

# HAVANA

**PATRIMONY, PATIENCE, AND PROGRESS:  
ARCHITECTURE, URBAN PLANNING AND  
HISTORIC PRESERVATION IN HAVANA, CUBA**



Published By The Vera List Center for Art and Politics at The New School and  
Heritage Trails Worldwide

New School University  
 **The New School**  
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A Conference held on December 7, 2001



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## PREFACE

### CONFERENCE INTRODUCTION

When I went to Cuba in 1999 to study the preservation efforts in Havana, I had no idea of the impact that Cuba would have on me. Over the past three years I have made several visits, traveled to many parts of the country, and made many good friends. I have also found many colleagues in the U. S. A. who share my interest in and enthusiasm for the built environment of Havana. And for the wonderful Cuban people. My visits to Cuba deepened my respect for those who are working so hard to preserve the historic center of Old Havana, as well as for those who are planning for the future of the entire city. My visits also raised questions in three areas:

- Historic Preservation: The ongoing restoration of Old Havana is inspired, but how has it been supported given Cuba's economic hardships? How can it keep up with the deterioration caused by decades of neglect? Will it go beyond the neighborhoods favored by tourists? What about 20th century architecture, especially "modern" architecture from the 1950's?
- Architecture in Cuba Today: What noteworthy buildings have been built in Havana in the last forty years? Is there a new Cuban architecture? Is creativity encouraged?
- City Planning: How are planners facing the daunting obstacles of crumbling infrastructure, inadequate transportation, and limited technological capabilities combined with a growing population that needs housing, schools and public facilities? Plans have been approved, but are they being implemented? Is Havana prepared for the 21st century?

On December 7th, 2001, The Vera List Center for Art and Politics and Heritage Trails Worldwide brought to the New School a distinguished group of Cuban and American professionals for a full day conference, HAVANA, PATRIMONY, PATIENCE AND PROGRESS. While many of the issues above were discussed, many others were raised. This publication represents the proceedings of that event. We thank not only the speakers whose words are presented here, but also the professionals who moderated and served on panels: Peg Breen, Luly Duke, Alex Herrera, and Robert Mayers. Without Sondra Farganis of the Vera List Center, this would not have happened. And I would like to especially thank Richard Kaplan, Chairman of Heritage Trails Worldwide, for his generosity and also for his interest, advice, support, and enthusiasm.

Alexia Lalli  
Conference Coordinator  
Heritage Trails Worldwide

## **THE VERA LIST CENTER FOR ART AND POLITICS AT THE NEW SCHOOL**

The Vera List Center for Art and Politics, founded in 1992, is The New School's vehicle for debate, discussion, research and reflection on the complex and vital relationship between politics and the arts. In its concern for a democratic culture, the Center serves as a forum for those seeking an open analysis of issues which are nuanced and controversial and which move us to think about, defend or revise deeply held beliefs about our civic life. We seek a genuine exchange of ideas and the Occasional Papers are one form we use to provide a mechanism for a discourse on democracy.

This is the fourth in the Occasional Papers series and once more we have provided a record of an important conference sponsored by the Center. How could we take the thorny issue of what constitutes a city's heritage and examine it in a context other than the more familiar one of our own geographic local? While the initial planning of this conference preceded the events of September 11 and their impact on New York City, the actual discussions, occurring as they did some two miles from the World Trade Center, were visibly enhanced by the present and future of our own metropolis. By enlarging the conversational participants, inviting your comments through the public mails (at 66 West 12, New York, New York 10011), e-mail ([farganis@newschool.edu](mailto:farganis@newschool.edu)) or through the Center's website ([www.nsu.newschool.edu/vlc](http://www.nsu.newschool.edu/vlc)), we hope to engage voices other than those at the conference.

Sondra Farganis  
Director

## **HERITAGE TRAILS WORLDWIDE**

Heritage Trails began by defining New York's downtown as the historical core of the city, the place where New York and indeed the nation began. Havana and Cuba are the places where the New World as we know it began. The common theme is heritage – the legacy of the past in the context of the present and the future. The conference explored the architecture of Havana from the 15th century to the present, from the colonial treasures of Old Havana to the modern buildings throughout the city. We were especially pleased to welcome four Cuban architects, Mario Coyula, Victor Marin, Eduardo Luis Rodriguez, and Julio Cesar Perez. They were joined by American architects and commentators, astute observers who know the country and its built environment. We know by the enthusiastic reactions to it that the conference was a success. We are certain it will result in projects to further the work on preservation, architecture and planning in Havana. Our thanks to the New School and its President, Bob Kerry, for hosting this important event.

Richard D. Kaplan  
Chairman

Heritage Trails Worldwide

**A MESSAGE FROM THE HISTORIAN OF THE CITY OF HAVANA**

*Dear Alexia,*

*I sincerely entreat you to convey to our friends my warmest greeting and at the same time the wish that they have a great success in the objectives for which they are gathered. We hope that their presentations cover the essential information about the work of preservation of the historic center of Havana.*

*I am confident that those who attend the conference will come to Havana and will meet with not only our heartfelt hospitality but will also get to see the results we have achieved with so much passion.*

*Restoration, yes, but with the social vision and the communal effort to integrate harmoniously the stones and the spirit.*

*These projects are about sustainable development. We do not exclude outside cooperation and support, nor do we depend on it for success. Instead we firmly believe in the use of decentralized collaboration from multiple sources: cities, non-governmental organizations, institutions and other culturally specialized entities. That is the challenge.*

*I invite you to participate in the first international biennial of architecture in Cuba that we will celebrate from the 25th to the 28th of March 2002 in Havana. It is based on two key issues: the legacy of modern and contemporary architecture and the management of the growth of the Historic Center of old Havana.*

*Eusebio Leal Spengler  
Historian, City of Havana*



## HAVANA AND ITS ARCHITECTURE: LIVING IN THE PAST AND FUTURE

### Leland Cott, FAIA

Thank you for your very kind introduction and of course for hosting this remarkable gathering here at the New School. Of course a very warm and heartfelt thanks to Richard Kaplan and Lex Lalli for their dedication and hard work that enabled this symposium to happen at all. It's good to be home again in New York City and particularly to be here with my very best and close Cuban friends. It is particularly gratifying to be here this morning and to have this opportunity to share some of my thoughts about a city that we Americans do not know very well. Although my interest in Cuba goes back many years, I have now been personally involved with the architecture and urban design of Havana for the past three years.

### Introduction

In February 2000, I introduced and taught an advanced design studio class at Harvard dealing with the issues of housing, historic preservation and community development in Havana, Cuba. Having secured a license for travel to Cuba from the United States Department of the Treasury, I was free to travel to and from Havana, as my students and I studied parts of the city, proposing master plans and guidelines for its development as well as specific architectural building design solutions for selected sites. It was, as you can imagine, a very different kind of an experience for us all. Having been completely intrigued by that studio I decided to teach a second Havana studio in the spring semester, 2001. In both instances, I was assisted by Mario Coyula, his colleagues at the GDIC, and by the architect Julio Cesar Perez. If all goes as planned, I will teach a third Havana studio that will start in February to study and propose architectural, urban design and landscape design solutions for the entire length of the Malecon.

I have made many trips to Havana during the past two-and-a-half years. My students and I have spent many hours walking the city and studying its built environment. Buildings and their settings, perhaps more than people, tell the story about a place. Havana's buildings, living in the past and future, tell a great deal about themselves in general and about Cuba itself in particular.

Having started college in 1959, the year of the Triumph of the Cuban Revolution and later living through the Bay of Pigs invasion in April, 1961 and the Missile Crisis in October, 1962 it was difficult, for anyone who was politically aware or active, to ignore Cuba. It was a place of enormous intrigue and interest. And so I come by my involvement there with an interest and curiosity that goes back more than 40 years.

My first trip to the island was not in 1999 but 24 years ago in October 1977. As a member of a business delegation sponsored by the Commonwealth, our role was to

investigate possible Massachusetts's business ties with Fidel Castro's government should President Jimmy Carter's intention to normalize relations become reality. A principal part of architectural practice at my firm, Bruner/Cott & Associates, included preservation and the re-use of old buildings and so an in person investigation of possible professional relationships in Cuba had a great deal of appeal in spite of the Cuban alliance with the Soviet Union. Our trip lasted nearly one-week, during which time we were treated suspiciously, but well. The highlight of the visit included an evening with Fidel Castro – no doubt the most interesting moment of the trip. The details of that evening must remain the subject of another discussion.

### **Havana, 1977**

Upon arrival in Cuba in October 1977, we were taken by bus through the streets of Havana to our hotel. Images of Lenin and Che Guevara, were ubiquitous reminders of what had become of the Cuban Revolution. Che's image, although reconfigured recently, is still evident on the Ministry of Interior headquarters designed by Aquiles Capablanca and Jose Fornes. This is a robust example of Cuban modern architecture from the mid-twentieth century.

Our hotel, located on the outskirts of Havana, was built in 1974 to house Eastern European tourists. The Hotel Marazul was designed by Mario Girona. The horizontality of the structure intentionally incorporates the landscape. The single concrete slip-form elevator shaft is the only vertical expression evident on the exterior. All in all, this was a very pleasant hotel, furnished completely with iron curtain country televisions and minibars that did not work very well but it did have a lovely beachfront.

The trip to Havana, on a new toll road, lasted a few minutes due to the absence of auto traffic. Once in Havana, I experienced a clean and well-maintained city. Our daily meetings were held in central Havana adjacent to the Cuban Pavilion designed in 1963, by Juan Campos and Lorenzo Medrano, for the Sixth Congress of the International Union of Architects. Its great eaves, courtyards, galleries, woodwork and coffered ceiling are modern references to Cuban architectural tradition.

Everywhere we went, new housing either in construction or recently completed, was evident. The Cuban Revolution considered good housing to be a government guaranteed right, not a privilege. We did get to visit some new housing neighborhoods and were welcomed inside a few apartments by their occupants. I was pleased to see the relatively high standard of living, by Caribbean standards, of these residents. Generally speaking, the quality of new housing was reasonably good.

During our evening with Fidel, he implored us to visit his latest pride, the new housing development, Alamar, in Eastern Havana. This development now houses 100,000 people and, it is not the success it once promised to be. It has become



victim to many of the same problems of dense, overcrowded public housing neighborhoods in the United States.

By June 1999, President Carter had come and gone as had nine other U. S. Presidents since Castro's successful revolution overthrowing Fulgencio Battista. President Carter's Panama Canal Treaty was not followed, as was the intention, by the normalization of relations with Cuba. Over the course of the past 24 years, relations have remained difficult and even strained depending on the moment and the political event. Most recently the Elian Gonzalez affair remained front-page news in the United States and Cuba for many months.

For Cubans, the difficulties resulting from the long-term U. S. Economic Embargo have been significantly exacerbated by the 1990 reduction and subsequent elimination of subsidies from the collapsing Soviet Union. In that year Castro proclaimed that Cuba was entering "A Special Period in a Time of Peace". New measures of austerity were ordered, many of which remain in place today. Last year I asked a Cuban colleague when he thought the Special Period will end. His answer was haunting. "About 25 more years," he stated, "that is when our economists suggest we will be back to the standard of living that we had when the Soviet Union ceased to be."

And so, this was a new and different Cuba to which I returned in 1999. My initial reactions were, as one commonly reads these days, that time had seemed to stand still in Cuba. I now have a slightly different attitude about what goes on there, having just returned last week from my eighth trip there recently. Cuba is laboring under extreme hardship. It has paid a price for the political stand it has taken but the debt, if you will is, being paid down. The American Dollar is legal tender in Cuba. Tourist dollars are being attracted to Cuba from all over the world and Cuba seems to be making the most of it. The standard of living for all its population is undoubtedly higher than in most of the Caribbean and extreme poverty has been eliminated. I won't bore you with facts you probably already know about high literacy rates and the quality of the Cuban medical system. Some food rationing is commonplace but I would imagine that it is probably better to stand on line for food occasionally than to not have it at all. The question that interests me is whether or not this is an environment conducive to intelligent planning and architectural design, let alone the preservation and reuse of entire cities. On the whole this seems to be so. Efforts are being made to protect Cuba, particularly Havana, from the ravages of a healthy tourist economy. New building location and size, particularly for foreign investment, is reviewed for compatibility with the existing city environment. The Cubans seemed to have learned from a few bad buildings constructed recently and are trying very hard to balance the desire for the new with the goals of their revolution. In spite of it all, Havana's fabric remains intact but battered and worn from lack of maintenance and neglect.



## Parque Central

My first view of Havana in June 1999 (22 years after my earlier trip) was of the Parque Central. The Central Park was just inside the old city walls on the western edge of La Habana Vieja, Old Havana. As the city grew, this park became its center after three smaller public spaces were combined in 1877 to form the space that was once again remodeled in 1960 by Eugenio Batista. Here you can watch the world go by, stay in the one of the city's most luxurious new hotels, have a pizza or discuss the Cuban Baseball leagues with the throngs of men who come here every day to haggle about the current league standings.

Looking into Central Park from a block away, gives the sense of its compatible scale to the surrounding structures. Opposite the park is the Manzana de Gomez, one of the more interesting buildings in Havana and ripe for a very exciting commercial and retail reuse. Built in 1894 by Pedro Tome and later remodeled and enlarged in 1917 by Ramirez Ovando, this building occupies an entire block and is bisected diagonally at the first floor by crossing pedestrian shopping arcades. There is not much to buy here now and the building sits pretty much unoccupied awaiting a foreign investment joint venture with the Cuban Government and its inevitable restoration.

There are two hotel structures on the Central Park that are worth noting. The first is the lovely eclectic Hotel Inglaterra with its facade pilasters, louvered blind woodwork and cast iron balcony balustrades, completed in 1915 and renovated again in 1982. The second is the unsuccessful attempt, in the postmodern style, of the Hotel Parque Central recently completed by a Dutch hotel chain.

Still on the Central Park and adjacent to the Manzana de Gomez is the Centro Austauriano built in 1927 and designed by the Spaniard Manuel del Busto. This building once housed the Cuban Supreme Court and now has been completely stabilized and renovated for use as a museum of art.

Directly across the park is the Centro Gallego whose design by Paul Belau in 1915 incorporated an existing theater complex. Now known as the Garcia Lorca Theater, this is one of the most elegant buildings standing in Havana today. Four towers, each graced by a copper angel top its exuberant Baroque facade.

The National Capital, one block south of the Central Park, was completed in 1929 by a team of architects led by the Cuban Raul Otero. The 700 foot long structure is visible from all of Havana. Its 300 ft. high stone clad, steel framed dome is attributed to the design of the Parisian Pantheon and of course the United States Capital dome. The interior spaces of the Capital are extraordinary in their scale and design and contain some of the most beautiful stone and marble work that can be seen in Cuba.

