

Western Havana

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At the end of the colonial period in Cuba, the urbanized territory of Havana extended approximately to the La Calzada de Infanta, with ramifications towards the southwest following the road to El Monte, to the south on both sides of the road to Jesus del Monte, and to the west with El Carmelo and El Vedado neighborhoods connected to the city via the urban railroad.

West of the Almendares river, at the intersection of the road to Vuelta Abajo and the road leading to the coast, some settled in what became the village of Quemados de Marianao. New settlements were established along the main thoroughfare, later named Calzada de Marianao. To the south, by the banks of the Quibú river, the nucleus of a rapidly expanding town developed. Because of the remarkable growth reached during the XIX century, in 1878 this town was given the official category of an independent municipality named Marianao.

The extensive area between the Calzada de Marianao and the coast remained practically uninhabited during the colonial period. In 1898 it was a territory crossed by small affluents of the Almendares and Quibú rivers and subdivided into numerous properties such as La Miranda, Barreto, Encarnación, San Salvador, El Recreo, Curazao, Buena Vista, San José, Pedrozo, and Constantina, many of which were delimited by stone fences. There were several quarries, roof-tile factories, and an oil factory near La Puntilla.¹ The area was crossed by several irregular roads and, after 1863, by the lines of the railroad that allowed a rapid connection with Concha, Tulipán, Cerro, Ciénaga, Puentes Grandes, La Ceiba, Buena Vista, Jesus María, and Los Quemados.¹ The Urban Railroad, inaugurated in 1859, did not have a route to Marianao, but the General Bus Company of Havana did have a regular itinerary to the area.

The urbanization and settlement of the territory, and the definition of the extension that has remained practically unchanged to the present, took place in the first decades of the XX century. This phenomenon was closely linked to the construction boom that took place in the capital, during which the area east of the Calzada de Infanta became densely built, driving the gradual settlement of El Vedado and, above all, the proliferation of suburban areas.

While Havana inherited from the colonial period renovated its image and extended toward the south and the west, the extensive coastal area west of the Almendares river became very attractive. The conversion of rustic properties in this area quickly gave rise to new urban zones.

Upon studying a map of western Havana that shows the juxtaposing networks with different orientations and dimensions, it is evident that urbanization of the territory occurred piecemeal. These neighborhoods appeared during several decades of speculative expansion, driven and materialized by land owners and developers. The areas near the coast were preferred by the wealthy, whereas the oldest areas located to the south, were occupied by people with fewer resources. This polarity differentiated the types of urbanization and architectural traits that distinguish the territory.

THE CAMP COLUMBIA

When the first military intervention by the United States began in 1898, the decision was made to build a military camp for use as the base for the troops in care of the western part of the country. For such purpose, specialists of the US army selected an extensive area to the north of Quemados de Marianao that included the properties San Salvador, Sabana de Magueyes or Barreto, La Gomera, El recreo de las tres rosas, La Soledad, Los Anones, and Jesus María.² A military order passed in 1902, established that the camp of Columbia, all of its surroundings, and other areas to be included in a future, would be part of the system of defense of the country.³

The decision to build the military camp of Columbia was a pivotal event in the urban evolution of the Marianao area. The first rural properties to be urbanized were those adjacent to the camp. Many of the first settlers were in fact military personnel with links to those facilities. The first of these properties to urbanize was Santa Catalina de Buena Vista, in 1902, followed

later in the decade by Benítez, Larrazabal and Jesus María, these latter three properties of Mr. Dino Pogolotti.⁴

NEW COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE CITY

The appearance of new means of communication within the city accelerated the urbanization of the territory west of the Calzada de Infanta. There is no doubt that the establishment of the streetcar was a significant step forward in this respect, and had an enormous impact on the urban and architectural development of the territory.

The first route of the streetcar for use by the people of Marianao opened in November of 1903, and linked Marianao with El Vedado. The route was built along what is today 31st Avenue, traversing a completely uninhabited area, undeveloped on both sides of the tracks. To build these railways it was necessary to use some lots of Nicanor del Campo and Federico Kholy in favor of the Insular Railway Company. This fact, far from harming the landlords, benefited them, because the value of their properties immediately increased. In 1903 Nicanor del Campo urbanized part of his properties and the Almendares neighborhood was formed. Their streets were designed parallel to the railways.⁵ The Columbia neighborhood was designed following the same format. As the possibilities of connection between Havana and Marianao progressed, the creation of new neighborhoods was fomented in the intermediate areas.

