

Havana, Caribbean Metropolis

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A Cubadebate column to tell the stories, curiosities and events of Cuban heritage cities, along with other topics of the urban and human landscape of the nation.



Havana is a unique city; it always was and has never lost that character. Photo: Julio Larramendi.

Havana is a unique city; it always was and has never lost that character. In colonial times it was the Venice of the “new world”, becoming the most important city on the new trade route, once the Fleet System was implemented. The condition of a port of call gave it that mestizo and multicultural face that survives to this day, not only in its excellent urban and architectural examples, but also in that very peculiar character of the Havana native, friendly, curious and exaggerated; boisterous and elegant at the same time.

It can be said that it is the ideal city to teach an architecture and urban planning class in situ, as it allows you to appreciate the various currents and styles in the gradual evolution of urban and architectural development just by touring its neighborhoods. Fortunately, and due to chance, the errors that a misunderstood modernity caused in the regional capitals with a balance of traumatic transformations, or the mass exoduses that caused the marginal peripheries that suffocate the large cities, were not made.



The great challenge for Cuban urban planners is, without a doubt, to preserve this spirit of the place, this genetic pattern of the city, introducing the necessary transformations that elevate it to the category of a 21st century city. Photo: Julio Larramendi.

The revolutionary triumph of January 1959 prioritized development towards historically neglected areas of the country and this resulted in Havana being frozen in time, being, paradoxically, one of its main attractions to this day. Despite the deterioration that characterizes it, in some cases truly alarming, not only its founding nucleus is preserved there, but also neighborhoods designed with urban planning intelligence and excellent workmanship of its architecture, which covers its almost 505 years of existence. The roads that follow the first paths to the south, with their endless colonnades to protect from the harsh sun or sudden downpour, transformed into the green tunnels of El Vedado, one of the best thought-out neighborhoods in the world; or the infinity of districts that towards the west or south, were drawing the social stratification of the city, sometimes opulent, sometimes more humble, but always under a standard of dignity.

Fortunately, Havana continues to be a city for the citizen, who has appropriated the public space, taking advantage of the fact that it still enjoys citizen security that is increasingly scarce in these latitudes. It is not yet invaded by the private automobile that opened irreversible scars in cities that today are trying to erase them, nor was there the developmental boom that in other cities erased entire traditional neighborhoods under the physiognomy of an impersonal architecture, in some cases of quality, but lacking identity elements. Havana still preserves that village spirit that facilitates the almost family relationship between neighbors but that curiously coexists in harmony with a cosmopolitan energy that is reborn. Its topography is friendly, as is its climate, and nature provided it with excellent beaches to the east, where everything from anonymous dormitory neighborhoods to singular examples of modern urbanism were also built.

On the other hand, it has extraordinary land reserves, not only in interstitial areas, but also strategically positioned, since with the transfer of commercial activity from the Havana bay to the port of Mariel, just 40 kilometers from the capital, they will be available of its development thousands of hectares to be developed with an extraordinary concentration of cultural and natural values. Without a doubt, the Bay of Havana will become, once again, the driving force of its development and for this purpose a Perspective Development Plan is already planned, recently concluded in 2021.

The great challenge for Cuban urban planners is, without a doubt, to preserve this spirit of the place, this genetic pattern of the city, introducing the necessary transformations that elevate it to the category of a 21st century city. The most important thing is to do so by skipping the mistakes that other cities made and that they are trying to correct today. The most difficult thing will be to convince decision-makers of the need to implement comprehensive, integrative and participatory plans, since the years of economic crisis known as the “Special Period” reduced the impact of urban plans as drivers of the capital's development; the most strategic thing will be to raise awareness to the authorities that urban land, with the enormous advantage that in our country it is the domain of the State, is one of the most important economic resources that cities have, generating wealth for their own development. It is also a great challenge, in the current circumstances, to create the appropriate conditions to retain young professionals who, trained in various specialties, can commit to the future of their city.



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Photo: Julio Larramendi.

Managing to introduce the most recent trends in ecological and sustainable urbanism will be another of the great challenges, since most of the most current approaches for the contemporary city (favoring mobility on foot, cycles and public transport, over the private car; urban agriculture or the mentality of recycling everything, to name just a few examples), came

to our country years ago out of necessity, due to the deep economic crisis and not from conscious and environmentalist thinking.

On the other hand, the peripheral areas of the city, that “greater Havana” that extends mainly to the south and east, have historically been the least served; Towards the south, the most proletarian neighborhoods and the most popular social classes developed, in a series of small and modest, but very well-ordered neighborhoods; Towards the east, the dormitory neighborhoods grew, much less qualified and with poor equipment networks, with the exception of Habana del Este (neighborhood unit No. 1, Ciudad Camilo Cienfuegos) and the implementation of the Pan-American Village. There are authors who describe Havana as a city of lights and shadows; the first is related to that strip that grows to the west, with a depth of about three kilometers; that is the well-known and iconic city. The other, historically neglected, must receive urban benefits that, fundamentally, better connect it with the central areas. There are some nuclei of informal settlements, for which cases there are specific proposals in the City Plan and today they receive some attention, still insufficient.

But Havana does not have those large marginal peripheries; on the contrary, since the migratory movements that generated this serious regional urban problem in the 60's and 70's had not occurred, marginality was concentrated in the central neighborhoods, fundamentally due to a chronic housing deficit that, together with a lack of systematic maintenance, generated serious structural and environmental health problems in these areas of the city that have been redensified: the main problem that other cities on the peripheries suffer today, in Havana, is found in the central municipalities, added to the fact that The greatest historical-cultural values are also concentrated in them.

A few years ago, a new General Urban Planning Plan for Havana was drafted, based on a broad process of institutional consultation and with the participation of a group of renowned experts; The document, written under the leadership of the current Provincial Delegation of Territorial and Urban Planning, proposes maintaining the polycentric structure of the city, while articulating development policies in the most disadvantaged areas.

From the Master Plan of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana we are organizing, together with the government of the capital and other fundamental actors, the process of drafting the Provincial Development Strategy, which will necessarily have to be articulated with the plan of the city, today in the process of updating, and emphasize the vision that Havana is not a sum of 15 municipalities, but a unique urban entity, on a metropolitan scale, the most complex in Cuba, in its capacity as capital.

This great responsibility will start from the premise that Dr. Eusebio Leal (Historian of the City of Havana) left us when he told us that... “Challenging the utopia of the integral development of the heritage city leads us to a path that is ambitious in content and necessarily innovative for its success; to the creation of a dynamic and flexible plan that, validated by citizens, becomes a navigation chart, a political and management instrument at the service of the government.”



The great economic potential of Havana lies in this accumulation of culture in its most diverse expressions, material and immaterial. Photo: Julio Larramendi.

Achieving a useful and co-responsible participation of citizens and entities in the formation of the instruments that guide the capital's development will be arduous, after decades of a paternalistic policy and a deep-rooted sectorial approach, above the territorial one, which is what really articulates and harmonizes.

We will have to understand the idea that Havana's economic potential lies in the accumulation of culture in its most diverse expressions, material and immaterial, and that culture itself can be the main engine of the capital's development, and not just a conquered citizen right. As such, it is a concept that will have to prevail.