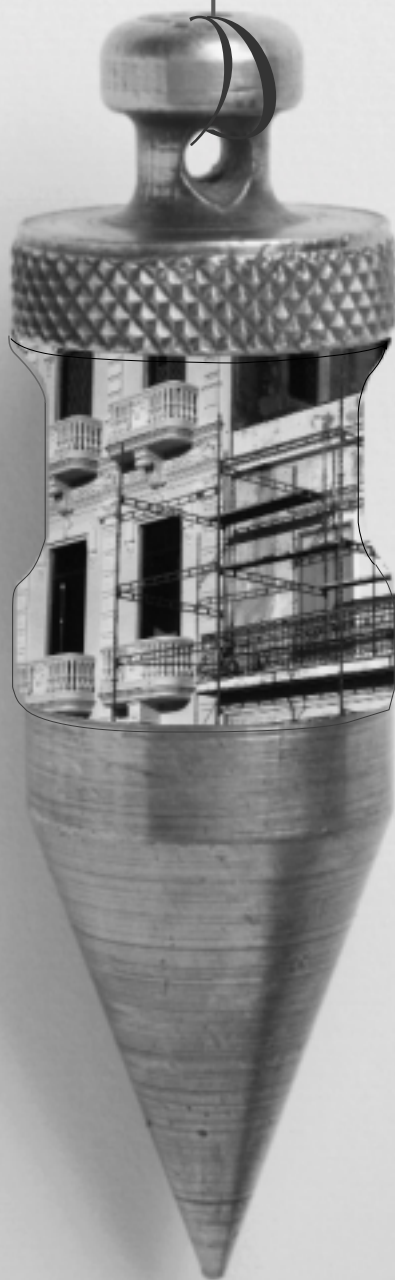


RESCUING *Old* HAVANA



 Lexington
Institute

*By Philip Peters
March 2001*

Rescuing Old Havana

by Philip Peters

MARCH 2001

Introduction

A clash of two sounds greets visitors to *La Habana Vieja*, Havana's historic center. One is that of ubiquitous bands in parks, cafes and restaurants, with singers' voices and percussionists' rhythms blending into each other, block by block.

The other is the screaming and grinding of power tools – the sound of a massive restoration effort, funded by tourism income, where Cubans are achieving a just-in-time rescue of Old Havana's architectural and cultural heritage.

The restoration is a race against time. Centuries of exposure to seafront elements have left buildings in precarious condition. Last December, when Havana was flooded by storms that dropped 7 inches of rain in 2 days, Cuba's official daily *Granma* reported that 4 buildings collapsed completely in Old Havana, and 19 collapsed partially.

The condition of the buildings, the number in need of restoration, and the need to address social priorities such as overcrowded housing while also generating increased tourism revenue, combine to create a challenge that might make Donald Trump walk away. Yet the work proceeds and expands year by year, the only effort of its kind in Cuba, and one of the most intensive construction efforts on the island.

This paper is intended to give the reader an overview of this subject: the work of restoration, the unique government and financial structure that makes it possible; its leadership; its challenges balancing social, economic, and preservation goals; and its implications for the future.



1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 325
Arlington, Virginia 22209
www.lexingtoninstitute.org
703-522-5828



History

The city of Havana, now home to 2 million, was founded by Spanish colonists in 1519. It grew to become a vitally important post in the Spanish empire; its natural harbor made it an ideal port, and in time it became a shipbuilding center and postal hub as well. Through the centuries Havana was a way station for Spanish ships coming to and from the Americas. Because returning ships were laden with riches from the new world, Havana and its maritime traffic were the constant targets of pirates and corsairs. Beginning in the 16th century, magnificent fortresses were built to guard the port and coastline from the threat of piracy and the navies of nations at war with Spain, and the city itself was enclosed by the bayshore on one side, and a defensive wall on the other.

Transatlantic trade, Cuba's own prodigious economic production, and Havana's position as a major colonial capital made the city rich. Local architecture reflects this wealth, beginning with the fortresses, churches, convents, palaces, and mansions in the old colonial center. With time and population growth, the city expanded to the west, *extramuros* in local parlance (outside the walls), with newer neighborhoods bringing more modern architecture. Consequently, modern Havana contains examples of myriad architectural styles, from colonial to baroque to Art Deco – and with the past decade's economic revival, new steel-and-glass hotels and offices have also appeared.

The focus of this paper is not the city as a whole, but rather its historic center, *La Habana Vieja*. For this district, in purely architectural terms, Cuba's four decades of socialism have been a double-edged sword. Economic hardship prevented expenditures on basic building maintenance and led to widespread deterioration. It also prevented real estate development projects that would have demolished buildings of historical value and put modern buildings in their place. A large-scale redevelopment plan commissioned by the Batista government in the 1950s, akin to "urban renewal" schemes carried out in the United States in the 1960s, envisioned the demolition of large parts of Old Havana. Modern buildings and new roads were to be erected in the core of the colonial zone, and high-rise apartments were to be built along the Malecon, Havana's beachfront boulevard, and on artificial islands extending from the coast. This plan, called the Sert Plan after the Catalanian architect Jose Luis Sert, died a quiet death when the socialist government took power.