One block to the east is the former Presidential Palace, now the Museum of the Revolution, which was built in 1920 and was designed by Paul Belau and Carlos

Maturi. Aside from the fact that this is the former palace, it is particularly fitting that the Cuban Government chose one of the most garish and opulent buildings in Havana to use as their Museum of the Revolution. The exhibit continues outside to the Granma Memorial, an open-air pavilion that contains the yacht that brought the revolutionaries from Mexico to Cuba in 1956. Other vehicles and weaponry with revolutionary history surround the structure.

The last building that I want to discuss in this Central Park district is the Bacardi Rum Building built in 1930 and designed by Rodriguez, Fernandez and Menendez. Curiously, the competition winning design originally contained an Italian Renaissance facade that was changed during the working drawing phase to an Art Deco facade more reflective of the period. Its materials are Swedish Granite, Capellania limestone, colored brick and terra cotta.

### **The Paseo del Prado**

The Paseo del Prado is the result of a 1929 renovation, by the French landscape architect, Jean Claude Nicolas Forrestier, of the original mid-eighteenth century Alameda de Isabel II. It is still as beautiful as ever, perhaps the most wonderful street in Havana. In my opinion it ranks as one of the most beautiful streets I have seen anywhere in the world. With its unique pedestrian scale, this tree lined shady promenade is the place to be on a hot day. The Paseo del Prado links the heart of Central Havana at the Capitolio and the Central Park with the eastern end of the Malecon, Havana's iconic waterfront boulevard. Acting as a linear extrusion of the Central Park, it visually connects the dome of the Capital with the tower of El Morro Castle at the mouth of the Havana harbor. Just imagine strolling in the shade here, with your feet on the cool marble paving with a slight breeze coming off the Caribbean a few blocks away.

As is the case with all precious open space in Havana, the Paseo del Prado is available to all citizens and supports a wide variety of activities along its 8-block length. At any given time, one can see lovers strolling and sitting, young children at school recess playing their schoolyard games, intricate roller blading contests and of course, street entertainers. This is the quintessential urban street – one that we all dream of creating – supporting an active street life, automobile traffic, pedestrian activity, and generous amounts of shade.

As you would expect, there are a number of fine buildings along the Paseo del Prado. Among them is the Pedro Estevez House of 1905 designed by the French Architect Charles Brun. This residence was eventually purchased by the first U.S. Consul to Cuba and is notable as one of the first buildings in Cuba to use a reinforced concrete structure. President Jose Miguel Gomez constructed his residence in 1915. The ground level portico was originally enclosed by metal balustrades but was later opened as public space to comply with regulations governing public and private space along the Paseo del Prado. The design



requirement of a continuous covered street facade along the Paseo del Prado gives the street a degree of visual harmony while also providing much needed shade.

Also of note along the Paseo del Prado is the Spanish Casino built in 1914 by the Spanish Immigrants Association as a community-meeting place. Of a different era and style is the Teatro Fausto, designed in 1938 by Saturnino Parajon. Interestingly, this streamlined building is as much a part of its context as the previous three shown, partly due to its compatible height and the alignment of its first floor covered colonnades on both elevations.

There is a great deal to be learned from this street as Havana looks for new models of urban design to cope with increased tourism and development. Forrestier's inspired design lifts the central pedestrian spine about three feet above the two lanes of traffic on each side thus elevating this eight block long linear urban room above the noisier less pedestrian friendly activities along its edges. Where the cross streets intersect the linear pedestrian promenade, granite steps bring the pedestrian to the grade below. Along its entire length, stairs with benches and streetlights allow access to the elevated marble surface. Today the smooth stone paving under foot provides a welcome relief from the broken pavement that typifies all of Havana. The Paseo del Prado is an urban oasis par excellence.

### **The Malecon**

At the northern end of the Paseo del Prado is Havana's other great open space – the Malecon, Havana's spectacular iconic waterfront boulevard. It is impossible for me to think of Havana and not call to mind this 7-kilometer long road that defines Havana's edge at the Caribbean. While in the city one is continually drawn to the Malecon time and time again. It is where the action is happening and the beauty of the sky, the Caribbean and Havana itself is lovely to behold. The US Governor General laid out the Malecon in 1902 after the original 1857 design by a Cuban engineer named Francisco de Albear. Judging from the ornate quality of the remaining buildings, the Malecon must have been quite a place at one time. Today, the ravages of storms, high seas, salt spray, revolution and time have taken their toll. The colorful facades are now faded and decrepit. Recently there has been an attempt to restore many of these wonderful buildings, in one case an entire block is being cared for by the Government of the Canary Islands, but one cannot help but wonder if it is not too late. Along the Malecon one can still see bathers using the sea-battered remains of the baths carved from the rocks. Incidentally, some of Havana's raw sewage flows into the Caribbean under the Malecon but this does seem to deter too many. Most wonderfully, the Malecon is Havana's most popular open space. For the tourist it is place for see the world go by. For young Cuban lovers, it is a place to be alone in public.



## La Rampa

Intersecting the Malecon, west of the Paseo del Prado is a well-known street called La Rampa. In the early 1950's, La Rampa was established according to more modern urban design principles. Within a short period of time, La Rampa became home to new hotels and gambling casinos, theaters and offices. Today this district remains an active center for tourism and business. La Rampa is home to the most famous hotel in Havana, the Nacional de Cuba. It was designed in 1930 by the New York architectural firm of McKim Mead and White in the style of the Breakers in Palm Beach, Florida. The construction of the Hotel Nacional de Cuba was the result of a new wave of American tourism partly brought on by Prohibition and the legalization of gambling that continued until the Cuban Revolution in 1959.

## Three Hotels

The 1950's were the heyday of new American style hotel design in Havana. This period coincided with Cuba's embrace of International Style Modernism. Of them all, three hotels remain standing today as evidence of the triumphs and failures of the modern movement. All three bear a strong resemblance to their Miami precedents and are on my "must see" list for Havana. While they appear on first reading to be a catalog of mediocre mid-century American design, each contains valuable urban design lessons for the Cuban Government as it considers design review of larger scale tourist-related developments.

The Havana Hilton, renamed the Havana Libre immediately after the 1959 revolution, is the largest and, at first glance, the most garish of the group. Yet, I maintain that more careful consideration reveals there is much more to be learned from the placement of this large building into this early 20th Century neighborhood. Designed by a California firm, Welton Beckett & Associates with the Cuban firm of Arroyo y Menendez in the late 1950's, the Havana Libre remains at the spiritual heart of much of the action in present day Havana.

Its location on a hillside, at the boundary of central Havana and the Vedado district, guarantees physical prominence and high visibility from nearly all of Western Havana. This 630-room, 27-story slab tower, by far one of the city's largest built projects, is surprisingly successful at the neighborhood scale. Its designers were clearly cognizant of the surrounding context and reacted with, what I see, as an unexpected degree of sensitivity. First, they set the hotel tower back to the middle of the site where its height would have the least impact on surrounding streets. They also turned the narrow side of the building to La Rampa to minimize the negative effect of its bulk and height. Next, they intelligently responded to the late 19th and early 20th century three-story building scale adjacent to the site by keeping the front and sides of the hotel low at the two and three story level aligning with the two and three story parapets of the neighboring structures across the street from the main entry.

At this level and at the level of the surrounding streets, one is minimally aware of the 27 story tower that is set back at another upper level far behind the actual entrance from the porte cochere. The building occupies a full city block and is taller at one end due to its sloping site along La Rampa. The architects chose to place the structure on a wide plinth to provide a level platform – an organizing datum line – on which to build their tower and to place shops at the street level below the plinth thus providing a nearly continuous retail space at the base below the entry level to the hotel. The car/pedestrian entry is the built continuation of La Rampa onto the site – an intelligent urban design maneuver that connects the building with its pedestrian and vehicular surroundings.

The second 1950's modernist hotel in downtown Havana is the Hotel Capri. It is located two blocks from the Havana Libre and was built in 1958 by New York mobster Santo Traficante. If the Havana Libre contains lessons of "what to do" then the Hotel Capri, designed by the Cuban architect Jose Canaves Ugalde is a primer on "what not to do". The Capri contains a mere 216 rooms but is very cramped on its site. It is evident there is just too much program on too small a site. This alone should be a valuable lesson for present day urban designers and planners in Havana. Evidently, the Capri was designed with no regard for its context – it rubs against its neighbors most inelegantly. Where the Havana Libre is nearly brilliant in relating to its context, the Capri is an architectural bull in a china shop – out of place and out of scale.

Quite another matter is the Hotel Riviera a few kilometers away along the Malecon. Opened in 1958 by Miami mobster Meyer Lansky, the Riviera caused quite a stir. Visitors gawked at its egg-shaped gold leafed casino, while watching Ginger Rodgers in the nightclub's opening act. It is told that Philip Johnson proposed an original, lower, building design to his client but when Meyer Lansky demanded that Johnson make the building taller, Johnson asked him if he knew "who the hell we was talking to" before walking out on the Miami Gangster. It is a graceful structure with cantilevered curved balconies and an articulated structural concrete frame. The design is reminiscent of the late Morris Lapidus's Miami Beach French style complete with Lapidus's favorite interior design device, the flying stairway to nowhere. Its elegant green, gray and black color motif blends well with the sea, sky and the Malecon. The 17-story tower stands alone – very much as originally intended – on a wide traffic island adjacent to a well-to-do neighborhood. The Riviera stands apart from its neighborhood context and succeeds as an object building in the landscape.

### **City University Jose Antonio Echeverria**

The City University, Ciudad Universitaria Jose Antonio Echeverria is worth discussing because it is widely accepted as one of the outstanding architectural achievements of post-revolutionary Cuba. The structural design of these concrete



buildings utilized lift slab technology in which the floor slabs were poured on the ground and then lifted into place by hydraulic jacks mounted on the columns. Designed by a team of architects. (including Humberto Alonso, Manuel Rubio, Jose Fernandez, Fernando Salinas and Josephina Motalvan). These buildings opened in 1964. The buildings are linked continuously at the open ground floor and connected by expressive freestanding stairs placed in landscaped garden areas. Internal vertical circulation within each structure occurs at the exterior wall at the edge of the floor slabs, thereby introducing a diagonal element against the strong horizontality of the greater building mass. Internally the building is rather simple and straightforward. The exterior curtain wall shows signs of wear and is in need of maintenance. Individual classrooms are quite pleasant.

### **The National Schools of Art**

Contemporaneous with the design and construction of the City University, was another complex of educational buildings, also revolutionary – but in a different manner. Cuba's National Art Schools, forgotten in recent years, have recently re-emerged with the publication of John Loomis's book *Revolution of Forms*. The project was led by the Cuban architect, Ricardo Porro, who by 1962 had recently returned from Venezuela and was already well on his way to establishing himself as a leading architect of the period. Rather than the direct importation of international modernism to Cuba, Porro favored a modernist architecture that integrated aspects of the Afro-Cuban culture. His early houses attracted the attention of the Castro Government and resulted in his being chosen to lead the design team for the National Schools of Art along with two Italian architects living in Cuba, Vittorio Garratti and Roberto Gottardi. The project consists of five schools in separate and distinct building complexes: The School of Modern Dance, Plastic Arts, Dramatic Arts, Music and Ballet. This complex was vacated within a few years of its inception and today is in a state of semi-ruin but on the verge of a comeback and is currently in limited use.

Gerardo Mosquera, writing in the forward to Loomis's book explains what originally happened. "The Schools of Art were born of the initial utopia of the Cuban Revolution – which, maintaining a certain independence from the tenets of the Soviet Block, contributed a good deal to the development of the general ideals of liberation in the 1960's. By 1965 they fell in disgrace and remained in oblivion. In the same way that people, books, paintings, and films are marginalized in totalitarian regimes, these buildings were also purged."

During these past two and a half years my students and I had the good fortune to have visited these buildings with the architect for the School of Dramatic Arts, Roberto Gottardi. Today, entry to the complex is through the three Catalan Entry Vaults of the School of Plastic Arts designed by Ricardo Porro. One then proceeds along a colonnade into the main entry plaza. Individual studios, classrooms and exhibitions gallery spaces are under the dome structures.



The School of Dramatic Arts by Roberto Gottardi is to my mind the most urban of the schools and is reminiscent of an Italian hill town landscape with its stepped piazza and street balconies, and narrow pedestrian streets between buildings. The main indoor theater was under construction at the time the project was abandoned.

The School of Modern Dance was also designed by Roberto Porro. It is situated on a hilltop, just above the Schools of Plastic Arts and Dramatic Arts. It is the only school that is complete as originally envisioned. The entire complex is composed from a series of intersecting Catalan vaults that define interior dance studios, performance spaces as well as outdoor plazas. Here Porro has connected the major spaces with a series of covered walkways, similar to his design solution at the School of Plastic Arts.

Vittorio Garatti's School of Music was never completed. All that was constructed is a portion of the serpentine element. From the street, this appears as a long covered walkway. Once inside, the complex consists of a series of incomplete practice rooms located off this long outdoor corridor.

The School of Ballet, also designed by Vittorio Garatti, is to my sense of esthetic the most beautiful of the five schools and, simultaneously, the most tragic in its utter sense of desertion and abandonment. One currently enters this building from above and then through a lower passageway defined by a series of thin-shell vaults. Today the building has been nearly consumed by the jungle while it rots and is used as a source of free building materials by those who wander by. As you proceed down the path a new world, cool and removed from the outside humidity, is revealed. The thin vault structures direct you straight ahead to a series of performance spaces.

The main auditorium, sitting ghost-like after 35 years of abandonment, reveals the marvelous architectural scale of this place. Further along a series of long winding corridor spaces lead to a grouping of additional performance and practice spaces. These too remain pretty much as originally designed; although the wooden louvered walls that closed in the arched spaces have long ago been scavenged by the surrounding community.

The story about The Schools of the Plastic Arts is one of the more interesting that I have ever heard about a building or group of buildings. The Castro government has announced its intention to begin the long, slow task of rebuilding these structures but money for architects and architecture is difficult to come by in present day Cuba unless it is for restoration in Old Havana and is related to tourism. This site has the potential, no doubt due to its architectural design, to be the biggest single tourist draw in the city.

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## Old Havana

At the extreme Eastern end of the Malecon is the opening to the Havana harbor opposite the El Morro Fort, and the edge of the waterfront district of La Habana Vieja... Old Havana. The ongoing restoration of this part of the city is the main tourist attraction in the city. In addition to the Port district, Old Havana also includes the area around the Central Park and Capital.

At the end of the Avenida del Puerto, is the Castillo de la Real Fuerza – the oldest of the four forts that guard the harbor. This fort was completed in 1582. As far as protection is concerned, in addition to the surrounding moat, these knife-edge walls are 18 feet thick and 10 feet high. This structure was the home of the governors of Cuba for nearly 200 years after its completion.

