THE MANY TIMES OF HAVANA

by Mario Coyula-Cowley

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You take delight not in the seven or seventy wonders of a city, but in the answer it gives to a question of yours. Or in the questions it asks you, forcing you to answer, like Thebes through the mouth of the Sphinx.

—Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities

On the Edge of Time

Graziella Pogolotti sees all of Cuba as a port: a fresher, more evocative and all-inclusive image than the old cliché of a crucible or a crossroads. Havana synthesizes and epitomizes the qualities of a port; an open and cosmopolitan city, noisy and sinful, licked by the salt and swept by the winds. But it is also a city with provincial throwbacks, phobias and reservations, mixed with an external joy noisily channeled into music, food and sex, which seems to provide an escape from the basic hardships of everyday life.

Havana has also served as a springboard. Spain used it to launch its conquest of Terra Firma and as the last stop for its fleet before setting out into the Gulf Stream for the return trip across the Atlantic, laden with the spoils of sacking on a continental scale. In the first half of the twentieth century, it was pivotal for the United States in its neocolonial expansion into Latin America; and from there as well several attempts were launched to spread revolution to other parts of the world.

Cuban cities have been built up by layers of superimposed foreign influences, almost always arriving late. These paradigms later underwent changes, following a process of generalization and extension greatly shaped by adaptation to the climate, the
imprint of the clients and the builders, and the availability of resources. If the time it took to assimilate them was quite long, these imported models underwent *cubanization*; and because Cuba was such a small island with only one dominant culture, the regional differences were small. Cuban essence has always been very tied to its physical, temporal and cultural context: it cannot be reduced to a period or a place, nor to a plan or building type nor to an ethnic or social class; or even to the deliberate intention of a creator.

There have been many unsuccessful attempts searching for a national expression with tall colonnades, Creole tile roofs, ornamental grillwork and stained glass windows. These elements have been taken from fragments of the long colonial era, to be used as recipes, turning them into stereotypical pastiches of a pseudo folklore. In any case, this search for the national should be oriented towards aspects which are more abstract, but also more essential and transcendental, such as basic forms and volumes, scale, proportion, the interplay of light and shade, and the alternation of mass and void; regular urban grids, the rhythm imposed by narrow lots, and emphasis on the base and the top of the buildings. One of those characteristic aspects, color, has been deeply altered in recent years. The typical shade that Italians call Havana—a pastel ochre cautiously approximating a neighboring range of light cream, sand, beige and sienna—has disappeared under the irreverent brush, guided by the strident esthetic of *aguaje*¹ that has swept up even young architects with intricate names: the generation of Misledys and Yhosvanis.

Several things set Havana apart from most of other great Latin American cities. The slight influence of indigenous culture and the fact that the country was under Spanish domination almost eighty years longer than the rest of the continental colonies made Cuba more Spanish. Being so close to the United States, it was also more North American. Because of its economic and social structure, it was more modern—more capitalist, if you prefer—and also more wealthy, in spite of pockets of extreme poverty. Even though it has always been an agricultural country, three-fourths of its population lives in urban areas. The population was already more urban than that of the United States by the time Spanish rule ended in 1898. Cuban cities suffered no significant destruction from war or natural disasters in the twentieth century. This, coupled with the fact that they grew by addition and not by substitution, made possible the preservation of the distinct layers of their rich built heritage.

The layout of narrow streets with small and compact blocks, corner stores, narrow lots and low buildings gave Havana a very special silhouette, rhythm, urban texture, scale and character. But in spite of the city’s great colonial heritage, most of its

¹ *Aguaje*, a slang word from marginal background describing a loud, garish attitude in life, usually connected to boasting, exaggeration and trying to impress others while really achieving nothing.
buildings are less than a century old. All this contributes to a rich mixture of styles and periods, and images perceived from the street. Even though it has a distinct urban character, Havana is a flat city, and its low density gives it a special quality of life that is lacking in cities that were overdeveloped in the 1960s and ´70s.

