



## HAVANA | CUBA

# Urban Development, Preservation & Academic Opportunities

Terry Schwarz, director of Kent State University's Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative and Douglas L Steidl, Dean of the College of Architecture and Environmental Design at Kent State University had the opportunity to tour the City of Havana with Jorge Delgado, president of the Joaquín Weiss Institute (JWI) and James Thompson, Director of Strategic Planning for the JWI.

The trip took place from March 26 through March 29, 2015. The purpose was for Ms. Schwarz and Dean Steidl to observe the physical environment of the city and provide initial reactions about how future development might evolve, and also to explore ideas for future academic programs.

## DEVELOPMENT CONTEXT

The existing Master Plan for Havana, drafted by architect Julio César Pérez, establishes ten guiding principles for the preservation and regeneration of the city:

1. **Waterfront Redevelopment** to give the city a new image and take maximum advantage of the coastline through mixed use development.
2. **Stronger Polycentric Approach** to create new urban centers in proposed development areas to the west (site of former Columbia airfield) and the east, in an effort to reduce the risk sprawl and future traffic congestion.

3. **New Public Transportation System**, including surface and underground transportation, to provide an effective and rational use of road infrastructure and reduce pollution.
4. **Infrastructure Upgrades**, including investments in water supply, electricity, the sewer system, communications networks (telephone and high-speed internet), and other services. The plan also calls for increased green space and a buffer zone in coastal areas to mitigate the possible rise in sea levels due to climate change.
5. **Social and Cultural Integration** to allow for the full use of the city, its neighborhoods, and spaces by all people.
6. **New Image of the City** that speaks to the city's transformation and vitality as a result of urban and civic actions.
7. **Increased Public Space**, including streets, squares, and parks for vibrancy and human exchange.
8. **Mixed Use**, to reinforce the traditional model of the city and provide the variety necessary for city life.
9. **Revitalization of Calzadas and Thoroughfares** as commercial axes that attract people and activity.
10. **A Broad View Combined with Detailed Urban Design** including projects of different scales that can be built at different points in time, with the flexibility to adapt to changing circumstances.  
(excerpted from *Havana Master Plan: A Vision for the XXI Century*)

## INITIAL OBSERVATIONS

Taking into account the planning work that has already been done or is currently underway, we offer the following observations:

- Restoration of the waterfront area of old Havana (Havana Vieja) is well underway, led by the Office of the City Historian.
- Restoration of government buildings (Capitolo, Fine Arts, Great Theater, Presidential Palace, and Departmental Offices) is also underway.
- Calle Obispo, the principal shopping street linking Havana Vieja with the government center, is substantially restored and spaces occupied.
- It appears that restoration south and north of Calle Obispo, and between the restored area of Havana Vieja and the government center will continue through the combined efforts of the Office of the City Historian and private investors.
- Paseo del Prado is currently a fringe area that has a mix of architectural styles as well as a mix of restored and not restored structures. This link is a logical target for restoration efforts, with appropriate infill development to complete the streetscape.
- The Malecón as it moves west out of the Havana Vieja is a mix of historic, early and mid-twentieth century architecture is likely to remain a mixture of uses, styles, and heights. As such, flexible development standards along this promenade would seem reasonable. Anticipated development will most likely be oriented to hotels, condominiums, and tourist facilities.

- The need for restoration in neighborhoods to the southeast and southwest of Havana Vieja is immense. The City Historian's plan to focus on squares/plazas and the links between these nodes is a viable approach for establishing restoration priorities.
- Housing in the coastal area west of the Malecón seems like a logical target for private investments in restoration and new development.
- The historical forts and parks east of Havana Vieja, reached via the Harbor Tunnel, are either restored or adequately maintained and will need only need minor enhancements in the short term.
- Future development, including high-rise offices, apartment buildings, hotels, and other businesses, is likely to be accelerated due to an influx of international investors. Much of this intensive new development could be concentrated in the underutilized industrial areas east of the harbor. Environmental remediation of contaminated sites may be necessary, but numerous vacant and underutilized parcels of land are well-situated for new development that would decrease development pressures in the most historic neighborhoods of the city.
- In the longer term, replacement of some of the Soviet-era housing to the east of the city with other housing typologies could enhance the social structure of city neighborhoods.
- A coastal plan is needed to balance the preservation of the pristine beaches with the desire to accommodate of holiday/vacation travelers and beach houses for residents.

