

# Globalization and Regional Architecture in Havana: Between Homogenization and Local Creativity

HEATHER WOOFER  
JOSEPH SCARPACI  
KAY EDGE  
Virginia Tech

*The city, however, does not tell its past but contains it like the lines of a hand.*  
*Italo Calvino, Invisible Cities*

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this paper is to sketch out some defining features of late 20th century architecture as part of a broader process of architectural uniformity that we define as globalization. Our examples come from Havana and our selection of buildings – from the tourist industry – underscore the tensions inherent in promoting local spaces and culture, while appeasing an international clientele that seeks comfort in familiar forms of design. To anchor the discussion empirically, we draw on selected buildings in Havana that reflect the rise of tourism during the Republican era (1898-1958) and the 1990s. Both periods reflect the island's insertion in the world economy at unprecedented paces: in the former, Cuba was emerging from extensive Independence Wars in the late 19th century. In the latter, Cuba reemerged in the world market after the demise of the Soviet bloc, embarking upon what has come to be called the 'Special Period in a Time of Peace.' We begin by interrogating the idea of regionalism in architecture.

## THE QUESTION OF REGIONALISM

Since Kenneth Frampton's 1983 article, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Architecture of Resistance," regionalism has been considered an opposing force to the homogenizing trends of globalism. In that essay and the subsequent essay "Ten Points on an Architecture of Regionalism: a Provisional Polemic," Frampton argues for a critical

regionalism, a consideration of the particularities of a place such as quality of light, traditional building technique, local materials and practices, and topography, that at the same time rejects nostalgic reconstructions of the vernacular architecture of a region. He seeks a middle ground between returning to traditions that no longer have meaning, and giving in to relentless and frenzied modernization. It is the paradox that Paul Ricoeur addressed in *History and Truth*: "how to become modern and to return to sources; how to revive an old, dormant civilization and take part in universal civilization." (Ricoeur 1965, 247)

Frampton was writing many years before the terms globalism and globalization were part of the scholarly lexicon, well before they were considered subjects of serious study. Globalism and regionalism in fact are symbiotic in many ways; the forces of globalization simultaneously fragment and unify the world. The binary opposition of regionalism/globalism may not be a useful one. (Dirlik 2000) Tourism, as a form of globalism that has been around from the beginning, presents this curious condition of interdependence – of containing and actually depending upon regionalism and cultural identity within the larger context of globalism. Tourism in turn, is dependent upon image-making and marketing. Manuel Castells has called image-making a necessity for competitiveness and profitability in the current economic and cultural climate. (Castells 1994) Images and travel together are largely responsible for the time-space compression that characterizes globalization. (Lash/Urry 1994) The tourist gaze is all, and all that is solid melts into image. (Berman 1982) Regrettably, efforts by urban designers, planners, politicians, and architects to perfect that tourist gaze produced the greatest amount of architectural destruction in the 20th century than any period in history (Hall 1988)

Recent post-colonial studies have questioned the idea of regionalism and this marketing of an image and culture that may, on closer examination, turn out to be falsely constructed. For Colquhoun, regional architecture is more a product of wishful thinking. The authenticity pursued by those who would make regional architecture can only ever be re-conceptualized and re-presented regardless of whether this "authentic thing" ever existed in the first place. He says: "the use of local materials, sensitivity to context, scale and so on would all be so many ways of representing "the idea" of an authentic, regional architecture. The search for absolute authenticity that the doctrine of regionalism implies is likely to create an oversimplified picture of a complex cultural situation." He argues that while regionalism is supposed to preserve difference, it is not any longer possible to "correlate cultural codes with geographical regions." (Nalbantoglu/Wong 1997, 8)

