

# **Rethinking the Spirit of Place: The Magic and Poetry of Havana**

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**Abstract.** Havana, a Caribbean Metropolis with a European influence, was spared the damage of the global urban renewal and overdevelopment of the second half of the 20th century. Even today, it keeps intact its traditional urban fabric. Its unique and appealing spirit stems not only from the well-known quality of its music and rhythms, its vibrant street life and its friendly ambience, but also from its built environment. However, the city's harmonious juxtaposition of different architectural styles, displayed by an impressive collection of buildings authored by world famous local and international architects, is currently threatened by overdevelopment, sprawl and neglect. A comprehensive Master Plan aimed at preserving the city's spirit and its historic, urban and architectural legacy has been devised. It is intended to encourage Havana's future urban and economic development, while respecting its spirit and remaining true to its history, its people's idiosyncrasies and its landscapes. The plan acknowledges Havana's readiness for a sensitive change and renovation according to sustainable principles that reconcile human needs with ecological imperatives. It envisions Havana's survival as an urban place with a strong cultural identity. For the first time, it supplies a comprehensive and long term vision that guarantees total connectivity and a seamless urban layout. The plan deals with the oldest areas by creating buffer zones that grant urban continuity, as well as social and cultural integration.

## **1. Cuba: key to the New World**

Christopher Columbus seems to have acknowledged the spirit of the place upon his arrival in Cuba in 1492 when he knelt and exclaimed "This is the loveliest land ever beheld by human eyes". From the standpoint of urban planning, the process that followed was unprecedented since the days of the Roman Empire. In the early 16th Century, Diego Velazquez founded seven settlements, or *villas*, along the island's coast whose primitive layout was based mostly on geographical features. The settlers were pragmatic and the new cities, towns and buildings were shaped by the need to adapt to local climatic conditions and the availability of local materials. In keeping with the founders' Catholic faith, the original names of the settlements were often associated with deities and religious patronymics.

The spirit of Havana as a place was cast by the progressive assimilation of European urban and architectural models. Together with the mark left by

immigrants from Europe, Africa, Asia, and the United States, these influences helped mold a culture with a highly distinct architectural heritage spanning over five centuries. This heritage reflected the country's development and defined its cultural identity.

## 2. The Spirit of Havana: genesis and evolution

Christopher, the guardian of travelers, is Havana's patron saint. One of the original seven villas, it was definitely settled by its protected harbor in 1519 after two previous attempts. The key geographic position of its port eventually allowed the fast growing commercial activity of the Spanish fleet and the development of an expanding shipbuilding industry. These features soon granted the city the highest prominence among the overseas colonies playing a major role between the Old and the New World and in turn motivated Spain to build fortresses to defend it from the attacks of pirates. Castles, convents, churches and palaces were constructed by European military engineers and craftsmen. They became the first beacons to delineate the urban landscape of Havana's medieval grid of narrow and shaded streets, expanding through a network of piazzas and piazzetas, which would establish the polycentric character of the city. The emerging and always evolving spirit of Havana was present from the very beginning, guarding and blessing the city, as well as determining its distinct character and essence.



Figure 1. Havana and its bay. Anonymous

A military plan laid out by Cristóbal de Roda in 1603 outlined the walls that later enclosed Havana. Subsequent plans, especially those drawn after the English Navy temporarily captured Havana in 1762, were conceived with a similarly military character in order to comply with new defensive demands. In the architectural realm, buildings centered on courtyards, a style adopted

by Spain from the Moorish tradition, were gradually accepted as the adequate typology to deal with local climatic conditions.

The first significant urban changes of the early colonial times took place in the late 18th Century, with the transformation of the Plaza de Armas into Havana's first civic center and the laying out of public promenades - the Alameda de Paula and the Alameda de Extramuros. These projects updated Havana's image according to European trends as the spaces they created for the appreciation and enjoyment of nature in the city added a new meaning to Havana. The transformation of the original military parade ground into a civic space had a particularly strong effect on the evolution of the city's Genius Loci, by juxtaposing magnificent newly-constructed baroque style palaces with the existing renaissance style Royal Force Castle.



Figure 2. Plaza de Armas, the first civic center

Havana in the 19th Century was characterized by prosperity and splendor based on steady economic growth. The existing colonial urbanism was overtaken in terms of urban expansion and continuity, as well as strategic needs. Progressive institutions, such as the influential Patriotic Society, favored an ambience of openness to science, technology and management that helped to insert Cuba into the world economy and allowed Havana to adapt to multiple changes. Culture reached broader sectors of society and fostered the gradual consolidation of a strong sense of identity. In architecture, Neoclassicism was embraced as the new style and expressed an aspiration to order, rationality and perfection.

