HAVANA IN ITS ARCHITECTURE

by Mario Coyula

The city

Havana opens into almost thirty kilometers of coastline that include an excellent strip of beaches at the East. The Bay, covering five square kilometers, has a narrow neck and then widens like a bag, protected from hurricanes and pirates by its shape, a hill and the most impressive system of Colonial fortresses that include both the older and the larger built by Europeans in the Americas. Because its protected bay and privileged geographical position of between two peninsulas, Florida and Yucatán, Havana was designated by the Spanish Crown as Key to the New World and Outpost of the Indies. Through several centuries, the port was the final meeting point of the Spanish ships before sailing back to Europe, when they were already full with riches; and in the early 17th century the number of sailors and soldiers sometimes more than doubled the local population of four thousand. The city supplied and protected this Fleet, stamping Havana with an early tertiary character.

The walled precinct had an irregular grid of narrow, treeless streets and small blocks, so buildings ventilated mainly through inner courts. This resulted in a very compact urban pattern. By mid-18th century the walled precinct was already saturated and upper floors had been built. A very homogeneous urban fabric developed from this slightly irregular compact grid where squares, churches and corner stores were the dominant features. The population of the city was already more than 60,000 in an urbanized territory of 151 hectares. The defensive walls were built quite slowly from 1674-1797, so the city had already outgrown them way before they were finally torn down, starting in 1863. The urban expansion followed some main axes along the old roads connecting with the rural hinterland that supplied the city and the Fleet, and the whole process of growth pointed West and Southwest because of the presence of the Bay as a physical obstacle for an eastward development. These roads gradually became very urban, becoming calzadas: wide streets with double-height porticos that performed as corridors for pedestrians in the ground floors, opening into stores; and dwellings above. Citizens could walk protected from the sun and the rain just up to the city outskirts.

Wealth was slowly accumulated until the second half of the 18th century, when western Cuba shifted to a plantation economy that made up for an enlightened, innovative and well-mannered Cuban-born sugar aristocracy. An impressive defensive system was completed as well as several monumental public spaces and buildings after Spain recovered the city from the British in 1763. This was coupled with the effects of the independence of the 13 North American colonies, opening trade with the United
States; and of the Haitian revolution that prompted into Cuba a flow of about 30 thousand learned French coffee and sugar planters. In architecture, these changes represented a shift in the upper-class dwelling, from the typical late 18th century Baroque palaces of the walled precinct—built in three stories with a double-height ground floor around a central court surrounded by wide, cool galleries and sharing common walls with their neighbors—to the mid-19th century Neo-Classical detached villas where the central court had already disappeared: the casas quintas in the new borough of El Cerro, favored by the powerful white Cuban Creole patricians.

The old core of 143 Hectares within the original walled precinct, plus a 19th Century extension and the full Colonial defensive system, were designated by UNESCO as a World Heritage site in 1982. But Havana's built heritage actually covers more than 2000 Hectares that include valuable buildings following Pre-Baroque, Baroque, some Neo-Gothic, Neo-Classical, Art Nouveau (much influenced by Catalan Modernisme) and a large stock of Eclectic architecture that actually shaped the inner city and the rest of Cuban cities. After Second World War there was another construction boom of Modern architecture that extended into the 1960's with some Brutalist influence. Architecture was later submitted to mass construction and deprived from much of its cultural meaning except for some special projects, mostly built at the periphery.

Several issues made Havana different from most other major Latin American cities: with no surviving native population, and especially by being under Colonial rule almost eighty years longer than the continental colonies and closer to the United States, Havana had much more Spanish and later American influence. As it grew mainly by addition, with a minimum of demolitions, the different layers of its rich built heritage were basically spared. The street layout, a typical Spanish-American grid creating regular city blocks with small lots and low-rise buildings gave Havana a special grain, rhythm, urban character and scale that were extended into most 20th century suburbs. Even if it has a definite urban character, Havana is more flat, and its lower density provides a special quality of life that is missing in other cities that underwent overdeveloping in the 60’s and 70’s.

On the other hand, the typical social pattern that stamped most other Latin American major cities, basically a few very wealthy families and the rest poor, didn’t apply to Havana. The affluent were quite many, and their presence in the city fabric shows even more as they subsequently left a trail of fine mansions in their search along different historic periods for better and classier places to live. These mansions were turned into shops or subdivided as tenements, but the buildings were not demolished. The very poor were either masked in the inner city behind Classical facades, or scattered in dreary shantytowns at the periphery where they were hardly visible. But what really shaped Havana was the existence of an extended lower-middle class demanding dwellings with a reasonably high average quality of design and construction, creating a well-defined urban fabric that covers large sectors of the city. Havana grew in
a conurbation process, gradually engulfing other smaller urban settlements, many more than 300 years old, which have managed to retain a distinct local character. Regla, Casablanca, Cojimar, Guanabacoa, Santa Maria del Rosario, Calabazar, Boyeros, Santiago de las Vegas, El Cano, Marianao, Arroyo Arenas or Santa Fe circle the busy inner city with a quiet, small town way of life. They also show simplified but still good examples of different historic architectural types that appeared in the central city, but also vernacular, including wooden architecture.

