Contesting the Global

Restoration and Neighborhood Identity in Old Havana

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In the city of Havana, the core area known as Old Havana has long played a commanding role. Historically, it has been the center of the colonial city and the site of Cuba’s major port. Therefore, global forces are not new to its neighborhoods. In the first half of the twentieth century the sector was an important symbol of North Americanization. By 1959, between 60 and 80 percent of the country’s incoming cargo passed through its port. One of Old Havana’s southernmost neighborhoods, San Ysidro, was in close proximity to the harbor with its steady inflow of foreign sailors. Activities associated with their presence led to that community’s reputation as a haven for women of ill repute.\footnote{These women are the subject of the novella by Tomas Fernandez Robaina titled *Recuerdos Secretos de Dos Mujeres Publicas*.} In the 1950s, also, the most important ‘growth’ sector of Havana’s economy was the largely American-financed expansion of the tourist industry, contributing to an ongoing contestation between the needs of the local residential population and global capitalistic forces. This struggle abated during the first decades after the revolution, but reemerged in the early 1990s with the onset of *The Special Period (of War) in Time of Peace* brought on by Cuba’s abandonment by the Soviet Union and the concurrent tightening of US sanctions. Under hardship circumstances, Cuba has revitalized its dormant tourist industry in an effort to obtain the resources necessary for its continued development. While the government wants to retain the residential character of neighborhoods and hold on to revolutionary principles, spillover from efforts to attract international tourists with their associated hard currency is beginning to impact Old Havana, even neighborhoods like San Ysidro which are peripheral to core tourist activity. Local concerns are mingling with the forces of global capitalism to effect some benefit, but also much uncertainty. Before examining the impact of this occurrence, however, it is necessary to take a brief look at urbanization in Cuba from a historical perspective. This will provide the insight that is necessary to evaluate what is happening today.

**Overview of Urbanization in Cuba**

**Pre-Revolutionary Baseline**

Cuba was an early urbanizer. By 1899, 28.5 percent of its population lived in localities of 20,000 or more inhabitants, a percentage slightly higher than that of the US (23.8 percent). In Latin America, only Argentina and Uruguay approximated that same level, having urban populations of 22.5 percent and 30.5 percent respectively. Accordingly, the country’s relative level of urbanization was higher than that of most other Latin American nations and was comparable to levels found in the more
industrialized and urbanized countries of the world. The urban hierarchy of Cuba was dominated by Havana. In 1899, the capital city had 235,981 inhabitants and was more than five times larger than the second largest city, Santiago de Cuba, which had 43,090 inhabitants. Aside from natural increase, Havana’s demographic growth was fed by the movement of campesinos (peasants) from the countryside to the city, and by immigration which was predominantly Spanish, African, and French in origin. The population of Havana City represented 55.5 percent of the total for Havana province, 15 percent of the nation’s total, and 31.8 percent of the country’s urban population. In Havana, the core area known as Habana Vieja (Old Havana) played a commanding role.

Old Havana was the center of the colonial city and held the country’s major port. Aside from the lovely, almost imposing, residences that had been integrated into the area, the community was also home to the capital’s financial and banking sectors. The section of Old Havana where they were centered was known as “Little Wall Street,” and served as an important symbol of the North Americanization which characterized the beginning of the Republican Period. Other business and administrative activities remained clustered around the old plazas: the Plaza de Armas held the major military institutions; the Plaza de Catedral housed the church; commercial undertakings were concentrated around the Plaza Vieja; and the Plaza de San Francisco handled foreign trade. Commercial ventures also surrounded the port where economic interests were increasingly influenced by American investment.

Habana Vieja took on expanded economic importance as the growth of the sugar trade spurred retail interests. Bustling commerce with the United States resulted in more extensive activity in the harbor and, soon, the ground floors of many residences were converted into warehouses, and housing was replaced by service sector structures. The old palaces were divided into flats which were then carved into rooms to rent. After communal bathrooms were added, normally in the courtyards, the structures began to function as ciudadelas or ‘boarding houses’, a form of housing which eventually became the predominant model. In addition, about this time, more than 200 brothels emerged, many in San Ysidro because of its close proximity to the port and business sectors of the old city. Squatter settlements were also common, and shantytowns appeared on the fringes, providing shelter for the “indigent, thieves, assassins, army deserters, freed slaves, and beggars.” The maturing pattern of development meant that, by the mid-1930s, the urban poor increasingly encroached on Havana’s formerly exclusive neighborhoods.

By the end of World War II, 26 percent of Cuba’s population lived in Havana province. The city itself dominated the island’s urban hierarchy. It was less dependent on agriculture than the country as a whole and housed nearly 50 percent of all industries. Eight of the fourteen Cuban plants with more than five hundred workers were situated in

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3 During the first three decades of the 20th century, 660,958 immigrants arrived in Cuba, and almost one out of every three (29.6%) settled in Havana. In the aftermath of World War I (and later World War II), Havana accepted refugees and migrants fleeing the break-up of colonial empires and, later, war-torn Europe. For example, East European and Sephardic Jews were ghettoized in the neighborhoods of Old Havana at least until the Second World War. Acosta and Hardoy, *Urban Reform*, 2; Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula, and Joseph L. Scarpaci, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (Chichester: John Wiley & Sons Ltd., 1997), 52.

