

José Martí: the Imagined Monument and the Unawarded First Prize

Por Juan Sarracino

Havana in the pages of *Arquitectura*, February 1939

Before a monument becomes a built presence, it exists as a debate about how to remember. The competition models for the Monument to José Martí assembled in the Sarracino Gallery Archives bring us close to that open moment: towers, platforms, stairways, figures and allegories explore different ways of giving national memory a visible form. The collection also preserves the distance between a shared aspiration and the difficulty of finding an expression the jury considered adequate.

The document's heading identifies *Arquitectura*, the monthly journal and official organ of the Colegio Nacional de Arquitectos, Havana, February 1939, year VII, number 67. This is the publication date established by the dossier. The received text specifies neither the day of the decision nor dates for every phase of the competition. No individual byline accompanies the report. This essay interprets the submission stage documented there, without turning it into a complete history of the monument eventually built. [1, pp. 1, 3–4]

The report begins by placing Martí on two scales: national and continental. Cuban independence and the spiritual unity of the Americas are linked in its justification for the memorial. This rhetoric belongs to the document: it expresses the journal's vision for the monument and the responsibility it assigns to artists. It does not establish unanimous public opinion. It does, however, help explain why architectural judgment also becomes a judgment about the capacity to represent a public figure.

The decisive fact is that the first prize was not awarded. According to the report, that prize carried the right to have the monument built; the jury considered that none of the designs fully combined the architectural grandeur and spiritual qualities required of the statuary. This is a jury opinion reported by the journal, not an aesthetic truth we must adopt. Recognizing merit among the proposals and withholding the prize that authorized execution were compatible decisions. [1, p. 3]

The caption for the Labatut, Varela and Otero model therefore combines two expressions that must remain together: second prize and first place. The apparent contradiction disappears once the award category is distinguished from position in the order of merit. Simply calling it the first-prize winner would misstate the result. The absence of that prize is itself one of the collection's historical keys.

Awarding prizes, ranking designs and deferring execution

The report assigns second prize to entry number 1 and third prize to number 24. It then describes a revision of the awards: the Commission increased third prize from 3,000 to 4,000 pesos, created a fourth prize of 2,500 pesos with a silver medal and diploma, and increased the number of smaller prizes from five to seven, each worth 1,500 pesos. The placard on the first model reads 5,000 for second prize. These sums are recorded as historical source data, without present-day monetary equivalents. [1, pp. 3–4; 2, 0008]

The following concordance compares the report's list with the places specified in the captions. Abbreviated names identify teams; the companion dossier retains full lists and variants. Fourth through tenth places received the seven smaller prizes: they should not automatically be renamed fifth prize, sixth prize, and so forth.

Place	No.	Team as captioned	Award
1	1	Labatut · Varela · Otero / Herrera · Waterland	2nd prize
2	24	Echeverría / Betancourt · Álvarez	3rd prize
3	7	Vassiliev · Sambugnac	4th prize
4	15	Maza · Batista · Macías / Sicre	Smaller prize
5	21	Govantes · Cabarrocas	Smaller prize
6	20	Tapia Ruano · Morales / Casagran	Smaller prize
7	4	Cozzo · Martins	Smaller prize
8	22	Walter & Weeks / Fisher & Jiroud	Smaller prize
9	25	Pani · Quezada	Smaller prize
10	18	Marco / Ramos Blanco	Smaller prize

The report states that the 10,000 pesos attached to first prize would be redistributed. Since it does not detail all the original allocations for the smaller prizes, I do not reconstruct a complete initial budget. What it does document is a decision to extend financial recognition while withholding the right of execution associated with the principal award.

Critical reading starts with that distinction: the competition produces an administrative hierarchy as well as a selection of forms. The entry number identifies a design; its place establishes a position; its prize defines an award and, in certain cases, a material consequence. Confusing those three functions would turn a precise dossier into a misleading narrative.