Directly behind the Castillo is Old Havana's most important, and beautiful urban space – the Plaza de Armas. This is Havana's first plaza that dates back to 1519. It was from here that the axes determining the growth of the city radiated. Today the Plaza de Armas is home to a few very nice restaurants and a wonderful used book fair that occurs daily where it is possible to buy some very valuable and rare books.

There are two beautifully preserved 18th Century buildings on the Plaza de Armas. The first is the Palacio del Segundo Cabo begun in 1770. It is a beautifully proportioned building that opens the pedestrian vista at its colonnaded base. The courtyard has a very beautiful top floor gallery enclosed by louvered shutters and tinted glass fan windows. The other notable building on the west side of the Plaza de Armas is the residence of the Captains General, The Palacio de los Capitanes Generales. This building is widely regarded as one of the best buildings in all of Cuba. It was begun in 1776 to be the seat of the Havana town council, the prison and the residence of the Captains General and is modeled after its earlier neighbor. These two buildings work well together making a wonderfully coherent edge to this side of the Plaza de Armas. The courtyard contains an open second floor veranda looking down onto the statue of Christopher Columbus who landed in Cuba in October, 1492.

On the eastern side of the Plaza de Armas are two more interesting buildings. El Templete was constructed in 1828 to commemorate the location of the first town council meeting in 1519. Next door is the house of the Count of Santovenia constructed in 1784 and renovated in 1966 for use as the Hotel Santa Isabel.

Almost immediately behind the Plaza de Armas is the Convent and Church of San Francisco of Assisi. Both were built between 1719 and 1738. These are outstanding pieces of Colonial architecture that have been the focus of recent massive restoration efforts. The Plaza de San Francisco, is another of Old Havana's important squares. This plaza was established in 1628 as a fresh water supply point



for ships berthed nearby. Directly on the far side of the plaza is the Customs Building designed in 1914 by the American firm of Barclay, Parsons and Klapp. This is one of the largest buildings in Havana and was just recently remodeled a few years ago. The port itself is rather non-descript but it contains the usual assortment of port- industrial architecture. The freighters that are berthed here are, as you can see, right next to the road. All of Old Havana has been the focus of one of the most aggressive rehabilitation and preservation efforts that I have ever seen. The entire project is under the direction of the Office of the City Historian headed by Eusebio Leal Spengler. Old Havana's architectural importance has been underscored by having been designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

### **La Plaza de la Cathedral**

The Plaza de la Cathedral, seen here from two opposite sides is interesting from an urban design perspective in that it successfully combines a number of monumental buildings with a great deal of intimacy due to its small size. A soft stone containing seashells and fossils is used on all the buildings on the plaza and further contributes to the sense of spatial intimacy. The Cathedral of Havana occupies the Northern side of the Plaza and is therefore in continual sunlight throughout the day. Its rich baroque facade stands in curious contrast to its two towers. Work on this building began in 1748 and lasted until its completion in 1777. The attached houses of the Count of Lombillo and the house of the Marquis de Arcos, were constructed in mid-eighteenth century slightly earlier than the Cathedral itself. Both these residences remain as excellent examples of residential architecture in Cuba. They are located on the eastern side of the plaza and designed with a robust first floor arcade providing ample shade from the afternoon sun. At the far end of the plaza and directly opposite the Cathedral is the small two-story house of the Count of Bayona constructed in 1720. Its facade has a wonderful simplicity, particularly when seen in contrast to the baroque Cathedral facade.

### **Necropolis Cristobal Colon**

The Necropolis Cristobal Colon, the Christopher Columbus Cemetery is located on the edge of the El Vedado neighborhood west of central Havana. This is a curious place that I have just begun to know. Covering more than 100 acres in the middle of the Havana, its plan is that of a small city with a grid plan and small plazas at the intersections of the major roads. It is an outdoor museum of architectural styles that clash so furiously that the net effect is complete harmony.

An outstanding example of a late 20th Century design is this mausoleum, designed by Mario Coyula and Emilio Escobar, for the students who died fighting in an attack on the Presidential Palace in March, 1957. This design, inaugurated in 1982, was made at the request of the relatives of those who died on March 13; most were students from the University of Havana including Jose Antonio Echeverria, a

student of architecture, and leader of the Directorio Revolucionario, the second most important revolutionary organization in the 1950's.

### **Central Havana and El Vedado**

A keystone of Central Havana and El Vedado is the campus of the University of Havana. The campus is very much a part of the cityscape, with its great flight of steps rising, in the distance, from the city street grid itself. The majority of these buildings were constructed in the first half of the 20th Century and were loosely modeled after the campus at Columbia University in NYC. These outside stairs were designed by Forrestier in 1925 and are used in conjunction with the plaza at its base as a fantastic outdoor amphitheater.

Nearby, is another monument designed in 1967 by Mario Coyula, together with Emilio Escobar, Sonia Dominguez and Armando Hernandez. This national competition winning design memorializes all Cuban university student martyrs who have died fighting against tyranny. Rather than resort to a traditional interpretation that would have placed the monument in the center of the space, Coyula and his fellow designers have placed the monument at the perimeter thus creating a sense of enclosure and urban calm within this outdoor room. The concrete walls that surround the space contain sculptures in bas-relief that depict the struggle leading to the ultimate triumph of the revolution.

Some of the city's most interesting housing blocks are in this part of Havana. One of the more outrageously scaled residential buildings in Havana is the Edificio Focsa built in 1956 and designed by Ernesto Gomez Sampera. The building contains 375 duplex apartments in 28 floors and at the time it was constructed, it was one of the largest reinforced concrete structures in the world. This building is currently about 15% occupied and is awaiting funding for a complete restoration. The Edificio Lopez Serano, designed in 1932 by the firm of Mira and Rosich has a distinctly New York appearance. It is one of the city's more interesting Art Deco buildings. It contains about 85 apartment units. Its lobby is decorated with metal ornamental panels.

The Edificio de Apartamentos Solimar designed by Manuel Copado in 1944 is located a few blocks away in Central Havana. The design of this building is quite advanced considering when it was conceived and one wonders if it was not a precedent of sorts for the Marina Towers in Chicago built about 15 years later.

Nearly across the street is this small apartment building, on the left, designed by the great Cuban modernist Max Borges in 1951. The entire facade of the Edificio Someillan consists of a series of trapezoidal balconies that alternate direction from floor to floor. The wooden sunscreens, a typical Cuban facade element, are newly integrated within this modernist facade. A second, similarly scaled apartment



building located nearby in Vedado, also designed by Max Borges a few years later in 1954. The Anter building has a highly rational and well-developed facade containing a few major elements. Here Borges relies on the angle of the sun to cast trapezoidal facade elements on the movie-screen like white walls.

During the same year, Max Borges worked with a similar aesthetic in his building for the Partagas Cigar Company. Again the use of balconies, so much a part of the history of Cuban architecture, is the major facade element that strongly defines the building's silhouette.

The Tropicana Club is widely considered to be Borges major work in Havana. The Arcos de Cristal hall was designed in 1951 as an addition to an existing building. I have yet to gain permission to photograph this building's interior. Borges also employed the use of long-span thin concrete shell structures in his other great work in Havana, the Nautical Club designed in 1953. As is the case in the Tropicana, the shells differ in height with glass skylights placed in between. At the entrance, the wave-like form of the portico structures are intended as a metaphor against the ship like structure of the original club building. The interior spaces formed by the open-air pavilions are visually beautiful and form wonderfully simple spaces that provide shade from the hot sun and shelter from the tropical rains.

Havana has a great tradition of modern residences. Two of the earliest shown here are the Casa de Eutimeo Falla Bonet designed in 1939 by Eugenio Batista. This early modernist interpretation of colonial precedents is a building of landmark importance. On the right, is Max Borges's own house that he designed for himself shortly after returning to Havana from the Harvard Graduate School of Design where he studied with Dean Walter Gropius. One of the few modern residences to be designed by a foreign architect was the Alfred de Schulthess house. It was designed by the Austrian born Richard Neutra in 1956 who had immigrated to the United States in the mid-1920's and within a few years was well established in Los Angeles. The house is designed to be a pavilion on the landscape with a simple progression of rooms opening onto a series of gardens designed by the Brazilian landscape architect Roberto Burle Marx.

There are also many examples of private residences from an earlier period in Western Havana most of which belonged to wealthy families who fled Cuba after the Revolution. Some are still occupied by their original owners or are now used as foreign embassies. Others are occupied by many families who were allowed to move in after the original owners left the country. These buildings are now referred to as *ciudadelas*, a tenement, Havana style.

While I was in Havana recently, my good friend Mario Coyula brought me to see the new memorial to Beatle John Lennon whose reputation has recently been resurrected in Cuba. It is a moving piece of sculpture that contains Lennon's words

inlaid in bronze at his feet: "You can say that I'm a dreamer, but I'm not the only one." And so, perhaps Cuba, having now lived by the philosophy of one Lenin for the past 40 years, will now attempt to incorporate the philosophy of the other.

## Conclusion

Mario Coyula has written a short piece that I think makes a fitting conclusion to this talk. Mario is now in his mid-sixties. He was peripherally involved in the revolution and fought with Fidel and Che as they entered Havana 40 years ago. He is now the director of the Group for the Integrated Development of Havana – El Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral del Capital – and as such, oversees and monitors new large-scale construction in Havana.

I quote him:

*For more than two hundred years, Havana has been the most important and attractive city in the Caribbean basin and Gulf of Mexico region. Although deteriorated, this built stock has survived all these years, making Havana a singular example among the great cities of the hemisphere.*

*A decade ago, it was estimated that the rehabilitation of Havana would cost between 10 and 14 billion dollars. Such numbers seemed crushing at the time, but they do raise a fundamental question: what is the value of the city? The conservation of that value, and the development which Havana needs in order to exercise the regional leadership to which it corresponds, only appear possible to the extent that the city itself can finance them from its own resources. This requires a just valuation of Havana: without becoming resigned to her wasting away, yet without deforming, selling, mortgaging or giving her away. Especially it means taking advantage of those things that make Havana unique in order to prevent the new investments that are already starting to happen from destroying that peculiar beauty, and under the sign of a simplistic, out-fashioned modernization, turn it into just another stop on the tourists itinerary.*

*That realizable utopia, involves the conservation and making use of the enormous values of this city. And, appearing above everything else, there is a deep and inescapable commitment to preserve from degradation and cynicism a human capital amassed with courage, hardships, successes, mistakes and illusions, which found its highest expression in the collective mysticism inspired by the Revolution in the unforgettable decade of the sixties, together with the image of beret and long hair framing a friendly face blackened by gunpowder. Havana has endured many difficult tests in its long history, some apparently terminal, and has come out bruised but graceful. Because, in the end, the people who mill along the streets without needing to look up to know that their lifelong companion of their dreams remains stubbornly in place, peeling, staggered, eroded by salt and water, marvelous and incredibly alive, still useful. A city that is no longer is, but continues being. Havana for ever, forever my Havana.*



## CUBA: THE PRESERVATION OF ARCHITECTURE SEEN AS SAVING A LEGACY FOR HUMANITY

Victor Marin Crespo

### Foreword and Objectives:

The Cuban Flag with its National Colors and an old map of the small island of Cuba, both projected simultaneously on the same screen, could be referents enough to introduce Cuban matters and cultural issues. These images used as symbols could be part of the answer on why or what do we try to restore and also the graphic response to average people who want to know the usual inquiries of who we are, and where we come from. More than striking symbols, strong attitudes, persistence and wise knowledge are required for the defense of heritage. The amount, categorization and location of relevant buildings and artifacts to fight for, and many alternative materials, human and moral resources to work are also needed. More than a slide presentation, a very specialized review of how preservation topics are faced is demanded by insiders, cultural organizations and fundraisers. This paper will try to give an overview of some of those demands going beyond the symbols.

Many questions and necessarily flexible answers are always contained inside preservation endeavors everywhere. Some of these inquiries are related to the maintenance or recovery of old buildings and neighborhoods, currently seen as part of a long-term negotiation process with the society to manage time effects and man-made damage. An important issue is the promotion of social need to recover cultural values; this is a moral task that sometimes seems ambitious when there are other priorities or expectations, such as choosing the right use and user, analyzing the availability of materials, and facing a mostly slippery budget. A lot of control is needed to achieve success. To face heritage matters as Cuba does, without forgetting to work for the remaining cultural needs and its maintenance in a whole country, has and will demand of course, a long term strong cultural policy and a vertical landmark conservation strategy. Thought must be given as to how to build a better ambiance for the ordinary demands and the growing needs humanity requires. This is much more complicated for a small and poor country such as Cuba with many challenges and a historically constrained economy.

Architecture as part of culture becomes an enduring artifact capable of becoming a cultural property by itself, but architecture is also supposed to contain or to generate layers of history and culture across its lifetime. Preservationists try always to consider architecture as patrimony but in some cases it is not viable because in every epoch and site humanity focuses mostly in every day life and events without a historical perspective on the cultural values of Architecture and Art. This paper deals with how architecture is managed as patrimony in Cuba, its categories and evolution, the training and practice of preservationists, the national and local agencies involved, availability of resources, recent effects of tourism on architecture and its impact for



the historic centers. Most of the topics mentioned further in this paper are presented in a personal vision introducing also upcoming events and inviting people to discuss the intricate connections between architecture, heritage and society in Cuba and the way cultural organizations and local preservationists are working to save the past for the future.

### **Historical background**

The very first Spaniards built and protected the newfound lands transferring their renaissance models to the weather and the virgin landscape of the tropics. They built churches to bring their faith into the lands of other idols, and, specifically in Cuba, to avoid losing their faith because of the behavior of soldiers and sailors amidst the new towns they founded and extended with African slaves. Once consolidated from conquerors to landowners, Spaniards built palaces transferring southern Spain patterns from Moorish architecture to Cuban conditions, and displayed patios, wooden ceilings and bay windows to get the breeze. They also created a colorful way to tame the sharp light, creating the codes for the new-born Cuban architecture, framed in a special social ambiance. Creoles led the way to our own transfigured patterns from original roots.

Vegetation covers or pitched clay tiled roofs as affordable alternatives to withstand tropical requirements, new artifacts and the integration of other local materials, creativity in the surroundings of a luxurious vegetation – these created different landscapes and new traditions along the way, to establish a national culture in Cuba. An untouchable and material legacy has been created along centuries influenced by Spaniards, African slaves, Americans and many other Europeans and visitors from many parts. Most of this should be preserved due to its age of construction, architectural or historical values. They constitute our clues to find a holistic approach to heritage preservation where the landmarks are just the visible skin to protect the precious core of humanity

### **A briefing on Cuban World Heritage Sites**

The ideals of preservation in Architecture were stated in 1948 during the first congress of Cuban Architects but they were basically developed in Cuba in the second half of the recent seventies. The actions come from punctual efforts of painstaking restoration around paradigmatic landmarks (some of them dating from the first half of the XX Century) to interventions in architectural complexes. Restoration efforts also comprised progressively selected urban areas by the beginning of the eighties introducing rehabilitation concepts to deal with a vast building stock.

