

Havana Forever, Forever Havana

by Mario Coyula

Havana Changes

Havana has changed in these last 35 years, and keeps on changing. Still greater changes are already on their way, posing the challenge of how to achieve an acceptable competitiveness that would not become detrimental to social equity, in a world where it no longer appears possible to receive significant selfless assistance. The challenge is complicated by the need to preserve an extensive and valuable built heritage accumulated over twenty generations of *habaneros*, following a development model which inevitably needs to be profitable, yet also sustainable and participatory. This requires revising mental schemes, organizational structures, work methods and conventional solutions exhausted through mechanical repetition.

It seems necessary to create a range of new alternatives to be evaluated in terms of actual results rather than as universal truths of indisputable value. This demands the critical assimilation of types and forms of shaping and using the built environment drawn from both national and international experiences, historic and contemporary, cultivated, vernacular and even marginal sources -often rejected as foreign or ideologically unorthodox, or discounted as backwards.

For some, Havana is an impressive built stock to be preserved for cultural, utilitarian and social reasons. Others see it as a frame of symbolic references that is significant for strengthening the national identity or as a showcase for visitors. For others still, the city is mainly a field for profitable investments that do not fit into a larger picture of holistic sustainability; while at the same time, it is felt as an unbearable load of accumulated problems without any foreseeable solutions. For all, Havana is a familiar territory ranging from friendly to hostile, a frame for everyday life.

If the city constantly changes, the idea of city should change as well. Nevertheless, as occurs too often, the reflection of reality may wither or distort changes, even potentially positive ones, which are already happening at the grassroots. For this reason, it is necessary to pause and gain an adequate perspective. Rethinking the city means looking at her with the eyes of both a vase person and a child, a native and a stranger, a preservationist and a renovator, an idealist and an entrepreneur; as an agent and as a subject of change.

From the bottom and the inside --but always upward

Changes can also be negative. The mushrooming of distortions within the inherited built fabric is not just the result of a relaxation of institutional mechanisms of urban control, but also of a more profound change in lifestyle resulting in an egotistical disregard for neighbors and community. Ironically, this negative attitude has developed parallel to the strengthening of patriotism and national identity. Its reflection upon the street and cityscape expresses -scarcities aside- the worrisome rise of an urban marginal subculture which, like an opportunistic mutant, tries to fill the void left by the displaced bourgeois culture.

Paradoxically, the extremely wide scope of opportunities for work and study quickly opened by the 1959 Revolution drained the neighborhoods from their best people; and left the streets free for

those individuals that the Cuban humorist Héctor Zumbado baptized as *petty-proletarians*. These characters, half-way between workers and marginal, gradually imposed their own set values and behavior, patterns in the use of public spaces and dwellings, the relations with their fellow, and ways of bringing up their children, dressing, talking, eating, spending free time and shaping their habitat.

These trends have introduced many distortions in the built environment. Conventional control through permits and fines is no doubt necessary yet insufficient; and very often the controllers are culturally identified with the trespassers. On the other hand, repression is not enough: along with it is also necessary to work at the grassroots and from within the community, interpreting its needs and promoting solutions which combine the interests of the city and its population. Equally important is to find out ways for imposing through personal conviction and social compulsion certain patterns of *urban, culture* without sacrificing equity and diversity. The problem turns more complicated when one realizes that reintroducing civic education in the school curricula is not enough: also needed is to create a frame that will attach a *value* to those patterns of behavior. That implies affording some privileges or at least distinguish those who keep the rules of civic good 'manners; and this in turn poses the risk of creating differences in status that may lead to discrimination and segregation, pumping a problem that was almost non-existent during the last thirty years in Cuba.

Allowable, or adequate?

Even the most conventionally objectionable actions may inspire imaginative, simple solutions to problems that have not been solved by other means. An inserted mezzanine takes creative advantage of the high ceilings in old buildings at the inner city. Done well -unlike the hazardous, uncomfortable and visually disturbing wooden barbacoa of ill-repute- it may prove a very satisfactory solution to the lack of privacy in dwellings due to a shortage of floor space. An added rooftop shack, if larger and well designed and built, may become a desirable living place for its views, ventilation and privacy. These two makeshift types born out of necessity are in fact poor cousins of the lofts, duplexes and penthouses populated by yuppies in the gentrified historic districts of many foreign cities.

There are majestic colonial structures built of earth which have withstood three centuries with hurricanes, earthquakes and vandals included. The picturesque yet destitute bohío with its palm thatch roof becomes a luxury tourist cabana when adequately built and equipped; while a pre-fabricated high rise, with shrunken apartments impossible to enlarge, kerosene stoves, leaking pipes, dirty hallways and noisy neighbors becomes a vertical slum less livable than the congested row of rooms in that typical inner city tenement, the *ciudadela*, given the frequent blackouts and lifts hang-ups. The long, narrow court of the *ciudadela* was the natural frame for supporting an intense social life and foments co-operation between neighbors: rethinking it, we can reinforce its positive attributes yet provide greater privacy and comfort through a variety of design options.

