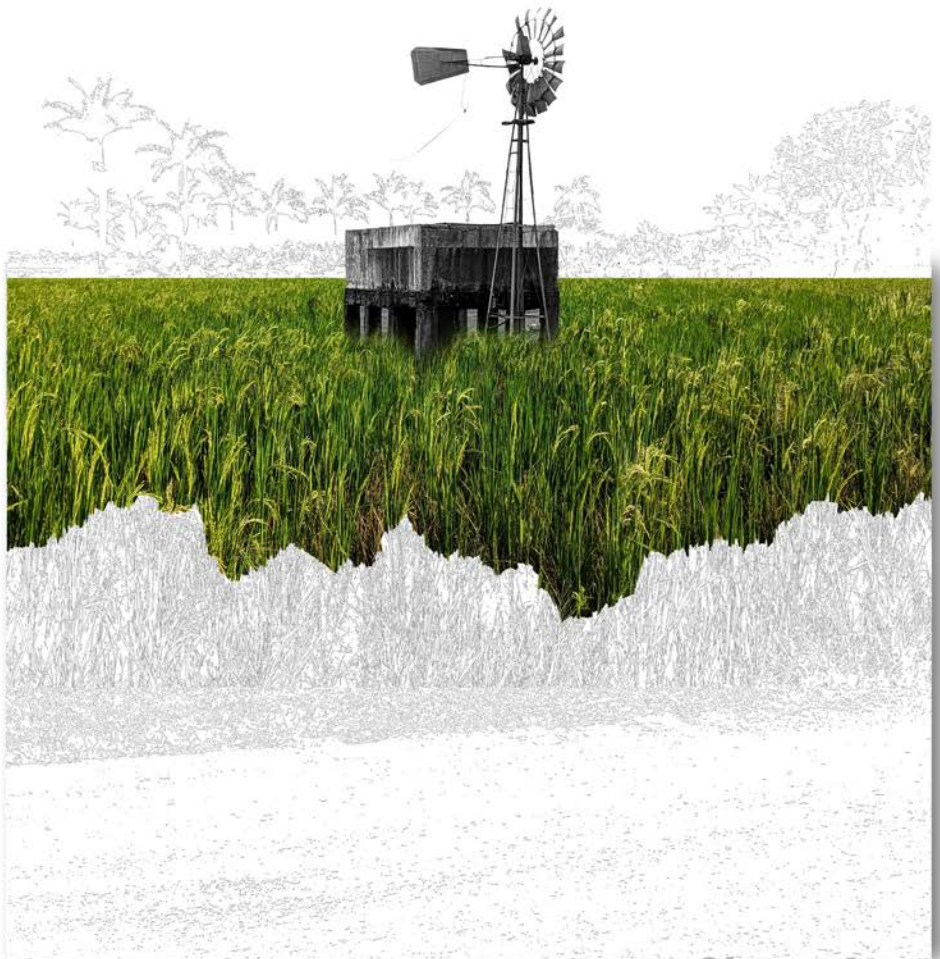
Due to the topic of this project, primarily focused on Cuban state-owned *centrales* (sugar-mills), research is severely restricted for tourists, foreign nationals (even if Cuban-born) and citizens alike. I was granted access to these sites through connections with relatives and family friends. This project has been self-censored to protect identities against backlash from the Cuban government in allowing me to conduct my investigations. As such, certain people and locations have been left intentionally vague.

“¡Azúcar!”: Fragments from a Land of Sugar was originally conceived in print; thus, this PDF has been optimized to be viewed as spreads. Part of this project was published in *ReVista: The Harvard Review of Latin America*, as *The Territory of Memory from a Land of Sugar: Cas-cal, Cas-cal* on September 22, 2023. This submission of the project has been edited down from its original length for copyright concerns.

The sugarcane-processing factory, or *central*, has long played a pivotal role in Cuba's history. For the Cuban people, the production of sugar is more than just an export commodity. Sugar, and by proxy the *central*—its spatial manifestation—are multifaceted cultural artifacts.

Through a series of anecdotes, I tell a story from a land of sugar. I piece together this narrative from visual, textual, and oral archives. These seemingly disjointed, scattered, asynchronous, and erroneously nostalgic voices construct a manifold view of Cuba from its colonization to the present. As such, this project is an interpolation, or an oscillation of fragments of a story that remains incomplete and littered with gaps.

