A Vision for the Future of Havana

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ABSTRACT

The Havana Master Plan aspires to recreate a pedestrian friendly urban ambience that encourages outdoor living – according to Cuban’s idiosyncrasy – and social and cultural integration where people can meet, work, relax and enjoy. It consists of a number of pragmatic considerations and proposals expressed in concrete projects supported by contemporary urban theory and studies and also based on the past plans with their virtues and failures. It is also based on the experiences obtained in numerous travels abroad – including the United States of America, Canada and Europe – and the exchange with qualified planning professionals from different latitudes.

Keywords: Havana, 21st century Master Plan, Caribbean metropolis, spirit of the place.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE OF HAVANA

Introduction

Havana, a Caribbean Metropolis with a European influence, was spared the damage of the global urban renewal and overdevelopment of the second half of the 20th century. Even today, it still keeps intact its traditional urban fabric. Its unique and appealing spirit stems not only from the well-known quality of its music and rhythms, its vibrant street life and its friendly ambience, but also from its built environment. However, the city’s harmonious juxtaposition of different architectural styles, displayed by an impressive collection of buildings authored by world famous local and international architects is currently threatened by overdevelopment, sprawl and neglect. This unique ensemble shows how good and humane urbanism makes possible the coexistence of buildings from different periods that follow guidelines and ordinances that have made their survival possible.

A comprehensive Master Plan aimed at preserving the city’s spirit and its historic, urban and architectural legacy has been devised to foster Havana’s future urban and economic development, while remaining true to its history, its people’s idiosyncrasies and its
landscapes. The plan acknowledges Havana’s readiness for a sensitive change and renovation according to sustainable principles that reconcile human needs with ecological imperatives and envisions Havana’s survival as an urban place with a strong cultural identity. For the first time, it supplies a long term vision that guarantees total connectivity and a seamless urban layout.

Cuba: The Key to the New World

Christopher Columbus exclaimed “This is the loveliest land ever beheld by human eyes” upon his arrival in Cuba in 1492.

From the standpoint of urban planning, the process that followed was unprecedented since the days of the Roman Empire. In the early 16th Century, Diego Velazquez founded seven settlements, so called villas, along the island’s coast whose primitive layout was based mostly on geographical features. The settlers were pragmatic and the new cities, towns and buildings were shaped by the need to adapt to local climatic conditions, the availability of local materials and the progressive assimilation of European urban and architectural models together with the mark left by immigrants from all over the world. These influences helped mold a culture with a highly distinct architectural heritage spanning over five centuries that reflected the country’s development and defined its cultural identity.

The Spirit of Havana: Genesis and Evolution

One of the original seven villas, Havana was definitely settled by its protected harbor in 1519 after two previous attempts. The key geographic position of its port eventually allowed the fast growing commercial activity of the Spanish fleet and the development of an expanding shipbuilding industry. These features soon granted the city the highest prominence among the overseas colonies playing a major role between the Old and the New World and in turn motivated Spain to build fortresses to defend Havana from the attacks of pirates. Castles, convents, churches and palaces were constructed by European military engineers and craftsmen and became the first beacons to delineate the urban landscape of Havana’s medieval grid of narrow and shaded streets, breathing through a network of piazzas and piazzettas, which would establish the early polycentric character of the city. In 1603 Cristóbal de Roda laid out Havana’s first urban plan outlining the walls that later enclosed the city. Subsequent plans, especially those drawn after the English Navy temporarily captured Havana in 1762, were conceived with a similarly military character. In the architectural realm, buildings centered on courtyards, a style adopted by Spain from the Moorish tradition, were gradually accepted as the adequate typology to deal with local climatic conditions.

The first significant urban changes of the early colonial times took place in the late 18th Century, with the transformation of the Plaza de Armas into Havana’s first civic center and the laying out of public promenades – the Alameda de Paula and the Alameda de Extramuros. These projects updated Havana’s image according to European trends as the spaces they created for the appreciation and enjoyment of nature in the city added a new meaning to Havana. The transformation of the original military parade ground into a civic space had a particularly strong effect on the evolution of the city’s Genius Loci, by juxtaposing...
magnificent newly – constructed Baroque style palaces with the existing Renaissance style Royal Force Castle.

Figure 1. Havana’s layers of History (© J. C. Pérez Hernández)

Havana in the 19th Century was characterized by prosperity and splendor based on steady economic growth. The existing colonial urbanism was overtaken in terms of urban expansion and continuity, as well as strategic needs. Progressive institutions favored an ambience of openness to science, technology and management that helped to insert Cuba into the world economy and allowed Havana to adapt to multiple changes. Culture reached broader sectors of society and fostered the gradual consolidation of a strong sense of identity. In architecture, Neoclassicism was embraced as the new style and expressed an aspiration to order, rationality and perfection.

