

# Havana in the Decade of the '90s

## Last Images of the City

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### I. INTRODUCTION

The image of Havana defined during the '90s, could be summarized in the following concepts:

- The recovery of wide sectors of the city for new ends that they don't always coincide with their original vocation. Example of they could be the tourism in Old Havana or the commercial, financial and administrative activities, in Miramar. Both sectors were conceived in their origins for residential use.
- The real estate development, favored by the Law of Foreign Investment, through isolated buildings in attractive areas of the city, fundamentally in the municipalities Playa and Plaza de la Revolución.
- The increment of the deterioration of central areas whose residential character, inadequacy of the technical nets – transports, aqueduct and sewer system, among others – and not well technical state of the constructions, they didn't allow to execute a rehabilitation program sustained by the foreign capital, like it has happened in other neighborhoods of the city.
- The remodeling of buildings, or part of them, for new services that operate in foreign currencies as oil stations, bank agencies, corporations or mixed agencies, gastronomic units and commercial centers, among others.
- The increment of remodeling, additions and repairs in private housing.
- The indiscriminate appearance of kiosks for private or governmental use.

In the beginnings of 1990, after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the rising disappearance of the European socialist field, an economic constriction began in our country denominated Special Period in Time of Peace. The crisis that caught us during these years had to find solutions to reorient the national economy with our own resources and at the same time to be able to face the competitive demands of insert in the world market. The development of the international tourism, taking advantage in first instance the natural resources that our

geographical position offers us gratuitously, and in second, the possibility to increase the hotel infrastructure and services to tourist with foreign support, has been the impelled variant for the government and its official institutions. Another solution that has energized the national economy in the decade was the Law of the Foreign Investment, approved in 1995. This law authorizes investments in housing, offices and tourism, through mixed societies constituted between Cuba and a foreign entity in which both parts contribute a percentage of the capital.

Another measure, of internal character, that helped to mitigate the effects of end of the socialist field in our country, was the authorization to exercise in a private way a series of occupations or activities. Some of them with a sensitive incidence in the urban image, for example, rent of rooms to foreigners, cafeterias, and "Paladares".

While part of the city, coincident with the north area of the county, shows a constructive movement to satisfy the space demands of new activities, the deterioration of the environmental quality in the sectors not favored by foreign investments or for national development programs, evidences the necessity to take very urgent measures if we want to save a good number of constructions and neighborhoods of architectural and environmental value.

This contradiction between Havana's north and south, will be one of the challenges more difficult of facing in next years to try to conserve our city with all its patrimonial values and with the character that has been fomented in the different neighborhoods and allotments along five centuries of constructions. Regrettably, the whole constructive potential that has spread in this last decade has not been to benefit or to increase the architectural values of Havana. On the other hand, the improvement of the constructive actions of particular character in housings has evidenced the faulty urban control in the city. When being mobilized the internal economy, some families have increased their revenues ostensibly, and for Cubans it is very important to have a beautiful and orderly house. For this

reason, one of the aspects that first the economic resources are used is in "to improve" the housing. However, when not existing sources of information or orientation and when having been weakened sensibly in last decade the urban control at level of the community, each one decides what to make with their own housing. As a result of that, lot of works of great architectural value has been modified in an irreversible way.

## II. NEW BUILDINGS

Great quantity of new works has risen during the years 90s, overalls if we compare the number of these with that built along three previous decades. Regrettably, most of that built has not been good. They have moved to our context foreign fashions that little contribute to the national culture. At the same time that the control has fallen about the architectural quality of the projects, the appropriate scale for works to be inserted in neighborhoods characterized by traditional codes has been forgotten.

### Architecture "of outside"

One of the first examples of new incorporate buildings to the traditional city was the **Cohiba hotel**, finished in 1994 and located in the important intersection of Paseo and 1st. street in El Vedado. This hotel is the fruit of an imported project that anything has to do with our constructive traditions. It appears like a concrete mass and dark glasses alternated in horizontal tapes. The ground level has a terrible solution in the corner of Paseo and 3rd. street, with a blind wall after a stairway, in what should be one of the main entrances to the hotel.

