

PROMOTING PLACE THROUGH ARCHITECTURAL HERITAGE: RESTORATION AND PRESERVATION OF TWENTIETH CENTURY ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN IN MIRAMAR, HABANA, CUBA

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Habana Vieja was designated a World Heritage Site by UNESCO in 1982. It is, in a sense, a living museum, its visible landscape almost identical to accounts given in travel guides and journals published over the last hundred and fifty years. As a result, the Cuban government has injected money and resources to preserve and maintain this historic part of Habana. Large tour buses crawl through the narrow streets giving passengers a controlled, glimpse of life in a colonial city, the 80,000 or so residents adding realism as they go about their day to day activities.

Tourism, which has become Cuba's number one industry, is the catalyst for major historic preservation and renovation projects in this part of the city. Most of the architectural design is based on European models; an eclectic landscape featuring Spanish, Moorish, Greek and Roman architectural elements meets the eye. Old Habana, however, is only a small part of the city. Other urban areas deserve more attention as well to reveal their potential economic worth for preservation based on architectural style and land use.

One of the most conspicuous residuals of American influence in the built landscape in Habana is the presence of a large block of former single-family housing stock in both Vedado and Miramar. The de-

velopment of the western fringe of Habana between the years of 1902 and 1959 utilized architectural design influenced by both European and American models. As a result, many large homes were constructed with local materials and imported trimmings in the Neo-Classical, Spanish Baroque, Art Deco and International styles. The number of Art Deco styles, for instance, rivals the famous South Beach area in Miami and has been referred to as some of the best examples in the Caribbean (Scarpaci 1996).

This paper will present an observational study done in June 1998 by faculty and students from the Geography Department at Indiana University Purdue University at Indianapolis classifying the architectural design in a specific area in Miramar as well as former and current uses of the structures. The data was recorded by direct observation and mapped using GIS software. This paper examines the potential to promote place through architectural heritage by stabilizing and preserving the area so it can be utilized by tourists, tourism facilities, embassies, and offices of foreign firms.

As the tourism market in the Caribbean continues to grow, should more effort be put into restoring available "National Treasures" for tourist consumption or promote continued entrepreneurial and international

1. This paper is only a part of on-going research on the architecture and land use in La Habana.

development in these restorations? Will this constitute sound economic planning, save energy and resources, and capitalize on extant culture, or will it create a new economic enclave of social stratification? Although these issues are beyond the scope of this paper, continued research and observation can reveal the long-term effects of current urban design policies.

HISTORICAL ARCHITECTURE

Spanning nearly 500 years, the architecture of Cuba is one of its most precious cultural attributes. Many cities in Cuba are veritable “living museums,” several having been declared World Heritage Sites by the United Nations. In most of Cuba, and exemplified in Habana, there are three distinct periods of architectural development: the Colonial (1512-1898), the Republican (1898-1959), and the Revolutionary (1959-present). Not only do these three periods roughly indicate the political and economic ideologies of the time, they also reflect the geographic resources and technologies available. Moreover, in residential structures, the types of building materials, along with the interior layout, speak to economic status, family size, and the perception of what the proper house should look like and how its spaces should function.

The three periods, influenced for the most part by European models, represent vast differences in architectural styles, although somewhat modified for the tropical climate. The Colonial period was influenced by European urban layouts and features colonnaded overhangs to help protect against the tropical sun and sporadic downpours and create shade to keep the buildings cool. High ceilings and corresponding massive doors and windows allow breezes to pass through the structures while wooden shutters protect against cold spells and violent storms. The red tiled roofs, common to Mediterranean climates, also permit rainwater to be funneled into underground cisterns. The remaining colonial architecture is located in Old Habana and around the inlet area, mostly within the old, walled city of the 18th and 19th centuries and concentrated on narrow, sometimes winding streets following the shallow contours around the harbor.