4 Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, *Havana: Two Faces*, 34, 42.
the capital. In addition, Havana was home to 66 percent of all Cuba’s professionals, contained 66 percent of the country’s hotel capacity, and possessed 80 percent of all hospital beds. The city boasted more graduates from high school, vocational school, and institutions of higher education than did the rest of the country. At 9.2 percent, Havana’s illiteracy was well below the national and urban averages. Despite these impressive figures, however, housing was scarce.

During the 1950s, Havana’s housing problems were exacerbated by the arrival of approximately 25,000 migrants per year who were relocating to the capital from less urbanized sections of the country. The arrivals placed a disproportionate strain on the city for even though Havana’s growth rate was only two percent above that for Cuba as a whole, much lower than the same figure for most capital cities in Latin America, the city’s population density was 2,200 inhabitants per square meter. Most available housing consisted of pricey new condominiums, a form of shelter that few new arrivals were able to afford. At the time of the revolution, between 650,000 and 750,000 housing units were considered substandard, about one-half of the total stock of 1.4 million units. Six percent of Havana’s population lived in squatter settlements. Meanwhile, problems associated with government spending continued to surface, exacerbating the social disparity which had been aggravated by the arrival of new migrants; corruption was widespread.

Opportunism shaped the daily life of communities like San Ysidro. Most officers in the national police (regardless of level) had become involved in a system of corruption known as the forrajeo. This was an instrument of extortion that was managed by police officers whereby every business, regardless of size, had to contribute daily to the local police precinct.

Payoffs occurred in every corner of Havana’s daily economy and were easily observed since all transactions were carried out openly. Corruption was clearly visible to ordinary citizens as they went about their everyday household chores. For example, approximately 3,400 bodegas (small family grocery stores) were located in Greater Havana and each bodega had to pay a “tax” of one to two pesos daily plus whatever consumer goods the police demanded from the owner. This “tax” was collected by the local patrol car every afternoon. Havana’s 180 bakeries and all snack bars supplied the police with their products and, in addition, paid three pesos daily to the foot patrol. Nearly 400 service stations gave one peso daily and serviced all police officers’ private cars free of charge. Some 940 butcher shops contributed two to three pounds of meat every day and another peso to the local patrol officer. Beer trucks were “taxed” for two pesos daily. Two hundred cigar delivery trucks paid one peso daily and additional

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6. Grupo de Trabajo Nacional de la Encuesta de Migraciones Internas, *Resultados de la Encuesta Nacional de Migraciones Internas según Niveles del Sistema de Asentamientos: El caso de Ciudad de La Habana* (Havana: Centro de Estudios DEMograficos, 1996), 7. (This document will subsequently be referred to as CEDEM.)


products on demand. Milkmen were assigned a quota of two liters per day or two pesos in cash. Even street vendors were required to make a contribution.\(^9\)

Gambling was the most profitable business for the police and many habaneros were themselves addicted. Six banks controlled gambling, each contributing an estimated $400 a day to various high-ranking police officers.\(^10\) In total, the banks’ share to the forrajeo system along with “other taxes” amounted to approximately $1 million a year paid to high-ranking officers. In addition, around 2,000 small vidrieras (gambling booths) were scattered throughout the capital where numbers were played every hour on the hour. The vidrieras were taxed on a daily basis and income was distributed to the bureau of investigation, the district police commander, and the captain of the local precinct. Also, the vidrieras had to allow each local police officer $2 daily for his personal gambling. All told, the vidrieras represented an income to the police of about $3.8 million a year, which was divided among majors, captains, and regular patrolmen.\(^11\)

The more offensive activity of prostitution was also an important income opportunity for the police. Each of Havana’s approximately 2,000 houses of prostitution paid an amount calculated by local patrolmen who figured out the number of clients per night and the fees charged each one. Very humble casas like most in San Ysidro would pay from $50 to $70 per night, while the richest contributed from $3,000 to $5,000 nightly. The transaction occurred in front of any clients who happened to be present. Moreover, officers sometimes served as pimps, with prostitutes often peddling drugs supplied by the police. However, not all police officers participated in the drug trade. This business was chiefly controlled by organized crime from the United States. Nevertheless, a substantial percentage of the profits reached the highest governmental circles, and corruption became one of many justifications for the emergence of organized opposition against the Batista regime.\(^12\)

Post-Revolutionary Havana

In 1959, the revolutionary government inherited a spatially distorted landscape dominated by Havana, Cuba’s primate city.\(^13\) The capital contained 1.5 million people and was more than six times the size of Cuba’s second largest city, Santiago, with its

\(^{9}\) Ibid., 32, 74.

\(^{10}\) One bank--owned by a consortium of government officials--was exempt. Another bank paid $1,000 per day in order to be permitted to expand into new areas of the city.

\(^{11}\) Bonachea and San Martin, The Cuban Insurrection, 32, 74.

\(^{12}\) Ibid., 33-4, 74. Drug traffic mostly supplied Havana’s rich as well as American tourists.