Old Havana was the first World Heritage Site in Cuba recognized by UNESCO in 1982. From then on, interventions have been organized into a network around main squares. The preservation movement has been transformed from a former organizational dependence on the main cultural authorities into a powerful trust with extensive popular recognition and economical and management autonomy since 1993. Today Old Havana recovery strategies are condensed into a Master Plan covering the whole territory of 144 hectares in the old district. Some special actions also stretch to some relevant areas over a city with more than 440 square kilometers of metropolitan area that "Habaneros" consider with relevant historic and culture values.

More than Old Havana, the architecture of the great city of Havana can be read in many layers and displayed to visitors with many faces from Baroque style to other colonial architectures that are also found in Guanabacoa, El Cerro and some other old sectors. Eclecticism, Art Nouveau, or Art Deco may be found in the parts of the city that grew up beginning in the XX century. Modern Architecture or even today's socialist architecture, such as the now famous Schools of Arts (listed as one of the world's most endangered sites by the World Monuments Fund in 1999 and 2002), or recently introduced and debated new commercial architecture can be found in the suburbs or sprawled and mixed throughout the city.

Trinidad, with an adjacent and fertile Sugar Mills Valley that provided its well-being from late XVIII to the first half of XIX century, has a wide variety of palaces and colonial domestic architecture where vernacular details can still be seen today. The recognition of Trinidad as a World Heritage Site and the natural attractions of the region have made the area an important tourist spot that is very visited and now is virtually harassed by tourists in spite of a site management and restoration plan that is carefully carried out by Oficina del Conservador de Trinidad. The preservation office is a trust tailored in 1997 as the fourth Special Preservation Office created after the Havana Historians Office was empowered successfully in 1993. The amount of resources needed for Trinidad and the surrounding territory is striking and the Preservation Office is working in many fields including industrial heritage and oral traditions.

San Pedro de la Roca del Morro in Santiago de Cuba, one of the three Morro castles in the Caribbean (including Havana and San Juan Puerto Rico), was recognized by UNESCO in 1997. The declaration of the area comprises also a small island in the harbor and surroundings where this XVII century military architecture witnessed the sinking of the Spanish fleet in Cuba during the so called Spanish-American war by the endings of first stage of Cuban Independence. This area and its unique landscape are under a management plan by the Office of the Conservator of Santiago de Cuba, also empowered in 1996.



In 1999, two proposals from Cuba were considered by UNESCO, both recognizing landscape sites in the western and eastern parts of the island. One of the areas is Viñales Valley in Pinar del Rio considered as the first Latin American Cultural Landscape entry recognized by UNESCO. Its tobacco plantations and special formations create an interesting landscape. While it is very valuable for tourist entrepreneurs, the National Commission of Landmarks is very aware of it, and several decisions have been taken to avoid the negative aspects of tourism. The National Park Desembarco del Granma was also recognized by UNESCO. The park is located in the southeastern coast of Cuba and it is a natural landscape where endemic fauna, marine terraces and local vegetation create a unique natural landscape in the Caribbean.

The archaeological remains of coffee plantations in Santiago de Cuba, comprising several former Haitian émigrés coffee plantations dating from the XVIII century, were considered in 2000 as the last Cuban site still written down in the World Heritage List. The site is managed by the Office of the Historian of Santiago de Cuba, and a lot of untouchable and industrial heritage is being studied and processed from the site.

### **Cultural and Preservation entities and its evolution**

Preservation of landmarks has grown in Cuba, especially if compared with isolated cultural results and weak preservationist efforts before 1959, to a revolutionary change after 1959 and the creation of a National Landmark Commission in 1963. In the last 40 years the recovery of old sites and landmarks and the declaration of new sites as Monuments has been connected to several historic, cultural or political reasons.

Starting originally with a small group based in Havana, and growing to the formation of restoration groups in many of the provinces of the country, the Preservation movement has raised an important cultural consciousness on the values of the existing architecture. Preservation has attracted many architects to this field of practice, especially during the eighties when new architecture and construction became more criticized than ever before and the benefits of restoring old Havana and other cities began to be part of a popular recognition.

The way to preservation, lead by the Landmark Commission, has been reinforced by other conditions and acts, such as the Urban Reform, the creation of the Planning Institute, the new administrative and political division of 1974, and the creation of new local governments in the 14 provinces of Cuba. However, it has been especially reinforced by the issuing of Laws Number One and Two by the National Assembly in 1977, both in regard to preservation matters. The Museums Act of 1979, and the creation of the School for Museum Studies in 1979, were also important echoes that helped to push the national movement towards preservation, especially after the creation of CENCREM and the recognition of Old Havana as a World Heritage Site.



CENCREM is the National Center for Conservation, Restoration and Museum Studies located at the Old Cloister of Santa Clara in Old Havana. It is a training and academic center created 20 years ago to foster the education and training of specialists in restoration. Most of Cuban architects have been trained in Cuba and some received postgraduate training abroad and progressively in Cuba by CENCREM through the many courses offered every year. Sponsored by UNESCO and UNDP during a first stage, CENCREM today is one of the main agencies of the National Council of Cultural Heritage of the Ministry of Culture, and, together with the provincial centers of Cultural Patrimony, and with the Office of the Historian of the Cities of Havana, Santiago, Camagüey and Trinidad, it creates the Cuban preservationist force to which Cuban Universities are also increasingly attracted.

CENCREM is very active in architecture exhibitions, congresses, workshops and teaching and in the restoration of objects and laboratory analysis. It has also undertaken more complicated architectural goals, such as the restoration of the Santa Clara Cloister and the Plaza Vieja in Old Havana where there is a large plan in progress sponsored by the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana with design guidance by CENCREM architects. The changes in Cuban economy and the natural growth of local centers at the already mentioned special preservation offices has diminished CENCREM's direct participation in construction projects throughout the country, allowing it now to concentrate its efforts in teaching and research.

Actually, efforts in Havana and throughout the country are concentrated in recovering buildings and, at the same time, giving them a direct social or economic use, thus trying to guarantee a fast retrieval of the investment. Tourism in many cases accomplishes this, but others social needs recommend a comprehensive management plan. Examples of this are along the Malecon and in the San Isidro neighborhood in Havana, where an interesting social improvement is already visible. Some other examples in Trinidad, Santiago, Bayamo and many other Cuban cities are creating a social fabric that in many cases is more important than the architectural content.

### **Challenges**

Preservation in Cuba has the same constraints, shortages and challenges faced by Cuban citizens. One example is the availability of materials or the substitution by others more affordable and perhaps less suitable. The cuts in preservation budgets make preservationist very cautious in their proposals.

The risks of disasters by hurricanes (as the recently catastrophic Michelle), the needs of improving housing stock, and the many new interesting cultural projects recently sponsored by the government, constitute not only challenges that are sometimes difficult to solve harmoniously, but also interesting commitments where preservationists are involved.

There are some programs such as vernacular architecture that need to be better encouraged: improving living conditions while avoiding the loss of traditional techniques and landscapes. Industrial heritage plans could also promote a wider participation of the working classes while improving their social conditions in old factories, sugar mills and mines still working with very old technologies. The restoration of Churches and Temples could also propitiate new gathering habits, not only inside those space but recreating surrounding squares and the revival of traditions.

Tourism is a big challenge, not only because of the main centralized support it receives from the government, but also because of the many associated social risks for which it is still considered responsible. In addition, there is a concern about the introduction of foreign proposals, materials, and ways to do work that could create new dependence without a real balance of local architecture or the impetus of competitions to preserve major works. This force is transforming the shape of many parts of the country with cheap models copied from similar foreign situations degrading the architectural entourage without creating new real architectural values neither contributing to improve the landscape nor presenting a major better standard of living.

An International Biennial of Architecture, which is scheduled for next March 25 to 30th, will surely debate most of these ideas, trying to deal with the past and the future for Cuba and its architecture. The expected exchange with visitors will surely contribute to create a better climate for debating architecture not only in regard to its contents but especially to the container itself as an architectural feature.

Victor Marín, Havana/ New York, December 2001



## URBANISM IN HAVANA

Roberta Brandes Gratz

I want to offer a few observations about urbanism in Havana, the glue that ties together the four centuries of Havana's built environment. I don't pretend to have seen all of Havana but I saw enough to know the value of what is there and how easily it could be lost.

The truly good news for urbanism in Havana is that the revolution occurred before Cuba could copy the urban renewal policies that decimated so many American cities starting in the 1950s and from which few of our cities have really recovered. It is still not fully understood in this country that the root of our urban problems rests so heavily on our own destructive policies. We wiped out whole urban economic and social networks when we cleared so many so-called slums in the name of progress. We built warehouses for poor people that we are now blowing up and rebuilding. We constructed mammoth highways that both erased large swaths of urban fabric and divided neighborhoods and downtowns in ways that are almost impossible to overcome. American cities today struggle with how to repair that damaged urban fabric and what is becoming increasingly clear is that where dense traditional urban neighborhoods remain in this country, from SoHo in NYC to Lower Downtown in Denver to the Pearl District in Portland, Oregon, people of all ages are moving back to the cities that have real city life available.

Thus, on my first visit to Havana and later to Santiago, I was stunned by an amazing bit of luck. Urbanism is intact in, at least, those Cuban cities. No overscaled highways plow through and divide up the urban fabric. City street systems are traversable easiest on foot, bike or pedicab and the automobile has not erased the richness of urban life. Kids can still play in a street, pedestrians can cross without taking their life in their hands, street level activity is vibrant, even in rundown neighborhoods. None of that is true in most American cities where the car has become dominant.

Perhaps, most amazing, is recognizing the streetcar routes that remain unchanged, missing only the cars themselves. I would guess the track remains as well, even where it might have been paved over. This is, perhaps, the best news of all. What the Cubans may not know and, in fact, neither do most Americans, is that we had the most intricate, efficient street car system in the world that was purposely put out of business and replaced by a consortium of automobile, steel, bus, tire and cement companies. This happened gradually after World War II but only recently has America woken up to the car dominant dysfunctional system we created in its place. Now, American cities are piece by piece – and very expensively – trying to put back that downtown transit network. We've been building a lot of light rail systems in recent years but not necessarily rebuilding the compact centers and neighborhoods that once thrived along streetcar routes. Only this year has the first

new true streetcar line been recreated in Portland, Oregon, imported from the Czech Republic, built cheaper, quicker, and causing less disruption than light rail and using a combination of private and public money.

It is no coincidence that the remaining American city neighborhoods that evolved along streetcar routes are the choice neighborhoods wherever they exist. They evolved as streetcar suburbs but the total distinction between the streetcar suburb and automobile suburb is not well understood here. The intricate connectedness of streetcar neighborhoods contrasts sharply with the forced apartness created by Post-World War II suburbs, when the car replaced rail as the necessary connector.

I won't assume you all know how to recognize those neighborhoods, many of which today are identified and designated as "historic." But they have a lot in common. Tree-lined streets. Tightly developed houses and multiple-family housing. Small front yards. Driveways to the side of a house, sometimes with a garage in the back with an apartment or workshop above. Parking is on the street. Wonderful, multi-purpose alleys often are the only separation between the back to back houses on a square block. The commercial character of these neighborhoods evolved in the era before zoning and the idea of separating uses, so a comfortable mix of street retail, office and residential uses on upper floors and occasional institutional buildings or theaters existed along the streetcar route.

Thankfully, Cuban versions of streetcar neighborhoods, maybe by default, still exist in Havana. The early 20th century neighborhoods of Havana are beyond match. Often parts of the whole have disappeared or are in poor condition. But the whole remains. The rejuvenation of the parts and the restoration of individual structures is an easy task next to recreation of that whole. We are trying in many places to recreate what the Cubans still have.

So while too many of the buildings may be in dramatic disrepair, though not irretrievable, and while the economy is slow to be able to afford the rebuilding of much that has deteriorated over time, more of a potential for a return to a vibrant urbanism remains in Cuban cities than in many of our own. The Cubans have what many American cities want again.

The question, of course, is if Cubans recognize and value what they have, not an easy assumption since we certainly did not for a long line. And the challenge is to take advantage of that opportunity that remains instead of going the route of most capitalist societies overly in love with the car and the truck and unappreciative of local transit and long distance rail.

When I first met Mario Coyula, and saw his vision of Havana, I was encouraged to think at least he understood the value of what is there. Of course, he has not had to face the 20-ton guerrilla of the American automobile, truck and highway building



industry and, hopefully, he won't have to. But Mario is a true urbanist, not just in the stature he has earned in Cuba but in the understanding he exhibits in many ways. He is of course an expert on Havana history, has traveled far and wide to see what has happened elsewhere and has won many awards nationally and internationally. Mario has held many important positions in Cuba since the revolution, including the director of the Group for the Integral Planning for the Future of the City of Havana. It is our good fortune that next spring, he will be the Robert F. Kennedy Professor at Harvard's David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies and will teach at the Design School. I welcome Mario Coyula

## CITY, TOURISM AND PRESERVATION, THE OLD HAVANA WAY

Mario Coyula

*Memory is redundant: it repeats signs so that the city can begin to exist.*  
*Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities*

### **The 1990s: built stock and período especial**

Against all odds, the Cuban revolution has managed to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union, forty years of US direct or indirect hostility and its own structural economic troubles in a globalized uni-polar world where no country can expect to make a decent living on selling sugar anymore. The 1990s were stamped by a crisis officially called período especial that brought severe shortages in food supply, blackouts and a dramatic decrease in public transportation and social housing construction. But the crisis also made evident some intrinsic weaknesses and forced to seek new, more sustainable solutions like bicycling, urban agriculture and organic farming, an opening to self-employment and small-scale ventures, increased popular participation and the use of appropriate construction technologies based on local resources.

Some changes were made in the structure of Cuban economy and government in the first half of the decade. More decisions were transferred from the national ministries to State enterprises and more room was granted to private initiative, including foreign investment – a trend that had already started in tourism since late 1980s.

