WHERE HAVANA MEETS THE WATER:

AUTOPSIES AND UTOPIAS

by Mario Coyula

Close to the Water

A location facing the water, when not into it, stamped the birth and growth of many human settlements. Water is at the same time an indispensable support for life and a destructive agent: it separates but also communicates; it protects, clean, freshens and soothes but can also attack, flood, corrode and overwhelm. This historic background has often imposed a high price on cities when water—artificially restrained at a time when engineers thought they could conquer Nature—finally claims back its stolen space. Harbors that for a long time sustained the city economy turned into a source of trouble. Heavy traffic, big ugly warehouses, freight railroad, and old factories, cheap bars and decaying buildings added to the blocking of views as well as filth, pollution and noise.

Areas close to the ports usually resented from poor access, the loss of their original centrality and a combination of ghettoification and marginalization processes due to the exodus of the upper class and the conversion of former good quality dwellings into slums. This sad picture includes the lack of identity plus social uprooting and the weakening of the local economy, with drugs, prostitution and violence as side effects. The often neglected and overpopulated built stock depends on obsolete and overcharged utilities. All these issues result in a severe land devaluation that fuels the vicious circle. On the other hand, old port cities often become asymmetrical, as the historic center next to the port will not coincide with the gravity center of the contemporary city. Often, the old street network still sticks to a no-longer-needed radial convergence into the port.

Constructions that once proudly advanced into the waterfront are now threatened by flooding and subsiding. Periodical catastrophes appear in parallel to the ruthless day-to-day deterioration produced by a humid environment—that, in Havana, is also saline—combined with emissions from motor vehicles and industries that turn marble into gypsum and endanger an often relevant and irreplaceable built heritage. Conversely, bodies of water are attacked by construction that invades their fringe of influence, brings in pollution and breaks the natural cycles that maintain the interactive balance between water and land. This has lead to an extended perception, both in Cuba as in other countries, often considering urban waterfronts as very serious problems—the sort that municipal governments must resign to carry as a burden.
Yet, many experiences show that those areas can be revitalized by improving their image and living conditions, but also generating a strong economic activity of their own that would finance the costs of upgrading and also attract investment and generate income. But other challenges come attached to the economic revitalization of port areas, often associated to the impact of globalization, which opposes diversity. This wipes away local character and increases dependence as a perverse side-effect of fast gains, even killing in mid-term the most important attraction of those areas. A booming real estate market can dramatically improve the image and bring in local economic and social life that can be initially perceived as steady, but is difficult to keep within borders before they suck other forms of life or expel them to less privileged areas. On the other hand, new technologies for the transportation and handling of freight can make ports more efficient, demanding less area. They can also make them friendlier to other functions, especially housing and recreation.

It is always advisable to keep as much as possible the local population, carry on with them social development programs and make them participants in the surplus value that arises from the redevelopment of port areas. This is not only out of social justice, but as a way to make the area safer for residents or visitors with a higher living standard. Ironically, the trend to recycle old waterfronts may sometimes block access and views to and from the water, and destroy the scale and texture of the urban fabric, not to speak about displacing the local population. The clearing of obsolete structures seeking to create new public space and open cities into the water, done through very expensive investments, often ends in a continuous wall of new, bigger and uglier buildings planted in the first row. In short, revitalization of ports and waterfronts may solve some problems but often bring in new ones.

**Havana and the Water: a Love/Hate Affair**

Havana was founded in 1519, and for centuries performed as a springboard for the Spaniards to conquer America and take the plundered wealth back home. For Graziella Pogolotti, the leading Cuban intellectual, all of Cuba is a port—meaning the openness to many superimposed layers of foreign influences over time. More than two hundred years ago, Havana was already the most important city in the Gulf of Mexico and the Caribbean basin. It opens into almost thirty kilometers of coastline that include an excellent strip of beaches at the east, 20 minutes away from the historic center. 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 to the east and the most impressive system of Colonial fortresses in the Americas. This added to the privileged geographical position of Havana between two peninsulas, Florida and Yucatán, allowing the city to be 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 already full with riches exploited from America. Ships waited there for each other for months, until the hurricane season was over and their number was big enough to sail back to Spain in large convoys protected by warships, with reasonable safety. Sailors and soldiers in the ships sometimes more than doubled the local population of four thousand in the early 17th Century. The city supplied that literally floating population with water, food, ropes, sails, wood, hides, honey, rum, tobacco and other goods. Ships were built and repaired at a local shipyard, considered the most important Spain had in America. This stamped Havana with an early tertiary character.

The city developed the most impressive Colonial defensive system in America. It could seem oversized for the city itself, but was definitely needed to protect the ships and the wealth they were carrying. The old core, composed by the 143 hectares of the original walled precinct, plus a 19th Century extension once the walls were torn down, and the full Colonial defensive system, was designated by UNESCO as World Heritage in 1982—making Havana number 27 in the list. But the city’s valuable built heritage is much bigger, covering more than 2,000 hectares that include many relevant buildings following different architectural styles: Pre-Baroque, Baroque, Neo-Gothic, Neo-Classical, Art Nouveau (mostly Catalan Modernisme) and a large stock of Eclectic architecture that shaped the inner city; plus another large stock of Modern architecture built after the Second World War.

