

## CUBA – HERITAGE @ RISK!

Cuba has a large and varied cultural and natural heritage. The best evidence of this richness is the inclusion of several properties in the World Heritage List, more than those inscribed in the other Caribbean islands.

For years the conservation of Cuba's national cultural heritage has been an important goal. Comprehensive laws and other legal instruments allow an adequate national protection system. There is an institutional structure working from the national to the local levels countrywide. A training system supported by both Cuban institutions and international organisations such as UNESCO, has had a positive influence on the conservation of historic towns and monuments and sites. This is the case of Old Havana, Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad, Camagüey and Cienfuegos, being among the most relevant.

In general terms, the results achieved in the conservation of Cuban heritage have been possible due to a defined cultural policy, among the main reasons being the existence of comprehensive legal instruments regarding the national legacy, the approval and implementation of innovative managing and funding methods for Old Havana led by Historian Eusebio Leal and later followed by Santiago de Cuba, Trinidad and Camagüey, the international assistance and recognition of these values (as presented by Rigol-Savio Isabel on The Cuban National Experience in Indianapolis in 2000). Publications world-wide have recognised these tremendous efforts as well as the skill of its specialised entities and committed professionals. But beyond these positive facts, there are still enormous challenges with regard to the conservation of this heritage.

The most influential aspects are the increasing decay of a great part of the building stock due to its age and under the very aggressive conditions of a tropical humid climate worsened by the effect of insularity, frequent and destructive hurricanes, the increasing human need to be satisfied, ie housing which represents one of the toughest problems, the impacts of a fast-growing tourism industry as an unavoidable phenomenon which has turned out to be the most important source for development, and in general terms, the lack of sufficient funds in proportion to the amount of work to be done. Although a considerable support has been obtained from UNESCO or some foreign collaboration agencies, it is impossible for Cubans to obtain the effective assistance of the many other important existent sources in the world as banks, foundations and others, due to well-known political reasons.

National and local inventories undertaken systematically for years nation-wide, including all cultural heritage places in the country have registered their location, values and physical condition, but there is still a number of them that have not had necessary action in order to guarantee their integrity.

Sometimes, it is a matter of understanding, that requires ongoing direction, control and monitoring by the national and local conservation authorities. This is the case of some 19<sup>th</sup> century exponents and the significantly large and valuable 20<sup>th</sup> century building stock. Currently, with the growth of tourism and the promotion of joint ventures with foreign partners as well as some extent of real estate, certain aesthetically privileged areas in the capital city from the 20<sup>th</sup> century have become the arena of a rapid construction process. The value of the land here has acquired its true economic dimension because of the proximity to the sea, and its scenic and architectural values, and among

other virtues, its vital system and connections with other central areas in town. In 2000, this part of Cuban heritage has turned out to be the most fragile. Today almost nobody would dare to alter the integrity of the many Colonial Historic towns in the country. But the 20<sup>th</sup> century's heritage is not yet fully recognised as something worthy of preservation and appropriate for wise use.

One very important example of neglect over many years, is the famous complex of the Schools of Arts from the 1960s, inscribed in 1999 among the "100 Most Endangered Monuments" by the World Monuments Watch and now undergoing restoration performed by the Ministry of Culture and the City Historian's Office. Another case is the Fifth Avenue in the Miramar District, displaying very good exponents from the 1920s to the 1950s, where some undesirable buildings have been built recently and others have been planned. As it often happens in many countries, some historic towns and areas survive and are not manifestly transformed due to underdevelopment and a low rate of change. As soon as "development" in terms of investment capacity grows, new patterns of living, and of course buildings may appear. The old is erroneously found unsuitable for new functions and developers then assume that these constructions have to be substituted or perfected by a new image.

Fortunately Old Havana and other historic areas in Cuba, have not suffered greatly from this kind of situation. The policies, laws, restoration programs and general awareness were already flourishing when the new era of opening up to foreign investment and tourism started in the 1990s. Many conservation projects and much heritage thinking were quite consolidated with regard to the oldest and most significant historic areas or towns in the country. But other historic values, such as some from the 19<sup>th</sup> century and mainly the above mentioned sectors from the 20<sup>th</sup>, had not yet been assumed as landmarks. In the last years, it has been painstaking for the heritage authorities to stop the action of many new developers and investors, both national and foreign. The reason for their position is basically that they really do not understand the merits of this kind of heritage and believe that they are free to transform it or eliminate it in order to install their new functions, hotels, shops, banks, offices and others. Fortunately, although they represent a majority among the investment sector, there are other entities which have appreciated the advantages of conserving heritage sites or buildings quite well in terms of prestige and marketing for their companies or installations, showing it is absolutely possible to match economic goals and needs with cultural aims.

One interesting case is that of the Sierra Maestra Building (formerly Rosita de Hornedo) from the 1950s, located by the sea in the Miramar District, completely rehabilitated recently for CIMEX Corporation by Architect Andrés Garrudo in order to install their offices and agencies. At the same time this Cuban Company has chosen the highly qualified team of architects, Choy and León, to design a new shopping centre nearby which will contribute to the quality and life of this place that is currently deteriorated. Another outstanding work by the same team has been performed on Fifth Avenue in order to install the Banco Financiero Internacional headquarters and one of its agencies. The result is a model, as the "high tech" additions to a sober classic bank from the 1950s by Architect Eugenio Batista, have been done with both creativeness and respect for its historic values.