The shack in the spontaneous settlements at the urban periphery -Mown in Cuba as *barrios insalubres*- is built over the weekend, and immediately thereafter starts to get improved through a gradual process resulting in a two-level solid house, without peaking "one-shot investments and without requiring construction companies. Furthermore, this process is generally characterized by the harmonious maturation of the potentials and necessities of the owners at the moment when they are both culturally and economically prepared for change. The greatest problems of these settlements are their poor siting and uncoordinated growth, and that can be solved. On the other hand, the

conventional multilevel apartment building offers a little more density related to the lot, but at far greater economic and ecological cost, with little chance for the inhabitants to maintain their dwellings and none to enlarge or adapt it to new needs. Thus, the livability curves of the shack and the flat cross in time; one always rising, the other always falling.

The traditional street corner shop or *bodega* was not simply a neighborhood store to purchase daily groceries -often on credit- but also a sort of elementary cafeteria and bar, with one or local drunkards under the friendly supervision of the *bodeguero* and neighbors; and with conveniently extended night-time hours. Shoe-shiners and newspaper vendors hung out on its porch, which served to facilitate social interaction. The shops performed as basic nodes of daily activity and *baryio* solidarity dotting the dense street grid of the neighborhood.

An ambitious program for building an extensive supermarket network promoted in the eighties intended to ease food distribution for the sake of the state agency in charge of that task, reducing the number of distribution points. This program was aimed to eliminate the small corner groceries, combining several under one single roof of a new building. Actually, the concept of a supermarket -meant to compel people into buying goods that they do not really need- did not fit with the purpose of a socialist country where the state's concern was to ensure a fair supply of basic food to everybody. These ersatz supermarkets concentrated the negative impacts of storage and mass assembly of consumers, forcing people to walk longer distances - *with* often heavy loads; and squandered valuable corner lots while leaving several previously "II-shaped city corners adrift.

The abandoned buildings formerly occupied by the bodegas often ended as informal garbage dumps or as precariously adapted low-quality housing, turning those previous nodes into eyesores. Something similar happened with the concentration of beer-vending in the notorious pilots, frequented by drunkards and rogues no longer under local control. The answer to popular rebuke was to pass the problem through the city on tanker trucks, popularly known as pipas, until the beer shortage solved the problem in a definite way.

Learning from the past

Traditional construction technologies provide lessons in rational and creative exploitation of local potentials, skills and resources; with minimal dependence on external issues and thus much less vulnerable to changing circumstances than high technologies. In line with tradition, are the rammed earth and muddle and daub walls, **pitched clay-tile** roofs with projecting **eaves** protecting from the too strong sun and helping to collect rainwater through canals into, cisterns or even enormous **clay** jars, the *tinajones*; or those typical houses in long, narrow lots sharing a common wall with a twin one, both ventilating through long lateral courts that also served for circulation within the dwelling, and a backyard with a chicken coop and fruit trees.

The fabric and patterns of land use in the inner city also provide suggestions, like the compact blocks formed by buildings facing the street aligned on deep, narrow lots of various heights and styles, yet unified by the common lateral walls, the same building materials and techniques, and the same ceiling, balcony and decorative fringes heights. Unity was also reinforced by the rhythmic modulation introduced by the narrow lots. Centro Havana has turned into a *heat island* nearly two Centigrade degrees hotter than the average in Havana because of the extremely high density plus the lack of green spaces and flat, reverberating roofs; but still the microclimate inside the dwellings

remains more comfortable than taller, detached buildings mercilessly punished by the sun, built poorly isolating external concrete panel walls and *Miami windows*.

This sector of Havana, by large the more densely populated territory in Cuba, presents a very interesting urban pattern that may well should have inspired many urban planners: on the one hand, a dense fabric of small compact regular blocks where dwellings predominate, yet superimposed over a thinner one of small shops and services, offices and even some manufacturing, workshops and warehouses. Both grids were in turn superimposed with a third, much wider one formed by the *calzadas*, which actually performed as lineal centers that paradoxically were peripheral to the neighborhoods, with a continuous row of shops in the ground floor facing a protected public corridor, and dwellings above. The calzadas concentrated public transit, thus helping to define neighborhoods by clearly separating them; but also brought them together with the magnet of shopping and sheer human interaction.

Still more interesting are the patterns followed in the development of Vedado since its beginning in 1859 with the El Carmelo subdivision, next to the mouth of the city's major river, Almendares. This new settlement close to the coast was extended next year with El Vedado, and in 1883 with Medina; and the three were later integrated under one single name, Vi6dado. The innovative urban design, contemporary to other enlargements in major European cities, had a strong green look: boulevards with a central pedestrian promenade covered by trees; regular streets, wider than in the inner city, lined by trees; a stripe five meters deep of front gardens in each lot (one third of the lot had to remain unbuilt) and a second stripe four meters deep at ground level composed by front porches, thus vadening the views for passersby. Fences were kept low and with a see-through design, but there still was a clear distinction between private and public space. Every number of blocks there was one left unbuilt, performing as a square with trees and a central gazebo or a simple raised stoop for a music band: the traditional *republican park*. Corners usually housed small groceries or drugstores whose revolving porches served as hang-outs for neighbors; or larger mansions using a double lot. This pattern reinforced the street life and *Gestalt* at comers, which are so important in an orthogonal grid.

