Havana Lessons
Teaching and research in architecture

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Deep Havana

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The following article discusses Deep Havana, an area located in the geographic center of Havana that has hitherto garnered little attention from researchers even in Havana itself. Nevertheless, Deep Havana is of great importance for the entire capital: it is the living space of a large part of the population, and, at the same time, it is the visible expression of the diversity of this metropolis: Deep Havana represents an important share of the city’s cultural and urbanistic heritage with a great richness of urban typologies and identities as shown in an exemplary fashion by Lapa’s Diez de Octubre project. Although in social terms, Deep Havana’s status is fairly peripheral, it can therefore in some ways be regarded as the heartland of Havana.

Deep Havana was identified and analyzed within the SeDUT project (Seminario internacional de Desarrollo Urbano y Transporte La Habana). This was a Swiss-Cuban research and cooperation project on Havana’s urban development that began with a meeting in Havana in 2004 and was concluded at the end of 2007.

The core of this project consisted of a series of five weeklong workshops in Havana at which qualified experts in urban planning and research from Havana joined with Swiss researchers and experts to elaborate analyses on urban development and mobility. The most important method employed in these workshops was a specific form of mapping (see below). This approach facilitated the generation of data and insights that had not previously been available for Havana. In parallel, the CEU-H (Centro de Estudios Urbanos de La Habana, Facultad de Arquitectura, CUIAE) developed a new approach to teaching and research. This resulted in a series of papers and master’s theses on various aspects of the urban development of Deep Havana (cf. especially Medina 2007). The material developed in these projects has informed the present article.

An Exceptional Case

Against the background of contemporary global urbanization, Havana must be regarded as an exceptional case: While on the global scale, urbanization is progressing at a very high speed and overflowing urban landscapes and megacities are emerging all over the world, this development seems to be bypassing Havana almost without a trace.

The Caribbean metropolis has experienced comparatively little growth in the past 50 years. With its approximately 1.4 million inhabitants in 1958, Havana was one of the large metropoles of Latin America. It was marked by a rapid urbanization process and an intense construction boom. The skyscrapers along the Malecón, which today form a still-incomplete skyline, bear witness to this fact. Today, Havana has a population of around 2.2 million, with the demographic development having stagnated since 1980 (cf. ONE 2008). The suburbanization process has been halted, and even today, the city’s outer limits are clearly discernible.

The reason for Havana’s almost unique model of urban development is mainly to be found in the nature of the Cuban revolution, which primarily aimed to improve conditions in Cuba’s rural areas. Accordingly, revolutionary Cuba pursued an explicitly decentralized
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development strategy. The main aim of policies was directed towards
developing rural areas as well as small and medium-sized cities. The
further development of the nation's capital, by contrast, was only given
secondary priority (cf. Scarpa, Segre, Coyula 2002).

By continually improving the situation in the countryside, rural
exodus as the main stimulus of urbanization was largely halted.
Furthermore, many mainly affluent residents left Havana immedi-
ately after the revolution. The vacated apartments and buildings were
occupied mainly by those who had previously lived in constricted and
unfavorable conditions. Therefore, although only few new residential
areas have been constructed since the revolution, Havana has almost
no barrios insalubres today.

This strategy of social equality and decentralist development is
also visible in the policies vis-à-vis the city itself, which ensured that
the basic requirements of the population throughout the city – as in
the country at large – were largely met. Particularly in the areas of
healthcare, education, and the supply of essentials of daily life, great
efforts were undertaken. One important result of this policy is that
the great urban poverty found in most of the metropolitan areas of
the South does not exist as such in Havana.

Museum of Urbanism

This policy of decentralization ensured that the existing urban struc-
ture was preserved. Only few new housing projects were constructed
in Havana, and these (e.g., Alamar) were added to the city without
destroying existing neighborhoods. Unlike in almost any other city of
comparable size, the historic quarters of Havana were not destroyed
by urban transformation processes, but were preserved.

Havana can therefore be regarded today as a museum of urban-
ism: All phases of its historical development, from the colonial and
republican periods to the metropolitan phase of the 1950s and the

revolutionary period, can be traced with extraordinary clarity in the
urban landscape.