This is a story about territory, race and ultimately catastrophe—reflecting a world that continues to be plunged into crisis. A crisis that is, as Eva Horn describes in *Future as Catastrophe*, “no longer an event, but a prolonged present.” But this project is also a tale of resilience, illustrating how in more ways than one, our personal geographies are inherently linked to the legacies of colonial-economic processes.





Train at Central Constancia (Now Abel Santamaría) (between 1900 and 1920). Manuel R. Bustamante Collection.

Cascal

Also pronounced *gascal*.

1 | *Cas-cal, cas-cal*: The Territory of Memory

At my grandmother's house in the rural town of El Santo, Villa Clara, I was in limbo. It was nearing noon, and I was anxiously awaiting a call from the head of Cuban security to obtain clearance. Just the day before, I had arranged to travel to Encrucijada's last remaining (semi-functioning) *central*. My family and I had made several calls, exhausting all our connections, but when we finally made a breakthrough, I was ordered to wait until security verified my visit. This time of year, the *central* operates during summer hours, pressing *caña* during the early mornings and closing at noon; staffing was limited. I was hoping for a bureaucratic miracle. But the day stretched on, and still no call. My original plans were suddenly crumbling apart.

Then, serendipitously, as things often are in Cuba, my cousin stopped by. He proposed that we travel to the defunct Central Emilio Córdova, historically known as Nazábal, instead. I was interested in seeing two sides of the same coin: a *central* and *batey* in opposing realities. One operational, and one in ruins. I felt that investigating both would provide me with a clear understanding of the *central's* imprint on the *batey*. However, reaching the ruins of Nazábal is no simple feat.

Even in such proximity, there is no readily available transport to Nazábal from El Santo. The main road is in shambles. Cars and horse-drawn carriages make the trip albeit with trepidation, and scooters would simply blow out their tires. The only somewhat reliable means of transport is the infamous *cascal*. A single locomotive, that laboriously trudges along from El Santo to Central Emilio Córdova, with its final stop seaside at Playa Nazábal. Like the 1957 Chevrolet Bel-Airs that proliferate on the Island, the *cascal* is a relic from a departed era. Every morning at six, its horn blares as it approaches the crossing in front of my grandmother's home. Minutes later, while I'm still in bed, it would shake the entire house, sluggishly reversing to its destination. The boarding platform is a mere minute walk from the house. However, it usually only makes three stops at El Santo, and the timetable changes from day to day in an almost arbitrary pattern. One must ask the conductor

to confirm the schedule, but I was fortunate. The *cascal* would leave at midday and return at 4 p.m.

Both my cousin and my grandmother's husband would accompany me. My cousin, Salvador had done a year residency at the *batey's* clinic and knew most of the community—they affectionately call him *el medico*. He assured me we would have no problem entering the remnants of Central Nazábal. My grandmother's husband, Jardines, would be my guide, a retiree of the now obsolete mill, he worked for decades in the *central's* laboratory as a chemist. A plan had coalesced, and we hurriedly boarded the *cascal*.

The *cascal* was recently painted cobalt blue. But the paint was already chipping, and the interior wood veneer was splintering at the seams from years of exposure to Cuba's unkind heat and humidity. That day was no exception. There was an unwavering-swelting heat inside the car. Beads of sweat were rolling down the necks of all those in front of me. The small polycarbonate window panels provided paltry relief, as did the *cascal's* painful advance of six miles per hour. Even so, we chugged along, and it became apparent how the term *cascal* was coined. Every couple of seconds, as the car swayed from side to side and the wheels vibrated on the track, a noise ricocheted: *cas-cal, cas-cal, cas-cal, cas-cal*. Salvador, seated next to me and drenched in sweat, sneered, "*una experiencia única* (a once-in-a-lifetime experience)." In a way, it was.

Seemingly a lifetime ago, public transport in this region was the extreme opposite. Locals lamented that the *batey* of Nazábal was probably the most well-connected town in the entire province of Villa Clara. Nazábal possessed a diverse array of trains and lorries to nearby towns and the municipal center of Encrucijada (aptly named as a crossroads). A *central* veteran, Riquito, recounted:

Mira aquí está es la foto del cascal viejo, todo de madera, y chiquito. Pero nunca se rompía. Aquí había más transporte que en ningún otro lugar de la provincia. {...} Y aparte habían dos locomotoras que te llevaban hasta la playa. La tienda de aquí y el central se abastecían por un vagón de línea que tenían también.

