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# THE POLITICS OF GLOBALIZATION AND HERITAGE IN HAVANA, CUBA

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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."

While many consider heritage practices to resist globalization, in Havana they embody a complex entanglement of global and local politics. 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.

This paper briefly traces the global politics of 20th century development in Havana, particularly in relation to tourism. It then analyzes tourism in relation to preservation / restoration practices in Old Havana using the *Plaza Vieja* (Old Square)—Old Havana's second oldest and most restored urban space—as a case study. In doing so, it exposes preservation / restoration as a dynamic and politically complex practice that operates across scales and ideologies, institutionalizing history and memory as an urban design and identity construction strategy. The paper ends with a discussion on the implications of such practices for a rapidly changing Cuba.

## A SHORT HISTORY OF PRE-REVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT: 1898-1958

After the second Spanish-American-Cuban war (1866-1898), U.S. political and economic interests in Cuba intensified due largely to the sugar and real estate industries. By the 1920s, Cuba's economy—benefitting from the sudden return of Cuban capital to the island, most of which was held in U.S. during the war—soared, triggering the so-called *vacas gordas* (fat-cow) period and an intense building boom that, typical of capitalist development, responded more to the market logics of real estate development and land speculation than to the professional knowledge and sociocultural responsiveness of architects and urban planners. According to Mario Coyula, "*Many master plans for the city were put forth, including those by Raul Otero (1905), Camilo Garcia de Castro (1916), Walfrido de Fuentes (1916), and Pedro Martinez Inclán (1919).*"<sup>i</sup> He continues: "*these plans were rendered defenseless against crude land speculation by landowners who held onto large tracts of land or sold them off in piecemeal fashion (to the highest bidder).*"<sup>iii</sup>

Hence as Havana expanded, it did so along development axes that were not always in the best interest of the old core's "sense of place." With a widening range of political and economic actors and stakeholders in the mix (e.g. foreign and local banks, insurance companies, investors, developers, etc.), it was not long before a series of faceless, banal, and over-scaled "Modern" buildings broke through its low colonial skyline, sprinkling the city with overt symbols of western wealth and political / economic power; new banks and a stock exchange, for example, formed a "mini Wall Street" area in the center of the old core. As Havana's population more than doubled by 1929, due in part to new political and economic influences, developers looked west toward the "open" periphery in search of new development opportunities. Eventually, Havana would expand (read: sprawl) beyond its old city walls into a series of high-end Garden City-type neighborhoods linked by lusciously landscaped *calzadas*.

Havana's western expansion, of course, required a considerable amount of financial and infrastructural investment. To help guide its transformation into a modern metropolis, the U.S. (which by the 1930s had considerable political and economic interest in Cuba) initiated and funded several major public works projects; namely, an expanded network of water mains, streetlights, communications, natural gas, and street improvements as well as a comprehensive system of

sewage and garbage collection. As a major economic engine, international tourism played a major role in this expansion strategy: both public and private stakeholders recognized the political and economic value of connecting the old core to the newly developed suburbs. Leveraging scientific advancements in building materials, the U.S. Corp of Engineers designed the Malecon—a five-mile long, four-lane highway and seaside promenade at the coast of the city (first proposed by the engineer Francisco de Albear in 1874)—in 1901, the first phase of which was built in 1902 and was fully completed in 1952. Political ideology notwithstanding, the Malecon, while a heavy-handed, economically-driven project, was a smart urban development strategy: as Havana's new "public living room," it not only mitigated the negative environmental effects of increased automobile usage, but also embellished the city with a continuous waterfront edge that mesmerized visitors as it filtered them slowly into the increasingly tourist-friendly historic core. It remains one of Havana's most vibrant, profitable, and beautiful urban spaces.