Architecture and sculpture: different relationships to the figure

The first-place design receives a broader attribution in its caption than in the summary of the decision. The photograph names Juan Labatut, Enrique Luis Varela and Raúl Otero as architects, and Crispín Herrera and Oliverio Waterland as sculptors; the report calls the first architect Jean and lists only the three architects. Retaining both records prevents the sculptural collaboration from disappearing. The caption gives Cuba as the entry's origin, which does not establish each participant's nationality. [1, pp. 2–3; 2, 0008]

The model elevates the figure above a structure of large vertical planes. Its detail sheet relates that height to a five-pointed star plan and an urban layout of axes and routes. My reading is spatial: ascent, centrality and visibility from a distance organize the memorial. Connecting the star to a national symbol is a reasonable iconographic hypothesis, but the received dossier contains no designers' statement explaining it. Nor does it allow the illustrated bust to be attributed individually to either sculptor. [2, 0011, 0015–0019; plates 1–2]

In second place, Luis Echeverría, Esteban Betancourt and Manuel Álvarez present a tower behind stepped masses and a pool organizing the foreground. Approach, reflection and elevation offer another means of producing solemnity. Third place, identified in its caption as Nicholas D. Vassiliev and Alexander Sambugnac, places a freestanding figure before a tall vertical element and a broad curved stairway. These are observations of reproductions, not reconstructions of materials, dimensions or experiences of use. [2, 0009–0010]

The fourth-place proposal by Aquiles Maza, Eugenio Batista, Raúl Macías and Juan José Sicre extends a horizontal arcaded body beside a vertical element. The fifth-place entry by Evelio Govantes and Félix Cabarrocas concentrates the composition along an ascending axis with reliefs. Its caption calls the former an architect and the latter a sculptor: I record that division as printed, without turning it into a general definition of their careers. [2, 0014, 0021]

The three proposals brought together in escanear0023 introduce substantial differences: sixth place frames a figure between vertical elements; seventh combines stepped masses and relief; ninth places an equestrian figure above an oblique structure. Their grouping shows that a shared vertical emphasis does not imply a single formal program. Reading the alternatives together restores a diversity that histories focused exclusively on first place tend to diminish. [2, 0023–0026; plate 3]

An international repertoire of possible monuments

Eighth place, attributed in its caption to Walter & Weeks and Fisher & Jiroud, organizes a slender tower above a platform with ramps and steps. Tenth place, by Pedro S. Marco and Teodoro Ramos Blanco, combines a tower of superimposed masses with sculptural elements displayed in the exhibition space. Models, drawings, portraits and sculptural fragments coexist in these photographs; the physical proximity of a bust does not by itself establish its intended scale or final position within the design. [2, 0013, 0022]

The ten honorable mentions widen the repertoire. Their captions record four entries from Mexico, two from the United States and one each from Cuba, Brazil, Colombia and Manila. Manila is retained as the location stated by the source, without turning the list into a uniform classification of countries. These origins describe competition entries, not the citizenship of every designer. [1, p. 4; 2, 0027–0039]

Among the Mexican entries, the proposal by Carlos Obregón Santacilia and Juan Leonardo Cordero presents a stepped building bearing the inscription MARTI, with a figure above. Mauricio Gómez Mayorga and Enrique Mayran's design encloses the figure within a large vertical opening. Enrique Aragón Echegaray and Adolfo Fonzanelli's proposal extends curves and transitional surfaces along the base. These names follow the captions; some spellings differ from the report. Such variety enables comparison of the memorial as a building, as a frame for the figure, or as a route. It does not demonstrate a shared school or common aesthetic intention.