While this happened, the original nucleus of Marianao was also enlarged, and San José, an enlargement of Los Quemados and Pocitos neighborhoods, arose. On the other hand, several streets of local importance were lengthened to reach the Calzada de Marianao, to which sidewalks were added at this time. Gradually, the routes of the streetcars were also lengthened and their itineraries enhanced, creating opportunities for new urbanizations.

The first block of housings for workers, the Redención, was finished in 1911. It was located in the properties of Dino Pogolotti, treasurer of the Compañía Nacional Constructora, the entity that was awarded the contract to build the neighborhood.⁶

The construction of the Asbert bridge over the Almendares river in 1910, which pioneered the use of reinforced concrete in the country, was another factor that favored the growth of urban areas in the western territories. The Asbert bridge provided a quick and safe link with 23th Street in El Vedado, a function until then served by a poorly kept wooden structure. Additionally, the City council in many instances demanded that owners built roads within the development areas as a condition for authorizing such development. When the urbanization of the Buen Retiro neighborhood, south of Camp Columbia, was approved in 1912, the developers had to build a road

connecting the Calzada de Marianao with the Calzada de Columbia. This road is today 100th Street, a tree-lined avenue with a central separator, first of that type in the territory.⁷

In 1911, ranch La Miranda was parcelled to become the Miramar neighborhood. This neighborhood began to be populated around 1918, to some extent becoming an extension El Vedado as an area preferred by the well-off of the time.⁸ The grid of Miramar maintained the orientation of that of El Vedado, with 5th Avenue, the main axis of Miramar, serving as a continuation of Calzada Street, even though city blocks had different dimensions and proportions. The planners preferred to maintain that continuity with the network of El Vedado, very appropriate relative to the coast line, rather than extend the grid of neighboring Almendares. Hence the irregularity of the encounter of these two layouts.

Miramar was initially an exclusively residential neighborhood, in which building exceeding three stories were not allowed and, as in El Vedado, it was obligatory for homes to have a front porch and garden and be laterally separated by a corridor at least two and one half meters wide. The construction of apartment buildings was forbidden, as was the establishment of businesses in avenues parallel to the sea.⁹ With the passage of the time, although maintaining its image of select area within the city, the initial exclusivity of Miramar was perturbed by the influx of other sectors of the population, who occupied the numerous apartment buildings that began to proliferate in the 1940's. In addition, the southward expansion of the neighborhood did not include the large parks nor was as generous with green areas as the initial nucleus.

In 1914, the urbanization of the Ampliación de Almendares subdivision took place in lands that Mendoza and Company purchased from Nicanor del Campo. With the development of Ampliación de Almendares, 13th Street appeared, through which would later run the tram line.

Also in 1914, the exclusive Country Club subdivision was developed to the west of the river Quibú. In contrast to the grided urbanizations that had arisen until then, the Country Club had wide winding streets that shaped irregular city blocks of dimensions never before used in Havana, and of evident Anglo-Saxon origin.¹⁰

In 1916, a project was submitted for the construction of a large residential and amusement park in the area of the beaches of Marianao. After a controversial auction, the project was approved that same year. The project was an ambitious plan that envisioned a residential area and an extensive recreational area that did not materialize. In 1917, the link between the old nucleus of Marianao and the Country Club was established through the Gran Boulevard, today known as 147th Avenue.

THE FIRST POSTWAR PERIOD

After the end of the First World War many other subdivisions were quickly established in the territory, some of them extensions of existing subdivisions, La Sierra in 1916, Ampliación de Almendares in 1917, and Querejeta and Alturas del Almendares in 1918.¹¹ The latter, known as Kholy, was laid out with irregular and wide winding streets that fitted very well the uneven topography of the area adjacent to the river.

The iron bridge known as Puente de Pote was built in 1921 to connect 5th Avenue of Miramar with Calzada Street of El Vedado, further improving communications between the two neighborhoods and fostering the population of existing subdivisions. In 1924, the urbanization of Alturas de Miramar was approved, and a year later that of Playa de Miramar.

After the political crisis of 1933, the area's most noteworthy urbanistic projects were focused on the facilities of Camp Columbia. Following the military coup, the camp underwent a general reconstruction. Because of its status as the most important military facility in the country, the hierarchization of the main roads leading to the base was deemed necessary. It is not by coincidence that today's 41st Street, one of the main arteries traversing the area, was called Calzada de Columbia, and that the tract of Buen Retiro Street, today's 100th Street, from the Obelisk to Calzada de Marianao was for a time known as Columbia Avenue.

