

Where Content Transcends Form

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Havana's famous seaside promenade, the Malecón, symbolizes the island's unique and seductive luster that bears witness to Havana's most beautiful sunsets and transcendental moments of national history. The Malecón extends seven kilometers from the docks of Havana Bay to the Almendares River. The Malecón is a nondescript, concrete walkway, perhaps ten feet above the water that curls around the northwest rim of Havana. Nevertheless, the Malecón is Havana's premier open space, the city's "living room", the longest bench in the world and a place of refuge from the tropical heat where one can embrace the invigorating breeze. Fishermen wait with patience as children play amongst the limestone rocks splashing in the waves, as lovers enjoy the setting sun, as mid-century Studebakers speed on by and tourists gawk with their cameras. The Malecón has become the image of Havana, as well as "a magnet that has always possessed an attraction that was hard to equal"¹, as Graham Greene remarked in 1958 of Havana:

"The long city lay spread along the open Atlantic; waves broke over the Malecón and misted the windscreens of cars. The pink, grey, yellow pillars of what had once been the aristocratic quarter were eroded like rocks; an ancient coat of arms, smudged and featureless, was set over the doorway of a shabby hotel, and the shutters of a nightclub were varnished in bright crude colors to protect them from the wet and salt of the sea. In the west the steel skyscrapers of the new town rose higher than lighthouses into the clear February sky."

— Graham Greene, "Our Man in Havana," 1958

On the south side of the Malecón is Old Havana, with its spectacular Spanish colonial architecture. Some of the buildings retain their grandeur, others have been renovated in admirable fashion, and yet others, which houses ordinary Cubans, are in a state of obvious disrepair. On the north side of the Malecón lies the ocean. Its vastness at times generates a defensive response of the past battles, flanked by a hill-top fort evoking memories of invading pirates and Spanish Galleons. But at other times the waves solicit adventure, holding out the promise of opportunities that could be immense, even if yet

unknown and fraught with danger. The Malecón as the face of Havana has become the point of reference for its citizens and the wandering stranger, a remarkable place where form and content participate in a dialectic dance. This coastal promenade, the Malecón supports an ongoing, interactive conversation that reflects the socio-political conditions of Cuba's culture. This discussion will examine three elements of the Malecón's existence: the Revolution's impact on the Malecón's physical form, the Revolution's social control of space, and the symbolic events of everyday life on the Malecón.

In the eighteenth-century, the area that is now occupied by the Malecón was kept clear of structures and used for farming and military use. The land also served as a buffer zone between the city and the encroaching sea, and eventually evolved into a pleasant walkway for citizens seeking refuge from the confinement of Havana. By the middle of the eighteenth-century, people had discovered its inherent beauty and airiness, which acted to invigorate all who walked along its shores.² In the first part of the nineteenth-century, buildings were built along San Lazaro, a street directly parallel to the Malecón. The buildings along this street were constructed with their backs facing the waterfront, as the punishing waves of the Florida Straits often washed over the shore and reached the backdoor. By the end of the nineteenth-century, buildings were constructed along the Malecón. In many cases, the backs of San Lazaro buildings were given a seaward entrance as the character-defining arcade connecting all of the structures was created. In 1901, during U.S. military occupation, the work continued with the plan to construct a waterfront boulevard along the shore. The Malecón would continue to grow throughout the twentieth-century to become an integral pedestrian and automobile corridor linking the expanding western and eastern portions of the city of Havana.³

The Malecón does not exist without drawbacks, however. The pounding of the sea waves permeates the boulevard and wears away at the original buildings. As early as 1937, a journalist describing the situation wrote: "To a spectator's eye, the number of fading buildings, lacking paint or totally neglected,

was not small."⁴ Between this time and the early 1950s, the road became congested with automobiles and was an increasingly undesirable place to take a stroll. However, the Malecón in the 1950's was internationally renowned as a tourist destination which was promoted as a tropical paradise and place to gamble where the tourist was tempted to "sin in the sun."⁵ Havana and its "shining face" the Malecón embodied the worst of capitalist development: corruption, vice, prostitution, and a glaring disparity among social classes.⁶ Likewise, the Malecón's most important engagement with history occurred on January, 8 1959.⁷ The victorious Rebel Army emerged from the Sierra Maestra Mountains and marched into Havana. The Habaneros, surprised, curious and admiring, witnessed their arrival as the masses paraded down the Malecón to celebrate the triumph of the Cuban Revolution.⁸

Since the Revolution in 1959, buildings along the stretch have become overcrowded suffering greatly from a lack of maintenance and care. The sidewalk is studded with potholes, the seawall crumbling away. In central Havana, the Malecón's colorful rows of balconied nineteenth and early twentieth-century buildings are falling in disrepair from the neglect of the Revolution's ideology. The Revolution's social relations inform the spatial relations that can be decoded to make some assumptions about group norms, shared goals and values that govern social behavior and organization.⁹ The Revolution's ideology can be read from the piles of rubble, to the heaps of bricks, and the fallen walls that have collapsed onto the sidewalks of the Malecón, left to become as much a part of the landscape as the colonial facades, themselves.