(Look here {showing me on his phone}, this is the photo of the old *cascal*, made entirely of wood, and small. But it never broke down. There was more transportation here than anywhere in the province. {...} Additionally, there were two dedicated locomotives that took you to the beach.

Both the main store and *central* were also supplied by a separate railcar too.)

(I asked)—¿*Los que vivían aquí en el batey, conseguían casi todo lo que necesitaban ahí en el centro del pueblo verdad?* (Those who lived here in the *batey*, got almost everything they needed right there in the center of town, right?)

En esa tienda, había de todo. Si tú le decías al dueño, me hace falta una máquina de este modelo o cualquier tipo, te la traía. (That store had everything. If you told the owner, I need this certain machine of ‘x’ model or type they would bring it to you {via train}.)

(I asked)—¿*Y, ahora?* (And, now?)

—*Ahora ni hay una bicicleta.* (Now there’s not even a bicycle.)

Central Emilio Córdova functioned as both a nexus and terminus for an area larger than 200 square miles. All the municipality’s *centrales* shipped their commodities (sugar, molasses, rum, etc.) through the *batey* of Nazábal. Their destination, *el espigón* (the jetty). Jutting out from the beach, the boxcars would be unloaded onto ships destined for ports in La Habana or beyond. However, when the *central* was dismantled much of the vast network of rail and roadways was left abandoned. The jetty was left to decay, until Hurricane Irma in 2017 razed what little had managed to endure. Yet it still exists, albeit submerged. When visiting Playa Nazábal, I could feel with my feet sections of the ruined *espigón* on the seafloor, sensing traces of concrete and metal. In the coming years as hurricanes continue to assail the Island, more fragments will run ashore, obscured remainders from bygone days.

The *casal*, now on its last legs, is also a remnant of those days. Gazing out from the window, it was unmistakable we were entering the *central*’s immense territory. Fragmented *cañaverales* were intermittently coming into view, disrupted only by dense shrubbery that crammed the railcar on either side. *Aromales*. Fields of the invasive and thorny *marabú aroma* that has besieged *cañaverales* and forests across the Island. So pervasive, that we were forced to shut the windows to prevent being abraded by the protruding branches. Any slight breeze inside the car was stifled further.

Jardines pointed at the fields, “*no sirven* (they’re no good).”

Indeed, Riquito confirmed when I asked him, “¿Qué quedan de los cañaverales por aquí? (What remains of the sugarcane fields here?)” With a dejected look, he explained,

Queda caña, el problema es la calidad de la caña, parece hierba bruja ya. Ya no sirve, porque acabaron. Mira, de ahí {desde el central, y la calle enfrente del apartamento} para allá hasta el agua {el mar}, era monte. Ahí en ese monte, aquí había unos que se llamaban Los Rosas, que lo tenían lleno de ganado. La leche sobraba, las vacas comían en la sombra y todo...vinieron los inteligentes y chapearon todo...se llevaron el monte completo.

(There is sugarcane left, the problem is the quality of the cane, they look more like *hierba bruja* now. They're no good because they {Cuban government} destroyed it all. Look, from there {from the *central*, and the front of his apartment} to the water {the sea}, was all forested. In that forest, there were these people, The Rosas, which had livestock. There was plenty of milk, the cows ate in the shade and everything...then the 'smart ones' {the regime} came and cut everything down...they uprooted the entire forest.)

—I asked, ¿En qué año fue eso? (What year was that?)

Los años '80. Entonces la salinidad empezó a caminar para acá. Cuando paró el central en el '97, ya la salinidad estaba de Buena Vista para allá. Ya estas tierras para la caña no sirven, tienes que tener mucho abono, y no hay.

(The '80s. Then the salinity began to creep in. When the sugar-mill stopped in '97, the soil's salinity was at Buena Vista {a satellite branch of the central about 3 miles inland} and beyond. These lands no longer work for sugarcane, you must have a lot of fertilizer, and there just isn't any.)