With specific regard to Cuba, Rosalie Schwartz's description of the marketing of *cubanidad* to tourists as early as the 1920s justifies Colquhoun's suspicion and eventual rejection of regionalism. Schwartz says: "Contrived entertainment? Blatantly and unapologetically so. ...Promotional materials portrayed an exotic, erotic, yet familiar island: Spanish food, quaint natives, Afro-Cuban music and dance, romantic moonlight, sensuous women, golf, tennis, country clubs, and racetracks. Cubans modified traditional culture, altered customary behavior, and when necessary, invented new experiences, such as sun worship ceremonials. Cubans stitched together a marketable cultural identity from bits and pieces of island life." (Schwartz 1997, 75) Americans became curious about the new-found possessions and war booty taken from the Spanish-American War. Photographs, especially those by the Detroit Publishing Company (available at the Library of Congress) and the U.S. Official photographer assigned to the Chief Engineer, Division of Cuba, Havana, during the U.S. military occupation of the island (1889-1902) led to what Bretos (1996) called the "imaging of Cuba under the American flag." These photographs became powerful allures in the minds of an American middle class that was gradually enjoying the benefits and privilege of affordable leisure travel. Cuba was billed as the "Paris of the Antilles" as early as 1923, but the built environment paled to such claims (Schwartz 1997, 71). As U.S. visitors to the island shifted from long-term wintering for the very well off, to a mass tourism industry, lodging preferences shifted from rented rooms in homes and apartments, to hotels.

If the marketing of Cuban culture was blatantly contrived for the foreign visitor, the grand hotels of the 1930s proved to be compromises between classic Spanish architecture set in spacious settings to accommodate the North American tourist. Beginning with first impressions gleaned from the railings of steamers entering Havana Bay, the Ministry of Public Works ensured that the first impression of Habana Vieja was a pleasant one. (Schwartz 1997). New projects in the 1920s and 1930s replaced older colonial buildings and remnants along the

waterfront. The U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, to construct the seaside promenade (Malecón), provided the appropriate "wrapping" of Habana Vieja and Centro Habana in a four-lane highway where merely a footpath had existed before. By 1930, the graceful six-story skyline of the city was punctuated with the construction of the Hotel Biltmore on Prado. Also in view by 1930 was the Hotel Nacional resting atop on old limestone quarry at a point where the Malecón had ended. Both the Hotel Biltmore and the Hotel Nacional had respected the beige colored stucco quality of the older parts of the city on their exteriors, but offered modern conveniences within for the expectant tourist.

Cuban architecture and the search for its identity (*lo cubano*) did not start anew with the island's Revolution of 1959. To be sure, public housing (*vivienda social*) borrowed prefabrication concepts and techniques from the former USSR, eastern bloc, and Scandinavian nations. Yet while the main contours of public housing were novel in the socialist Cuba of the 1960s and 1970s, their adoption was local and Creole (*lo criollo*). Local elements revealed themselves in subtle ways, whether in the form of colorful painted murals (*supergráficas*), through using local vegetation more attentive to shade, or by employing a smaller sense of scale in project design than might be found in Warsaw, Leningrad or Moscow (Segre 1970, 1989, 1990). While some architectural historians framed Cuba's modern period of architecture between 1935-1965 (Rodríguez 2000), the island – and especially the capital of Havana – embraced a few celebrated attempts of forging a national identity. (Cárdenas 1991) Porro's School of Fine Arts in the Havana suburb of Cubanacán is perhaps the finest example of indigenous design in the face of a powerful free-market economy and modernist style and a socialist building model that emphasized efficiency over controversial and often bourgeois-laden aesthetics.

## TOURISM AND THE IMPENDING BANAL

But while tourism around the globe still depends upon the marketing of difference and the selling of a "place-myth," the place where tourists are housed, the hotel, shows that other trend of globalization-homogenization. (Lash/Urry 1994, 165) If the Eurodollar has its architectural equivalent it is in these generic hotels and office high-rises. These buildings have become the neutral, interchangeable units that facilitate global exchange. (Richard Sennett seminar, Yale University, October, 2000) Guy Debord's assertion that "tourism is the chance to go and see what has been made banal," is born out. (Debord 1994, 95) These hotels show the architectural intersection of tourism and the banal.