■ "...a well constructed city, a handsome port full of ships from all countries, a countryside apparently well cultivated, sailboats going in all directions, and docks full of people: natives of all colors, dressed in every type of clothing. Havana is the best Spanish city in the Americas. The entry to the port is ideal (it is very narrow, no more than 200 yards wide). To the left is the Morro castle, built upon rock. It is 50 feet high. The waters around it are so deep that a warship can almost touch its prow to the rock. The castle

is old and has an especially romantic air. The right bank is low, and is also defended by a fortress. It would be impossible to enter by force... Havana should be a place of uncommon wealth. The port is secure, large, and commodious, and in it a very active trade takes place. The island is, perhaps, one of the richest of the world... The island of Cuba should belong to us, and if not to us, then to the Americans..."

– Diary of Sir John Maxwell Tilden, 1815

■ "The interior of the plaza [Plaza de Armas] is full of shrubbery protected by iron fencing and the streets that surround it are well paved. In the center is a statue of Ferdinand VII brought, I believe, from Rome. Three times each week a military band offers a concert, which is a meeting place for everyone with free time and for all the beauties of the island. The women arrive in their carriages in their evening wear with their heads uncovered, wearing neither shawls nor hats. Some sit in the interior of the



The finishing touches are put on a mural on O'Reilly street, commissioned by the Office of the Historian to decorate the blank back wall of an auto repair shop. Cuban artists worked 2 years on the project, which illustrates 67 figures from Cuban history using a medium of colored crushed stones coated in acrylic resin.

Early restoration efforts

Visitors who return frequently to Havana, even at intervals of a few months, are struck by the steadily increasing number of restoration projects. In front of each is a sign with the insignia of the entity that manages these projects, the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana (OHC).

The Office of the Historian was founded in 1938 by Emilio Roig de Leuchensring, the Historian until his death in 1964. The office was like a historical society that promoted scholarship, cultural activity, and preservation of monuments and historically significant buildings. One Cuban observer described the office as a small-scale operation, "a kind of sanctuary" under Roig's leadership. Roig's successors remember him reverently as a promoter of knowledge of the city and its history; he organized museums, gave conferences, and authored a three-volume history of the city that was published in 1963 and 1964.

If Roig is known for teaching about the city of Havana, his successor Eusebio Leal Spengler is known for expanding the office's size and mandate, and for managing the restoration of the city's historic center.

Leal was born in 1942 in Havana. In his teens, he was a member of the Catholic youth and the 26th of July movement, where he assisted in "propaganda, subversion, and acquisition of medical supplies" for the anti-Batista revolutionaries, according to an official biography.

Leal became director of the Office of the Historian in 1967 and was named Historian in 1982. He inherited a small budget commensurate with the office's traditional role. "I had nothing for the restoration budget," he said in an interview in his office, where a marble bust of Roig is on prominent display. "I was on the street asking for donations from ministries and enterprises. There was not then a general appreciation of the value of our past."

Leal describes himself as Roig's "disciple" and emphasizes the "continuity" of the office's current work with that of the past. To continue Roig's teaching function, Leal brought OHC into the mass media age; in the 1960s he began to appear on radio and television to talk about history and architecture, and today he hosts a program, *Andar La Habana* (Walking Through Havana), on Cuban television.

Leal also turned to the work of restoration. His first project was the Palacio de los Capitanes Generales, a stately one-block building erected between 1776 and 1791 on the Plaza de Armas. This building's main purpose has been governmental: in its history it has housed – in addition to private offices, shops, and (until 1834) a jail – the offices of 65 Spanish colonial governors, 4 chiefs of U.S. occupation forces, 3 presidents of Cuba, and 170 mayors of Havana.

plaza while the men stroll around, some talking with the women they know, others smoking lazily. The military band is passable, and with a cool breeze and a bright moon, the effect is enchanting."

– Sir Charles Augustus Murray,
Visit to Cuba in 1836

■ "Generally, women who go shopping do not leave their coaches. Rather, their merchandise is carried to them. The strictness of Spanish

etiquette prevents them from talking to the porters, and only when the vendor is of the same sex do they venture inside the stores. The custom of appearing in public only in a coach is so common that some American women who ventured out on the street to go shopping were greeted with expressions of surprise by the habaneros, shocked to see a woman walking on their streets, as if they were Persian women with their faces uncovered.... Nothing is so striking to a foreigner in Havana as the

substantial way in which even the most insignificant building is constructed; each seems made to last a lifetime. The walls of a simple storehouse are rarely less than two feet thick..."

– Dr. J.G.F. Wundermann, Notes on Cuba, 1844

■ "The civilization of Havana and of Cuba in general is a mixture imported from the neighboring country, and this is one of the most surprising things, this contrast of Spanish civilization which here is disappearing bit by bit,



The Palacio de los Capitanes Generales
on the Plaza de Armas.

One of these mayors and his municipal government staff were housed in the Palacio, its large salons partitioned into small offices, when Eusebio Leal decided to attempt its restoration. “I convinced them to move out, and finally they did,” he said, and there followed 11 years of work to convert the Palacio to the Museum of the City of Havana, which opened in 1968 and gradually expanded as restoration was completed.

Old Havana and its fortifications (the system of fortresses and cannon emplacements that extends beyond the historic center) were declared a United Nations World Heritage site in 1982. This designation draws attention to the site and carries a commitment on the part of the local government to preserve it. It also allows modest funding to be provided by the UN’s World Heritage Fund.

