Mapping and designing Havana: Republican, socialist and global spaces

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Buildings, public spaces and other urban elements are employed to characterize three periods of Havana's history as it moves to global status as a consequence of the tourist industry. As globalization provokes antagonism between the regional and the global, the paper shows that the challenge for Cuban architects, planners, and urbanists will be to find a middle ground in planning and design that accommodates this global status without forsaking distinctive attributes of Havana's built environment.

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Introduction

This essay will draw on selected buildings, public spaces and other urban elements to characterize three periods of Havana's history. These places, etched by unique historical forces and signature buildings, serve as reference points in a city that is slowly making its way to global status (Hall, 1988).

The issue of globalization and its attending pressure on public spaces – and on the architecture that delineates those spaces – has provoked the classic antagonism between the regional and the global in Havana. The overlap of socialist public space and commodified, “for-profit” space is now fully evident. We show how the challenge for Cuban architects, planners, and urbanists will be to find a middle ground in planning and design that accommodates this global status (for inhabitants and foreign visitors alike), without forsaking distinctive attributes of Havana’s multi-layered built environment.

Regionalism, globalism, tourism

Globalization is coming to Cuba once again by way of tourism, which in recent years has become more profitable than sugar production (Peters, 2003; Scarpaci, 2005a). Since most real estate investment, urban planning and building activity in Havana now is related to the industry, it is appropriate to consider a brief history of tourism there. The latter requires the marketing of an image, and urban design and architecture are means to marketing such impressions (Klingmann, 1998; Blais, 1997; Scarpaci, 2005a). We begin by considering the idea of regionalism in architecture and human geography, which we believe, is helpful in assessing the role of architecture in contemporary planning and design.

Since Kenneth Frampton's 1983 article, “Prospects for a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance”, regionalism in architecture and urban design has been considered an opposing force to the homogenizing trends of globalization. In that essay, and the subsequent article, “Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: a Provisional Polemic”, Frampton argues for a critical regionalism (Frampton, 1983, 1987). By this, he means a consideration of the particularities of place, such as quality of light, traditional building technique, and local materials and practices. Efforts like these reject nostalgic reconstructions of vernacular architecture (Wagner, 1988). Frampton sought a middle ground in urban design, between returning to traditions that no longer have meaning, and giving in to relentless, frenzied modernization and the resulting banality therein.
Globalism and regionalism are symbiotic in many ways; the forces of globalization simultaneously fragment and unify the world (Dicken, 2003; Berman, 1982). That is why Dirlik (2000) argues that the binary dichotomy of regionalism/globalism may not be a useful conceptualization. Tourism is a form of globalization that has been present for many years. It clearly presents this curious condition of interdependence – of containing and actually depending upon regionalism and cultural identity within the larger context of globalization (Graham et al., 2000). Tourism, in turn, is dependent upon image-making and the marketing of this cultural identity. Some analysts call image-making a necessity for competitiveness and profitability in the current economic and cultural climate. Place images and travel are largely responsible for the time-space compression that characterizes globalization (Castells, 1994; Lash and Urry, 1994).

Recent post-colonial studies highlight the difficulties faced by architects and urban designers as they question the idea of regionalism and this marketing of an image and culture that may, on closer examination, turn out to be falsely constructed. For architectural theorist and historian Alan Colquhoun, regional architecture is more a product of wishful thinking. The authenticity pursued by those who would make regional architecture can only be re-conceptualized and re-presented if this “authentic thing” ever existed in the first place. He says: “the use of local materials, sensitivity to context, scale and so on would all be so many ways of representing the idea of an authentic, regional architecture. The search for absolute authenticity that the doctrine of regionalism implies is likely to create an oversimplified picture of a complex cultural situation” (Colquhoun, 19XX). He argues that while regionalism is supposed to preserve differences, it is no longer possible to “correlate cultural codes with geographical regions” (Nalbantoglu and Wong, 1997, p. 8). Geographers, too, have long grappled with the complexities of deciding which landscapes of the past should be included in heritage tourism (Lowenthal, 1996; Graham et al., 2000). Historian Rosalie Schwartz’s description of the marketing of cubanidad (e.g., all things Cuban) to tourists as early as the 1920s justifies Colquhoun’s suspicion and eventual rejection of regionalism. Schwartz says: “contrived entertainment? Blatantly and unapologetically so… [Cuban] promotional materials portrayed an exotic, erotic, yet familiar island: Spanish food, quaint natives, Afro-Cuban music and dance, romantic moonlight, sensuous women, golf, tennis, country clubs, and racetracks. Cubans modified traditional culture, altered customary behavior, and when necessary, invented new experiences, such as sun worship ceremonies. Cubans stitched together a marketable cultural identity from bits and pieces of island life” (Schwartz, 1997, p. 75). Interpreting these cultural landscapes and built environments are often elusive tasks.