Of course, U.S. aid and development would come at a heavy price. Following the war, U.S. interests monopolized urban services, agriculture, and the tourist industries—triggering rapid and uneven development. Following the *vacas flacas* (lean-cow) period triggered by the economic crisis of 1920 (which forced many Cuban and Spanish firms into bankruptcy) U.S. businesses quickly increased investment and production in Cuba at such a rate that by 1925, Havana had become all but subservient to American economic interests—exporting 50% of its sugar to the U.S. Eventually, the U.S. would control 50% of the city's railroads, 40% of its sugar production and 90% of its telephones and electric utilities as well as 25% of all bank deposits.<sup>iii</sup> Meanwhile, the Cuban government continued to invest borrowed money toward modernizing Havana; falling deeper into debt and more entangled with U.S. economic interests.

By the 1950s, Havana was a bustling city fully absorbed in the effects of Vegas-style capitalism; the growth of the financial, gambling, and tourism markets bred all sorts of crime, inequality, and corruption. Notorious mobsters such as Meyer Lansky and Charles "Lucky" Luciano operated profitable crime rings; crime "families" controlled virtually all gambling, narcotics, and prostitution in Havana with the support of Fulgencio Batista's government (explicitly and/or implicitly). Indeed Havana was being marketed and consumed as a tourist playground, where one could leave behind all sorts of illicit activities on their half-hour flight back to Miami. Henry Louis Taylor Jr. and Linda McGlynn put it this way,

*Prior to the revolution, the U.S. mafia controlled the international tourist industry in Cuba and anchored it in gambling, prostitution, and drugs along with the attractions of the sun, sea and sand. Tourism was about pleasure and thousands of visitors from the United States and around the world came in search of it. Between 1948 and 1957, tourists arrivals in Cuba grew by 94%...arrivals from the USA alone accounted for approximately 86%...*<sup>iv</sup>

They continue,

*However, tourism and sugar painted Havana's social landscape in misery and pain. There were more than 5000 beggars walking the streets of the city in 1958, many of whom were homeless women with children. Crime was on the rise and so too was juvenile delinquency. Arthur Schlesinger Jr. recalled a visit to Havana during the Batista epoch: "I was enchanted by Havana—and appalled by the way that lovely city was being debased into a great casino and brothel for American businessmen over for a big weekend from Miami. My fellow countrymen reeled through the streets, picking up 14-year-old Cuban girls and tossing coins to make men scramble in the gutters. One wondered how any Cuban—on the basis of this evidence—could regard the United States with anything but hatred."*<sup>v</sup>

## A SHORT HISTORY OF REVOLUTIONARY DEVELOPMENT: 1959-2006

In January of 1959, Fidel Castro and his militia ousted President Fulgencio Batista and inherited a Cuba whose development was severely compromised by a single-crop (sugar), single-export (U.S.) economy. As Coyula states, "*Profit and land speculation drove development. Little concern was given to the quality of the natural environment, the rational use of human and material resources, or social and spatial segregation.*"<sup>vi</sup> In response, *los rebeldes* (the rebels) sought to "level out" the social strata—to construct what Che Guevara defined as a "new" man within "new" society—by focusing development on people-centered, socialist conceptions of justice, reciprocity, and equity.

Hence the new leadership established development strategies that focused more resources to the underdeveloped rural outskirts than to Havana, by now associated with both the bourgeois culture of uncontrolled capitalism and an oppressive colonial past that the revolution was all too happy to erase. In effect, by ruralizing the city and urbanizing the countryside, development in revolutionary Cuba focused on flattening the spatial concentration and redistributing the social inequalities triggered by its capitalist predecessors. To add, Cuba's increasing financial dependence on and ideological adoption of Soviet political, economic, and social development models formed an international, anti-American partnership that flourished until the USSR and the Eastern European Communist Bloc collapsed in 1989. In retaliation for nationalizing

U.S. businesses and properties, the United States imposed a crippling commercial and economic embargo against Cuba in 1962 that is still in place today (2014).

