

Conditioning History: Heritage Construction as Design Strategy And Catalyst

GABRIEL FUENTES

Marywood University

In what follows, I argue that under the assumption of ‘authenticity’, history - the recollection and recontextualization of artifacts and events of the past for the present - is not only an ethical problem of honesty and truth but also, and perhaps more importantly, an aesthetic problem of representation and power. As such, heritage construction practices - by which I include historic preservation, restoration, and conservation - operate in geopolitical tension between the ethics of truth and the aesthetics of counterfactuality, conditioning history within asymmetrical relations of power. To construct heritage, then, is not merely to represent the past but to design history as a site for architectural and urban practice; It is itself a design operation, strategy, and catalyst, particularly in old cities. In order to ground some broader thoughts on the aesthetics of authenticity and the geopolitics of heritage, I turn to Havana, Cuba (a UNESCO World Heritage site since 1982) as a case study; a city where heritage construction, globalization, and ideology intertwine with architecture and urban planning/design at multiple scales. Specifically, I analyze the collaborative practices of Havana’s Office of the City Historian (OCH) - the only autonomous, non-centralized, capitalist entity in Cuba’s socialist polity with the power to regulate, design, and develop heritage sites within Havana’s old core.

THE AESTHETICS OF AUTHENTICITY

The term ‘authenticity’ is rooted in the Greek ‘*authentēs*’, meaning author or authored. Much like its contemporary usage, its earliest usage was linked to the original-*ness* or genuine-*ness* of artifacts as opposed to counterfeits or reproductions. Seen this way, artifacts may be considered authentic to the extent that they reflect a certain honesty about their author’s original intentions and/or their processes of construction (we may rightly wonder, then, about the authenticity of non-authored objects). Hence an artifact’s *authentic* history - the kind of history that

might properly constitute its cultural heritage value - presupposes that truth was its primary historiographic motivation - an objective history with no counterfactuality, no ulteriority.

But isn’t a history - a narrated account of an artifact or a past told from the vantage point of the present - always motivated by the storyteller’s intentions? In turn, doesn’t an *authentic* history - a narrated account about the *origins and authorial honesty* of an artifact or a past, *motivated by the storyteller’s intentions*, and told from the vantage point of the present - seem like an excessive double-authored surface draped over the core factuality of the past? Seen this way, any claim to ‘authenticity’ poses not only ethical problems around questions of truth and honesty, but also aesthetic ones around questions of representation, power, and motivation. To frame ‘authentic’ socio-cultural, architectural and urban histories, then, is in part to condition the (geo)political ground and aesthetic stakes for heritage construction practices in the city, practices which are already implicated in architecture and related disciplines (urban planning, landscape architecture, historic preservation / restoration, interior design, real estate, etc.).

The construction of cultural heritage unfolds as a negotiation between narrated histories, collective memories, and contested authenticities, often in a context of power and national identity. In other words, as power relations and national identities shift, the meaning and agency of history, memory, and authenticity shift with them. Seen this way, heritage is not embedded into artifacts, but rather recollected and projected onto them. Such recollection and projection of heritage, in turn, is often articulated in asymmetrical relations of power and made tangible in tension with the various institutions that seek to regulate meaning and “freeze” heritage objects at specific moments of truth.

It is precisely this “freezing” of time - that aesthetic impulse to reveal and represent a specific past at the expense of many others (and by direct association, concealing and repressing other pasts) - that ties heritage construction practices to the politics of the present, politics that, perhaps paradoxically, have historical roots in both Modernity generally and Modern preservation theory in particular. Since the Enlightenment, preservation discourse and practice has been entangled with questions of ‘progress’ and Modernity; for if the Modern stood opposite to a “traditional” past, then to preserve that past was to enclose “tradition” (those ills of the “premodern” world) and distance it away through the

teleological progress of a Modernity purified through Reason. Hence preservation not only established a historical ground against which to legitimate the Modern but also helped distinguish a time *before* Modernity from a time *after* it - relegating historic monuments to the former in order to help construct the latter. In Hegelian fashion, then, the preserved monument stood frozen in time somewhere in between the end of tradition and the beginning of Modernity.

