

# Cuba, historic preservation: Integrated community and policy

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**ABSTRACT:** As an island nation where tourism is essential to the economy, Cuba relies on its architectural heritage to be the backdrop and foundation of that industry. Even before tourism played such a large role, Cubans fiercely valued their built heritage. The Office of the City Historian organizes preservation efforts in Havana and has consistently prioritized the needs of the local population while carrying out preservation projects. Funding generated by completed projects achieves preservation goals as well as supports social projects through restoring buildings to house tourism functions and to house programs that address the needs of the neighborhood. Havana's experiences reveal a model of sustaining the local population and supporting social projects through tourism.

The objective of this research is to better understand the circular relationship between preservation, social projects and economics that exists in Havana, Cuba. Through on site interviews and project visits this research analyzes the Cuban policy model. While Cuba has a unique political situation, the integration of functions that at first glance, seem unrelated to the work of preservation are part of the strength of the program. The combination of job – training programs, health care functions, and community involvement turn the luxury of preservation into a needed tool that serves the community. By serving the population that has the greatest need, the Office of the City Historian has built a support network. An analysis of these relationships sheds light on the connection between built heritage and a living, breathing community.

The practice of precedent research is core to the practice of architecture. This particular precedent reveals an opportunity in the practice of preservation. Through analyzing this model, this research builds a foundation for future innovation.

**KEYWORDS:** Cuba, Historic Preservation, Integrated Development

## INTRODUCTION

Though founded over twenty years before the Revolution in Cuba, the Office of the City Historian of Havana has incorporated social themes crucial to the Revolution while preserving the tangible and intangible elements of Old Havana's heritage. Through the integration of disparate priorities, the Office of the City Historian has built a system that ties preservation efforts to the delivery of social services, which turns preservation from an apparent luxury into a tool that serves the community. The system relies on accomplishing two or more goals through one project. The conversion from luxury to necessary tool is only possible because preservation and non-preservation activities are managed by the Office of the City Historian through what it calls Integral Development Management. The Office of the City Historian enjoys the autonomy to orchestrate so many different projects because it has the legal authority to self-finance through the corporation Habaguanex, instead of being funded by the central government. This is a unique arrangement in Cuba. The investment of funds into projects that are primarily for tourists and foreign businesses is necessary to attract them to Cuba to spend money that can then be invested in preservation and social projects. However, the juxtaposition of tourism interests with the extreme needs of the local population can be jarring. In this paper, I will argue that by employing a strategy that looks at Old Havana holistically, instead of addressing issues in isolation, the Office of the City Historian has served multiple priorities concurrently. I will argue this by showing how its unique funding model benefits from tourism, as well as promotes tourism, provides social services and training, all while preserving the built environment.

## 1.0 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research is based on extensive secondary and primary source literature as well as travel to Cuba in June 2014 to conduct interviews with historic preservation professionals, architects, professors, and conservators. These interviews, in combination with tours of significant sites, self-directed exploration of the

city, and contextualizing reading before and after this travel forms the foundation of my research. I use the term preservation as the umbrella that includes a range of intervention strategies, including preservation, restoration, and re-creation of historic elements.

### 1.1. Setting the scene

The Office of the City Historian did not have its current social focus from its inception. Founded in 1938 by Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, early preservation efforts of the Office fought unsuccessfully to reverse the effects of deterioration and prior neglect (*Una Experiencia* 2006). By the time that the Office was founded the historic center was already deteriorated. The historic center, established in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, was originally home to very wealthy citizens, but the demographics changed over the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and by the 20<sup>th</sup> century larger mansions had been subdivided in order to house multiple families. In addition, many tenement style buildings were built to house the influx of lower income families. (*Una Experiencia* 2006). Eusebio Leal Spengler succeeded Leuchsenring in 1967 as City Historian. Activity accelerated quickly in the early 1980s: in 1981 the first five-year plan for the restoration of Old Havana was established, in 1982 Old Havana and the fortifications were named a World Heritage site by UNESCO, and later that decade multiple projects were completed radiating out from the main city squares (Oficina del Historiador, 2014, *Una Experiencia* 2006). As a governmental body, the Office of the City Historian was originally funded through the government and therefore subject to fluctuations in funding based on availability of funds and prioritization, including the drastic cuts that were enacted during the rationing of the Special Period after the collapse of the Soviet Union, a key supporter of the Cuban economy.

