Havana was the most “Spanish” city among the Iberian-American colonies on the continent, emancipated eight decades earlier. The indigenous population in Cuba was underdeveloped and scarce and was exterminated and assimilated very rapidly, leaving few traces on Cuba’s material culture, except for the typical palm-thatched hut, the “bohío”, and some basic foods that have had the rare privilege of passing from poor to luxurious. The cultural legacy of the slaves brought over from western Africa and Angola was very important to intangible heritage, especially the syncretic religious cults, music and dance, but did not influence territorial structure or urban images, which were dominated by European codes and values, with Mudéjar vestiges in the early period. Between the late 18th and early 19th centuries, almost 30,000 French colonists arrived in Cuba, fleeing from Haiti and Louisiana. That immigration brought progress to sugar and coffee production and also became a part of culture and customs, above all in Cuba’s easternmost regions.

In addition, from the mid-19th century, the influence of the United States began to make itself strongly felt, combined with an awakening of a sense of national identity among the nascent bourgeoisie and the rich, educated and innovative native-born patrician class. They favorably compared the young republic of the North with the ancestral oppression of the European colonial power over a colony that by that time was its main source of income. That sense of national identity was constructed over different attitudes, sometimes superimposed: the annexation movement, reformism, autonomy movement and finally, the independence movement. They all reinforced the white character of the city. The culture of African slaves, upon whose backs the buoyant plantation economy of 19th century Cuba was based, was misunderstood and repressed for a long time.

Free blacks and pardos (mixed-race), many of whom worked in skilled trades, had gradually populated the poor Havana neighborhoods that lay outside its walls. Most of them lived in tenement housing called solares or ciudadelas, in double or single rows of rooms that ran along long, narrow and deep patios, with complete families crowded into each room. Another form of substandard housing, also very associated with race, was the cuarteria: old mansions converted into slums, subdivided horizontally and
vertically with the ubiquitous *barbacoas* or makeshift mezzanines that take advantage of the original high ceilings. The Chinese immigrants, mostly Cantonese, who took the Place of African slaves, did not develop their own types of housing. That community was concentrated in a neighborhood in the city center, but living in buildings that modestly followed the codes of European neoclassicism and eclecticism. This ethnic component is in extinction due to the fact that those immigrants were mostly men, and they were not replaced.

Despite the massive participation of black and mixed-race people in the Liberation Army during the independence wars of the latter third of the 19th century, the officers were mostly white, and several top black commanders died in combat. During the first quarter of the 20th century, more Spanish immigrants arrived in Cuba than during the previous four centuries of colonial rule, and to a much lesser extent, European Jews also came, particularly as a result of World War II. With a century of delay, it seemed like the “whitening” strategy for the island was being fulfilled, something recommended by the ideologues of the native-born landowning class since the late 18th century to prevent the "black threat" after the upheavals in Haiti. The brutal repression of the uprising of the Independents of Color Party in 1912, when more than 3,000 people were killed—many murdered after surrendering—, was a clear message from the white oligarchy to blacks who were not content with being marginalized.

While Spanish colonial Havana was white, it remained so under the republic. That was evident in the culture and patterns of conduct imposed by the ruling class; in urban design and street landscaping, the architecture, avenues and parks; stores, cafés and theatres; and in the business districts, veritable linear centers that gave structure to the urban fabric. Heading into the 1920s, Buenos Aires and Havana were the two major urban centers of Latin America, but the Cuban capital had already begun to take on a majestic aspect by the last third of the 18th century, reinforced by the urban reforms of the 1830s. From the mid-19th century, an entire neighborhood, El Cerro, was populated with splendid housing estates with neoclassical architecture, where the native-born patrician class escaped from coexistence with the lower social layers, but also from the cholera that, in 1833, took the lives of 8,000 Havana residents in three months. Those epidemics were caused by the overcrowding that was already affecting the old walled-in city, located at the end of the open-air aqueduct of 1592, the first built by Europeans in the Americas. The apogee of this neighborhood was very brief, and by the last quarter of that century, the construction of new palatial villas came to a halt.

El Vedado district was an avant-garde urbanization, the best and biggest piece of Spanish colonial urban development in Cuba, with wide, straight streets that for the first time were lined with trees, homes set back behind strips of garden and front porches, and also spaced apart, with the advantage, moreover, of being near the sea and its fresh breezes. The beginning of this urban development in 1859, with El Carmelo
neighborhood, contributed to the decay of El Cerro, while the independence wars brought housing construction to a standstill. In the early 20th century, a spectacular explosion in housing construction occurred, sparked by the settlement in the area of veteran Liberation Army officers who took advantage of their retirement pay, immediately followed by the high sugar prices stemming from World War I: the “fat cows” period.