Buildings and spaces of the republican era

At the beginning of the 20th century, Americans became curious about newfound possessions and war booty taken from the Spanish–American–Cuban War of 1898. Photographs, especially those by the Detroit Publishing Company (available at the Library of Congress) and the US Official photographer assigned to the Chief Engineer, Division of Cuba, Havana, during the US military occupation of the island (1889–1902), stirred the imaginations of Americans. It led to what Bretos (1996) called the “imaging of Cuba under the American flag”. These photographs became powerful allures in the minds of an American middle class that was gradually enjoying the benefits and privilege of affordable leisure travel. Havana and Cuba were billed as the “Pearl of the Antilles” as early as 1923 (Schwartz, 1997, p. 71). Beginning with first impressions gleaned from the railings of steamers entering Havana Bay, the Ministry of Public Works ensured that the first impression of Habana Vieja was a pleasant one. New projects in the 1920s and 1930s replaced older colonial buildings and remnants along the waterfront. While not yet evoking a landscape of power expressed by multinational capital or imposing public buildings (Zukin, 1991), Havana’s skyline displayed European sophistication and charm (see Figure 1).

The US Army Corps of Engineers, to construct the Maleco seaside promenade, provided the appropriate ‘wrapping’ of Habana Vieja and Centro Habana in a four-lane highway where a mere footpath had existed before. In view by 1930 was the Hotel Nacional resting atop on old limestone quarry at a point where the Malecon ended. Both the Hotel Biltmore and the Hotel Nacional had respected the beige colored stucco quality of the older.
parts of the city on their exteriors, but offered modern conveniences within for the expectant tourist.

Tourists arriving in Havana have always been struck by the façade along the Malecón, a seaside promenade initially built and expanded by the US Army and later extended by various Cuban governments. Sixty years ago, at the end of the Republican period and when tourism was at its height before the socialist period, these facades were considered crucial. They were generally kept in good repair, in order to greet the visitor arriving by steamship and entering Havana Bay where the Malecón begins (Figures 2 and 3).

As US visitors to the island shifted from long-term wintering for the very well off, to a mass tourism industry delivered first by steamships and then by airplanes, lodging preferences shifted from rented rooms in homes and apartments to hotels. In the Hotel Nacional (Figure 4), built in 1930, we see a structure that was monumental and the first of its size. Located in the Vedado section of Havana (Figure 5), the footprint is quite extensive. If marketing Cuban culture was blatantly contrived for the foreign visitor, then the grand hotels of the 1930s proved to be compromises between classic Spanish architecture and spacious modern settings to accommodate the North American tourist.

Melding regionalism with international design models did not end with Cuba’s relationship with the motherland. Architectural avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century appeared as Art Nouveau and Art Deco. A variety of influences came from the US and Europe. Havana’s rich collection of these buildings existed mainly as private residences, offices and factories, rather than as tourist complexes. The 1905 Paris Exhibition, a strong wave of Catalan migration to Cuba and technical knowledge about how to construct new facades all greatly eased the introduction of Art Nouveau in Cuba. A strong sugar economy until 1920 allowed for palatial buildings to grace the streets of Havana, especially in the western suburbs of Vedado and Miramar. Art Deco structures peppered the old quarters for Habana Vieja, including the Bacardi Building in 1930 (Figure 6) and the Fausto Theater (Figure 7), and in Centro Habana too (Figure 8, the Streamline Moderne Solimar Building: Cárdenas, 1991). Although these ‘modern’ buildings were not tourist facilities, they lent the city a sophistication that Eduardo Luis Rodríguez (1996) contends forged Havana’s ‘modern regionalism’ in key ways.