When the Soviet Union collapsed in 1991, the Cuban economy also collapsed. The USSR and other Soviet countries had been purchasing the vast majority of Cuban exports at prices that were frequently higher than the products would have received on the open market (Gott 2004). This collapse ushered in the so-called "Special Period" wherein the Cuban government enacted strict rationing. All resources became scarce, from food to funding for projects like historic preservation. The Cuban government was forced to adapt and adjust their policies to the new reality: government workers were laid off and previously banned private businesses were encouraged instead (Gott 2004). Tourism was actively cultivated as an export that appealed to a wide range of countries. Most importantly for the Office of the City Historian, it was permitted to become self-funding.

## 2.0 OUT OF CRISIS, OPPORTUNITY

In response to the Cuban government's inability to support all the government's programs in the face of severe scarcity, the corporation Habaguanex was founded in 1994. Habaguanex, owned and operated by the Office of the City Historian, runs tourism based businesses in order to earn revenues in support of the Office of the City Historian's other projects. In the interest of supporting Cuban independence, Fidel Castro had previously scorned tourism asserting that Cuba should avoid becoming an "island of bartenders and chambermaids as had other Caribbean nations" (Scarpaci 2005). However the economic crisis of the 1990s required a shift in policy. The Decree Law 143 gave the Office of the City Historian legal power to own and run Habaguanex, separate from the other branches of government (*Una Experiencia* 2006). Instead of receiving funding from the central government, the Office of the City Historian is legally allowed to self-fund, unlike any other city historian office in other Cuban cities. The revenues from Habaguanex are reinvested at a rate 60% into preservation work and 40% into social projects, thereby perpetuating the activities of the Office of the City Historian without funding from the central government (Red 2012). The economic disaster of the Special Period provided the impetus to allow the Office of the City Historian to establish its financial autonomy by harnessing the funding potential of tourism.

Currently, Habaguanex manages a variety of businesses that capitalize on the opportunities of tourism. The corporation was formed in order to generate revenue for the Office of the City Historian running hotels, restaurants, and souvenir shops. In this way the Office of the City historian leverages the tourism industry in order to pursue additional preservation projects which have a threefold effect: preserving the tangible and intangible heritage of Cuba, fostering additional tourism opportunities and serving the community by providing employment opportunities and spaces for needed services. By tying these disparate interests together, the Office of the City Historian ensures that each element is necessary to and supports the others.

## 3.0 TOURISM, A NECESSARY EVIL?

Today, Cuba still has few resources that it can export, and tourism has become its most important industry. Cuba relies on its architecture and culture (or tangible and intangible heritage) to be the backdrop and

foundation of tourism industry. As the backdrop, architecture may not be fully engaged by tourists, in the same way that socialism creates an exciting locale, but is not necessarily understood in depth by visitors to the island (Babb 2011, 58). The romantic and colorful decay of Cuba is the setting for the adventure of travel as sold by tourism agencies, but tourists are not required to understand the architectural heritage that they are seeing. On the other hand, architecture and culture create the sense of a place in the eyes of locals as well as tourists. As such, the architectural and cultural heritage of Cuba creates the foundation, the support and the basis for the tourism industry.