\(^{13}\) Primacy can be measured in several ways. Arnold Linsky proposes determining the ratio of the largest to the second largest city. A second method, proposed by Surrinder Mehta, involves calculating the population of the country’s largest city in proportion to that of the sum of its next four largest cities. A third way of assessing population balance involves determining rank size. Using this methodology, the first city should be twice the size of the second, three times the size of the third and so on. Whichever methodology is selected, a balanced hierarchy is thought to prevent the domination of urban exchanges and markets. When the largest city becomes several times bigger than the next three cities, it is defined as primate, and urban growth in the other cities will be (arguably) stunted, with negative percussions for the relations between these cities and their rural hinterlands.
population of 225,000. In this sense, the city boasted many of the characteristics associated with primate cities worldwide. It was indisputably the center of Cuba with a concentration of industry, commerce, and government services disproportionate to that existing in other areas of the country. Havana accounted for 52.8 percent of national industrial production by value including sugar (75 percent excluding sugar); it handled 90 percent of national port activity, containing the most important shipyard as well as the major fishing terminal; it was the sole center for university education and the unchallenged cultural center; it housed the bulk of government offices along with the most important hospitals; it contained the best shops and stores and attracted the largest percentage of housing investments; and it was the principal center of origin and destination for national travel as well as the almost exclusive center for international travel. Observing these qualities, the revolutionary government argued that Havana was parasitical, noting “the exploitative role of urban-based elites in perpetuating inequality....” Furthermore, the regime determined that “the concentration in the cities of wealth created in the countryside [had] been a historical constant in the development of Cuban society” with most of such wealth channeled into Havana. Consequently, the government set out to reduce Havana’s dominance and to expand opportunities in the rural areas.

Despite this newly formed objective, Castro knew that, notwithstanding its obvious advantages, Havana was failing to meet the quality-of-life needs of its approximately million and a half inhabitants. Almost 50 percent of the city’s housing was in a poor state and there were only 1.10 square meters of greenery per inhabitant as against the 18 square meters established as the norm for its climate. The city’s water supply was constantly short by about a third and the situation was hard to correct since there were not enough reservoirs or other reserves of potable water. Also, the population lost a million hours daily in travel within the city, a reflection on its areal extension and poor transit system. Moreover, within the capital, difficulties were not equally shared. A spatial division existed between urban socioeconomic groups which had been exacerbated by the land speculation of the prerevolutionary period.

Next to the sea and west of the old city, on a strip of land that traversed Vedado and Miramar, then reached toward Marianao in the best served and environmentally most satisfactory areas, were the residential barrios of the upper class, the barrios of one-family houses and low density. Beginning with the colonial city, between Malecon [in Centro Havana] and Maximo Gomez [in Old Havana], and stretching to the south along Independence Avenue were the high-density barrios of multistory buildings intermixed...
with stores and commercial shops, where the employees and professionals with low incomes lived. A good part of the old city within the boundary of the colony had been converted into a tenement house. Bordering the port on the south and the west were the houses of poor quality, and heaped on the outskirts of the city, on the edges of ravines, and on other lands of no interest to the urban developers were flimsy dwellings made of perishable materials.¹⁸

Because spatial imbalance and widespread poverty affected both urban and rural areas, the government acted quickly to introduce corrective policy. A number of specific measures including the First Law of Agrarian Reform, the Second Law of Agrarian Reform, and various bills dealing with Cuba’s housing emergency were designed to redistribute income, eliminate rural-urban inequities, and address the ‘urban crisis’. At the same time, the regime worked diligently to incorporate and mobilize the poor, dispossessed, and unemployed. As part of this effort, by 1960, there was a movement to eradicate slums, emphasizing self-reliance and mutual aid. New neighborhoods were constructed as replacement housing. Also, the Department of Physical Planning was created under the Ministry of Public Works. The regime modified the architecture of Havana by promoting social, not socialist architecture, and it drew on a variety of architectural techniques and concepts.

The government initially built two large housing developments in the capital--East Havana and El Cotorro--that were costly and still premised on Western middle-class design ideas. El Cotorro was built to house industrial workers in the southeast of the city, in order to reduce workers’ travel time and to ease congestion. East Havana (Habana del Este) was constructed for the urban poor on land assembled for speculative purposes before the revolution. In fact, many of the first residents in such communities came from Las Yaguas, Luyano, and other sections of the city which had historically contained slum and squatter housing.¹⁹ As soon as the old shantytowns were eliminated, however, new problems appeared. Migrants attracted to the city from other areas of the island flooded into the neighborhoods of El Romerillo and La Corbata near the Columbia military base, the neighborhood of Atares adjacent to an old colonial castle, and to the area of La Guinera. Overcrowding and quality-of-life problems soon became endemic in these areas.

Meanwhile, in its continuing effort to ease existing spatial disparities, the revolutionary government began to construct new communities. The government perceived problems in the countryside to be the root cause of the urban crisis. Consequently, it focused on what it called ‘the urbanizing of the countryside and the

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¹⁸ Ibid., 62.
¹⁹ Susan Eckstein, “The Debourgeoisement of Cuban Cities” [from Irving Louis Horowitz, ed., Cuban Communism, 3rd Edition (Brunswick: Transaction Books, 1981)], edited for The Cuban Reader, edited by Philip Brenner, William M. LeoGrande, Donna Rich, and Daniel Siegel (New York: Grove Press, 1988) 425. Butterworth notes that it was with an invasion of squatters in the early 1930s that an area in Luyano, a dreary, industrialized sector of East Havana, developed into the settlement which became known as Las Yaguas. It claimed some 3,500 inhabitants at the time of the Revolution in 1959, most of whom were black. Many of the early settlers in Las Yaguas came originally from rural regions of the island. Some also came from small towns. There was often a step-like movement of families from the countryside to a small town and then to one of the Havana solares (tenements) before the eventual move to Las Yaguas. Douglas Butterworth, The People of Buena Ventura: Relocation of Slum Dwellers in Postrevolutionary Cuba (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1980) 5.
ruralizing of the urban population’ through a process of concentrating formerly dispersed rural inhabitants in small towns and building new cities and rural towns.