The triumphant Revolution from January 1st, 1959 found a city housing one-fourth of the country’s six million population. The new government stopped a land speculation process that was already threatening fine neighborhoods like El Vedado. Looking for a more balanced national distribution, also tried to weaken the excessive leading role of the capital city. Construction was mainly diverted into more than 300 small new rural villages and a network of provincial capitals and intermediate cities, while new shapeless housing compounds in Havana were built mainly at the periphery. This led to the appearance of a sharp distinction between the traditional city and the new housing tracts where hundreds of thousands found a roof but the rest of the city was still missing. On the other hand, this approach indirectly preserved the historic and architectural value of the inner city. At the end of the 20th century, Havana’s population was slightly exceeding 2.25 million in an urbanized area of 360 square kilometers, but population had already started to decrease and age.

**Architecture**

Architecture in the 16th century was mainly military, and the initial dwellings of the Conquistadors were mostly improved versions of the local thatched-roof hut, *bohío*, or simplified patterns of vernacular transported from southern Spain. The small castle of La Fuerza (Bartolomé Sánchez, Francisco de Calona; 1558–1577) has a Renaissance plan and is the oldest defensive structure made by Europeans with endurable materials in America. A poorly chosen location quickly made it inadequate from a military point of view, so the Spanish Governor built his house on top of what obviously was the sturdier structure at that time. In 1592 Havana received the title of “city”; and the first water-supply system made by Europeans in America was built by the renowned Italian military engineer working for the Spanish Crown, Bautista Antonelli, who also built with Cristóbal de Roda the two fortresses at the mouth of the Bay, the Morro Castle (1589–1630) and La Punta, (1589–ca. 1600).

Opposed to the pre-Columbian Andean and Meso-American peoples, Cuban natives lacked a developed material culture. They were also few and pacific, which led to their quick disappearance without leaving an architectural influence other than the picturesque *bohío*. Military architecture and public buildings remained fully European in the 17th century, but religious architecture and housing—most of all, among the
poorest—clearly showed a more popular face, combining a very simple early Baroque with Spanish-Moorish mudéjar elements. Otherwise, the imprint of African slaves supplying most of the construction labor force is difficult to trace without falling into the cliché about tropical sensuality and bright colors. In fact, Havana was never a Caribbean city, but one that strongly wished to be European and white. Roofs were often the work of ship-builders, and they curiously resembled inverted hulls, often with tall and finely carved alfarjes Mudéjar ceilings. The most impressive building from this period is the Santa Clara Convent (1638–18th century), a nunnery with beautiful courts covering four small city blocks, including the 1643 church, in Old Havana.

Baroque style arrived late to Cuba, and the lack of local skilled labor force and the porous nature of the stone, imbedded with coral fossils and seashells handicapped its ornate style. Its main example is the Cathedral, started as a Jesuit church in 1748, and finished in 1777. Though most relevant mansions in Old Havana from mid-1700 on are classified as Baroque, they remained quite austere; and the trademark curvaceous lines developed in Europe only appeared sometimes as a decoration enhancing the main front door. The portico from the Casa de la Obra Pía (1666–1793) is the best example of a trend that include many others, such as the lintels of the Royal Post Office (1770–1791) or the palace the Counts of Mortera, also from the 18th century. Typical of this architecture is a fine inner court surrounded by wide, shaded galleries where the family spent most of their every-day life. Sometimes there was a second court, opening to the kitchen and servants quarters; and the main court was embellished with a fountain or a well and surrounded by plants with strong perfume following a tradition from Southern Spain. The palace of the Colonial Governor (Antonio Fernández de Trevejos, Pedro de Medina, 1770–1791) at the Plaza de Armas (Square of Arms), now Museum of the City, has what probably is the most beautiful court in Havana and rivals the Cathedral as the best 18th century building in Havana. Another special feature of this period was the large stained-glass windows, called mediopuntos, where the very thin and elaborate partitions were made of wood instead of lead. Among the many fine examples of mediopuntos are those added in early 19th century to the palace of the Counts of San Juan de Jaruco (1737) at the Plaza Vieja (Old Square). Mediopuntos and wooden shutters were meant to control the excess sunlight and heat. Simple wooden grills to protect the windows and balconies were later changed to more elaborate in iron, creating another trademark for Colonial architecture. This has been poorly copied in banal architecture, including contemporary, that use grills, round arches and colored glass looking for an easy, tourist-oriented Cubanness.