## PRESERVATION CONSIDERATIONS

Havana presents a range of complex and interesting opportunities for historic preservation and adaptive reuse. The vast collection of historic buildings—reflecting different eras, cultures, and architectural styles—is truly remarkable. But the extent of deterioration and disinvestment pose daunting challenges.

The restoration of European cities after World War II laid the ground work for the historic preservation movement. The intrinsic value of these historic places and the level of devastation caused by the war led to new theories and methods for restoration. Today, Havana offers a similar opportunity, born from decades of deterioration and disinvestment.

The economic and cultural value of the city's historic architecture is enormous, as are the resources that will be needed to stabilize buildings (many on the verge of collapse) and restore them for new uses. City leaders, with the support of preservation specialists, will have to make difficult choices about which buildings to preserve and which to demolish. Establishing clear guidelines and priorities will help to ensure that the buildings that most define the city and its neighborhoods will be retained for future generations.

Numerous buildings in Havana Vieja and other neighborhoods have collapsed due to lack of maintenance, high winds, and heavy rainfall during tropical storms. In the near future, infill development will most likely occur on many of the vacant sites where historic buildings once stood. Standards for new construction and infill development will be critical for protecting the city's historic character while also allowing designers of current and future generations to help shape the city.

Some guiding principles might include:

- **Restoration Priorities** could be established based on building condition and architectural integrity. Buildings in stable condition might be targeted for restoration first, before they become seriously deteriorated. Buildings of major architectural significance (i.e. those that have not been substantially altered) should also be early targets for restoration, due to their intrinsic value. (See *Figure 1*)
- **Infill Development:** Design standards for infill development could be from highly prescriptive in the heart of Havana Vieja, where protecting the continuity of the historic environment is paramount. Less restrictive guidelines could be developed for areas that already have more recent architecture and many vacant sites. Even more open and flexible guidelines could be established for brownfield sites, open land, and peripheral districts.
- **Reconstruction:** In some parts of the city, it may be possible/desirable to replicate or reconstruct missing buildings based on historic drawings and photographs.