In 1981, OHC had issued its first restoration plan for Old Havana and received funding for restoration projects. Ninety percent of the buildings in the area of the old walled city were judged to have historical or architectural value: 144 constructed in the 16th and 17th centuries; 200 in the 18th; 463 in the 19th, and 101 from 1901 to 1935. With a five-year budget of 11.7 million pesos, 25 projects were completed between 1981 and 1985, and 36 were done in the following 5 years on a budget of 30 million pesos. In this period, the Cuban armed forces financed the restoration of El Morro and La Cabaña, the massive fortresses guarding Havana from across the bay.

With these activities in the 1980s, the character of the Office of the Historian had effectively changed: in addition to teaching, it was now managing actual restoration projects. The pace and level of investment may have been modest, but the effort was under way, a construction enterprise had been established, and a specialized workforce was beginning to gain experience.

with the modern American civilization which is irresistibly invading everything.”

– Nicolas Tanco Armero, *Viaje de Nueva Granada a China y de China a Francia*, 1853

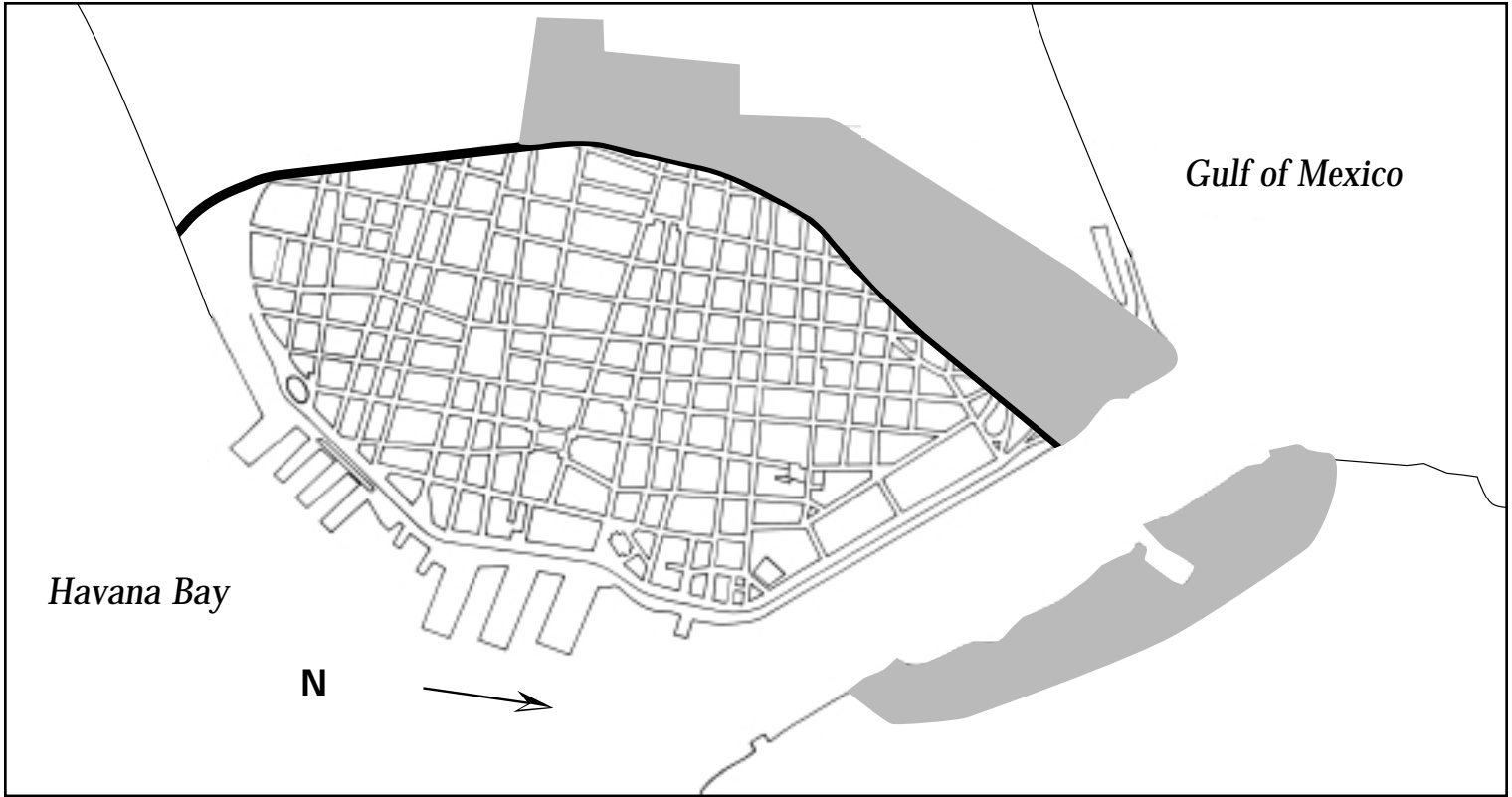
■ “The streets of Havana are generally set at right angles and are narrow, irregular, without pavement or drainage, and shaded by heavy awnings... Both sides of the streets are lined by sidewalks, but they are so narrow that they barely permit two people at one time to pass.

Some of the busier streets are paved with stone, although without great care, and the constant rains – better said, deluges – pull the mortar from between the paving stones and make passage dangerous for man and beast.”