In the 19th century, French architect and theorist Viollet-le-Duc theorized restoration as a practice that combined historical “fact” with interpretive counterfactuality. In the “Restoration” section of his 1854 *Dictionnaire raisonne de l'architecture francaise du Xle au XVIe siecle* (Dictionary of French Architecture from the 11th to 16th Centuries), he says,

*“To Restore an edifice means neither to maintain it, nor to repair it, nor to rebuild it; it means to establish it in a finished state, which may in fact never have actually existed at a given time.”*¹

Along this view, to establish a building in a “finished state” is not to receive heritage as what was built but rather to (re)construct it as *what would have or should have been built* - the aesthetics of counterfactuality meet the ethics of truth in order to condition the public's view and reception of architecture as an agent of Modernity. In the process, Viollet-le-Duc imported graphic techniques from anatomy into his architectural drawings; engaging a critical process of selective cutting and separating, recombining of the architectural body and exposing specific parts at the expense of others. Hence in “Memory as Construction in Viollet-le-Duc's Architectural Imagination” Aron Vinegar likens the *Dictionnaire* as an “*imagination technology*” that operates as “*an instrument for the extension of imagining or visualizing activities through the selective amplification and suppression of matter, form, and content.*”² Viollet-le-Duc's architectural drawings are not authentic history; they are a critical element in the construction of a historical counterhistory.

Inherent in modernization processes, then, are questions on preservation value: By what criteria are things included into or excluded from the preservation frame? What artifacts and events are worth preserving? How is history valued? What makes a monument? In “Preservation and Modernity: Competing Perspectives, Contested Histories and Questions of Authenticity,” Mrinalini Rajagopalan analyzes historic preservation as a political practice (the construction of Modernity was indeed political) in relation to forces of colonization, nationalism, post-modernity, and globalization.³ By her account, historic preservation can never be separated from its affiliations with power; for if the colonial city used preservation to encode difference onto indigenous pasts, contemporary heritage institutions (UNESCO, ICOMOS, etc.) homogenize aspects of such pasts by standardizing the meaning of heritage across the globe.

Situating historic preservation within discourses of modernity and modernization exposes inherent paradoxes: as a heritage-building practice, historic preservation entangles narrated histories and embodied memories to bring the past in and out of view (forgetting is the other side of remembering). By simultaneously constructing and erasing histories, the preservation frame renders heritage objects both timeless and contemporary - *foregrounding* and *backgrounding* the past relative to the present while crafting and instrumentalizing collective memory for

political gain. For while historic preservation attempts to freeze time to a particular moment of universal historical “truth”, the collective memory it bounds and historicizes is both produced in the shared social spaces of everyday life and embedded in contemporary power relations, often in a context of nationalism.

Seen this way, memory is not embodied in artifacts but are attached to them through social processes of signification. In her article “Collective Memory Under Siege” The Case of ‘Heritage Terrorism,’” M. Christine Boyer takes issue with those who represent memory - collective or otherwise - is an objective *thing in itself* outside of social and political practice. In other words, for Boyer, memory is not some withdrawn condition waiting to be activated or released from the urban fabric but is rather socially produced and constituted in discourse as a “storehouse for memories.”⁴ Heritage objects, then, are the anchoring points for such discourse, the points around which collective memory is gathered, recollected, and/or instrumentalized, often in political contexts.