John Loomis notes three architectural directions in Cuba that were evident by the end of the republican period: the large-scale public buildings erected by the Batista government, a number of commercial and residential real-estate speculations, and smaller scale projects that seemed to be about exploring cubanidad (Loomis, 1999, p. 7). Perhaps the largest

Figure 2 Malecón, c. 1935, Courtesy of Library of Congress.

Figure 3 Malecón, c. 1910, Courtesy of Library of Congress.
222 public complex erected by the Batista government (1952–58) was the Plaza Cívica, or Civic Square.
223 Since the famous air reconnaissance made by the French landscape architect Jean Nicolás Forestier
224 in 1925, this site (originally called Lomas de los Catalanes, or Catalan Hills) had been sited as a
225 new holding for modern government buildings that could move beyond the narrow confines of Habana Vieja (Forestier, 1928). The Frenchman was sensitive to open spaces as they helped to frame the city’s monuments but also allowed the casual stroller a stage on which to appreciate Havana’s tropical

Figure 4 Hotel Nacional (1930) in the heart of the Vedado district, overlooking the Malecón and the Florida straits. It is perched at the edge of an old coralized limestone quarry.

Figure 5 Location map of key buildings, streets, and public spaces noted in article.
of Latin America, Cuba was looking to European high culture and influence (Segre, 1989), and was keen on presenting Havana as a “tropical Nice [France]”.

The Great Depression and political turmoil delayed the implementation of Forestier’s plan to re-map and re-design Havana. Thus, it was President Fulgencio Batista (an avid supporter of road and building construction) who embarked on an ambitious campaign to construct a national auditorium, national library, and a half-dozen public buildings to house national ministries in the Plaza Cívica. When the revolution arrived in 1959, Civic Square became Revolution Square (Plaza de la Revolución). While the many images of massive gatherings in the socialist era (including the famous May Day parades) lead many outsiders erroneously to
believe this square’s design embraces ‘new socialist realism’ (Figure 9), its execution is attributable to the right-wing Batista.

**Buildings and spaces of the socialist era**

To characterize the urbanism of socialist Havana is to acknowledge what began as the revolution’s anti-urban stance, which shares similarities with other socialist projects of the late 20th century, such as the USSR and Vietnam. Chauncey Harris’ study of the USSR in 1962 highlights Soviet efforts to limit the growth of large cities (>100,000) and encourage the development of small (<50,000) and medium sized centers (50,000–100,000: Harris, 1970). This ‘anti-metropolitan syndrome’ reflected a spatial vision of Marxist–Leninist ideals, that rejected the spatial concentration and regional inequality engendered by capitalism (Jensen, 1984), or what others might label ‘urban primacy.’ Elsewhere in the socialist realm, Vietnamese planners struggle to keep Ho Chi Minh City from becoming another Bangkok: “urban planning controls are limited and far from effectively enforced”, and underreporting of return migrants may be as high as 25% of the official urban census count (Drakakis-Smith and Dixon, 1997, p. 36). All this suggests that the void between urban and regional theory on the one hand, and regional planning on the other, is especially wide in socialist cities. Cuba, too, embraced an anti-urban position, choosing to develop rural centers and provincial capitals rather than invest excessively in the national capital of Havana (Eckstein, 1981; Scarpaci et al., 2002).