Misty-eyed, he stared past me—you can see the ruins of the Empresa Cañera Central Emilio Córdova from his apartment balcony. Without altering his gaze, he muttered, “*Pero pa' que, este central era una joya.*” (“I am telling you, this *central* was a jewel.”)

Riquito remembered a land of sugar at his doorstep. Though his connection with the *central* arose by circumstance, it became an inextricable facet of his life. I asked him how old he was when he began work at the *central*:

Abí en el central {batey} no había televisor en ningún lado, solo si estabas en el sindicato nada más, y no nos dejaba a ninguno entrar a ver televisión. Entonces mi papá habló con Pepe Álvarez, que era del sindicato para ver si yo podía entrar. {Dijo Pepe} Bueno tendrá que pagar el sindicato, como si fuera un obrero.' Entonces empecé a pagar el sindicato y así entre para ver televisión. Y así cogí el escalafón, por eso entre desde los 16 años al central.

(In the *central* {batey} there was no television anywhere, only if you were in the workers' union, and they would not let you enter to watch otherwise. So, my dad talked with Pepe Álvarez, who was part of the union, to see if I could enter. {Pepe said} "Well you need to pay into the union, as if you were an employee." So, I paid my dues, and that's how I entered to watch television. That's how I began to climb the corporate ladder, and that's why I was 16 years old when I started at the *central*.)

As the *cascal* finally approached the *batey*, the *central* came into full view. It was a giant. The colossal structure loomed over me, rusted, and with most of its zinc roof panels absent. On its singular steam-stack, in faded bold-lettering, recorded its name, registry number and the year it was seized by the state and renamed, "Emilio Córdova. 420. 1967."

A small group of people congregated at the *central* entrance. My cousin approached one, and blurted, "He's an architecture student (pointing at me), working on his thesis, can we come in?". The man shot a quick look at us, "¿No vas a poner una bomba verdad? (You're not going to plant a bomb, right?)" Bursting in laughter they greeted each other, and I shook his hand. I was lifted out of bureaucratic purgatory.

But more waiting was coming. The *cascal* broke down, and as we idled near the track for the repairs, storm clouds were materializing. Just as the first raindrops fell on my skin, we boarded for El Santo. It was 7 p.m., three hours delayed. Condensation collected on the windows, foliage lashed at our arms, and our bodies swayed. *Cas-cal. Cas-cal. Cas-cal. Cas-cal.*

...

That same night at my grandmother's house, amid a heated domino match, my cousins told me stories about my late great-grandfather's obsession with *caña*. The man may have been afflicted by undiagnosed OCD but had the disposition of a sugar-connoisseur. One would arrive eager, at his house in La Puntilla, for a sip of his renown *guarapo*. Still, seldom would he allow you to pick the sugarcane stalk of your pleasing; his selection process was akin to choosing a fine wine pairing. Striking the cane with a machete, one stalk, selected from rows neatly labeled by variety or hybrid. *Caña violeta*, *criolla...cristalina*. Their respective tastes, like a family heirloom, were passed down to three generations. I felt inexplicably nostalgic, longing for a piece of my inheritance that would be forever lost, only to be remembered in instances such as these: crowded around a small table, domino pieces shuffling in our hands.



The town of El Santo (2023).







The town of El Santo (2023).
The *casca*, in front of my grandmother's house in El Santo (2023), following spread.







On the *casca* overlooking fields (2023).



21v-22p

17-18p





On the *casal* overlooking *cañaverales* (2023).
Playa Nazábal and the *espigón* (2023), following spread.







Presumably, Nazábal's *espigón* (c.1990). Sourced from Facebook.

Espigón

A jetty, and the terminus for Central Emilio Córdova. Most of the *central's* exports were shipped by rail and emptied into large barges that docked by the *espigón*. That is, until 1997—the last *zafra*. After the *central* was shut down, the *espigón* was briefly converted into a snack-bar, offering ice-cream to children in the summer, as families swam on the nearby beach. But a hurricane razed most of it. Now when visiting Playa Nazábal, remnants of the *espigón* are less apparent. A boardwalk still exists, yes. I walked its full-stretch, conscious that a locomotive used to chug along these same wooden boards, except this segment of the railway is gone—more clearly, from satellite imagery, I can trace the full length of it, from *central* to *espigón*. Better yet, the *espigón*, littered across the seabed, is better felt than seen—stepping on its fragments, as I waded from shore.