For the purpose of highlighting the significance of the military base, General Batista prioritized the remodeling of the streets and the construction of several monumental buildings in lands that originally belonged to Camp Columbia. As a result of Batista's plan, the area gained greatly in splendor and transitivity. Among the new buildings, the group around Plaza Finlay stands out, consisting of four similar buildings laid out around the Obelisk dedicated to the famous Cuban scientist. The Obelisk was designed by the architect Pérez Benitoa, who also executed the Military Hospital annex,¹² as well as other works commissioned by the government. The Obelisk stood at the center of a rotary that guided the flow of vehicular traffic.¹³

Also built on lands belonging to Camp Columbia were the Institute for Secondary Instruction, the Maternidad Obrera Hospital, the Marianao Police Headquarters, and the High Court of War. Groups of housing units for military officers, according to their rank, were also built along the Calzada de Columbia.¹⁴ The construction of these buildings took place concurrently with the remodeling of the area's streets, the Calzada de Columbia, in particular.

THE SECOND POSTWAR PERIOD

After the end of the Second World War, another boom in the number of allotments took place in the capital. The rapid adoption of the automobile as a means of transportation facilitated the development of new urbanizations in peripheral areas. Henceforth, the neighborhoods Alturas de la Salle, Alturas de Belén, Alturas del Bosque, Santa Felicia, Nautico, and Alturas de Marianao, among others, arose in Marianao in the late 1940's. These new urbanizations filled areas between already existing ones.

This process was linked to an effervescent building activity. It is estimated that by the end of the decade an average of three hundred houses were built every month.¹⁵ In 1949 the motto "Marianao, city that progresses" was coined, alluding to the building boom. But the urbanistic norms requiring the creation of open areas and public buildings were not met in these new subdivisions, many of them becoming endless successions of "little houses with gardens."

In 1950, the process of facing out the tram services began, giving way to the urban bus as the main form of public transportation. Thirty first Avenue, formerly 9th Street, became a wide artery of vehicular circulation, which brought forth numerous building projects along its length. During those years, 41st Avenue, the old Calzada de Columbia, was remodeled a tract at a time,¹⁶ and the length of other important avenues such as Consulado Street, today's 60th Street, Paseo September 4, today's 124th Street, the Gran Boulevard and Luisa Quijano, today 147th and 130th, respectively, was increased.

The completion of the tunnel connecting Calle Linea of El Vedado and 31st Avenue in 1950 further improved communications across the Almendares river. This was followed, in 1959, by the completion of the tunnel linking Calzada of El Vedado with Miramar's 5th Avenue.

In 1956, the 19th century tradition of identifying the streets of the municipality with personal names of diverse origin, some of which were changed as time went on, was replaced by a more uniform system. For example, today's 45th Avenue was called Dolores and later Steinhard; 114th Street was first called Dominguez and later General Lee; 124th Street was called Paseo de la Reina and later Pasco September 4; 118th Street was called Principe de Asturias and later Adolfo Castillo. The preference in the majority of the new neighborhoods was to identify the streets with letters or numbers, each adopting its own particular sequence. Hence, streets were assigned the numerals 1, 3, 5, and so on, in Almendares, Ampliación de Buenavista, or Miramar, and the letters A, B, C, etc., in Buenavista, Almendares, Buen Retiro, and others.

The new identification system resolved the existing chaotic situation by requiring in all cases the use of even or odd

numbers according to orientation, trying to achieve continuity both east to west and north to south, as much as the characteristics of the existing layout permitted. It was also established that streets and avenues be assigned even and odd numbers, respectively. Of the previous nomenclature only that used in Miramar remained unchanged, since it fitted well with the new system adopted by the rest of the territory.

The area west of the Almendares river took shape through successive additions of new neighborhoods, without a plan that regulated and ordered its growth. The most important roads crossing the area acquired their importance accidentally rather than by design. These roads are today's 31st, 41st, and 51st Avenues. Fifty first Avenue evolved from the primitive road that linked the city of Havana with Vuelta Abajo, and was known in the 19th century as the Calzada de Marianao. The path traced today by 31st Avenue was established in 1903, by the first line of the tram that linked Marianao with El Vedado. Today's 41st Avenue was conceived in 1902 as a road to connect El Vedado with Camp Columbia, hence its original name of Calzada de Columbia. The importance of these avenues increased over the years, and successive modifications were carried out in tune with the hierarchy they attained. The 5th Avenue of Miramar is one of the longest and most important roads traversing the area. It was defined in 1911, when Miramar was being parcelled and, unlike those mentioned above, was meant to be a main street that from its inception received the urbanistic treatment befitting this role. As urban development spread west along the coast, 5th Avenue retained its character as the backbone of the new urbanizations and continued to allow rapid vehicular access to the area.