In addition, the typical social structure that characterized most other major Latin American cities—basically, a few dozen extremely wealthy families against an interminable backdrop of shades of poverty and misery—did not apply to Havana. There were many more rich people, and their presence in the urban fabric was more evident because of the trail of mansions they left behind as they constantly moved west, in search of better and more elegant locations. Those old mansions were turned into offices, warehouses and businesses; or subdivided into substandard multi-family housing and rooming houses, falling into a serious state of disrepair. But the buildings were not erased by real estate speculation and the population has not been displaced by gentrification.

The very poor were almost invisible: hidden behind classic facades in downtown slums, or scattered throughout the outskirts in squalid neighborhoods of indigence. But what really set Havana apart was the existence of a huge lower middle class that demanded housing of high-quality design and construction. That created a well-defined and serviced urban fabric that covered large areas of the city. Havana grew outward in a process of urban sprawl, swallowing up nearby small towns, some with more than 300 years of history. These settlements retained their own local character and surrounded the active central city with small-town life. Persistence, diversity and a decadent but very lively charm have characterized Havana.

**Colonial Times**

Havana exists because of its bay. The city extends almost thirty kilometers along the coast, including an excellent strip of beaches in the east; but it was born and grew up because of the bay. With an area of five square kilometers, the bay has a narrow neck and then opens like a huge bag, protected from hurricanes and enemies by a hill and the most impressive system of colonial fortresses, including both the oldest and the largest forts built with durable materials by Europeans in the Americas. At the beginning of the seventeenth century, the influx of sailors and soldiers at times more than doubled the local population of 4,000. The city supplied and protected this fleet, giving Havana an early tertiary vocation.

The fingers of urban expansion followed the roads that connected the city to the rural environment that supplied it. These roads, along with the others that successively marked the city limits, were gradually urbanized and became calzadas, wide streets bordered by covered pedestrian walkways lined with stores and services on the first
floor and housing above. The citizens could then walk to the outskirts of the city, protected from the sun and the rain.

Wealth accumulated slowly until the last third of the 18th century, when the western part of the island began shifting from a local factory economy—just above subsistence level—to a booming plantation economy, aimed at export and employing slave labor. The leap was promoted by an enterprising educated Creole sugar aristocracy, and was facilitated by enlightened despotism in Spain and the independence of the 13 colonies of North America. After the Haitian revolution, the Cuban economy took over the niche that had previously been occupied by that prosperous French colony. Havana began to take on a noble image, with elegant plazas and promenades, mansions and public buildings; assuming the leading role among the other cities of the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean Basin.

Beginning in the 1840s, the homes of the upper classes changed from the typical 18th-century baroque mansions inside the city walls (three story homes around a central patio surrounded by cool, spacious verandas) to isolated neoclassical villas with gardens and front porches. These suburban homes proliferated in the new neighborhood of El Cerro, favored by the white Creole aristocracy. The urban renewal, which took place in the city in the 1830s, organized expansion, reinforced the grand civic image and enlivened public life with boulevards, cafes and theatres.

In 1859—the same year as Cerdá’s Plan for the expansion of Barcelona—a new avant-garde neighborhood sprang up in the west, very near the coast. El Carmelo was laid out with straight, wide streets, the first to be lined with trees; landscaped boulevards and square blocks a hundred meters long. Houses were set back from the street by a double front strip of gardens and porches, and one-third of each lot must remain unbuilt. The original settlement continued expanding toward the east, in search of the existing city, adding El Vedado in 1860 and Medina en 1883, thus creating the largest and most advanced urban colonial district. This entire sector would later be known by the generic name El Vedado, and the upper classes that had been living in El Cerro began to move there, initially building the same type of neoclassical villas.