In recent years, Havana has gained increasing attention in
terms of urbanism. However, the main interest remains strongly
focused on the Habana Vieja quarter, which was declared a UNESCO
World Heritage site in 1982. The government development program
to renovate the old city, which explored new avenues in urban rede-
development, achieved some initial successes despite Cuba's difficult
economic situation. However, Habana Vieja only constitutes a small
part of Havana's urban heritage. Our analysis shows that Havana's
historically and urbanistically significant area is much greater. Due
to the great diversity and wealth of its urban structure, the city at
large is a unique example of our global heritage.

The Urban Question

However, only little attention has so far been devoted to these great
urban qualities of Havana. In all the years since the revolution, both
buildings and infrastructure have been greatly neglected. In many
cases, not even basic maintenance was ensured, and the building
substance deteriorated as a result. Under these circumstances, a
culture of urbanization evolved that is geared towards improvisa-
tion and sparing use of resources. Over the years, the population has
employed a great deal of imagination and creativity to arrange itself
with daily life in a city that not only originated in a different era, but
was also built for a different society.

As a result, Havana today remains a city marked by public
transport and pedestrians. The exceptional aesthetic qualities of
the city are also largely due to this urban culture: Most of the bar-
tio streets have little traffic, the facades of buildings are devoid of
billboards, and the cityscape is not disfigured by road signs and
traffic markers.
This exotic beauty that is held in such high esteem by foreign visitors today conceals an urban daily life that has become very cumbersome for most residents, ranging from the often cramped and uncomfortable housing to travels across town that are often long and arduous. Due to the severe and persistent economic crisis since the early 1990s, the situation has massively deteriorated. The decay of the city has noticeably accelerated in many places, and everyday life has become a precarious affair for many people. The introduction of the peso convertible has also led to further socio-economic inequality. The lack of petrol and of buses has severely curtailed urban mobility, limiting access to many urban facilities. This has led to a situation where many residents find it difficult or were unable to make use of parks, beaches, or public institutions.

The precarious state of public transport has improved noticeably since autumn 2007, but nevertheless, Havana’s public life is largely restricted to the barrio. The highly touted urban appeal of Havana is mainly reserved for tourists and privileged individuals with access to foreign currency. Thus, socio-spatial differences within the city are increasingly becoming evident.

Urban Configurations

Despite the many efforts to achieve social equality, the socio-spatial differences in Havana have not disappeared completely since the revolution.

These differences are based, first, on the urban architectural heritage of Havana: The narrow quarters of Centro Habana and Cero offer very different conditions for daily life than the spacious construction featuring broad streets in Vedado or the exclusive residential areas of Miramar. Second, there is a great disparity in the way the various quarters are equipped with specialized services and facilities and therefore also in their access to resources. This aspect becomes particularly noticeable under conditions of restricted mobility. Third, the social structures and local identities that existed before the revolution have been preserved in many locations, despite the fundamental social and political change.

Analyzing these differences in urban space was one of the core elements of the SeDUT project and the corresponding work at the CEU-H. The focus was on analyzing the urban structure of Havana and identifying specific urban configurations.

The term “urban configuration” is used to describe large-scale urban areas that exhibit certain common features and differ in core aspects from other areas. The basic idea is to demarcate discernible units within the fabric of the city by overlapping urbanistic, morphological, economic, social, and cultural elements. The differences in everyday life and the varying patterns of orientation developed by residents are decisive aspects of this analysis.

One essential aim is the “discovery” of previously ignored, unrecognized, and/or neglected parts of the city. Therefore, a key purpose of identifying urban configurations consists of discussing such areas, assigning clear meaning to them, and drawing public attention to them.

Mapping

How can such variations in the urban space be elicited? The method developed by ETH Studio Basel has proven very suitable for this task (cf. Diener et al. 2005). This technique aims to grasp and visualize urbanization as a multi-faceted phenomenon. Mapping is used as a research tool and not only as a means of illustrating already established findings. It is based primarily on qualitative analysis rather than on statistical calculations. Experience has shown that precise cartographic representation of spatial phenomena and distributions often only creates the appearance of accuracy. Therefore, the
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approach used in our project is a qualitative cartographic visualization and overlapping of various characteristics. It also allows us to integrate different forms of expert knowledge into the research process.

This technique was developed in Switzerland under conditions of a surfeit of data, and served to reduce complexity and to produce clear statements. It was applied in Havana in a completely different environment. In this case, the analysis of urban structure met with special challenges, since for many socio-economic issues, almost no small-scale data are available.