Several issues made Havana different from most other major Latin American cities. Because local natives quickly disappeared, plus the fact that Cuba remained a Spanish colony almost 80 years longer than the other continental nations, and being so close to the United States, Havana—and the country as a whole—had more Spanish and later American influence. Since the city grew mainly by addition, with a minimum of demolitions, its built heritage was basically spared. 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 cities that underwent overdevelopment in the 60s and 70s. Finally, a large part of its urban fabric was composed of lower-middle class dwellings with a reasonably high average quality of design and construction. The existence of this extended and influential sector of population also explained the seemingly endless rows of storefronts since 1800s along the main commercial streets, the calzadas. Even if many of those stores have been adapted as makeshift dwellings since 1960s, the tall porticoed pedestrian walkways under the buildings that frame the calzadas are part of the urban image of Havana. Alejo Carpentier, the leading Cuban novelist in the 20th Century, referred to Havana as The City of Columns.

A master plan by a Harvard team led by José Luis Sert was drawn between 1956-1958. It proposed some shocking interventions, like lining the Havana iconic
waterfront promenade, the Malecón, with a continuous wall of high rises that would have blocked the views and the sea breeze that cools and cleans the air of the city. The plan included an artificial rectangular island in front of the older sector of the Malecón, filled with casinos and a hotel. It also proposed to demolish a strip one-block wide running North-South through the middle of Old Havana, to make room for more Cartesian high rises; and cleared the center of the compact city blocks to create parking space. Ironically, the same person that wrote that classic book, The Heart of the City, planned to eviscerate Havana. The triumphant Revolution in January 1st, 1959, stopped this project together with land speculation and private developers.

Priority was given to construction in the rest of the country, trying to compensate the historic excessive leading role of the capital city; and new housing compounds in Havana were built mainly at the periphery. Havana was spared from the Sert plan but also from ourselves. In the early sixties, most Cuban architects and the very few self-taught planners would have done exactly the same thing, following the CIAM patterns. Actually, the new housing tracts built in the ‘70s at the eastern periphery produced a shapeless landscape of endless walk-up blocks interspersed with slabs and towers—a barren landscape where almost 100,000 persons have found a roof but the city is still missing.

The harbor that once gave life to the city became obsolete as bigger ships and new freight technologies were developed. But there are two other good bays close to Havana—Matanzas and Mariel—with better natural conditions to handle heavy freight traffic. At a regional scale, other cities like Miami and Houston—once sleepy villages or even not yet born at a time when Havana was already important—developed as world-class contemporary ports. The closed shape of the Bay was once useful to defend the city and the Spanish fleet, but now slows down the self-recycling process of the water, increasing the effect of pollution. Access to the Old City and other waterfront settlements facing the Bay increasingly became more difficult, especially when rough weather prevents traffic from running along the city’s iconic waterfront promenade, Malecón.

The upper class jumped from beside the port to southwestern El Cerro in the early 1800s, but later moved to northwestern El Vedado and Miramar, facing the ocean waterfront. That exodus was stimulated in the 20th century by private car ownership. New city centers also followed that trend in the 1950s. Since the 1990s a new trade center for the parallel dollar economy is being built in Monte Barreto, Miramar. This new center only accommodates hotels, shopping malls and office and retail space, with no local residents that would contribute to a more healthy diversity. Ironically, Monte Barreto is following the American suburban pattern of development depending on
private cars, which is the last thing Havana needs. More about that tract is to be discussed later in this paper.

Vacant stores in Central Havana have been precariously adapted through self-help to sub-standard dwellings, distorting the streetscape and impoverishing urban life, while former mansions in the once upscale neighborhoods of Miramar and Vedado are adapted to make-shift offices and stores.

Just west of Old Havana, working-class Centro Habana enjoys a central location and a marvelous view into the ocean, but it was already by-passed by the upper class even before the Malecón seaway was built. It is plagued by overcrowding, neglected maintenance and social problems. El Vedado, a state-of-the-arts development started in 1859, incorporated green for the first time in Cuba as an important part of the urban structure and streetscape. Vedado opened for the first time into the waterfront, once it was no longer perceived as being threatened by enemies. The construction of the Malecón started in 1901 during the first American military intervention that followed the Spanish dominion, and continued in several stages, linking Vedado to the central city until it reached the mouth of the Almendares River in 1958. This main artery of Havana continues west through a tunnel into Fifth Avenue along Miramar, a development from the 1920s that partially substituted Vedado as the choice habitat for the upper class.

Vedado, Miramar, Country Club (now Cubanacán), Flores, Biltmore (now Siboney) and Nuevo Biltmore (now Atabey) reflect the appropriation of the western waterfront by the wealthy since late 19th Century. In the opposite direction, the Malecón was linked through a tunnel under the Bay with a fine highway that runs east along 100 kilometers up to the city of Matanzas and continues for another 40 into Cuba’s most famous beach resort, Varadero.