The globe in the Colombian proposal by Alberto Manrique Martín and Gustavo Arcilla introduces a visual reference to a worldwide scale. The cylindrical design attributed in its caption to Karl Frey, Wayne Livingston Remley, Bernard Ritchers and Frederick Cleverland stands on columns above successive circular steps. The scheme by Serafin de Lara y Panlillo and Guillermo E. Tolentino places a tower behind stepped terraces. These forms suggest different relationships among territory, gathering and elevation; identifying their allegories precisely would require the original explanatory statements. [2, 0034, 0037–0038]

An honorable mention is a documented distinction, but the report does not rank these entries as eleventh, twelfth and subsequent places. Nor does the photographic sequence constitute a ranking. The value of this group lies in its preservation of solutions recognized by the decision without inclusion among the ten prizewinning places. The journal thus allows us to examine a field of proposals broader than the list of financial rewards alone.

Disqualifications and the material dossier

The eleven proposals labeled as disqualified form a particularly revealing part of the archive. Captions cite missing explanatory statements or budgets, incomplete models and drawings, absent entry forms, missing samples, details out of scale and an omitted elevation. These are reasons for exclusion published by the source; they do not automatically constitute judgments of artistic inferiority. Nor do they establish that the proposals would have won awards had they met the conditions. [2, 0040–0054]

R. Franklin and J. A. Homs's entry is linked to incomplete drawings. The Venezuelan proposal by Tomás F. Stolk and Pedro Covarelli lacked the rear elevation and samples. The Argentine entry by Ernesto de Lorenzi, Julio B. Otaola, Aníbal J. Rocca, Gonzalo I. Pondal and C. Carcova was disqualified for lacking samples. Other captions omit the designers: those gaps remain unknown information and are not filled by conjecture. [2, 0042, 0049, 0053]

The photograph of a large head beside a model deserves particular attention. Its caption refers to details out of scale, but the image cannot establish which element breached the rules or whether the head was intended for installation at that proportion. Competition displays assemble objects serving different functions. Mistaking a study sample for a proportional component of the model would invent a monument unsupported by the source. [2, 0048]

The received collection also requires its formats to be distinguished. The PDF has fourteen pages and is a digital recompilation; its metadata records creation in January 2010, a computer date that does not replace the 1939 publication date. Its text includes errors and variants also present in the DOC. The JPG images preserve other captions and arrangements. The 47 files are not 47 projects: grouping repeated views, details and composite pages identifies 31 proposals in this corpus: ten prizewinning entries, ten honorable mentions and eleven disqualifications. This count does not certify the historical total of participants.

There is a specific anomaly: PDF pages 8 and 14 repeat the sheet of three disqualified entries preserved as escanear0051.jpg. Conversely, escanear0023.jpg, showing sixth, seventh and ninth places, is absent from that PDF. The new dossier assembles all the JPGs and documents the difference; the facsimile retains the received file intact. This distinction expands access without presenting an editorial repair as the original document.

Preserving the alternatives and their differences

Name discrepancies belong to the document's transmission. The report prints Humberto Bartolomeu where the seventh-place caption reads Humberto Cozzo; Quesada and Quezada alternate for Mario Pani's collaborator. The report's honorable mention for entry number 8 names only Frederick Claverland, whereas the cylinder's caption lists four names and spells Cleverland. These are substantial attribution differences. The catalogue records both readings without choosing a definitive form through familiarity. [1, p. 4; 2, 0025–0026, 0038]

The basis for future research must also remain visible. Princeton University Library reports that the Jean Labatut Papers, C0709, contain documentation concerning a monument to José Martí in Havana. This is a specific institutional lead for further study, not a set of drawings examined here or proof that all its material belongs to this submission stage. [3]

The value of these images does not depend on showing that they inevitably anticipated a later structure. They reveal how the same memorial could take the form of a tower, building, enclosure, platform or allegory; how architecture and sculpture distributed attention; and how documentary requirements affected selection. The photographs record designs under consideration, not completed monuments. Their differences keep a history of possibilities open.

Reading the competition through the Sarracino Gallery Archives means preserving both the jury's recognition and its reservation. There was a first place, there were prizes and honorable mentions, and there were disqualifications; first prize nevertheless remained unawarded. That structure returns us to a moment when Martí's memory was a public demand whose monumental expression was still being debated.