As El Cerro became more urbanized, the detached quintas returned to a more compact urban pattern. Front gardens were lost and the front porticos sometimes were used as public space, starting right at the narrow sidewalk. Neo-Classical architecture extended in the 19th century with many fine examples, as the Palacio Aldama (1844) at the Plaza de la Fraternidad (Fraternity Square), considered the best example of 19th
century Colonial architecture in Cuba; or the huge palace of the Counts of Santovenia (ca. 1841) in El Cerro, now a home for elderly citizens tended by Catholic nuns. The oldest remaining fully Neo-Classical building is El Templete (1828), at the Square of Arms, marking the place where the city was founded in 1519. But the pretty, simple façade of the church of Regla, across the Bay, dates from the 1818 renovation of a former chapel. Around 1830 Havana already had a population of almost 170,000 and the urbanized area covered 443 hectares. Many urban innovations were brought into Havana during the first half of the 19th century, including railroad in 1837—placing Cuba as the seventh country in the world, eleven years before its own metropolis. Streets were paved using the McAdam system; fountains, monuments, theaters, hotels and cafes were built; plus a fine boulevard lined with trees, Paseo de Tacón or Carlos III, now Salvador Allende. This boulevard was somehow an anticipation of those cut by Haussmann in Paris: wide streets both for prestige and military purposes, so troops could get quickly into the city in case of a revolt.

Neo-Gothic architecture was rather sparse in Havana, consisting mainly of some additions or refurbishing of older buildings, like the reconstruction and extension of the Iglesia del Santo Angel in 1871, over an older building whose origin dated from the second half of the 17th century. Neo-Classicism jumped later on into a new subdivision close to the sea, El Vedado. Started in 1859 with El Carmelo, this is the largest feat of Colonial planning, contemporary to the landmark Ensanche Plan by Ildefons Cerdá for Barcelona. El Vedado grew from West to East in the opposite direction as the general growth of Havana. The regular grid consisted in square blocks 100 meters to a side and it was tilted so as to allow the breezes in. Streets had trees on both sides; and two wider avenues, the current G and Paseo, had a central linear park. The building codes called for one third of the lots to remain unbuilt, and houses were set back with a front strip for gardens and porches in the ground floor. The Independence wars practically paralyzed construction in Cuba during the last thirty years of the 19th century, with Spanish dominion coming to an end in 1898. El Vedado was quickly filled with Eclectic villas during the first quarter of the 20th century, triggered by an incredible economic boom nicknamed the fat cows that was boosted by the high price of sugar because of the First World War. This boom brought in during the first 25 years of the 20th century more Spanish immigrants than during the former four centuries of Colonial regime. The effects of the 1929 crack was coupled with a serious political crisis in Cuba, and a lean cows period came after, pushing a simplified but yet well designed and built minor Eclecticism that extended through all neighborhoods and actually accounts for most of the built fabric in Cuban inner cities.

Art Nouveau architecture covered a very short period at the beginning of the 20th century, and was rejected by Cuban architects from the newly founded Faculty of Architecture. It actually had more of Catalan Modernisme than French or Belgian influence, with some occasional Viennese Secession elements as in the Cetro de Oro.
(ca. 1910). Together with the Crusellas house (1908) and Masià L’Ampurdà (1919), these are among the best examples. Many minor Art Nouveau buildings are located along Cárdenas street, close to the railway terminal, which is a fine Eclectic building from 1912.

Major Eclecticism left very fine pieces in Havana, like the Asociación de Dependientes (1907), Hotel Plaza (1908), Lonja del Comercio (1909), the Velasco palace (1912), now Spanish Embassy; the house of the Marquis of Avilès (1915), now seat of ICAP; or the Presidential Palace (1920), now Museum of the Revolution. Among other good examples are the Cuban Telephone Company (1927), the Capitol (1929), now seat of the Ministry of Environment and the Academy of Sciences; Centro Gallego (1915), now Gran Teatro de La Habana; the full complex of Havana University (1906–1940) that substituted the original from 1728 in Old Havana, sitting on top of a hill like a modern acropolis with its monumental stairs; the Vedado Tennis Club (1912–1920), now José Antonio Echeverría; the Habana Yacht Club (1924), now Julio Antonio Mella; or the Colegio de Belén (1925), now Instituto Técnico Militar. Several relevant private mansions were also built in that trend: the Countess of Loreto (1923), now Ministry of Foreign Affairs; Orestes Ferrara (1928), now Napoleonic Museum; Pablo González de Mendoza (1916–1918), now residence of the British Ambassador; José Gómez Mené (1927), now Museum of Decorative Arts; or Estanislao del Valle (1930), now residence of the French Ambassador. Around 1920 Havana had achieved a monumental urban look, and together with Buenos Aires were the two major cities in Latin America, followed closely by Mexico City and Lima.