Colonel-engineer Antonio María de la Torre's Plan de Ensanche (1817-1819), the first of its kind in Havana, guided the expansion of the city beyond the walls in an orderly manner by using the existing layout of the roads that connected the walled city with the countryside. This plan was the model for the main arteries with sheltering Neoclassical style porticoes, called calzadas, which became the most distinctive feature of Havana's new streetscape and stood in clear contrast with the character of the walled city.

The first comprehensive modern urban transformations in terms of scale and design were conducted during the term of Governor Miguel Tacón (1834-1838). Anticipating Baron Haussmann's Parisian boulevards, he achieved the

redefinition of Havana's urban landscape in a monumental style with the construction of wide straight avenues and walks decorated with fountains and statues. His ample and effective public works program to embellish Havana was financed by a blossoming sugar cane industry. He was able to widen and resurface many streets and build new markets, theaters and even a new jail. Both Antonio María de la Torre and Miguel Tacón contributed to redefining Havana's landscape by modifying the urban scale and encouraging high quality designs for public spaces. The works performed by military engineer Mariano Carrillo de Albornoz confirmed Havana's monumental scale and they included the completion of new calzadas, named Belascoáin and Infanta, as well as the reconstruction and embellishment of the promenades begun by Tacón.



Figure 3. Tacón's Theater and Alameda de Extramuros

Cuban-born intendant Claudio Martínez de Pinillos, supported by the Creole commercial and industrial class, rivaled Tacón's plan with one of his own. It included the pioneering introduction of the railroad in 1837, ten years before Spain, to connect Havana with the rural sugar cane fields, as well as the construction of hospitals, technical schools and a new aqueduct.

In the first half of the 19th Century, along the Calzada del Cerro, the affluent bourgeoisie built a series of free-standing Neoclassical villas, called quintas, with gardens and porches that served as a model for the new district of El Vedado. Designed by Luis Yboleón in 1859, the plan for this part of the city emphasized order with a regular grid defined by tree-lined avenues along which lots were laid out. The buildings' frontage featured a five meters deep private garden and a four meters deep porch, allowing for the primary separation between the public and the private realms. This ensured privacy and created a very distinct streetscape.

New recreational facilities, such as restaurants, theaters and outdoor cafes, appeared along the former Alameda de Extramuros, renamed Paseo de Isabel II, following ordinances adopted in 1861. The latter also regulated new districts such as The Ring of Havana (The Walls Subdivision), developed by military engineer Juan Bautista Orduña in 1865 after the demolition of the walls in 1863, echoing metropolitan models from Europe.



El Vedado and The Walls Subdivision, marked the birth of modern city planning in Havana. Furthermore, the development of the Malecón by US engineers Mead and Whitney in 1901 reshaped Havana's waterfront image and became an iconic boulevard showing Havana's capacity to reaffirm its Genius Loci.

### 3. The Spirit of a Caribbean Metropolis

From the beginning of the 20th Century, land speculation and a lack of comprehensive planning control led to sprawl and the loss of Havana's traditional character of mixed public/private use. New suburbs spread westward from the city, mostly influenced by the United States model based on the use of the automobile. Several plans were put forth unsuccessfully by local architects who attempted to address the lack of greenery and the traffic congestion due to a poor road network. They advocated the extension of the existing civic center with a network of Parisian style boulevards and plazas, as well as increased green spaces.

In central areas of Havana, like the Paseo del Prado and the Parque Central zone, new building techniques introduced from the United States of America, such as reinforced concrete and steel frame systems, were used in the construction of representative buildings for different regional groups from Spain. Because their scale was different from that of the existing buildings, these structures had a major urban impact.

In 1926, the Cuban government commissioned French landscape designer J.C.N. Forestier to draw up an embellishment plan for Havana. The plan was based on a network of rectilinear boulevards intended to facilitate traffic and shape the new monumental image of Havana by visually and physically linking important landmarks. Although Forestier's plan was only partially realized, by the 1930's Havana was already an expanding Caribbean metropolis with a compact center, a well defined urban fabric and a very distinctive streetscape with a vibrant street life reaffirming the spirit of the place.



Figure 4. Forestier's embellishment plan for Havana

The boom of the Cuban economy during the Second World War extended through the 1950's. In Havana, this period was generally characterized by excellence in architectural design and construction, as well as the presence of an elite group of international architects. There were, however, some threats to the city's integrity. The National Planning Board, created in 1955, commissioned Josep Lluís Sert's Town Planning Associates to prepare a new urban plan. This project neglected the legacy and spirit of Havana by including an artificial island with hotels and gambling casinos for Americans across from the Malecón. If built, this would have had a negative effect on the spirit of Havana by causing a major change in the character of the waterfront.