Heritage value, then is both acquired and projected (not, as already mentioned, embodied). In his seminal 1903 essay “The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin,” philosopher and art historian Alois Riegl theorized monuments as “*a human creation, erected for a specific purpose of keeping single human deeds or events alive in the minds of future generations.*”⁵ For Riegl, there were two types of monuments: 1) *intentional* monuments: those built specifically to commemorate specific historic periods and events, and 2) *unintentional* monuments: those, that while built without such commemoration intent, acquire historic value as through age. While useful, both types are defined using very different logics. Whereas the former attempts to *disrupt* time and distance - that is, to reference and represent the past *in the present* as a way of evoking and immortalizing a specific memory of that history - the latter attempts to *preserve* time and distance; that is, to reveal its age - the traces of its “authenticity.” Hence it can be argued that any process of urban / architectural restoration attempts to convert unintentional monuments to intentional ones.

THE GEOPOLITICS OF HERITAGE

On an international plane, UNESCO's discourse about places like (Old Havana) reterritorialization by disembedding sites from their concrete locations within the boundaries of local, regional, and national meanings and policies, and reattaching them to UNESCO's World Heritage program and its notions of “universal cultural value.”

—Matthew J. Hill⁶

Contemporary heritage construction is a multi-scalar project that involves the reorganization of a range of social and institutional relationships that intersect at various geographic and political scales. UNESCO - established in the immediate postwar context (1945) in part to carry out the CIAM's Athens Charter mandate to preserve historic urban fabrics - constructs heritage through a dialectical process of *deteritorialization* and *reterritorialization* by (dis)articulating geopolitical relationships between and among local, national, and planetary scales in order to align specific national identities with a “universal history of

mankind.” In this way, UNESCO situates local heritage objects (historic cities, sites, buildings, and artifacts) within the global flows of capitalist expansion, international capital, information technology, and tourism (and vice versa) - looping them together with its global heritage grid, that geographic space of “outstanding universal significance.” Seen this way, heritage is but the other side of globalization; to understand historic preservation as a heritage-building project is to understand the ways in which UNESCO’s global project loops (and scales) through local processes of (re)constructing sites as cultural patrimony, processes embodied in the multiple (and at times competing) interests of specific actors and their institutions.

In Old Havana, historic preservation practices pull UNESCO’s universal cultural project, Cuba’s quasi-socialist political project, and the city’s heritage project *into each other* as they all negotiate the meaning and value of cultural patrimony; for if UNESCO redraws the world’s cultural and natural heritage in its own image, in Old Havana this image is infused with the ideals and development practices of a nation-state that seeks consumption and tourism to survive. Cuba’s political/ideological project, in turn, intersects with multiple actors on the ground (architects, urban planners, preservationists and politicians on the one hand, the hospitality industry, entrepreneurs, and tourism developers on the other) who participate in *“the work of bounding, naming, marking, and regulating the urban landscape so that it can be known and recognized as an ‘authentic’ heritage object.”* The institution that binds these actors together is the Office of the City Historian (hereafter OCH).

CASE STUDY: HERITAGE AS STRATEGY AND CATALYST IN HAVANA, CUBA

Since granted world heritage status by the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in 1982, Old Havana has been the site of contested heritage practices. Critics consider UNESCO’s definition of the 143 hectare walled city center a discriminatory delineation strategy that primes the colonial core for tourist consumption at the expense of other parts of the city. To neatly bound Havana’s collective memory / history within its “old” core, they say, is to museumize the city as “frozen in time,” sharply distinguishing the “historic” from the “vernacular.”

The Soviet Union’s collapse in 1991 triggered a crippling recession during what Fidel Castro called a “Special Period in a Time of Peace.” In response, Castro redeveloped international tourism—long demonized by the Revolution as associated with capitalist “evils”—in order to capture the foreign currency needed to maintain the state’s centralized economy. Paradoxically, the re-emergence of international tourism in socialist Cuba triggered similar inequalities found in pre-Revolutionary Havana: a dual-currency economy, government-owned retail (capturing U.S. dollars at the expense of Cuban Pesos), and zoning mechanisms to “protect” Cubanos from the “evils” of the tourism, hospitality, and leisure industries. Using the tropes of “heritage” and “identity,” preservation practices fueled tourism while allocating the proceeds toward urban development, using capitalism to sustain socialism.