Despite its elegant image, El Vedado was a socially mixed neighborhood, almost from the very beginning. The major families of the old patrician class, associated by marriage with the wealthy bourgeoisie, coexisted there with immigrants and newly-rich politicians, professionals, public employees, workers and even marginal elements. Except for the latter two groups, it was a white population, with the always-blurry lines in this part of the world between the white-white and the light-skinned mestizos with “good hair”…. The poor, generally non-white, were full-time servants in the houses of the rich or worked as artisans, peddlers, carriers and other low-skilled low-paid jobs. They mostly inhabited tenement housing hiding behind classical-looking facades. But the image projected outward in El Vedado by the ornamented main facades—with their front porches and gardens, low see-through fences and service entrances in the rear—was dictated by the upper class, as were the guidelines for the use of public spaces, observed by everyone. This was not just a result of the determination to impose the values of the official, class-oriented and racist white culture, but the personal interest of property owners, who wanted to keep their values up.

In the 1930s, after the overthrow of the Machado dictatorship, the white native-born oligarchy lost direct political power, which passed on to populist but also corrupt politicians, and the prevailing cultural models switched from Paris to New York. However, the great mass of construction in Havana was determined not by the haute bourgeoisie but by a very large lower middle class that demanded decent housing, even if the rent cost them half their monthly income. That class included tens of thousands of small business owners located on almost every street corner of the grid, and in long rows of shops along the arcaded avenues or Calzadas. They inhabited complete neighborhoods with smaller-size versions of high-class houses, proud of making obvious their status as non-proletarians, and also as whites. But whites still worked as servants to the wealthy, as evidenced by classified ads for “Spanish cooks,” making it clear they were white.

With the first revolutionary measures, between 1959 and 1961, there was a mass exodus of the high class and a large part of the middle urban sectors, almost all of them white people. The properties abandoned by their owners were taken over by the state and used as offices, housing, schools and dormitories for students who came from distant rural areas. Complete elegant neighborhoods of western Havana, such as Miramar, Country Club (with its name changed to Cubanacán after 1959), Biltmore...
(Siboney) and Nuevo Biltmore (Atabey), filled up with rows of uniformed, marching schoolchildren, whose skin was darker than that of the previous inhabitants, cared for by even darker-skinned “aunties.” Many of the latter ended up living illegally in the homes that were initially used as dormitories or schools, and which became emptied of their students as ad hoc facilities were built.

This gave rise to an interesting pattern, with empty mansions or occupied by foreign individuals or companies coexisting with illegal inhabitants who, for the most part, lived in the former garages and servants’ quarters in the back. From above, one could see an interesting concentration in the form of a stain formed by precarious, dense additions at the center of the block, where the rear parts of each property met; while on the outside, the previous bourgeois image was precariously maintained. Other smaller houses and apartments were given to needy families, which led to a greater social mix, above all when the General Housing Law allowed renters to become the owners of their homes, via their monthly rent payments, which had been cut by half since 1960.

Almost 85 per cent of households in Havana are now the owners of their homes, but do not have the means to maintain them. The ban on selling or buying homes brought the paradoxical consequence of the population becoming rooted in the place where they were living or where their parents were living at the time the Urban Reform law was passed in 1960. The lucky ones who were living in good houses and good neighborhoods became the owners of desirable, but not saleable assets, while those who had the misfortune of inhabiting substandard housing at that time remained tied to them, although in the worst cases they were exempted from paying rent. Given that housing had always been associated with race, this tended to keep blacks and mestizos in the poorest neighborhoods and houses.

Yet, by taking advantage of the possibility of house swaps and negotiating infinite restrictions, some people with more income have been able to move into the old elegant neighborhoods, generally by offering money under the table to the other party. That phenomenon grew after the economic crisis of the 1990s—which followed the collapse of “real” socialism in the Soviet Union and was given the cryptic name Special Period—could reinforce the territorial inequalities that already existed between Havana’s traditionally wealthier northern coastal strip and southern Havana, where the common folk live. Those old elegant neighborhoods are more accessible and attractive for foreigners who want to rent rooms. As a consequence, those houses have ostensibly improved their visual qualities, by direct action of their owners, who are taking care of their business’ image. In some cases, that change is beginning to radiate out toward the neighboring buildings.