The turn of the century, between the 19th and the 20th, was marked by the aftereffects of the bloody Independence Wars (1868-1878, 1879, 1895-1998) and the American military intervention (1898-1902) that replaced Spanish colonial domination. The intervening government had to confront a critical situation of sanitation and urban poverty, exacerbated by the effects of the terrible forced concentration of more than 100,000 peasants on the outskirts of Havana during the final war of independence in order to deprive the Cuban patriots of support. This concentration created what were probably the first slums in Latin America. The city began, at last, to look toward the sea when, in 1901, the first section of the Malecón seawall was begun, a feat envisioned 40 years earlier by that Cuban genius of 19th-century engineering, Francisco de Albear.
The enormous influence exerted over four centuries by several regions of Spain and the Canary Islands on the morphologic patterns, cultured as well as vernacular, and on both urban and rural zones of Cuba, has been well studied. This influence began to be felt as well in civil architecture, from the pre-baroque, with 17th-century Mudejar\(^2\) vestiges, created by builders and carpenters; continuing with the austere Cuban baroque of the 18th century that extended into early 19th-century. This was followed by a brief and isolated neo-gothic period and a neoclassicism of much greater weight in the city. In the latter, French influence surfaced through the spirit of Enlightenment and the massive immigration of colonists fleeing Haiti.

All these influences were associated with the gradual formation of a national identity that evolved during periods of reform, autonomy, annexation attempts and then independence—at first with a patrician leadership, and finally with a popular base. In addition, the influence of the native peoples did not carry much weight in the architecture, due to their scant numbers, their level of underdevelopment and their rapid extinction; they contributed only the primitive but ecologically sustainable palm-thatched hut, the bohío.

The Time of the Republic

The first third of the 20th-century brought enormous urban growth, supported by large investments previously made in the infrastructure and municipal services including the electric trolley network, the paving of streets and organized trash collection; as well as the sewage system inaugurated in 1913 and designed for 600,000 inhabitants, more than double the population at the time. In the first 25 years of the century, more Spanish immigrants arrived in Cuba than during the entire colonial period. This was due to an incredible economic boom caused by a spike in sugar prices, the so-called “Fat Cows”; culminating in 1920 with the famous “Dance of the Millions.” The violent crash of world prices of the product in that same year unleashed the “Lean Cows,” a period aggravated by a serious internal political crisis and the effects of the world-wide depression.

This period was clearly marked by a real boom in construction that adhered to the codes of Beaux Arts architecture in public buildings as well as the homes of the various social classes. This eclectic style had arrived late in Cuba, but it was quickly assimilated, after a short period in the first decade of the new century when Art Nouveau proliferated, actually more influenced by Catalan Modernisme than Belgian or French. Called the “style without style” by the Cuban novelist Alejo Carpentier, eclecticism practically covered entire districts like El Vedado, Santos Suárez, La Vibora, Lawton, and large parts of other neighborhoods in the central city as well as various suburbs. In fact, this architecture, especially that which could be called minor

\(^2\) Spanish-Moorish
eclecticism, made up the bulk of buildings in almost all Cuban cities.

In the 1920s Miramar, an elegant new neighborhood began to develop all along the west coast. Separated from El Vedado by the Almendares River, it still followed the same checkerboard street layout, but with larger lots and even more green space. It was deliberately deficient in public transportation and services in order to dissuade the less well off. Fifth Avenue, its magnificent boulevard, served as the green spinal cord of the neighborhood and continued even farther west toward the Country Club (now Cubanacán), where the very rich lived. There the Spanish-American regular street grid changed to an Anglo-Saxon winding City Beautiful urban pattern. Havana also boasts an important Art Deco heritage, in both its streamline and geometric trends, which dates from the end of the 1920s through the early 1940s. This evolution marked a change from European to U.S. influence and coincided more or less with the fall of the dictator Machado in 1933. Two other tendencies appeared in the final stage of this movement: neocolonial, used almost exclusively in private houses; and monumental modern, with a mixture of futurist and proto-rationalist influences, in public buildings.

The post-World War II period witnessed the second great 20th-century construction boom, by this time marked by modern architectural codes. Several dozen suburban subdivisions sprang up under the protection of the Law of Promotion of Guaranteed Mortgages (FHA); and the coast of El Vedado began to fill up with high-rise towers, taking advantage of the Condominium Law. All this further reinforced the primacy of the capital as the great resplendent head of a poor country.