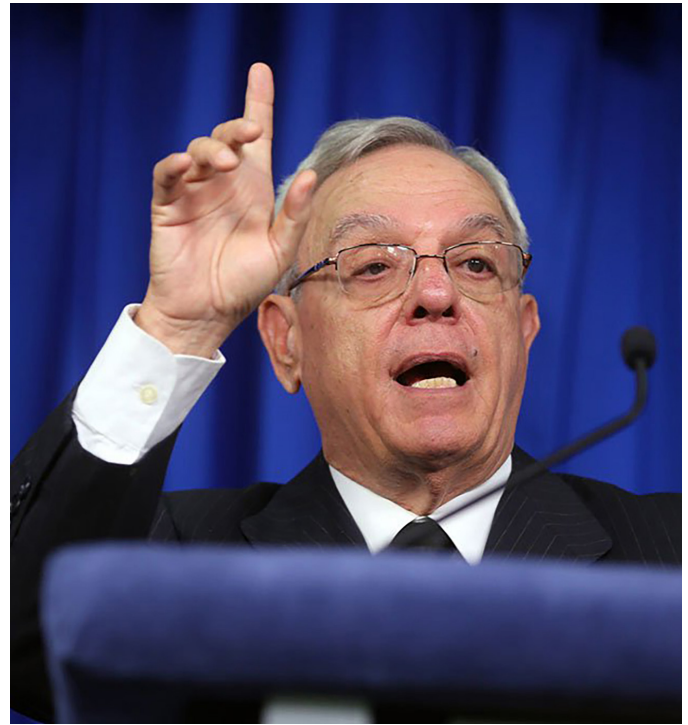


Figure 1: Eusebio Leal Spengler, Havana City Historian. Image Credit: Digital Hoy, August 6, 2015.

The Office of the City Historian

While romanticized by the public, architects, and scholars alike as an urban jewel “frozen in time,” Old Havana’s value as a heritage object has been contested since at least the beginning of the 20th century. Emilio Roig de Leuchsenring, Havana’s first City Historian, took on the task of preserving / restoring Old Havana as early as 1935 - 24 years before the 1959 Cuban Revolution. Yet despite his efforts to protect Old Havana from ruin (designating it as a “protected zone” in 1945), he got very few preservation / restoration projects off the ground during his tenure. In 1967, Eusebio Leal Spengler (Roig’s assistant) was promoted to City Historian and was tasked with advocating for an old urban core that was by then facing major shifts in demographics, deteriorating infrastructure, and waning public perception.

By the 1980s, Old Havana - crumbling under the effects of economic centralization, crime, salt, humidity, water, and government neglect - appeared a different city than its old republican self. To add, both the revolutionary government and the Cuban public associated the dilapidated urban fabric with the ills of capitalism, prompting Leal to double-down on his rehabilitation efforts. His first project was to restore the *Palacio de los Capitanes Generales*, which would ultimately become the Museum of Havana. The international attention gained by that project helped Leal establish international partnerships to aid in restoration / preservation process; in 1976 the Cuban Ministry of Culture partnered with the United Nations Development program to raise \$1 million U.S. dollars (\$200,000 a year over a five-year period) to help establish the *Centro Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología* (National Center of Conservation, Restoration, and Museology). Following the

establishment of this agency, the National Assembly of State passed two acts calling for the protection of cultural heritage.