Colonel-engineer Antonio María de la Torre’s Plan de Ensanche (1817-1819) guided the expansion of the city beyond the walls in an orderly manner by using the existing layout of the roads that connected the walled city with the countryside. This plan was the model for the main arteries with sheltering Neoclassical style porticoes, called calzadas, that became the most distinctive feature of Havana’s new streetscape and stood in clear contrast with the character of the walled city. Notwithstanding the first modern urban transformations in terms of scale and design were conducted during the term of Governor Miguel Tacón (1834-1838). Anticipating Baron Haussmann’s Parisian boulevards, he achieved the redefinition of
Havana’s urban landscape in a monumental style with the construction of wide straight avenues and walks decorated with fountains and statues.

In the first half of the 19th Century, along the Calzada del Cerro, the affluent bourgeoisie built a series of free-standing Neoclassical villas, called quintas, with gardens and porches that served as a model for the new district of El Vedado, designed by Luis Yboleón in 1859. This plan emphasized order with a regular grid defined by tree-lined avenues along which lots were laid out. The buildings’ frontage featured a five meters deep private garden and a four meters deep porch, allowing for the primary separation between the public and the private realms. This ensured privacy and created a very distinct streetscape. New recreational facilities, such as restaurants, theaters and outdoor cafes, appeared along the former Alameda de Extramuros, renamed Paseo de Isabel II, following ordinances adopted in 1861. The latter also regulated new districts such as The Ring of Havana (The Walls Subdivision), developed by military engineer Juan Bautista Orduña in 1865 after the demolition of the walls in 1863, echoing metropolitan models from Europe.

El Vedado and The Walls district, marked the birth of modern city planning in Havana. Furthermore, the development of the Malecón by US engineers Mead and Whitney in 1901 reshaped Havana’s waterfront image and became an iconic boulevard showing Havana’s capacity to reaffirm its Genius Loci.

An Expanding Caribbean Metropolis

From the beginning of the 20th Century, land speculation and a lack of comprehensive planning control led to sprawl and the loss of Havana’s traditional character of mixed public/private use. New suburbs spread westward from the city, mostly influenced by the United States model based on the use of the automobile. Several plans were put forth unsuccessfully by local architects who attempted to address the scarcity of greenery and the traffic congestion due to a poor road network. In central areas of Havana, like the Paseo del Prado and the Parque Central zone, new building techniques introduced from the United States of America, such as reinforced concrete and steel frame systems, were used in the construction of representative buildings for different regional groups from Spain. Because their scale was different from that of the existing buildings, these structures had a major urban impact.

In 1926, the Cuban government commissioned French landscape designer J.C.N. Forestier to draw up an embellishment plan for Havana. The plan was based on a network of rectilinear boulevards intended to facilitate traffic and shape the new monumental image of Havana by visually and physically linking important landmarks. Although Forestier’s plan was only partially realized, by the 1930’s Havana was already an expanding Caribbean metropolis with a compact center, a well defined urban fabric and a very distinctive streetscape with a vibrant street life reaffirming the spirit of the place.

During the Second World War the boom of the Cuban economy extended through the 1950’s. In Havana, this period was generally characterized by excellence in architectural design and construction, as well as the presence of an elite group of international architects who visited and lectured like Gropius, Neutra, Mies van der Rohe and Philip Johnson among many others.
There were, however, some threats to the city’s integrity. The National Planning Board, created in 1955, commissioned Josep Lluís Sert’s Town Planning Associates to prepare a new urban plan. This project neglected the legacy and spirit of Havana by including an artificial island with hotels and gambling casinos for Americans across from the Malecón. If built, this would have had a negative effect on the spirit of Havana by causing a major change in the character of the waterfront.

After the Revolution in 1959, Havana's urban development was stopped in order to favor the rest of the country. The master plans developed by the state’s planning agencies in the 1960s and 1970s were merely a reflection of the government’s economic and social programs and they imported into Cuba prefabricated stereotypes from Eastern European countries that were incompatible with the existing urban context. These new methods were supposedly a massive solution to housing needs and caused several zones of Havana to undergo radical transformations, the most regrettable of these being the loss of the traditional grid. There was also an increase in sprawl, due to the appearance of new satellite neighborhoods, following a negative trend in international urbanism. These neighborhoods had no mixed use and lacked connections to the rest of the city, as well as green spaces and public spaces. Transportation, infrastructure and housing were not addressed appropriately and still remain unsolved problems today. Thanks, however, to the relatively limited scale of new construction during this period, the spirit of the place was not lost.

In the late 1980's the collapse of the Soviet bloc brought a wave of foreign investment and other real estate projects outside the central areas of Havana. Again, these plans neglected the traditional mixed use character of the city and thus created dead zones by promoting the segregation of functions. Like the American architecture from the mid 20th Century, notably the Miami style hotels, these new projects created a hostile environment devoid of a recognizable spirit of place. These buildings, with curtain walls and low ceilings, have no shutters or balconies to shade and cool them without air conditioning. They also ignore the zoning and building bylaws for they are totally unrelated to the Cuban climate, economy, local building materials and lifestyle. The unfortunate outcome of these insensitive interventions is that they call into question the spirit of Havana. Their impact may become irreversible in the near future if Cuba is assimilated into a new market economy as increasing numbers of these projects are likely to appear when developers and foreign business people pursue money-making opportunities in Havana.

