

# ACCIDENTAL

Cubans who own cars from the 1950s and earlier once rehabilitated them out of necessity. Today, many classic cars are used as tourist taxis. The cost for such a ride is often around \$50 per hour, which is almost double a Cuban's monthly salary. The cost of refurbished vehicles from this era can easily reach tens of thousands of dollars.



# SUSTAINABLE



# BILITY

**An American planner wonders whether Cuba's culture of reuse will persist.**

**By J. MARSHALL BROWN, AICP**

PHOTO BY ALEX GARCIA



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**TO WALK THROUGH THE HISTORIC QUARTERS OF HAVANA** is to experience a city unlike any other, one that has stubbornly persisted for nearly 500 years of poverty and plenty. ¶ There, the ever-present humidity and exhaust fumes from cars that should have been retired decades ago mingle with brief sea breezes, a constant—and pungent—reminder of Cuba’s economic realities. And then there are the elegant but crumbling facades of Havana’s iconic Malecón seafront. A lively meeting place for Cubans of all ages, Malecón gatherings have a backdrop of buildings so pockmarked by the relentless assault of sun, sea, and time that they look like sandcastles melting into the water below. ¶ While the city did not arrive at its present state because of any one factor, years of economic isolation due to the American embargo—colloquially known as “*el bloqueo*”—and the fall of the Soviet Union have had an outsized impact on the city’s built environment. When the USSR collapsed in 1991, it was providing about 85 percent of Cuba’s foreign trade, dealing a catastrophic blow to the island nation’s economy. The time that followed, known as the “Special Period,” marked an era in which basic goods and services were hard to come by for ordinary Cubans.

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The Malecón is a roadway and seawall that stretches for five miles along the coast in Havana.



Still, the city persisted. Between *el bloqueo* and present day, Havana’s population has essentially doubled within the same urban footprint—and without many resources. Residents have had to get creative, sharing and reusing materials—everything from automobiles to apartment buildings. Orlando Inclán, an architect and planner with the Office of the City Historian in Havana and founder of La Habana Re-Generación, calls it an “accidental sustainability,” borne of necessity.

As I toured Havana’s colonial core in the spring of 2016, I wondered: Will economic and infrastructural changes, brought on by a rehabilitated relationship with the U.S., lead to a broader change in Havana’s culture?

### Pressures of growth

I wasn’t the only American to visit the city that spring. My weeklong research trip with the Tulane School of Architecture to study the city’s architectural history and preservation—and attend a lecture given by Orlando Inclán—coincided with the state visit of President Obama. It was the first made by a

sitting U.S. president since Herbert Hoover in 1928, and the feeling in the city was electric.

President Donald Trump announced that he would add or reinstate some of the travel and commerce limits eliminated by the Obama administration, but the potential impacts of those policies, if implemented, are unclear.

Still, the relative thaw in relations between Cuba and the U.S. is likely to continue, meaning Havana is poised to grow faster than any other time in its history—thanks to the expected influx of hard currency from American tourism and expanded international business interests. The potential is immense, says Inclán, whom I interviewed in the months following his lecture. But it also brings challenges—and, possibly, some unwelcome change.

Though accidental sustainability is ingrained in the Cuban mindset, many who grew up under the leadership of the Castro brothers are eager for some of the material goods readily available in other parts of the world: cell phones, new clothes, cars, music. More than older generations, they struggle to “see the merits of the Revolution,” says Inclán.

After the diplomatic opening between Cuba and the U.S. in 2015, a 2016 art exhibit about presidents Barack Obama and Raúl Castro appeared at the Wifredo Lam Centre of Contemporary Art in Old Havana. A projector under the hood of a 1950s American-made car beamed a picture of them onto a sheet hanging from a clothesline.



Cuban workers bury new utility lines in a trench cut in the pavement of Paseo Martí in this view looking southward along the Paseo del Prado in Havana in 2016. In the background is the Hotel Telégrafo, which reopened in 2002 after a total restoration.

This rush toward Western consumerism, made easier by the relaxation of laws regarding private enterprise and personal property coupled with a potential end of *el bloqueo*, could erase the innate sustainability emblematic of the Cuban experience.