The construction of the tunnel and the highway were obscurely linked to a multi-million tricky real estate business, but the whole operation was stopped by the triumph of the Revolution on January 1st, 1959. That area was used in the 1970s for the biggest social housing complex in Cuba, Alamar.

As the city expanded west and southwest from the initial walled precinct, the port and Old Havana became less accessible, especially with the enormous increase of private cars after World War II. Several disturbing industries were located around the Bay: oil refineries, dockyards, a gas plant, two power stations burning oil, grain towers, cargo railroads, a fertilizer plant, the new piers along the southern half of Old Havana and a very large garbage dumping yard, Cayo Cruz. This was worsened by the trade winds that brought smoke and foul odors into the city. That condition slightly improved when the dumping yard was removed and oil spilling into the Bay was reduced.
Yet two main sources of water pollution remain: the Martín Pérez and the Luyanó rivers. These are practically open-air sewers running into the Bay from the South. Luckily, most of the pollution they carry is not chemical but organic waste from historically poor neighborhoods without proper treatment of the effluents. The water edge of both rivers should be redefined with walls so as to produce a sharp, clean limit between water and land, and give access to pedestrians. It is important to create public recreational use of the riverfronts. Separating the rivers from the local residents is a way for both to survive.

In a rosy future, those two rivers can become green arrows spreading out from an inner green belt around the south of the Bay, until they meet with the great green belt that already encircles the city, including the three large parks in the South: Lenin Park, the National Botanical Garden and the National Zoo. This outer ring or *Cordón de La Habana* was created in late 1960’s and includes 31 water reservoirs. Thus, the rivers might help to structure and add value to that southeastern sector of Havana, traditionally very poor and shapeless.

The Master Plan from 1971 placed emphasis on transportation and shipping terminals around the Bay. It proposed limits to port investments so as to achieve a better balance with other Cuban ports. The Plan proposed concentrating cargo and industry into a smaller area at the southern border of the Bay, clearing the piers in Old Havana so the city could reopen into the water. Even if some new large port installations were built, including a fishing port, the old docks remained blocking the southern half of Old Havana; and the proposed new Traffic Center that would have allowed removal of the old railroad terminal and taken heavy traffic away from the inner city was never built.

In the mid-1990s, one of the three piers from the 1914 Custom building was recycled into a passenger cruise-ship terminal, as a reflection of the rise of tourism to become the main source of hard currency income for the country. This adds to the increased efforts in restoring many landmark buildings and public spaces in Old Havana by the City Historian Office, which in 1993 was granted the special privilege to run businesses and reinvest profits in their own programs. These programs now also include the improvement of living conditions for the local population.

The pragmatic opening in the 1990s to Cuban-foreign tourist and real estate joint ventures has been concentrated in the best in-fill locations along the Malecón and in Miramar, always close to the waterfront. Planners tried to divert those investments toward the east, where large tracts of land remain barren but well connected to the inner city by the tunnel and the Monumental highway. But this became wishful thinking, since most investors still prefer the West, where the city is. After all, it is difficult to reverse a pattern of urban growth that has been shaping the city for five centuries. In 2000,
foreigners could no longer buy condominiums, and the real estate joint-venture business soon became stalled, practically closing this source of hard-currency income for the Cuban government.

Havana's waterfronts present many opportunities. They include the Bay, the coastline and the riverfronts. Three major areas of intervention around the Bay—Old Havana, Regla and Casablanca—may trigger its recovery, which is essential for the strategic goal of compensating the present unbalance in the structure of Havana with a steady eastward development along the waterfront.

**Old Havana**

The northern half of Old Havana is framed by a nice ring with great views, also allowing in the fresh air from the sea. Yet the southern half, which was historically poorer, has been closed by the old piers to the east and the 1912 railroad station and yard to the west. Some worthless sheds have already been cleared from several piers and more will come as the docks are relocated to better port facilities on the southern rim of the Bay. Those former piers will be used for commercial and leisure purposes, like terminals for boat tours around the Bay or to nearby places, green space and other leisure activities. The process has already started with the terminal for cruisers and the revitalization by the powerful City Historian Office of the 18th century Alameda de Paula, the first promenade built in Havana. The new available space facing the water can be used for restaurants, art galleries, concert halls, offices and shops, while on the opposite side of the street new or rehabilitated dwellings should contribute to diversity and ensure vitality in the evenings.

**Casablanca**

On the eastern side of the Bay lies Casablanca, a small village of a little more than 5,000 inhabitants. It was an original settlement of careeners dating from 1780, and is historically linked to the sea, the bay and the port. Many of its present dwellers still work at the shipyards. Casablanca has a peculiar layout, with humble but picturesque buildings crawling over a steep hill dominated by La Cabaña (1763-1774), the largest fortress made by Europeans in America.

