

Workers Build Own Apartments Near Havana

By Terri Shaw

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HAVANA—On the outskirts of almost every Latin American city are miles after miles of makeshift shacks, built by the poor who have come to the city seeking jobs.

In Chile, these slums are called "callampas," or mushroom rooms, because they seem to spring up overnight.

On the outskirts of Havana and other Cuban cities is a different kind of housing is "mushrooming"—modern, sturdy prefabricated concrete apartments.

Like the slums surrounding South American cities, these homes are being built by the people who will live in them. But the material, the blueprints and the workers' salaries are provided by the government.

The biggest of these developments is Alamar, where more than 140 white, red, yellow and blue apartment buildings have been built near the Caribbean about five miles east of Havana. More than 140 more 5- and 12-story buildings are in various stages of construction, and the new town is expected to have 150,000 residents.

Enrique Abreu, 51, was one of the first workers to begin building Alamar in 1971. When he and about 30 other workers at the Havana oil refinery volunteered to form a "microbrigade" to work at Alamar, those who stayed behind pledged to handle the volunteers' jobs. In return for supplying a "microbrigade," the refinery workers were promised a specific number of apartments at Alamar.

One of those apartments

— a small, two-bedroom, fifth-floor flat with a kitchen and bathroom—went to Abreu and his wife.

"Before we lived in one room with a wooden divider that I put up myself," said Abreu, a friendly, weathered-looking man with two bottom teeth missing. "There was a small area for the stove and we shared the bathroom with nine other families."

"The old place had cockroaches and was very closed and stuffy. This one is cool and clean," said Mrs. Abreu, who suffers from asthma. The Abreus were allotted their apartment by the workers of the oil refinery, on the basis of their need and their "revolutionary merit," a concept that seems to mean their contribution to the society and the many civic and political groups most Cubans belong to. Like other Alamar residents, the Abreus pay a rent equal to about 6 per cent of the husband's salary.

Along with the new housing, the Alamar "microbrigades" have built

schools, day care centers, supermarkets, and amphitheater, a clinic, and a factory that makes furniture to be sold to residents of the project.

Under construction are more schools, stores and day care centers, another factory and a movie theater with three auditoriums. One of the auditoriums is to show children's films under the supervision of babysitters when their parents are watching a show "unsuitable for minors" in another hall, Abreu said.

A foreign businessman who visited Alamar said the buildings appear well-constructed, although 80 per cent of the workers had never before done construction work.

Abreu said the ideas of forming the microbrigades was suggested by Prime Minister Fidel Castro in a conversation with a group of workers in 1970.

Construction of new housing was neglected during the early years of Castro's government because most of the government's resources were devoted to providing the essential goods that could no longer be imported as a result of the trade embargo initiated by the United States.

The government also concentrated on constructing new schools and hospitals in an effort to strengthen the human resources needed to build the Cuban economy.

Even with microbrigades building houses all over the country, there is still a housing shortage. In his annual July 26 speech this year,



These two factory workers became brick layers at Alamar.

Castro said: "Right now between 25,000 and 30,000 housing units are being built and it's not enough. It's one-third of what is needed just to make a beginning."

While it's hard for many Cubans to find a new house or apartment, the spending that they do have does not make a serious dent in the family budget.

One of the first radical changes made by the Castro government after it took power in 1959 was the "urban reform," which provided that tenants could buy their houses or apartments through small monthly payments to the government,

while the government provided a pension to the former landlords. Now many Cuban families own their homes, while others pay a small rent never more than 10 percent of their income.

Housing assigned by the government, although people who want to change are allowed to arrange a trade. It must be approved by a government inspector who checks to see if new housing fits each family's needs.

Because of the trade embargo and the government's priority on investment in the countryside, housing in Havana and other cities has decayed. Maintenance is difficult since necessary sup-

plies, such as tools and paint, are often unavailable. Many of the beautiful, Spanish colonial buildings of Old Havana reportedly are salvageable, and there are plans to rebuild the area completely once new housing has been provided for the residents.

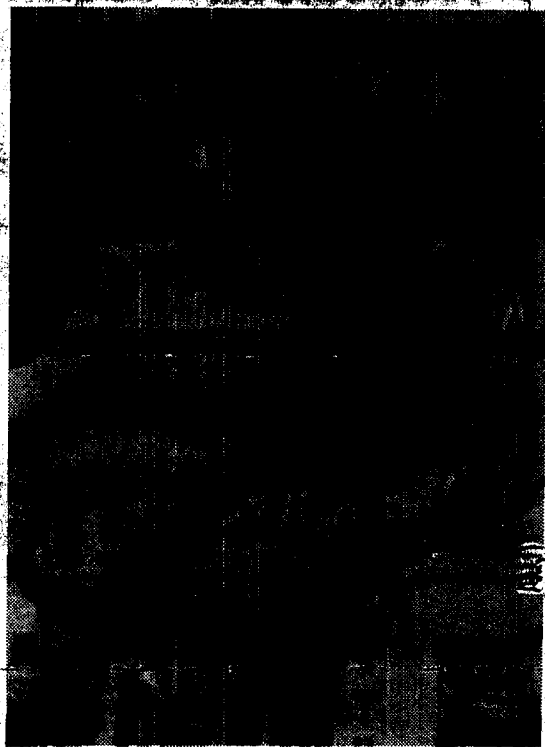
No Cuban official was made available to describe the reconstruction plan, but a Western diplomat said it would preserve the most historic buildings and replace the others with parks, theaters and offices.

New housing will be outside the city in places like Alamar, making the inner city a place for work and recreation, but not housing.



Apartment buildings in Alamar overlook a primary school, right, with a fenced-in swimming pool.

Photo by Terri Shaw—The Washington Post



The Abreus in the living room of their new apartment.