For the first three decades the Revolutionary government prioritized rural development over urban improvement. The countryside alliance developed as a direct result of the interaction between the peasants in the years of the struggle in the Sierra Maestra.¹⁰ The ideological foundation for the Revolution's support of the countryside translated into a condemnation of Havana in terms of economic development and city maintenance. The new socialist leadership perceived Havana as a parasite that had been draining the island's resources for centuries.¹¹ The city was being neglected and the Nicaraguan priest Ernesto Cardenal, while visiting Havana in 1968, made the following notes in his diary: "*The houses of Havana, rundown, paint peeling. Mud covered trucks; and the broken down buses, with rotten floorboard. "Havana is an afflicted city," someone said. "No public works are in progress. All the progress is in the town and in the country. The used to call Havana the brothel of the Caribbean, and it is a city that the Revolution is still punishing."*¹²

The testaments of the Revolutions speak in the faded facades—ranging in style from Neo-Gothic to Renaissance to Art-Deco that line the Malecón.¹³ Havana's seafaring boulevard was not a priority because the Malecón symbolized a bourgeois and exploitative past. The physical neglect of the socio-political

aspirations of the prevailing ideology in Havana is represented in the decaying forms along the Malecón. The space along the Malecón becomes a message, a product of many processes that is informed by the Revolutionary content and then animated through the physical form.¹⁴ Within this ideological construction, the Malecón dilapidation affirmed Revolutionary aspirations. The Revolution's beliefs dismissed the city as a space to spark revolution, as Fidel proclaimed in 1967, "It is absurd and almost criminal...to try to direct guerillas from the city."¹⁵ There was thus an ideological and political basis for disregarding the city and supporting the countryside.

The Revolutionary aspirations not only neglected the buildings on the Malecón but also altered the social contours of its street. The Malecón activities are socially controlled and regulated by the state. Police are everywhere, patrolling every street, every corner, and every plaza to provide the social control for the Revolutionary government. The Revolutionary government put into place the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (CDR), in 1960 as a system of neighborhood vigilance for counter-revolutionary activity. The CDRs have become "the savior of the revolution"; others cry out that they are a "big brother spy network".¹⁶ Essentially, they are a comprehensive neighborhood watch system to guard against counter-revolutionary activity and to help develop Revolutionary enthusiasm. The CDR's system is aimed to bind neighbors together in a "grass-roots" structure to promote the community of each individual block. The CDRs keep a detailed register of each neighborhood's inhabitants, not only listing each occupant by house, but also recording such information as academic or work history, spending habits, any potentially suspicious behavior, any contact with foreigners and their attendance at pro-government meetings.¹⁷ The CDRs host numerous neighborhood projects to promote the Revolution's aspirations: the regular sweeping of the streets every Sunday, setting up of amplifiers, TV's and radios to broadcast political speeches, holding special parties and organizing recreational activities.¹⁸ These activities of the CDRs are held in the streets of every neighborhood. It is this political stage that spills out onto the Malecón and cultivates Revolutionary zeal.

The Socialist government deploys both formal and informal systems of control to enact the Revolution's ideology. It is a system of symbols and constructed meanings that are used by the government to establish and sustain relations of domination. The signs of Revolution and the images of the past heroes are prevalent throughout Cuba reinforcing the government's creed. The Malecón host the monuments of Jose Martí, their national hero; the images of Che, the guerilla fighter; and along with many other political billboards promoting the Revolutions ideals. The spaces are entrenched with political propaganda to reinforce and assert control over the censored public. The Malecón defines the relationships of the individual and the CDRs, of that between citizens and the authority of the state as it reveals and reinforces Cuba's identity.

Yet amongst all this social control the citizens of Havana continue to thrive in the spirit of everyday life. The Malecón becomes a theatrical event, a permanent spectacle that allows the citizens to engage in their own space; to produce their own space. Henri Lefebvre remarked, a "revolution that does not produce a new space has not realized its full potential; indeed it has failed in that it has not changed life itself."¹⁹ The Malecón supports everyday life and is likewise a site of meaningful social resistance. The socio-political relationships are expressed on the Malecón which transform everyday life. The Malecón becomes the physical existence of the content: the built expression of the content relations, whereas the content is the totality of socio-political conditions that produce the space. The content is not in itself something to which form adheres from the outside.²⁰ Rather, through its development, the socio-political conditions, gives birth to the space which is already latent in the content. Therefore, the Malecón necessarily grows from the multiple interrelations between their space, their culture, their Revolution and the interactions of the people themselves.²¹ There can be no content without a form, no ideology without a space which it refers to, nor form without content, and no space without an ideology it represents. The production of space occurs between the unity of content and form on the "shining face" of Havana.