Despite the success of Leal's early work, however, the revolutionary government stood opposed to using resources to rehabilitate of the old urban core - focusing instead on building factories and developing housing in the rural outskirts of the city. Of course, the effects of this social "leveling" project left Old Havana's 74,000 residents to live in extreme poverty and squalor. Yet ill will towards urban development and real estate speculation left its fabric - its scale, dimensions, proportions, contrasts, continuities, solid/void relationships, rhythms, public spaces, and landscapes - intact, albeit in poor condition. Finally, after drafting a five-year plan to restore Old Havana in 1981, Leal convinced the government to pledge \$10 million, to which UNESCO added \$200,000. By 1982, Old Havana - delineated as the 143 hectare geographic area defined by the old city walls, including its 4,000 buildings (900 of which are considered "masterpieces") - was designated a world heritage site, with all of its geopolitical implications (more on that later). With new international support, the Office of the City Historian drafted comprehensive restoration plans for the old core, starting with its major plazas (including the *Plaza Vieja*, which I will discuss later on) and principal streets. Restoration was underway until the Cuban government's ability to fund the work was disrupted by the economic crisis following the collapse of the Soviet Union, their strongest ideological and economic ally at the time.⁸

In 1993, British reporter Jonathan Glancey toured Old Havana with a Cuban conservationist Victor Marín when the UNESCO-designated Colegio Santo Angel collapsed. In an article for *The Independent* on October 19, 1993, he wrote:

"To say that Havana is collapsing is to state the obvious. It is even more obvious when the building you are about to enter falls down in front of you. One moment Victor Marín, one of the city's leading architectural conservationists, is reciting the faded glories of the arcaded 18th century merchant's house that occupies the north-west corner of Plaza Vieja, one of the oldest and most elegant squares in the Americas. The next, the building crumbles and falls as quickly and quietly as a house of cards."⁹

After this article along with images of the collapse spread across European media, President Fidel Castro purportedly met with City Historian Eusebio Leal to discuss restoration strategies in Old Havana. Well aware of the economic constraints of such efforts, Leal suggested a hybrid capitalist-socialist strategy: if granted control over state-owned hotels and restaurants, he would use (some of) the profits toward restoration projects in Havana. Soon after, Cuba's Council of State passed Law Decree 143, transforming the OCH into a decentralized, autonomous, and self-financed institution with the power not only to rezone and redevelop sites in the historic district, but also to tax those operating in it. In short, the OCH was granted absolute authority over every public investment in the historic zone (zoning, housing, public administration, financial management, etc.) as well as authority to negotiate directly with foreign investors and run businesses for-profit (hotels, restaurants, museums, real estate deals, etc.) in order to promote the "physical and

social" restoration of Old Havana. Starting with \$10,000, the OCH now generates over \$80 million under its own profit-making enterprise, Habaguanex S.A., with Leal himself as CEO.

In 1994, the OCH and Habaguanex S.A. formed a group of architects and planners to master-plan the UNESCO-defined area including Old Havana, Central Havana, and the Malecón—Havana's seaside promenade. The plan claims to "*preserve the historical patrimony of the city, address urban problems, and promote responsible community and urban development.*"¹⁰ Their strategy was to implement a "Special Plan for Integrated Development," which defines a "Priority Zone for Preservation and Highly Significant Zone for Tourism."¹¹ On the relationship between tourism and preservation, Leal writes,

"Tourism has double significance. It provides an opening to the world, a chance to hear other voices, to break down insulation and the blockade. Tourism draws us closer to other people, to other forms of living, dressing, thinking and feeling, and that is good. Its second significance is economic: tourism is a thinking and feeling indispensable part of our economic strategy and is important to the country. We must reconcile tourism with the preservation of the city. We must respect Cuban ecology and Cuban history, and the development of tourism must work within this context."¹²

In theory, the plan develops tourism through preservation / restoration of the historic core and uses the revenue for urban and social development projects throughout the city—in effect using capitalism to sustain socialism. In practice, however, the plan narrowly frames and defines fragments of the city as "historic" and marginalizes the majority of *Cubanos* both socially and economically.