The mansion of Catalina de Lasa / Juan Pedro (Govantes & Cabarrocas, gardens by J.C.N. Forestier; 1927) had the first Art Deco interiors. Art Deco landmarks are the Bacardí building (Esteban Rodríguez Castells, José Menéndez; 1930) and the López Serrano (Mira & Rosich, 1932), the first tall apartment building in Cuba. The geometric Art Deco trend was followed by the streamline, like in the Fausto theatre (Saturnino Parajón, 1938) or in the America apartment building and theatre (Fernando Martínez Campos, Pascual de Rojas; 1941). Simplified, or rather stripped-out versions of Art Deco extended in the 1940’s into lower-income dwellings so as to skip the complicated Eclectic decoration. The 1929 World Fair in Seville plus the California-style shown in Hollywood films had an influence on architecture, the so-called Neo-Colonial style. The impact was delayed by the political and economic crisis of the 1930’s, so that revival spread mostly during the 1940’s with its cozy wooden grills and clay tile roofs in single-family houses, signed by the typical quadrifoglio window. Another important trend from that decade was the Monumental-Modern, used in public buildings like the Maternidad Obrera hospital (Emilio de Soto, 1939) and the Plaza Finlay complex (José Pérez Benitoa, 1944). It fashioned a mixture of the Chaillot Palace Parisian Art Déco trend coupled with a strong influence from L’Eur in Rome and some slight recalls of earlier Italian Futurism.
The post-Second World War period witnessed another spectacular building boom, now following slightly modified architectural patterns from the Modern Movement. More than thirty new subdivisions of single-family detached houses appeared triggered by a blooming speculative real estate business supported by the FHA Law (1954) allowing the National Bank to back-up mortgages on new housing developments. A previous Law on Propiedad Horizontal (1952) fuelled the construction of condominiums, epitomized by what probably was the first self-contained condo in Latin America, the huge FOCSA building (Ernesto Gómez Sampera, 1956) covering one full block in El Vedado. The definitive shift into modern architecture came in 1947 by the Radiocentro building (Gastón, Junco & Domínguez), which triggered the astonishing development of La Rampa into the most alive city center in less than twelve years. La Rampa is a seven-block strip of 23rd Street; and it starts at the Malecón, flanked by the earlier presence of the Hotel Nacional (McKim, Mead & White, 1930) on top of a small rocky hill overlooking the sea, the previous site of the Santa Clara Battery of cannons in Colonial days.

As opposed to the trend in United States, Modern architecture was happily endorsed by Cuban upper and middle-class for their homes. Some of the best examples from the late 1940’s and 1950’s were individual dwellings, like the prize-winning Noval house (Silverio Bosch and Mario Romañach, 1949), now a protocol house; the Borges house (Max Borges, 1950), now a commercial firm); the Vidaña house (Bosch & Romañach, 1953), presently the Iranian Ambassador’s residence; the Pérez Farfante house (Frank Martínez, 1955); or the Schulthess house (Richard Neutra, with gardens by Roberto Burle-Marx, 1956), now residence of the Swiss Ambassador. Leading Cuban architects managed to soften the rigidity of early Modern architecture and the commercialized banality of the international Style, adapting it to the tropical climate and the Cuban cultural roots like in the Tropicana night club (Borges, 1951). Others tried to incorporate elements skimmed from Colonial and vernacular architecture like projecting eaves with clay-tile roofs, wooden jalousies and stained-glass windows. The Isabel García House (Cristófol & Hernández Dupuy, 1960) represents this trend, following the pioneer work of Eugenio Batista in his Eutimio Falla House (1939) and in his own house (1944).

Still others picked a more contemporary re-interpretation of the court, the gallery or the tall window; and more abstract issues like scale, proportion, rhythm and the play of light and shadow. The Stanley Wax House (Frank Martínez, 1959) is one very fine example of this approach. But modern architecture also produced some very fine office and apartment buildings in the 1950’s, like the Retiro Odontológico (1953), now faculty of Economy; and the Seguro Médico (1958), now Ministry of Public Health—both by Quintana, Rubio & Pérez Beato—or the La Rampa movie theatre (Gustavo Botet, 1955) and the Habana Hilton Hotel (Welton Becket & Associates, 1958); all set in La Rampa. Again, this movement was important not only because of the work of some masters, but
for the high average quality of second-rate architects spreading their work into large expanses of city fabric. Notwithstanding the very valuable Colonial heritage, Modern architecture was only second to Eclectic in shaping 20th century Havana.