Four decades of Cuban socialist order have transformed the way Havanans use public spaces and accommodate international visitors. The elimination of most private enterprises in the early years of the Cuban Revolution (post-1959) created new public spaces that could serve as ideological arenas, in which the collective identifies of socialism could be forged in a vision outlined by the leadership. In rather obvious ways, the cityscape changed. Private automobile usage tapered off over the following decades as fuels were rationed, the US trade embargo against Cuba deepened, and public transportation became the main mode of travel. Different orders of space appeared in the Cuban capital: public monuments, Eastern European-like housing blocks, health care facilities, and small signs posted by mass organizations (Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, Federation of Cuban Women) etched their way into the Havana landscape. Curiously, these elements of the socialist built environment – places of public ceremony and work – coexisted next to elements of a bygone era, such as international tourist facilities from the early 20th century.\(^1\)

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\(^1\) Unpacking the meaning of uses of public spaces in socialist cities offers insight into competing geographic structures of urban space. A burgeoning literature has addressed the meaning of “socialist cities”, highlighting the features that set them apart from their capitalist counterparts (Andrusz et al., 1996; Bater, 1986; Forbes and Thrift, 1987). Szelenyi (1996) notes three sets of attributes about the socialist city that are useful in understanding Havana’s present urban condition. First, many socialist cities are “underurbanized”. That means they are often smaller and display lower population densities than capitalist centers. This derives from a great reduction or near elimination of private property, as well as strict controls over rural-urban migration. Second, socialist cities experience fewer “social problems” (crime, prostitution, poverty and homelessness) than their counterparts in market economies (Scarpaci, 2000). As well, socialist cities serve largely as administrative centers that appear spartan in character. Pre-1989 Warsaw (Regulska, 2000) and contemporary Havana illustrate these features particularly well. According to most Western cities in market economies, open space in the socialist city is used more “wastefully” in the construction of massive public squares and monumental sites.
The search for cubanidad that began in the early part of the 20th century continued in the socialist era, with projects like the Escuelas Nacionales de Arte (National Art Schools). In keeping with socialist anti-urbanism, it is situated on a site removed from Havana’s urban center, a republican-era golf course seized by revolutionaries. The Art Schools, built from 1961 to 1965, were meant to – in the words of John Loomis – “express the revolutionary passion and utopian optimism” of the Cuban Revolution. (Loomis, 1999, p. xxxii) The schools, by Cuban architect Ricardo Porro and Italian architects Roberto Gottardi and Vittorio Garatti, also address the debate between regionalism and globalism outlined above. But quite separate from this made-up culture meant for tourists was an honest and intense search by intellectuals and artists for cubanidad. Cuban architects were part of this search and the younger ones were enthusiastic about modernism in the 1940s and 1950s. There seemed to be a genuine intent to carve out a place for an architecture of regional culture, an architectural cubanidad in answer to the International Style (Loomis, 1999, p. 6). As Porro pointed out in a polemic published in 1957, the socially committed architect must produce work that has social merit and that reflects Cuban tradition (Loomis, 1999, p. 11). The Art Schools employed the Catalan vault, local materials and craft, and a certain brand of feminine sensuality and even open sexuality that Porro associated with Afro-Cuban culture (Figure 10). Eventually, the local craft and particularity represented in the schools was overruled by Soviet-style standardization (Scarpaci, 2003).

Public spaces for gathering are important ceremonial settings such as the Plaza de la Revolución described above. Even though some amount of spatial inequality is observable in Havana – especially with new tourist enclaves – the differences include the absence of a high-rent/high-rise Central Business District and the proliferation of exclusive single-family and low-density residential suburbs. Although the stage was set for urban sprawl because of the spread of “bedroom communities” in the 1940s and 1950s, today, sprawl is not a problem in Havana. The city’s skyline displays a low-lying uniform set of buildings (Figure 11) in contrast to the spatial polarization that is happening on the periphery of Moscow (Rudolph, Brade, 2005) and

Figure 10  Cuba’s Art Schools.
the urban sprawl occurring in parts of east Germany (Nuissl, Rink, 2005). Havana's low level of private automobile ownership, fractured public transportation network, and very limited real-estate market for foreigners have served to prevent sprawl in the Cuban capital.