Vedado displayed an aura of elegance and exclusiveness, but was actually a quite socially mixed neighborhood. The upper class imposed its architectural and environmental codes in the image projected upon the streets and also in the patterns of behavior in public spaces. Other social sectors had to adjust to that or leave. While poverty and discrimination were masked this way in a typical late 19th Century bourgeois hypocritical fashion, the result was visually pleasant and the benefit somehow spread to the old neighborhood.

Public space: beauty pays

Another lesson that largely went unnoticed by contemporary planners and decision makers was the important role played by public spaces in urban development. Land that remained unbuilt to be used by squares, parks and partees triggered higher prices in lots facing them, like in Paseo del Prado, Parque de la Fraternidad, G and Paseo avenues in Vedado, Fifth Avenue in Miramar or the dozens of republican parks in Vedado, Santos Suarez, La Vibora and so many other subdivisions or *repartos* that guided the expansion of the city during the first half of the 20th Century. Some of these same design criteria were reformulated in the recent Villa Panamericana project east of Havana (1991), resulting in a strong urbanistic framework which gallantly withstands the impact of a rather banal architectural wrapping.

On the contrary, the approach to the use of Monte Barreto, a large rectangular land reserve in western Havana, open to the sea and crossed by Fifth Avenue, turned out simplistic and short-sighted. The land was initially used to place impersonal buildings like Tritón Hotel -stubbornly cloned a decade later with its twin, Neptuno Hotel- and a supermarket selling in foreign currency which the late Cuban architect Fernando Salinas ironically defined as *tin architecture*. These buildings coexisted with the tenacious *temporary facilities* of the construction workers, under using a valuable land and devaluating the whole area. The possibility of opening Monte Barreto into the sea was lost, definitively damaged by following investments in real estate businesses by Cuban-foreign joint ventures, plus more hotels already under construction. The largest expanse of open land south of Fifth Avenue, will be reduced to a small central lot previously designated as a natural local flora preserve that will otherwise remain with no public access, surrounded **by a** row of defying new buildings for the dollar economy.

This approach only draw profits once from the value of the land, without taking full advantage of the area's vocation as a major urban park for the West of Havana that would eventually open into the sea with a marina and recreational facilities. That park could not only had been widely used by a great number of Havanans and visitors -again, public space serving as a social leveler- but it would also shoot a steep rising of the land value in the surrounding lots, just like it happens in Manhattan's Central Park or, in a more modest way, with the Havana examples previously mentioned. Maybe that would have solved the contradiction in the popular North American saying that you cannot keep the cake and eat it.

Beauty, yes; but of what sort?

The reappraisal of abandoned or discarded models also applies against canons of conventional architectural taste, thereby overcoming a shrunken petty-bourgeois aesthetics supposedly at the service of an ill-defined proletariat whose interests and tastes were never consulted. It also implies and end to the mimicry of a high technology of doubtful precision which has for so long allured the large state construction firms; while at the same time acknowledging the impossibility of attaining an artisan craft perfection given the need to use inexperienced handwork.

In the history of Cuban architecture Especially in the pre-Baroque period, and above all in the vernacular- one can find appropriate responses in which expression rests upon more essential and stable precepts, such as spatial and volumetric values, proportion, texture and the play of light and shadow. These precepts proved to be more dependable and easier to control by the designer than unlikely machine finishes and a use of color too vulnerable to any neo-Neanderthal capable of opening a can of paint in search of appraisal from his peers.

Architects generally assume a laudable yet self-centered stance against such problems, as if solutions "re solely dependent upon their actions. Actually, even in affluent societies most of the building is done without the advice of an architect. On the other hand, the needs and restrictions to which architecture must respond place the profession at some distance from the more individualistic creative concerns and opportunities of the visual arts, grounded as it is in the field of team design with various specialists and with the users. Such a broad notion of the role of the architect should lead to a consciousness of and respect for quality of place, lifestyles, needs, traditions, tastes, aspirations and even fears of city dwellers, embedding a kind of humanity in his work of form-giver,

organizing space and erecting structures harmoniously within the urban fabric that was waiting for them.

To the extent that such work glorifies nature and is reflective of a society and its epoch; or preserves, assimilates and creatively reinterprets valuable experiences, the task of the architect gains cultural and social relevance. If furthermore, such work moves the user by way of its visual beauty, conveys some new significant meaning and belies a personal way of making architecture, then perhaps the critics may find an honored place for him or her within the whimsical and seductive history of art.

Winning over tourism

Tourism may bring about irreversible losses and distortions to the city, but it is also one of the few affordable means to garner the capital necessary for urban conservation. Along with the construction of new hotels in Havana—generally if not always irrelevant or even disturbing—followed the restoration of older ones, more advantageous to the city and business itself because of prime central locations and a name already established in the market. But that positive effect could be extended through the development of a network of hostels and inns within the restored shells of hundreds of mansions spread throughout the city, disseminating both the negative and the positive economic and social impact of tourism that could even reach a neighborhood-based tourism in which benefits "re directly experienced by the local residents. Indeed, the goal is to extract the maximum social benefit with the same scarce resources, be those financial, energy, construction materials, equipment or human. Most especially, it is necessary to take into consideration that other non-renewable resource, urban land, which due to the curious persistence of an atavistic sixties-era provincial prejudice against the capital city, only now starts to be appreciated, though with great oscillations up and down from its value due to the lack of a land market.