Recently the National Commission for Landmarks supported by Law Number 2, led by Dr Marta Arjona, also President of the National Council for Cultural Heritage, and composed of outstanding notabilities from the cultural, academic and architectural fields, approved a Resolution declaring several relevant avenues in Havana as Protected Areas, such as the previously mentioned Fifth Avenue in Miramar, Paseo and Presidents Avenue in Vedado and others, in order to avoid their arbitrary transformation. Since then, all built projects have to be approved by the Commission in order to guarantee the conservation of these areas and their landmarks. It does not mean that new buildings cannot be built, it means that all added new elements have to respond to the quality of the site where they are to be inserted. The question is to add values and not to subtract them in any way. Perhaps it will take some time to achieve a complete understanding and to avoid certain current conflicts but at the moment, the force of the law is already acting in favour of 20<sup>th</sup> century landmarks, as it has with regard to older cultural heritage places. Another recent achievement has been an agreement between the National Council for Cultural Heritage and the Physical Planning Institute.

The National DOCOMOMO group and the Committee for Cultural Heritage in the Cuban Union of Architects and Engineers are also currently working on a detailed list of Modern landmarks to be submitted to the National Commission in order to be declared National or Local Monuments according to their significance or to be considered as legally Protected Places, while broader research on their values is undertaken. On the other hand, the Cuban National ICOMOS Committee that has historically played an important role as part of the National Commission for Landmarks and co-ordinating its action with the national specialised bodies and the local conservation offices, is regularly alerting all of them in regard to any dangers. At the same time, it gives its advice in order to guarantee the effective protection and conservation of heritage places.

A preliminary list of Heritage at Risk identified by ICOMOS Cuba includes a representative group of monuments and sites which require urgent attention. Among them we could mention the Gibara Historic Town in Holguín, the Carolina Sugar Factory near Cienfuegos, the Ruins of Taoro Sugar Factory close to Havana, San Ildefonso Sugar Factory in Guantánamo, all of them from the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Also from early 1920s Vernacular, San Miguel de los Baños Spa and Village in Matanzas, and Cayo Carenas Wooden Houses on Cienfuegos Bay. Other cases are the impressive Neobaroque Gran Teatro de La Habana from the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early twenties in the border between Old and Central Havana, the Eclectic Alaska Apartment House from 1922 and the Retiro Médico, a classic Modern high rise from 1956 with important murals by Wifredo Lam and other famous artists on La Rampa, a former commercial area in Vedado, Havana.

### Case Study 1 – Reina Cemetery, Cienfuegos

The Reina Cemetery was built in Cienfuegos in 1839 under Neo-Classical patterns. It is the only cemetery in Cuba where niches for vertical burials survive. It is very similar to the Espada Cemetery in Havana that has already disappeared, and that is regarded as an achievement of 19<sup>th</sup> century public health programs because until that time, burials took place in churches and convents. The slabs on the above-mentioned niches are ele-

gantly worked in marble, iron or limestone with beautiful carvings and bas reliefs. The magnificent ironworks surrounding classical tombs are also worth of praise. So are the abundant beautiful sculptures like the one known as the Sleeping Beauty made in Genoa with Carrara marble. Buried at this cemetery are the founders of the town of Fernandina de Jagua – now the Old Town of Cienfuegos- as well as several patriots of the 1868 and 1895 Cuban Independence Wars. For its relevance, beauty and damage it was inscribed in 1999 among the “One Hundred Most Endangered Sites” by the World Monuments Watch.

Currently its main risks are from age, salinity caused by its proximity to the sea, pollution from nearby industrial areas, the constant moisture of the tropical humid Cuban climate, a lack of systematic maintenance, the paralysis of works already started, and lack of enough funds for their operation.

### Case Study 2 – Jewish Cemetery, Guanabacoa

The Macabbeus Cemetery is one of two built by the Azhkenazim Jews at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century on a smooth steep hill in Guanabacoa, an old town close to Havana. This cemetery dates from 1911, and is perhaps the most important exponent of Cuban Jewish heritage, a legacy with few remaining cultural heritage places in the Caribbean region. One of its most important features is its beautiful complex of tombs composed by the ancestral *matzevah* or tombstone of a millenary origin, the chapel-like one or *ohel* and the sarcophagus, which show the assimilation of different concepts with regard to burial traditions.

Another significant feature is the presence of inscriptions in Hebrew, Yiddish and Spanish as well as the employment of the universally recognised Jewish symbols like the Menorah or candlestick, the Star of David, the Lion of Judeah and others. The names and birthplaces inscribed on the tombs belong to people from Eastern and Central Europe, and evidently differ from those of Spanish origin, dominant in Cuba. The general layout responds to Jewish tradition; according to them, a room for washing the deceased is located at the entrance of the Cemetery and there is also a faucet with water to allow the participants to wash their hands before they leave the place. Outstanding personalities of Cuban history and culture were buried here. The Jewish burial traditions have been preserved and practised until the present by the Cuban Jewish community.

The very sober but beautiful marble, limestone and bronze works of the Cemetery have been seriously threatened by pollution, corrosion, physical impacts, vandalism, a lack of systematic maintenance and a lack of enough funds. As a property of the Jewish community, this landmark is of their greatest interest and despite the scarce funds available for its maintenance, they have not allowed it to lose its integrity at all. On the other hand, it has been part of the research program ICOMOS Cuba has started on Cuban Jewish heritage. But however, it is seriously physically damaged and its disappearance or arbitrary transformation would mean an irreplaceable loss for the almost 2000 Jews living in the country, for their descendants and for their many relatives abroad. It would also mean an unfortunate loss for Cuban heritage, because of its uniqueness as a proof of the diversity of national culture. It would diminish the legacy of the melting pot that is the Caribbean region.