A group of important architects who were part of the artistic vanguard of the 1950s managed in different ways to adapt the intrinsic iconoclasm of the Modern Movement to their specific climate, programs, urban context and cultural identity. This vanguard would create master works that prodded a multitude of followers to achieve a high average level, which is evident in the extensive modern heritage of Havana. That influence, along with the renovating echoes emanating from Brazil, Venezuela and Mexico, could be seen in the young architects and architectural students of the time. They would also face new challenges in construction after the mass exodus of professionals following the triumph of the Revolution, in 1959. Against conventional wisdom, the search for excellence within modernity continued well into the second half of the 1960s, incorporating a strong brutalist component.

Revolutionary Times

Havana in 1959 housed a little more than one fifth of the country's six million inhabitants. The new government stopped the land speculation that already had begun

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3 A trend in architecture originated in mid-1950s whose expression relied on strong contrasts and textures, and in exposing structures, building materials, installations and secondary components.
to devalue good residential neighborhoods such as El Vedado. The master plan for a Havana of four million inhabitants, drawn up in 1956–58 by a team headed by José Luis Sert and Paul Lester Wiener, fortunately remained on paper. The plan would have disfigured the city, eliminating an important part of its historic heritage. The Malecón, the seawall that functions as a gigantic bench and its iconic promenade, would have been blocked by a continuous screen of skyscrapers and an artificial island of casinos and hotels. In fact, Havana was not only saved from the Sert Plan but also from the young Cuban architects, brought up in the fundamentalist spirit of the Modern Movement and the International Congresses of Modern Architecture, who, given the opportunity in the early 1960s, would have carried out equally destructive projects.

In an effort to achieve more balanced distribution of wealth and population, construction was directed toward improving living conditions in the rural areas and in the national network of provincial capitals and medium-sized cities. Between 1959 and 1970, 214 new rural settlements were built, with a total of more than 41,000 dwellings. This policy was detrimental to the conservation of Havana's important heritage, where social and physical deterioration had already begun much earlier in the central districts. As a result, overcrowding increased in those areas and the population sought to relieve it by constructing illegal internal additions that ended up impacting the exterior as well as degrading the streetscape. But this policy also appeased the flow of internal migration and preserved the capital from traumatic reconstruction projects such as the one projected for the central Cayo Hueso neighborhood in the early 1970s, which luckily was interrupted.

Strangely, the 1950s high-rise apartment prototype continued, with a few adjustments, after the triumph of the Revolution; probably under the assumption that what had served the bourgeois well could be done on a cheaper, smaller scale for the proletariat. In any case, the famous Unit #1 of Havana del Este (1959–61) remains the best large-scale housing project ever built in Cuba. The 1960s were marked by enthusiasm, creativity and experimentation, with several outstanding works, like the Cubanacán Schools of Art and the Jose Antonio Echeverría University City (CUJAE), and with an overall high average level of design and construction.

Cuban architecture soon came to be dominated by the massive construction of a few models, repeated ad infinitum, without concern for the context and stripped of cultural intentions. There were some special high-quality projects, although almost all of them were on the outskirts of the city and therefore had little influence on the urban image. But there also were some works, especially schools, which demonstrated how good quality architecture could be achieved within the rigid framework imposed by prefabrication. On the other hand, the construction of hundreds of secondary schools in the countryside changed the rural landscape of Cuba.

In the 1970s, new housing developments were constructed in the capital, mainly...
to the east, in Alamar; to the south in Altahabana and to the west in Ermita-San Agustín. The innovative method of the microbrigades was used in these buildings, as an alternative to construction by state brigades. Workers and employees of various work centers left their jobs for two or three years to construct dwellings for themselves and their coworkers. The State continued to pay their salaries and provided materials, equipment and technical support. The model was always the same, with buildings of five floors and some of twelve scattered without a defined urban structure, lacking services, utilities and organized public spaces. In this way a clear distinction arose between the traditional city, well planned and memorable, and those amorphous sets of buildings where hundreds of thousands of people found shelter while the rest of the amenities that make a city inhabitable remained pending. Nevertheless, that policy indirectly helped to preserve the central city.

