

REGENERATING HISTORIC AREAS IN CUBA

The history of Cuba over the last half century, and its World Heritage sites, shows not only what can be achieved with very limited resources, but also the limitations of relying on tourism as the main engine for economic growth. To understand the challenges of urban renewal in a historic area we need to appreciate a little of Cuba's colonial history, and also its extraordinary situation as an isolated experiment in putting communism into practice. ¹

A Caribbean colonial island

For many centuries part of the Spanish Empire, and strategically located near Florida and the Gulf of Mexico, Cuba was largely developed for its crops of sugar and tobacco. There are some extraordinary planned colonial towns such as Trinidad and Cienfuegos, where fine mansions contrast strikingly with the largely single storey homes of the mass of residents. The shacks of the former slaves have disappeared, but the ruins of old sugar mills can still be glimpsed. Cuba's history of slavery has left it with a multi-cultural population with an exceptionally rich musical heritage. By the end of the 19th century, as in many countries, the rich have moved into new suburbs, leaving the older areas to become multi-tenanted slums

After gaining independence from Spain, Cuba entered into a strange relationship with the USA, and American companies ended up owning the main industries and utilities. Cuba's proximity and fine climate made it a natural destination for tourists. Havana grew into a fine modern city with wide boulevards and impressive buildings in areas such as Miramar and the Rampa. Wealthy Cuban families built magnificent houses but its position as one of the wealthiest Latin American countries in the 1950s was associated with some of the greatest inequalities. The poor moved from the country into dense areas such as Havana's Old Town, which few tourists would have visited. Restoration of monuments and buildings go back to 1929 with some of the palaces. However the breakthrough in designating historic areas came when the Office of the Historian was established in 1938 to protect what was special about the part of Havana that was developed in colonial times

The impact of the 1959 revolution

An over-whelming desire for freedom and for the downfall of Batista, who had become a dictator, culminated in a successful revolution led by Fidel Castro, with support from both the countryside and the towns. American outrage at the nationalisation of key industries and larger properties led to the extraordinary long blockade, which is widely known, as well as all kinds of 'dirty tricks' to depose Castro. After attempts at economic diversification, for example into medical products, Cuba was forced into a deal with Russia, which for a time

¹ This paper draws on a number of books, including Richard Gott's excellent history, and the Rough Guide and Lonely Planet for the context. There are excellent books such as Red Heat by Alex von Tunzelmann, which document the achievements of the Castro regime in surmounting outright hostility from the USA for over a century.

The insights into the restoration process in Havana came from Professor Orestes del Castillo, who formerly assisted the Historian of the Old Town and acted as our guide. I also benefitted from correspondence with Professor Julio Perez.

went well, as a high price was secured for sugar exports. But the collapse of the USSR led to the Special Period, with acute shortages of both food and oil.

Investment since then in social services such as education and health has resulted in a long-lived and 100% literate population, which has almost doubled to around 11 million, with 2.1 million in the capital city of Havana. But many of the former middle class emigrated to the USA through the 1960s. Florida is only 90 miles away at the closest points, and this large expatriate group has exerted exceptional influence on successive US governments. In the last year groups of -are being allowed in from the USA to visit cultural attractions, while strong links have been developed with Canada. Many tourists also come from other Latin American countries and Western Europe, resulting in tourism being the main source of foreign currency, and a major employer. Many of those trained in subjects such as medicine and engineering, are attracted into tourism because it offers much higher incomes in convertible currencies.

The consequences for conservation

Initial attempts to document and interpret the Island's unique history led on to ingenious initiatives to turn Cuba's heritage into hard cash. Havana's Historian secured a budget for improvements in 1981 from the Cuban government. In 1982 UNESCO designated the first of a series of World Heritage sites which made it much easier to justify putting scarce public resources into conservation. Significantly the goals are not -only conserving the physical fabric, but also the social qualities that make the area so special. The historic area covers some 14 hectares between the harbour and just beyond the old city walls, including part of the waterside promenade known as the Malecon. The core is pedestrianised, and traffic is largely confined to bike taxis. Car parks have been provided on the edges, and there are large numbers of taxis, many of them old American cars from the 40s and 50s, which add to City's special atmosphere.

Repaving the four main squares, and streets between them, along with landscaping small pocket parks where buildings had been demolished, helped create the confidence needed to attract foreign investment. With an initial budget of \$1 million, joint ventures with international hotel chains were set up for some 18 hotels. The first was the Hotel Valencia, one of many private mansions built around courtyards. These are joint ventures between the state agency Habaguanex and foreign investors, often Spanish hotel chains, on a 51:49 basis, often with joint managers. In the Historic Centre there are just two joint ventures linked to the Historian's Office: an office building -the first built in Havana in 1907-1909 and totally rehabilitated in 1995-1996 with a 51% to 49% participation and the Saratoga hotel with a 50% to 50% participation, the first with a Spanish Bank and the second with a British group .