Conservation,, empowerment and revitalization

The conservation of Havana's built heritage has been successful within the context of the restoration of landmarks endowed with a singular cultural value, but for a long time was not integrated with other sort of interventions to solve the accumulated problems in infrastructure, rehabilitation or maintenance. Acting in such a way would allow to connect cultural value to the socioeconomic sphere and tend towards the rescue of entire urban districts over isolated buildings. The passing of Decree # 143 allowed the City Historian to run businesses within the historic core and reinvest profits on the territory. Financing needed for the restoration program is secured in this way, as well as for other actions to improve the quality of life for the local population who predominately dwell in poor conditions.

Working at the same time in the recuperation of monumental structures, mostly dedicated to tourism and culture, and in rehabilitating the housing stock of the inner city is not only right because of social justice, but also indispensable in order to improve the social and environmental quality of the urban fabric surrounding major buildings and public spaces in the historic districts, turning them more attractive and safe for visitors and investors. On the other hand, that would be more consequent with the fact that the greatest value in those districts is not in a collection of very relevant isolated buildings but in a very extended and coherent built stock covering over four centuries and more than to thousand hectares in Havana.

A few pioneering examples aside, the tendency to equate the oldest -usually from the colonial period- with the most valuable, has yet to be transcended. Meanwhile, whole neighborhoods are forgotten, even if they are as important to the city as the old walled precinct. On the other extreme of the ideological spectrum, this nostalgic and actually elitist approach had its counterpart in the reductive, technocratic strategies of conventional urban planning through the 'seventies which viewed these inner-city neighborhoods merely as a *transformation potential*, that is, as an expendable urban matter -an attitude ironically close to that of the 'fifties real estate speculators. In fact, this enormous built stock will only be preserved through a social project which systematically reinforces the identification of residents and users with their environment, placing emphasis upon norms of shared living patterns as the basis for an *urbane culture*, both urban and ecological that is, a culture of the street life, not a street culture, popular but not populist- that would complement the culture of the salon. Such a social project should not be restricted to assistance help, and should definitely not be confused with political activism. On the other hand, this social project must be supported by a sound local economy allowing that built stock to remain in use. An economy that needs to work in a parallel way at three different levels: city, neighborhood and family.

A street to live in -a living street

The street is a basic element of the urban image, and occupies more than one fourth of the area of the central city, otherwise bereft of significant open space. This condition could be improved, improving the environment, increasing the physical security of pedestrians and enhancing the traditional use of the street by local residents, through a system of park-streets-like the Dutch woonerven-introducing thousands of trees to the central city and outlying districts. These could well be fruit trees, but the idea always runs up against conventional wisdom which equates street fruit trees with a plague of one thousand kids who aggressively remove the unripened fruit, terminating with the fruits, the trees and most of the glass in the nearby Windows. As usual, the solution lies in a simple change in proportion, for example, planting one tree for every child. Seville, with its tradition of orange groves, provides a good example of the potential coexistence between fruit trees and people. Another alternative might be to revive the ancient custom from Santiago de Cuba of planting a tree when a child is born, so that they may both grow together. The creation of a popular green culture might also be promoted if a way could be found to extend into other trees the Afro-Cuban taboo that protects the majestic ceiba.

Finding formulas for incorporating trees where they are most needed-between the street and the people would seem to be more rational than clearing the inside of the city blocks. This fashion, which ultimately was never carried out, became attractive to many of our urban planners who adopted the idea from Europe, Without realizing that to do this successfully, one need large blocks (which " do not have), and must carry out extensive demolition projects (which we cannot afford). On the other hand, that interior open space so painfully achieved does nothing to ameliorate the image or animation of the street, becoming far too vulnerable to future additions and other inadequate uses which would directly attack the softer components of dwellings --bedrooms- which generally open onto the rear of building lots.

Density, myth and reality

The density myth deserves special attention. There are still some among us specialists who are surprised to hear of the idea of low rise/high density. On the other hand, density reaches its limit when it begins to conflict with economy and maintenance, flexibility and the potential to adapt to

change or meet the needs for services, open space, parking, sense of place and community life. For many years, Havana was blamed as a low-rise, sprayed city. Some have shifted high density development from the center to the periphery without understanding the need to adequate housing to physical and social contexts, or of allowing for diversity and choice.

This line of thought saw the vast unbuilt triangular spaces that separates the major radial traffic arteries at the urban periphery as wasted land, and could not imagine the potential of these areas to serve as important recreational and biological armatures of the city. These greenbelts can also be farmed as an *edible landscape*, thus significantly reducing the cost of transporting fruits and vegetables from as far as 60 kilometers beyond the city limits. Farmed greenbelts could link up With the smaller isolated patches of urban barren land which are gradually being transformed into productive land, following the example of the more than 26,000 vegetable gardens currently functioning within the capital city. The logical next step would be to support the commercialization of the surplus produced in these gardens, as well as the sale of locally processed foods; to incorporate circular cyclic systems With other organic productions that will rest on reuse, recycling and renewable energy; and solve the watering of crops Without using drinking water from the aqueduct.