The Republican period resembles urban planning designs incorporated in United States cities in the early

1900s. A grid system of streets crossing at right angles, created rectangular blocks that were divided into lots. Curved streets were straightened and widened to accommodate the automobile. Neo-classical, Bauhaus and Mediterranean styles from Europe as well as Art Deco and Moderne styles from the United States dominated single-family residences, complete with front yards and garages. Builders used concrete, stucco and brick, and windows featured screens to keep out the insects and closed tightly to keep out the cold. Pastel colors, decreed by the early Spanish in their building codes to help keep buildings cooler, gave a tropical look to this period of architectural design. Many examples of these architectural types are located in Vedado and Miramar.

The Revolutionary period contributed another European concept, that of pre-stressed concrete used in multi-level designs and sometimes referred to as the International style. These high-density designs allowed quick construction and were used to in-fill many vacant lots around the city after the revolution. The major housing projects outside the city, although advanced for their day, show their age and have contributed to a change in the perception of high-density residential areas. Today, new urban design strategies in Habana incorporate low-density housing, green spaces and accessibility (interview with Mayda Pérez Alvarez, Subdirector, Grupo Para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital, Habana, July 1998).

The mix of these three periods, however, gives the city its charm. Given the economic problems that have prevented maintenance of the buildings, the older buildings continue, for the most part, to survive the lack of paint, plumbing and electrical supplies. Walking around parts of Habana today is not much different than walking around Habana 40 years ago, or even 400 years ago. Economic investment at different periods of Cuban history has left its mark on the urban landscape. As historic preservationist Rachel Carley put it, “this remarkable built legacy has been preserved largely through benign neglect, and so the island today serves as a rare archive of Caribbean architectural history waiting to be rediscovered” (Carley 1997).

HISTORY OF MIRAMAR

The development of Miramar was greatly influenced by the American presence after Cuba's war for independence. The location of a military base to the west of the city during the American occupation from 1898 to 1902 had a profound affect on the location of Habana suburbs. Geographically, it made sense. The spacious harbor inlet limited movement to the coastal areas east of Habana. It was much easier to push westward, towards Marianao, an area where affluent habaneros had places of summer residence. U.S. occupation forces also found this area much to their liking and General Fitzhugh Lee, military governor of the island's western end, located his headquarters there (Schwartz 1997). The magnificent architecture and tropical canopy in Miramar today are no accident. It was the potential of this heretofore undeveloped parcel that attracted the attention of land speculators.

The flock of tourists to the island early in the twentieth century, as detailed by Rosalie Schwartz in her book *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*, increased during the boom years of global tourism. In the mid-1920s, the Almendares River was bridged allowing automobile traffic to flow unrestricted to areas west of the city, where many North American visitors found the country club, the race-track, casino and beaches irresistible (Schwartz 1997). Many of the tourists bought homes and President Machado authorized Carlos Manuel de Céspedes, the Public Works Secretary, to construct a broad avenue from the Almendares to Marianao. The result was a broad east-west avenue known as La Quinta Avenida. At the junction of Fifth Avenue and the river, Céspedes built a sizable green stucco house (which was later burned by angry habaneros [Schwartz 1997]) replete with a \$200,000 mosaic shrine from India. He recognized the demand for housing in western Habana and not only supervised the construction of the grand thoroughfare through Miramar, but with banker and developer Claudio G. Mendoza, bought much of the land that would soon be developed into the western suburb of Miramar. Mendoza developed the subdivision and financed the homes while Céspedes oversaw the building of streets and highways to make those homes convenient to

downtown Habana. Miramar became a neighborhood of sumptuous homes and lush gardens (Schwartz 1997).

By the early 1950s, the Malecón had been extended some 8 kilometers to the Almendares and in 1957, a tunnel joined Vedado and Miramar, cutting automobile travel time from downtown to 20 minutes (Scarpaci 1996). By the late 1950s, Miramar was known for its modest to palatial housing and upper middle-class residents, many of whom fled to Florida after the revolution. In the early 1960s, the revolutionary government divided many of these houses into apartments, schools, government offices and boarding houses (Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci 1997). During the 70s and 80s, many of the elitist structures were occupied by government ministries, foreign embassies and Communist Party officials (Scarpaci 1996).