We can begin to discuss this architectural banal by considering three interrelated symptoms: architecture as "skin" (facadism), the tendency toward the quantification of quality in building design, and the hybridization of building types in the creation

of leiscapes that include hotels, restaurants and entertainment. A homogeneous building skin clads a hybridized building, calculated in terms of return per square foot of space. In a postmodern world, architecture is reduced to a package, a marketing skin that takes the form of either prefabricated homogenous panels or Dryvit historical references. Behind these panels lies sheer quantification: the maximization of usable square footage, statistics and demographic study of potential users, prediction of percentages of retail exposure and the maximization of possible uses of the space. These are the generators of design and they represent the attempt to reduce aesthetic qualities to something that is quantifiable and ultimately profitable. (Leach 1997)

By reproducing the signage of a culture through the making of hotel enclosures, the building type fragments not only the "sign" present in the skin of the building, but also the polyvalent uses that tourism lodgings promote. The discussion of the skin is relevant to the topic of tourism as often referred to in the models of Disney and Vegas. Instead of looking at the building as being original, there is often an attempt to define an artificial experience that is somehow made more real through the use of dressing an otherwise conventional building type supplemented with hybrid uses. "Hermetically sealed, the virtual implant of sunset, cocktail and coconut tree becomes a sensory reality. ... [The] synthetic experience is more intense, more exciting and also more real than the real experience.... Synthetic resorts are borne from the same concept as is Vegas or Disney, that is a shared sense of entertainment, and the collective celebration of 'fun culture.'" (Klingmann 1998, 26) Here, Klingmann contrasts an architecture of constructive rigor with one founded on the principles of marketing an identifiable building to speak a story to the consumer, and redefine itself with current trends. Perhaps the most prevailing concern in the proliferation of hotels is the tourist market focus groups and their ability to package a variety of changing experiences within one enclosure. By lining the coast with these recreated events, homogeneous curtain-walls clad the owner's limits of hybridized space.

Is there any validity to the idea of cladding separated from the tectonics of the building? This question has been raised in various forms. One argument suggests that a separation in fact promotes an understanding of the object being held within by acting as an interpretation or representation of the building type. An example is the analogy of clothing as a dressing to the body. The analogy of clothing/body to cladding/architecture is one that implies a metaphorical reference of one to another. The difference here is that these hotels are being dressed without reference to the body, or the interior space. This is in part because the objective of the new mega-hotels resembles that of leisure environments that attempt to not only house living domains, but also recreate external experiences such as beaches, urban plazas and street restaurants. In this case, the building typology has changed to one of a hybrid nature. Here,

the building's enclosure attempts to package rather than disclose a cultural reference. But is it appropriate to borrow historical references without regard to their methods of construction?

In a conference geared to the discussion of tectonics in the post-industrial world, Myriam Blais looks at cladding theories of Gottfried Semper and Karsten Harries in a discussion regarding cladding and representation. "Harries's and Semper's ideas are useful in setting theoretical and practical limits within which either to appropriate or to reject altogether the new materials that often superficially resemble and imitate older or different materials without carrying along their tectonic (that is their lawful, ordering, and decorative) possibilities." (Blais 1996, 127) Her conclusions, however, create the obvious link to Wagner whose thoughts on presence and importance of ornamentation does not limit their link to construction. Construction being an inherent consideration along with the "art-form." In order to create meaningful architecture a discussion of appearances or cladding should be considered equally with contemporary constructions and changing social orders. (Wagner 1988) Here it may be interesting to reference the example of the National Schools of Art, which was born from the idealistic view of the revolution and the necessary material constructions to realize a building product within the identity of Cuba.

#### CALCULABILITY

"My buildings are a product," a building developer says. "They are products like Scotch Tape is a product, or Saran Wrap. The packaging of that product is the first thing that people see. I am selling space and renting space and it has to be in a package that is attractive enough to be financially successful." (Zukin 1991, 44)

Kracauer's notion of mass ornamentation challenges the ability of the individual to discern from a created propaganda and individually appropriated interpretations of structure.