A new waterfront promenade may create a new face for Casablanca, and open the village at water level through a cautious tourist development. Vertically it may be linked with a viewpoint on top of the hill, where an 18-metre-tall white marble statue of Jesus Christ (El Cristo de La Habana) was inaugurated in late 1958 by the wife of dictator Fulgencio Batista, who fled under the rebels on December 31st. The current Weather Bureau, with its iconic top sphere, could be recycled as a Planetarium open to
Due to its steep topography and its location at the point where the Bay suddenly widens, Casablanca has very fine views into both Old Havana, with the Malecón on the background, and the port. Thus it opens into two different townscapes: an increasingly well-restored stock of Colonial architecture from a World Heritage historic city center, and the busy life of a contemporary port.

The air at Casablanca is much cleaner than in other settlements around the bay and even Old and Central Havana, because of the prevailing winds. Being so close to the open sea, the water of the Bay is also clearer. Even slums in Casablanca have better ventilation and views than in the rest of Havana, because of the terraced pattern forced by the steep topography. The village has one primary street, Artés, which is parallel to the waterfront. Perpendicular pedestrian paths start there, giving access to the dwellings built above. These public paths, leading to mostly makeshift squatter dwellings, sometimes merge with semi-private spaces of collective dwellings or ciudadelas, turning courts into a sort of very elemental plazas. A second short street, Animas, is parallel to Artés and uphill from it. Therefore some dwellings can have access from both ends and the buildings themselves can perform as stairs.

Almost all dwellings are simple, one-story buildings and follow three main morphologies, a) eclectic, down-sized, stripped versions of the European Beaux Arts architecture found in El Vedado and other early 20th century middle and lower-middle class houses, with a colonnaded front porch, high ceilings, flat roofs, tall doors and windows, plastered walls and Classicist decoration; b) vernacular, such as found in all Cuban small towns: row houses with very simple railings and a continuous porch, often supported by wooden columns, and steep roofs originally with clay tiles, sloping down to the front. Some houses are still wooden, though termites, humidity, hurricanes and the lack of paint and proper wood for repairs have taken their toll; and c) makeshift home-made shacks, typical of shantytowns.

The cross section streetscape is the same for a) and b) types: buildings, with or without a front porch, starting right at the sidewalk. Sidewalks and streets are very narrow. Because of the hill, buildings on the eastern side of the street are raised on podiums, making the porches more private; while on the western side, which is closer to the water, they sometimes lie even lower than the sidewalk. This side of the street is a continuous strip of dwellings and sheds leaving no gaps between the buildings, so the water is close but invisible.

Casablanca is a transportation node. A ferry line takes passengers from and to Old Havana and Regla, Casablanca belongs to the Regla municipality, something resented by older residents, since they once were part of more fashionable Old Havana. Nevertheless, Casablanca is under the City Historian Office. This might allow this small town to follow the same successful process of economic revitalization that has made
restoration and rehabilitation self-sustained in Old Havana. A 1916 train—the only electric train in Havana, and the oldest of its type still working in the world—starts at the same point where the ferry lands. The train was built by Hershey to connect with his sugar mill about 60 kilometers east of Havana. It continues into Matanzas, a Neo-Classical city 40 kilometers further east. Varadero, the main Cuban beach resort, lies 40 kilometers more to the northeast of Matanzas. Casablanca is served by an aqueduct and sewer systems.

Some interesting landmarks in Casablanca are the already-mentioned Christ of Havana, the National Weather Bureau, Tiscornia (Cuba’s Ellis Island, where all immigrants were quarantined in early 20th century) and of course, La Cabaña fortress, now housing a museum, and also the seat of the Art Biennial and the yearly Book Fair that draws tens of thousands of visitors. Further north of Casablanca, yet presently not connected with the village, lies the Batería de la Divina Pastora—a Colonial battery of cannons that was an outpost of La Cabaña. This has been turned into a restaurant and bar, with spectacular views from the mouth of the Bay at sea level but tasteless, expensive food.

Right beside Divina Pastora is the Dársena de los Franceses, an artificial rectangular cove made for the construction of the tunnel under the Bay in 1958. It has remained unused since then. Another outpost of La Cabaña is the Hornabeque de San Diego (ca. 1770), protecting the valley that borders the Cabaña ridge from the southeast and reaches the Bay. San Diego has been populated by squatters but keeps its great views, potentially valuable. The ridge extending East of La Cabaña hill and the marshes where the valley meets the Bay are a stop for migrating birds.

Casablanca can become a small paradise with relatively little investment. Lying right across from Old Havana, it can work as an attractive alternative for visitors, while creating jobs and improving the living standards of the local residents. A fully pedestrian malecón, partially cantilevered on the steeper part of the waterfront cliff, can give access to a new housing development ending in a marina at Dársena de los Franceses. Another access can come down from the viewpoint that already exists at the base of the 18-meter tall statue of Christ. But any further development should be carefully separated by a strip of green from the majestic La Cabaña fortress that crowns the hill.

