

Dynamic heritage: the case of Havana

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Abstract

This text discusses some practices and theories related to urban planning and architectural design in a UNESCO listed city, promoting a shared approach on the theme of Urban regeneration in Historical contexts. The practices and theories derive from researches and didactic experiences that I have developed with other professors and students in Havana, Cuba.

The first one with CUJAE Instituto Superior Politécnico José Antonio Echeverría was the international cooperation program PatrIndArch on Water Heritage (2013-15), in which CUJAE Cuba, University of Alicante Spain, University of Padova and University of Ferrara were involved.

From this pedagogical experience came the opportunity to program an international Seminar dedicated to "Water, Architecture and Landscape in Europe", held in November 2014 in Instituto Universitario del Agua y de las Ciencias Ambientales, Universidad de Alicante, where I participated with professors and researchers from the Universities of Ferrara, Padova, Alicante, Coimbra, Bucarest, Valenciennes et Hainaut-Cambrésis, with proceedings published in 2015.

This text is mainly derived from the PRIA research program "URB_HE Urban Heritage Conservation as vector of social equity", in which I participated (2015-17), and which was financed as an "Interdisciplinary research project" by the University of Ferrara under a call for proposals dedicated to defining new international fields of research. This research and pedagogical activity was related to the concepts of rehabilitation, regeneration, heritage conservation, which were considered like "moving concepts". The emblem of this dynamic is the evolution of the concept of heritage: from tangible to intangible, from monuments to cultural landscape. Havana and its territory represent a privileged case study from which to observe not only influences of European and North American culture on the Global South cities, but also original hybridizations deriving from the intertwining of different practices related to urban planning and architectural design in UNESCO cities.

The prevailing polycentric structure of the city of Havana, outlined in the phases of its development and in the plans preceding the Revolution, is radicalized through policies implemented in the decade of consolidation (1965-1975) and in the following so-called Five Year's Plan. According to the concept that '... the city is a territorial collectivity, a human

community, both considered in its totality and at the level of each of the parts that compose it' (Segre R. and Lopez Rangel R., 1982: 217)¹, there is the possibility to observe how some of the most complex transformation actions of the modern city are articulated.

First of all, actions linked to a first phase of demolition and thinning of historic centers

¹ / Institute for Physical Planning, "El esquema del Plan Director de La Habana", Habana 2, in *Arquitectura/Cuba*, 34 1/2, 1973: 30; in Segre R. and Lopez Rangel R. (1982) *Architettura e territorio nell'America Latina*, Milano: Electa.

that evolve towards opposing policies of conservation and reconstruction of the built heritage, partly result in the relocation of inhabitants and gentrification. Secondly, the permanence of the urban plans for Havana – from those preceding the Revolution to the most recent ones – and in contemporary regeneration projects environmental systems along the waterfronts play a strategic role, tend to infiltrate the urban fabric in sectors relevant for the development of the city. Thirdly, the flexible hierarchy of the urban structure favored by the existing sensitive orthogonal grid in some parts of the city of Havana – in particular in the Vedado district – allows different conditions and situations to coexist, both from a morphological and settlement point of view, and they are recognized over time as heritage values by communities and institutions.

From demolition to reconstruction to displacement

The theories of the avant-garde developed in the CIAM, which in the 1920s and 1930s proposed the demolition of ancient and obsolete areas in the historic centers of European cities, reverberate in some plans and transformation projects of the central areas of Havana² starting from the late 1940s. In those years the area of La Habana Vieja was considered unhealthy, and the concept of rehabilitation was used to justify demolition projects and thinning plans. In 1955 the Junta Nacional de Planificación de Cuba was established

with the main objective of drawing up a master plan capable of guiding the urban development of the city. The development of the Master Plan was carried out under the direction of José Luis Sert and his studio TPA Town Planning Associates, in which Paul Lester Weiner and Paul Schultz also worked³. Settled in the United States, Sert was at the time president of the CIAM and this plan, while evidently affected by some of the theories that had been developed in previous congresses, presents interesting innovations in the ways in which it defines, for example, the relationship between city and water.

Starting from a zoning by social classes and functions, this plan takes into consideration the tendencies that different parts of the city had shown, including tourism in particular. This plan, while providing some radical replacement interventions at the heart of the historic city and in the Centro Habana area, it modifies the road layout and also the number and size of the urban blocks (*manzana*) in the historic center much less than what was foreseen through the application of CIAM's principles. After the 1959 Revolution, the plan was not carried out and some of the demolition interventions that had been proposed in parts of the historic city were not followed up.

In the last decades another practice was developed which, starting from the competences of the Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de La Habana directed by

² / Zardoya Loureda, 2012: 16-18.

³ / Lester Weiner, P., Sert, J.L. and Schultz, P. 1959.