More than 200,000 persons registered for self-employed jobs as 155,000 stopped working in State enterprises. 2.6 million hectares of State land were leased to agricultural cooperatives (UBPC) and urban agriculture boomed while agricultural markets were allowed again, with prices dictated by demand. Consejos Populares (Popular Councils), originally created only for isolated rural settlements, were extended into Havana in 1990, seeking for a grass-root level where residents could participate more directly in decisions regarding their own neighborhoods. Nevertheless, this has not led yet to the empowering of a real local economy. Havana is a low-rise, lower-middle class city that has grown at a very slow pace compared to most other major Latin American cities. Its built heritage was spared by the overcoming of the 1959 revolution from large urban renewal projects in the inner city, while investments were mostly addressed to create jobs and improve the living conditions in the rest of the country, which had historically remained much more underdeveloped than the capital city. As a result, deterioration and overcrowding increased in Havana but its built heritage has not disappeared through demolitions driven by real estate speculation. Another consequence was that the internal migration flow from the countryside stalled for decades, except for a short backlash in mid-90s that forced the government to approve special regulations.



## Havana's architectural heritage

The city has amassed in its 482-year life a very large and valuable architectural stock that include the first fort and aqueduct made by Europeans in the western hemisphere. A variety of architectural styles cover from late Renaissance, pre-Baroque (with a strong mudéjar influence from southern Spain), Baroque, some NeoGothic, NeoClassical, Art Nouveau and Catalan Modernisme. Eclecticism arrived late because of the terrible Independent Wars, but in the 1920s it stamped the look of inner Havana and practically the rest of Cuban cities. There are many good examples of Art Deco, both in the geometric and streamline trends, followed by short periods of NeoColonial and Modern Monumental. A second construction boom after the Second World War was already affiliated to the Modern Movement, and the city expanded quickly in the 1950s with dozens of new subdivisions of single-family houses, while high-rise condominiums began to appear along the waterfront.

Against conventional wisdom, Modern architecture extended into the early 1960s after the triumph of the Revolution, with some Brutalist influence, but a growing centralization that emphasized on mass-production with prefabricated concrete panels almost obliterated the cultural component of Cuban architecture during the 1970-1980s. An exception to this was a few special projects, mostly located at the periphery and thus contributing very little to the urban image. In late 1980s there was a short-lived attempt by young Cuban architects to regain that cultural approach, but they were too much influenced by a superficial Postmodernism that was already fading away in the countries where it had started. A leading Cuban scholar, Graziella Pogolotti, has said that Cuba is a port, recalling the eternal mixture of influences that shaped the Cuban architectural identity –mainly Spanish, but also French and American. Africans brought as slaves left a very strong imprint in music, dance and cuisine, but not distinctly on the built environment. Nevertheless, recent makeshift additions and striking paint jobs, together with some patterns of behavior in public spaces might indicate both a growing African and rural influence over the inherited white city.

Nearly forty years of strong political and economic ties to the Soviet Union and the eastern socialist bloc left surprisingly no influence, other than the heavy-panel prefabricated plants and a fashion for names such as Yuri or Tatiana that has been replaced by impossible tongue-curling Yusleidys and Yosvanis that dominate all Cuban sports teams. The 1980s brought in new dollar-oriented programs like hotels and condos for foreigners, mostly following banal, bland designs meant to please customers seeking for a "tropical" architecture of palm trees and mulattas. Yet, a few good projects started to appear toward the turn of millennia. This still early trend addresses the goal to bring back architecture into the realm of culture: an issue that received unanimous support during the seminal 6th Congress of the Cuban Union of Writers and Artists in November, 1998.

## Economy and tourism at the beginning of the 21st Century

Tourism grew from 2,000 visitors in 1967 to 1.4 million in 1998. Havana is a major destination: 55.1% of all tourists visit the city and contribute 26% of all the national dollar incomes from tourism. The capital city has a strong cultural and social appeal to visitors, but it also offers 11 kilometers of fine beaches only 20 minutes east from the center. Havana's total hotel capacity was 10,700 rooms (31,600 nationwide) in early 2000. Havana has around 4,500 rooms in private houses renting to foreigners, an equivalent of 12-15 new hotels. The figure only accounts for those rooms registered and paying taxes, so the actual amount might be at least twice. In a descending order, tourists came to Havana from Spain, Italy, France, Mexico, Germany, United Kingdom, Argentine, Canada, Colombia and Brazil. Figures from the United States are not available, since spending dollars in tourist trips to Cuba is not permitted by the US government, but a large number of Americans travel mainly for cultural and educational reasons and others just ignore the regulations. US-source amounts to 3,5-4,0% of the total of visitors, and it seems to increase.

Tourism now stands with sugar and remittances from relatives in the US as the main sources of dollars. Immediately after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 the flow of tourists to Cuba dropped, as it happened all around the world. But by October 1st, 2001 there were 2,100 more tourists than at the same date in 2000. Cuba is considered a very safe destination for tourists –something especially attractive at the moment– and foreign partners with their own market networks manage 50% of the total amount of rooms. Nevertheless, the 2 million-tourist goal for 2001 will not be achieved, and the expected growth of 12,7% will fall to 5-7%. Tourism is a very vulnerable industry, and its future depends to a large extent on whether terrorist attacks will continue or not, and on the evolution of the war in the Middle East against a faceless, ubiquitous enemy who –like Poe's Red Death– is already inside.

Often, tourism has been compared to a locomotive pulling economic development, but it may also turn into a destruction machine of the natural, the built and the social environment. Ecological balance is especially vulnerable in small island countries, and even if Cuba is by far the largest island in the Caribbean, it is composed of many well-defined but small ecosystems that can be easily ruined in an irreversible way. This calls for a long-term approach to development, one that will not kill the source of profits itself. Inappropriate technologies and building materials and excessive alterations on the terrain are associated to constructions that create a visual disturbance with the surroundings. There is still little use of sustainable approaches, like low-consumption designs that preserve energy and water; or use natural ventilation and lighting, as well as recycling and reuse. Ironically, what represents the main attraction for visitors to these pristine environments is endangered by a narrow-minded approach looking for fast profits.



## **Hotels and Inmobiliarias**

Around 80% of the recent construction activity in Cuba is related in some way with tourism and real estate projects known as inmobiliarias –condos for foreigners. Joint ventures are mainly with Spanish, Canadian, Italian and Israeli associates. The Cuban contribution represents an estimated of 500 million USD and has been mostly concentrated in supplying the land and to a lesser extent construction workers and some basic building materials. Since land is the main Cuban contribution, it tends to amount up to 50% of the social capital. New projects have often been criticized because an excessive use of land, with too high densities and little open space. Investors try to justify this because of the high price they must pay for the land. Land leasing on a 25-year term (that can be extended to another 25 if both partners agree) has always been preferred instead of selling. A law regulating Land has been discussed during many years but still has not been approved.

In May, 2000 the Cuban government decided not to sell flats to foreigners anymore. Buildings under construction and deals already closed were given green light; but since then foreigners will only be able to rent. While preserving the national property from being sold to foreigners seems a correct decision, this approach tends to look at real estate business as a one-time source of income, without capturing land value increments. On the other hand, the price of land is decided without using it as a planning tool; and there is no systematic updating of its price. This leads to seek short-run profits, with buildings as big as possible –actually bigger than they should– fitting badly in large vacant lots within the existing urban fabric, usually made up of much smaller lots and narrow, low-rise buildings set close to each other. Residents don't see any direct benefit from the newcomers, which instead overload their already critical utilities.

Monte Barreto is a developing zone on a large tract of land in western Havana. The development plan called for several strips of buildings parallel to the waterfront, with a public park behind. But a much wiser general layout would leave a linear central park running all the way north-south into the sea, lined with buildings that could all have two great views, a direct one into the park and another slanted into the ocean. This public space might perform as a social leveler, bringing together foreigners and Cubans –or, in the future, just different kinds of people with different income levels. The whole complex of more than 40 hectares is dollar-oriented, with no room for a badly needed mixed-development that would include other urban functions and a variety of social strata. It also gives a hint on what might become a car-oriented consumerist pattern of suburban development –something that can reshape the image of Havana and change the traditional way people behave in public spaces. A lesson can be learned from the Monte Barreto experience: diversity is not only good to preserve Nature.

## **Planning, but for how long?**

In December 2000 two important documents were approved by the Provincial Assembly of Poder Popular in Havana: the general Territorial and Urban Plan, and

the Strategic Plan for the Economic and Social Development. The latter identified nine relevant projects citywide: the Master Plan for the rehabilitation of Old Havana and the plan for the integral rehabilitation of the waterfront promenade, the Malecón; the Metropolitan Park, including the redevelopment of the mouth of the Almendares River; the rehabilitation of Centro Habana, including Chinatown, La Fragua district and the first park-street, Aramburu; the new city center at Monte Barreto, Miramar; the new development zone in Eastern Havana and the cultural complex of the National Museum –recently inaugurated. Eight important programs were also approved: the protection of the Malecón from flooding; the cleaning of the Bay, the waterfront and the Almendares River basin; a townscaping and tree-planting program, 33 zones of housing improvement, the rehabilitation of 51 public health centers, and urban agriculture. Nevertheless, priorities shifted later to a massive program of construction and rehabilitation of schools; and a serious worsening of the Cuban economy will undoubtedly affect the original plans.

Some important issues must be addressed: Can the present level of decentralization of the Cuban economy sustain a stronger participation of the population in planning? How to coordinate local and national plans? Is it possible to do local planning while depending on the allocation of budget from the national government? How can benefits from the dollar economy reach the population in a more direct, obvious way? How to reduce its negative social and cultural impact? Where will the money come from for the large investments that are needed in infrastructure and utilities, and to create successful public spaces that will improve the environment and the quality of life, attract investors, raise the value of the surrounding lots and perform as social levelers? And, the main underlying question: how will Cuba-US relations evolve in the near future?

### **Preservation pays**

Preservation since early 1960s had been mostly focused in the restoration of some very relevant buildings, but the works increased and the scope widened as the City Historian's office took over as the main investor for restoration in Old Havana in early 1980s. A significant increase of this work happened after Decree-Law 143 allowed the Office in 1993 to run their own businesses and reinvest the profits in their preservation programs.

The structure of the City Historian Office led by the charismatic Eusebio Leal grew more complicated as the scope of businesses and tasks increased. By the end of 2000 it included the Master Plan office, also comprising the San Isidro project in the southern tip of the old walled precinct, aiming for the total revitalization of a historically poor neighborhood where the most notorious red-light district of Havana boomed in early 1900s; a negotiating group; the Plan Malecón for the comprehensive development (PERI) of the first fourteen blocks along Havana's landmark waterfront promenade, and a mass media group with a radio station. Also



under the City Historian were the departments of cultural heritage, architectural heritage, housing, architectural projects, and a workshop-school to train youngsters into skilled rehabilitation workers. It also has an economic department that deals with accounting, investments, taxes, donations and cooperation, imports/exports, employing and commercial.

The entrepreneurial system of the Office comprises several enterprises: the Puerto Carenas construction company, two real estate agencies (Aurea and Fénix), Habaguanex (the initial commercial enterprise under the City Historian Office and still the most important), a nursery supplying plants and flowers, La Begonia; a tour-operator agency, San Cristóbal; and the Restoration of Monuments company that grew from the one that started preservation works on historic landmarks in Old Havana in the 1980s. Income grew from 3.0 million dollars in 1994 to 62.0 in 2000; and investment grew from 1.169 to 43.0 in the same period.

The experience of the City Historian Office in Old Havana has been partially extended to other historic centers in Cuba like Trinidad, Santiago de Cuba and Camagüey. It shows that what was once regarded as an impossible burden on the back of the Cuban government is now able to pay for itself and even extend the benefits to the local residents through the creation of jobs and the improvement of their living conditions: a demonstration of a fruitful convergence of cultural, social, environmental and economic interests. City tourism moved mainly by cultural reasons can bring new life to central districts that were already abandoned, neglected or by-passed more than a century ago. Such a tourism –especially if properly disseminated– will carry less negative social and environmental impacts. But a viable large-scale preservation of Havana's enormous built heritage calls for the active participation of the local population, building a culture of cooperation within well-established neighborhoods. In the end, an empowerment of the residents through a flexible local economy should make as many persons as possible capable of paying for themselves.

The economic success of the preservation program in Old Havana and to a less extent in other Cuban historic sites confirm the notion that preservation pays, but also bring in the question of how to use a historic site or building without destroying its physical values and also the intangible ones, like character and dignity. This may call for an unstable compromise. And it also may push a review on the ethics of preservation and the search for authenticity. Historic sites should be attractive and livable, but gentrification and tertiarization processes driven by the market, plus a kitschy commercial approach to please cheap users might ruin them even faster than neglect, poverty or violence. A careful combination of pragmatic and cultural goals, like in Old Havana, might succeed in walking along the thin line between paralysis and disaster.

## THE POLITICS OF DEVELOPMENT IN CUBA

Linda Robinson

It is a pity that so few Americans have been able to see Havana's extraordinary architecture, culture and history for themselves. They would find a city deeply veined with U.S. influences, such as important landmarks designed by prominent American architects. They would encounter a city like no other in the hemisphere, unique in having escaped the ravages of the bulldozer, if not of time. Havana's long and varied history is there for all to see, in four centuries of architecture still standing. These are not isolated representatives here and there, but entire blocks and neighborhoods, a well-planned city that gracefully melds different styles and periods. Sea storms, inadequate maintenance and alterations made by a population that is squeezed into woefully insufficient housing are all taking a severe toll, and much of the architecture will be lost if more is not done and soon. But what is truly remarkable is how much progress Havana has made in restoration and preservation while undergoing a cataclysmic economic contraction brought on by the Soviet Union's collapse.

I began traveling to Cuba in 1990 just as the economic implosion began. Over the next four years the Cuban economy shrank by 35 percent. Transportation ground to a halt as Russian oil supplies dwindled. Long power outages left homes in the dark. State-rationed food supplies dwindled to a few paltry staples. Finally as the people were reaching their breaking point and a massive exodus of some 40,000 refugees threatened to spin out of control, some market reforms were introduced. New farmers' markets sprang up, small businesses were allowed to open, and the use of dollars was legalized (for those lucky enough to have them). Perhaps most important, the Castro government made a concerted effort to welcome foreign investment, which led to joint ventures in a number of sectors, tourism above all. Tourism today is the top income earner (after remittances from Cubans abroad) and seems certain to be the main engine of future economic growth. Cuba's famous past as a tourist destination still exerts a strong lure even though Americans remain prohibited from leisure travel by the 1962 U.S. embargo. Tourist visits have grown by over ten percent each year of the 1990s, approaching two million in 2001, most by Canadians, Europeans and Latin Americans.