Against conventional wisdom, good Modern architecture did not end in 1959 when most of the major Cuban designers left for the United States. It actually extended well into the second half of the 1960’s with outstanding works in Havana like the Habana del Este neighborhood unit (Mario González, Hugo D’Acosta-Calheiros, Reynaldo Estévez et al, 1959–1961), the Schools of Arts (Ricardo Porro, Vittorio Garatti and Roberto Gottardi, 1961–1965), the CUJAE campus (Humberto Alonso, Fernando Salinas et al, 1960–1964 and on), Pabellón Cuba (Juan Campos and Enrique Fuentes, 1963), the Parque-Monumento de los Mártires Universitarios (Park-Monument to the University Martyrs) by Emilio Escobar, Mario Coyula, Sonia Domínguez and Armando Hernández (1965–1967), Coppelia ice-cream parlor (Marrio Girona, 1966) or CENIC, Centre for Scientific Research, (Joaquín Galván et al, 1966). Several of these projects showed some Brutalist influence connected to a search for artistic expression in structure, materials and construction. Deprived of its experimental approach and under heavy administrative control, this would evolve in the 1970’s into a dull catalogue of repetitive projects that spread nation-wide, mostly relying in heavy concrete prefabricated elements. This was felt by the construction authorities as the only way to deal with the huge accumulated needs. Nevertheless, some good projects appeared during what some named the lost decade, like the Lenin School (Andrés Garrudo, 1974) or the Volodia School (Heriberto Duverger, 1978), demonstrating that architecture was possible even with the most rigid fully prefabricated technology. Jardín Botánico Nacional (Luis Lápidus, Estrella Fuentes, Sergio Ferro, Félix Rodríguez, José Planas; 1968-1989) is a rare case of a patient work that went on for more than twenty years and was finally carried to a successful end.

Some special projects were allowed more freedom and a larger budget, producing outstanding works such as the Lenin Park (Antonio Quintana et al, 1971), that include two well designed restaurants, Las Ruinas (Joaquín Galván) and La Faralla (Juan Tosca); the Convention Hall (Antonio Quintana et al, 1979); or INGEBIOT, a huge scientific research center for Genetic Engineering and Biotechnology (Rafael Moro, 1986). In the late 1980’s there was a short construction boom without a real economic basis. It was quickly stopped by the sudden fall of the Soviet Union, Cuba’s dominant trading partner. That short-lived boom allowed some young architects to experiment with an already outdated and poorly assimilated Postmodernist architecture. In spite of some shortcomings, this represented a worthy effort to regain control over architecture by designers. Many family-doctors surgeries were built, as well as apartment buildings through the Microbrigades movement. Microbrigades had started in 1971 as an alternative housing program halfway between self-construction and State brigades. But even if the construction technique was flexible and the policy of urban in-fill called for
specific projects, most of the designs repeated either the dull volumes of conventional prefabricated buildings, or went back to banal patterns from 1950’s commercialized architecture. Some good early examples of experimenting with contemporary architecture in a valuable historic context can be found in medical consultories for Old Havana at Sol 351, (Eduardo Luis Rodriguez, 1988), Luz 217 (Ricardo Fernández, 1988) or San Juan de Dios at Villegas (Mayda Pérez, 1987). Other outstanding designs for Microbrigade buildings were at 1st Avenue and 10th Street, Vedado (Antonio Colás) and at 36 and 47, Nuevo Vedado (Ulises Ferrer), both from the end of the same 1980’s decade and authored not by the angry young but by older, established architects.

This short construction boom also gave birth to ExpoCuba (Humberto Ramírez, Rómulo Fernández, Heriberto Duverger; 1989); a large exhibition fair too enthusiastically committed to a high-tech trend. The collapse of the Soviet Union triggered an economic crisis in 1990, the so-called Special Period. Nevertheless, Villa Panamericana (Roberto Caballero et al) was built because of the government’s commitment to the Pan-American Games scheduled for Havana in 1991. For the first time, a neo-traditional urban design was adopted as a reaction to the typically scattered building blocks of the conventional housing tracts. The pattern proved so strong as to resist an indifferent architecture that searched for variety by simply changing caps over the same basic apartment building. Las Arboledas (Huck Rorick, Graciela González et al; 1984...) searched for a more environmentally friendly suburban housing complex design, carefully setting the apartment buildings among fine existing groves. Unfortunately, construction was gradually slowed down and finally paralyzed during the Special Period. The economic crisis left many unfinished buildings and new construction was practically limited to Cuban-foreign joint ventures in tourism and real estate, trying to bring in badly needed hard currency. Most of these buildings had a banal, international scent that gave rise to criticism among influential architects and intellectuals. The Meliá Habana Hotel (Abel García) and the new Terminal # 3 for the international airport (Mario Girona, Dolly), both from 1998, were important buildings that barely managed to float over a pool of irrelevant architecture.

The first two of a series of eighteen office buildings, the Miramar Trade Centre by Tarek el-Katib were finished in 1999, a sober architecture on an existing layout that misused the potentials of a large tract of barren land, Monte Barreto. This area, already distorted by the huge Soviet Embassy (Alexander Rochegov, Basilio Piasecki; 1988) includes seven hotels that failed to produce good architecture. The question of blending old and new was successfully solved in the addition made in 2000 by José Antonio Choy to a bank in Fifth Avenue, Miramar. His building wraps and crowns the sober late 1940’s bank with a strictly contemporary new one, following the deconstructivist trend. This feat of integration by contrast proved unattainable for the Parque Central Hotel (1998), a project that by large fell short of what such a unique urban site demanded. Several other recent good new projects by Choy and the world-famous Spanish
architect Rafael Moneo bring hope for a return of architecture into the realm of culture, which was the main subject of discussion during the first session of the 6th Congress of UNEAC (Cuban Union of Writers and Artists) in November, 1998 and has since stayed in the agenda of this influential organization.