As the basis for tourism, architectural heritage is something that is managed carefully. Joseph Scarpaci in his 2005 book, *Plazas and Barrios* is critical of what he describes as “[reviving] the semiotics of [Old Havana’s] colonial and exploited past [in order to market] its cityscape” (Scarpaci 2005, 203). The issue of control of image, which results in control of history, is particularly poignant in a place with such pervasive government control. Perhaps one of the more visible examples of how Habaguanex manages the image of Old Havana’s historic architecture is mansions that have been converted into hotels. For example, the Hotel Beltrán de Santa Cruz was the home of a marquis according to the Habaguanex website (Habaguanex 2015). The former mansion is made up of 11 rooms, a kitchen, dining and living rooms as well as an open courtyard. The second story rooms are reached by individual staircases and the third story includes a balcony that overlooks the central courtyard. This style of building allows airflow to every space, despite the fact that the building itself abuts its neighbors. From the street, the large doorway is typically open, but before entering what would have been the main living space any visitor must pass through what is now used as the lobby. The image included here shows the restoration the murals on the walls along the main staircase. There were multiple layers of the murals, so when the building was restored, sections of each layer were worked on and left visible as a sort of educational reveal. Without any explanation, some of the buildings history is understandable.



**Figure 1:** Wall in the Hotel Beltrán de Santa Cruz showing multiple layers of restored mural. Source of image: Author 2014.

The idea behind segregating this historic building from the general public is that through renting these rooms, visitors are able to engage with some of Old Havana’s history while they are supporting other preservation projects with their payment.

Part of the reason tourism is such an influential industry in Cuba is that tourists’ money is worth more than locals’ money by virtue of the dual currency system that exists in Cuba. Salaries in Cuba are paid in national pesos (CUP), but tourism based businesses price their products in convertible pesos (CUC). When CUP and CUC pesos were established they were intended to be equal, today the value of one CUC is tied to the dollar (although the exchange rate does vary), but CUP are worth 1/25 of a convertible peso (“Cuban Peso” 2014). Staple goods intended to meet the basic needs of the Cuban citizens are priced in CUPs and

price controlled: there are markets made up only of these types of goods. There are also markets selling basic goods that more expensive and difficult to obtain that are priced in CUCs (Vladimir 2014; Symmes 2010). Most businesses that cater to tourists have prices only in CUCs. Based on recent travel to Cuba, CUC prices were slightly cheaper than prices one would expect for similar products in the United States. Some restaurants, for example, were noticeably cheaper than in the United States, but when compared with salaries in CUPs, it is easy to understand why Cubans are not able to patronize those restaurants and also they are able to make a great deal more money when they have access to tips in CUCs. One former Geography teacher left teaching in order to earn more money driving a cab for tourists. At the time of the interview, a 20-minute drive would cost 10 CUC. He quoted his previous monthly salary as a teacher as equivalent to \$11 or 11 CUC (Alfredo 2014). Fostering tourism both brings in money but also has the power to warp Cuban reality. If the most lucrative career opportunities for Cubans are centered around presenting Cuba to outsiders (tourists) how much of the 'real and authentic' Cuba remains behind the presentation?

#### 4.0 FOCUS ON COMMUNITY

The counterpoint to the hypothetical damage that tourism can inflict on Cuba are the social services that are paid for with the profits of tourism. The Office of the City Historian has taken advantage of its autonomy to prioritize not only preservation, but also to meet the needs of the local population. In fact, the same law that gave it the legal power to run tourism businesses to support its activities also charged the Office of the City Historian with taking care of the inhabitants of Old Havana. The Office was assigned "powers to adopt measures and solve, within the area of its jurisdiction, the most pressing and urgent needs of the population" (*Una Experiencia* 2006). The Office of the City Historian has actively addressed the needs of the population by folding those needs into the scope of preservation projects.

Through the practice of what the Office of the City Historian calls their Integral Development Management Strategy, the Office addresses issues of economics, social policy and preservation (*Una Experiencia* 2006). UNESCO and other international organizations praise this model for successfully addressing disparate issues concurrently. Through accomplishing multiple goals with the same projects, the Office of the City Historian is able to work efficiently and make sure that multiple stakeholders value its work. This is not a superficial connection between priorities, the examples that follow show that apparently unrelated goals become dependent on the success of one another.