Return to the *barrio*

In textbook fashion, the control of urban expansion was seen as necessary to prevent the over stretching of traditional utilities and transportation networks. These principles may need to be revised in a city where bicycles are used on such a massive scale: within the 1991-95 period their numbers grew from 70,000 to nearly one million. There is also a rising consciousness of the potentials in heretofore under-utilized alternative technologies like small-diameter sewers, rain water storage, neighborhood food production within the concept of low-entropy systems; and **locally** made building materials to be used in the construction and maintenance of housing units, and artisan workshops.

The implementation of alternative technologies would create jobs in the neighborhoods no longer formal, but really productive employment's soaking up the surplus of state workers MO, as a result of the scarcity of energy and raw materials, have been sent home to vegetate with 60% of their salaries. The process might also begin to reverse the social *drainage* which has occurred gradually since 'Sixties as the most qualified residents left the neighborhoods to take up the new jobs and educational opportunities opened by the Revolution. It also opens new possibilities to cover the present gap between the state enterprises -which generally were not very efficient and are now nearly paralyzed. and self-employed workers, who must now create wealth independently and often at the edge of the law, both curiously dependent upon hardship and scarcity. This expanded local economy may well support a new community-based socialist option sustainable.

All this points to a resurgence of the *barrio*, a territory that People can identify as their own, tending towards self-sufficiency and now reinforced by the return of its best residents. In such a place, dwellings *YALL* stop being a mere refuge and become a micro workshop, the basis of a neighborhood economy which could be organized much like the recently established rural co-operatives. Perhaps in this way, the old Marxist dream of erasing the difference between the city and countryside would follow a different path, away from the simplistic approach of building five-story apartment blocks in the middle of the countryside and small, squalid detached houses in the inner city.

Havana can

Ethics and aesthetics have generally occupied the center of architectural criticism. However, asset of values based upon a limited notion of cultural patrimony-focused upon the oldest and most relevant artifacts, yet disinterested in processes and other factors which condition the final quality of products-might wrongly conclude, that the tropical heat has boiled off the creative capacity of Cuban architects. A hard learned truth is that beauty cannot be seen as a luxury to be put off for better times, or as a kind of mascara to be applied after the fact. Neither is it a secret code to be enjoyed by a literate, few, or as a signal for identifying social or intellectual status. Beauty is an indispensable part of the overall quality of any mark, be it a single building or a city, and when, beauty **is** sacrificed in order to build much and build fast, the whole is lost; functionality, bioclimatic comfort, constructive quality, and even the very quantity which those extensive and paradoxically reductive projects aspired to.

Quality demands someone interested in choosing among different options, and discard those which do not meet the established criteria. The single option, made worse through the mediation of those who supposedly interpret the needs of others, leads directly to the loss of quality. To a large extent, this observation is valid independent of the adopted technology, if indeed each technology carries its own ideology.

The zeal which sought solutions that could be replicated everywhere, based upon a narrow vision of industrialized construction, threatened to generate since the late 'sixties a new city no longer urban; where the street was a mere vessel for cars that otherwise scarcely exist, bereft of its traditional role as the frame and condenser of social activity. That approach created exasperatingly identical housing blocks drift within residual space void of any visual or functional value. This typology, originally conceived for large peripheral developments, upon invading the city, caused a traumatic rupture with the morphology, scale and character of what were well defined neighborhoods, accompanied as it is by large-scale demolition projects which bring about the loss of both cultural and economic values.

The reorientation of investment away from the city, followed by the postponement of building construction and maintenance in Havana, limited the impact of this sort of intervention, leading indirectly to the preservation of a valuable built stock, and halting the flow of rural migration into the city. The price paid was accelerated deterioration of buildings and infrastructure, accompanied by overcrowding and destructive renewal. At the same time, the mirage of the high-rise condominium of the 'fifties reappeared in a diminished version intended to meet the social demand for housing. Besides being more expensive and complicated to build, use and maintain than other low-rise dwellings, this model broke with both the traditional urban fabric and predominant way of living.

The typical prefabricated high-rise brought along dreariness and rigidity, coupled with its intrinsically irrational demand for excessive cement, steel and specialized equipment. This type lost by its own initial approach the greatest attribute of concrete, being monolithic; thus inevitably introducing a leaking problem. Yet the worst about that type was rather the terrible correspondence between the rigidity of the building and that of the exceedingly centralized form of project management, which eliminated any flexibility that technology could eventually provide. Another neative effect of the mimetic fascination vath high technology was the progressive loss of the skill and know-how ingrained within more traditional building technologies.

Happily, the violent confrontation with reality known in Cuba as the "special period" has clarified the dangers and pitfalls of rigid models and processes, which are both wasteful and polluting, overly dependent upon unreal circumstances, highly entropic and extremely vulnerable. Diversity, flexibility, resilience, the capacity to regenerate and adapt to changing circumstances, the potential for individual components of a system to perform several functions -and conversely, that the same function can be performed by several different components- are principles leading to a belief that all existing things are performing some function and should therefore be respected.