One of the main sources of income in the country is the remittances sent by Cubans who have emigrated, chiefly to the United States, to relatives who stayed
behind. In their majority, those emigrants are white, and therefore so are the relatives on the island who receive help. However, part of that money is redistributed by paying for the work and services of the self-employed, in that way reaching blue-collar workers in different trades who often have darker skin. That redistribution includes an extensive network of illegal supplies via the black market.

By the 1990s, the population of Havana began to shrink and to age. That is partly because of emigration, which is greater in the capital; low birth rates stemming from the material difficulties in raising children, especially food and housing shortages, and longer life expectancy, which reaches 76 years. For several decades after the triumph of the Revolution, rates of migration to the Cuban capital remained numerically small, but grew significantly as a result of the severe shortages of the Special Period. In reality, the problem of migration to the capital had been more qualitative than quantitative until then. In 1997, access to Havana became regulated. Paradoxically, the best are dissuaded in that way, leading to a worsening social composition of those who continue to come. Many of these migrants are from eastern Cuba, historically poorer and “darker,” who are given the pejorative name of Palestinians because their uprooting, accused of aggravating the situation of the capital’s inhabitants. This internal discrimination is making itself felt, indirectly, in the worrying rise in violence among supporters of the baseball teams from the capital and Santiago de Cuba.

While it is difficult to estimate, total remittances sent from abroad by people who were publicly repudiated at the time of leaving the country now exceed earnings from the sugar harvest, which had always been the foundation of the national economy. The first Cubans who emigrated after 1959—setting aside those who were directly associated with the recently deposed Batista dictatorship—were educated people with a talent for business and refined tastes. But the successive waves of emigration, starting with the Mariel exodus in 1980 and the rafters in 1994, included others with different cultural patterns and without references to a higher quality of life.

These last migration waves recreated in a foreign place, based on their often second uprooting, distorted values that have sprung forth spontaneously after the radical fumigation represented by the Revolution, and that altered the models of success, habits, styles, language and customs that each previous social sector routinely tried to copy from the immediately higher social strata, in their attempts to climb the social ladder. The crisis of values is a recurring concern for authorities and intellectuals, but the first problem is how to give value to values. To do so, they must bring some direct and visible benefit for those who practice them. This becomes complicated with the rise of a new perverse model of success, one that is individualistic, amoral and rude.

Over the last half century, the way people talk has changed a lot. The particular aspects of this new speech has taken on an almost caricature-like level, no longer limited to confusing “v” with “b,” slurring over or simply dropping the final “s,” or doubling
some consonants at the expense of the adjacent. But the most noteworthy is the epidemic of invented names—a nightmare for notaries and scribes—which have replaced those of Spanish Catholic saints. Interestingly, those new names use an excess of the letter “Y”—Misledys, Yusimi, Viocysandry—thus showing a taste for the exotic that may reflect escapism or a perceived need to express individuality and a separation from the anonymous masses. Mutilated diction has almost always been associated with the previously subdued black race; however, it has now become common, above all among young people. It also includes some terms taken from criminal slang. All of this is probably the result of integration and the mass nature of the schools, including teachers, who are often not well trained: only 19% of them in Havana are experienced. Another source of influence is populist realism in TV soap operas.

Between 1993 and 1994, the crisis made it necessary to carry out a set of economic reforms and openings, such as the legalization of dollar possession by Cuban citizens; the openings to tourism and foreign investment; the distribution of 2.6 million hectares of state land to agricultural production cooperatives for guaranteeing food for the population; an expansion of the self-employed sector; experiments with soft technology with low environmental impact; greater decentralization and more active participation by the population. However, these measures were seen as necessary steps imposed by emergency, reluctantly accepted by decision-makers, without understanding their rationality. Interestingly, at the end of the 1990s, an official perception began to spread that the macroeconomic situation was improving, with a consequent tendency to return to greater state centralization, and even to ways and models whose urbanistic, economic, environmental and social unfeasibility had apparently been demonstrated.