The structure of the mass ornament reflects that of the general contemporary situation.... Personality and national community ... perish when calculability is demanded.... A system which is indifferent to variations of form leads necessarily to the obliteration of national characteristics and to the fabrication of masses of workers who can be employed and used uniformly throughout the world.... The activities which have been invested in the process have divested themselves of their substantial meaning. (Kracauer 1995, 69-70)

Perhaps the parallels in this quote to the hotel industry lie in the realm of 'calculability' and the loss of 'substantial meaning.' Calculability not only implies an understanding of the direct

correlation of experience to dollar value, but it also resonates with undertones of demographic feasibility studies, prediction of retail exposure, and square footage analysis that is based upon maximizing area and rental space ratios. These factors underlie the interior of the hotel complex. This renders discussions of typology incongruent within these building priorities. The essential program "to house" is secondary, and the loss of meaning occurs when this interior is separated so completely from its form by the required return-per-square-foot calculations and the drive to enclose a maximum number of profitable activities. From Simmel in his essay, *The Metropolis and Mental Life*, "The calculating exactness of practical life which has resulted from a money economy corresponds to the ideal of natural science, namely that of transforming the world into an arithmetical problem and of fixing every one of its parts in a mathematical formula. It has been money economy which has thus filled the daily life of so many people with weighing, calculating, enumerating and the reduction of qualitative values to quantitative terms." (Leach 1997, 71-72) How then might some of the ideas alluded to here apply to Havana in the 'Special Period of a Time of Peace'? To consider these matters, we turn to a brief review of three projects: two are hotels and one entails a business complex. All were erected in the 1990s (and the latter continues to resolve) and are direct manifestations of Cuba's rather rapid insertion into the world economy in the post-Soviet era.

#### HOTEL PARQUE CENTRAL

Two renovation efforts spearheaded restoration efforts within the UNESCO-defined World Heritage Site district of Habana Vieja. At the eastern edge, the traditional stock market building (Lonja del Comercio), a 1909 iron-girdered building built by Purdy and Henderson, was transformed to accommodate foreign businesses and joint-ventures (empresas mixtas) in the early 1990s. Exterior modifications were minimum while the interior changes were significant and necessary to accommodate a contemporary office complex. At the western edge of the historic district was the Parque Central, whose rebuilding on the corner of Zuleta and Prado has been controversial, and for good reason.

After standing abandoned for a number years, the Ministry of Tourism, in consultation with the City Historian's Office, solicited bids for rebuilding a new hotel. The site is exceptional because it anchors one end of Parque Central and faces one of the finest pedestrian malls in the Americas: Paseo Marti or Paseo del Prado, with its Laurel-tree lined perimeters and iron benches, flower pots and lamp posts made out of melted metals from the Independence Wars.

Understandably, the Ministry of Tourism at the outset of the Special Period faced significant pressures in maximizing the number of hotel rooms within the allotted building footprint. A

design review process was called, and the winning design eventually went to a European firm. The Dutch hotel chain Golden-Tulip, known for its quality hotels and resorts in Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, selected the winning design. Local architects complained privately that it was difficult for Cuban architects to be relieved from their remunerative duties, purchase drafting materials and software (often in dollars), and find spare time to work on a site design (Scarpaci 2000).

The renovated project opened in 1995. It has been criticized for its exaggerated portico gallery which stand in almost brutalist fashion against one of the city's streetscape hallmarks, which Alejo Carpentier called "the city of columns." The post-modern panoply of various motifs contrasts with the more sober turn-of-the-century buildings such as the Hotel Plaza (early 1900s), Centro Asturiano (1938), now an art museum, and the Hotel Inglaterra (1872). Although the Hotel Parque Central contains a rooftop pool and the traditional patio courtyard with a glass dome over it that cannot be seen from the street, its overall features cannot be disguised.

#### HOTEL MELIÁ COHIBA AND THE GALERIA DEL PASO

Outside the UNESCO historic district in the heart of Vedado, a mid-19th century suburb that came to accommodate the city's modest skyscrapers of the 1950s, stands a prime location. Near the Malecón and sitting on Paseo Street, is the Spanish-managed hotel, Meliá Cohiba. It is just one block from the seawall and adjacent to the well-known Hotel Riviera (1957), financed by Meyer Lansky at a testimony to the Modern era of the 1950s as well as a by-gone era of gambling.