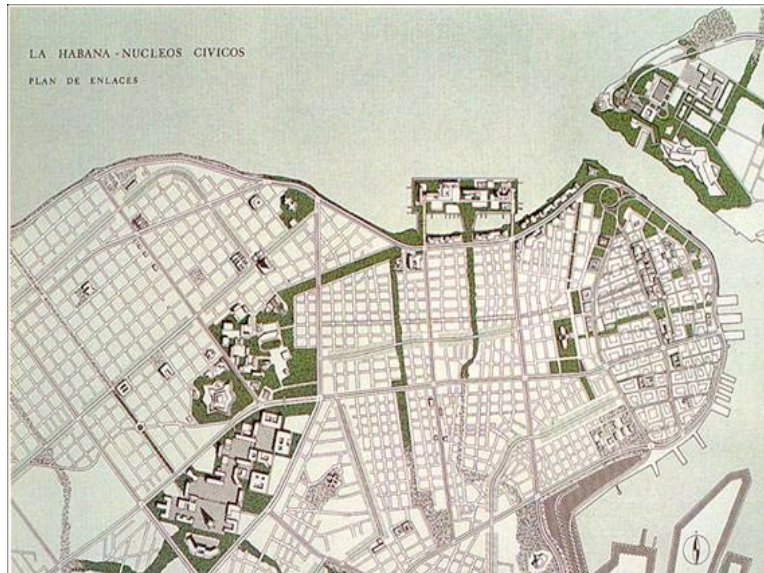


Figure 5. Sert's plan with an artificial island

After the Revolution in 1959, Havana's urban development was stopped in order to favor the rest of the country. The grand houses and luxury apartments became overcrowded and inhabited by people that were unable to maintain them. After fifty years, many have become so run down as to be unsafe or beyond repair. The master plans developed by the state's planning agencies in the 1960s and 1970s were merely a reflection of the government's economic and social programs and they imported into Cuba prefabricated stereotypes from Eastern European countries that were incompatible with the existing urban context. These new methods were supposedly a massive solution to housing needs and caused several zones of Havana to undergo radical transformations, the most regrettable of these being the loss of the traditional grid. There was also an increase in sprawl, due to the appearance of new satellite neighborhoods, following a negative trend in international urbanism. These neighborhoods had no mixed use and lacked connections to the rest of the city, as well as green spaces and public spaces. Transportation, infrastructure and housing were not addressed appropriately and still remain unsolved problems today. Thanks, however, to the relatively limited scale of new construction during this period, the spirit of the place was not lost.

With the collapse of the Soviet block in the late 1980's, a wave of foreign investment encouraged the appearance of huge hotels and other real estate projects outside the central areas of Havana. Again, these plans neglected the traditional mixed use character of the city and thus created dead zones by promoting the segregation of functions. Like the American architecture from the mid 20th Century, notably the Miami style hotels, these new projects created a hostile environment devoid of a recognizable spirit of place. These buildings, with curtain walls and low ceilings, have no shutters or balconies to shade and cool them without air conditioning. They also ignore the zoning and building bylaws for they are totally unrelated to the Cuban climate, economy, local building materials and lifestyle. The unfortunate outcome of these insensitive interventions is that they call into question the spirit of Havana. Their impact may become irreversible in the near future if Cuba is assimilated into a new market economy as increasing numbers of these projects are likely to appear when developers and foreign business people pursue money-making opportunities in Havana.

#### **4. The Hope for the Revival of the Spirit of Havana**

The unique and appealing spirit of Havana is a celebration of urbanism and architecture, ever incapable of remaining still, connected to all of the world's cities and at the same time maintaining its own magic and poetic urban identity.

Although the city experienced an impressive growth during the first half of the 20th Century, it was spared the damage of the global urban renewal and overdevelopment of the second half of the century. It has managed to keep its original personality and is now ready for a sensitive change and renovation according to sustainable principles. When thinking of how to revive unique places, we can learn many important lessons by looking at their past and by connecting with their spirit.

A team of Cuban architects, led by this author, has designed a Master Plan aimed at preserving the city's spirit and its historic, urban and architectural legacy, while encouraging its future urban and economic development. The urban plan expresses a vision independent of the government and of the official planning agencies. It looks toward Havana's future while remaining true to its history, its people's idiosyncrasies and its landscapes. For the first time, it provides a comprehensive scope, spanning both urban planning and urban design, in such a way as to give continuity to Havana's traditions and to seek a contemporary image.