The end of the 1980s saw a renaissance of the microbrigades with a new variant called social that mostly incorporated local residents into the construction process, inserting buildings into vacant lots within the consolidated urban landscape. Those builders also constructed public works such as medical clinics, schools and additions to hospitals. These programs coincided with the delayed arrival of postmodernism, adopted by a group of young architects uncomfortable with the low quality of the predominant architecture in Cuba. For them, the Cubanacán Art Schools were the swan song in the search of a vanguard architecture, both cultured and Cuban. At the beginning of the 1990s, a terrible crisis was unleashed by the sudden collapse of the Soviet Union and the Eastern European Socialist Bloc. This crisis, known in Cuba by the somewhat cryptic name of “Special Period,” practically paralyzed these projects and left the city with many partially-completed works. All of this prevented the decanting and digestion of that diluted postmodernism.

Ironically, the apostles of creativity almost always limited themselves to copying the external form of paradigmatic international examples, embracing as novel a movement that was already passé in European and North American cultural centers, where it was born fifteen years earlier. These transplants proved even more pathetic when trying to imitate an architecture whose principles were dictated by opulence and esthetics that, according to Fredric Jameson⁴, reflected the logic of late capitalism; and that therefore required abundant space, high quality of execution and costly materials. That, obviously, could not be achieved in the native version applied to small projects to be carried out by improvised builders. Something similar happened to the few examples of high tech⁵ architecture, almost always limited to the use of metallic latticework.

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⁴ Contemporary Marxist American philosopher.
⁵ A trend in architecture since the 1960s strongly influenced by avant-garde building materials and technologies that combined lightness and transparency with sculptural structures.
The Time Between Two Centuries

In one of his first visits to Havana, Kevin Lynch\(^6\) asked about the changes in the form of the city that reflected the great social and economic changes produced by the Revolution. In the early ’70s, the inherited physical structures still gave the false illusion that little had changed in the capital, above all in the central city. But already many businesses and service establishments concentrated in the center and several sub-centers which dotted the boulevards and main streets, comprising continuous kilometers of storefronts, had begun closing as part of the downsizing process associated with the scarcity of products; and finally they were turned over to needy persons to be adapted as housing, almost always substandard.

Along with the impoverishment or even closing of window displays and the deactivation of lighted signs, this brought a radical change in the main traditional department stores and entire commercial streets, whose images deteriorated along with their operations. But the city was also freed from the visual contamination produced by the accumulation of aggressive commercial graphics in bad taste and the periodic plague of electoral posters of the pre-revolutionary era. Later the government, looking for a more ostensible way to increase supply to the populace, placed shabby kiosks on the sidewalks in front of the old closed businesses. An inverse process occurred in many mansions of old elegant districts such as El Vedado and Miramar. Abandoned by the mass exodus of their owners after the triumph of the Revolution, they were turned into government offices, schools, student dormitories, embassies and residences for diplomats and foreigners. The apartment buildings and smaller houses became the homes of families of more humble origin and civil employees. The change in those districts was initially one of content, with little variation in the image.

In fact, El Vedado was always a mixed neighborhood in spite of its elegant aura; but the upper classes imposed their urban image and guidelines of behavior on their neighbors of lesser means. Nevertheless, the generous porch of the traditional \textit{bodega}—a small corner store selling groceries and often snacks and drinks, usually run by a Chinese or a Spaniard—performed like a spontaneous center of social exchange on the block, where ladies rubbed shoulders with servants. That mingling also occurred in the typical \textit{parque republicano}, a vacant block planted with trees with a small central podium or gazebo, where the very young and the very old of different backgrounds coexisted. To live on the second or third floor in front of a park in El Vedado is still the ideal for a majority of the residents of Havana.

The supermarket construction program in the 1980s eliminated the majority of

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\(^6\) American urban planner and professor from MIT that in 1960 established a revolutionary approach to urban perception theory with his book \textit{The Image of the City}. 