– James M. Phillippo, *The United States and Cuba*, 1857

■ “The Spaniards have the reins of government in their hands and their hands are soiled by plunder. Not satisfied with taxes, tariffs, and

regulations, all of which are at levels of thievery, the government of the Madre Patria sends to the colony a group of authorities whom one expects will live from embezzlement, since their salaries are almost symbolic... A man receives a post with a salary of perhaps one thousand dollars per year; immediately he rents an expensive home, acquires a coach, dresses his wife and daughters extravagantly, lives as if he earned ten times that sum, and retires in a few years with a good fortune. What is the secret?



Havana's Office of the Historian has broad authority in a 2.14 square kilometer "priority conservation zone" with a population of over 70,000. The zone consists primarily of the original walled colonial city (inside heavy line) and extends to the west, where it ends at the Paseo del Prado boulevard, the Capitolio building, and nearby parks. It also includes the city's fortifications across the bay and elsewhere on the coast.

The 1990s: going broke, then going into business

When the Soviet bloc dissolved and Cuba went into economic crisis, Havana's restoration met the same fate as all other investment projects in Cuba: "We were almost at a complete standstill," Eusebio Leal explained. With the economy contracting by one third, the state had more immediate priorities than historical preservation. "Our situation was precarious," Leal said, "and we were in danger of losing our skilled laborers." A low point, now remembered with irony by many Cubans, came in June 1993 when an architect was leading British journalists on a

Plunder, in both directions, from the people and from the government. And this, from the lowest level to the highest, is the universal rule."

– Julia Ward Howe, *A Trip to Cuba*, 1860

■ *"It is the greatest and most prosperous trading center in the Antilles. Its bay is one of the best in the world, and it is full of ships. Its docks and warehouses are full of goods... Its exports are worth nearly nine million pounds sterling each year, and the customs revenue sent to*

Madrid each year exceeds the cost of government and the army of occupation. Of the 8,500 ships that call each year on the port of Havana, 4,700 are American."

– Edward Beau Underhill, *The West Indies, Their Social and Religious Condition*, 1861

■ *"The tomb is formed by a plaque of yellow marble, worked in bas-relief, placed on the right wall of the cathedral, two or three feet above the floor. The facial expression is*

extremely sweet... And this is the only monument that Spain and its colony raised to the memory of a man such as Christopher Columbus..."

– *A description of Columbus' tomb in Havana's cathedral in N.B. Dennys, An Account of the Cruise of the St. George on the North American and West Indian Station During the Years 1861-1862, 1862. The explorer died in Spain, his remains were moved to Santo Domingo, then to Havana, then back to Spain in 1899.*

TOURISM PAYS**OHC Tourist Business Revenue (\$ million)**

1994	4.8
1995	11.3
1996	21.7
1997	32.7
1998	43.0
1999	51.8
2000	60.0

OHC Museum and Other Revenue (\$ million)

1994	0.312
1995	0.388
1996	1.213
1997	1.753
1998	1.687
1999	1.944

Source: Office of the Historian of the City of Havana



tour, and as he described the Edificio San Angel on the Plaza Vieja, the building collapsed before their eyes.

A return to the status quo – renewed appropriations from the national budget – seemed impossible. The solution for OHC came as a result of a novel law, and was made possible by two critical policy changes made in 1993: post-Soviet Cuba had decided to welcome tourists and foreign investment. This allowed the government to consider financing OHC's restoration efforts not from current state funds, but from future tourism revenue.

In October 1993, the Office of the Historian was given extraordinary standing and powers in a law decreed by the Council of State. The stated purpose of Decree-Law 143 is to enable OHC better to carry out the high-priority task of restoring and conserving Old Havana. To this end, it broadens the Office's authority and its institutional and financial capabilities.

First, the law gives OHC high status within the Cuban government. It is linked directly to the highest organ of government, the Council of State; it is not subordinate to any ministry or provincial or local government. A separate measure later made clear that OHC, not the Ministry of Tourism, governs tourism development in Old Havana. OHC exercises these authorities:

- the planning of restoration efforts, and the control of land use in the entire zone;
- the operation of businesses and the development of "its own sources of financing" to support restoration, tourism development, and enhanced social services;
- authority to enter contracts, to import and export, and to buy and sell freely in the Cuban domestic market;
- authority to tax businesses such as hotels that operate in its zone but are not part of OHC's own network of businesses; the tax rate is set at 5% of gross revenues.

OHC and its businesses have generated about 10,000 jobs and now earn about \$60 million annually, over 12 times the revenues of 1994, the first year of operation. The businesses include:

Habaguanex, founded in 1994, which operates a chain of hotels, restaurants, and shops, and has a business unit that arranges foreign commercial financing for hotel, housing, restaurant, and other projects.

Aurea, a real estate company founded in 1996 with capital from OHC and a Spanish partner. Its first project was the restoration and rental of the Lonja de Comercio, Havana's former stock market that now serves as an office building on the Plaza San Francisco near Havana's cruise ship terminal.

Fenix, another real estate company that rents housing, offices, and retail space, and also operates a car rental agency and automotive repair shops.

■ "The day barely begins, which is very early in Cuba, when the recently arrived traveler finds himself startled from his delicious morning slumber by the alarming sound of bells coming from all corners of the city... with a church on each corner, and a bell tower or two or three on each church, and with a half-dozen large bells in each bell tower... with no apparent reason or rhythm the bells peal, the bell ringers in each church endeavoring to make the greatest possible noise, for the purpose of calling the faithful to

attend morning mass..."