There is no doubt that Cuba desperately needs an infusion of capital that its commodity-based economy cannot supply. Tourism can either save or wreck the city, even the island, depending on the choices made in the next few years. Havana's rich history, cosmopolitan nature and cultural wealth distinguish it from anywhere else in the Caribbean. A number of devoted Cubans are fighting to ensure that it retains its special character and does not become converted into another low-brow sun-and-sand destination. If those forces prevail, if Havana can be preserved and its legacy of high culture promoted and continued, then Cuba hope to emulate the success of Italy as a high-culture tourist destination that both preserves and profits from its assets. If this goal is embraced by the Castro government, it is more likely



to be achieved under its political system than a wide-open US-style system where developers often have more pull than the officials trying to enforce compliance with zoning and other standards. This is a topic of heated debate in Cuban intellectual circles, and the jury is still out whether cheap new buildings will ruin the cityscape.

The most hopeful sign is the broad authority granted to Eusebio Leal Spengler, the historian of the City of Havana. He has pioneered important means of financing restoration through the proceeds of tourism, and his restoration work has been of generally high quality. Furthermore, he has extended his reach from the colonial sector to include some Republican-era buildings and zones. The most important concept guiding his effort is that of the Living City. Leal is determined not to create a ghost town of museums and tourist destinations but rather a mix that houses foreigners in refurbished hotels, next to social centers for elderly or infirm Havanans, next to fortresses and churches that provide exhibition and performance space to Cuba's flourishing crop of contemporary artists. New art hangs in the Iglesia de Paula, for example, and the second oldest fort in the hemisphere, the Castillo de la Fuerza Real, is a ceramics museum showing famous and new artists. An artisans' school trains young folks in 14 different handicrafts and skills like making stained glass. Local residents are employed in the restoration, in tourist establishments and in cooperatives that do such work as sew uniforms for hotel staff. This integrated approach, one that yields tangible benefits for the population, has been key to persuading the socialist government to embrace tourism. This approach is also breathing new life into a city that has been collectively depressed for a decade. On a recent trip I attended a concert of old boleros and danzon in the convent of St. Francis de Assisi, right outside Leal's office. The audience was young and old, Cuban and foreign. Most of the Cubans knew the words to the songs, and were singing.

That Havana is a special city requires no argument for those who have been there. The challenges are, first to convey its cultural and historical wealth to those who do not know of it, and then to make the case that the city's preservation is intimately connected with its future prospects. It would not be exaggerating to say that the preservation and continuation of Havana's rich cultural legacy, embodied in its buildings and the artistic and social activities that go in and around them, is the key to a healthy, dynamic and prosperous society—in other words, to a successful transition. Why? Because these are the defining attributes of cubania, the essence of Cuba and Cubans, and their cultural identity is both a powerful fence-mender with the diaspora and a bridge-builder to other nations. Most immediately and most practically, Cuba's culture is the golden goose that is resurrecting its economy. Let us hope it is not killed.

## SAVING THE LEGACY OF THE ARCHITECTURE OF THE MODERN MOVEMENT IN CUBA: NOTES FOR THE RECOVERY OF THE FUTURE.

Eduardo Luis Rodríguez

*Note: this was submitted in lieu of the talk given at the symposium*

### Modernity in Cuba. A Summary

After four hundred years of Spanish Colonial Government, modernity erupted with renewed impetus in Cuba at the dawn of the twentieth century. A very strong desire for actualization in every field, including architecture and urbanism, had been evident in Cuban society since the middle of the previous century. But it was with the arrival of the new century that several factors worked together to produce a total openness of the country to full modernity: the suppression of the Spanish Government, the improvements of urban conditions carried out by the North American administration between 1899 and 1902, and finally, the installation of the Republic in that year. These factors created a collective state of mind in desperate search of advancement and progress, in order to diminish the differences between the island and other developed countries taken as models—mainly the United States and France.

The avalanche of new architectural tendencies and styles that were formed sequentially during the three first decades of the century was related to the diversification of options and alternatives realized from interchanges with other countries and the improvement of communications. Also, and essentially, these were related to the common wish for change and renovation, of realization and rejection of the past. It was an effort to erase the stigma of having been a colony for too long, even longer than the rest of the Latin American countries. The way to achieve this was through the continuous renovation of every sector of society. So, the word “modernity” even came to mean the salvation of the country. It was compulsory to become modern, if not in essence, at least in shape.

The image of the cities, and especially that of Havana, changed quickly. The roads were paved, the demolition of the old city walls was almost finished, construction of the Malecón—the new promenade and boulevard at the sea border—advanced steadily to the West, and new buildings towered to never before imagined heights. Structures of steel and reinforced concrete replaced all colonial constructions systems, and the city expanded with a crowd of new residential neighborhoods, each one claiming to be the most modern of all.

Following neo-gothic and neo-baroque trends, all possible revivals arrived in the first years of the century, forming an eclecticism that first developed parallel to Art Nouveau, then acquired neo-classical features in the 1920s, and finally was replaced by Art Deco in the 1930s. This style's apparent lack of historical references, together with its almost pure geometric conception, has been identified frequently



with the definitive arrival of modernity. In fact, it happened before—as we have seen—but nevertheless, there is no doubt that in its brief existence of a mere decade, Art Deco meant a tremendous step toward avant-garde conceptions, formally speaking, and shortened considerably the chronological space between local and universal art.

The arrival of the modern movement, a little later, was the real leap that gave Cuban architecture the same stature as that of other developed nations. The initial ideals of the modern movement were introduced and spread out in the country in the second half of the 1920s and the first significant works were erected at the beginning of the following decade, which witnessed the arrival and acceptance of new forms, first affiliated with rational orthodox conceptions, and later introduced as local variations that made solutions richer and more appropriate. The new conceptual and formal repertoire acquired maturity during the 1940s and reached its apogee and plenitude in the 1950s, a moment of brilliance for local architecture, when it even surpassed in interest what other nations were doing.

In this way, with urgency but without omissions, Cuban modernity was formed. A modernity that configured such a vital, extended and important portion of our urban and architectural reality that today it should be understood as a key and integral part of our cultural heritage, with the same status as colonial architecture. This is not to ignore that there were certain limitations in the Cuban modern movement, such as having forgotten the social component of the initial ideals of the international modern movement, or not having respected the pre-existing environment.

### **Modernity as Patrimony, and Its Denial.**

Currently, we face a paradox: the same works that half a century before erupted irreverently in the urban landscape of our cities – many times in a traumatic way, erasing with their iconoclastic presence some pre-existent values—claim for themselves preservation and protection to keep them from suffering the same fate as their ancestors. It is fair; there is no need to make the same mistakes once more, and buildings are not guilty or innocent, but just representations of ways of thinking that evolve to allow the salvation, for future generations, of important exponents that otherwise could have been sacrificed.

In an international context, the works by the great masters of modern architecture—Wright, Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, Aalto, among others—are recognized more and more as monuments to be officially protected. In our local context—though their significance reaches beyond Cuba—it is the works by Mario Románach, Max Borges (Jr.), Frank Martínez, Manuel Gutiérrez, Nicolás Quintana, Ricardo Porro, and Joaquín Cristófol, among other architects, which should receive similar recognition and protection. Among the many considerations

that support this way of thinking the one that stands out is the artistic value of modern architecture, of which most of the significant examples reached extraordinary formal and compositional achievements and are capable of producing great aesthetic pleasure and emotion of the kind to which Le Corbusier referred in one of his most known definitions of Architecture (1). With similar preponderance we should consider the enormous step forward to find and implement new functional and technical solutions, which led to realizations of great structural audacity and constructive logic, without forgetting the introduction of prefabrication techniques with a very creative focus.

The intelligent and enriched integration produced in the 1950s between local and universal values, based on the reinterpretation of traditions in a way that avoided nostalgia and recreated already proven solutions of climactic adaptation, formed a strong regionalist movement and should be considered as a supreme moment for national culture, as important as the similar movement that took place in national painting. But many other works that do not belong to this tendency have great value in terms of identity, because they form an artistic body that expresses in its variety what national identity really was in that specific moment and exemplify a particular state of mind that had strong repercussions in the cultural development of the nation in such a way that it extended all over the territory and for a long period of time. Finally, the frequent inclusion in the buildings of murals and sculptures by the most prestigious Cuban artists of that time complements the very positive valorization of our modern movement, which is, on the other hand, a moment that very soon will belong to the "past century."

It is precisely the consideration of the insufficient age of the buildings that prevents those works from being classified as National or Local Monuments. Even though the Cuban legislation for monuments (2) does not demand a minimum of antiquity to receive such classification, there exists among the officials in charge of that responsibility a kind of consensus or complicity in favor of requiring at least thirty years of age for a building to be considered as having monumental value. Such a practice—that prevented around 1985 the nomination as a Monument of the High Polytechnic Institute of Havana, built in 1964—entirely obviates other considerations such as the intrinsic artistic value of the work, its significance to local context and national culture, and above all, the fact that without a proper protection many of the original values could be lost in the course of those thirty required years, due to vandalism or careless behavior. This situation contradicts what happens in the fine arts, where a painting signed by a famous artist can be classified as "patrimony" the day after its completion.

In a similar way, it has been assumed that a work in poor or bad condition should not be declared as a Monument, in spite of the fact that, again, Cuban legislation says nothing in that sense and, on the contrary, it is precisely the works in that situation that need more urgently to be considered Monuments and to receive some



protection to prevent their total disappearance. This is the case of the National Schools of Arts, a masterpiece of Cuban modern architecture, which was denied designation as a National Monument and received only the lesser category of Protected Area.

On the other hand, the enormous and well-deserved recognition of colonial architecture today, thanks mainly to the intensive work of the Office of the City Historian of La Habana, has had a negative implication: some people have inferred, influenced by the wide publicity in favor of that architecture and the almost nonexistent dissemination of knowledge of the values of other architectural periods, that the only valid portion of our cities and our architecture is the colonial one, and hence, the rest can be sacrificed. These criteria are wrong and must be changed. Fortunately, the above-mentioned office is already moving in this direction.

Additionally, a political-ideological factor reinforces the reticence to give the Landmark status to modern buildings, particularly to those built in the decade of the 1950s. This introduces a variable to the discussion that is only common to those countries where a radical social change has occurred. Revolutions are made to confront and transform the past, and it is frequently assumed that everything belonging to the former social system is negative and must be rejected. Most of Cuban modern architecture was produced before the Revolution by promoters and architects who did not support the Revolution and who went into exile after 1959. This situation stimulated the generalized opinion, still today very strongly alive, that those works and architects should be stigmatized and erased from our cultural history—as they were for many years from textbooks and university curricula. Today, forty years after those events, there is in certain professional sectors a little more flexibility to analyze these works, based on the undeniable reasoning that if it is true that the architects no longer live here, their works still stand in our cities to form our life scenario, and these buildings have been and still are very useful in both the material and spiritual senses.

Those who still use the superficial argument of the political affiliation of the author of a work to reject it must be convinced that theirs is a merely political argument that has nothing to do with the physical reality and the artistic value of the work. In addition, it should be pointed out that the same criteria could be applied also to the totality of colonial works today considered the best of our built heritage: they were conceived and built by a pro-slavery regime against which a very long and bloody war was waged, and which committed many crimes that are still very much alive today. There is still a lot to achieve in this difficult aspect: the recognition of the value of modern architecture implies the recognition of a mistake in not having protected it in time and even having promoted its transformation.

Finally, other negative considerations relate to practical situations: to assume the patrimonial character of modern works would limit their flexibility of use; it is

possible to dispose of them freely, given that nearly the principal goal in every city is to address different kind of daily needs. This would mean that the State should assume additional responsibilities; if undesirable additions or transformations are needed by the occupants to increase the livable area of their house, and this is not allowed in order to preserve the integrity of the work, it is understood that there should be an alternative way to satisfy that family's needs. However, under the present economic circumstances that is totally impossible.

### **Transformations and Their Evident Causes**

Every building is susceptible to being transformed. This is not because of a supposed weakness of the particular kind of architecture, but because of the strength of the circumstances that work against it. Causes are complex and multiple.

A study of a selection of 200 works chosen by their individual quality and importance as representations of the best of Cuban modern architecture discovered that 100—that is, 50 percent—have been transformed in some way. We identified some of the causes for transformations, most of them originated after 1959.

They are:

- The lack of regular maintenance.
- The change of the original use, in many occasions to an inappropriate one.
- The change of the original owner or occupant, which implies the loss of a sense of healthy pride in the property.
- The lack of general culture – and particularly, architectural culture – of many of those involved in making decisions with regard to modern works.
- The overuse due to occupancy of the building by many more persons than originally intended.
- The absence of most of the original designers and the lack of consultation with the few still available about possible changes.
- The lack of a specific law protecting modern works and the lack of application of the few regulations that could have a similar effect.
- The lack of efficient urban control and planning.
- The increase of crimes, which leads to transformations searching for more protection, for example, the building of high fences or the placing of iron bars in windows, in almost every case without the advice of a professional designer.
- The huge housing deficit accumulated by decades and the still insufficient priority given to this program.
- The application of urban concepts that do not respect the pre-existing environmental context.
- The present and superficial identification of progress with the construction of high towers with glass skin, in spite of being located in a tropical and underdeveloped country.



- The openness to foreign investment, whose promoters do not have, in general, any concern with the protection of local heritage.
- The insufficient dissemination of the values of modern architecture.

The lack of enough economic resources has not been as negative as it could be thought, because in many circumstances the slow decay of some works due to the lack of money to maintain or restore them is preferable to the insensitive transformations that other works have suffered because of the availability of a lot of money. The first cause of transformation is even understandable because of the situation of the country, but the second one should be unacceptable from every point of view, even though it relates not to a desire to damage the work but to ignorance of its values and improper actions of the officials in charge of urban control. The worst cases are those in which drastic transformations have been made with the authority of a building permit issued by the Planning Office just to avoid saying no to a foreign investor.

### *Types of Transformations. A Classification*

The analysis of the same group of buildings also allowed identifying the most frequent types of transformations. The most general classification would be “urban changes” and “architectural changes.” Another possibility would be to identify two groups of modifications, one with those made due to “poverty” and those made due to “richness.” But as these two classifications don’t provide enough elements to fully explain the nature of the transformations, we prefer to use a description of the changes as the best final classification. The identified alterations are:

- Total or partial demolition. There have been just a few.
- Lost of original spatiality due to horizontal or vertical subdivision of rooms in order to double the number of available spaces.
- Substitution of a mirror glass facade for the original facade of transparent glass.
- Substitution of a facade of bricks or cement blocks for the original facade of transparent glass.
- Addition of rooms of poor design and execution.
- Painting materials whose surface should have been left exposed, as ceramic tiles or bricks.
- Painting buildings using a totally inadequate and inharmonious set of colors.
- Covering with plaster materials whose surface should have been left exposed.
- Construction of high blind fences to keep the building from public view, which constitutes a flagrant violation of still valid urban regulations.
- Closing of originally open fronted carports of houses, seeking protection for the cars but transforming the initial open-close and empty-full relationship of facades.
- Substitution or elimination of original elements, such as jalousies.
- Addition of inharmonious iron works in windows and doors.
- Substitution of original windows and doors with others of inharmonious

design.