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the bodegas. The liveliness of the corners perished along with them, and they became a focus of litter and later, of visual aggression, when the premises were turned over to be adapted as makeshift housing. Many of the buildings would return to use as rudimentary in-home eating and drinking establishments when private work was legalized in the decade of ´90s. On the other hand, the very idea of the supermarket that arose in the consumer society to induce customers to buy things they do not need, was in contradiction with the essence of socialist rationed product distribution, always in small quantities at subsidized low prices. Thus, the new supermarkets—apart from their architectural blandness—ended up with internal subdivisions, not very different from small bodegas, where the customers mark their places in several lines at the same time.

As the social composition changed in many parts of the city, so also did the priorities and expectations of the people, marked by the chronic shortages of resources. A greater social homogenization was also produced by the state control of employment, medical care, services and education and the effect—more qualitative than quantitative—of internal migration. The deliberate national policy of urbanizing the countryside coincided with a spontaneous backlash that ruralized the city, the most visible manifestations of which were the planting of banana trees and raising of farm animals in yards, patios and rooftops; the illegal construction of rustic wooden structures with thatched palm roofs, inaugurating a neo-Taino⁷ style; the street parties around huge pots of soup cooked over wood fires on the parterres;⁸ the appearance in the streets of tractors, carts pulled by animals and the monstrous humped busses known as camels, and many unrepaired streets themselves gradually returning to the original dirt. All of this reflected, but also stimulated, a change in values, customs and patterns of behavior.

At first, these changes remained inside the homes, but slowly they broke out into the streets. They especially wrought a substantial change in the previously porous barrier between the public and the private, with the appearance of all sort of grates, walls, fences and awnings. This jerry-built architecture altered the facades and became the first images to be seen from the streets, narrowing and impoverishing the perception of the city. These modifications, which violate municipal regulations, proliferated in the 1990s due to a suicidal relaxation of urban control. This action and inaction were both conditioned by the Special Period.

Up until that time, Havana had received little internal immigration and less still external, while it experienced considerable emigration. During the first three decades

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⁷ An irony for coarse, uncultivated people transferring elementary rural patterns into the city. Tainos were pre-Hispanic native inhabitants of Arawak descent in eastern Cuba. They pressed their heads with boards to distort the skull. Some contemporary versions of tainos might have pressed too hard.

⁸ The narrow green strip, usually planted with trees, between the sidewalk and the street pavement.
following the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, population growth rate in the capital city was less than the already low national average, something extremely rare in Latin American capitals. Nevertheless, in the mid 90s an increase in internal migration took place, mainly from the poorer eastern provinces of the country, requiring for the first time a law—passed in 1997—to control it.

That migration was reflected in an increase of substandard housing. With neighborhoods, as with people, the more you have, the more you have to lose. The traditionally poor districts have stayed about the same—many have even improved—but the old elegant areas soon lost the front strips of garden and porches that separated the buildings from the public thoroughfare, and their beautiful facades now appear deformed by the many additions that have blossomed like tumors, badly filtered through high chain-link fences rusting in the sea breeze.

The End of Time?

Contrary to the predictions of many, the Cuban Revolution managed to survive the collapse of the Soviet Union. The crisis also highlighted some intrinsic weaknesses and forced it to seek new more sustainable solutions, such as riding bicycles, urban agriculture, local resources and soft technologies, as well as greater decentralization and participation of the population. Between 1993 and 1994 the government made several important decisions, including an opening up to tourism, private work, and foreign investments, along with the legalization of the circulation of the dollar. The country now must find its place in a globalized, unipolar world where the market economy reigns, and where it can no longer aspire to live only by selling sugar.

Around eighty percent of the recent construction in Cuba is related to tourism and real estate operations addressed to foreign clients. In addition, money remittances from relatives abroad displaced sugar as a major source of income. Many of those investments are joint ventures with Spanish, Canadian, Italian or Israeli capital, where Cuba's basic contributions are the land, some rough and basic materials and the work force. As a consequence, in the old, elegant neighborhoods of Miramar and El Vedado, bad imitations of internationally repudiated models have sprung up: heavy and inexpressive hotels, shopping malls with reflective glass facades, even facing west; condominiums for foreigners with fluffy architecture and a hard density; and fast-food outlets with their strident color signature, mustard yellow and catsup red. Fortunately, the pace of investment has still been relatively slow. At the beginning of the 21st century, the country once again faces a worsening of the economic crisis and international political isolation promoted by the most formidable military and economic power in history.