Working within a significantly autonomous fiscal and political framework, Habaguanex is Havana's most productive developer and memory machine - linking historic preservation/restoration projects directly with the construction of dollar-generating bars, hotels, and restaurants. In an effort to preserve "social and spatial balance" (read: generate the most tourist dollars), Habaguanex strategically focused on restoring and preserving the dilapidated buildings and sites along *Calle Obispo*, *Paseo del Prado*, and Old Havana's four major plazas: *Plaza de San Francisco*, *Plaza Vieja*, *Plaza de la Catedral*, and *Plaza de Armas* - priming these for tourist consumption along a neatly bound geographic network of heritage sites. In the process, Habaguanex formed international partnerships, often working on specific projects with European investors and non-profit preservation institutions. As foreign investors invested more capital into tourism, Cuba - perhaps unwittingly - invested more "human resources" to its growing memory machine; In 1995, Cuba's Council of State passed Law Decree 77, mandating that Cuban hospitality workers be paid with national currency instead of the Convertible Peso, a law that in effect not only situated local *Cubanos* outside of the preservation frame (is their livelihood not preservable?), but also commodified both their labor and everyday lives.

Still, while reopening itself to the international tourism and the global economy, Cuba maintained majority control over restoration / preservation. By 1996, Habaguanex had transformed the former



Figure 2: A Restored Plaza Vieja fit for tourism. Photo by Author, 2004.

Lonja del Comercio building into a new \$13 million office complex jointly financed with a Spanish firm. They had also begun restoration work on the Plaza Vieja.

The Plaza Vieja

Built in 1559, the Plaza Vieja was traditionally used domestically for recreation and commercial purposes (markets, parties, etc.) at a time when the city's only other public square--the military-occupied Plaza de Armas--was used exclusively for civic and defense purposes. Bound by San Ignacio, Mercaderes, Teniente Rey, and Muralla Streets, the plaza was originally named the Plaza Nueva until 1835 when it was renamed Plaza Vieja in order to distinguish it from the new Plaza de Cristo. But its name was not the only thing changed. With its renaming also came a fundamental change in use after Governor Tacon built the central Mercado de Cristina, resulting in the gradual transformation of the square both programmatically and geometrically until 1908 when the market building was destroyed. Then in 1952 the plaza underwent another major transformation: an increasing amount of cars linking the Malecon to the historic core prompted the city to commission a public parking garage to accommodate the "bulky American autos." Designed by modern architect Eugenio Batista, that partially sunken structure defined the plaza's central space for the next 46 years until it was demolished in 1998.

When the demolition crews arrived to the plaza in 1996, they had planned to implode the parking garage with explosives, effectively eradicating any trace of the republican-era structure and the "modernist" park that sat a meter off the ground on its roof-top surface. The Havana Park, as it was known locally by *Habaneros*, was valued as a public urban space: it included trees, benches, a large amphitheater, and open green spaces used by residents to gather, listen to music, drink rum, dance, ride their bikes, debate baseball, and enjoy the Caribbean breeze from the harbor. It was, for better or worse, a true *community* space, one that framed, enabled, and intensified everyday urban life.

But the everyday urban life of this community would indeed be disrupted for the next two years as demolition crews slowly chipped away 235 tons of concrete with jackhammers, a compromise in the demolition method made after residents protested to the Communist Party fearing that imploding the garage with explosives would risk damaging and/or collapsing their vulnerable tenement buildings surrounding the plaza. When it was all said and done, all that was left was a gaping hole in the plaza's center, a temporary scar of a recent republican past that was all but violently erased. In its place, conservationists restored the plaza to street level by dressing the imported topsoil with polished stone paving and - no doubt to regain that old "colonial charm" - placing a large imported Italian marble fountain in the center protected by a ten-foot-high black iron fence meant to prevent neighborhood kids from bathing in its

waters and to set up the spatial relationships necessary for tourist gaze consumption, relationships predicated on strategic distancing (between subject and object) and the selective (re)bounding, (re)positioning, and (re)narrating of such spaces and objects in order to assert heritage-value.