In the framework of the SeDUT project, a sophisticated analysis of Havana’s urban structure was elaborated over the course of five workshops with scientific and planning experts. This was a participative process involving around 50 experts in various compositions (cf. Bancroft, Lechleiter 2007).

This analysis identified a total of seven different urban configurations (cf. Peña Díaz, Schmid 2007). Two urban configurations in particular were found to be of great importance for Havana: the Blue Strip and Deep Havana.

Blue Strip

Blue Strip refers to a strip of varying breadth along the coastline. This is the district that continues until today to define the identity and image of Havana: El Malecón, Hotel Nacional, the skyscrapers of Vedado, the famous squares of Habana Vieja, the beaches... The Blue Strip is the major attraction of Havana that appeals to both visitors and international capital. For many, it is synonymous with Havana: The image of a tropical El Dorado cultivated for decades in cinema, literature, and advertisements is expressed here, through the exclusive city along the coast, in its world-famous iconography.

Accordingly, the Blue Strip is the part of Havana that attracts the most international attention. The majority of tourist flows, investments, and core services are concentrated here. International architectural and research projects also focus almost exclusively on this area.

However, this urban configuration does not form a unit. It encompasses areas with highly diverse characteristics, namely Miramar, Vedado, Playas del Este, and — in the city center — Habana Vieja. Furthermore, this strip is of varying breadth: In certain places, it spreads out, while elsewhere it suddenly becomes constricted again. In the Centro Habana area, it almost disappears completely and only forms a very narrow ribbon along the Malecón.

While the Blue Strip continues to define the image of Havana to this day, there lies behind it a largely forgotten and ignored part, far remote from the flows of visitors and capital: “The South”, which is in a way overshadowed by the famous quarters along the coast. But the southern part of Havana is also quite heterogeneous, and encompasses highly diverse urban configurations. At its core, we identify a large contiguous area that we call Deep Havana (la Habana profunda).

Deep Havana

What are the defining characteristics of Deep Havana? Like the Blue Strip, this configuration is not a single entity. It consists of highly diverse elements and has a very heterogeneous social and urbanistic structure. As far as political administration is concerned, Deep Havana stretches across several different municipalities (municipios). Specifically, it covers Díaz de Octubre and San Miguel del Padrón, as well as parts of Arroyo Naranjo, Boyeros, and Cerro.

Deep Havana can be defined first of all by its location: It is effectively situated to the rear of the Blue Strip, southeast of the harbor.

This location gives the area a dual identity: On the one hand, in terms of urban structure, it is located at the periphery of the metropolis, far removed from the centers of the Blue Strip, the tourist quarters of Habana Vieja and Vedado, and the national center surrounding the
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*Plaza de la Revolución.* At the same time, our analysis shows that social conditions in *Deep Havana* are fairly difficult today: Incomes are often low, and the fabric of many buildings is crumbling (cf. Peña Díaz, Schmid 2007). Detailed studies of individual *barrios* confirm this picture (cf. Iglesias Rojas, Pérez Villanueva 2004). In social terms, large parts of *Deep Havana* can be regarded as being on the periphery.

On the other hand, *Deep Havana* is also situated at the center of Havana: Geographically speaking, Havana has a noticeably eccentric structure. It is not only limited by the coast, but also effectively constricted by the harbor. For centuries, the harbor limited urbanization towards the east, forming a border that was only penetrated in the 1950s with the construction of the *Tunel de la bahía*. From this perspective, the center of gravity in the settlement area of the metropolis is in *Deep Havana*.

Thus, *Deep Havana* forms the core of the “South” of the capital. However, it is clearly distinct from the other configurations of the “South”: It never constituted an independent municipality as was the case with *Martíana*, *Regla*, or *Guarabacoa*, and thus did not develop a unique identity.

Towards the north, *Deep Havana* can be distinguished from the central districts of *Cerro* and *Centro Habana*, which were built in the 19th century and display a compact, dense urban structure with connecting blocks. This area, which we call *Habana Éntire*, reaches to the coast and is thus directly linked to the *Blue Strip*.

The next districts to the south are the industrial town *Cotorro* and the area surrounding the airport, which forms an *Airport City*. These areas are very different in their makeup: They are strongly shaped by industrial development, which has determined their form as well as their character.

Compared to these surrounding urban configurations, the specific character of *Deep Havana* becomes more distinct: It is heterogeneous, fragmented, and – figuratively speaking – forms the belly of the city.