At the turn of the century, the population of Havana was 2.2 million—a fifth of the
nation—occupying an urbanized area of 360 square kilometers.

**Time Comes and Goes**

The old 143-hectare core within the original walled city, plus the 19th-century expansion of the old strip of walls, and the complete colonial fortification system, was designated by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) as a World Heritage Site in 1982, before the worldwide glut of such designations. But the historically valuable heritage of Havana really covers more than 2,000 hectares and many architectural styles and eras. Historic preservation has recovered, in a slow but continuous way, prominent buildings in Havana since the 1960s, with a greater impulse in the 1980s. The actions were initially concentrated on the restoration of the oldest, most unique and significant buildings and limited to the ancient walled city. The new uses for those buildings were restricted to the dominion of culture: museums, libraries, bookstores, art galleries, artists' studios, cultural research centers, conference halls, and offices related to cultural activity. This brought both public and official recognition, making Old Havana an obligatory stop for visiting dignitaries and guests of the government.

The scope was broadened during the 1990s with the adaptive reuse of historic buildings as hotels, hostels, restaurants, cafés, stores, boutiques and the offices of foreign or Cuban-foreign joint ventures. This was supported in the Law Decree 143 of 1993 which authorized the Office of the Historian of the City to function as a promoter and investor in the landmarks restoration program in Old Havana, to develop its own businesses and reinvest the profits in its conservation, rehabilitation and restoration projects. In the second half of that decade, the activity was expanded even more to incorporate the rehabilitation of dwellings and other social programs for benefit of the local population, especially in the traditionally poor neighborhood of San Isidro, on the southern tip of Old Havana.

Some newer sectors were also rehabilitated, such as the first fourteen blocks along the Malecón, thanks to the generous collaboration of several autonomous Spanish communities. This reflected a growing awareness of the cultural value of 20th-century architecture. Nevertheless, this project exemplifies the challenges that must be faced in the integral rehabilitation of the city. The initial focus, one that might be labeled “politically correct” by a liberal U.S. academic, was to preserve the existing buildings as they presently are, without displacing the present inhabitants. But many of those buildings are in very bad condition, and are subjected to the constant aggression of the sea in the form of corrosive salt and occasional coastal flooding.

The original population, predominantly lower middle class and some middle class, left that strip of the city a long time ago; and the present inhabitants lack the
resources to keep it up, something akin to living on a boat. This is exacerbated by overcrowding and the lifestyle it brings together. In a market economy, these persons would have already been displaced by yuppies or foreign retirees. The buildings would look like new, but the strip would be an enclave of the well-off within one of the zones with most social problems in all of Havana. Perhaps the solution might be, as it so often is, to achieve a balance. That requires a subtle, but effective handling of the processes and the mechanisms of encouragement and dissuasion, as well as the participation of the population and the reinvestment of profits to make the effort self-sustaining.

On the other hand, the training of workers for the restoration projects brought about the recovery of long forgotten skills. This could be extended to other sectors, to rise the long-lost quality of the construction trade due to improvisation and the use of prefabricated techniques. The success of these programs has also demonstrated the economic advantages of preserving Havana. The Office of the Historian of the City is now financially self-sustaining, turning into a resource something which for a long time was seen only as a problem. The income of the office was 23 times greater in 2001 than it was in 1994, and investments grew 20 fold. By mid-2002, Havana had a population of 2.18 million, with a tendency to decrease and to age.