The Hope for the Revival of the Spirit of Havana

The unique and appealing spirit of Havana is a celebration of urbanism and architecture, ever incapable of remaining still, connected to all of the world’s cities and at the same time maintaining its own magic and poetic urban identity.

Havana skipped the worldly injurious urban renewal of the second half of the XX century but it is currently endangered not only by climate change but also by an eventual market- driven overdevelopment. Havana features compact city blocks, mixed-use buildings, and lacks traffic jams and multi level highways and has managed to keep its original personality and is now ready for a sensitive change and renovation according to sustainable principles. When
thinking of how to revive unique places, we can learn many important lessons by looking at their past and by connecting with their spirit.

A team of Cuban architects, led by this author, has designed a Master Plan aimed at preserving the city’s spirit and its historic, urban and architectural legacy, while encouraging its future urban and economic development. The urban plan expresses a holistic vision that is independent from the government's ideas and from the official planning agencies that replicate the official mandate. It looks toward Havana’s future while remaining true to its history, its people’s idiosyncrasies and its landscapes. For the first time, it provides a comprehensive scope, spanning both urban planning and urban design, in such a way as to give continuity to Havana’s traditions and to seek a contemporary image.

Figure 2. The Master Plan (© J. C. Pérez Hernández)

The Plan is mostly based on ten key concepts that call for a holistic approach.

1. Waterfront Revitalization: A waterfront helps to define a city's image
2. Reinforcement of Havana’s Polycentric Structure: A key to the city's identity
3. Increase of Public Space: An real necessity and a must
4. A New Public Transportation System:
5. Infrastructure Upgrading
6. Mixed —use development: Guarantees a livable human environment
7. Social and Cultural Integration
8. Redevelopment of the Traditional Calzadas
9. Increase of Green
10. Urban Infill

The Master Plan envisions the waterfront redevelopment as a key concept to achieve a new urban image of the city. It aims to develop the structure of both urban spaces and buildings by orienting them towards the sea in a way that its presence is felt even inland with seafront boulevards, squares, parks and promenades that will help create a new streetscape and a pedestrian friendly urban ambience that encourages outdoor living and social and cultural integration. Considering climate change issues of the utmost importance, the plan envisions urban infill with reasonably high densities. The intention is to encourage outdoor living, as well as social and cultural integration so that people can meet, relax and enjoy city life. Public space combines both high quality outdoor space and fine art, where strolling, jogging and sunset watching support a vibrant, livable and sustainable community life. The whole waterfront area has been divided into sectors for a detailed study and for concrete proposals showing the attributes, existing conditions and potential for future development.

The harbor sector is considered the most important one and it helps illustrate both the working method and the scope of the proposals. We believe that the principles applied to the regeneration of the Havana harbor can be applied to the rest of the city. The harbor area was also divided into sectors for a more detailed study of each zone.

![Figure 3. The Master Plan for the Harbor of Havana (© J. C. Pérez Hernández).](image-url)
In environmental terms the proposal involves the sanitation of the harbor area and the existing rivers. In this regard, one of the key aspects is to turn the current industrial character of the harbor into a sport and recreational one allowing at the same time for the increase of public space in its entire perimeter and the creation of new mixed use areas mostly for residential, commercial and cultural facilities as well as sports.
This principle can be applied to other areas in the city. Three international Charrettes have been held in Havana along 2007, 2008 and 2009 and they have focused on the planning of the harbor as we believe that its regeneration can serve as a model for the rest of the city’s. Two other international Charrettes have been devoted to the detailed study of two other different waterfront sectors – the East Havana (2010) and Centro Habana (2011) – adjacent to the harbor. This way the ideas of the Master Plan have been tested with the participation of the community.

The Plan also includes the creation of a new public transportation system, whose coastal stretch would run parallel to the Malecón, presently overrun by traffic, thereby freeing the ground level for pedestrians and increasing the public space along the waterfront. This strategy takes advantage of the existing topography of the reef and also helps to deal with eventual rising sea levels due to climate change by creating a buffer zone. Such zones should be outlined in order to protect the surroundings of the oldest areas of Havana from the marine aerosol of the sea.

The plan presents an ecological alternative to suburbanization by reinforcing the polycentric character of the traditional city and by increasing the amount of green spaces. To reduce sprawl, it focuses on the revitalization of the traditional commercial arteries, the calzadas, where community life is more vibrant.

The Master Plan emphasizes the mixed use character that is found in traditional Havana. It reinforces the identities of the different districts and the need for density balance in the traditional centers where commerce plays a key role. Urban infill encompasses the creation of two new major neighborhoods, Vistamar and Habanamar, with their own new centers and space for around half a million new dwelling units tackling housing issues. This will help increase connectivity and regional liaisons, while giving character to these zones according to their own geography, history and culture.

The Master Plan for 21st Century of Havana aspires to a more beautiful, urban and dignified Havana where people can live, work and enjoy life: a contemporary city that respects the spirit of the place, values its heritage and honors its culture.