Positions

The whole area is structured to a large extent by the topography and constitutes a veritable hilly country. Historically, it was an outcrop and an expansion area of the metropolis, situated along the main arterial road southwards: *La Calzada Díaz de Octubre*, lined with colonnades, is the central axis and backbone of the entire area.

Here, south of *Cerro*, the first settlements date back to the 18th century. Subsequently, the whole area was settled incrementally. While the upper class of Havana, after having moved outside of the closely walled city to the open surrounding countryside in the 19th century, first settled the plateau of *Cerro* and subsequently populated the coastal areas of *Vedado* and *Miramar*, *Deep Havana* was the preferred location for the growing middle classes. Later, they were joined by workers, and, especially in the southern part of the district, large slums were established.

Thus a suburban patchwork began to emerge. The individual areas were developed and urbanized according to their specific location, producing the variations in street grids and building types that determine the area’s appearance to this day. While the northern part is dominated by fairly dense zones, the hilly areas also feature villa quarters, and the south has relatively poor areas with a quite suburban appearance.

Challenges and Potential

Today, *Deep Havana* is largely forgotten in the public debate. It is a place where no tourists are ever seen and where, in a few areas, even some *Habananos* fear to tread. There are hardly any in-depth studies or inventories of this area.

The full ambivalence of sectoral politics can be seen here: On the one hand, *Deep Havana*, like all of Cuba, is still fairly well equipped with the facilities of everyday life. On the other hand, there are hardly any central services, and the existing centers are mostly of a local charac-
ter. The great urban qualities of this district have attracted far too little public attention and have accordingly not been sufficiently promoted and developed in the planning process.

One important problem is due to the political structure: While most of the other urban configurations of Havana form fairly small-scale and manageable units in urbanistic and political terms, and have thus been able to mobilize their own potential, Deep Havana is confusingly complex and fragmented and has been unable to develop an identity of its own.

Havana is confronted with great challenges today: In view of an unpredictable future and limited resources, the essential qualities of Havana, which should be regarded as the heritage of a historical development that has been unusual in many ways, must be carefully preserved. A culture of urbanization is required that takes care to strengthen the city’s qualities. In particular, an effort must be made to ensure and further improve the access of all residents of Havana to urban resources.

In this sense, Deep Havana has a key role especially in view of Havana’s future development: On the one hand, it is situated at the geographic center of the city, and features a differentiated urban structure with great qualities. It should be regarded as an important asset and resource, as a reservoir of Havana’s authenticity, and as a platform for future development. On the other hand, it is a neglected area that has until now not received the necessary public attention and is not recognized as an essential part of Havana. As a result, there is a great risk that the process of deterioration will continue, possibly producing severe social problems. This highlights the importance of looking at Havana not only from the point of view of the shiny, stately Blue Strip and the tourists it attracts, but also from the perspective of this hilly and balconied hinterland.

Any future-oriented development planning for Cuba must be measured according to whether it succeeds in giving this area the necessary attention and developing its potential. It is here that the

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Havana represents a case of special interest for urban research; the development and expansion of the city virtually came to a halt after the Cuban revolution in 1959. Therefore the urban structures of the past have been conserved to a large extent.

But today Havana is a city on the brink of change, experiencing the demand for intense development and restoration of its built substance. The focus of attention generally lies on the historical centre and the areas adjacent to Havana’s attractive coastline, whilst the workaday Havana is in peril of falling behind in its development.

The authors introduce the characteristics of the municipality of 100E10, as well as the inherent problems and potentials of the site. The Urban Constitution for 100E10 outlines the objectives for future urban development within the municipality.

This urban planning proposal is then illustrated by a series of architectural projects. The publication concludes with a series of texts by different participants and experts which comment on the site conditions and the project process.

Teaching and Research in Architecture

Today the question of teaching architecture and of research in architecture is pertinent. The role of the architect in the building trade is changing rapidly and the profession needs to define and defend its realm of influence. The formation of professionals will have an impact on the direction of the profession in the future. This publication presents the teaching methodology of the Laboratory for the production of architecture (lapa) at the EPFL, Switzerland. The approach to teaching in architecture at lapa is informed by the procedures and project experience of international practice and the desire to establish a comprehensible and trans-disciplinary culture of analysis and design in architecture.

The application of the teaching method is exemplified by the study of “10 de Octubre”, a large popular municipality of the city of Havana.
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