– Samuel Hazard, *Cuba a Pluma y Lapiz*, 1867

■ "Without doubt, the Cuban in his own country must be a very unhappy man because of dissatisfaction with his political status. An American would feel that way. He can make all the money he wishes, dress in the best possible clothes, use all the silver he likes in his horses' harnesses, live in a tiled palace, be addressed as 'Sir' and be revered by his friends. But he

cannot become governor of his jurisdiction nor take part in the discussions of laws, good or bad, under which he lives. His influence will only be of a social character; and his power over his fellow citizens only that which derives from his personal relationships.

– James W. Steele, *Cuban Sketches*, 1881

■ "If there is a noisier city than Havana I have not found it. Apart from boys shouting and the voices of street vendors, and the ordinary noises



A 1996 survey found that 30% of Old Havana residents carry water into their homes every day.

Puerto Carenas, a construction company created in 1997, with 1,200 workers who build and restore historic buildings and monuments.

San Cristobal, a travel/tourism agency founded in 1996 that promotes Havana as a destination and provides travel-related services in Havana.

In addition, the restoration effort benefits from about \$2 million in annual revenues earned in 21 museums, 2 art galleries, 15 retail stores, and other OHC operations; and about \$2 million in United Nations aid since 1982 for technical assistance, training in restoration arts, academic and specialist travel, and similar purposes.

The result is dramatic: \$30 million was invested in restoration in 2000, and as of January 2001, 290 projects were in progress.

While the restoration efforts were set back by the economic crisis, OHC took several steps forward in the new law. In addition to preserving architecture, OHC is now charged with developing tourism and providing services to the community. The law gives these goals equal priority and sees them as complementary.

The law granted OHC authority that no other local entity in Cuba enjoys. Cuban municipal governments do not levy their own taxes and spend their own revenues; they receive appropriations from the central government. Restoration projects in Trinidad and Santiago benefit from locally generated tourism revenue, but only in Havana does the restoration agency have the authority to develop and operate its own chain of businesses.

The Historian himself is a member of the Council of State and the Central Committee of the Communist party – a factor that “eliminates bureaucratic slowness in our operations,” one of his employees said.

“The Office of the Historian began as a research organization,” an architect outside the OHC organization marvelled, “and now it is like the Vatican.”

of commerce, there is the constant sound of vehicles moving across the stone streets, which the walls immediately amplify. Havana's commercial activity is simply immense, and possibly has never been greater in history. This in spite of the leonine share taken by the Spanish government, extortionate taxes on imports of all kinds, and bribery and corruption from right to left.”

– EA. Ober, *The Knockabout Club in the Antilles*, 1883

“Sir: In compliance with the Treaty of Peace, the agreement of the military commissions of evacuation, and the orders of my King, there ceases to exist from this moment, today, January 1, 1899, at noon, the sovereignty of Spain in the island of Cuba, and there begins that of the United States.”

– from the surrender document signed by Spanish General Jimenez Castellanos and delivered to U.S. General Brooke, ending what

Cubans call the “Spanish-Cuban-North American War”

These accounts are drawn from *La Fidelísima Habana* (Gustavo Eguren, Editorial Letras Cubanas, 1986), a compilation of travelogues, eyewitness accounts, and historical documents on Havana from 1508 to 1899. Discrepancies with the original works are due to re-translation by the author.

Restoration in progress

Vatican or not, Eusebio Leal's task is not enviable, even with expanded authority and resources.

He would bristle at the description, but he is in many respects the de facto mayor of Old Havana – his office is the zoning authority, planning board, housing authority, parks commissioner, tax collector, comptroller, and final arbiter of nearly every public investment decision. He relishes his role as custodian of the living neighborhood – “We are restoring Havana not just to see it, but to live in it,” he is fond of saying – and this social concern permeates his organization.



As in Havana, restoration of Trinidad (above) and other historic cities benefits from tourism revenue, but only in Havana does the restoration agency have the authority to develop and operate its own chain of businesses.

However, it is a role that carries difficult challenges. The Office of the Historian cannot possibly make everyone happy. One reason is the immense scale of the restoration task and the impossibility of completing it all at once. Another is extreme overcrowding. A walk through a few Old Havana apartment buildings sheds light on OHC's toughest dilemma: it is impossible, within any reasonable building code, to rehabilitate those dwellings and then have all current residents move back in. Old Havana's location and its opportunities for residents to earn dollars have made it a magnet for internal migration, leading to unsustainable crowding in old buildings.

Tourism development was an early priority because it produces revenues for the entire project. OHC's strategy was to begin with the five main plazas of Old Havana and the

streets that connect them, creating an attractive atmosphere for pedestrians. This has largely been accomplished, along with restoration of the cruise ship terminal and hotels throughout the district.

OHC polled 847 residents of Old Havana in 1996 and found that the main problems they identified were the bad condition of housing, the lack of sanitary facilities and running water, the existence of slums, and crime. Thirty percent said they carry their own water into their homes each day; 68% expressed a preference to stay in Old Havana, especially the elderly; 47% said they did not yet benefit personally from OHC's works in the neighborhood, but 85% viewed the changes as positive.

