

From one collapse to another: living in a Cuban homeless shelter

By Rebecca Alonso

It's been three years since Bernardo Calviño Bayola's apartment collapsed. He was living in Cuatro Caminos, a bustling mercantile crossroads in La Habana Vieja. Most of the neighbors in the three-story building were inside avoiding the rain, suffering through another *apagón*. But, in an instant, the building's infrastructure caved in and the third floor collapsed onto the *alero*. A moment later, the power came back—but Bayola's life has never been the same. The tenants were able to evacuate the building and luckily there were no fatalities. Bayola re-entered soon after to use the bathroom (a public bathroom is a rarity in Cuba). Amidst the rubble, he tripped, fell down a hole—and landed in a pile of feces.

The government quickly offered Bayola a place to stay in a mechanic's warehouse, but the conditions were not livable—no windows and minimal air circulation. He decided to live with his in-laws. But, a month later, his health began deteriorating. Almost a year after he was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

First it was a dental infection that not even the prescribed antibiotics could cure. He went to Calixto Garcia hospital where he was treated for three months. In May 2014, Bayola went to the Covadonga hospital where he was diagnosed with a respiratory infection. In July, he was moved to the IPK for lab tests. A month later, the results came back—he was diagnosed with HIV/AIDS.

Because of his diagnosis, he was pushed to leave his in-laws. Bayola quickly relocated to an *alberger* (homeless shelter) around the corner from his old building in Cuatro Caminos.

"Imagine the heat at the end of August," says Bayola, pointing to the sole window in his one bedroom shanty. "I came here with my ailing mother to try to recover, but I feel condemned to death."

The entrance to the shelter is unassuming—another crumbling building in la Habana Vieja. But inside, apartments are split in perpetual mitosis—at the moment; there are 15 units for a shared bathroom.

"When the building floods, the sewer spills over and you have to walk over that," says Bayola. "We're breathing all of that."

Bayola's hole in the wall is a façade of neon green and chartreuse. A rickety metal staircase leads the way into the place where Bayola has been nursing his weak immune system for over a year. Inside, rats scurry across the floor, and the ceiling stops at about five feet, trapping all of la Habana Vieja's heat with it.

"Look at the ceiling how low it is, with the heat here," he says. "And you can't have the AC turned on all day because the bill comes back for 400 pesos and my salary is 390 pesos."

Bayola, a 51 year-old technician, shares the space with his 84 year-old mother who suffers from severe dementia—despite warnings from doctors that AIDS patients should have their own living space to avoid contamination. But it doesn't matter, says Bayola. He's spent the past two years writing letters to various levels of government requesting better living conditions to no avail.

"The answer is always the same, 'Sin solución, con razón,'" says Bayola.

He's written to the provincial government, the municipal government, the official government newspaper Granma, to Mariela Castro, the CDC, the Partido provincial, and the

ministry of public health. But, the ministry of public health and the partido provincial are the only ones who have answered with the same empty reply.

“At least the department of public health has not stopped responding, they tell me keep writing, keep writing, don’t stop,” he says. “But for long am I going to be writing?”

Inside the apartment, Bayola’s mother walks around the crowded space nervously, tapping a hairbrush against her face. Her frail demeanor is akin to her ailing son’s—just 30 years younger than her. But what can be expected when they live in a hot bed of disease and infection? In two years, he contacted dengue fever, and two children who he mentions are family of military officials, recently contacted zika.

“They tell me I’m the first one who has to go from here,” he says. “But I’m still here.”