The vast majority of the buildings in Old Havana were built in the early 20th century or earlier. Most of this stock is housing, but there are some key historic buildings whose programs, after restoration, focused specifically on other needs that exist in the community of Old Havana (*Una Experiencia* 2006, 36). One frequently referenced project is the Hogar Materno Infantil, a facility available to expectant mothers who either reside in Old Havana or work for the Office of the City Historian (Rodríguez 2014). There are 50 beds for pregnant women who need close medical care. The staff has the capacity to see an additional 60 patients who need daily medical and nutritional care, but do not stay in the facility (González 2010).



**Figure 2:** Hogar Materno Infantil is a maternity home that was offices before the Office of the City Historian and the Ministry of Public Health rehabilitated it. Source of image: Author 2014.

Originally built in 1950, the building housed the offices of social services for women and maternal health. The rehabilitation and conversion into a medical facility was the result of a partnership between the Ministerio de Salud Pública de Cuba and the Office of the City Historian, completed in 1997 (González 2010). This particular project blends restoration with social services, but is an example of prioritizing the needs of the community over strict preservation. The Hogar Materno Infantil building does not have a long, storied history, nor is it particularly architecturally significant. The services that are provided in the building, on the other hand, are extremely important and contribute to the reduction of the infant mortality rate within Old Havana.

Another project that does not fit cleanly into either the category of preservation or social services is Our Lady of Belén Convent and Church. This convent, built between 1712 and 1718 was run as a “convalescent home and poor house by the Order of the Bethlehem ... nuns.” The Jesuits enlarged the complex in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it was abandoned in 1925 (Our Lady 2014). The convent and church occupy a full city block in the Belén neighborhood. A large fire in 1991 destroyed much of the church, including the oldest cloisters. The restoration effort quickly won broad popular community support. Today the social programs that have been implemented are extensive, and the facilities serve “families, children, young people, mentally and physically disabled persons, and the elderly... [through] recreation, relaxation and performance spaces, a home for the elderly (18 apartments for 50 people...) a school for special needs kids, museums, kitchens, a computer and internet lab, workshops for crafts, a small factory for the production of clothing, health and eye care clinics, and a pharmaceutical warehouse and dispensary” (Our Lady 2014).





**Figure 3:** The Belén Convent, originally built in the 1700s, was abandoned early in the 1900s and rehabilitated by the Office of the City Historian in order to serve many of the same functions it originally did, in addition to providing new social services. Source of image: Author 2014.

Despite being a restoration project executed by the Office of the City Historian, the social services now housed in the Belén Convent are independent of the Office. The staff at Belén conduct surveys to assess what additional needs are not being met and the programs grow and change with the community. Restoration by the Office of the City Historian is still ongoing, with additional funding from international sources. The convent was intended specifically to return to its original functions, so in this way the restoration was not only of the physical building, but also of the services as well.

The third project to be examined could be considered a restoration of skills in addition to restoration of buildings. The Office of the City Historian simultaneously achieves both social and preservation goals through La Escuela Taller or the Workshop School. At first glance, the Workshop School could appear to be wholly focused on preservation activities. The purpose of this school is to train young people in traditional preservation trades, many of which would not be taught outside of this type of program.



**Figure 4:** Escuela Taller students at work on a project in the Colón Cemetery. The trade skills these disadvantaged youth learn on projects such as these are valuable in the preservation profession. Source of image: (Author, 2014).

The program, though, is another social effort. The students, all between the ages of 18 and 25, are all disadvantaged in some way. For example, family conditions may have prevented them from finishing high school, for all of them the University was not an option (Rodríguez Sánchez "Interview" 2014). In Cuba there are no tuition fees, but students are required to pass tests in their field of study before they can attend college. Many of the Workshop School students live in Old Havana, while other Cuban cities have similar programs for their residents (Castillo 2013). These students learn trades like masonry, mural painting, ironwork, glasswork and other trades critical to restoration work. The chance to study at the school is so popular that they are only able to accept between 10 and 20% of those who apply. After graduating from the two-year program, students work for the Office of the City Historian, private companies, in other countries as preservationists and or in non-preservation fields where their technical skills are still in high demand (Rodríguez Sánchez "Interview" 2014). By opening the door to economic opportunity to residents of the communities where the work is happening, the Office of the City Historian builds support for all their projects, not just for the Workshop School projects. While increasing the value that the community places in preservation, they are also building a strong workforce so that preservation projects can be accomplished. It would be difficult to separate the two priorities in this example; it is an effective blending of meeting two needs: preservation and job training with one program: the Workshop School.