**Galerías de Paseo** (1998), a shopping center located in the same intersection of the Cohiba hotel, is another example of cheap and commercial architecture that repeats everywhere of the current world. Facades of dark glasses, weak volumes, metallic marquee, they are the main elements that characterize this work. Their plant is organized around a central patio, however the best views in the same one – that could have been taken advantage of with a terrace – they are blocked by *Floralia*, an useless store of plastic plants that most of the time remains it empties. The snub image of this building, contrasts with the scale of the context, at the same time it wastes the possibilities of the spectacular corner in which is located in front of the sea.

### "Ar-kitsch-ecture"

After a long period of stop in the building design, it was logical to suppose a certain disorientation as for the aesthetic parameters to continue for new buildings. In many cases, the opinion of a foreign investor has constituted the design line

approved without having been kept in mind the particular and exceptional characteristics of our architectural environment.

One of the examples of this situation is the **Parque Central Hotel**, building of a strong presence, located in an environment of high urban and architectural quality. Dissimilar elements characterize the architecture of their incoherent facades: domes, arches, marquees, balconies. The flimsy iron grills that limit the balconies of the building, contrast in a negative way with their monumental facades. On the other hand, the connection of this hotel with its environment, is difficult to understand: In more than 100 meters of facades toward the streets Prado and Zulueta, two axes of an intense pedestrian movement, access doors, neither services don't exist toward the public road.

The interior design, elaborated by a Spanish office, tries to be inserted in the Havana eclectic architecture, but in fact it was very below its neighbors built in the first decades of the 20th century. The low scale of the mezzanine are inappropriate for a lobby of so big dimensions: the two colonial windows with lathed balustrades that flank the entrance area, are in extreme kitsch, an uncentered interior patio and a fountain ornamented with stones, complete the inappropriate scenery. It had been more appropriated for that important corner, a respectful building of the surrounding means and contemporary lines, instead of the bad copy that it constitutes this hotel.

The **Montecarlo Palace** was the first one, but not the last one, of the new buildings that come to complete the Fifth Avenue of Miramar. With an image between eclectic and postmodern, it recaptures the formal elements of the domestic architecture of the years twenty that are reiterated in the built landscape of that important area, but that they don't fit with our times.

### Gigantism

If something characterizes the Havana's traditional architecture it is the measured scale of their constructions. Until the National Capitol, our more monumental work of all the times, built to demonstrate the magnificence of Gerardo Machado's government, makes balance among its dissimilar elements. Its designers made to surround it of wide gardens and to remodel the vial environment, to avoid attack in excess the urban means in that it is located. However, another tendency that is appreciated in some works of the decade of the 90s is its enlarged magnitude.

One of the few areas that even remained free at the beginning of the decade, was **Montebarreto** that, located to the west of the city, was kind of a paradise crossed by the Fifth Avenue of Miramar. The urban project that was carried out for this area contemplated the hotel and offices development. The **Miramar Hotel**, (Raúl González Romero, 2000) is one of the first works

finished in this new development and it responds to the monumentality that were preset in the project. This hotel produces a disconcerting contrast with the urban image that is defined along the journey for the Fifth Avenue, road in which the domestic scale of the constructions stays uniform for more than seven kilometers and alone it is interrupted abruptly by the surprising embassy of the old Soviet Union, built in 1988. The enormous urban complex projected for Montebarrreto, comes to be integrated to the aesthetics of the embassy and it minimizes the architectural codes that prevail in the neighborhood. In this area were built – and are under construction – other hotels with the same monumental presence as the **Meliá Habana** (Abel Garcí a, 1998) and the **Panorama** (Roberto Caballero y otros, under construction)

In Montebarrreto also the **Miramar Trade Center** was located, group of 16 same buildings, of rectangular plant and six floors of height, projected by the Canadian firm Zeidler Roberts Partnership. Although this project avoids the resource of the so used glass boxes, not very appropriate solution to our tropical climate, and it uses square volumes discomposed for the treatment of facades, 16 same blocks, it seems excessive.