Documentary note and references

[1] "Concurso para el Monumento a José Martí," a recompiled document headed Arquitectura, Havana, February 1939, year VII, no. 67. Received 14-page PDF and associated DOC. Citations refer to the digital PDF pages, not verified original journal pagination. No individual byline is identified beside the report.

[2] Sarracino Gallery Archives, 47 JPGs: escanear0008.jpg–escanear0054.jpg. Four-digit references identify those filenames. Photographs, captions, details and repetitions were compared. The companion dossier contains the catalogue and complete series; originals are retained without retouching or reconstruction.

[3] External archival-location reference: Don Skemer, "Voyage of the Hindenburg, 1936," PUL Manuscripts News, Princeton University Library, October 27, 2015; paragraph on the Jean Labatut Papers (C0709). <https://manuscripts.blogs.princeton.edu/2015/10/27/voyage-of-the-hindenburg-1936/> (accessed September 2026).

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Fuentes consultadas: Archivos Sarracino Gallery.

Plate 1. First place, second prize

Model attributed in the caption to Juan Labatut, Enrique Luis Varela, Raúl Otero, Crispín Herrera and Oliverio Waterland. Complete JPG 0008.

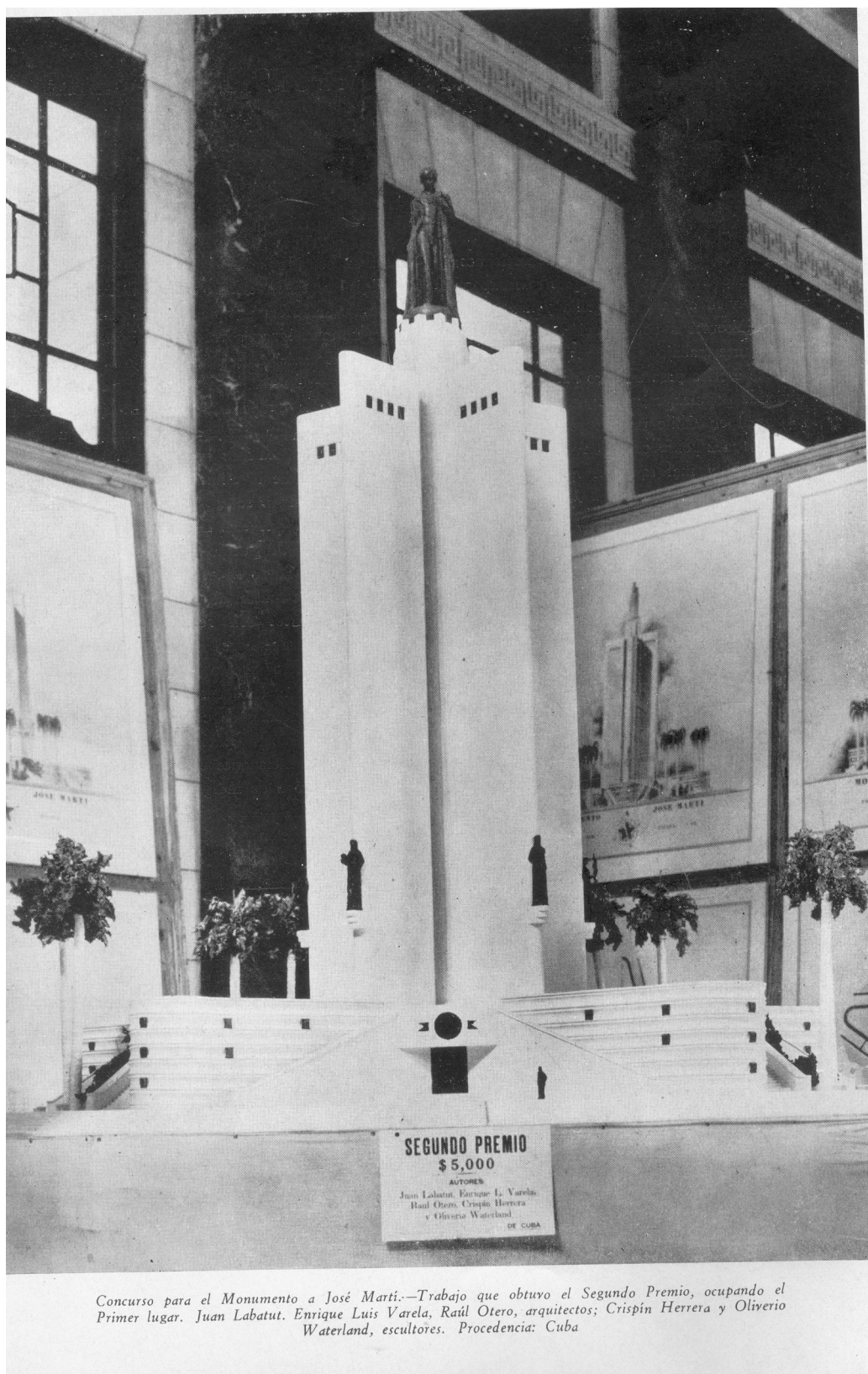
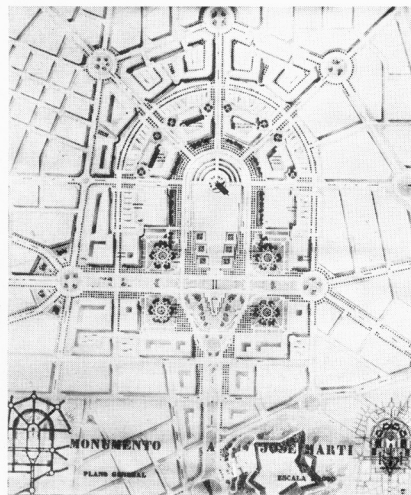
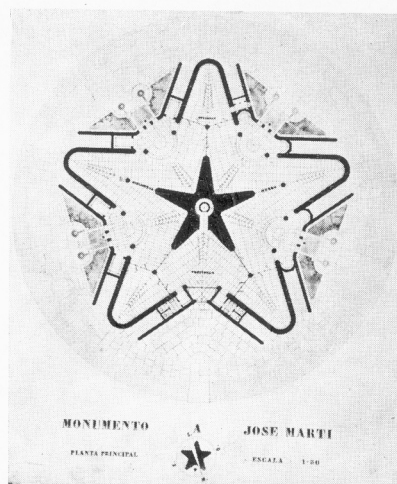