The Office of the City Historian addresses goals at multiple scales: through individual buildings, city blocks, neighborhoods, and the district of Old Havana. Each of these projects also addresses an additional, similarly scaled social issue. For example, the construction work being done to upgrade the infrastructural systems of Old Havana will benefit the residents and businesses there, but the work is also taking into consideration the growth of the tourism sector. Since most of the buildings were constructed before the advent of electricity, the electrical system is not systematic or reliable in many buildings with wires running in every direction in order to be able to service all the different residential units. After being in Old Havana for just a short time you will see water delivery trucks supplying potable water each day to many locations around the historic center. There is nothing to suggest that demand will drop in the near future. While the torn up streets are inconvenient for pedestrians and bicycle taxi drivers, the improvements that will come to both the residents and the tourism sector will be greatly appreciated.

## 5.0 BENEVOLENT DICTATOR?

Through the collection of examples it is possible to begin to tease out the circular relationship between preservation, social projects and economics. It is difficult to analyze the connection between built heritage and a living breathing community because much of daily life is the same whether or not the setting is historic. For example people in every city cook meals, buy goods and go to work. The intangible history as represented by the tangible architecture colors the community and gives it a sense of place, of rootedness. In turn, the architecture without the people becomes a museum, static and unchanging. When a community like the one in Old Havana has so many needs: physical repairs, overcrowding, healthcare for the elderly, it seems frivolous to dwell on the value intangible history. It seems far more important to address the needs of daily life. By creating economic dependencies between preservation and social services, the Office of the City Historian has created a network that would not function without any one of the pieces. Despite the positive accomplishments that the Office of the City Historian has made, there are still questions that have to be addressed. In general, the image that the Office would like to present is that the "human being is the protagonist of the process" (Castillo 2013). In speaking with residents of Old Havana and other neighborhoods of Havana, this may be called into question. Joseph Scarpaci in particular, questions the number of residences that really are retained after restoration. Old Havana is extremely overcrowded, "planners insist that only half of the roughly eighty-five thousand residents occupying Habana Vieja should reside there" but some formerly residential buildings have been converted into business spaces (Scarpaci 2005). As a result of the extreme overcrowding, people have to be moved to other neighborhoods. Many received new apartments in the public works housing in Havana del Este. While some residents are extremely happy to have moved their large extended family from one small, inadequate apartment perhaps into two newly built apartments, others feel that the projects are unattractive, have bad services and bad public transportation (Scarpaci 2005). Resolving all of the competing demands on the current urban fabric in such a way that appeases all parties may not be possible. Still it is very difficult to justify expenditures on hotels and restaurants to a resident with a damaged leaky roof; the value of tourism investments does not stop the rain from falling in one kitchen (Scarpaci 2005).

In some respects it seems that the Office of the City Historian behaves like a benevolent and responsible dictator. The projects and services that they offer are valuable and address the needs of the community, but there is not a formal system to consult the population themselves as to their needs. From an outside perspective, the projects that the Office of the City Historian has enacted seem powerful and pertinent. In

order to effectively manage the Integral Development System, very well organized leadership is required. The Office of the City Historian has created dependencies between tourism, social needs and preservation requirements. The relationships between these elements are not obvious or simple, but they have resulted in important accomplishments in all three realms. In order to see the big picture, the singular body of the Office of the City Historian is better positioned than the population at large. As Havana and Cuba reestablish relations United States, whether or not the Office of the City Historian will be able to maintain the potentially delicate balance between preservation, social projects and economics may depend on the strict control that they have benefited from to date.

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