In other areas of the city they can seem equally giant buildings of five or six plants, if these are inserted in a residential urban fabric in which the constructions don't exceed the two plants, like in the allotments Nuevo Vedado or Siboney, for only to mention two examples with potential areas of filler and in which buildings have already been located that transform in a negative way the scale of the place.

### III. REHABILITATIONS AND RESTORATIONS

One of the main constructive activities carried out in the decade of the ninety has been the recovery of existent buildings, by means of the rehabilitation, the restoration or other similar actions. These actions have played an important paper in the rescue of the urban image, and they have allowed to lengthen the life to buildings of great value in danger of disappearing. The Office of the Historian of the City, has been the main character of these activities inside the territory of Old Havana and, in smaller measure, in other areas of the capital.

Numerous works of this category have returned to the city constructions that were practically missing. Among them they stand out, the hotels **Santa Isabel** (Eldris Miranda, 1996), **Tejadillo** (Adalberto Mesa and Emilio Hidalgo, 2000), **Florida** (Lina Alba Díaz and others, 1999) and **Comendador**, (Miriam Acosta, 2000); the Commercial Center **Harris Brothers** (Rafael Palli, 1998); **Carlos III Market** (Humberto Ramírez, 1999), and the theater **Amadeo Roldán**, in El Vedado, for only to mention some of them.

Other interventions of this category that are interesting are the **Film Cultural Center** of 23th. street between 10th. and 12th. (Oscar Ruiz de la Tejera, 1998); and the cafeteria – restaurant **A Prado y Neptuno** (Roberto Gottardi, 1999. Murals: Roberto Gottardi and Emilio Castro). In the first one, its author roofs part of the existent free area with a policarbonato vault that remembers the hangar for dirigibles designed by Freyssinet in the years twenty, and that it provides a fresh and welcoming atmosphere very to tone with the cultural function that there is carried out. The second, stand out for the fine exercise of interior design in that the architect surrenders homage to his favorite teachers and it reproduces with naturalness, elegance and creativity, furniture of Mackintosh and Phillip Starck; gigantic-graphics of Leichtenstein; ceramic tiles, stained glasses and roofs from Frank Lloyd Wright's style; and an underlying atmosphere that remembers Carlo Scarpa.

The rehabilitation of the **Hotel Habana Libre — Tryp**, begun in 1994 according to project of L & V International and the Company of Projects for Industries of the Basic (EPROB). It didn't constitute an outstanding example. The work included the modification and the enlargement of the rooms with the closing of the balconies; the placement of stairways against fires embedded to the facades; the demolition of the cabins in the swimming pool area and the construction of a "ranchón": the restructuring of the lobby with the modification of the original elements and the construction of an ornamental source that it interrupts the free circulation for the lobby, among other aspects. Although this rehabilitation included the reinstatement of Amelia Pelaez's mural in the facades of the hotel, one of the biggest achievements in this rehabilitation, the rest of the work of the external areas was also wronged.

Other important rehabilitation works that are still in execution are the **Pedro Borrás** hospital, and the hotels **Zaratoga**, **Packard** and **Great Hotel**, for only to mention some that attract our interest due to the big transformations that are made to the original works, all of architectural or at least environmental value.

The private sector has also had an important participation in the rehabilitation, and it has executed numerous works for particular initiative without professional advice. Although this it should be one of the effective ways for the rescue of the built patrimony, the economic resources in the most appropriate way have not always been invested. Irreversible modifications to valuable properties for ignorance and, overalls, for lack of control on the part of the competent authorities, have been frequently produced. Inside the private sector, the houses of **Petra Verdera** (Manuel Gutiérrez, 1957) and of **Cristina Abad** (Ricardo Porro, 1954), both in the Nuevo Vedado, constitute two examples of what should not be made: in 1995, their new proprietors attacked rehabilitation actions that modified the original attributes of both works, very outstanding exponents of the Cuban modern architecture. Another similar example was

the rehabilitation, in 1999, of **José Menéndez' house** (José Menéndez, 1938) that was transformed in kind of a carnival-esque coach after its new owner had added fences, grills, large wings and dark glasses. Similar results were obtained with the works of rehabilitation of the **Interests Section of the United States** (Caballero Architects, 1997) that included the remodeling of the building of the embassy and the adaptation for offices of the former **house of Santiago Claret**. Both interventions caused the irreparable loss of two valuable examples of modern architecture.