The Meliá company manages a number of hotels around the world, including its home country (Spain) and elsewhere in Latin America. As of early 2002, it was the largest builder of new hotels in Cuba. When the proposal to develop a hotel in the Vedado was floated in the early 1990s, the economic condition of the country could not have been more dire. With hindsight, economic pressure was the only factor that could have justified a modern, 21-floor design, with more than 400 rooms. The structure is a banal architectural design that disrupts the lower-skyline. It could be an office complex, a condominium, or a hotel set anywhere in the world. From swimming pool at the back of the complex, sunbathers look up at a public housing complex and the adjacent Hotel Riviera. Unfortunately, local design and review panels such as the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral were not consulted in the project's review. Had they been consulted, high-level decision makers would have seen a model of the structure placed at the Grupo's 1:1,000 scaled-model of the city, where the disproportionate dimension of the hotel could be seen. On most any evening scores of Cubans wait outside the complex in hopes

that a tourist will invite them in to one of the evening shows at the 1950s and retro-styled Habana Café.

Across the street and built a few years after the *Meliá Cohiba* opened its doors came an ancillary facility for tourists. This shopping complex, *Galeria del Paseo*, accommodates a dozen or so small retailing outlets as well as a jazz bar. Its currency of operation is dollars (as are all tourist facilities) and perhaps because of its 'international' clientele, decision makers agreed to allow this dark-glass wrapped structure to be built. Like the *Meliá Cohiba* across the street, it is inappropriate in design and therefore clashes with the extant urban fabric. Because of two structural outcrops at opposite ends of the building that look like protruding ears, as well as its dark color, it has been nicknamed the 'Bat mall.'

#### MIRAMAR TRADE CENTER

If the Revolution of 1959 did anything, it curtailed a flurry of high-rise construction that would have likely extended along Havana's waterfront. In the western suburb of Miramar, between the former U.S. military base Columbia (built in 1898 by U.S. forces but renamed Ciudad Libertad by the revolutionary forces) and the waterfront, sat until the 1990s one of the largest and flattest open spaces in Havana. This prime real-estate was slated at the Miramar Trade Center complex and is anchored by a Novotel and (yet another) *Meliá* hotel, a shopping mall, and a series of office buildings. Although the nearly 20 twenty office buildings have not been built, they are quite generic. Like other buildings addressed in this paper, their ubiquitous façade could situate them in any corner of the world. Moreover, the site layout impedes would might have been a striking view of the Florida Straits but the layout of this huge complex has made that impossible. While real-estate speculation is technically illegal on an island where the state is the sole owner of property, it is difficult to imagine how such a prime location was spoiled by this office and hotel complex.

#### CONCLUSIONS

Globalization's impact on Havana's architecture, before 1958 and after 1989, has led to anticipated results. The disruption of urban spaces and buildings, and the insertion of design elements that are anachronistic, stem from these global forces. It is unrealistic to expect a small island of just 11 million inhabitants to resist such powerful pulls that accompany international tourism. In that spirit, Anthony Tung's assessment of historic preservation efforts in 22 cities is instructive:

While the speed of modern urban change has led to rapid transformation and destruction, it can also lead to rapid reconfiguration of that which we have already built.

Having fractured our cities, with time, can we un-fracture them? If we understand that that current intrusive structures will eventually become obsolete and subject to replacement, and that vanished historic buildings might be reinstated, an un-prescribed palette of urban possibilities is presented, making it possible to change the spirit and form of the city at many locations (Tung 2001, 430).

We trust that the incursions of anachronistic design in Havana's built fabric will, in the notion of Tung's forecast, become 'un-fractured.' Political decisions by the Ministry of Tourism and the Ministry of Foreign Investment will always outweigh informed design review and assessment. Havana is endowed with the Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital which not only provides scaled models to illustrate how proposed buildings mesh with the existing urban fabric, but also employ a multidisciplinary team to offer comment and feedback. All those involved in design decisions must find a middle ground between returning to traditions that no longer have meaning, and giving in to a relentless and frenzied modernization that yields only banal homogeneity.