The Malecón continues to display the rhythms of everyday life: the contrasting forces of content and form frame a new narrative that embodies and exemplifies the meaning of Havana. It is here on the Malecón that Cuban history is made visible and where the conversation begins to speak of the future. As Guy Debord remarks, the "Revolution is not showing life to the people, but making them live."²² The Malecón continues to be the place to let one live and escape the harsh realities of the evolving horizon. The interaction of content and form is illuminating as the spatial discourse of the Malecón conveys Cuba's social relations. Furthermore, the Malecón continues to provide insights into the relationships among politics, culture and space in a small socialist state struggling to reconcile conflicting realities. The seaside promenade, a kaleidoscope of unfolding dramas, and the Corinthian colonnades ravaged to the bone, and the buildings with their old stories, as the ghost of yesterday flows through the open doorways into the vistas of urban poetry. The endless sea and the setting sun lies to the north as the south becomes anchored in past stories of human aspirations. The Malecón's greatest attribute is its beauty and the feeling of tranquility that is present at the limit of things, always drawing attention to where they end. As content transcends form on the "Face of Havana" I want to conclude with some words from Mario Coyula:

*"Havana has endured many difficult tests in its long history, some apparently terminal, and has come out bruised but graceful. Because, in the end, the shared complicity which time imposed layer by layer has woven a thick mesh of relations and meanings which transcend the facades to include the people who mill along the streets without ever needing to look up to know their lifelong companion of dreams remain stubbornly in place, peeling, staggered, eroded by salt and water, marvelous and incredibly alive, still useful. A city that no longer is, but continues being. Havana for ever, forever my Havana."*²³

"A revolution of forms is a revolution of essentials."
Jose Marti

- ¹ Greene, Graham. *Our Man in Havana*. New York: Penguin Books, 1958.
- ² El Malecón de la Habana: un Proceso de Transformación y de Cooperación. (CiudadCity, 1998), 10.
- ³ Ibid.
- ⁴ Valencia, Marleys. *Granma Internacional*, October 24, 2001.
- ⁵ Coyula, Mario and Roberto Segre, Joseph L. Scarpaci. *Havana: Two faces of the Antillean Metropolis*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1997.
- ⁶ Scarpaci, Joseph L. *Reshaping Habana Vieja: Revitalization, Historic Preservation, and Restructuring in the Socialist City*. *Urban Geography* 2001.21.8.
- ⁷ Luis, Rolando. *Cuban Review*, No.77, October 2001.
- ⁸ Ibid.
- ⁹ Gottdiener, M. *The Social Production of Urban Space*, 2nd ed. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1994.
- ¹⁰ Capello, Ernesto. *The Havana Street as Political Discourse, 1959-1975. The rural peasants helped Fidel and the Guerrillas Rebels in Eastern Cuba, in the Sierra Maestra Mountains that lead to the defeat of Batista's National Army*.
- ¹¹ Scarpaci, Joseph L. *Reshaping Habana Vieja: Revitalization, Historic Preservation, and Restructuring in the Socialist City*. *Urban Geography* 2001.21.8.
- ¹² Cardenal, Ernesto. *In Cuba*, translated by Donald D. Walsh. New York: Bellantine Books, 1961.
- ¹³ Anderson, James. *Havana's Malecon Getting a Facelift*. Associated Press, December 24, 1999.
- ¹⁴ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- ¹⁵ Castro, Fidel. *Those who are not Revolutionary fighters cannot be called communist: March 13, 1967*. New York: Merrit Publishers, 1968.
- ¹⁶ Capello, Ernesto. *The Havana Street as Political Discourse, 1959-1975*.
- ¹⁷ Rosendahl, Mona. *Inside the Revolution: Everyday Life in Socialist Cuba*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997.
- ¹⁸ Fagen, Richard R. *The Transformation of Political Culture in Cuba*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1969.
- ¹⁹ Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. New York: Random House, 1965.
- ²⁰ Rubin, Isaac Illich. *Essays on Marx's Theory of Value*. Moscow: Black Rose Books, 1996.
- ²¹ Gottdiener, M. *The Social Production of Urban Space*, 2nd ed. Austin: The University of Texas Press, 1994.
- ²² Debord, Guy. *The Society of the Spectacle*. Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1994.
- ²³ Coyula, Mario and Roberto Segre, Joseph L. Scarpaci. *Havana: Two faces of the Antillean Metropolis*. West Sussex: John Wiley & Sons Ltd, 1997.