45% of the revenues of all commercial activity funds under the control of the Historian go into new investments to provide physical renovation and 35% into social programmes, which are seen as equally important. The other 20% is used for new projects such, as for example a contribution to the rehabilitation of the national art schools. At the moment major work is underway to improve the infrastructure, such as new water pipes. The comprehensive plan of rehabilitation of the historic centre is reviewed every five years after a survey to establish occupation and the state of the buildings. About the 30% had been accomplished in the period between 1993 and 2004, and work is underway on a number of sites where no more than shells remain.

Some 70,000 people live in the 14 hectares of the Old Town, similar to the situation half a century ago, which means high levels of overcrowding. The policy is to avoid squeezing anyone out, while securing a greater social balance, which can be achieved because the Office of the Historian or the municipality owns almost all the properties. One benefit was to use the museums as classrooms while schools were being refurbished, and there is a huge range of museums including unusual ones dealing with playing cards and, of course, rum, which have taken over many of the finest buildings.

An important part of the investment has gone into improving living conditions, in the five main squares, which are gradually being upgraded. But a building of 15 apartments houses formerly housed 46 families when the building was still a tenement house, and there is still relatively little new housing being built to accommodate the growing population. Rents are related to 10% of family incomes, which is quite insufficient to pay for the renovation that is needed. There are other potential sites for hotels, so relying just on tourism to support regeneration may not be feasible in the longer-term. But the local industries are still weak and small-scale. Interestingly the main cigar factory is closed for refurbishment. A fine mansion has just been restored and reopened as galleries for artist-craftsmen and creative businesses are playing a major role in the Old Town's renaissance.

The conservation policy has also had economic aims. It is noticeable how many people are involved in keeping the streets clean, and staffing the large numbers of museums which have taken over some of the finest buildings. More than 10,000 jobs have been created through the process, and the Old Town has become Havana's greatest attraction. The fine streets of Obispo and Mercaderes now include not only lots of bars featuring different styles of Cuban music, but also increasing numbers of private restaurants and shops, now that occupiers are permitted to establish small enterprises. There is also a huge amount of street activity. A lady with a strong voice who sells peanuts, was given a grant so long as she continued to wear her fine costume! The Office of the Historian employs 300 people itself, and effectively manages the neighbourhood '*like the Vatican*'. Some employment is provided through construction work, and there is a Trade School, which leads on to apprenticeships.

Conclusion

Within the strong street grid there is an extraordinary variety of building sizes and styles, with tall 1930's modernist or art deco buildings next to two or three story classical mansions or commercial buildings. . Open windows with grills or balconies, and often large courtyards creates a rich melange of living streets, making walking a pleasure.. High densities in the older parts support high levels of social interaction, and the rich social capital compensates perhaps for the poor state of many of the buildings. Cuba feels much safer than many comparable countries.

However the contrasts are still very visible, not just between town and country, but also between different parts of town. It is probably the people living in rural areas who have benefited most from the Revolution, but there are not the jobs to use the skills of all who now get educated. The temptations of moving abroad, particularly to the US other parts of Latin America or Canada are strong. Incomes that depend heavily on tips encourage hustling, which can conflict with the calm that visitors may seek.

Cuba's historic quarters and balmy climate attract plenty of retired visitors, while the music scene appeals to a broader age ranges. The regeneration not just of Havana's Old Town but also Cienfuegos, Trinidad and other historic cities that now form a national network could therefore offer models for colonial cities in other parts of the world, and shows what can be achieved without letting economic forces get out of hand. But the achievements could also be fragile, depending very much on the policies of future US governments who so far have preferred to support dictators who give free rein to big business and international capital to those who try to control their own destinies.

So what are the features of the Cuban model of heritage based regeneration that others could learn from?

1. A strategy based on upgrading the public realm in the main squares and the streets that link them
2. A policy based on retaining the historic qualities and memories that make the old areas distinctive, and that conserve the quarters as living places, not museum
3. A strategy of public ownership of all the properties, under the control of a team with skills in historic conservation and economic development, and led by the position of historian (and who has been described as 'like the Pope')
4. Partnerships with private investors but on terms that maintain control and with proceeds being reinvested in the wider area
5. The involvement of creative people at every level, including excellent interpretation, signing, landscaping and public art.

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