Socialist Havana: accommodating the new global market

While rich research questions assess how globalization homogenizes cities in the new millennium, relatively less investigation has addressed the transformation of socialist cities. Crowley and Reid (2002) argue that a unitary and universal definition of socialist space is impractical because of the city-specific setting in which such spaces have evolved. Nonetheless, bourgeois and fascist configurations of urban spaces are markedly different than the socialist spaces carved out in Europe, Asia, and Cuba.

"[M]assive investment was made in the production of grand monuments and new public spaces to symbolize the new order. Parade grounds, public artworks and ‘people palaces’ formed a ubiquitous environment throughout the [Eastern] Bloc. Official discourse about these and other spaces reproduced the shared ideological priorities and tactical operations of the socialist regimes. Marxist–Leninist ideals of progress and principles of social justice, based on an equitable redistribution of all resources throughout the agency of the State, were claimed to be the basis of a new spatial economy. Measured against these ideals, such ‘socialist spaces’ will no doubt be found wanting" (Crowley and Reid, 2002, p. 4).

Like the impacts of socialism’s antithetical cousin – industrial capitalism – the experiences of socialist cities around the world share certain experiences. Socialist projects unfold over long periods of time as they aim to ameliorate uneven development imposed by market forces. Chilcote and Edelstein (1986, p. 121) claim “[t]he progression from the consolidation of a socialist regime to the achievement of advanced socialism is a project whose length is measured in generations”. Urbanists search for changes in the built environment that appear in shorter periods; Havana offers such an opportunity. In fact, the lines between “post-socialist” and “socialist” city are easily blurred as noted by Manuel Castells (1977, p. 94):

“…designating a society as capitalist, then specifying the precise conjuncture and the stage of capitalism that is revealed in it, enables me to organise my analysis theoretically. But the reverse is not true: to designate a social formation as ‘socialist’ does not elucidate its relation to space, and, very often it tends to divert research, which takes refuge in a series of ideological dichotomies tending to present the obverse side of the capitalist logic, instead of showing the real processes that are developing in the new social forms.”

These conceptual problems are even more salient in the new millennium – nearly three decades after Castells’ observations – well after the dissolution of the USSR and the Soviet bloc. The forces of perestroika, glasnost and the policies of Mikhail Gorbachev unleashed a domino-effect crash of the Council of Mutual and Economic Exchange. In many corners of the world public welfare services were increasingly dismantled (Scarpaci, 1998) and the commodification of public spaces (long an as-
pect of the capitalist city) began appearing in places like Poland (Regulski, 2000), China (Smith, 2000), Vietnam (Smith and Scarpaci, 2000), and Cuba.

Szelényi (1996, 288) concluded that during and after transition, the socialist cities of Eastern Europe witnessed changes in these three sets of characteristics noted above: under-urbanization, fewer resources spent on urbanization and fewer urban characteristics in the largely administrative centers. In particular, “…many features of socialist urban development are now dying rapidly, and those that still survive are increasingly in contradiction with the emergent socio-economic reality of the region”. When collective agriculture disappeared, for example, the countryside suffered. Greater out-migration ensued and caused a slight rise in urbanization. The quality of urban life also changed significantly with the (re)-introduction of capitalism (Sheppard, 2000). Today, many downtown centers bustle with petty-commerce vendors, traders, and immigrants. A casual stroll through Warsaw, Shanghai, Ho Chi Minh City, or Havana verifies that trend. Western-style urban social problems are also on the rise. To contend with these new market-created problems, some wealthier groups are suburbanizing and the massive apartment complexes of the city core are being abandoned. US retail franchises and shiny shopping malls are springing up in the richer suburbs of China and Eastern Europe. At the same time, however, inner city decay continues. Long-time city dwellers become trapped by poverty and are left behind in the least desirable areas. Unfortunately, parts of downtown Ho Chi Minh City and Havana portray this under-investment (Freeman, 1996; Scarpaci, 2000).