#### The syndrome of the "dark glasses"

One of the fashions that more has been extended in this period is the use of black window glasses in the facades. The image of the corporations, mixed companies, facilities for the foreign tourism and housings for strange personalities, it is invariably identified with the use of dark glasses in doors and windows.

The mentioned hotel Cohiba, it imposed us the dark glasses in its angular facades, including the windows of the stores that are in the ground floor, supposedly in the area of more contact with the public.

Maybe the crazier example of that limitless desire of placing dark glasses to the buildings, it has been the remodeling of the former **Núñez Bank** (CUBALSE, 1999). This bank, located in Fifth Avenue and 112, responds to a project of architects Max Borges and Félix Candela, and it was conceived as a glassed prism whose main facade was carefully placed toward the north, so that it was protected geographically of the sun during the whole year and it could exhibit without modesty some the brilliant structure conformed by two arrays of hyperbolic sustained individually by slender columns of square section. The project of remodeling of this building, among other modifications, included the closing of the main facade with dark glasses. After a lot of discussions among the investors with the Office for the Physical Planning and Architecture, the commitment arose on the part of the first ones, of always maintaining the lit lights inside the local so that the internal structure was appreciated, and the project was approved. Very questionable solution if we think about the energy problems confronts the country at the present time. Of course, the commitment was not completed, and one of the most creative spaces of our city has become a hard black box, without grace neither apparent function.

Endless they would be the examples, but for luck the glasses have limited life and any day will be the appropriate one to rectify this bad habit of placing dark glasses to the buildings.

#### IV. DEMOLITIONS

In the decade of the ninety the loss of three valuable constructions linked strongly with the development of the architectural and urban culture of the capital took place. The first of them, a former **restaurant located in Fifth Avenue and 36**, in Miramar (Mario A. Colli and Manuel Bahamonde, 1927) took place in 1999, due to the application of the land where it was pierced by a Real Estate Office, to build a residential complex occupying the resulting area of the demolition. This restaurant constituted one of the first examples of architecture art deco erected in our country. During several years the property was abandoned. Nevertheless, they were still appreciated the main characteristic ornamental elements of the style, what had allowed their rescue. The demolition was authorized in 1998, for ignorance of the values of the building.

At the beginning of the 2000 the demolition of the former **Carvajal Asylum**, in Marianao, the one that remained in a very bad state of repair for more than one decade and it had even served from quarry of construction materials to the neighbors of the place. The spoliation in this property produced fatal accidents what forced the local and provincial government to fence the place and to promote its demolition, in spite of having been a solid building that still allowed to be repaired.

The Asylum Carvajal was inaugurated in 1911, property of the Marquises of Pinar del Río. Manuel Carvajal, Marquis of Avilés and son of the Marquises of Pinar del Río, donated the property to the congregation Sisters of the Abandoned Old Men, in memory of their parents. The asylum occupied a wide land of approximately one hectare in the intersection of the street 114 and the avenue 43, in Marianao. In 1924, it was added in one of their patios an interesting neo-Gothic chapel, project from Esteban Rodríguez Castells, of the signature Morales and Co. This chapel possessed in its interior a group of multicolored stained glasses with topics religious, of invaluable artistic value.

Everything came it below after the devastating action of the implacable pillory that converted powdered one of the most valuable properties of the municipality Marianao, with potentialities of being rescued for a social use as the so deficit one in our county home of old men.

Another important work that it was disappearing for stages along the decade it was the old **Hotel Trotcha**, complex that possessed invaluable importance not only because or the architectural characteristics of the properties that conformed it, their gardens and ornamental elements, but also for that tied to the history of the neighborhood of El Vedado and of the city of Havana. The demolition of the Trotcha had begun in the decade of the eighty, after having been set on fire one of its blocks. In the ninety other two partial demolitions took place until finally the demolition was completed in the 2001, being nowadays alone some useless remains as loquacious testimony

of the lack of insensibility and culture that it even prevails in our society.