Any intervention, be it new clusters or in-fill projects, can draw inspiration from spontaneous patterns found in the site that so well function and blend with the topography. These features cover a wide span, from the small, gracious steps closing Echarte Street—Casablanca’s naïve miniaturized version of Piazza de Spagna—to the rough, uneven steps carved in the rocks uphill. Fishing boats brought in to land to be kept or careened can add to the character of the site, instead of being hidden. Honoring its name, Casablanca can be totally painted white with whitewash, leaving color accents
for the windows, doors, railings and awnings. That would enhance its Mediterranean flavor. More natural color can be added by planting bright flower shrubs and trees as the existing glorious red *flamboyants* that bloom in May-June, but including others that will blossom at different seasons.

The Bay of Havana was rated among the most polluted in the world. This condition is slightly improving and some fish can be found again in waters once feared for its sharks that afterward totally died out. Now pelicans graciously glide after the fish. Anyway, being closer to the entrance of the Bay, the water is cleaner in Casablanca. Trade winds also blow away from Casablanca the smoke of the oil refineries and industries in the southeastern and southern edge of the Bay. But the hill itself blocks the cooler breeze coming from the ocean.

Casablanca is a giant terraced sun collector, facing south and southwest. In the hot and humid Cuban climate, direct sunlight increases discomfort, though air temperature never exceeds the body temperature. This suggests screening out the sun from the dwellings. Screening devices may be also used to create additional living or storage spaces over flat roofs, and give a particular visual trademark to the settlement. A more sophisticated approach could also use the screens to collect solar energy, at least for schools and public buildings, turning heat into electricity or (why not?) even air conditioning.

In a rocky and steep place where land is scarce, urban agriculture might prove difficult. But there might be some specific organic crops that can grow there—and maybe in roofs and walls—, so food can be a by-product of sun protection. Rainwater can also be collected and these devices used to enhance architectural expression and local character. Urban agriculture should be organic and turned into a source of income and jobs. Terraces can help in preventing the erosion of steep hillsides and beautify the landscape. Garbage is difficult to collect; so it can be used for composting by the residents themselves. Since fishing was and still is typical, a fish market could be an attraction, even for visitors from across the Bay. Swimming pools can give a nice impression of being in clean, safe water right beside the polluted water of the Bay. These pools may be terraced, sloping down to sea level.

Any intervention should integrate with the existing population, bringing in economic life while avoiding segregation and preserving the quiet character of the place. A way to achieve this would be to place higher standard new dwellings as in-fill into the existing fabric, using vacant lots or sites of crumbling buildings beyond repair. New housing should include some low-income dwellings. This will ensure blending. New high standard dwellings for newcomers can be bigger and more comfortable, but should not *look* different from the average dwellings for local residents. Using a sort of spatial modules can work: some dwellings can have more modules than others and still not
show off. Good public spaces should help to integrate different sectors of population and levels of income. Local residents must perceive a visible improvement in their lives due to the new interventions.

But social justice must also be viable. A cost/benefit assessment is needed: how much investment is demanded, what rate of returns—and where and how to raise the needed capital to upgrade the site and make it more attractive for new investments, moving one step ahead of the current short-sighted joint Cuban-foreign ventures looking for fast profits. A plan including progressive stages and adequate management will probably require a strong institution, maybe a specific local development corporation for Casablanca. This kind of entity has been unusual in the highly centralized Cuban decision-making. But, as said before, this can be easier since Casablanca is under control of the City Historian Office, so a similar self-financing scheme can be used as in Old Havana. There are trade-offs that should be analyzed: for instance, there has been some talk about docking mega-cruise ships at Casablanca. That would create an almost permanent tall metal wall blocking the whole village, plus the need to transport visitors across the Bay into the city. How much money can that bring in, and at what cost—including the ruin of other development potentials?

A similar analysis is needed about a recent idea to build a funicular over the Bay. There has never been a bridge over the Bay. The only way to reach the eastern territories until the construction of the tunnel in 1958 was by circling the Bay, or using the ferry and then commuting to other means of transportation. This explains why the east was traditionally not developed, coupled with the difference in height in the eastern rim regarding Old Havana, and the use of the area for military purposes. A major eastern development would at some point require a new way to communicate across or under the Bay. But funiculars are mostly meant to connect a mountain vertically with the land beneath, not to bridge over water. And they primarily fulfill a recreational function, not a practical one, making it a single-purpose large investment that would not benefit an eventual expansion of the city to the east. Moreover, any overhead structure similar to a funicular, including a bridge—even by a fashionable designer—could distort the iconic skyline of a World Heritage site and place restrictions on any further development. So it seems reasonable to carefully assess pros and cons. A second tunnel under the Bay may be a better choice—and a needed one if East Havana is to be developed to its ultimate potentials.