Between 1959 and 1962 alone 83 new towns, with an average population of 300-500, were founded: 27 in Oriente, 17 each in Havana and Las Villas, 9 in Pinar del Rio, 8 in Camaguey, and 5 in Matanzas. By 1971, 246 new settlements had been built, about half with more than 40 dwelling units. Most of the settlements are connected with work centers: with sugar and cattle farms, and, to a lesser extent, with other agricultural, mineral, and textile centers. In designing the new communities, the Cuban leadership was inspired by both Western and socialist models.20

While Castro did not sponsor the large industrial colonization projects common in the Soviet Union immediately after its 1917 revolution, the government intervention described above was one aspect of an integrated policy designed to counter forces that were generally thought to contribute to urbanization. In addition to the new towns, other rural population centers were designated to serve as growth poles, absorbing a portion of the population from the most congested cities.21 Furthermore, the regime restricted geographic mobility by controlling access to jobs and housing. To offset the economic concentration in Havana, new industries were located near natural resource sites and provincial ports were developed.22 It was hoped that improved conditions in the countryside would make migration a less attractive alternative.

The rebeldes met with a fair amount of early success. Rural-urban imbalances diminished a great deal during the decade of the 1960s, although the demographic growth of Greater Havana continued until 1963. This occurred mainly because of the political-administrative reorganization of the country and the creation of new state enterprises, but also because of an initial emphasis on improving the city’s existing educational facilities, a policy which attracted numerous students from the interior. Gradually, the demographic growth of the city was normalized, particularly after the Urban Reform Law.23 The government also made an attempt to stabilize social conditions in the city. For example, a war on prostitution in communities like San Ysidro was an effort to improve women’s lives and, at the same time, gain loyalty for the revolution. In fact, “The revolution portrayed prostitution as a shameful legacy of Cuba’s colonial and neocolonial past.24 At first, prostitutes were viewed as victims of the capitalist system and sent to rehabilitation schools concentrating on ideological and vocational training. (Pimps, on the other hand, were sent to work farms.) Later, those who refused rehabilitation were imprisoned. The regime also attempted to reach women through the efforts of the Federation of Cuban Women (FMC) which initiated a series of study seminars at the neighborhood level. By 1964, women were studying the transition from capitalism to socialism. However, the study groups did not address the issues of feminism—especially power relationships—that were attracting worldwide attention at the time. In fact, the FMC leadership sometimes

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“denounced feminism for misleading women into blaming men, not capitalism, for their woes.”

At the same time, there was continuing focus on the built environment. In 1963-1964, the first socialist master plan for the city of Havana was created as an attempt to address the problems of the city in a centralized manner. The master plan created six regions which were to be treated as a metropolitan entity. Previously, the six municipalities had worked independently, each with its own mayor and separate municipal agencies. The master plan took effect when the city had 1.5 million inhabitants and one of its main objectives was to strive for a decrease in the city’s rate of population growth. As we have seen, in an effort to slow the migration from the countryside, strategies were devised to redistribute maritime and port activities as well as noxious industries to points elsewhere in Cuba. Development of infrastructure was planned to support these economic activities. This decentralization slowed the rate of Havana’s yearly population growth which had previously included the annual arrival of 17,000 immigrants from the interior of the country. Natural increase also diminished. Consequently, from 1970-1980, Havana’s growth trends were the reverse of other cities in Latin America and, indeed, in the Third World as a whole. (See Table 1.)

While urbanists concerned only with issues of urban balance may look at Havana’s low population growth quite favorably, the declining rate of natural increase is a matter of some concern. Since 1978, fertility in Cuba has been below the level necessary to assure the long-term replacement of the population. The estimated fertility rate for 1979 was, in fact, the lowest recorded for any developing country and was “comparable to or lower than that characterizing fertility in most developing nations.”

The lowered birthrate is often positively portrayed as a gain related to an increasing level of modernization. However, some argue that despite the emphasis on health, educational reform, and changes in women’s roles and status which dominate the literature, the “modernization” explanation of the Cuban fertility decline is, at best, incomplete. Indeed, Diaz-Briquets and Perez argue that:

The key to Cuba’s very low fertility, in our opinion, lies in the sharply differing prospects of Cuban couples regarding the fulfillment of their material and status expectations during the early 1960s, and in the years since that time. The former period was one of optimism. The latter, reflecting the revolution’s growing inability to meet material expectations, was a period of pessimism. Only in the light of this radical change in outlook can the rapid fertility decline be understood. Had the generation

25 Ibid., 42.
Also see, Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital, Estrategia (Havana: Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital, June 1990), 18. Havana’s birth rate did not increase substantially over the course of the 1980s, remaining at a low 15.1 per thousand in 1990. Contrary to the situation in China, Costa Rica, Taiwan, Singapore, and other countries undergoing rapid and significant fertility decline, the fertility decline in Cuba took place in the absence of explicit policies to produce that effect.
entering reproductive ages in the 1970s been able to fulfill their aspirations, it is unlikely fertility would have declined as fast and to as low a level as it indeed has.\textsuperscript{27}