These ecological principles also apply to the city, the economy, politics and ethics. Unfortunately, there are some who worry about problems caused by others, like the deforestation in the Amazon basin or the hole in the ozone layer, and mourn the imminent extinction of the humpback whale and the Bengal tiger, while at the same time ignoring their own guilt in everyday wasteful and degrading behavior, and who refuse to understand that the rationality which ecological equilibrium demands is only the tip of the iceberg of a greater sense of living that would be more friendly to Nature and to fellow human beings.

On the other hand, the lack of urban control manifested by inappropriate land use, illegal construction and uncensored aggressions against the city image, mirrors grave problems of civil irresponsibility. In a sense, the assault on Havana's always undervalued trees serves as a barometer for gauging more profound damages yet to befall the built environment; and each aggression prefigures an incipient social degradation which is very difficult to reverse once it has set in. This can be confirmed in any street of a former elegant neighborhood starting with a *parterre* where trees have been cut down. Behind those beheaded trunks one may almost always see a ruined, makeshift fence, followed by a garden where decorative plants have been substituted with dusty earth or a banana tree; and yet farther by a former porch closed with unplastered walls, painted in striking ill matching colors and cut by half of its height by a precarious *barbacoa*. The experience ends by knocking to the front door and waiting, while remembering Lombroso, for the character that answers.

A recent variant associated to a relatively higher income level of a pathetic *nouveau riche* projects into the streetscape with a Peerless type of chain-link fence two meters high that separates a passer-by from the salivating fangs of a well-fed Doberman pinscher, plus a front garden turned into a car porch covered with undulating green Fiberglas, where the owner's 1950's well-kept Chevrolet stands side by side with a 1990's Nissan rented by a foreign paid guest. The ubiquitous fencing sadly reflects the rising increase of thefts, which ten years ago were few. -

Havana matters

Luis Lcidus (1937-1995) was one of the most lucid critics and actors in the different levels of design and historic preservation in Cuba over the last thirty years. In his last essay, published by journal CASA, he referred to the built heritage of the post-1959 era: "One can still debate whether the radical option in favor of standardized matter-of-fact architecture has yielded any representative products* if, for example, the Rural Basic Secondary Schools were in fact the reappearance of Bauhaus idealism ... if the beautiful interiors of the Las Ruinas restaurant, by Joaquin Galvcin, illustrate the will to infuse architecture in the 1970s with a specifically national character, or whether they merely demonstrate the professional skill of its creator. If the 1980s infill projects by young architects in Old Havana represent a submissive late following of post-modern fashion, or whether any of them actually deserve their international recognition for capturing a crucial moment in the return to the city and, from the hand of restoration, the long awaited resurgence of an artisanal

architecture... Analysts of the coming century will also judge whether or not any work of the current anguished moment achieved with ingenuity and profundity the urgent re-conceptualization of architecture, if the ideas of sustainability, resource preservation and economic and ecological realism were in fact translated into lucid and conscientious architectural methodology' (Lipids, 1995).

With that razor-sharp clarity irradiating from the serene anticipation of death, L6pidus was able to distill the essence of the transcendental and also everyday concerns of his contemporaries. In fact, the architecture which we have made and which we can still make, is the built image of the Revolution and of our lives as professionals. For Cuban architects now, defending this architecture is their principal task in the defense of national identity and of their own dignity. It is a heritage received with honor from our ancestors, which we are committed to pass on to and enrich for our descendants.

But returning to the often overlooked essence of Marxism, economy both explains and answers many of the problems which hang over Havana. It follows that economy should take its place as a guide: surpassing technological fetishism and its distortions which impose a culture of formal compliance associated with voluntarism and improvisation; but free as well of narrow economism limited to a deceitful notion of entrepreneurial profitability which does not take into account real economic, social, cultural and ecological impact over the environment where the future generations of Cubans will live.

It seems urgent to begin to see problems as opportunities which most likely carry their own solutions \within them. This means taking action in the city on the basis of understanding, and of guiding -as softly and invisibly as possible-- processes by their very nature should have been part of a chorus, instead of concentrating upon the elaboration of finished products, administrating by command and planning in quest of an ever elusive final image.

Processes and products: comparing three

A proper comparison between Vedado, East Havana and Alamar should view these settlements as the results of processes rather than artifacts extracted out of context. The planning -of the Vedado district was an example of a good relation between an idea and a reality, between process and final product: the plan started with basic regular scheme clear and unifying, and advanced for its time-- composed of a network of straight streets forming square blocks, with an overlay, or super-network wider streets defining various sectors. The whole subdivision contained a strong "green" element in its free blocks left for open as public plazas, in its landscaped setback requirements creating a continuous row of front gardens, and in parterres aligned with streets, especially emphasized along major boulevards in the form of continuous shaded lineal pedestrian promenades, or "paseos", slightly raised above the street level.

