

A COMMUNITY PROJECT – CUBAN STYLE

For anyone walking along the hot, dusty backstreets of Santa Clara – the city in central Cuba inextricably linked to the memory of Ché Guevara – it is always a welcome surprise to come across the cool, shady gardens of the community project, NaturArte, in the Calle Nueva.

It is difficult to believe that up until 1999 the whole 10,000m² site had been a rubbish tip. Over the past ten years, NaturArte's director, artist and former actor Ermes Ramírez Criado, and his team have been painstakingly removing the rubbish, accumulated over decades, and transforming the site into one of the most unique projects on the island. Today, there still remains one small area of rubbish to be cleared.



Some of it will be used in the craft work carried out by the project, exemplified by the entrance gates, with their delicate leaf design, made from recycled junk metal.



Most of the rubbish, however, will be sold to one of Cuba's many *empresas de materia prima* – companies which buy junk metal, plastics and cardboard for recycling. The money from the sale of rubbish comes in handy as NaturArte is entirely self-financing.

The gardens, with their abundant palm fronds, tropical flowers, ponds containing brightly-coloured fish and humorous statues emerging from the shadows, serve as an environmentally sustainable haven, supporting an abundant wild life.



The project also runs an urban farm with rabbits (bred to produce meat for meals at the project), birds and fowl, which include different species of chicken originating from Brazil and Poland, turkeys from Canada and 3,000 quails in addition to geese, guinea-fowl, pheasants and ducks.



Some of the fowl have won national awards. Hybrids are bred which have a greater resistance to disease or which will produce larger quantities of eggs, the sale of which is another source of income for the project. There is even a donkey – the *burro Perico* - which eventually will be set loose to roam the streets of Santa Clara to resurrect the (true) tale of a coal merchant's donkey in the 1940s which used to knock at doors with one of its hoofs to request food from the townspeople and which was looked after by the town after its master retired from work. When the *burro* died, a statue was erected in its memory. The donkey at Ermes' project is being trained to knock at specified doors only!

Then there is the craft area where flower pots, decorated with leaf design printed from real leaves (patented by Ermes), are made for sale.



Ornamental plaster sculptures and other kinds of decoration are made to order for work places and hotels, including some major hotels in Havana.

Recently the project received a request for ornamental artefacts for the exterior and internal reception areas of an oil refinery in the southern city of Cienfuegos. The sale of ornaments constitutes a major source of income for NaturArte.

“No-one took us seriously at first, but now we have been awarded the title of Site of National Excellence,” explained Ermes, an unassuming and very affable character in his forties whose wife, journalist Idiana Moreno, helps him run the project and whose children, Belinda(14), María Carla (10), Ermes junior (9) and María Fernanda (4), all join in its activities.

With an eye to the future, Ermes showed me two further developments, still at an embryonic stage. The first is an attractive functions area for festivals and gatherings with trees, large ponds with ducks and water features and tanks for breeding carp and other edible fish. NaturArte is



intending to host the Santa Clara fashion show next May and they are building a catwalk over one of the ponds. The second project is a small solar park, mainly to supply energy for producing heat for incubators and the preparation of feed for the fowl.

However, NaturArte's underlying aims are not material gain. "Money will buy almost everything we need, but not everything," says Ermes. Of paramount importance is the project's ability to contribute to the life of the community. The site is open, free of charge, to everyone. Ermes has forged close links with the local primary school whose pupils visit to attend classes about the environment and to grow vegetables. There is a bonsai group for adolescents and regular visits by members of the local *círculos de abuelos* (pensioners' groups, found in every locality throughout Cuba) who also work as volunteers.

Among the workforce are 12 artists and craftsmen and women. Another 14 people are involved in gardening, the care of animals and birds, construction work and working in the community. Since 2007, Ermes has offered places to 24 apprentices who are training to gain nationally



recognised qualifications in Crafts and who take a full part in the life of the project. Over 50% of these apprentices, together with seven members of the paid workforce, come from highly dysfunctional, sometimes violent, backgrounds. A number of them have been in institutions for young offenders, are on probation, experience drink problems or have family members in

prison. Finally, twelve people work at NaturArte as a form of occupational therapy. Ermes – himself one of eight siblings who also experienced serious family problems and severe material hardship as a child (alleviated, he told me with the arrival of the Cuban Revolution in 1959) – is particularly proud of his work with these youngsters and of the work they do for the project. "The most important thing is to develop their self-esteem and emotional intelligence," he explains. "When they joined NaturArte, almost all of them had been school drop-outs with no





qualifications or training. They had poor motivation and very low levels of self-esteem, usually never having had a job before. By getting them to contribute their ideas and, above all, by showing that we trusted them through allocating them individual tasks or projects for which they would become responsible, gradually we saw a development in their self-esteem and sense of commitment.”

Individual tasks may consist of caring for certain animals or fowl, work in the gardens, or even the design and production of one of the ornaments ordered by a hotel.

The workers’ midday meal is prepared using food produced at the project and they all receive the same basic pay. When there are surplus funds, they each receive a bonus, which can be sizeable.

On the other hand, in 2007 NaturArte found itself in serious financial difficulties and for three months there were no funds with which to pay the work force. With justifiable pride Ermes told me how he had called a meeting to explain the situation to his workers, saying that he would understand if they wished to leave to find a job elsewhere (not a problem in Cuba, where all people of working age – 18 years - who wish to work will be found a job or training). Not a single person wanted to leave. “It was one of the proudest moments of my life,” he added.



To keep the project running is hard work. As Ermes said, “For me, there are no Saturdays, Sundays or holidays.” He went on to stress the importance of creating a family atmosphere for his young work force. “For New Year’s Eve I organised a party for them here, together with my family, as I knew that many of their families wouldn’t be doing anything that evening,” he explained. Small wonder that his workers are so reluctant to leave.



When writing about Cuba, journalists invariably refer to ‘independent’ professionals or entrepreneurs as an indication of a desire by the population to see a decline of socialism on the island. For Ermes, quite the opposite applies. At the main entrance to the project stands a statue of Ché as a

soldier in the Escambray mountains during the Cuban revolutionary wars. It was erected last December.

During the final moments of my visit, Ermes stated his wish that the project should reflect the socialist values that underpin Cuba's social and economic framework. To use his own words: "Here, we defend the socialist system we have in Cuba which, although it may not be perfect, defines who and what we are."



*"When the last river has dried up
the last tree has been felled
and the last fish killed,
only then will mankind realise
that money will not feed us."*

Jenny Kassman
kas.jenny1959@googlemail.com