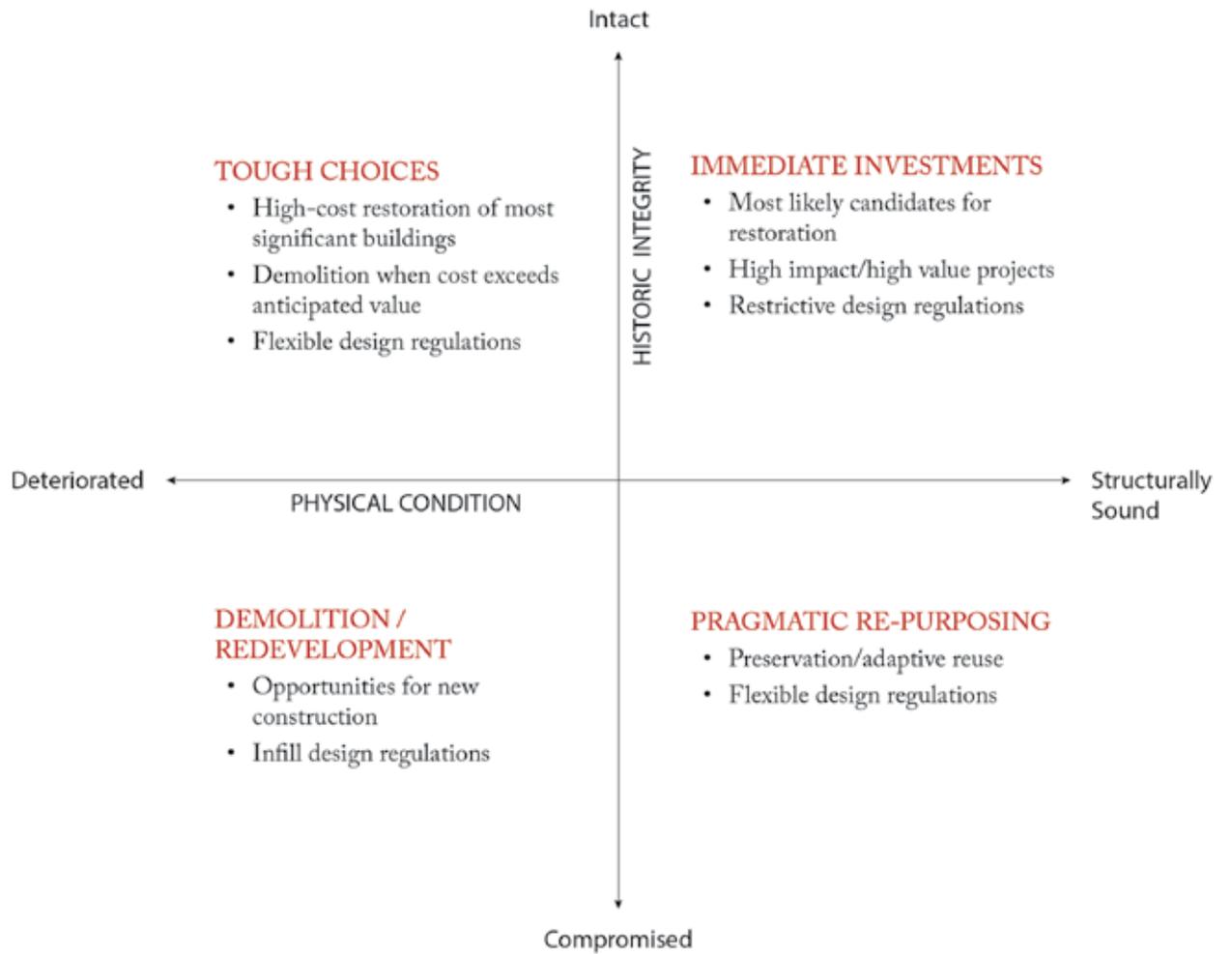
In the US, the Secretary of the Interior's *Standards for Historic Preservation* advocate for infill development that reflects the massing, materials, proportions of surrounding buildings, while clearly appearing as architecture of its own time. The goal is to be respectful of surrounding historic buildings and not distracting, but also not misleading; new construction should not appear as 'historic' so as to be confused with actual historic buildings. This methodology often leads to new construction that is bland and inoffensive. As such, it might not translate well to Havana, where the Master Plan expressly calls for a "new urban image."

In a less constrained alternative, infill buildings could be strong design statements in their own right, that have their own distinct presence within the surrounding historic environment, and offer a counterpoint to the prevailing historic context. To some extent, this reflects the existing condition in Havana Vieja—buildings of varying styles, that somehow read as a cohesive whole, though architecturally distinct as individual buildings.

### **PRESERVATION TOOLS AND METHODOLOGIES**

- **Historic resources survey** is an important first step in assessing the condition of historic buildings throughout Havana today. There are many methods for conducting historic surveys, which can be completed by preservation professionals, students, or trained volunteers.
- **Asset mapping** to identify urban features such as waterfront areas, parks, plazas, shopping districts, and other amenities. The city could prioritize the restoration and adaptive reuse of high-value, high-integrity buildings next to these resources, which would build on efforts that focus on important plazas and the buildings that front on these plazas, as well as connections between plazas.
- **Architectural sampling** to identify and preserve key details that are prevalent (repeating, representative) in the city and also unique or distinct to Havana.