About one third of current OHC spending is on social projects, principally new housing. “Housing is a very serious problem that we will solve in the medium to long term,” one official said, “but in the short term we have brought benefits to all the people of Old Havana. All our kids have a decent school, all the elderly are taken care of.”

La Plaza Vieja



The Plaza Vieja, dating from the late 16th century, was an early priority for restoration. The Office of the Historian began by restoring the square itself – a task that called for demolishing an underground parking garage that occupied the entire square. This concrete structure had a roof extending one meter above ground level, and constituted, in Eusebio Leal's eyes, "an act of vandalism" in an important public space.

Above, one side of the plaza is a microcosm of Old Havana's restoration.

Far left, an early 18th century mansion, rebuilt after a 19th century fire, now being restored for retail stores on ground level and housing upstairs.

Second from left, a building housing OHC offices and cafeteria; in the rear are several floors of housing for residents who lived in a building on Mercaderes street that was restored with Venezuelan aid to become the Simon Bolivar Museum.

Third and fourth from left, apartment buildings slated for renovation in 2001. Residents have been told that they will move to transitional housing, but do not yet know who will move back into the new apartments. Typical of local construction, the interior rooms have high ceilings, and typical of contemporary overcrowding, residents have built lofts, called *barbacoas* (barbecues) in reference to the grid of beams that holds them up.

Fifth from left, an art gallery.



Renovated housing on the Plaza Vieja in the building shared with OHC offices.



A *barbacoa* built in a 15 foot by 15 foot apartment with a 15 foot ceiling, shared by a mother and son.



Navigating the Plaza Vieja's restored square on a scooter.



Children from local elementary schools converged on the plaza to see actors perform skits and quizzes on Cuban history. Behind them, the Gomez Vila building, built in 1909 and used as a post office, now being renovated as an apartment building for rental in dollars to foreign residents, managed by the OHC corporation Fenix.



Just off the Plaza Vieja is transitional housing – prefabricated 2-bedroom apartments where residents wait for their homes to be completed. A 50-year-old woman who has lived there for one year applauds the restoration work: "It's good, and it's very ambitious – they are planning to go all the way through San Isidro." A man who lives there with his wife and two children is also pleased that he will continue to live in Old Havana: "I love it here. I grew up here, it is centrally located and I don't want to leave. But some who go to Alamar [apartment blocks east of Havana] say it's luxurious, they have houses with new flooring, glass windows, it's breezy and ventilated and cooler. And they are not living 8 to a room – people have their own rooms."

The limits of private enterprise

Small-scale private enterprise, or self-employment, was legalized in 1993 in Cuba as part of a response to the post-Soviet economic crisis.

By 1996, 209,000 Cubans were working as licensed entrepreneurs, with perhaps an equal number working part-time or full-time without licenses. Many thrive on tourism dollars in Old Havana and elsewhere, operating family restaurants, renting rooms in their homes to tourists, and working as artists, vendors, taxi drivers, and guides.

Today about 159,000 licensed entrepreneurs are in business. The reduction was caused by competition from each other and from the state, regulations, and the re-imposition of a personal income tax in 1996 after a 37-year absence.

The strongest measures taken by the state seem to be intended to limit private competition with state enterprises that earn foreign exchange from tourists. An example has occurred recently with the *bicitaxis*, re-engineered bicycles with a two-wheel rear axle, two-passenger seat, and canopy, that carry passengers throughout Havana's tourist zones.

In November 2000, authorities made it known that as of February 2001, *bicitaxis* would be permitted only to carry Cuban nationals, cutting off lucrative dollar revenue from tourists. Drivers say that state employees will replace them, driving new imported vehicles.

This measure is viewed harshly by the *bicitaxi* drivers, who are not wealthy, but earn good profits by Cuban standards for their very hard labor. One driver, a former cook for a state construction enterprise, has earned a steady \$40-\$50 per month for 5 years, 7 times his former earnings. For him, the ban on carrying tourists "means we can't continue, and there is no reason for it," he said.

"They want tourists to have contact only with the state."

Another driver, a 30-year-old father of two sons, estimates that his earnings range from \$15 to \$40 monthly after

continued on page 13

Housing

Housing is particularly difficult, an official said, because of overcrowding: "To work on a building of 20 units, we need 30 units of transitional housing." To prevent re-creating overcrowded conditions, some of the

residents are relocated to new homes outside Old Havana. For those who wish to return to renovated housing, an order of preferences is established, with priority given to those who legally occupy their housing in Old Havana. Large numbers, he said, simply say they want a new dwelling – "and if they take one outside Old Havana, they become owners of that home."

Some homes are rehabilitated without the residents moving out. Just off the Plaza Vieja on Mercaderes street, a 22-year-old man describes how his family's apartment was renovated by OHC with a new bathroom and kitchen. They are now trying to get workers to complete the paint job; "You have to keep asking," he said.

The San Isidro neighborhood in the southern end of Old Havana presents special challenges. Originally a sector where shipyard workers and tradesmen lived, the houses are relatively modest; an inventory found 70 percent in deteriorated or highly deteriorated condition.

Three residents, all workers in an auto shop, described the changes on their block. Five of 12 houses had been repaired with OHC aid; one had the entire original roof in his 18th century house replaced because it was leaking and in danger of collapse. Another said his house has not been repaired, but he is beginning to take advantage of inexpensive materials that OHC makes available for do-it-yourself jobs. A bathroom sink that costs \$80 in a state dollar store was provided to him for 130 pesos, the equivalent of \$6.50. They said that OHC personnel hold meetings several times each year to consult residents about OHC projects and their prospects for participating in them. One also noted that Eusebio Leal, "an honest man," holds walk-in office hours once a month for neighborhood residents.