Many socioeconomic and political factors spurred declining fertility. Several are particularly pertinent. These include the housing shortage, low wages, and a poor sense of economic well-being. By 1978, the marriage rate was down and the divorce rate was up. The unavailability of housing was certainly a factor. A 1973 study cited a sample of Havana’s residents as stating that “the unavailability of housing and the need to share accommodations with relatives” were reasons for the increase in the divorce rate.\textsuperscript{28} By 1979, nearly 50 percent of Havana’s households consisted of extended families. Often young couples were required to live with parents for an extended period. As one author argues:

A vicious cycle ensued. The doubling-up of families, and the inevitable overcrowding and loss of privacy, contributed to declining births and rising divorces. Divorce, in turn, broke up households, thereby creating new demands for housing. Not infrequently, divorced people were obliged to continue living with former spouses.\textsuperscript{29}

The debate centering on poor economics versus better healthcare is certainly relevant to the countrywide debate on decreasing fertility. However, there is another, much simpler explanation for Havana’s fertility decline. Simply put, Havana has had a continuing shortage of men which persists to the present day. In fact, the 1981 census reports that Havana is the only province in the country with fewer men than women per each 1,000 inhabitants. In 1990, there were about 10 percent more women than men residing in the city.\textsuperscript{30} Over time, those leaving the city have increasingly been male, while in-migrants have increasingly been females who are searching for work, particularly in the service industry. A recent study found that 55.6 percent of those migrants who had arrived in the capital prior to 1995 were women.\textsuperscript{31} One of Cuba’s principal demographers has stated that women make the migration decisions in Cuba, not men. Thus, even when a male relocates, a women has been the “behind the scenes” decision-maker. Cuba’s female driven rural-urban migration is quite unique by Third World standards where, most usually, men make the decision to migrate and relocate without their families.\textsuperscript{32}

Rural-urban migration as well as legal and illegal emigration, in conjunction with fertility decline, have assured both the aging and the feminization of Havana’s population. Havana’s growing concern (like the United States) is with the increasing cost of social security and medical care. The aging of the capital was evident in statistics garnered from the 1981 Cuban census. The youngest cohort, the group between 0 and 14 years, had

\textsuperscript{27} Ibid., 525. The slight rise in Havana’s fertility rate over the decade of the 1980s is consistent with this explanation. Cubans describe this as a period of prosperity. The special period of the 1990s, then, should see a declining trend.
\textsuperscript{28} Ibid., 526.
\textsuperscript{30} The city’s 1990 population was 2,071,221. There were 992,115 males and 1,079,106 females. Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital, Estrategia, 18.
\textsuperscript{31} CEDEM, 97.
\textsuperscript{32} Interview at CEDEM, June 1997.
declined from 36.9 percent of the total population in 1970 to 30.3 percent. From this perspective, Havana’s future vibrancy seems threatened and the city’s current prospects become quite different from the rosy picture painted by urbanists obsessed with such issues as overurbanization and rank-size. For Havana’s slow growth has not eliminated problems generally associated with urban excess: environmental degradation, substandard housing, and insufficient demand for labor. In the 1970s and 1980s these problems became increasingly severe despite the slow expansion in natural increase, low rates of rural-urban migration, and the export of labor flows. Moreover, purposeful government policies adopted to cope with problems in the economy have exacerbated the fertility decline, the aging of the population, and the predominance of unskilled workers in the labor market. While long-term prospects may portend a smaller population (and more jobs and housing) due to the natural mortality rate, the picture is still of a city struggling to survive. A reduction in population density in the older areas of Havana was not achieved, and the reallocation of resources for infrastructure outside of Havana meant that the area had no new housing construction. Also, physical deterioration accelerated due to the lack of routine maintenance, especially that of streets and buildings which required periodic repair and painting.

The rapid decay and imminent collapse of older sections of the city led to a continued focus on urban redevelopment. In the late 1970s there was a move to protect historic districts. Old Havana became very fashionable as a result of visits by Fidel Castro and foreign elites. The area was declared a national landmark and greater resources were allocated to its restoration. In fact, as many as six agencies and national commissions emerged to preserve Havana’s built heritage. Thus, the indiscriminate demolition required to implement the Soviet model of urban development did not extend to areas of the city involved in historic preservation. In fact, for a short time in the late 1970s and early 1980s, Old Havana reactivated its functional role as the historic and artistic center of the capital.

The memorable ‘Saturdays in the plaza’ entailed the authorized selling of artwork and handicrafts by talented artists in two improvised markets located in the Plaza de Armas and Plaza de la Catedral. Within a short time, however, the crafts fair was abruptly shut down by the government because of ‘illicit enrichment’ on the part of the artisans and craftpersons.33

Subsequently, officials encouraged a unique socialist model of rehabilitation. Still, the facade of the historic city remained unchanged. UNESCO granted Old Havana “world cultural status” in late 1982, further ensuring the protection of Old Havana’s hundreds of landmark buildings. Thousands of other structures in the historic district have since fallen under this protective umbrella.34

33 Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, Havana: Two Faces, 299.
34 By the mid-1980s, investment required for rehabilitating Havana was estimated at between $10 and $14 billion, a staggering amount since most of Havana lacks revenue-generating mechanisms.
The 1990s: A Study in Contrasts

Today, despite Havana’s slow growth policy, planners estimate that about 80,000 individuals live in Old Havana. Many of them are relative newcomers since after 1990, and coinciding with the Special Period, investment in Cuba’s hinterlands became more limited, leading to increased migration to the capital. As one migrant stated:

Since the start of the special period things have gotten really tough back east...There are shortages of food and medicine and gasoline there, and that is what has driven us here. We’re desperate to improve our situation.”