Take bicycling. While many Western cities embrace biking as a healthy mode of transportation, its use in Havana is simply due to a scarcity of alternatives. Bikes have become a symbol of poverty to many young Cubans, Inclán says, and they are reluctant to use them.

Planners, engineers, architects, and historic preservationists in Havana are aware of what this could mean for their city and are working on strategies that will help the city endure for the next several generations. Inclán contends that the values related to reusing and repurposing that emerged by necessity should be retained and adapted to Cuba's new reality.

"We must be capable of generating new approaches to contemporary problems [while also embracing] what we have learned from the product of need," Inclán says.

#### State-run sustainability

The city's growth and development is carried out

under the auspices of the Office of the City Historian, where Inclán works. Here, planners, architects, preservationists, demographers, engineers, and sociologists work to preserve Havana's colonial core—approximately 214 hectares and more than 900 buildings of historic value—as part of the city's master plan.

Created in the early 1990s, that plan—the *plan maestro*—focuses the government's redevelopment priorities on the city's built environment, socioeconomic and educational programs, and heritage in a civic participatory environment.

The historian's office has been given special powers to regulate the city's growth by overseeing control of all touristic properties through a state-run company called Habagüanex, which in turn directs the revenue from those enterprises toward restoration projects and infrastructure improvements.

Since 1994, Habagüanex has grown to manage more than 300 hotels, restaurants, shops, and markets in the city, averaging well over \$100 million in proceeds. One of its most prominent projects, Hotel Telégrafo, a 19th century architectural marvel near the old capitol building (and the future home of the Cuban government, now under restoration), reopened in 2002 after several years of rehabilitation.

**Enter the entrepreneurs**

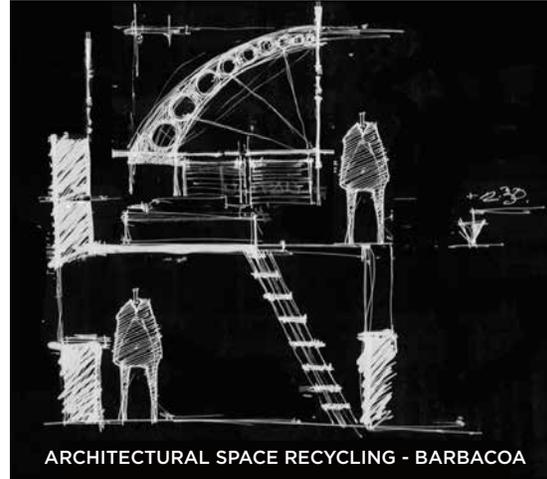
Following the forced closure of the Colegio de Arquitectos in the late 1960s, architects had no other choice but to work for state-funded programs like the city historian's office, creating new housing projects and tourism enterprises. However, a relaxation of laws under President Raúl Castro in 2011 allowed Cubans to pursue limited private ventures, which has recently opened up some creative opportunities for architects, interior designers, and artists, as Julia Cooke wrote about in a 2015 article for *Curbed* ([tinyurl.com/y7cgysn8](http://tinyurl.com/y7cgysn8)).

Looking to seize the moment, Orlando Inclán and a group of other young architects with day jobs at state-run firms created an informal think-tank studio. La Habana Re-Generación has designated priorities for sustainable growth, seeking to preserve not only the city's historic architecture, but to envision how modern sustainable design can fit into Havana's historic cityscape, provide for new public space, and preserve the city's recycling culture.

The studio is currently prioritizing the following areas:

- TERRITORY RECYCLING**, or limiting growth to within the city's current footprint
- ARCHITECTURAL RECYCLING**, by continuing historic preservation work and expanding it beyond the city's colonial center, which is the government's current focus
- OBJECT RECYCLING**, by continuing to find creative methods of reuse for everyday objects
- PROMOTING THE CITY'S CULTURE** and sense of place through design
- RECLAIMING BROWNFIELD SITES** around Havana's harbor and modernizing the city's antiquated utility infrastructure
- IMPLEMENTING NEW PROJECTS** with the latest sustainable design methods
- FOSTERING SUSTAINABLE** transportation

Moving forward, Inclán says, any intervention into the cityscape must be "anchored on [the] pre-existence" of the city's historic architecture and culture, using it as the underpinning for each proposal. By doing this, he says, new development could in-



*Barbacoas* are improvised and sometimes unsafe mezzanine spaces that are used to expand limited interior floor space in the old city as a way to address housing shortages. La Habana Re-Generación is taking some inspiration from this informal system, seeking to incorporate similar creative reuses of architectural spaces in their projects. The image at top shows its concept of supporting the continued use of *barbacoas* to "recycle architecture" in a way that is structurally safe and sound.



corporate sustainable, modern design which is sensitive to its surroundings—a middle way, neither a "tabula rasa nor sterile nostalgia for the past," but a new future for Havana.