Ivan Szelényi’s (1982) pioneering and comparative review of socialist cities identified several reasons as to why these inequalities persist. One explanation is that socialist governments cannot remedy centuries of uneven capitalist development in short order. Another factor is that transitions to socialism often used some private capital to recompense the state’s inability to create certain goods and services. Private markets linked to hard currency transactions serve as conduits to external capital, and international tourism in Havana serves just that purpose. Finally, the historical periods in which Szelényi addressed public spaces in socialist cities included 20th century Eastern Europe and the former-USSR; because neither Lenin nor Marx had an empirically grounded nation-state in mind to forge the transition to a socialist state, well-thought criticisms of 19th century industrial capitalism established instead the foundation for a socialist project.

In this first decade of the new millennium, many analysts claim that the 20th century was a victory for industrial capitalism. When Soviet communism collapsed, the outlook for capitalism seemed bright, and double-digit GNP growth in many nations was common in the mid-1990s. By the decade’s end, though, the weaknesses of some market economies emerged. Various dubbed the ‘tequila effect’ (Mexico in 1994), the ‘samba effect’ (Brazil in 1998), or the ‘dragon effect’ (Japan and Southeast Asia in 1998), it became unclear whether contagion could be prevented elsewhere. Dunford and Smith (2000) argue that the European Union will create both convergence and divergence in the continent’s reunification; “market reforms and market integration will [not] automatically result in greater “cohesion” between the various territories of Europe” (Dunford and Smith, 2000, p. 172). In 2004, Cuba adopted the Euro as its hard currency of choice, and now charges a ten percent commission on dollar conversions on the island. The move underscores the drop in numbers of US academic and cultural tourists who have been greatly restricted from traveling to the island since mid-2004. It also reflects Cuba’s great reliance on European tourists. These trends suggest that Cuban capital may once again (as it did during the 1920s) turn towards Europe, adopting and blending elements of urban design and planning. Such tenacity in the Cuban revolution and Havana suggests that the nature of the socialist city is more indelible than many anticipated.

Old meets new

Although tourism around the globe still depends upon the marketing of difference and the selling of a “place-myth”, the place where tourists are housed, the hotel, shows that other trend of globalization: homogenization (Lash and Urry, 1994, p 165). If the Eurodollar has its architectural equivalent, it is surely these generic hotels and multi-purpose venues that mean to entertain. These buildings have become the neutral, interchangeable units that facilitate global exchange (Sennett, 2000). Guy Debord’s assertion that “tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made banal”, is borne out (Debord, 1994, p. 95), as hotels demonstrate the architectural intersection of tourism and banality (Kracauer, 1997).

Havana’s Caribbean location poses special challenges in urban design. Sea-salt and storms weaken the lovely facades that range from Art Deco, Art Nouveau and brutalism to eclectic. With the recent increase in tourist travel and the allowable growth of this industry, Havana’s Malecón promenade is again the subject of reconstruction. Arguably, the restoration of these structures activates a different kind of program along the street for the inhabitants – a public living room as many gather along the water edge for the evening (Scarpaci et al., 2002, p. 277). Yet, this type of restoration raises several questions regarding facade in the infrastructure.
of the city and the enclosures of the hotels themselves. Because of the 1959 revolution, the city of Havana was saved from a ‘Cancunization’ of its coastlines. Yet recently constructed hotels and touristic facilities indicate the pressure to accommodate international clientele. At the same time, the city has languished as investment has kept pace with infrastructural enhancements in water, light, and sewage (Díaz-Briquets and Pérez-Ló, 2000; see Figure 12).