Regla

Covering most of the southern rim of the Bay is Regla, an old Colonial working-class town dating back to 1687. Even more than Casablanca, Regla has been linked to the sea, along 13 kilometers of waterfront. Its local Catholic patron is the Virgin of
Regla, who has a “bastard” twin in Afro-Cuban Santería, Yemayá. Both rule over the waters and have the same colors: blue for the water and white for the spray of the waves. Yet, the town is currently almost blocked from the water. In a way, Regla is crucified between the large oil refineries to the east and an obsolete thermoelectric powerhouse that has recently stopped working, though the structures remain there. Still farther west of the plant are two large port terminals, Cuatro Atraques and Contenedores. The refineries cover an area that is almost two-thirds of the town. They block any possible expansion to the east, including a most desirable connection with the green reserve that leads right into the Bay. They pollute the Bay with oil spills and also pollute the air with a permanent stack of black smoke ending in a flame. More than any other settlement facing the Bay, Regla has been strangled by the port that once was its raison d’être.

There is an existing fishing port and container terminal at the southern bottom of the Bay. They both fulfill a practical function with economic results, not the least being to receive the port facilities that must be removed from Old Havana so as to clear its southern waterfront. But it might be interesting to study a trade-off that can still seem visionary at present. What can bring more benefits, both to the economy and to the urban and historic values of the city: to keep the present use of the facilities, or move them to other ports more suited—like Matanzas 100 kilometers east or Mariel, 60 kilometers west—and then use that very valuable land to build a new central business district right across from the old historic one, that could also include housing for different levels of income? Being separated by water from Old Havana, this area can hold good 21st century architecture without the tight restrictions that a World Heritage site has. It can also help to push the city farther along the southern rim of the Bay, supporting the long-term strategy of colonizing the east. In doing so, this future settlement can incorporate a Colonial landmark, San Antonio, an 18th Century fortified gunpowder storage that is protected as part of the 1982 World Heritage designation.

Regla protrudes into the Bay from the south, climbing from sea level to several small hills that offer great views into Havana and the Bay. It has a very strong local identity and is an interesting place of authentic Afro-Cuban religion, still not distorted by tourism. It also has an old tradition of good popular music and baseball. Regla and Casablanca are connected to Old Havana by a maritime shuttle—a regular passenger ferry service. The town’s northern tip, Punta de Santa Catalina, was once occupied by huge 19th-century cast iron sugar warehouses designed by James Bogardus, which were wiped away by a hurricane in 1906. That prominent site is now underused by a bus terminal and irrelevant sheds that might be removed to create a sort of island in the middle of the Bay, linked to the Colonial core of Regla. This historic center is dominated by a Neo-Classical church and the gingerbread style terminal where ferries dock. Art galleries, public swimming pools, hostels, seafood restaurants or maybe even a small
aquarium can benefit from that prime location. That new center should be encircled by a waterfront pedestrian promenade and a seawall recalling the iconic Malecón. Travelling back and forth by boat between Old Havana, Regla and Casablanca can become more than a practical means for local residents commuting to work. It may also be a pleasant tour for visitors.

Another current problem in Regla is the railroad that crosses the town east-west. It seems necessary either to divert it to the southern periphery, or bury it on a trench and then line it with a linear park that would perform as a buffer and reinforce the basic urban structure. The challenge with Regla is how to enhance its link with the port—which is its most remarkable character and provides employment to the residents—while regaining access into the water and eliminating the main sources of pollution that discourage development. This also calls for elimination of the physical barriers that block an eventual visual and functional reopening of the town into the water, and its natural expansion to the east—the only chance Regla has to gain pedestrian access into a green reserve.

Removing the old powerhouse seems rather easy, though maybe part of the structure can be recycled as an industrial or port museum—as long as it allows views and access to the waterfront. Taking away the sheds in Santa Catalina also seems possible without big investments; but the elimination of the oil refineries and later cleaning of the contaminated site is more difficult, even if relocation to Cienfuegos, in central Cuba, would be much more balanced on a national scale than in western Havana. A morphologic analysis of Regla’s waterfront was done in 2001 by Blandine Frachon, under professors Claude Prelorenzo, from the School of Architecture of Versailles, and Mario Coyula, from the Faculty of Architecture of Havana. A diploma project by Aldo Pérez Zurita, also tutored by Coyula in that same year, proposed a redesign of the Punta de Santa Catalina.

**Central Havana**

The oldest strip of Malecón was being rehabilitated by the City Historian’s Office through a special project, PERI, originally with help from several Spanish regional governments. This aid has almost stopped and the pace of rehabilitation is falling behind the increase of deterioration. Buildings are under constant aggression from the nearby ocean, both by occasional flooding and the permanent salt spray from the waves. On the other hand, the original middle and lower-middle class residents have long ago moved out. Most of the present inhabitants are squatters who can’t take care of the maintenance of their dwellings. In a market economy, they just could not afford to live there. The challenge is how to incorporate true economic life so as to guarantee some self-reliability for that strip, with a minimal disturbance of the current local
residents. Another challenge is how to slow down traffic along the Malecón—which is the only fast access to Old Havana and the Bay tunnel—so pedestrians might cross safely to the water edge, which performs as a promenade, especially in summer evenings. Several projects to protect the front line of buildings from the rough winter sea or occasional tidal waves have been sketched, but the required investment is too big.