This condition parallels the situation before the revolution when the majority of investment in construction and services occurred in the capital spurring relocation for those seeking a better life. In 1953, Havana’s net migration was 22,801 rising to 43,578 in 1959. In contrast, in 1994, the city’s net migration was 16,541 individuals, more than any year since 1963. By 1996, the figure had risen to 28,103 migrants and, thus, was at the pre-revolutionary level. (See Tables 2 and 3.) By the mid-1990s, the average population density in the capital itself reached 3,000 inhabitants per square kilometer which can be compared to 2,200 inhabitants per square kilometer at the time of the Revolution. Density is highest in the core areas of the city--Centro Havana and Old Havana--where many of the recent migrants have found shelter. The impact on Old Havana has been particularly significant, especially since this area is at the very heart of the prioritized tourist sector. In the early 1960s, the sector held approximately 70,000 residents. As just mentioned, by the mid-1990s, planners estimated that about 80,000 residents lived in the area. Of this number, over one-half (40,000) are internal migrants with over one-third of this number (about 13,500) living in the area for over twenty years and one-fourth (10,000) arriving between 1990 and 1995.

In the early 1960s, Habana Vieja had approximately 70,000 residents. It is important to add that while Havana’s share of the country’s population is now 19.8 percent of the nation’s total, very close to the 20.8 percent of 1959, it remains much lower than that of some other capital cities in Latin America. The same figure for Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile is more than 30%, while Lima, Caracas, and Mexico City each contain more than 20% of their nation’s population. CEDEM, 13. Over one-half (40,000) of the area’s residents are internal migrants. Of this group, about one-third (about 13,500) have lived in the area for more than twenty years; one-fourth (10,000) arrived between 1990 and 1995. Arq. Patricia Rodriguez Aloma, Viaje en la memoria apuntes para un acercamiento a la habana vieja, (Havana: Plan Maestro de Revitalizacion Integral de La Habana Vieja, Oficina del Historiador de la Ciudad de la Habana, 1996), 28. The 1995 Census and Survey defines immigrants as those residents originating from other sections of the city, the rest of the country, and other countries.


CEDEM, 16. Migration has always impacted Havana’s expansion. In 1977, when Havana was most influenced by the Soviet Union, migrants accounted for 40.7 percent of the city’s growth, increasing to 74 percent of the city’s growth during the first years of the Special Period (1989 to 1993).

Ibid., 18.

It is important to add that while Havana’s share of the country’s population is now 19.8 percent of the nation’s total, very close to the 20.8 percent of 1959, it remains much lower than that of some other capital cities in Latin America. The same figure for Buenos Aires and Santiago de Chile is more than 30%, while Lima, Caracas, and Mexico City each contain more than 20% of their nation’s population. CEDEM, 13.

In addition to an increase in the numbers of migrants and changes in their place of origin, composition is changing in terms of age and sex. For example, from 1989-1991, there were 85.7 male migrants for every 100 females; in 1992, the number of male migrants had dropped to only 65.8 per every 100 females. And, while the majority of migrants (55 percent) were between 15 and 30 years old, the proportion of older migrants was growing, with those over 60 years old increasing from 5.9 percent of the total in 1989-1991 to 9.1 percent of all migrants in 1992. The demographic make-up of Old Havana reflects these trends. Of the area’s total population:

48% are male and 52% female; 62% of the population is aged between 15 and 64 and the low-birth rate manifests a tendency towards population ageing. Over one half is white, almost one third mulatto and almost one fifth black, while slightly over one-hundred people are of Asian origin. In three out of five nuclear families, the head of the family is female. Of the families surveyed, over one half have no children and over one third have only one child. Nonetheless, 37% of nuclear families contain old people, the presence of one or two people of this age being predominant.\(^{41}\)

The demographics discussed above are troubling because the tension created by the conflicting needs of in-migrants and long-term residents (as well as increasing pressure on fragile infrastructure) is occurring in the area of the capital that is most attractive to tourists. Cuban authorities quite frankly admit that the current socio-economic situation has made it necessary to widen the vision of the Historical Centre. Not only is its historical, cultural and social value to be taken into consideration, but also its economic dimension, as the aim is to achieve self-financed, integrated development which will make investments recoverable and productive....The new perspective has generated the fast growth of a local economy which is basically governmental and the creation of national-foreign joint ventures.\(^{42}\)

One of the greatest challenges in the current environment is to develop “social housing which will guarantee the permanence of the local population, as a right of its citizens, and because they add their own values to the territory, without which Old Havana would lose a major part of its charm.”\(^{43}\) Planners believe that one way of achieving this objective is to adequately exploit “the cultural heritage in its quality as an economic good, generating richness” and to “orient a major part of the funds obtained by the Historian’s Office towards attention to the social problems of the Historical Centre and, especially, towards the solution of the habitat.”\(^{44}\) The government’s aim is to avoid displacing the many residents of the old core (a large majority of whom live doubled up in substandard housing). Therefore, the area is being redeveloped with a concern for the integration of social services, living quarters, and commercial enterprises. While business is pursued on the first floor of many buildings, renovated housing is available on the upper levels. Due

\(^{41}\)Ibid.