The blocks were in turn divided into deep and narrow lots, maximizing use of land area. Double lots were created at the corners, generally marked by mansions which gave visual prominence to the intersections, or by neighborhood commercial facilities like *bodegas*, pharmacies or small bric-a-brac stores, all functioning as local gathering places. The basic structure of the district was complemented by a few regulations, such as the five meter setback for gardens and the four meter grade-level portico requirement; minimum side yard with and regulation on overall maximum lot coverage (33% of the area should remain unbuilt). This high quality urban image contained a little recognized social mix in which millionaires, professionals, civil servants and even blue-collar workers lived side by side

according to architectural and cultural codes imposed by a bourgeoisie interested in maintaining the conditions and exchange values of their properties. *This framework* was gradually filled-in by projects for different programs and users; by a variety building types, styles and architects. The variations and the regulations turned out to be quite harmonious, with a surprising capacity to support change, even if traumatic.

The process which gave birth to East Havana -the first major work following the triumph of the Revolution, and still the single best modern urban complex in Cuba- is very instructive. Fidel Castro, who conceived of the initial idea, delegated the execution of the project to one of his guerrilla aides, *Pastorita* Nunez; who quickly organized a youthful team of professionals with little experience in such a large scale work, the first of its kind *in* Cuba. They selected the most advanced model of the time, the English neighborhood unit, broke off the plan into project teams and completed the whole according to plan. The construction documents were well detailed and precise, and the work was carefully supervised. This coincided with a historic moment characterized by a high-spirited revolutionary ethic, in which the speculative interests which threatened previously, had at once ceased to exist. On the other hand, workers still only knew how to build well; and *Pastorita* demanded total commitment from her subordinates while respecting and backing them in her seek for a thrifty quality. The results are evident.

At the time, there was intense discussion as to whether this high quality model could be used on a more massive level. The line of thinking which in the end predominated -to simplify, economize and accelerate- seemed right at the time, especially as it coincided *with* a narrowing of options in general because of the impossibility of rejecting. Thirty-five years later the cost of the project seems ridiculously low, and its rapid rate of construction surpassed that, of later projects which used what were supposedly more advanced technologies, while the buildings of East Havana have aged gracefully *with minimal* maintenance, thanks to its residents, o clearly appreciate the unique quality of their housing.

Alamar was built upon an irregular urban layout conceived in the late 'fifties for detached lower-middle class housing. The place was turned into a vast demonstration of the potential of *micro-brigades*. The pressure to quickly start construction triggered an endless repetition of average and even low-quality housing designs. The urgent need to supply housing overtook the provision of urban jobs and infrastructures. As architects and engineers began to lose control in the face of rushed schedules, improvisation, technical and material shortages made it increasingly, difficult to define responsibilities. Natural contradictions were seen as opposing the general goal, while the builders increasingly took command of the projects. The project managers and developers in turn focused their attention strictly on meeting quantitative, overt and sectional goals. The poverty of design ultimately spread to construction itself, and a marked difference in quality developed between the more carefully planned initial district and the next ones, most notoriously, the one popularly nicknamed "Siberia".

Problems or challenges?

For more than 200 years, Havana has been the most important and attractive city of the Caribbean basin and the Gulf of Mexico. At the end of the First World War, Havana and Buenos Aires were considered the two best structured cities of Latin America. The city grew without significant destruction, adding to its important colonial patrimony a vast array of building made by and for an omnipresent middle class, animated by a *Weltanschauung* which moved quickly from an eclectic

European historicism towards North American pragmatism. Although in deteriorated form, this built stock has survived through all these years, making Havana a singular, example among the great cities of the hemisphere. These riches are not limited to its relevant history and buildings, but include also the economic value of the vast resources in money, energy, materials and skills accumulated over four and a half centuries.

A decade ago, it was estimated that the rehabilitation of Havana would cost between 10 and 14 billion dollars. Such numbers seemed absolutely crushing at the time, but they do raise a fundamental question: what is the *value* of the city? Because Havana is costly, but it is also worth it. The conservation of those values, and the development which Havana needs in order to exercise the regional leadership to which it corresponds, only appear possible to the extent that the city itself can finance them from its own resources. This requires a just valorization of Havana: without becoming resigned to her wasting away, yet without deforming, selling, mortgaging or giving her away. Especially, it means taking advantage of those things that make Havana unique, in order to prevent the new investments that are already starting from destroying that peculiar beauty, and under the sign of a simplistic, out-fashioned modernization, turn it into just another stop on the tourists itinerary.

Many questions which just five years ago seemed irrelevant now have importance, such as the necessity to really assess the value of urban land market; or how to employ the new investments in the recuperation areas. It seems imperative to study ways of achieving a social appropriation of the surplus generated by real estate activities, so it would become more meaningful and motivational for the population; to use taxes and other instruments to reinvest in neighborhood development; and a fair share of profits generated by productive, service and commercial activities.

Existing zoning and building regulations were established to resolve differences "among ourselves", thus oriented towards persuasion over force, and towards conciliation over repression. New regulations are needed to prevent potentially traumatic interventions and deal with once forgotten characters that are already dropping by. On the other hand, defensive mechanisms intended to prevent disorder should be combined with positive incentives, keeping ahead of problems and enhancing the likelihood of convergence between the interests of business and those of the city and its residents. Convergence should be achieved through opening up rather than closing down public debate.