These comments are offered as a first impression. Further analysis of demographics and economic data, and on-going city planning efforts would be needed to support more detailed recommendations.



*Figure 1: Possible criteria for establishing restoration priorities*



### ACADEMIC OPPORTUNITIES

Havana offers a wealth of opportunities for educating students and exchanging ideas about the design and development of cities in transition. Designers in Cuba and the US have much to learn from each other. US practitioners could offer input on green building technologies, community engagement practices, placemaking strategies, and other topics. Cuban practitioners have a lot to teach the rest of the world about resourcefulness, self-reliance, and techniques for fostering vibrant street life.

There are several existing programs for cultural exchange, including the Havana Urban Design Charrette, which has been conducted annually since 2007 by the Council for European Urbanism and the International Network for Traditional Building and Urbanism. Also, the University of Notre Dame and Virginia Tech, among others, have conducted classes and studios in Havana.

At Kent State, our interest would be in finding areas of common interest between Cuba and Northeast Ohio. Clearly, Havana and Cleveland are very different cities, but both struggle with disinvestment and decay (although for very different reasons). Both cities have major ports and valuable coastlines. Perhaps most importantly, both cities are durable, optimistic, and willing to do the hard work of reinvesting and rebuilding in response to changes and losses that have occurred over time.

We could identify a range of Ohio-based design challenges that relate to comparable (though not identical) challenges in Cuba. And then work with graduate students at the Cleveland Urban Design Collaborative to translate ideas and discoveries for related sites in both cities.

Some possibilities include:

- **Port Development** Havana Harbour and the Port of Cleveland present different, but related, opportunities for redevelopment. We could conduct a Cleveland/Havana studio, perhaps in the Spring of 2016, where graduate students spent the first ten weeks of the semester working on design and development options for the Port of Cleveland. Then the students would travel to Cuba over spring break to tour Havana Harbour and meet with local officials. For the final five weeks of the semester, the students would return to Cleveland to work on designs for the Havana site, inviting Cuban officials to Cleveland to participate in the final reviews.
- **Aerotropolis Studio** Havana's airport is likely to experience a major wave of reinvestment as the relationship between Cuban and the US continues to improve. Students could explore emerging approaches for intensive development around airports using José Martí Airport in Havana and Hopkins, Burke, or the Akron/Canton airport in northeast Ohio as the basis of exploration.
- **Historic Resources Survey** Preservation planning students from Cleveland State University and architecture students from Kent State could collaborate on a comparative exploration of survey and documentation methods for historic properties in Cleveland and Havana.
- **Community Design Charrette** The CUDC conducts an annual community design charrette with our students, where we travel to a new location each year to tackle a pressing design challenge, typically over a long weekend. Typically, charrette locations are in Ohio, Michigan, or Indiana. But a Havana charrette would generate great excitement among our students.
- **Infill Studio** We could identify a range of vacant sites in Havana—places where buildings have collapsed or have been demolished. These sites could include key locations in the historic core where a very context-sensitive response is required, to more open-ended sites in areas where there is greater variety in architectural styles and eras, and more of an opportunity for creative design explorations. Cleveland offers a similar dichotomy, with vacant sites in some neighborhoods that are subject to a high degree of design oversight and others where almost anything goes. The outcome of this studio could be a typology manual or a set of design guidelines for each city, illustrating how design responses can adapt to the surrounding context.
- **Tourism Studio:** Both Cleveland and Havana are on the verge of expanded tourism. The workshop could look at sites along the Malecón and sites in Downtown Cleveland, developing design guidelines with recommendations for building height and massing, architectural styles, color palette, signage, preservation of view corridors, public access to waterfront, wayfinding, etc.

Other topics of interest to the CUDC/CAED include:

- Community engagement/public participation
- Public space design
- Urban ecology
- Sustainable infrastructure/transit-oriented development
- Environmental remediation
- Public health/healthcare architecture
- Temporary urbanism/interim strategies for transitional sites

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