Removing the garage, repaving the plaza, and installing the fountain was only the beginning of a large-scale, long-term preservation / restoration strategy aimed at transforming the plaza from a public urban space to a commodified tourist spectacle. Consider the interventions that followed, as described by anthropologist Matthew J. Hill:

“First, conservationists mounted a camera obscura on the roof of the plaza’s tallest building, through which tourists are afforded a panorama of the plaza. Next, they opened the restored balconies of former palaces transformed from tenements into hotels, museums, and shops, offering the tourist another set of viewing points from which to gaze down upon the square. Further, they mounted a large placard at the main entrance to the square, depicting enlarged reproductions of various eighteenth-century engravings of the square by different European traveler artists, and set in place life-sized cutouts of Spanish colonial troops dressed in signature red-and-white uniforms, playing fife and drums. Finally, viewers to this space are instructed in how to see it as part of a “disciplined order of things” by tour guides who circumambulate through the square, instructing viewers what to see and how to see it.”¹³

Such design strategies produce heritage space not only by simply restoring colonial features but also by selectively highlighting the historic elements that cast the plaza’s colonial past; that is, in order to reveal a specific colonial history, such preservation / restoration practices must also conceal cultures, events, histories, and features that don’t fit neatly into the colonial heritage framework. The newly “restored” *Plaza Vieja*, for example, comes equipped with all sorts of defense mechanisms against potential defilements: ranging from the heavy metal cannons and chains installed at the four corner entries, to the security features placed in lieu of widely used public benches, to the uniformed police officers that, fearing the onslaught of kids, prostitutes, thieves, hustlers, and flaneurs, discourage all local *Cubanos* from loitering and mingling with tourists, to the banning of Rumba—a form of percussive Afro-Cuban music that is linked to the lower tenement classes—from the plaza’s bars and restaurants.

A POSTSCRIPTIVE PROVOCATION IN THE FORM OF A CONCLUSION

“In Havana, we have a unique opportunity, a chance to do something no other city in the world can do, which is to try to figure out that question.” _Paul Goldberger, The Future of Cuban Cities Conference

Havana is anything but a city “frozen in time;” It is not a static artifact but a living city. To be sure, all cities mediate—and are mediated by—multiple and intertwining ecologies, their socio-cultural, political, economic, and environmental systems. Put differently, cities are structured, formed, and informed by a multiplex synthesis of physical and non-physical forces, forces that architects and urban designers must leverage and negotiate through expanded critical practices. Change in Havana is

inevitable. But it’s how Havana changes that’s important. Romanticizing nostalgia—whether of nineteenth century colonialism, 1950s Vegas-style consumerism, or 1980s Miami Vice—is unsustainable, indeed counter-productive to Havana’s future. *“Havana must not become Disneyland, but it must not become Houston either.”*

The question that Goldberger refers to above, then, concerns Havana’s position as one of the only Latin American cities to be spared the destructive overdevelopment of the past three-quarter century, due in no small part to the revolution’s indifference to Cuba’s historic national capitol. At the same time, the opportunity he speaks of is to strategize ways of preserving Havana in the face of an emerging political and economic shift, a shift that will inevitably, albeit gradually, open Cuba to global market forces. And to do it in a way that critically engages, but does not submit to, these market forces; in a way that does not succumb to profit-hungry developers, the tourism industry, heavy-handed political historicism, and/or self-assuming “starchitects.” For a free-market Cuba, while bringing much longed-for political change, leaves Havana vulnerable to the same sprawling, banal development of its “imperialist” northern neighbor.

What we need, then, are heritage construction practices that go beyond “business as usual;” that is, heritage practices that understand Havana as a living, breathing city with multiple histories, multiple stakeholders, and multiple potentialities. Instead of limiting such practices to revealing the colonial and / or concealing the republican (preservation through negation), we ought to preserve through design—to discuss *what* and *how* to build the Havana of the future as opposed to freezing a specific Havana of the past.

ENDNOTES

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