\(^{42}\) Arq. Patricia Rodriguez Aloma, Viaje en la memoria, 10-11.

\(^{43}\) Ibid., 40.

\(^{44}\) Ibid.
to a shortage in classrooms, elementary school classes are held in the public space of recently reconstructed museums. And, although building facades retain their historic appearance, the family doctor or a cottage industry may be housed inside. Meanwhile, joint ventures and foreign real estate investment insure that resources are available to redevelop historical commercial structures designated for office space, and UNESCO continues to assist with the renovation of convents, cathedrals, and other designated buildings. Despite this creative approach, however, the revolutionary government’s need to promote a mixed economy is giving renewed vigor to Havana’s prerevolutionary dualities.

*San Ysidro*

As with all areas of Old Havana, San Ysidro, a working class neighborhood remembered chiefly for its colorful history, has been affected. This is in some respects surprising, because this community does not have the major tourist attractions of a *Catedral*, for example. Rather, the locale’s first occupants--artisans, bricklayers, port and shipyard workers--defined the area’s primarily residential atmosphere. The modest character of this community, however, means that it has been particularly hard hit by economic constraints. There are currently 1,244 dwellings in the neighborhood. A majority (52.8%) of its 3,965 residents live in ciudadelas. Over one-half of all housing has structural faults--cracking and crumbling of walls and leaks in the roofs or ceilings. Hygiene is difficult, and 40 percent of inhabitants manually bring in the water they need for daily living.\(^{45}\) Interestingly, however, San Ysidro is a beneficiary of spillover from the revitalized tourist industry which has become a prime focus for the generation of short-term, freely convertible hard currency. In fact, the need to exploit Havana’s cultural heritage as an economic good means that this distressed community--representative of the city’s first stages of development and birthplace of the nationalist leader, Jose Marti--has been prioritized for rehabilitation. This decision is a very popular one since, while most residents consider Old Havana very attractive in general, only 48% believe San Ysidro to be attractive. Instead, a 1996 report noted that those who lived in the neighborhood were concerned with the high level of disrepair of housing, deficient communal hygiene, the disrepair of streets and pavements, water supply problems and crime. They would like their neighbourhood to have leisure facilities for children and young people and to see an improvement in street cleaning, refuse collection, house maintenance and water distribution.\(^{46}\)

Consequently:

81% of people surveyed were ready to participate in the rehabilitation projects for their neighbourhood and, of those 83% agreed that they had to contribute to the payment of those resources necessary for the repair of their houses. Furthermore, 42% considered as the most positive form of organising work, the creation of

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 41.

\(^{46}\) Ibid.
neighbourhood brigades and 41% would be ready to contribute to the work by their own effort.\(^47\)

The involvement of volunteers is consistent with the *taller* model of integrated rehabilitation which has been successfully employed in the cases of Atesares and La Guinera. Implementation of the San Ysidro project began in July 1996 and, by the summer of 1999, restoration was in full swing.

Tourism

While there has been substantial debate over the social costs and benefits of developing tourism, there has been little choice but to do so.\(^48\) Thus, there have been immediate and concerted efforts to expand and develop the industry with the expectation that multiplier effects would increase sales of rum and tobacco, enriching those businesses as well. Major state investment has centered on improving physical infrastructure, and a great deal of effort has been involved in diverting highly educated labor to the tourism sector. Foreign investment to expedite the rapid expansion of tourist facilities has been aggressively solicited.\(^49\)

The growth of the tourist industry has been accompanied by large investments in construction to enlarge hotel capacities, by professionalization of personnel through in-depth training programs, and by nationwide airport expansion. In 1989, Cuba had 13,000 hotel rooms which earned $200 million from 326,000 tourists arriving from Canada, Mexico, West Germany, Spain, and Italy. (This number compares favorably with the 304,711 tourists who visited the island in 1957.) By 1993, over 560,000 tourists generated a gross income of about $720 million and, in 1997, over 2 million tourists visited Cuba. Joint venture capital includes major investors from Spain, Germany, Austria, and Finland, among others. A state enterprise based in the Cuban military, Gaviota, S.A., has emerged as the main Cuban player, combining private enterprise flexibility with strong state financing and high worker discipline. The firm gained much of its expertise while managing recreational centers for Soviet advisors in the 1960s, and “reportedly studied

\(^{47}\) Ibid.

\(^{48}\) Revolutionary leaders consider tourism closely linked to prostitution, drugs, organized crime, and gambling. This view is substantiated. “A 1995 survey carried out in the Italian tourist magazine, *Viaggiare*, ranked Cuba as the most popular destination for sex tourists.....An April 4, 1996 raid on 400 ‘bawdy houses’ in Havana rounded up residents who worked as prostitutes at ‘tunnels, bridges, dens, rooftops and public spaces which served as a shelter for those who lived from sexual exploitation.’ In June 1996, *Juventud Rebelde*, a Cuban Communist Party weekly publication, announced that a network of 7000 prostitutes had been destroyed.” Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, *Havana: Two Faces*, 266. Ordinary Cubans express concern that children will be corrupted and will also not understand the gains of Revolution in the areas of social justice and redistribution.