As intended, the U.S. embargo, layered onto the anti-urban, Soviet-influenced development strategies already in place since the revolution's "triumph," have severely stalled architectural and urban development in Havana. To add, the very idea of preserving / restoring the "old" Havana was anathema to the "future-oriented" Socialist ideals of the new polity, which sought to sever any ties with its colonial past. Hence if the old system emphasized international tourism—long believed by the revolution to be associated with capitalist evils (drugs, prostitution, racism, corruption, social inequity, etc.) and U.S. imperialism—as a way to leverage and mitigate the effects of globalization, the new system focused on domestic tourism as a way of inculcating national pride, as a form of pedagogical leisure time designed to emphasize the leftist idea that all of Cuba belonged to all *Cubanos*. To this extent, the revolutionary government established the *Instituto Nacional de la Industria Turística* (The National Institute of the Tourism Industry or INTUR) in November of 1959, a mere 10 months after Casto's coup.

This had a profound effect on the way public spaces were used in the city, particularly during the early years of the revolution. In contrast to republican-era capitalist urban space—privatized, commoditized, and slated for consumption—socialist public spaces were politically charged and set the stage for the collective vision of socialism to unfold within the city. In other words, such spaces were used to discipline the public in socialist values and ideals rather than as a conduit for market forces. Hence what was once *La Plaza Cívica* (Civic Plaza) became *La Plaza de la Revolución* (Revolution Square), repurposed to host massive socialist parades and gatherings. To add, centralized planning made little room for competition and private enterprise, resulting in basic resources including food, fuel, and income being evenly rationed from the top down. As a result, automobile usage decreased and, as the U.S. tightened their trade embargo, public transportation and bicycles became the dominant mode of transportation. By the late 1960s, banal Soviet-style housing blocks, monuments, and technical institutes—spaces of collective work and socialist ceremony—coexisted with the capitalist relics of pre-revolutionary eras. Yet despite the dreary physical development, Cuba did make major advancements in social development, namely in education, the sciences, and medicine.

But after the 1991 Soviet collapse, Cuba lost almost 75% of its international trade, leaving its economy in shambles and triggering what Fidel Castro called the "Special Period in a Time of Peace." In response, the revolutionary government redeveloped international tourism in order to capture the foreign currency needed to maintain its political, economic, and social structures. Castro explains, "*We have to develop tourism. It is an important source of foreign currency. We do not like tourism but it has become an economic necessity.*"<sup>vii</sup> Interestingly, international tourism within a socialist framework triggered inequalities similar to those found in pre-revolutionary Havana. The legalization of the U.S. dollar—and, of course, the government-owned retail stores designed to capture it along with naïve policies and strategies to separate Cubanos (read: "protect" them) from the so-called evils of the tourism, hospitality, and leisure industries triggered a dual-society / economy that marginalized local Habaneros while catering to wealthy foreign consumers.

## CONSTRUCTING HERITAGE: WHAT MAKES A MONUMENT?

Typical of most Latin American cities, much urban planning / design in Old Havana unfolds in tension between heritage construction and tourism development. But how is heritage constructed? By what criteria, in other words, are things included/excluded in the preservation frame? What artifacts and events are worth preserving? How is history assigned value? What makes a monument?

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.*"<sup>viii</sup> 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 455 year-old (as of 2014) *Plaza Vieja* is a case in point.

## 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 cars. 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 stoned 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."*<sup>x</sup>

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.

But such heritage construction also involves the reorganization of a range of social and institutional relationships that intersect at various geographic and political scales. After images of the collapsed UNESCO-designated Colegio Santo Angel spread across European media in 1993, 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 Office of the City Historian (hereafter OHCH) 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 OHCH 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, OHCH now generates over \$80 million.

In 1994, OHCH 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.*” Their strategy was to implement a “Special Plan for Integrated Development,” which defines a “Priority Zone for Preservation and Highly Significant Zone for Tourism.” 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.