Relocated residents of Old Havana are in newly built housing in Alamar, a vast apartment complex overlooking the sea east of Havana. Lower photo: Before major restoration efforts began, other residents were relocated to small single-story apartments just across Havana Bay.

paying \$52 in tax. Each month he divides his earnings in three parts: his, his wife's, and what he saves for his sons, which is "untouchable." He



lamented the new regulation in late January as he was cleaning and repairing his vehicle. He knows some foreigners who live in Cuba and hopes to find work with them, but as he looked at his final weeks in business, he said simply, "I don't know what I will do." ■

The workforce

Havana's restoration has spawned the development of a specialized workforce. The Gaspar Melchor de Jovellanos school for craftsmen graduates about 90 students each year in 8 specialties: tile, glass, carpentry, blacksmithing, mural painting, oil painting and restoration, plaster, and stonework. Students age 17 to 21 take 2-year courses in their craft, plus 5 months of history. The school was founded in 1992 with aid from the government of Spain. Today the operating budget comes from Spanish aid and OHC funds.

Off the Plaza Vieja, a carpentry shop operates in a gutted building that was partially destroyed by fire. A wizened 77-year-old

Extensive housing works are under way on the Malecon. This avenue was built by the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers under the command of Gen. Leonard Wood during the U.S. occupation at the turn of the last century. According to a 1999 Associated Press report, aid provided by provincial Spanish governments will help to produce 1,400 new apartments.

Many of the residents displaced by the work in Old Havana now live a few miles east of Havana Bay in Alamar, a large beachfront complex of apartment buildings. They occupy newly built apartments in a cluster of 3-story and 4-story buildings built by a brigade of workers from Guantanamo and Baracoa in eastern Cuba. The apartments have 2 bedrooms approximately 12 feet square, a dining area, a bathroom with a tiled shower, a railcar kitchen and 2 small balconies.

One couple in Alamar complained that they were displaced against their wishes from their home on the Paseo del Prado and are now unable to work because transportation from Alamar to Havana is so difficult. A housewife nearby was pleased to be living there. Her family of four lived in an old house on Mercaderes street that was "awful," she said. "We lived in 2 small rooms. Every time it rained, we got wet inside."

Elsewhere in eastern Havana is a group of former Old Havana residents who feel short-changed. They live in small one-bedroom apartments in rudimentary single-story cinder block buildings. They left Old Havana due to fires, building collapses, and other reasons long before large-scale restoration began. Having lived in these buildings for up to 11 years, they argue that they, not the residents moving out now, should have the first claim on new Alamar apartments.

Social projects

The restoration effort also includes improvement of the social services facilities in Old Havana.

The Center for Childhood Rehabilitation is one example. Housed in a meticulously restored 19th century mansion on Lamparilla street, it opened in early 2000 and serves as a home and rehabilitation center for children with severe mental disabilities. The idea came from OHC's survey of Old Havana residents, which indicated that 38 such children were without specialized care. It appears to be a state-of-the-art facility, spacious, with new imported equipment for rehabilitation and sensory stimulation. The children's mothers are given preference for jobs in the Center, an OHC official explained, so they can be with their children as much as possible.

Nearby, a Mother's and Infant's Home of the same quality serves women with problem pregnancies.

Two neighborhood schools visited by the author had classrooms and equipment that seemed brighter and better equipped than most schools in Cuba. Old Havana's school-children regularly visit their neighborhood museums for instruction. This "museum-classroom" program was the result of luck: When students from a partially collapsed school were temporarily housed in a museum, their teachers took advantage of the environment,

“maestro” serves as foreman and teacher, leading the 15 workers as they “learn on the march – it’s the best way,” he says. They create custom reproductions of doors, window frames, and molding used in restoration projects. The crew uses an assortment of Russian and American power drills, planes, saws, and routers.

Along the Paseo del Prado, old imported street lamps made of 100 individual cast iron parts are being replaced by reproductions. OHC located a mothballed foundry in Havana’s Luyano neighborhood and reactivated it to produce the lamps.

Worker pay seems to vary widely.

Tourism workers, as elsewhere in Cuba, earn dollar tips directly or as beneficiaries of tips

continued on page 15



In the back room of a mansion next to Havana’s cathedral, craftsmen make reproductions of molding, balusters, and other interior ornamentation by taking plaster casts of the originals and manufacturing replicas on the spot. The building being restored, the Palacio del Conde del Lombillo, was originally built in 1618 and rebuilt in its current form in 1737; through the 20th century it housed government offices.

Issues for the future

As a cityscape, Havana’s colonial center seldom fails to impress foreign visitors.

However, outsiders may reasonably find little drama in the dedication of tens of millions of dollars in public investment to stop the deterioration of a precious national resource. And visitors from abroad can certainly suggest ways that free-market mechanisms and different models of local government could be used to meet the same restoration goals.

Still, Cuba’s restoration efforts are very dramatic in the Cuban context for several reasons: they are having an impact in an area where little had been done before; they represent a decentralization rare in Cuba; and they occur in a larger capital city that contains many

The restoration also seems popular in Old Havana and among Cubans generally. The most frequent criticism one encounters is that the effort is too limited – many Cubans would like it to be replicated where they live.