Central

The Central is amalgamation of parts: a steam-stack (or, two), an expansive shed to house all the equipment (historically, the shed was made out of lumber, but now more commonly steel), warehouses to store the goods (sugar, molasses, if there was a distillery attached, rum, too), a laboratory to test those said goods, lockers, changing rooms, restrooms, a cafeteria, administrative offices, and miles of *cañaverales* that surround the architecture—integral to the *central*'s whole operation. This non-exhaustive list makes up what Antonio Benítez-Rojo deemed as The Cuban-Creole Machine: “As the century ends {19th}, with slavery now abolished, there are radical changes in the sugar-making agribusiness complex. The new productive unit is given the name ‘central,’ acknowledging the consolidation of great stretches of land surrounding a much more productive mill.”¹

Yet, the *central* is also a container for millions of *obreros*. I revisit Riquito, the *central* veteran we met in Emilio Córdova, whose existence has been wrought by the rise and fall of just one of these machines. He recounts when he and fellow *obreros* dismantled Central Emilio Córdova:

1997 was the last *zafra*.

(I asked)—When it {Emilio Córdova} was transformed, was there a period when it was empty?

Well, no. Immediately as the *zafra* ended, they {the regime} started to cram the *central* with old locomotives. They began to take parts of Emilio Córdova to other *centrales*. We spent three years dismantling it. But most of it just went to scrap yards.

Somewhat trailing off, he continued, “...*Y aquí, este central, molía maravillosamente... no sé porque lo quitaron.* (And here, this *central*, it milled wonderfully...I don’t know why they removed it.)”²

1 Rojo, Antonio B. “Sugar and the Environment in Cuba”. DeLoughrey, Elizabeth M., Renée K. Gosson, and George B. Handley. 2005. *Caribbean Literature and the Environment: Between Nature and Culture*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

2 Stated by Riquito, interviewed in the summer of 2023.





Central Emilio Córdova (2023).





S. XOUERDOFC



Façade of Central Emilio Córdova (2023).
Inside the *central* (2023), following spreads.











Half of the *central* is now a railyard (2023).



4205

Carea
de
Fumar





Lubricant storage (2023), above.
Smoking area (2023), left.







The other half of the *central* (2023), following spreads.











The former railyard, connected to the *central* (2023),
above and following spread.
From outside (2023), left.







The former railyard, connected to the *central* (2023).







Central Emilio Córdova's former sugar warehouse,
now a basketball court (2023).
The central (2023), following spread.





10	<i>Cascal</i>
30	<i>Central</i>
32	<i>Espigón</i>

ii | Further Reading

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iii | *Agradecido*: Acknowledgments

Although my name is displayed on the cover of this work, this was *not* a solitary undertaking. I owe this effort to those that sat by my side, in passing or as a fixture in the process of constructing this project—whether over a *cafecito* or a formal review.

I want to begin by acknowledging Professor Mayra Rivera and teaching fellow Steve Rizzo. Thank you for allowing me a space within your seminar to incubate the initial ideas for this project; for granting me the language and tact to intertwine narratives of coloniality, race, and ultimately, catastrophe. But you also presented me with a path forward. Even in overwhelming catastrophe, I saw resilience: millions of Cubans, not only *resolviendo*, but claiming their futures. Yet just as you have taught me, the work is not done. I see this as the beginning of a lifelong project.

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Of course, this project would be in a very different state if not for my amazing advisor, Lisa Haber-Thomson. Thank you for pushing me, and this project, to the lengths it has reached; for taking the time

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Finally, to my mother and father—where do I even begin? Whenever I write, whenever I think about my beginnings, I think about you. I think of that voyage you made to a foreign land, with the hope of starting anew. The miles of sea you perilously crossed with no landfall in sight. I think of your relentless and unwavering labor, decades building up everything we now have from scratch. We had no shoulders to stand on then. So, would you believe that a little boy from Vega Redonda would have the prospect of being where I am now? I think you did. This project is inconceivable without your literal blood, sweat, and tears. *Te lo debo todo. Gracias mimi y papá.*