## V. THE PUBLIC SPACE

The main creation works or rehabilitation of public spaces of the decade of the '90s concentrate on the territory of Old Havana, product of the promoted investments and carried out by the Historian's Office. Among them we can point out:

- **Garden Diana from Wales.** Avenida del Puerto (D.I. Ernesto Marimón)
- **Garden María Teresa from Calcutta.** Ave. del Puerto and Churrucá (Daniel Taboada, 1998)
- **Park Obispo and Aguacate** (Alejandro Ventura and D. I. Pedro Luis Díez, 1999-2000)
- **Park Alejandro of Humboldt** (D.I. Ernesto Marimón)
- **La Punta** (Group PISAN and Roberto Caballero, 2000)
- **Garden of José Martí's house.** Paula corner to Egido (Ayleen Robainas, 1999)
- **Renovation of the Square of Arms**
- **Renovation of San Francisco's Square** (Ayleen Robainas, 1999)
- **Renovation of the Old Square** (Victor Marín and others, 1999)

Another great public space designed in the decade was the **Plaza Antimperialista José Martí**, in Malecón (Maykel Menéndez and Carmen Orquidea Álvarez, 2000), devised as tribune to carry out popular protests, in front of the Office of Interests of the United States and, mainly, like space to sum up the campaign of the boy's rescue Elián González. The design based on strong metallic arches, contrasts in a negative way with the characteristics of the built environment.

Nevertheless these projects, the Havana public space has not been favored by specific investments and but well it has been mistreated in this last decade. One of the main causes of this abuse is the scarce recognition that has this space as component of the urban context and of appraisalment of the urban land.

The public space, as it indicates it their name, it is that that doesn't belong to an owner in particular, but rather it is part of a collective of people. All those that we use in an and another way this space are entitled same on him, but we also have our duties.

It is good to remember that the public space is conformed, mainly, for the streets, the parterres and the sidewalks. On this

few doubts will have, but they also integrate this collective patrimony the facades of the buildings that give toward the exterior, the gardens and the portals, although these they belong to certain owner.

If we are entitled to traffic freely for a sidewalk, to shelter us of the low sun the trees of a parterre, to protect us of the rain in a public portal, we also have the duty of offering a harmonious facade, a taken care garden and an appropriate portal in view of those that circulate for the streets and avenues, although it is of our private use.

Any owner or lessee of an apartment, are free to modify the part of the facade that belongs him, ignoring the rest of the property in which is located and to damage in that way the totalitarian image of the building: any proprietor of a hotel, cafeteria, or another establishment, are free of closing the portal of collective use that faces him, in own benefit.

In Havana, the current use of the portals of the main commercial streets for salespersons self-employed, not alone it interrupts the step for these circulation areas, but rather it contributes to the general chaos that is appreciated in these areas by the lack of maintenance and of activities adapted in the low plants of buildings that formerly were occupied by trade and services. Of same way hotels like the Colina in El Vedado and Inglaterra in Old Havana, they have appropriated of the public portal of the installation and they impede the step for the place.

The closing and roofed of a garden it is not only a violation of the urban regulations and ordinances established for that area, but also of our civic duty of to preserve that part of the public space and not to transform it into a private area with an use for which was not conceived.

The location of kiosks in parterres and gardens is also another form of ignoring our obligations towards the preservation of the public space. This is as inadequate as the appropriation of a near street tract to a center of attraction of foreign currencies, for a "street owner" that appropriates of the asphalt and receive money for the parking.

On the other hand, the excessive use of grills, rails, bollards, bullets, etc. in areas of pedestrian traffic, dedicated to the tourism, transforms our welcoming city into an unpleasant and aggressive place, without keeping in mind the numerous accidents that they cause frequently by the crash of a distracted pedestrian with these elements unaware to the urban environment. In the last years, Old Havana has become impassable for the proliferation without control of these elements that more than to avoid the access of vehicles, they become an obstacle for the pedestrians.