

Gran Teatro and domed Capitolino Nacional in Havana Vieja.



## Learning from Havana

BY WILLIAM F. STERN

**HAVANA**, as I discovered on a recent trip to Cuba, is unlike any other large city in the western hemisphere. Contrary to its popular image as a city on the verge of ruin, suspended in time somewhere before 1960, the city has a wholeness of grace and beauty that can hardly be found anywhere else in North or South America. The paucity of new development since the 1959 revolution has preserved this Caribbean city as a masterpiece of architecture and urbanity. But Havana is not stagnant either, and continues to evolve as a delicately knitted fabric that incorporates centuries of building growth into a virtually seamless whole.

The last half of the 20th century has not been so kind to North American cities. Mega-development and redevelopment projects, products of rampant speculation and commercialism, abetted by an ever expanding and indifferent urban freeway system, have fractured the cohesive fabric of cities. Central and South American cities increasingly are experiencing similar dissolution; moreover, these cities struggle with heavily populated communities, impoverished, neglected and barely integrated into their host cities.

Such is not the case with Havana. Imagine a city without multi-lane free-

ways arbitrarily cutting one part of the city from another, where one era of building melds into the next with virtually everything still there, period by period, place by place. Imagine a city where distinctive buildings from the past survive not as isolated monuments but as parts of a richly intricate urban whole. Imagine this, and you can begin to visualize Havana.

Clearly, Havana has been lucky. Fidel Castro was never particularly fond of cities, and after the revolution invested far more in the rural areas of Cuba. He never built monuments to himself, nor did he feel moved to wipe out the architectural evidence of the colonial period, the period of the so-called republic, or the officially vilified years of Batista. He simply left it all alone. There never was a wholesale program to erase the past, as sometimes happened in other communist capitals, such as Beijing or Bucharest. In Havana it was simply a case of benign neglect, and for the most part, the government left Havana's buildings to deteriorate. Movies such as *The Buena Vista Social Club* and *Strawberry and Chocolate* evocatively capture the image of a crumbling, romantic city, which shows

up again in Robert Polidori's seductive photographs of Havana's decaying Beaux Arts and Art Deco mansions and townhouses.

But Havana is not a relic, nor is it completely crumbling. Perhaps the most prominent preservation project in the western hemisphere can be found in Havana Vieja — the area that adjoins the port and is most associated with the colonial period, which lasted until the end of the 19th century. In 1982, UNESCO declared Vieja a World Heritage Site, but restoration lagged until the 1990s. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Fidel and company, badly short of cash, resorted to a capitalist ploy. By encouraging foreign investment that included the expansion of tourism, the government was able to direct funding to the restoration of Havana Vieja. This work has been entrusted to the city historian, Eusebio Leal, who directs a large team of architects and has virtually unlimited power to set the direction of Vieja's restoration. Leal also runs the state-owned company Habaguanex, which restores and controls endangered buildings that have been given new life as hotels, restaurants, shops, and businesses — mostly catering to tourists. Half the income from these properties supports Vieja's ongoing restoration.

Havana, though, is much more than Vieja. From its colonial heart, the city grew well into the first half of the 20th century. In the sprawling neighborhood of Vedado, the heart of Havana in the 20th century, one still finds lushly planted boulevards with an eclectic architectural mix of large houses, apartment buildings, and elegant reinforced-concrete office buildings dating from the 1940s and '50s. Well into the '50s, Havana continued to fan out with suburban neighborhoods that mirror the planning and architecture of American cities such as Los Angeles, Miami, and Houston. These neighborhoods are replete with extraordinary examples of modern design, all still standing, if a bit tarnished.

Unfortunately, Leal's vast network of restoration does not go beyond Havana Vieja, for obvious economic reasons and political reasons that are not quite as clear. But others are calling for action. In particular, scholar Eduardo Luis Rodríguez, author of *The Havana Guide: Modern Architecture 1925-1965*, has made a strong case for the restoration of Havana's 20th century legacy.

It can be argued that the American trade embargo, a policy that effectively keeps Fidel Castro in power by keeping out significant American influence, only hurts the Cuban people. But ironically, this estrangement may be all that stands in the way of an invasion of American-style development. Already, investment from Canada and Europe has introduced unattractive hotel buildings, and more are

planned. And what if the U.S. eventually ends its absurd policy of embargo and isolation? Will a flood of American investors, including Cuban exiles in south Florida, sweep away whole neighborhoods for blocks of commercial and residential urban renewal? This need not be the inevitable conclusion. The Cuban government should stay in the driver's seat, and set in motion a comprehensive plan to protect and restore Havana — a revival similar to that in Havana Vieja, only on a city-wide scale.

In many ways, Houston and Havana are opposites, but closer examination reveals similarities. Houston was born of a 19th-century laissez-faire capitalism and still embraces its principles of unregulated growth. Havana began as a colonial city, but in the 20th century its growth was not unlike that of Houston's, spurred by capital investment to become the vibrant commercial and political capital of Cuba. Until 1960, the same kinds of market forces and commercial interests that dominate Houston dominated the development of Havana, and in all probability the city would look very different today if Fidel had not come into power. Over the 40 years that Castro has dominated his country, Houston had its most extensive period of growth, and it was during those years that the city changed most dramatically. Today, the two cities represent radically different systems of city government. In Havana, decisions come from the top, from a government tightly controlled by a few. Houston's government is democratically elected to represent its citizens, but in reality business interests dominate the decision-making process. The results are obvious. Houston's lack of zoning, its weak preservation ordinance, and leaders who have promoted road-building over alternative transportation systems have all taken their toll. As a result, we are left with a fragmented city where mediocre commercial and residential development surrounds shrinking islands of urbanity, and where noteworthy architecture and protected neighborhoods are increasingly threatened.

Houston could learn from Havana, in particular, a lesson that places equal value on the past as it does on the future, and where the sanctity of established neighborhoods is respected even as development encroaches. Eusebio Leal and his group prove that planning and preservation can be sources of renewal and capital growth. We learn that unregulated development can and must be balanced with planned development and a comprehensive vision of place. Though it is impossible to turn back the clock and revive the city we have lost, we learn from Havana how graciousness, vibrancy and a sense of history are conditions of urbanity. Above all, we learn about respecting the delicate threads that hold a city together in both time and place. ■