\(^{49}\) In mid-1990, the first joint venture hotel—a Cuban-Spanish partnership—opened in Varadero Beach with profits to be split fifty-fifty. The hotel, built with foreign capital, had construction costs of $30 million. After one year of operation, the resort had housed 34,000 guests and garnered an 84 percent satisfaction rating.
China’s state-managed economic opening, a process that changed the People’s Liberation Army into a major company.\textsuperscript{50}

Gaviota now operates bus tours, marinas, spas, hunting preserves, fishing excursions, and luxury hotels. It also boasts a large fleet of taxis and airline flights. Gaviota pursues horizontal linkages. It taps into tourists’ expendable income through the TRD (foreign-currency collection stores) Caribe chain of department stores...Cuba’s armed forces have been down-sized by some 25\% (from a maximum of 200,000 men and women during its involvement in Africa in the 1980s). The market, though, has brought problems from which even the armed forces are not immune: nepotism and corruption. Despite these problems, the army has produced a well-disciplined cadre of engineers, managers, agronomists and technicians.... ‘The armed forces are trying to generate foreign exchange so as to be able to sustain themselves as a military force without being a load on the state or a burden on the rest of the economy.’\textsuperscript{51}

While much of Cuba’s tourist development is centered on beaches throughout the country, especially Varadero Beach 60 miles east of Havana, there has been substantial construction of tourism facilities within Havana itself, which retains its position as the main tourist attraction within the country. In Old Havana, a new state agency, Habaguanex S.A., has been established to take charge of restaurants, stores, and hotels within the historic center. In 1995, only two years after its inception, income of $11 million was reinvested in the restoration effort. The firm also negotiates with foreigners who wish to invest in Habana Vieja.

Conclusion

Over the course of the 1990s, as renewal converted the outer ring of Old Havana into a tourist sector, the residential areas behind the newly restored periphery have become increasingly feminized. Fifty-two percent of the municipality’s residents are now women, and three out of every five of its nuclear families are headed by a female, some of whom once found a livelihood in prostitution in San Ysidro. Almost all live in substandard and overcrowded housing. Still, 80 percent of Old Havana’s residents find their community intrinsically attractive because of its historic, architectural, and cultural value. While 47 percent of the population do not feel that restoration projects in the historic core have directly benefited their lives, 85 percent still say that the results are largely positive. There is a sense of pride in the new cordon, and some women say that measures undertaken to promote tourism have lessened their own worries--the crackdown on crime, for example, has guaranteed personal safety. Although there is a growing weariness with the hardship of everyday life, global and local forces have established a tenuous balance.

As restoration proceeds, more and more tourists staying in luxury hotels in the core of Old Havana open their guidebooks and strike out on independent walking tours. They are seduced by a desire to peek at Havana’s oldest surviving church, the Iglesia Parroquial del Espiritu Santo. They might also express curiosity regarding the Afro-

\textsuperscript{50} Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci, \textit{Havana: Two Faces}, 270.
\textsuperscript{51} Ibid.
Cuban connections associated with the Iglesia y Convento de Nuestra Senora de la Merced. On the way, those who are most perceptive will note the prefabricated *transito* housing on the outskirts of the Plaza Vieja, providing temporary living quarters for those whose homes are being reconstructed. This housing, on the outskirts of the Belen and San Ysidro communities in Old Havana, gives priority to those residents who are long-time members of the community and who have jobs in the area. Some blocks later, the visitors will glimpse the large warehouse full of alcohol and other hospitality needs which is close to the Iglesia y Convento de Santa Clara which now houses the National Center for Preservation, Restoration, and Museology (CENCREM), the technical team in charge of the restoration of colonial Havana. As the walkers move closer to the waterfront, the truly observant will peer behind a facade hiding the old neighborhood boxing ring; sports minded or inquisitive travelers will go inside to view a match. Most, however, will miss two new gymnasiums--one where school children practice tai-chi and a second where women take aerobics--and will proceed directly to the Museo-Casa Natal de Jose Marti. Here they may not notice the “grandparents” having breakfast in the courtyard. In other words, while the most southern half of Old Havana, once given short shrift, has now become more visible, the totality of the neighborhood’s everyday life remains elusive.

The tourists themselves are objects of curiosity. Their very presence is a reminder of government policies which have contributed to substantial inequalities between ‘haves’ and ‘have nots’, particularly between those *habaneros* with access to tourist dollars and those without. At the same time, construction activity behind the *outer ring* continues, marking a renewed commitment to revolutionary promises regarding adequate housing for every Cuban. In other words, the conflict between capitalism and socialism which is shaping San Ysidro’s future identity is increasingly reflected in the struggle to restore and preserve the community’s history and heritage. Indeed, many residents are torn, desiring to hold on to most of the redistributional gains of the last thirty years at the same time that they wish to benefit from the increasing capitalist presence within Cuba. Thus, the conflict between the *grassroots* and global capitalism may be held in abeyance as individuals attempt to benefit from both.\(^{52}\)

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\(^{52}\) Comments in this section are drawn from personal interviews and observations, June 1999.
Table 1: Average annual rate of growth of Latin American cities (in percent)

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Table 2: Internal migration per historical period (in thousands)

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<td>Period of Regional Planning</td>
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Source: CEDEM, 12.

* Estimate.
Table 3: Internal Migration to Havana 1959-1994

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