A Time for People

The 21st-century found Havana a city preserved by default. The buildings are overcrowded and seriously deteriorated. Lack of money is still the main problem, but it is combined now with another opposite threat: money that comes in too quickly. This could turn Cuba's magnificent cities and natural attractions into easy prey for commercial ventures with cheap anonymous architecture, looking for easy profits in a country that is so desperately needy. Another threat, possibly worse, comes from the pathetic search for prestige by the emerging sector with access to dollars. The recent increase in purchasing power—often attained by illicit means—in people who may have an acceptable level of instruction but bad manners and very bad taste, is increasingly distorting the image and use of public spaces. That perception of "wealth," following the cheap esthetics of the streetwise, has filtered down to decent citizens, in the same way marginal slang once crept into their language.

There is a disquieting ascent of a combination of visual patterns, tastes, fashions and behaviors strongly influenced by cheap soap operas, third class tourists and poor nouveau riche Cubans, along with relatives who emigrated in the last waves boasting about a pathetic well-being from Hialeah in Miami. All of this is taxing on a lifestyle marked by many kinds of scarcities, the uprooting of rural immigrants and the stubborn persistence of urban marginality, with a historical component that is associated with

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9 Young urban professionals.
race and substandard housing.

The problems of cultural identity in the city and its architecture, ranging from banality—be it imported or native—to marginalization, were discussed extensively in November of 1998, during the seminal Sixth Congress of the Union of Writers and Artists of Cuba (UNEAC); and they continue to draw the attention of the highest-ranking authorities. Fortunately, a few recent good examples, generally associated with deconstructivism, stand out from the insipid bulk of complacent or deficient architecture. Perhaps the analysis of these tendencies might prevent, or at least cushion, potential irreversible disasters produced by a new intervention from the north—this time not military—when individuals marked by uprooting and moved by greed—still speaking the same chewed language and sharing the same flat expectations, cheap tastes and dubious models of success—return to meet their peers on the island.

Despite so many achievements in historical preservation, the vast richness of Havana's buildings can only be saved when the greatest possible number of people can take care of themselves and fix up their own dwellings. Even if the macroeconomics of the country improves, it is good to remember that the spirit—and also the form—of a city is given by its people; and the people establish their priorities and project them on their surroundings according to their lifestyles. It is necessary to construct a solid and vibrant civic culture to carry forward into the streets and into daily life the impressive successes of contemporary Cuban culture in art, music, literature and science. In order to rescue and to defend ethical, moral and cultural values, value must be given to the values (in other words, real and recognizable value must be attached to them). In a very special way this is also true for architecture. It is essential to bring it back into the world of culture, rescuing it from the secondary place to which it has been relegated as simple construction. All this is possible if Cuba preserves, empowers and mobilizes the greatest resource it has: its remarkable human capital.

After Time

But the need to involve the people is often overlooked by those who think that they already know everything that needs to be known. The terrible attacks of September 11 awakened serious concerns about the intrinsic vulnerability of megacities and the growing threat of the limitation of individual rights as a sacrifice to security. Instead of analyzing the causes of terrorism, the reaction of the only world-wide superpower and some of the old European metropolises—now almost turned into its colonies—has been "preemptive" war, feeding the vicious circle. Metropolitan life as we know it could

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10 An avant-garde, iconoclastic trend in architecture that in the 1990s substituted postmodernism with a vocabulary influenced by Russian Constructivists in early 1900s and the deconstructivist literary theory of contemporary French author Jacques Derrida. It intends to disturb conventional perfection and the feeling of stability through fragmentation, tilted grids, angled intersections of planes and warped surfaces.
disappear, with all its marvelous interactions of ingenuity, brightness and misery. Or, perhaps worse, it could become a virtual substitute. The game has just begun, but is interactive and does not have a predetermined final outcome—if we learn how to play.

June 2002–June 2003

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[Editor’s note: "The Many Times of Havana" was an address presented to a gathering of the Toronto Society of Architects on September 13, 2007.
Spanish versions were also published:
The essay was also published en Revista Bimestre Cubana # 20, pp 147-160, Sociedad Económica de Amigos del País, La Habana, ene-jun 2004, and in Mapping # 93, pp 52-61, ISSN 1.131-9.100, Madrid, abril 2004.]