**Recovering Havana**

Historic preservation had been steadily recovering relevant buildings in Havana since the 1960’s, with a stronger impulse in the 1980’s under the leadership of the City Historian Office and the creation of the Centre for Conservation, Restoration and Museology (CENCREM). In 1993 the Historian Office received the opportunity to run their own businesses—hostels, restaurants, office space for rent—and reinvest the profits into their preservation programs. The scope of preservation was initially focused in the rehabilitation of relevant buildings like the Cathedral, the Palace of the Spanish Governors or many other churches and noble mansions, with an approach that implicitly limited the historic center to the old walled precinct of 143 hectares. The work has extended during the 1990’s into the rehabilitation of dwellings for the local population, especially in the San Isidro neighborhood at the southern half of Old Havana; and other social programs such as day-care centers, creating classrooms at the museums, a clinic for handicapped children or a center for pregnant women. It also spread into some more recent districts, like the rehabilitation of the initial 14-block strip of the little less than seven kilometers long waterfront iconic promenade, Malecón. There has been a growing awareness about the cultural values of other more recent districts; and the training of workers for rehabilitation projects has helped to start a recovery of long-forgotten skills that hopefully might extend into regular builders. The success of these programs has also demonstrated the economic value of preserving a relevant built heritage, as the City Historian Office is now financially self-sufficient.

The staff also grew, mostly composed of young professionals such as Rafael de Rojas, María Buajasán, Tatiana Fernández, Patricia Rodríguez, Ayleen Robaina, Pablo Fornet et al; with the collaboration of some experienced planners as Madeline Menéndez and the advise from the dean of Cuban preservationist architects, Daniel Taboada. There is an office for the Master Plan, another for design, and one for the PERI (which deals exclusively with the rehabilitation of the Malecón strip. A short list of the more recent rehabilitation projects show the extent of this work: the San Francisco Convent (1998), plus the square with the same name and several surrounding projects as Café de la Marina and a small park dedicated to Mother Theresa of Calcutta; the former Cámara de Representantes, built in 1909–1911 and restored in 1998; three hostels: Conde de Villanueva (1998), El Comendador (1999) and El Tejadillo (2000); the scale model of the historic center (1999); a café, A Prado y Neptuno (Roberto Gottardi, 1999), that restores a Neo-Classic building at a corner of the Central park.
while creating a striking contemporary interior.; the esplanade in front of La Punta castle; Hotel Florida (1998–1999), the Art Deco bookstore *La Moderna Poesía* (2000) and a mid-18th century church turned into a concert hall (2000), Iglesia de Paula, linked to the first promenade of Havana, Alameda de Paula (1772).

**Public spaces**

Old Havana is obviously the most renowned area of the city because of its values, age and the results of a continuous effort on preservation. The strategy of its master plan concentrated first around the major public spaces and the streets that link them, looking for a visible improvement that would perform as a catalyst for further rehabilitation. The original walled precinct has a system of squares—plazas and plazuelas—over its slightly irregular grid of narrow streets and compact blocks.

*Plaza de Armas*, the place where the city was founded in 1519, holds a set of relevant buildings that include Castillo de la Fuerza, Palacio de los Capitanes Generales—the former seat of the Spanish Governors, now Museum of the City; El Templete (1828), the oldest remaining neo-Classical structure in Havana; and the old mansion of the Counts of Santovenia (1784), now Hotel Santa Isabel. *Plaza de la Catedral* is considered the best proportioned of all the squares in Havana, a dry plaza surrounded by tall public corridors providing shade. Initially a swamp where the 1592 Havana aqueduct ended, it was later paved and the surrounding buildings added new facades facing that space. The square is dominated by the Cathedral (1748–1777) facade, acknowledged as the best example of Cuban Baroque; and is sided by other fine buildings, the former palaces of the Marquis of Aguas Claras (1751–1775) and the Marquis of Arcos 1746, and the Counts of Casa-Bayona (1720) and of Lombillo, dating from mid-18th century.

*Plaza Vieja* is unique in not having religious, military or civic buildings but only mansions from prominent families. Its origins go back to mid-16th century, but its current appearance dates from late 17th and throughout the 18th, when portals were added facing the square. Some relevant buildings are the mansion of the Counts of San Juan de Jaruco (1737, with the early 19th century addition of its fine stained-glass windows closing the upper floor loggia), now seat of the Fondo Cubano de Bienes Culturales; the house of the Counts of Casa Lombillo (1745–19th century), or the house of the Cárdenas Sisters, remodeled in 1834, now seat of the Center for the Visual Arts Development; the house of the Franchi-Alfaro (ca. 1751, with an addition from 1771), also remodeled in the 19th century. Palacio Cueto (1908), showing at one of the corners, is a whimsical building with an Art Nouveau influence that differs from the dominant look of the square.
**Plaza de San Francisco** was created around 1628, closely related to the major role of the city as supplier to the Spanish Fleet. In spite of the strong visual presence of the church and convent (1738), it was functionally linked to the port. Other relevant surrounding buildings are Lonja del Comercio (Tomás Mur, 1909) that underwent a full renovation in 1996 including the addition of a striking upper floor with a reflective glass facade; and the Custom building (Barclay, Parsons & Klapp, 1914)