Assuming these structures continue due to the growth in tourism, there would be the natural extension to promote additional functions within the hotels because of their increased isolation and numbers of guests. This emphasis on the making of a façade in both restoration and new hotel enclosures raises several key issues. First, the role of restoration – how may the tourist industry create a relationship with the businesses and residences along the Malecón? Second, how does one enclose multi-function and large spaces within the public realm where isolation is not necessarily created as a default? Third, with respect to the growing tendency to emphasize the façade in tourist destinations, how might constructions and materials reassert themselves? Developers designing for the tourist industry attempt to mimic the look of historical buildings while employing less expensive, flexible, and arguably empty systems at the interior. In this way, the enclosure and interior are separated. No attempt to mimic the look of traditional buildings may be found in Galería del Paseo and Meliá Cohiba Hotel, (discussed below) which were built in the 1990s in the mode of banal enclosures, indicative of transplanted generic international hotels. In both cases, modern facades are denied meaning because there is little evidence of the place and time of the work. In a way, they both fall victim to economic pressures. Architecture critic Anne Kingman contrasts an architecture of constructive rigor with one founded on the principles of marketing an identifiable building that speaks a story to the consumer and realign itself with current trends. How then might some of the ideas alluded to here apply to Havana in the ‘Special Period of a Time of Peace’?

To consider these matters, we turn to a brief review of three projects: two are hotels and one entails a business complex. All were erected in the 1990s (and the latter continues to evolve) and are direct manifestations of Cuba’s rather rapid insertion into the world economy in the post-Soviet era (Scarpaci, 2005b).

**Hotel Parque Central**

After standing abandoned for several years, the Ministry of Tourism, in consultation with the City Historian’s Office, solicited bids for building a new hotel. The site is exceptional because it anchors one end of Parque Central and fronts one of the finest pedestrian malls in the Americas: Paseo Martí or Paseo del Prado, with its ficus-tree lined perimeter (Figure 13). The renovated Parque Central project opened in 1995 as a joint-venture project between a Dutch company and the Cuban government (Figure 14). It has been criticized for its exaggerated portico gallery which stand in almost brutalist fashion against one of the city’s streetscape hallmarks, which Alejo Carpentier (1970) called “the city of columns”. Just across from the Parque Central on the plaza of the same name is the Centro Asturiano. The post-modern panoply of various motifs on the Parque Central contrasts with the more sober turn-of-the century buildings such as the Centro Asturiano (Figure 14) (built in 1938, now an art museum). Although the Hotel Parque Central contains a rooftop pool and the traditional patio courtyard with a glass dome that is not visible from the street, its

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2 This is a reference to high-rise buildings lining the coast of Cancun in Mexico. Artificial Mayan temples and artificial ecosystems disguise the large and varied spaces in the interior of the hotels. Practically, the hotels need to contain multiple functions (restaurant, theater, sports center, lodging, etc.) in order to keep clients on the premises for the duration of their stay. These tourist enclosures deny both the scale and reality of the place.
overall features cannot be disguised. While it provides 5-star hotel comfort to international visitors who want access to remarkable cityscapes, it does violate the urban fabric within the UNESCO World Heritage Site where it is located.

The intersection of Paseo and Malecón

One of the first signs of new architecture in the post-Soviet tourist economy of the Special Period surfaces at the intersection of Paseo Street with the seaside promenade, the Malecón. There, a Spanish-managed hotel, the Meliá Cohiba, was introduced in 1994. The Meliá company manages a number of hotels around the world, including Spain and elsewhere in Latin America (Scarpaci, 1998). Today, it is the largest builder of new hotels in Cuba and offers a variety of turnkey complex styles and options. When the proposal to develop a hotel in the Vedado was floated in the early 1990s, the economic condition of the country could not have been more dire. With hindsight, economic pressure was the only factor that could have justified a modern, 21-floor design with more than 400 rooms (Figure 15). The building is a predictable architectural structure that looms over the lower skyline. From the back of the hotel at the swimming pool, sunbathers gaze up at a housing complex and the back of the Hotel Riviera (Figure 16). Unfortunately, local design and review panels such as the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral were not consulted in the project review. If a model of the structure had been placed in the Grupo’s 1:1000 scaled-model of the city, it would have demonstrated the disproportionate dimension of a hotel that protrudes in a medium-density neighborhood of the Republican era. As Mario Coyula (2005) points out, these inappropriate, ill-fitting buildings are threatening to destroy what brings tourists to Cuba in the first place. It could be an office complex, a condominium or a hotel, set anywhere in the world (see Figure 17).