- Total or partial closing of terraces and portals.
- Elimination of the original furniture.
- Destruction of the original garden design.
- Total or partial abandonment, which causes subtraction of original elements.
- Addition of disruptive lettering or signs on facades.
- Destruction or disappearance of mural paintings and sculptures.

We concluded that the most effected program are single-family residences, and also that works built in the 1960s are in general in better condition than those built before the Revolution, in spite of their similar construction quality. This could be due to the common superior valorization of the works built after 1959.

### Case Studies

Because of the importance of the original works and also to alert against similar situations, it is important to describe with greater amplitude the transformations suffered by a small group of buildings. By doing this we intend to gain some understanding of the processes that promote modifications as well as possible measures to avoid them.

*Case 1: House of Eutimio Falla-Bonet, 1939. Architect: Eugenio Batista.*

This house is a key work considered by many to be an important step toward the realization of full modernity, creatively integrating the lessons of tradition. The image of the house is almost minimal, essential and ascetic, and eludes any gratuitous complexity, as did also the colonial mansions of Trinidad in which the architect found inspiration. The floor plan is articulated around galleries, portals, and patios; therefore all rooms enjoy great natural cross ventilation and great views to the sea. In this work the Eugenio Batista expressed better than ever the concept of how we should live in the tropics, paying attention especially to climate, context, and local culture.

After 1959 and because the owner left the country, the house became the property of the State, according to the Laws of the Revolutionary Government. It served for many years as the "Soviet Club," a use that implied many transformations that were suppressed around 1995 when the building was given a new use as offices and the new occupants asked our advice to carry on its restoration. But again a new change of use—this time it was converted into a sales center for imported products—provoked huge transformations done without any building permit. The minimal expression of the house was greatly affected by the addition of big signs on the facades; the long porch that surrounded the rear patio and swimming pool (the real living room of the house) was enclosed with mirror glass, and its red tile floor was covered by linoleum, to be used as an exhibition hall for goods to be sold.



Finally, the extraordinary mural done by the architect using Cuban motifs was covered with a wooden cladding.

*Case 2: House of Santiago Claret, 1941/1956.  
Architects: Max Borges (Jr.) and Félix Candela*

This work was one of the best examples in the country of the Rationalist tendency that spread in the 1930s and 1940s, the original designer being one of its best practitioners. He and the Hispano-Mexican engineer Félix Candela, the most notable designer of parabolic structures in the world, carried out an addition in 1956 consisting of a library, a swimming pool, and three hyperbolic paraboloids to prevent views of the swimming pool from the adjoining apartment building.

After 1959 the house was used as an embassy for years, then it was turned into lodging belonging to the Science Academy, and finally it was abandoned because of the floods that affected the area. The parabolic structures had already been damaged by proximity to the sea and lack of maintenance, and around 1985 it was decided to demolish them rather than to restore them. Later the house was given by the Physical Planning Institute to the Interest Section of United States in Cuba, to be used as a new Consular Office. On that occasion we were asked by the Havana Planning Office to provide advice as to which values of the work should be saved, but none of our critical recommendations was included as compulsory work in the building permit extended to carry on the transformations.

*Case 3: House of Cristina Isabel Abad, 1954. Architect: Ricardo Porro.*

This house is an early and valuable example, in times of full modernity, of creative reinterpretation of typical elements of colonial tradition, such as the bay window to better capture the breezes and the stained glass window to soften the strong tropical light. The work also exemplifies the peculiar method of this architect who integrated elements of national idiosyncrasy into every one of his designs.

The second family that occupied the house was aware of its value and respected its integrity very well, but after that family moved to a new residence, the third family living in the house—obviously of much greater economic resources—undertook major transformations to adapt the house to their particular taste. Among the most dramatic changes was the substitution for the original iron works of others of a very incoherent design and, even worse, the masking of the basement with a wall of false bricks.

*Case 4: House of Ana Carolina Font, 1956. Architect: Mario Románach.*

Mario Románach was probably the best Cuban modern architect and this house is one of his most notable works. It represents the architect's integrative approach of

the most updated universal tendencies with his particular interpretations of local culture and, additionally, it also exemplifies Romañach's interest in Japanese traditional solutions and details.

During the 1960s the house was converted into a transitory lodging of a state institution. The supposedly temporary residents, coming to Havana from other provinces, became permanent ones and brought their families, which also grew up in time. Currently there is more than one family living in each one of the rooms of this house originally intended for just one family, and this has motivated great changes and a very poor present condition, both aspects rendering the house practically unrecognizable. However, it is still possible to save it.

*Case 5: Hotel Habana Libre (former Habana Hilton), 1958. Architects: Welton Becket and Associates, with Nicolás Arroyo and Gabriela Menéndez.*

Symbol of the modernity of the Cuban capital city, this building exemplifies the assimilation of the influence of the hotel architecture of Morris Lapidus developed mainly in Miami Beach. This influence is related to a light interpretation of local tradition that is evident specifically in the great patio covered by a skylight in the shape of a cupola, complemented with jalousies made of Cuban precious woods and with abundant vegetation. This patio was an integral portion of the main lobby.

With the openness to foreign investment, the administration of the hotel passed to a Spanish company, Guitart, that undertook great transformations. The firm had previously received a building permit issued by Havana Planning Office, in spite of some complaints by a few local architects. Later on the administration changed again, to another Spanish chain, Tryp, that continued and finished the alterations underway. The most drastic changes are:

- The closing of the balconies on both facades with mirror glass to increase the floor area inside the rooms and obtain a higher hotel category. This transformation meant the loss of the open terraces, very necessary and sought after in the tropics, to provide a connection to the exterior and to serve as protection against the torrid sun. Additionally, the most expressive element of the facades, the alternating bands of light and shadow produced by the balconies, was lost, and the hotel image now resembles one that can be found over the world.
- The replacement of the central patio by a pool with a fountain, totally out of proportion, with a very poor design and that almost never contains water. This pool totally spoiled the former reference of this space to a traditional colonial courtyard. The substitution of cold marble for wood elements.
- The substitution of a glass wall with some canes painted on it for the wall of bamboo canes that gave name to the famous bar "Las Cañitas," and the totally



unnecessary demolition of the cabins surrounding the outer swimming pool, which provided an element of urban interest with their vaulted ceilings, now replaced by some wooden kiosks with tile roofs.

The only positive decision of this terrible intervention—which was executed with construction of very poor quality—was the recovery of the ceramic mural designed by the Cuban artist Amelia Peláez to be located above the main entrance, which had been removed due to structural failures that caused an accident. This repositioning of the mural had been planned long before, but it was just now that it was finally possible.

*Case 6: National School of Ballet, 1961-1965. Architect: Vittorio Garatti.*

The National Schools of Art of Cubanacán, designed by architects Ricardo Porro, Roberto Gottardi, and Vittorio Garatti, are a masterpiece of Cuban modern architecture. At the same time, with their multiple levels of interpretation, they represented new expressive and compositional possibilities promoted by a situation that brought renewed expectations to the local panorama. Their history, which resembles a novel, has been widely disseminated. They were conceived at the beginning of the Revolution as a symbol of what the new government was capable of doing, but shortly thereafter the bureaucrats of the Ministry of Construction decided that they represented exactly the opposite and the buildings were stigmatized equally by critics and officials. This situation, also influenced by the fact that two of the architects, Porro and Garatti, went to live abroad, determined the progressive deterioration of the five buildings that make up the compound, as they were left without maintenance and care for many years. The School of Ballet in particular was really totally abandoned, after having been almost completely finished. It was never used to the end for which it was built—something that is still incomprehensible—and only served as School of Circus for a brief period of time before being definitively given over to vandalism and indolence. This building has completely lost its wonderful wooden work in windows and doors, as well as the tiles of the floors and many other elements. It now remains almost swallowed by the exuberant vegetation of the place, with the appearance of a modern ruin charged with the mystery that contains its amazing history.

### **First Actions and Results**

The causes that led to the described transformations, and the transformations themselves, are not exclusive of the architecture of the Modern Movement. They are also part of the present reality of the rest of twentieth-century architecture in Cuba. Some degree of consciousness has been achieved regarding the values of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and eclecticism, but the hardest task continues to be raising awareness in every sector of Cuban society regarding the architecture of the modern movement, precisely due to its pejorative political connotations.

Anyway, something has been done since two decades ago when we initiated studies for the reassessment and promotion of the architecture of the modern movement in Cuba. Through lectures and publications, we have attempted to spread the values of modern patrimony and the necessity of its inclusion in restoration plans. If this is done on time, what would be needed is just repair and maintenance of most of the buildings, instead of restoration, which would be much more expensive. But above all, what is needed is protection against possible transformations.

The growing concern among some professionals led to the creation in 1997 of the Cuban Section of DOCOMOMO (Documentation and Conservation of the Modern Movement), assigned to the Committee of Patrimony of the Cuban Architects Association. This has given official and collective character to former individual efforts. The main priority in the work of DOCOMOMO is the development of the Register of Modern Works with Patrimonial Values, which, when finished, will be the main tool used to begin actions of protection for the included buildings and sites. Other recent and positive signs have been the approval, by the National Commission of Monuments, of two resolutions avoiding any construction that could damage the integrity of the Fifth Avenue in Miramar and of the central areas of El Vedado neighborhood (4). We hope that in the not so distant future this Commission will begin to consider and approve the classification as National or Local Monuments of some modern works. With this step, some extraordinary designs such as the Cabaret Tropicana, by Max Borges (Jr.), and the houses Noval (Jr.), Vidaña, and Alvarez, all by Mario Románach, could be added to the short list of Monuments in which the only modern work to appear now is the Number 1 East Havana Housing Development, finished in 1961.

Unfortunately, we have not yet achieved any successful action in the concrete aspect of saving or protecting any modern structure in danger of transformation. But one of the most important actions is under way. After many years of struggle—with many battles lost and won—the State has finally approved a budget, coming from the Office of the City Historian, to restore and finish the compound of the National Schools of Art. This internationally significant step is the culmination of the first stage of a long process that included first the classification of the Schools by the World Monuments Watch as one of the 100 Most Endangered Sites in the World in 1999, as well as many exhibitions, discussions, and publications. We hope that the work will begin soon.

But it is not yet the time for satisfaction. Other modern monuments are still in danger. In some cases their transformations are approved by every institution dealing with the activity of licenses and permits, as is the case of the alterations already underway at the National Museum of Fine Arts, built in 1954 by Alfonso Rodríguez Pichardo. Renovation of its interior to fulfill present-day requirements was as necessary as modification of its facades was unnecessary.



## To Recover the Future

The urgent tasks that should be integrated into a Plan of Action of DOCOMOMO are:

- To finish and publish the National Register of Modern Works with Patrimonial Values.
- To keep raising the awareness about this subject through publications, lectures, and seminars or symposia.
- To establish contacts with other DOCOMOMO groups to exchange experiences and enrich our perspective.
- To establish coordination with every institution and commission related in any way to the granting of building permits and with urban control, to avoid the approval of insensitive projects and to find effective methods of control.
- To offer advice to individuals and institutions about how to carry out those modifications that are strictly necessary.
- To establish coordination with the occupants of the buildings included in the Register in order to avoid transformations.
- To achieve the approval of a legislation – or a complementary set of decrees – specifically to protect the modern patrimony.
- To achieve classification of the most significant works of Cuban modern architecture as National or Local Monuments.
- To achieve the application, in the rest of the city of Havana and in other important cities or areas, of the same economic model approved for Old Havana by the Decree 143 of 1994, which has had a great positive effect in that territory, under the administration of the Office of the City Historian.

The above-mentioned tasks integrate a possible but difficult endeavor, especially taking into account that this work should be carried on from the perspective of a cultural action with no immediate economic connotations. All actions should be based initially on the consideration of the extraordinary value of the works to be saved and on the importance of such salvation for the spiritual and even material life of the present and future generations.

Recovering the feeling of pride for our architecture and our cities and maintaining awareness of the need to rescue our patrimony are essential if we want a full life quality. That's the only way to save our future.

### Notes

1 Le Corbusier: *Towards a New Architecture*. The Architectural Press, London, 1946, p. 141.

The two main Cuban laws regarding monuments are numbers 1 and 2, from August 4 of 1977, named the Law for the Protection of Cultural Patrimony, and the Law of National and Local Monuments. The latter states that the declaration of National or

Local Monument can be achieved due to the artistic value of "...those constructions...that represent because of their style or decorative details, values that deserve to be preserved"; or due to the environmental value of those "...historic urban centers and constructions that, because of their shape or architectural character, represent a characteristic environment of a time or a region." Ministerio de Cultura: Cuatro documentos de la legislación cubana sobre el patrimonio cultural. Ediciones Plaza Vieja, Havana, 1984.

To further understand the history of the Schools of Art, read: John Loomis, *Revolution of Forms. Cuba's Forgotten Art Schools*. Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1999

They are resolutions 154 and 155 by the National Commission of Monuments, both dated March 12, 1999

5 The Office of the City Historian has widened its range of action in the last years to include in their restoration plans not just colonial buildings, but also some twentieth century buildings located in Old Havana, such as the Stock Exchange and the Bacardí buildings. The range of action has also started to have some incidence in other key areas of the city of Havana.

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## CONTEMPORARY ARCHITECTURE IN CUBA. WHO SPEAKS IN THE NAME OF ARCHITECTURE?

Julio Cesar Perez

The first and major Cuba diaspora took place in the early 60's. Almost all the architects left Cuba. Back in the 60's, few major works were produced in Cuba that qualify as Architecture, that is to say that transcend the mere concept of just building. They shared the same fate: they were not finished. They also became paradigmatic. They were located in the outskirts of Havana, in the former golf course of an exclusive bourgeois neighborhood.

The Schools of Arts of Havana were an attempt to find a new direction in Cuban Architecture both rooted in tradition and avant-garde as part of a certain continuity with the creative decade of the 50's. The five schools (Fine Arts, Modern Dance, Ballet, Music and Drama) fit into the landscape giving a lesson in great spatial articulation, adaptation to the existing topography, and above all an architecture of poetry, mystery, charm and magic, an architecture of new free forms and of a great coherence as an ensemble. Individually each buildings speaks its own language: The design of the Fine Arts School has a very interesting urban approach that invites you to enter through three organic entrances – instead of a single one – that seems to swallow you into vaulted labyrinthian galleries that take you either to the domed studios or to the plaza – this time a personal interpretation of the traditional courtyard- where a sculpture alluding to the female sex stands on a very Gaudian fountain all in clay. The Modern Dance School has a propileus-like entrance with high Catalonian vaults that also take you to a courtyard where all the pillars of the galleries point out to different directions "as when you smash a glass and all the particles run in a different way". The vaults covering the spaces seem to be about to explode, expressing anguish and excitement, the mixed feelings of a starting revolution. Both were designed by Cuban architect Ricardo Porro.