A well defined triangular neighborhood, La Fragua, lies between Centro Habana and La Rampa, the city’s most alive mixed-use center from the 50s and 60s. La Fragua can provide the opening of that strip into the waterfront, thus improving the link between Centro Habana and Vedado. The area calls for a combination of rehabilitation along one historic axis leading to Havana University, San Lázaro; while the northern sector is open to a more active redevelopment with contemporary architecture that might turn it into the 21st Century La Rampa. This sector was thoroughly studied in late 1990s by the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital (Group for the Integral Development of Havana), ending in a booklet. It was also selected for the first urban design Havana studio in 2000, led by Professor Leland Cott with his students from the Graduate School of Design at Harvard. In 2002, Cott and Mario Coyula carried out an urban design studio on the Malecón with students from Harvard GSD. That same year Professor Jan Wampler from MIT also led an architectural studio on that area, to be repeated in early 2004.

**Eastern Havana**

The historic Park Morro-Cabaña is being developed at a very slow pace. The area is very sensitive because of archaeological findings from the Spanish Colonial military garrisons. It will provide the only relatively accessible large open space available for residents in Old Havana, across the Bay's narrow neck. Farther east several subdivisions might be developed, some still using part of the infrastructure dating from pre-Revolutionary days. Eastern Havana has the benefits of clean air, eight kilometers of fine sand beaches and a good connection to the city center. But a large-scale development would eventually call for a second tunnel. A treatment plant for the city’s 1913 sewer system—which presently pours raw sewage straight into the Gulf Stream—must also be built there.

One especially interesting place for a careful mixture of preservation and development is Cojimar, a small fishermen village with a very healthy microclimate where Ernest Hemingway kept his fishing boat. His former skipper lived there and died at 104 years old. Cojimar has a small 1646 Colonial fort protecting the mouth of a very beautiful river, which has the only spot of natural vegetation in Havana untouched by human beings.
Western Havana

The almost seven-kilometer long Malecón waterfront drive links Old Havana through Centro Habana with the western pre-revolutionary period upper and upper-middle class districts of El Vedado, Miramar and Country Club (now Cubanacán). A very careful in-fill may be carried on—one that would avoid the massive skyline proposed by Sert. Special guidelines for this area are already being studied by the planning authorities to determine how many tall buildings—and how tall, how wide and how close—could be built there; and how these new interventions should blend with the original urban fabric. The Malecón stops at the mouth of the Almendares, Havana’s main river, just by the small 1646 Colonial fort La Chorrera. The Almendares River is the spine of the projected Metropolitan Park, which includes an ecologic reserve with vegetal fossils at Josefina Island and a strip of giant trees along the river with dense vines, hanging as in a fairy tale forest. This Park is crucial for Havana because its central location, making it easily accessible from five different municipalities of Havana.

A careful redevelopment project might eliminate a shantytown, El Fanguito and two unplanned shipyards, replacing them by a park and a marina as part of the Metropolitan Park. The Malecón could then continue as a riverfront pedestrian promenade, and the once-elegant Vedado neighborhood could get a new face looking into it. This project, which also requires cleaning the river, could be paid for gradually with the income generated by new real estate investments in what could become one of Havana’s prime locations. The area has been studied by several undergraduate diploma projects at Havana’s Faculty of Architecture, a charrette led by Andrés Duany focused on the western side, and a Harvard GSD urban design studio led by Lee Cott in 2001 focused in the eastern side.

A former elegant private club, the Vedado Tennis, now José Antonio Echeverría, was on that eastern side, at the mouth of the river. The club was built much earlier than the final strip of the Malecón, so it presents its back to the Malecón, wasting great views. The municipality of Playa begins west of the river. Its 15-kilometre long waterfront includes a row of 18 former private clubs originally covering a wide social range, from the landowners and members of the financial upper class of patrician background to nouveau-riches, professionals, merchants, immigrant associations, students, military and white collar workers. Those clubs were confiscated by the government in early 1960s and turned into trade union clubs. Public access to the western waterfront has been closed since the 1920s by the clubs and private mansions, so the city lost the opportunity to have a Malecón three times as long.

Playa is one of the 15 municipalities into which Havana City is divided. Located in northwestern Havana, it inherited great social differences still visible in its built fabric.
Most of the urban green spaces in Havana were concentrated in the former upscale neighborhoods of Playa, as well as most of the best schools. Urban settlements covered a very wide range—from the most fancy to shanties, even standing right beside each other. Inequality had been sharply diminished after 1959, but started to grow again in the 1990s because of the sharp economic crisis after the fall of the Soviet Union, known in Cuba as *periodo especial* (“special period”). Shanties actually grew, as well as luxury hotels, condominiums for foreigners and dollar stores.

Miramar has possibly changed more times than any other neighborhood in Havana during the last forty-five years. Many mansions were adapted as schools and dormitories for students from all around the country after Miramar became practically vacant in early 1960s due to the massive exodus of the upper classes. When new schools were built, those dwellings were emptied again, and many squatters broke in—mostly former employees that had taken care of the schoolchildren. The best mansions were used for embassies and residences for diplomats and foreign experts. Many were adapted as State offices, cultural or scientific research centers; others assigned to high-ranking officials or just regular Cuban families. But still more changes happened in the 1990s, all related to the new parallel dollar economy.