Before the Meliá Cohiba was built, the primary commercial building in this part of Vedado was the Centro Asturiano, now the International Art Museum. In contrast, the Centro Asturiano was a cultural center and meeting place for the Hispanic community in Vedado. The Centro Asturiano was built in 1923 and has a rich history as a center for cultural and social activities.

Figure 14 Hotel Parque Central.

Figure 15 Centro Asturiano, now the International Art Museum.

Figure 16 Hotel Meliá Cohiba.
Hotel Riviera. Originally designed by a design team that included the late Philip Johnson (but who was later replaced by a Cuban architect), the Hotel Riviera embraces the modern style of Las Vegas-like 1950s buildings that still grace the Nevadan city as well as older parts of North Miami Beach in Florida. The Hotel Riviera was financed by the notorious crime figure, Meyer Lansky, and was one of the largest casinos and hotels in Havana of the 1950s. Gambling profits lined the pockets of many politicians in that decade and provided grist for revolutionary fervor (Schwartz, 1997). The views from the front and back of the building are also wanting. From the front, one sees a glass-wrapped shopping arcade called the Galería del Paseo (Figure 18). Architects and planners remark that the two prominent support columns rising above the façade appear like the ears on a mask, and have dubbed the building the “bat mall”. It contains a mix of non-peso retailing establishments (jazz bar, pet store, hardware store) whose high prices make them inaccessible to most households (Peters and Scarpaci, 1998; Scarpaci, 2005b). The town square between it and two other hotels is filled in the evenings with taxis, tour buses, and young Cubans (some of whom are sex workers) seeking entrance to the hotel’s nightclubs through the favor of foreign tourists. What may be a Fellinesque depiction of Havana led satirist and literary critic Andre Codrescu’s (1999, p. 113) hyperbole that Havana at times appears as a “thoroughly eroticized proletariat”. In short, this intersection at Paseo and the Malecón, like other corners of transitional Havana, introduces a distinctive blend of tourist facilities oriented to the global market with an
unusual milieu of design and public space. It has created an unusual melding of Republican and socialist spaces.

Conclusions

Globalization’s impact on Havana’s architecture – before 1958 and after 1989 – has led to anticipated results. The disruption of urban spaces and buildings, and the insertion of design elements that are inappropriate, stem from these global forces. We began our study of mapping and designing Havana by summarizing Frampton’s call for a middle ground: where local materials and traditional building techniques temper a relentless, frenzied modernization and banality. Accommodating these changes is never easy, and Havana is certainly not alone in blending external forces with local needs. It is unrealistic to expect a small island of just 11 million inhabitants to resist the powerful pulls that accompany international tourism. In that spirit, the assessment of 22 cities from around the world by Anthony Tung, former President of New York City’s Landmark Commission, is instructive:

While the speed of modern urban change has led to rapid transformation and destruction, it can also lead to rapid reconfiguration of that which we have already built. Having fractured our cities, with time, can we un-fracture them? If we understand that current intrusive structures will eventually become obsolete and subject to replacement, and that vanished historic buildings might be reinstated, an unprecedented palette of urban possibilities is presented, making it possible to change the spirit and form of the city at many locations (Tung, 2001, p. 430).

We hope that subsequent mappings and designs of Havana’s built fabric will, in the context of Tung’s forecast, become ‘un-fractured.’ Political and economic decisions by the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Foreign Investment will always outweigh informed design review and assessments by planners, architects and urban geographers. In this sense, Cuba is not unique, since government interference and decision makers is described by Paul Ricouer in History and Truth: “how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization”.

Will Cuban developers, in reconsidering the value of uniqueness in the marketing of their environment, allow this ‘Pearl of the Caribbean’ to regain its Antillean lustre?


Segre, R (2000) 40 años, 90 millas y una cubanía (40 years, 90 miles but one sole cubanhood). Introduction to the special number of AAVV: Arquitectos de Arquitectura Antillana (Santo Domingo) 9(10), 11–13.