HAVANA IS CHANGING

Official pre-revolutionary Havana—urban, cosmopolitan, white and petty bourgeois—has suffered a partly planned but mostly spontaneous readjustment that responds to the interests of new actors in other settings. For a time, changes in the existing city were kept to the building interiors, limited to the new uses for old shells, but afterward they began to pop out and spread. These changes to the city’s image and functioning have become even more visible with the economic crisis and a parallel, suicidal relaxing of control over urban development. There are generalized, visible and permanent distortions, which reflect the growing social indiscipline that has invaded the streets. In addition, the accumulated shortage and poor condition of housing is aggravated by overcrowding and the loss of centrality in the traditional compact city. On the other hand, real estate and tourism investments, plus hard currency retail became concentrated on the western coastal strip, privileged since the 1920s, with a worrying growing dependency on automobiles. Public transport went from 2,200 city busses in
1989 to 400 operating in 2000, with a slight recovery in 2008, whose most visible manifestation is the disappearance of the monstrous passenger-packing local-built buses known as “camellos”.

This shortage is aggravating the differences between citizens who travel in cars and those who don’t. Inequality is being reinforced with the existence of two currencies, the national one that is used to pay wages, and the convertible one, 25 times more valuable, which is used to pay for many goods and services—except staples from the food ration card, which are subsidized but fall quite short of the needs; and health care and education, which are free. The latter two were considered for a long time to be the two greatest achievements of the revolutionary government, but the crisis has finally begun to affect them. More than 30,000 Cuban doctors are working abroad, and the Government takes a substantial part of the salaries they are being paid. Actually, income from Cuban professional and skilled technicians working abroad now ranks as the country’s first, above tourism. The rising world prices of food and fuel are adding to Cuba’s own structural economic flaws.

In parallel, the macetas—those poor/new rich with access to hard currency, often through illegal channels—have begun to impose their own tastes and norms of behavior, which are being projected into public life, possibly as part of a triangle that once started in the countryside and small Cuban cities and now includes Hialeah, in a Havana-Miami-Havana two-way flow of persons, habits and tastes. That has produced hybridizations and mutations with repercussions on the built environment, becoming increasingly distant from the coherent image of the traditional city once imposed by the former ruling class and its official white culture, with a heavy European and later U.S. influence.

Actually, that phenomenon had begun before, with the migrants from the countryside and provincial cities and towns, who came to the capital seeking opportunities for a better life. The precedent to that was probably the forced concentration of peasants into the cities in 1896, ordered by the Spanish governor to deprive Cuban patriots fighting for independence of sources of support, and which led to the death of some 200,000 people in a country with a population of one million. That cruel measure also led to the appearance of complete neighborhoods of improvised shacks in the outlying and interstitial areas of the city, the precursors to the so-called

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1 Popular name used for the huge lump-back local-built buses that, as an emergency solution and with long routes, transported large numbers of passengers in the capital. They were recently replaced by new articulated buses mostly made in China.
“insalubrious neighborhoods,” which in other countries are known as shantytowns, favelas, bidonvilles, callampas and villas miserias, or that euphemism, “young towns.”

The revolutionary government’s policy of urbanizing the countryside led, for a long time, to state investment aimed at improving living conditions in rural areas and provincial cities. More than 600 new rural towns were built beginning in 1959, in an effort to stabilize the agricultural workforce, but that was not achieved to the desired extent. Migration from rural areas was diverted to nearby cities, which saw their populations doubled as their territory tripled. What happened instead was a spontaneous “ruralization” of the capital, with a proliferation of shanties made of plywood, tin and scrap, and palm thatch roofs that had been prohibited at different times by the colonial government; plantain groves and farm animals, country soup cooked over wood fires in street parterres—where many trees were felled because they were too much of a reminder of the rural environment from which their killers once escaped—, horse-drawn carts to compensate for the shortage of city buses, and tractors circulating through deteriorated streets that are returning more and more to the original earth underneath.

The “macetas” and former farmers, notable to a lesser or greater degree for their sense of being uprooted and essential models of success, very different from those of the former white dominant sectors of the capital, were combined with an urban marginalized sector. This sector had persisted within the pockets of poverty, with both substandard collective housing in the city’s center and the self-built, precarious residential neighborhoods in its outskirts. That excluded population was always “darker.”

The culture of those previously dominated sectors—industrial and rural part-time workers, blacks—was reclaimed by the revolutionary government for easily comprehensible reasons of social justice. However, as is often the case when there is an effort to correct an injustice, it is possible that the weight of those sectors within national culture was exaggerated, which is explicable, because beating a drum is more agreeable than being hit as a boxer, and you last longer in the profession.