An independent journalist, Tania Quintero, lamented changes occurring in parts of Havana in a 1999 article. However, she noted, “Where something – a lot – has been done, is in the old part. One can’t fail to recognize the merit of the Historian of the City, Eusebio Leal, who has become an entrepreneur at the head of Habaguanex, a firm that rescues homes and palaces while building stores and hotels that earn hard currency.” She quoted a man who lives in overcrowded housing and is hoping “that Eusebio Leal’s people take note of us and give us apartments in Alamar.”

Opinions vary on the degree to which the public is consulted by the Office of the Historian. One resident of a western Havana neighborhood said that Old Havana “is the one place where local sentiment is taken into account.” Some in Old Havana agree, and many recognize that while OHC receives public comments in numerous ways, it cannot satisfy all requests at once. A foreign observer who attended an OHC neighborhood meeting said residents were surprised that the OHC officials truly wanted to hear public opinion: “I didn’t know this was going to be a true discussion,” one man told him. Others disagree. A bicycle taxi driver claimed that his neighborhood in the northern part of Old Havana is never consulted and his building will never be repaired. An Old Havana resident said that while OHC has responded to criticism that it focused initially on museums and monuments only, more could be done to increase “social participation,” for example by opening greater possibilities for residents of San Isidro to repair their own homes.

In Cuba, all discussions of Old Havana’s restoration seem to lead to the same question: Will the model be repeated elsewhere? One foreign observer notes that “regardless of what you think of Leal and his efforts, it is a new financial model, so if someone recommends that it be expanded, it’s not new, it’s already working in Old Havana.”

Architect Mario Coyula, a professor and director of an organization dedicated to city-wide urban planning for Havana (*El Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital*), raised a series of issues in an essay that could at least in part be addressed by OHC-like mechanisms for the city as a whole:

“Especially, [Havana’s rehabilitation] means taking advantage of those things that make Havana unique, in order to prevent the new investments that are already starting from destroying that particular beauty...”

shared throughout the workplace. That is the hope of a 22-year-old man who is studying to be a chef and will seek work in a hotel or restaurant operated by Habaguanex. Musicians working in restaurants pass the hat for tips between sets, a trumpet player explained, “because we cannot live from our salaries,” which are in the 200-300 peso range. With the dollar valued at 20 pesos, even modest dollar tips have a large impact on purchasing power.

In the construction sector, young laborers on one construction site receive salaries of 200 pesos per month, just below the 223-peso average for the Cuban state sector. A worker on Mercaderes street earns 400 pesos fabricating plaster ceiling molding by hand, fitting the specifications needed in a building under restoration. An older craftsman whose specialty is tile work has worked 7 years with OHC; he earns a salary of 1,028 pesos per month plus a 30% bonus payment. He says that he expects to be paid partially in dollars and to receive, like few others in Cuba’s workforce, an ATM card to withdraw his dollar pay. “But we don’t know when that will be,” he says, as he gestures to imaginary epaulets on his shoulder, the common Cuban gesture to make silent reference to the country’s top decision maker. ■

“Many questions which just five years ago seemed irrelevant have now taken on great importance, such as the necessity to really assess the value of urban land for a neophyte land market; or how to employ the new investments in the recuperation of undervalued areas. It seems imperative to study ways of achieving a social appropriation of the surplus generated by real estate activities, so it would become more meaningful and motivational for the population; to use taxes and other instruments to reinvest in neighborhood development; and a fair share of profits generated by productive, service, and commercial activities.”

Judging from the limited discussion of the issue, it seems unlikely that Cuba’s central government will soon devolve fiscal and other authorities to additional local entities. But as that and other debates proceed, visitors will continue to return to Havana to see skillful Cuban workers combining tourism earnings and hard human effort to save the memory and relics of their nation’s past.



One of many collapsed buildings in Old Havana.



Further reading and resources

The website of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana describes all aspects of the restoration effort. It is illustrated and contains information useful for visitors and researchers; see <http://www.ohch.cu/>. *Opus Habana*, OHC's quarterly magazine, provides in-depth coverage of restoration projects in addition to coverage of arts and culture; for subscription information contact opus@cultural.ohch.cu.

Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis, Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula, and Joseph L. Scarpaci, John Wiley and Sons, 1997.

"Reshaping Habana Vieja: Revitalization, Historic Preservation, and Restructuring in the Socialist City," Joseph L. Scarpaci, *Urban Geography*, No. 21, December 2000.

Lexington Institute studies on Cuba's economy, U.S.-Cuba relations, and other materials are found at www.lexingtoninstitute.org/cuba.

Bridges to Cuba is a nonprofit organization dedicated to education about historic preservation throughout Cuba, including programs in cooperation with the Savannah College of Art and Design. Contact Juan E. Romagosa, bridge@connect2cuba.org.

The Georgetown University Cuba Briefing Paper Series is a wide-ranging series of papers on current economic, political, and social topics. See www.georgetown.edu/sfs/programs/clas/Caribe/cbps.htm.

Photos by Philip Peters.

The Lexington Institute gratefully acknowledges the financial support provided by the Ford Foundation for this study.



1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 325
Arlington, Virginia 22209
www.lexingtoninstitute.org
703-522-5828