**Alameda de Paula** (1772) was one of Havana's first promenades as part of the late-18th century attempt by the Spanish Governor, Marquis de la Torre to create a monumental look for the city after it was recovered from the British. In the 1840’s it was remodeled by Mariano Carrillo de Albornoz as part of another series of urban improvements started since the 1830’s as a reaction to the independence of the continental colonies in America that left Spain only in the possession of Cuba and Puerto Rico. After rehabilitating the Alameda in 2000, the City Historian Office plans to gradually clear out the docks to reopen the views into the Bay.

**Paseo del Prado** was also started in 1772 by de la Torre as Paseo de Extramuros, at a time when the city had already spread beyond the walls. It underwent remodelings in 1834 and at the turn of the century. Its present look, mostly due to Raúl Otero, dates from 1929 as part of the J. C. N. Forestier plan for Havana. This is probably the finest public space in Cuba, an homage to the Barcelona Ramblas, with even more fine detailing. Several unsuccessful renames (Alameda de Isabel II, Calle Ancha, even Paseo de Martí) have been stubbornly ignored by the population who continues to call it Paseo del Prado. This was a long-time favorite promenade, and at the beginning of the 20th century many affluent families built their houses there, like the Estévez—later Steinhart—house (Charles Brun, 1905) or the Gómez house (Hilario del Castillo, 1915); and also several important public buildings as the Asociación de Dependientes (Arturo Amigó, 1907), Casino Español (Luis Dediot, 1914), the Sevilla-Biltmore Hotel (Schultze & Weaver, 1923) or the Fausto theatre. By 1950s it was no longer fashionable as a place to live, probably because of the vicinity of the largest red-light district in Havana.

The demolition of the walls, started in 1863, allowed for the creation of a demi-ring that engulfed three main streets—Paseo del Prado, Zulueta and Avenida de las Misiones—with significant buildings like the Velasco house (José Mato, Francisco Ramírez, 1912), now seat of the Spanish Embassy; the Pons house, later Pérez de la Riva (Francisco Ramírez, 1906); or the Presidential Palace (Paul Belau, Carlos Maruri; 1920). This ring had the Central Park as a climax; but Paseo del Prado actually went further south along the Capitol gardens, to finally reach its end at the Fraternity Park (César Guerra, 1928), both part of the Forestier plan.

The **Parque Central** is a square with trees that was shaped in 1877 on an open area outside the Monserrate gate of the City Wall. It is surrounded by monumental
buildings such as the Manzana de Gómez (Pedro Tomé, 1894), a shopping arcade with two diagonal interior streets in the 19th century European fashion, that was enlarged in 1917; Hotel Inglaterra, built 1856, renovated in 1891 and enlarged in 1915; the Centro Gallego (Paul Belau, 1915), now Gran Teatro de La Habana; and the Centro Asturiano (Manuel del Busto, 1927) currently being renovated as an extension of the National Fine Arts Museum. The most recent building facing the square is the Parque Central Hotel, covering a full city block of neo-Classical buildings whose only remains are a few stone arcades clumsily pasted to the main facade of the new (1999) hotel. The square was remodeled in 1960 by Eugenio Batista. Other relevant buildings partially looking into the Parque Central are the Hotel Plaza (José Mata, 1908), the Capitol (Raúl Otero, Govantes & Cabarrocas; 1929) and the Bacardí building (Esteban Rodríguez Castells, José Menéndez; 1930, considered the best Art Deco example in Cuba.

**Cementerio de Colón**, Columbus Cemetery (1871) is a huge rectangle covering more than 64 hectares shaped along two main axes crossing in the middle like the *cardus* and *decumanus* in an ancient Roman military camp. Its monumental neo-Romanesque front gate by Calixto de Loira is crowned by a sculptural group by José Vilalta de Saavedra, the best Cuban sculptor from the turn of the last century who is also the author of the mausoleum for the eight Medical students shot in 1871. Built mostly with white Carrara marble and designated as a national landmark, this cemetery has many fine monuments by some other top Cuban artists and architects like Juan José Sicre, Rita Longa, Antonio Boada, René Portocarrero or Max Borges; the Spaniards Agustín Querol, author of the tallest monument at the cemetery, dedicated to the firemen killed while in duty in 1890; and Mariano Benlliure, who cast in bronze a Christ rising to heaven, probably the finest piece among so many good ones; and a magnificent Art Déco mausoleum designed by René Lalique for Catalina de Lasa, who was considered the most beautiful woman in Cuba’s Belle Époque. The last monument at this cemetery is the Pantheon for the Heroes of the 13th of March (Emilio Escobar, Mario Coyula, José Villa; 1982), a group of stainless steel flags performing as a sun dial that every year recall the assault by young revolutionaries on the Presidential Palace on March 13th, 1957.