The Ballet School – totally vandalized and taken over by the jungle now – displays a series of domes in a valley where part of the building is underground. Once you enter, the unique atmosphere created by the wise play of light and shadow takes your breath away, inviting you to start the architectural promenade that Le Corbusier stated. Again the clay-vaulted galleries connect the different spaces that seem to breath once and again whenever these spaces contract or expand to accommodate the different functions they were designed for. The spatial richness and quality of this building goes beyond its interiors to create even a roofscape based on the meeting - wisely resolved - of the different volumes and the way devised for conducting the rain down them, cascading in basins like fountains and alluding to the rite of water in different cultures and specifically in the Islamic culture. The Music School is a ribbon extending over 300 m into the site and creating a rhythm with the way it relates to topography. At the same time, it creates all the possible variations of this rhythm with the roof and its inverted curve that

pays homage to Le Corbu's Ronchamp. Again the galleries of circulation become a contemporary interpretation of the arcaded streets of Havana where you can walk under their shades for kilometers. Both school were designed by Italian architect Vittorio Garatti.

The Drama School, designed by Italian architect Roberto Gottardi and yet unfinished, reminds you of a little town with its medieval look. Walking along the corridor-like circulation pattern he created to link the also vaulted ceilings buildings, makes you feel like in Venice, the architect's hometown. The constant presence of the brick and clay tiles of the vaults provide a warm ambience together with the intimate scale of the spaces that soar at the entrances of the classrooms making good use of the unlevelled terrain where the buildings stand on.

The East Havana District Project achieved both urban and architectural quality and stands for the best effort so far done in Cuba in Public Housing. Based on a previous plan by Franco Albini, a team of architects led by Mario Gonzalez and Roberto Carrazana designed a plan which assimilated the urban planning and design trends of the time based on the combination of buildings with different heights. The creation of public space of a certain quality together with the high construction quality of the whole are among the most outstanding features of this project.

The New Campus for the Technological Careers(CUJAE)followed the international trends of the moment too. It was designed by Humberto Alonso and Fernando Salinas- who led the project after Alonso left the country – and is based on a grid of circulation providing pedestrian spaces underneath the different faculties. This buildings 'on pilotis' with horizontal strips of windows and protruding closets gather around plazas and gardens that allow them to have cross ventilation and natural light.

Outside Havana, in Santiago de Cuba a new Medicine Faculty was designed by architect Rodrigo Tascon using new aesthetical codes based on the collision of different volumes wrapping around a courtyard anchored in tradition and new building techniques based on the double-curved surfaces, those of the parabolic hyperbolics. The outcome is an amazingly simple and beautiful complex where space flows and light and shadow play their spatial game.

A boom took place in construction in the 70's decade but not in architecture. As part of the strategy of the government to provide new schools and housing and hotels and recreational facilities, prefabrication had been adopted since the late 60's as the universal solution. The bad quality not only of the designs but also of the construction was soon evident in the leakage of the buildings and the stereotypes. Only special programs like the Lenin Park complex and the Botanical Garden complex as part of a plan for creating the so-called 'lungs of the city'. The city indeed needed to breath... Architecture. A set of buildings were designed for



both complexes, bucolical in character, recreational in function. The most relevant is "Las Ruinas" restaurant, built around the remains of the ancient stone walls of a plantation. Although its sometimes overwhelming concrete structure a post and beam grid, set up in a garden, it achieves great spatial quality based on the play of different ceiling heights that provide a diversity of ambiances enhanced by the combination of marble, natural stone and wood and the integration of different pieces of stained glass. Among the best a mural by Cuban painter Rene Portocarrero located on the upper story on axis to the main entrance.

The above mentioned decades were characterized by 3 major features. First was the lack of information; almost no book was published during those times except for the manipulative and very politically driven ones written by the official writer Roberto Segre, responsible for the distortion of the learning of architectural history of Cuba. The quality of the architecture from the past was irrelevant and not worthy to be acknowledged as it would have been dangerous. *Arquitectura Cuba* – the only magazine- mostly published speeches by the officials taking part at the professional events, and ended up disappearing. Second was the lack of criticism; no one dared to criticize the bad architectural quality and the wrong concepts in new settlements. It would mean a critic to the system itself so everything seemed to be perfect: the ugly soviet panels, the unfinished neighborhoods, the absence of gardens and greens, the distortion of the tradition and the bad finishing of the buildings. Of course, it wasn't. Third, and as a result of this situation, was the lack of interest in the profession that encompassed the students' own lack of interest and also the professors', and ended up deepening the crisis.

In the 80's a new generation of architects started a protest against the bad quality of the architecture produced in the past decades. Through exhibits, salons and writings and also by the design of some buildings, a group of young architects stated the importance of considering Architecture – yes, with Capital Letters as it should always be written – an art and not merely a technical issue. This group didn't neglect the social importance of Architecture, or the role of the architect in society but claimed the possibility of building something dignified aesthetically and out of the boring prefab paradigm. Part of this group left Cuba in the late 80's and early 90's frustrated by the circumstances that continued to mean a crisis of the profession. Some other architects abandoned their careers to work in the tourism industry to make a better living. Some stayed working at the state offices where projects are approached without the necessary creative attitude that can turn them into Architecture. Others decided to design houses for friends attempting to fulfill their creative needs.

The input of tourism in Cuba has aroused another controversy, specially after very bad projects– some foreign ones – have been executed, bringing a new international image to no relationship to the scale of the city or the sites where they have been built. Just to mention some, the Cohiba Hotel in Havana, copied after a

project in Japan by Kenzo Tange, and the Parque Central hotel across the Parque Central and just in the border of the Old Havana district, stand as the worst examples, together with the one more recently built on 5th Avenue in Miramar. Whenever you see these buildings a common question comes to mind: Who allows those horrible buildings to exist? Some more questions are posed too: What is the Group for the Integral Development of the Capital is doing? Why did the Office of the Historian of the City allow this design – the Parque Central hotel is a postmodern structure – to be constructed? What does the Physical Planning Institute do? What is the role of these offices? Are they really necessary? And the most important one: WHO SPEAKS IN THE NAME OF ARCHITECTURE?

I do believe in Architecture as part of culture. I believe in our tradition for excellence. We must stop accepting bad buildings and bad projects. That doesn't help our country. We need to give the opportunity of designing the new buildings to the young talented architects. There's talent in Cuba. Let's use it. Let's convoke contests and select honest juries. Let's go to the next step. Let's speak in the name of architecture, an architecture that makes our people proud of it, an architecture that can become part of the rich legacy we have inherited through years. We not only create and built for the present but for the future. Ernesto Sabato, the Argentinean writer said that living is, perhaps, constructing future memories. Here we have two concepts: Building and Memory. Building is indeed one of the contributions architects can make and should make. But they also have the duty of building with quality. Let's remember that Architecture is the Art of Building- and endurance and beauty. Memory is something we not only should care about but share with others in the present and in the future.

LET'S SPEAK IN THE NAME OF ARCHITECTURE.



## SPEAKERS

**Peg Breen** is president of the New York Landmarks Conservancy, a 28-year-old non-profit organization that gives financial and technical help to owners of historic buildings. Under her leadership, the Conservancy launched a successful, national campaign to obtain federal money to stabilize the south side of Ellis Island and is working to save and restore the City's historic schools. Breen is vice-president for public policy of Preservation Action, a national preservation lobbying group. She gave the keynote speech last year at CENCREM's International Preservation Conference in Havana, and participated in a symposium on the restoration of religious properties, chaired by Victor Marin. She recently co-chaired a conference in St. Petersburg Russia of new uses for old buildings. Before joining the Conservancy, Breen working in government and the media.

**Leland D. Cott, FAIA**, is a founding principal of Bruner/Cott Associates in Cambridge, Massachusetts, whose designs for housing, large-scale adaptive reuse projects, and buildings for colleges and universities have been widely published and have received over 35 local and national awards, including a P/A design award and a 2000 AIA Honor Award. He is Adjunct Professor, Department of Urban Planning and Design, at the Harvard Design School. He first visited Cuba in 1977, as a member of a delegation of Massachusetts businessmen, where he discussed historic preservation and building re-use with Fidel Castro. In conjunction with his design studio teaching at Harvard, he has been to Havana six times in the past two years. He is a faculty member of the Cuba Committee on Studies and Exchanges at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies at Harvard, a fellow of the AIA, and former president of the Boston Society of Architects and a graduate of Pratt Institute and the Harvard Design School.

**Mario Coyula** is one of Cuba's leading architects and urbanists. As a noted expert on the history of Havana, he has traveled and lectured at universities around the world and has been recognized by receiving prizes and awards nationally and internationally. His many papers and articles have been widely published, and he is the co-author of *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*, published by John Wiley. Coyula has held a number of important positions in Cuba since the revolution, the most recent being the director of the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital, the equivalent of our National Capital Planning Commission. He is a professor at the Instituto Politecnico Jose Antonio Echeverria, (ISPJAE) Havana, Cuba and former director of the School of Architecture. He is on the National Council of the National Union of Artists and Writers, one of the most important cultural institutions in the country. For the spring term, Coyula has been appointed Robert F. Kennedy Professor at the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies, Harvard University and will teach at the Design School.

**Luly Duke** is president of Fundacion Amistad, a four-year-old non-profit organization that promotes scientific, academic, cultural and professional exchanges between Cuba and the United States. She is currently working with the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana on several preservation and conservation projects.

**Victor Marin Crespo**, architect, is Deputy Director of the Centro Nacional de Conservacion, Restauracion, and Museologia (CENCREM), Cuba's national preservation organization. He is an adjunct professor at ISPJAE in Havana, senior professor for restoration and rehabilitation at CENCREM, and has presented courses and lectures on Cuban architecture and preservation in Europe, South America, and U.S.A. He is a member of the Board of Directors of the National Union of Architects and Engineers of Cuba, Vice President of the Pan-American Committee of Historic Heritage (based on Costa Rica), and a member of the Cuban ICOMOS Committee. He has recently been appointed a Managing Director of the First International Biennial of Architecture of Cuba, which will take place in March 2002, in Havana.

**Robert Mayers** is an architect and urban designer, founder of Mayers & Schiff Associates Architect/Planners in New York City (the firm was sold in 1997 to Einhorn, Yafee, Prescott). He has served as an adjunct professor of architecture at Pratt University, a member of the Buildings and Property Committee of the Board of Trustees of Cornell University, and has led architecture and design trips to Cuba. Mayers is a graduate of Cornell University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology.

**Roberta Brandes Gratz** is a freelance urban critic, and author of *The Living City: Thinking Small in a Big Way*, and *Cities Back from the Edge: New Life for Downtown* (with Norman Mintz). She is an international lecturer on urban development issues and a former award-winning reporter for the New York Post. Most recently, she wrote a report for the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, "A Frog, A Wooden House, A Stream and A Trail: Ten Years of Community Revitalization in Central Europe." Her articles have appeared in leading local and national publications, such as the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times Magazine, and The Nation. The recipient of fellowships from the National Endowment for the Arts, the New York State Council on the Arts, Surdna Foundation, and the Rockefeller Brothers Fund, and writing awards from the AIA, APA, Municipal Art Society, New York Press Club and others, she has served on influential task forces and committees to shape urban planning and preservation policy in New York. Gratz founded the Eldridge Street Project, the effort to restore the historic Eldridge Street Synagogue on the Lower East Side.



**Alex Herrera** is an architect and the Director of Technical Services for the New York Landmarks Conservancy. He was formerly the Director of Preservation for the New York Landmarks Preservation Commission, the government agency that oversees preservation efforts throughout the city of New York. A graduate of the Columbia University Preservation program, he has published several reports and manuals, and received the Sloan Public Service Award from the Fund for the City of New York. Herrera was part of the delegation to Havana for the symposium on the restoration of religious properties in May, 2001.

**Julio Cesar Perez** is a practicing architect in Havana, Cuba. His work has been broad, including the design of private homes and public buildings, and master planning of new communities and neighborhoods. In the community in which he lives, San Antonio de los Banos, he is the Architect for the Community and has served as Chief Building Officer and Senior Planner for the urban renewal of the historic center. He is a founding member of the Union of Architects and Engineers of Cuba, as well as the Cuban section of DOCOMOMO, and was invited to join the prestigious National Union of Writers and Artists. He is an adjunct associate professor at the University of Havana. The *Island, Visions of Cuba*, by Perez, is a comprehensive essay about the history and evolution of the architecture of Cuba being published by Editorial Samper of Vancouver. He has won numerous awards, has frequently lectured in the U.S., USSR, and England. Perez is presently a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Design School.

**Linda Robinson** is currently a Senior Writer for U.S. News and World Report. She has covered Latin America for the magazine since 1989. During the 2000-2001 academic year she was a Nieman Fellow at Harvard University. Since 1990, Robinson has visited Cuba 25 times and interviewed Fidel Castro on several occasions. She has traveled throughout Latin America, writing over 250 articles and has received journalism's highest awards and prizes. From 1983 - 1989 she was Senior Editor at Foreign Affairs magazine.

**Eduardo Luis Rodriguez** is an architect, critic, historian, author, Guggenheim Fellow, and Editor in Chief of the journal *Arquitectura Cuba*. He is the author of *The Havana Guide, Modern Architecture 1925 - 1965*, published by the Princeton Architectural Press, as well as many other books and articles for which he has received prizes and honors. He received a Silver Medal as Distinguished Guest of Old Havana; awards at the 2000 Venice Biennial and the 2000 Quito Pan-American Biennial; and major accolades in Cuba. He has lectured often in the U.S., Central and South America, and Europe and been the curator of exhibitions such as "Back to the Sixties" for the 2000 Havana Biennial, which will be shown in New York in the fall of 2002. He is the Executive Coordinator for the First International Architectural Biennial in Cuba, a member of the Cuban section of ICOMOS, Vice President of the Cuban section of DOCOMOMO, and a member of the National Writers and Artists Association.

**Alexia Lalli**, Conference Coordinator, is Executive Director of Heritage Trails Worldwide and former Executive Director of Heritage Trails New York. For many years she led her own firm, which managed projects in the field of design, including the renovation of subway stations, plans for a highway and park along the Hudson River, and the International Design Conference in Aspen. She is an Adjunct Professor at New York University where she has taught tourism development. A graduate of Cornell University, Lalli was a Loeb Fellow at the Harvard Design School. She has led preservation groups to Cuba, spoken at conferences in Cuba, and has a special interest in Havana's efforts to preserve its heritage and restore its urban fabric. She has recently been asked to develop a project to preserve the legacy of 20th century Cuban architecture.



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