Plate 2. Plan, elevations and sculpture

Sheet associated with the first-place design. Its grouping does not allocate authorship of each component among the collaborators. Complete JPG 0011.



Planta y detalles del trabajo que obtuvo el Segundo Premio, ocupando el Primer lugar

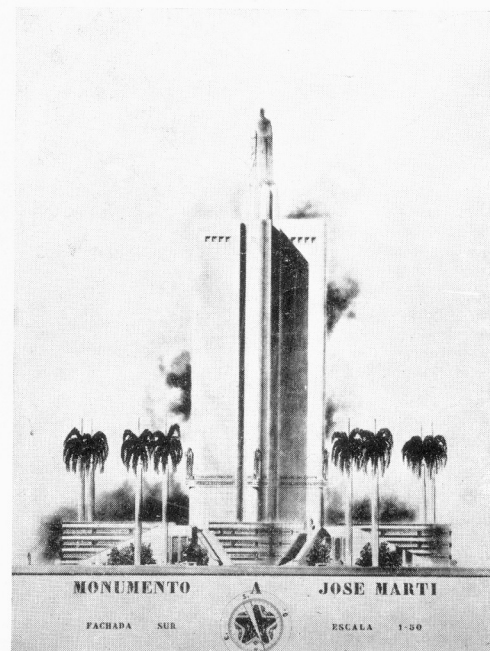
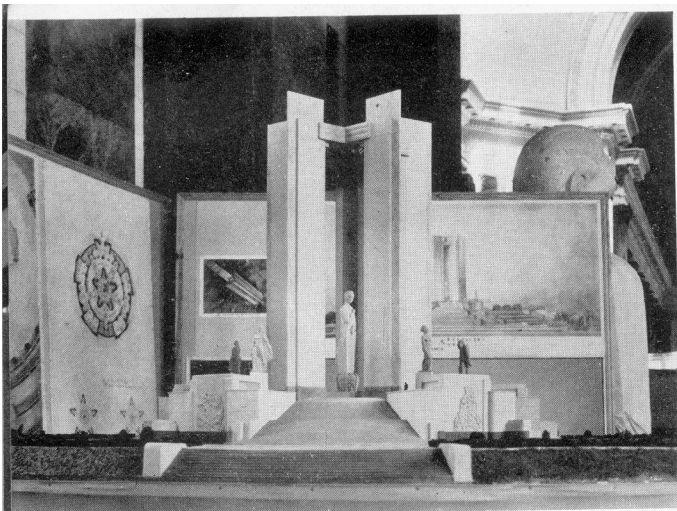
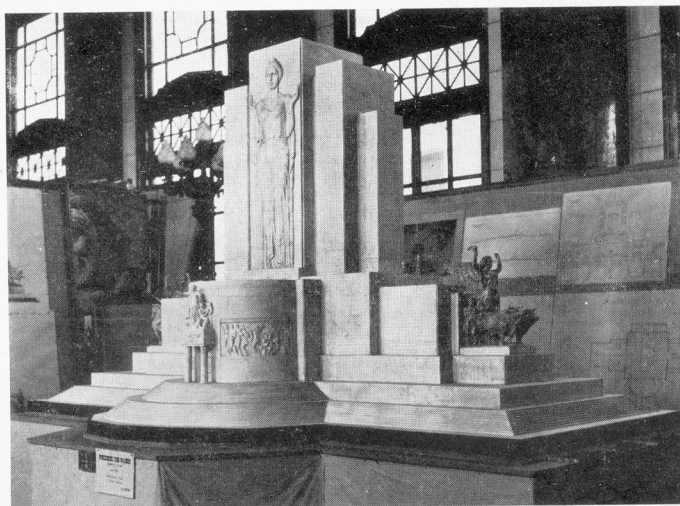


Plate 3. Sixth, seventh and ninth places

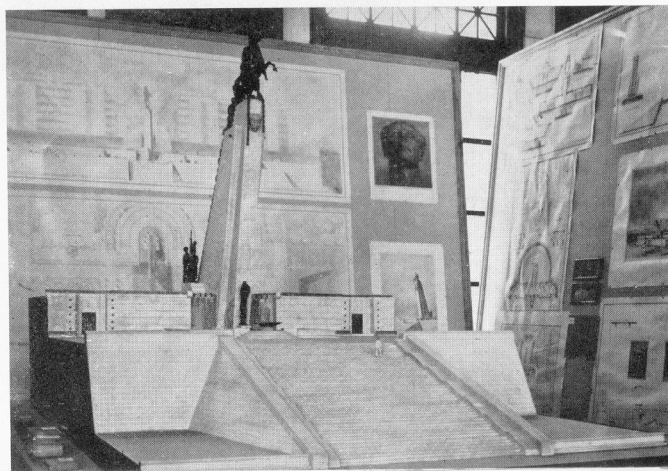
Sheet present in the JPG series and absent from the received PDF. Its three designs are recorded separately in the catalogue. Complete JPG 0023.



Trabajo que obtuvo el Sexto lugar. Manuel de Tapia Ruano y Victor Morales, arquitectos; Jesús M. Casagran, escultor. Procedencia: Cuba



Trabajo que obtuvo el Séptimo lugar. Humberto Cozzo y Gabriel Martins, arquitectos. Procedencia: Brasil



Trabajo que obtuvo el Noveno lugar. Mario Pani y Armando Quezada, arquitectos. Procedencia: México