**The Malecón**, Havana’s landmark four-mile plus long waterfront boulevard, was built in stages from 1901 to 1958, when the two tunnels at both ends were also built. This provided a continuous east-west coastline axis linking Havana with two important ports and the main beach resort in Cuba, Varadero. The S-shaped street goes along a low-rise concrete wall that allows magnificent views into the sea and performs as a giant bench where locals sit to gaze and take the breeze. But this calm character changes abruptly into an imposing landscape of huge waves, sea spray and occasional flooding in winter and during tropical storms.
**Universidad de La Habana**, Havana University (1906–1940) sits as an acropolis on top of a hill, forming a pivot between central Havana and El Vedado. The university was moved here at the beginning of the 20th century from its original site in Old Havana, where it was founded in 1728. Its magnificent stairs of 88 steps go past an Alma Mater by the Czech sculptor Mario Korbel and through the tall portico of the Rectorate building (Enrique Martínez & Félix Cabarrocas, 1921) into the fine Plaza Cadenas, later renamed Agramonte. The stairs and the Alma Mater resemble closely those at Columbia University, but the stairs are steeper and framed by two secondary sets of stairs following a different rhythm. Other relevant buildings surrounding the plaza are the School of Sciences (Pedro Martínez Inclán, 1939) with a fine Corinthian portico; and the late Art Déco general library (Joaquín Weiss, 1937). The whole campus is encircled by a wall and slopes down the hill in terraced Italianesque gardens by César Guerra. There is an unforgettable spatial sequence, walking up the hill from the Parque-Monumento de los Mártires Universitarios at the corner of Infanta and San Lázaro (Emilio Escobar, Mario Coyula, Sonia Domínguez and Armando Hernández; 1965–1967 —the first abstract expressionistic commemorative monument in Cuba), past the fading revolutionary graffiti from the 1950s, experiencing the sudden lateral opening of a triangular square with the monument-mausoleum of the student leader from the 1920s Julio Antonio Mella (Antonio Quintana, Fernando López et al, 1975), climbing the monumental stairs, cross through the four sets of tall columns of the Rectorate building into Plaza Ignacio Agramonte, and then turn left to the Ciencias building, with its perfect Ionic portico and cozy inner court.

**Plaza Cívica**, renamed as Revolution Square in 1959, is a complex of civic buildings inaugurated in 1953. The Enrique Luis Varela layout was conventionally symmetrical, in the shape of an elongated horseshoe focused around a monument by Juan José Sicre to Cuba’s national hero, José Martí. An obelisk enhances the monument, reaching the highest point in the city at 139 meters above sea level. Some Modern buildings stand out among other large and well built but indifferent, the most outstanding being the former Tribunal de Cuentas (Aquiles Capablanca, Henry Griffin, with a bronze sculpture by Domingo Ravenet and a ceramic mural by Amelia Peláez; 1953), now Ministry of the Interior. Others are the Ministry of Communications (Ernesto Gómez Sampera, 1954), the Renta de Lotería (Lorenzo Gómez Fantoli, 1960) and the National Theatre (Arroyo & Menéndez, 1960, renovated in 1979). Two massive buildings by Govantes & Cabarrocas, the National Library (1957) and the City Hall (1960), now Ministry of the Armed Forces, are examples of an old-fashioned Modern Monumental. The complex was never finished, and remains a barren space lacking the enclosure a square needs; and dead—except during huge political rallies—in spite of the presence of the theatre and the nearby Polyvalent Sport Hall (Eusebio Azcue, 1991), which is the last building made at the Plaza.
**Quinta Avenida**, Fifth Avenue, is the main axis of the westward expansion of Havana, across the Almendares River into the neighboring municipality of Marianao at the beginning of the 20th century. Starting at the 1958 tunnel that connects with the Malecón, it stretches close to the coastline for more than seven miles, linking the upscale subdivisions of Miramar, Cubanacán (formerly Country Club), Siboney (formerly Biltmore), Flores, Atabey (formerly Nuevo Biltmore) and reaching Marina Hemingway, former Barlovento. Quinta Avenida has a beautifully landscaped median, enhancing a myriad of upper-class mansions; but it also led to one of the most popular recreation spots of Havana, Playa de Marianao, where the most exclusive private club of Cuba, the Habana Yacht Club, coexisted with a strip of fast food stands, per-hour motels and cheap bars and night clubs located just in front.

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Mario Coyula Cowley (Havana 1935–2014) was a Cuban architect, urban designer, critic and professor. For full biography, see http://mariocoyula2014.wordpress.com/authored-publications/