As we have seen, preservation and conservation in/of Old Havana involves spatial practices that intertwine the influences and ambitions of multiple actors and stakeholders across geographic, political, and economic landscapes—in effect globalizing the local by re-territorializing “historic” fragments of the city within UNESCO’s “world heritage” framework. According to Hill,

*On an international plane, UNESCO’s discourse about places like (Old Havana) reterritorializes 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.”<sup>x</sup>*

Concurrently, while UNESCO defines the criteria for sites of “outstanding universal value,” local actors in Old Havana (OHCH, architects, urban planners, conservationists, and politicians) take measures to localize UNESCO’s “world heritage grid” within Old Havana’s geographic boundaries; that is, they “do the work of bounding, naming, marking, and regulating the urban landscape so that it can be known and recognized as an ‘authentic’ heritage object.” In the process, administrative measures are taken to ensure that local sites adopt the transnational language of UNESCO—standardizing the historic core’s urban space according to their specific rules, procedures, and regulations.

By this definition, the “Special Plan for Integrated Development” is not very “integrated.” To clarify, the issue is not preserving/restoring Havana’s historic core as such but the inequalities triggered by the spatial/heritage practices deployed, practices that frame specific parts of the city as objects of consumption at the expense of broader social and urban concerns. In other words, the “reterritorialization” process—and the “world heritage” status it produces—excludes the vast majority of *Cubanos* from the tourist flows it sets up. And while claiming to address the city as a whole, “heritage sites” in Old Havana exclude elements and histories that are not fit for such consumption; that is, they are limited to the “monumental political, military, ecclesiastical, and residential architecture of what one conservationist called eighteenth and nineteenth-century ‘palace Havana’ while excluding other vernacular elements important to Havana’s urban history (tenements, docks, warehouses, red-light districts, industrial buildings, etc.). OHCH’s plan treats Old Havana as a museum object for the tourist gaze, “a city frozen in time.”

## 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.”<sup>xi</sup> Paul Goldberger*

Contrary to some, however, Havana is anything but a city “frozen in time;” It is not a static artifact. It is a living city full of real people with real lives, real ambitions, real complications, and real histories. 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 counterproductive to Havana’s future. *“Havana must not become Disneyland, but it must not become Houston either.”<sup>xii</sup>*

The question that Goldberger refers to above, then, concerns Old 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 preservations / restoration strategies 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.

## BIO

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As a designer, writer, and educator his work has been widely recognized. He has presented his research both nationally and internationally, including: the 2014 ACSA conference (Globalizing Architecture), the 2013 National Conference on the Beginning Design Student Conference, the 2011 Cuba Futures Conference, and the 2010 ACSA Fall Conference (Urban/Suburban Identity). He has published a book chapter on Cuban Modern Architecture as well as an article on developing world urbanism in the December 2013 issue of the Journal of Space Syntax.

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<sup>i</sup> Scarpaci, Joseph L., Roberto Segre, and Mario Coyula. *Havana: Two faces of the Antillean metropolis*. UNC Press Books, 2002.

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> Taylor Jr, Henry Louis, and Linda McGlynn. "International tourism in Cuba: Can capitalism be used to save socialism?." *Futures* 41, no. 6 (2009): 405-413.

<sup>v</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vi</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>vii</sup> Taylor Jr, Henry Louis, and Linda McGlynn. "International tourism in Cuba: Can capitalism be used to save socialism?." *Futures* 41, no. 6 (2009): 405-413.

<sup>viii</sup> Riegl, Alois. "The modern cult of monuments: its character and its origin." *Oppositions* 25 (1982): 20-51.

<sup>ix</sup> Hill, Matthew J. "The Future of the Past: World Heritage, National Identity, and Urban Centrality in Late Socialist Cuba." *Global Downtowns* (2012): 186.

<sup>x</sup> Hill, Matthew J. "Reimagining old Havana: World heritage and the production of scale in late socialist Cuba." *Deciphering the global: its scales, spaces, and subjects*. Routledge, (2007).

<sup>xi</sup> Goldberger, Paul. "The Future of Cuban Cities." *Herencia Magazine* 7 (2001): 26-31.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*