Are we implying that the tourism and commercial development industries would benefit from a return to the "work of our hands" as described by Hannah Arendt—or the need to produce uniqueness? Cuban architects have historically fought trends of European 'iconographical agendas' through artists that sought national imagery and identity when it was unfashionable to do so. The spirit of their efforts was inspired by the need for identity to promote the value and legacy of the Cuban society and individual. It seems ironic that the development of the tourism industry is marked with unrelated building skins and interiors that are rooted in the demands of consumerism. Type has been reduced or overloaded to such an extent that it is no longer a valid point of departure. Perhaps Cuban developers should reconsider the value of uniqueness in the marketing of their environment, and in this way, "the idea of type, which ostensibly rules out individuality ... [may return] to its origins in the single work." (Moneo 1978, 23) If, then, the single work creates a dialogue with its type, region and direct context, the 'Pearl of the Caribbean' may regain its Antillean luster.

#### REFERENCES CITED

- Berman, M. 1982. All that is solid melts into air: the experience of modernity / Marshall Berman. New York: Simon and Schuster
- Blais, M. 1997. Cladding and Representation: Between Scenography and Tectonics in Constructions of Tectonics for the Postindustrial World. 1996 ACSA European Conference. New York: ACSA Press
- Bretos, M. a. 1996. Imaging Cuba under the American flag: Charles Edward Doty in Havana, 1899-1902. *Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 22:82-103.
- Cárdenas, E. 1991. *En Busqueda de una Arquitectura Nacional*. Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas

- Castells, M. 1994. *Technopoles of the world: the making of twenty-first-century industrial complexes* / Manuel Castells and Peter Hall. London, New York: Routledge.
- Debord, G. 1994. *Society of the spectacle* / Guy Debord. Rev. ed. Detroit: Black & Red.
- Dirlik, A. 2000. *Globalization as the End and the Beginning of History: the Contradictory Implications of a New Paradigm* [www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~global/workpapers/dirlik.pdf](http://www.humanities.mcmaster.ca/~global/workpapers/dirlik.pdf)
- Hall, P. 1988. *Cities of Tomorrow: An Intellectual History of Urban Planning in the Twentieth Century*. Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell.
- Klingmann, A. 1998. *Architecture as Product in Daidalos 98/99 Dec/Jan v.69-70*
- Kracauer, S. 1997. *Mass Ornament*The hotel lobby. In N. Leach, Ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lash, S., Urry, J. 1994. *Economics of signs and -space*. London: Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage.
- Monco, R. *On Typology in Oppositions 13*, Summer, 1978 Cambridge: MIT Press
- Nalbantoglu, G.B., Wong, C.T., 1997. *Postcolonial space(s)* / edited by Gulsum Baydar Nalbantoglu and Wong Chong Thai. 1st ed. New York: Princeton Architectural Press.
- Ricoeur, P. 1965. *History and truth: [essays]* Translated, with an introd., by Charles A. Kelbley. Evanston [Ill.] Northwestern University Press.
- Rodriguez, E. L. 2000. *The Havana guide: Modern architecture 1925-1965*. New York: Princeton University Press.
- Searpaçi, J. 2000. Reshaping Habana Vieja: Revitalization, historic preservation, and restructuring in the socialist city. *Urban Geography*, Vol. 24:724-744.
- Searpaçi, J., Segre, R., and Goyula, M. 2002. *Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Schwartz, R. 1997. *Pleasure Island: Tourism and Temptation in Cuba*. Lincoln and Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press.
- Segre, R. 1990. *Ensayo: Lectura Critica del Entorno Cubano*. Havana: Editorial Letras Cubanas.
- Segre, R. 1970. *Diez Años de Arquitectura en Cuba Revolucionaria*. Havana: Cuadernos de la Revista Unión.
- Segre, R. 1989. *Arquitectura y Urbanismo de la Revolución Cubana*. Havana: Editorial Pueblo y Educación.
- Simmel, G. 1997. *Myth and Metropolis*. In N. Leach, Ed., *Rethinking Architecture: A Reader in Cultural Theory*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Tung, A. 2001. *Preserving the World's Great Cities: The Destruction and Renewal of the Historic Metropolis*. New York: Potter.
- Wagner, O. 1988. *Modern Architecture*. Santa Monica: The Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities 1986? Pending
- Zukin, S. 1991. *Landscapes of Power*. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.