AFTER 1959

The triumph of the revolutionary movement in 1959 halted the development of new urbanizations in the territory. Building activity was geared to the refuncionalization of numerous buildings, in the context of which the conversion of Camp Columbia into the educational center Ciudad Escolar Libertad stands out. A large number of residences located in until then exclusive subdivisions were transformed into boarding schools. The private clubs on the beaches underwent a similar transformation, becoming recreation centers for the workers.

The constructive activity was geared mainly to the creation of educational, health, sports, and recreational centers. Emphasis was also placed on meeting the housing needs of the populations, a task initially undertaken by the INAV, which produced the so-called "buildings of Pastorita," and later by construction brigades known as "microbrigadas."

Among the educational centers built in the western territory, there are two paradigmatic works of the Cuban architecture in the second half of the 20th century: the School of Art of

Cubanaacán, built on the golf courses of the Country Club, and the University City José Antonio Echeverría, CUJAE, built farther south, next to the old Toledo sugar refinery, the only facility of its kind that existed in the capital.

As new educational centers were built that fully met the requirements for such an end, many of the converted old residences were refuncionalized once again and became research centers, offices for foreign diplomats, embassies, or state offices. Some of these research centers constituted the embryo of the so-called Polo Científico that was established to the west of the territory beginning in the 1980s, whose main precedent was the construction of the National Center for Scientific Research, CENIC, built in the mid 1960s.

The economic changes that took place in the country in the early 1990s greatly influenced the utilization and development of the area, especially Miramar and other parts of today's Playa municipality. The old residences were again refurbished to become offices of foreign companies now allowed to do business in the country, or in stores where goods were sold for hard currency, among many other functions stemming from the newly introduced economic measures.

Increased investment in the tourist industry, both foreign and national, fueled the construction of hotels near the coast. The once solitary Tritón Hotel, built in the late 1970s, is now surrounded by several new facilities, some already completed and others still in various stages of execution. The new hotels show a very diverse profile in terms of typology and design level.

THE FUTURE

Many opportunities and challenges await the Havana of the West in the new century. The future is known for its ability to escape the control of the best planners, and its inscrutability is legendary. It is a crucial task of today's historians and educators to instill in the new generations of urban planners and architects the awareness of the area's history and the respect for the work of past generations. Respect for the city and its values should prevail over the interests of individuals. Above all, we must clearly understand that the preservation of our history is a service to ourselves and future generations, and a contribution to our culture.

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³ Inclán Lavastida Fernando, *Historia de Marianao*, Publisher El Sol, La Habana, 1952.

⁴ Map of Finca Bénéitez, Propiedad de de Dino Pogolotti y H. L. Norfleet, Abril 1903.

⁵ Map of Reparto de población Almendares. "La Molina" y "La Meléndez". Nicanor del Campo y Diez., 1903.

⁶ Bay Sevilla Luis, "Porqué la barriada obrera de Pogolotti fue un fracaso", *Arquitectura*, jan. 1941, pag. 30-35

⁷ Map of Finca Buen Retiro, Propietario Lucio Betancourt y José A. Cabarga, Proyecto de Reparto, Sep. 1911.

⁸ Map of Reparto Miramar, Vedado Nuevo, 1918.

⁹ "Las condicionales del reparto Miramar y Alturas de Miramar", *Arquitectura*, La Habana, mai. 1945, pag. 162.

¹⁰ Map of Country Club Park, mach. 1919

¹¹ Inclán Lavastida Fernando, *Historia de Marianao*, Publisher El Sol, La Habana, 1952.

¹² Map of Hospital Militar y terrenos hasta calle Santa Rosa, 1943.

¹³ Viejo José Antonio, "Obras de mejoramiento urbanístico", *Arquitectura*, sep. 1943, pag. 361.

¹⁴ Map of Reparto "Cabo Justo Machín", Casas para sargentos, 1938.

¹⁵ Inclán Lavastida Fernando, *Historia de Marianao*, Publisher El Sol, La Habana, 1952.

¹⁶ Maps of Proyecto de reconstrucción de la avenida 4 de septiembre (Calzada de Columbia) desde Avenida de la Victoria al Puente Asbert. Plano de Proyecto de reconstrucción de la avenida 4 de septiembre (Calzada de Columbia) desde calle 14 hasta Avenida de la Victoria.

NOTES

¹ Herrera Sorzano Mercedes, *Los transportes habaneros. Estudios históricos*, Instituto de Investigaciones del Transporte, La Habana, 1990, tomo II

² Map of Fincas Sabana de Maguayo Barreto, San Salvador, El recreo de las tres rosa. La Gomera, Los Anones y Jesús María.