Interestingly, in recent years it has been possible to observe a flowering of Spanish dance groups, which seems to be related to the search for the Iberian past in order to obtain Spanish citizenship. That passport facilitates travel abroad and eventually a pension in euros from the Spanish government. There has been a visible tendency to favor the hiring of white people for administrative work and services related to foreigners, jobs much sought-after because of the access to tips and other advantages. There also has been a noticeable decrease in the number of black people who have access to higher education in some fields of study, which may be owing to the scanty economic incentive for working as professionals in these areas, together with the poor housing conditions, which have an influence on being able to study at home. That is less critical for young people who come from families with more resources, generally
with a high educational level and also “whites,” who can afford waiting for better times while they are supported by their families, or who are preparing to migrate with a university degree under their armpits.

On the other hand, the tastes and standards of living of the “poor-new-rich” are already being projected into public life, taking an increasingly greater distance from the coherent and Westernized image of the traditional white city. Tall walls right at the sidewalks, never before used in Cuba, with entrances ridiculously crowned with locally-produced tiles and showy front gates made of varnished cedar have become a status symbol for people who are torn between showing off their pathetic wealth or hiding it to avoid questioning about its source. These primitive and not very civic-minded forms are the result of a culture of survival, a free-for-all which is mixed with the sub-culture of aguaje. 2 Another danger is the reinforcement of a dual city. On the one side, “coastal Havana”—accessible, cosmopolitan and white, sometimes referred as Blue Havana—for foreign residents and tourists, officials, corporations and joint enterprises, with its reserve of emergency electric power plants, shopping centers, cellular phones and Japanese cars, disconnected from “deep Havana,” decapitalized, slummified, amorphous, the city of everyday Cubans, who are also “darker.” That would affect the very identity and the vital mix of coherence and diversity that has characterized the capital.

The outcome of the most recent population census, released after a delay of several years, seems to indicate a change in the racial composition of the population, with a decrease in the number of whites and blacks, and a higher number of mestizos. But attaining a uniform, light-ochre skin color among the entire population is not a guarantee of equality. The fusion of racial, social, economic and cultural aspects—which apparently helps to solve the problems of discrimination and inequality, increase vitality and open up new opportunities—nevertheless affects the cultural specificity of human and territorial groups, making them increasingly homogeneous, as occurs in globalization. On the other hand, pure folklore is rarely attractive to those who are not ethnologists. It is the same case with exotic food, which is tasty because it has been “toned down.” That folklore, if it is authentic, reflects, to a great extent, superstition, backwardness, poverty, machismo and violence. And if it isn’t, it becomes a fake source of attraction for tourists.

In short, if a whiter skin implies easier access to the best jobs and living conditions, and with that the corresponding patterns of conduct are valued, the formation of interethnic couples—something that increased under the Revolution—will tend to diminish. At the same time, the much sought-after national or local identity is

2 A term derived from “dar agua”, used by domino players when they noisily scramble the pieces after each game—similar to much ado about nothing.
nothing more than the result of diverse foreign mixes and influences, which have had sufficient time to decant and be digested so as to become something new and unique, where the source of its original components is no longer recognizable. The speed with which different influences make themselves felt in this globalized world has disrupted assimilation and re-elaboration make that process much harder. The question is not an easy one, because identity and a feeling of belonging cannot be found via isolation, dogmatism and xenophobia.

Identifying as a resource what was conventionally considered a problem, plus effective participation of local residents in decisions affecting them, the empowerment of the local and family economy, the use of the “convoy effect” in new investments, inducing projects with a visibly direct social interest; the use of incentives and deterrents such as the price of land, the right to build, exemptions from taxes and urban regulations on land use intensity; the search for a system of mixed development that would maintain a balance between functional and social, and making use of the potential of public spaces as a structuring, identifying, value-adding tool and a leveler of inequalities, are some of the possible ways that Havana must find to avoid a segregation or anonymity that would later be more difficult to correct.

Many of these ways have already been experienced in other countries, more or less successfully, in order to defend themselves from the speculative pressures of the market. In Cuba’s case, however, we have not yet been immunized against those problems, which are new for us. That makes us more vulnerable. The unbridled hyper-development now facing some major Asian cities, copying the worst aspects of the West, is an ominous warning, but the solution is not to close off from the world. For a time, Cubans will need to coexist with the old limitation of a lack of money, along with the new threat of a lot of money coming in too fast. Worse yet is the fact that such aggression may be received with a smile by the unwary natives, once again dazzled by little trinkets, and taken as a signal of development imposed by the new Conquistadors. Very fast changes can bring irreversible damage to the city and society, but no change at all is equally bad. On the other hand, it is always better to make inevitable decisions on time, before they impose themselves. All this requires that the city and its inhabitants can be capable of paying for themselves. Having things done is more important than doing it yourself.

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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/