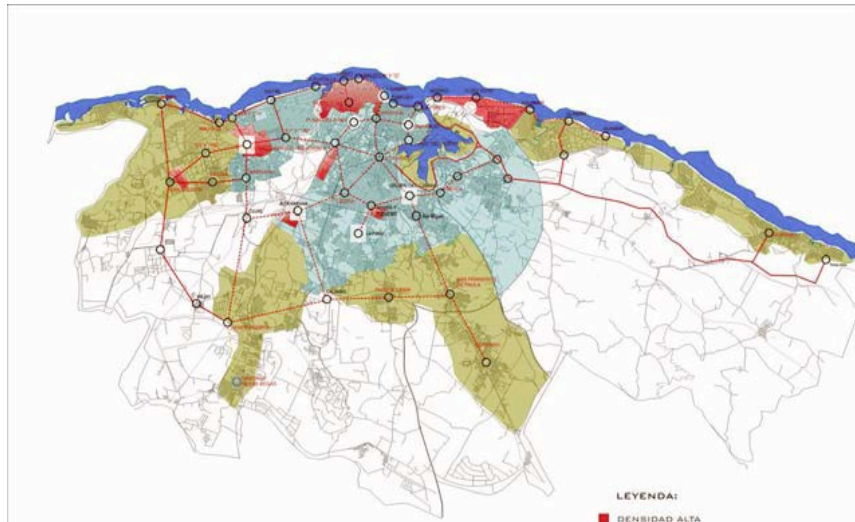


Figure 6. The Master Plan for 21st Century Havana

The project envisions a waterfront redevelopment with seafront boulevards, squares, parks and promenades that will help create new streetscapes and a pedestrian friendly urban ambience. The intention is to encourage outdoor living, as well as social and cultural integration so that people can meet, relax and enjoy city life.



Figure 7. Waterfront redevelopment enhances public space

It also includes the creation of a new public transportation system, whose coastal stretch would run underneath and parallel to the Malecón, presently overrun by traffic, thereby freeing the ground level for pedestrians and increasing the public space along the waterfront. This strategy takes advantage of the existing topography of the reef and also helps to deal with rising sea levels due to climate change by creating a buffer zone. Such zones should be outlined in order to protect the surroundings of the oldest areas of Havana.





Figure 8. Illustration of new coastal stretch of tunnel

The plan presents an ecological alternative to suburbanization by reinforcing the polycentric character of the traditional city and by increasing the amount of green spaces. To reduce sprawl, it focuses on the revitalization of the traditional commercial arteries, the calzadas, where community life is more vibrant.

In environmental terms, it involves the sanitizing of the rivers and the existing harbor area by turning its current derelict industrial port into a sport and recreational facility. This principle can be applied to other areas in the city.



Figure 9. The Master Plan for the Harbor of Havana

The plan emphasizes the mixed use character that is found in traditional Havana. It reinforces the identities of the different districts and the need for density in the traditional centers where commerce plays a key role. Urban infill encompasses the creation of two new major neighborhoods, Vistamar and Habanamar, with their own new centers and space for around half a

million new dwelling units. This will help increase connectivity and regional liaisons, while giving character to these zones according to their own geography, history and culture.

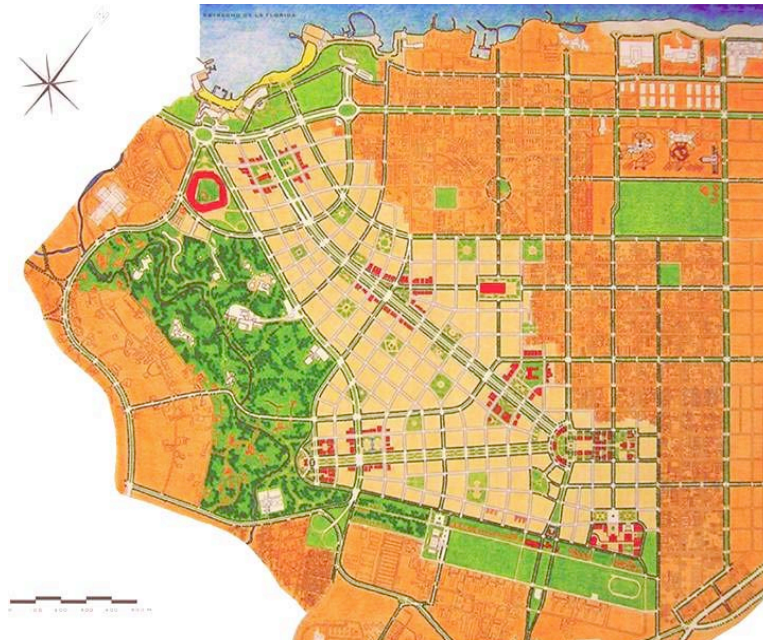


Figure 10. The Master Plan for Vistamar

The Master Plan for 21st Century Havana aspires to a more beautiful, urban and dignified Havana where people can live, work and enjoy life: a contemporary city that respects the spirit of the place, values its heritage and honors its culture.



Figure 11. Three layers of time, three layers of architecture