**Autopsies and Utopias**

Perhaps the most impressive recent changes happened in a large tract of land that remained un-built and populated by goats and mongooses up to the mid-1970s, Monte Barreto. The area was quickly developed during the 1990s: four hotels were built along the coastline and two more south of Fifth Avenue, plus one more to come; while a double line of 18 buildings for retail and offices is under construction. Most investments have been Cuban-foreign joint ventures. The basic general layout placed the buildings in strips parallel to the waterfront. An area for a park at the farthest southern border was finally agreed after a tough battle with the investors. But the waterfront is already closed by four hotels that block access and views, while stopping the gentle sea breeze. A much more sound approach would have been to lay out a long central park running from south to north and opening onto the waterfront with marinas, water sports, swimming pools, seafood restaurants. All buildings could have been placed on both sides, having a straight front view onto the park and a slanted view onto the ocean. And this central public park could have been used by Cubans and foreigners, functioning as a social leveler to soften the impact of a dollar-only area.

Playa de Marianao is an artificial beach around a short crescent where several private clubs were located before the Revolution. A nearby military airport, Ciudad Libertad, is no longer being used. It can provide the largest redevelopment area west of Havana. This project could link Playa de Marianao and the once most exclusive.
subdivision in Cuba, the former Country Club, with the nearby working-class neighborhoods more to the south in Marianao; and also provide a more direct way to the international airport. Such a project requires a careful functional and social mixture, also matching with the traditional layout and streetscape of Havana, so as to avoid the main flaws of the Monte Barreto development. This would call for the elimination of two large shantytowns that ironically were next to the most elegant private clubs.

This western rocky coastline is pierced by four small rivers, starting westward with the Almendares, Quibú and Jaimanitas. Close to the mouth of the Jaimanitas River is a well-preserved facility, Marina Hemingway. The last of these rivers, Santa Ana, is the western limit of Havana, right at the end of Santa Fe, a former fishing village that has some interesting wooden architecture. An unusual beach of shells is at the mouth of the Santa Ana River. All these rivers can function in the future as green spines bringing the values of the waterfront deep into poor neighborhoods.

The future of Havana as well as the possibility to regain the leading role it once had in the Caribbean Sea and the Gulf of Mexico depends to a large extent on its ability to revitalize the harbor, the coastline and the riverfronts with new activities like tourism, recreation, sports, food expenditures, shops and—inevitably—marinas and port services. This adds to the possibility of using those areas for real estate development, housing, finances, high technology, communication and informatics, and even appropriate administration and production, coupled with the empowerment of the local economy and residents. Such a task requires proper use of three main resources: a privileged tropical site around a strategically placed bay and along a nice waterfront including fine natural beaches, a unique world-renown built heritage and a well trained population.

A sound strategy for Havana should start by identifying the vocation of the port, seen in a national scale but also within the Gulf of Mexico and Caribbean Sea basin. How much of what Miami took away from Havana since 1959 can ever be recovered, and at what expense? Some hints for the future of the city may come from carefully studying its past. The city owed its splendor to the port, when ships were the regular means of transportation and sugar was a good way to make money. Can it become again an international hub of ships, and also planes? Will the port change from cargo and industrial oriented to leisure, high-tech, finance and real estate oriented? Geographically, Havana is in the crossing lines of north-south and east-west—and between North and South America, and between Europe and the Americas. Even in an era of informatics and telecommunications, people and goods need to travel.

On the other hand, the incredible development of the city in the early 20th century was supported by a brand-new infrastructure of aqueduct, sewers, paved streets, buses and electric trams, plus electric, gas and telephone networks. A lot of
money was actually buried and moving, but it paid off in a very visible way. A renovated Havana would now need a large previous investment in good quality infrastructure and efficient public transportation.

Havana’s wealth and relative economic and political stability was supported in the past by an extended and influential lower-middle class that shaped kilometers of continuous store frontage along the main commercial streets. The smart dwellings of that social layer were compressed versions of the upper class mansions, and they actually made up for most of the city’s built fabric. So what 21st -century equivalent of that lower-middle class is needed to restore that extended built fabric and put life back into the decaying streets, while bridging the recently growing social gap between those who have and those who have not? Maybe the answer lies in finding more proper, really productive jobs for the large population educated after 1959. Ways need to be found that would reverse the unfair reality that makes the income of high-ranking scientists and professionals place well behind that of hustlers and poor-nouveau-riches who profit from scarcity.

A cautious but sustainable development can help to level, or at least soften, those differences. This requires investments with a balanced mix of interests and functions, so as to ensure environmental, urban, economic, social and cultural diversity. That diversity is needed to encourage vitality and the capacity to adapt to change, supported by a mutually beneficial interaction between different actors and the site. Havana, its population and the water must learn to live in harmony or run the risk of being wiped away.

Havana, December 2003-September 2006

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/

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