Fig. 1 / Focsa building and public market, Vedado, Avana, Cuba. Source / Massarente, 2014.

Eusebio Leal⁴, established instruments of action through the availability of a real estate fund and by declaring the historical center, i.e. the area of La Habana Vieja, as an "Area of priority interest for Conservation" in 1993, following its registration in the UNESCO list in 1982. Then an urban renewal process started and this was based on new types of planning tools⁵ in addition to the conservation and reconstruction interventions of the buildings in the historic center. This process, while intending to favor business initiatives that adhere to the principles of social and solidarity economies and cooperative forms of associations, inevitably produced phenomena of gentrification and relocation of inhabitants to other areas of the city⁶. The transition from projects of radical transformation of the historical center to plans for the reconstruction and conservation of the UNESCO area of La Habana Vieja leads, therefore, to the phenomena of temporal relocation, displacement and progressive replacement of original inhabitants with international tourists.

Environmental systems infiltrate the city

The areas along the waterfront of La Habana Vieja that face the Puerto and the Bahía to the east form a continuation of the system formed by the Malecón

tradicional, which represents the front of the city towards the sea from the Vedado and the estuary of the Almendares river to the west. The possibility of considering this urban front towards the water as a single complex system allows the intertwining of infrastructural and environmental issues of particular importance for a city like Havana. After the plan of Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier (1925-1930), which articulates a network of open spaces inspired by the model of parks and avenues of Paris and on which the structure of today's city hinges, the plan directed by Sert identifies a sequence of public parks and pedestrian areas on a metropolitan and urban scale, which infiltrates the urban fabric of the neighborhoods of this part of the city, aimed at strengthening the role of this Malecón / Puerto system towards the waterfront. The idea of the landscape tinfiltrating the city is developed and radicalized in the "Plan Director de La Habana" (1965-1970) developed by the architects of the Institute of Physical Planning, directed by Sergio Baroni.

The plan intends to strengthen the polycentric structure of the city, through the '... succession and alternation between urban landscape and natural landscape ...' 'Metropolitan-level green areas will become a green thorn of the metropolitan structure. [...] The green

⁴ / Leal Spengler, E. 2017: 34-41

⁵ / For example, PEDI Plan Especial de Desarrollo Integral, starting from the first edition in 1998.

⁶ / These phenomena were particularly deepen in Alietti, A. 2018: 45-55.



Fig. 2 / Walking through Linea, Vedado, Avana, Cuba. Source / Massarente, 2014.

will be a structuring element of the urban design that will strengthen the unitary image of the space' (Vaquero, M., Garnier, J.P., Asquez, E., Gonzales, M. and Garatti V. 2017: 72-73).

The recent "Plan Maestro para la revitalización integral de La Habana Vieja" confirms a unitary vision of the internal waterfront, assuming that the recreational vocation of port equipment, already started with the new cruise terminal, the market and other commercial activities within the pre-existing piers, becomes predominant in the new regeneration scenarios. Considering the eastern part of Havana as a suitable place for the development of the contemporary city and the Bahía as a new 'center without

a center' (Castillo del la Cruz, C. 2013), according to these studies it is possible to convert the Bahía into a large park capable of infiltrating the urban fabric from the edges of its own waterfront. The urban front of the city towards the water, whether rivers or sea, can therefore assume strategic importance for the future of cities where it is possible to intertwine settlements, infrastructural networks and environmental corridors.

Formal variety and flexible hierarchy

The Vedado district of Havana, developed through the model of the garden city for the bourgeois social classes, is characterized by a wide formal variety, a sort of catalogue of buildings that refer to



Fig. 3 / Through Calle K towards la Rampa, Vedado, Avana, Cuba. Source: Massarente, 2014.

different architectural styles - neoclassical, Neo-Romanesque, Neo-Gothic, Art Deco, Modern Movement - which coexist thanks to an urban structure based on the orthogonal grid.

This particular character of the Vedado is confirmed by being recognized as "Zona de Protección" of the area of 5ta Avenida by the Comisión Nacional de Monumentos" in 1999. However, the gap between the values recognized in the central urban areas of Habana Vieja remains important, including all the phenomena of gentrification that ensued, as well as the role that other areas such as Vedado have played in the history of the city. In recent years, a series of interventions and investments have tended to enhance individual episodes of the Vedado (as in the case of the Fabrika de Arte Cubano) and have begun to consider, albeit sometimes with questionable results, the global value of this part of the city, as well as other areas such as Habana Vieja.

Along these margins between the city and water, it will be necessary to consider with the necessary attention settlements, infrastructural and environmental issues deriving from this evolving framework, if we want to explore possible sustainable scenarios for the city of Havana in the coming decades, at different scales and between local development and social roots.

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