The group's ambitions do not stop in Havana proper; they are also working toward a unified vision for La Gran Habana, a blueprint for the city's

## BEYOND HAVANA

FORTY MILES TO THE EAST OF HAVANA, in the Mayabeque Province on bluffs overlooking the Straits of Florida, the small town of Hershey (pronounced “AIR-sey”) lives its own hardscrabble reality. The town, officially labeled Camilo Cienfuegos since the Revolution, was founded to support a sugar refinery owned by candy maker Milton Hershey in 1916.

Today Hershey is a shadow of its former self. The refinery, which was nationalized following the Revolution, finally closed its doors in the early 2000s. But Hershey’s town once boasted amenities rarely found in Cuba outside Havana: good health care, a free school, a baseball diamond and golf course, public gardens, a general store, a movie theater, and ample American-style worker housing. Most importantly, Hershey had the first electric railway in Cuba, which connected the town to port facilities in Matanzas and Havana.

Since the closure of the refinery, the town’s population has slowly declined as younger residents seek jobs elsewhere. The movie theater no longer gives shows on its rusty Soviet machinery, much of the worker housing is in disrepair, and the general store (still the center of town) has only a few wares for sale. Once a town so different from the rest of the country, Hershey’s state of decrepitude is quite similar to many other small Cuban towns.

Still, older residents persist. Hershey is special, they say, and they refuse to abandon the town in the hopes that something will change. Families still inhabit carefully kept-up houses on tidy blocks, the boisterous clamor of school children still pierces the daytime quiet at recess, and the old railway still operates, now the oldest operable electric train of its type in the world, notes Joseph L. Scarpaci and his coauthors in the book, *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*.

It remains to be seen, however, if Hershey and other small towns on Havana’s periphery will reap the benefits of Havana’s newfound verve and vitality.



The Hershey Electric Railway is Cuba’s first electric railway and the oldest operating train of its kind in the world.

interaction with its hinterland provinces Artemisa and Mayabeque, as well as formerly industrial sites around Havana’s harbor, *la bahía*. (Havana’s industrial port infrastructure is slated to move to new facilities being built at Mariel, a town 25 miles west of Havana.)

Inclán’s group recognizes the opportunity that will emerge, and reenvision the formerly industrial area of *la bahía*—which gave birth to Havana—as a new multifunctional, inclusive, green urban center.

The overall goal, he says, is to help create a Havana where development is civil, economic, and cultural, that will reinforce public spaces, environmental values, and public transport. He envisions an “open city—green and facing the sea.”

In doing so, the studio says, they will better position the city as the leading metropolis in the Caribbean region and reclaim its status as one of the world’s great cities.

For La Habana Re-Generación, the biggest challenge in turning these ideas into a reality is the availability of economic capital.

Currently, most government funding is allocated to economic priorities, which essentially means hotels and other supporting infrastructure—not to mention most of these projects—are done in the group’s spare time, with services donated in-kind.

Still, the brightening economic forecast is giving Inclán and others more hope than hesitation for Havana’s future. ■

J. Marshall Brown is a historic preservationist and urban planner in North Carolina. He thanks Orlando Inclán of the Office of the City Historian of Havana, and I. Carolina Caballero, PhD, of the Institute of Cuban and Caribbean Studies at Tulane University.

## RESOURCES

### ONLINE

“The Challenge of Change: The Future of Havana,” (presentation given at the Harvard School of Design by leading Cuban thinkers on Havana’s future, including Orlando Inclán): [youtube.com/watch?v=LeWpgQYLUHg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LeWpgQYLUHg).

La Habana Re-Generación: [habanaregeneracion.com](http://habanaregeneracion.com).

### IN PRINT

*Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 2002).

*Havana Modern: 20th Century Architecture and Interiors* (New York: Rizzoli, 2014).