The recuperation of the traditional city center, with its more than ten lineal kilometers of stores on either side of the main boulevards and other commercial streets, requires great investment and co-operation as well as a sweeping renovation of infrastructure; but also the YAII to confront social problems which impact the image, function, hygiene and security of those areas. This investment can be recuperated, and even generate profit as well as an improvement in the image of the city to the benefit of Cubans and tourists -especially compared with the sum of unconnected projects propelled by dollarization that are turning former mansions in Miramar into offices and stores; while the commercial districts of the central city lie abandoned or are haphazardly converted into makeshift housing.

Other related questions arise: how to steer what will inevitably be million-dollar investments into the dilapidated central districts in order to prevent gentrification and the dislocation of current residents to the margins? If inevitable, then how to assure an adequate social mix in the redeveloped central areas? How much of a capital layout is required to carry out redevelopment, who will provide it and

how will it be recuperated? How to present "trade-off" or equitable options in order to help in decision-making and also to explain those decisions? How to establish an adequate time frame for these projects, to foresee and stimulate progressive growth? Who should define priorities, and how? Where will the necessary resources come from to allow a more decentralized, grassroots participation? If in fact, the one who pays controls, how do those who cannot afford to pay, dream of controlling? What does "local" mean --at what will be the scale of local action and who will the actors be? How to integrate decentralization, diversity, and adaptation to change \within a strategy of well-defined objectives?

In a city whose built frame and ways of urban living were mainly determined by the middle and lower-middle class, what would be a post-modern equivalent of those disappeared social sectors at the end of a millennium marked by the ambivalent sign of globalization? Will it be possible to fill the gap between the state enterprise and individual workers through flexible and sustainable micro-businesses for services and productions, as per the example of the farm co-operatives formed in 1994 to replace state farms? For now, it appears that the development of local economies, with a multitude of medium and small enterprises of all sorts, will help not only to create needed jobs, but also to rescue thousands of stores, many of which are in danger of collapse; and of housing the many ambulatory vendors who impede urban transit, destroy green areas and visually pollute the cityscape.

This could give rise to the resettlement of an economically active population along the main streets, repeating in a way the history which gave way to this great city. Such a trajectory would make Havana less vulnerable to economic pressures and foreign political strategies, including the North American embargo, than a few large multinational corporations continually imposing new conditions and threatening to depart. This is related to the necessity of empowering the economy of the city, neighborhood and family, with more productive activities than the elaboration of home-made sweets; thus avoiding to recreate step by step the long and tedious path from the earliest street vendors in the seedy environs of the port at the start of the 17th Century, to the cosmopolitan splendor of *El Encanto and El Carmelo de Calzada* of the mid 20th Century.

The city is not a sandwich

It is evident that all of these scenarios risk the creation of a crude and rapacious nouveau riche, mutants of the *maceta* -that sad, perverse character result of scarcity- whose model appears to be the worst of the Cuban-Americans in Hialeah, Miami. A Havana dominated by those cheap hustlers, from here and there, decked out in heavy gold chains and panoramic black sunglasses, comes out of a sunburned yet equally ominous version of "Blade Runner". There is still time to avoid it, with a range of attractive options which would actively incorporate the best sectors of that large middle strata of the population which contains millions of university graduates, students, technicians and skilled workers trained since 1959.

To this, one should add the best part of the extensive state bureaucracy which along with its eradicable routine habits, has accumulated valuable administrative experience. As in environmental protection and the recuperation of raw materials, recycling offers great opportunities. One of them, not to be discounted in the least, would be to present acceptable alternatives to sectors which, otherwise confronted by massive layoffs, would most likely block necessary structural transformations and methods of work. The empowerment of this vast social body might just invert

the order of an absurd sandwich where the bread is in the middle, the ham on top and the cheese below.

Havana forever

All this implies finding a new model of production and appropriation of the built environment which is flexible, decentralized, cautious and regenerative. This in turn requires adjusting thinking processes, institutions and work style to a changing reality, and not the reverse. This path could lead to the construction of a new paradigm, that of a *sustainable socialism*, if able to achieve and maintain the difficult equilibrium between the built, natural and social environment and a supportive economy; that is, a creative socialism, viable and deeply participatory. That realizable utopia, which prolongs and renovates the dedication of the last three generations of *habaneros*, includes the conservation and activation of all the tremendous potential of this, city -a patrimony which not only concerns Cubans, but all the inhabitants of this beautiful overheated blue sphere. And above **all**, a visceral commitment to rescue from degradation and cynicism a human capital amassed with endeavors, successes, mistakes, hardships and illusions, which achieved its highest expression in the collective mystique fanned by the Revolution in the unforgettable decade of the 'sixties: that Cuban contribution to the intangible heritage of Humanity, embodied in a beret and a mane framing a face blackened by gunpowder.

Havana keeps on

Havana has endured many difficult tests in its long history, some apparently terminal, and has come out bruised but graceful. Because, in the end, the shared complicity which time imposed layer by layer has woven a thick mesh of relations and meanings which transcend the facades to include the people who mill along the streets without ever needing to look up to know that their lifelong companion of dreams remains stubbornly in place, peeling, staggered, eroded by salt and water, marvelous and incredibly alive, still useful. A city that, no longer is, but continues being. Havana forever, forever my Havana.

Mario Coyula Cowley

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