All of this changed in the early 1990s, however, as space was needed for offices for foreign investors, due in part to the "special period" of the Cuban economy. Miramar was the perfect place. It was well planned, easily accessed and had the amenities that were needed for storefronts, offices and hotel development. As a result, many of the old structures, which were modified for revolutionary uses, are now being refurbished with hard currency. "Land use in Miramar still includes the presence of embassies, housing for foreigners, and Cuban government officials. However, there is an unprecedented surge in retail outlets for Cuban and foreign shoppers with hard currency...as well as new joint-venture offices" (Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci 1997, 132-133). From its stark beginnings as a planned grid, Miramar has matured into a tropical, eclectic neighborhood, changing its primary land use from single-family to high-density residential, and then to mixed residential/office/retail. "In this regard, Miramar has become the Habana neighborhood with the greatest change since the triumph of the revolution" (Segre, Coyula, and Scarpaci 1997, 133).

In 1998, the neighborhood continues to change, especially at its western-most end. Several new hotels, condo suites and shopping areas are either under construction or completed. Further east, towards the Almendares, Fifth Avenue, is called "Embassy Row."

The wide fig-tree-lined boulevard is flanked by mansions that have been restored to an earlier grandeur, while the Ministry of the Interior's police kiosks sit side by side with bright, colorful retail signs (Baker 1997).

CONCLUSION

In Miramar it is obvious that historic preservation has a different meaning than the one used in Habana Vieja. It is not the tourist that is being attracted, it is the foreign-owned businesses renting properties, restoring facades and upgrading systems. Habana Vieja is over 400 years old. Miramar is only 70. Spatially, the old part of the city can be seen on foot. Miramar cannot. Hard currency for restoration in Habana Vieja is generated by a non-government organization (NGO) with governmental authorization. In Miramar, private investors and government agencies are furnishing capital to finance restorations. Some observers have suggested that Miramar is becoming more socially stratified than the rest of the city due to the influx of tourist and investment dollars. Those dollars do not contribute to continued restorations as in Habana Vieja. As a result of the actual land use, very few tourists actually see Miramar as a tourist destination even though much of the tourist economy and related facilities actually reside there.

With continued corporate and government restoration, however, the suburb will continue to demand high rents from foreign occupants. Most businesses and embassies appear to locate on the main east-west thoroughfares, as opposed to the smaller side streets. But a recent survey done in June 1998 by students from Indiana University Purdue University Indianapolis found that a higher concentration of new retail business and offices are starting to become more dispersed throughout the neighborhood. The displacement of residents appears to be increasing as former apartment houses and single-family homes are converted to new uses.

Even though the motivation for preservation in Miramar is focused on attracting foreign businesses, there is still a considerable amount of historic preservation taking place. The preservation and refurbishing of this neighborhood may, in the end, lead to in-

creased tourist development. Although most of the palatial architecture is not located by the water, there are still a number of waterfront properties that can be developed as tourist accommodations. The focus of historic preservation must also be examined. A house cannot simply be renovated and considered historic. The history of an area makes a structure significant in the neighborhood. No plaques relating to the history of the development of Miramar were noted. It is historical, but few know the history.

There are notable examples of specific architectural styling such as turned columns and embellishments on massive Spanish Baroque houses, various styles of Art Deco (including Tropical, Pueblo and Streamlined) and monumental Neo-classical designs that have utilized imported decorative detailing in their construction materials (granite and marble). Originally, many of these houses were designed by famous European and American architects for use as single-family homes. Today, many carry a mixed-use label and the change in function has caused severe neglect and decay.

Socialist economic policies play a large part in the deterioration of many of Miramar's and Habana's outstanding architectural examples. Former large private residences have been subdivided into apartments as a solution to housing shortages. This has led to neighborhood deterioration, under capitalistic definitions. Regentrification, common in U.S. urban areas, has restored a sense of place to older neighborhoods, but at the price of displacing former residents due to higher property taxes. The continued development of Miramar into a neighborhood of foreign investment could facilitate a capitalistic fate for the residents as the government forces them to relocate to other areas inside or outside the city. On the other hand, this does promote the restoration and preservation of Miramar's architectural heritage. This also constitutes sound economic planning, saves energy and resources, and capitalizes on extant culture. But the question remains, should local residents have a voice in neighborhood development or should the government continue its quest to stimulate foreign investment in capitalistic enterprises in Miramar?

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