HOUSING, URBAN RENEWAL AND POPULAR POWER: SOME REFLECTIONS ON HAVANA

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Introduction

Cuba is the largest of the Caribbean Islands with an area of more than 110,000 square kilometers and a population that recently reached 10 million inhabitants. Four hundred and fifty years of colonial domination and neocolonial dependence created structural inequalities throughout the territory.

At the triumph of the Revolution in 1959, Havana, the capital city, held 20% of the 6 million inhabitants of the country. Located there as well was 75% of the Island's nonsugar-based industry, most port services, health services, education, and tourism. This inequality between the capital city and the rest of the country stimulated heavy migration that resulted in shantytowns of marginal character with unhealthy conditions. These communities were not only removed from the lifestyle of all sectors of the bourgeoisie, but also from the proletariat. The latter, with more of an urban tradition, had become entrenched in the dense web of the ancient city center, undergoing the ghettoization that followed the exodus of the ruling classes.

The living conditions in the entire country were critical. More than 50% of the population lived in conditions of poverty and depended on self-built construction for shelter. Cuba also lacked a national tradition in the creative use of local building crafts and materials that could have produced relatively compact housing groups, as occurred in other countries with traditions of a popular culture.

From the very beginning, the successful Revolution provoked a break with the previous social structure, introducing great changes such as agrarian reform, a national literacy campaign and the nationalization of foreign industries. At the same time the Revolution produced new employment opportunities in agriculture and industry that quickly eliminated unemployment. The historical imbalance between urban and rural areas began to diminish with the construction of a network of new towns that served as a support system providing needed services to cooperatives and state farms.

In the area of housing the capital city witnessed a strong surge of construction directly on the heels of the Revolution. This phenomenon permitted the maintenance of employment levels in

an important sector that had been primarily in private hands -- construction. A primary example of this new construction was East Havana. East Havana was conceived as a neighborhood of 15,000 inhabitants with buildings of four and eleven stories and abundant green areas. Various other single-family units of one or two stories and multi-family units of four stories were constructed throughout Havana, designed in part to replace the unsanitary shantytowns.

Concurrently, other revolutionary measures,such as the lowering of rents, were enacted to benefit the population. The Urban Reform Law of 1960 made property owners of the majority of tenants. The government assignment of newly constructed housing and the reassignment of housing abandoned in the first years by the fleeing bourgeoisie to families in need had the positive effect of breaking up the social segregation in the class-based zoning inherited from the old regime. This new mobility created problems initially by inducing abnormal deterioration in the multi-family housing units. The deterioration in housing was created by the fact that the new tenants were accustomed to a much lower standard of living. Most critical were the cases where an entire ghetto neighborhood was transferred to a new settlement. The social development that followed, together with the use of alternate methods of housing distribution, was able to eventually resolve this problem.

The housing activity during this stage was continuous with the conventional schemes of construction technology typical of the lower and middle urban bourgeoisie before the Revolution. This achieved a high quality of design and execution. However, it failed to resolve the technical and economic issues which, if addressed, could have provided a more global response to the accumulated need for housing. This period introduced Cuban architects to the urban scale. For it was during this period that they became involved with the construction of new rural towns and prepared the first studies of territorial organization, including the initial outlines of a General Plan for Havana (1963).

Great investments were made to provide the infrastructure for agricultural and industrial development, and to level the imbalance between urban and rural life. They had the positive effect of diminishing the migration to the capital city without using coercion. However, these investment policies did have the negative consequence of slowing construction, renovation, and maintenance of housing in Havana until the mid 1960s. This resulted in deterioration of existing housing stock in Havana that was already deficient before the revolution. Havana's population increase during the 1960s only aggravated the situation. The unpainted, crumbling facades, combined with the changes in the commercial network and in the service sector (down to the old North American cars lacking spare parts) brought about a deterioration of the

urban landscape, especially in the central city.

From the first years of the Revolution it was clear that to achieve the required volume of construction, it would be necessary to industrialize the construction sector. Other concerns requiring attention were the scarcity of construction materials and the lack of qualified construction workers. The solution posed to the housing problem was a program of large-scale, technologically-advanced prefabricated construction. State companies were established to serve as construction agents for this new building system. The objective of the construction strategy was to achieve high density by increasing the number of floors.

However, the economic priorities of the early revolutionary period severely limited the available resources for construction purposes. Had these resources been available during the early 1960s, they could have resulted in the massive housing construction that is only now being accomplished by prefabricated technology. Another indirect consequence of early planning priorities was the loss of prestige for maintenance and renovation activities, as well as a slowing of technical advances in these areas. The older traditional structures that formed the majority of existing housing stock in urban areas were most affected by these trends.

The accelerated deterioration of this older urban core not only cut short the useful life span of buildings, but produced a perceived degeneration. Often this deterioration occurred in the old zones rich in historical values and ambiance that were most important to preserve as part of the cultural heritage.

Popular Action: Problems, Possibilities

The growing scarcity of housing, combined with the desire to remain in central locations, impelled the public to use their own resources to create additions, subdivisions, and modifications in the housing structures. Their actions added to the urban density and the burden upon city facilities and infrastructure that were already inadequate. Traffic congestion grew, the structural stability of buildings was affected, and the original architectural and planning codes were ignored.

One of the most disturbing aspects of this spontaneous activity was the use of vacant commercial sites as living units. This changed the face of the urban street without resolving the fundamental problems of ventilation and privacy. Other self-directed urban solutions included the construction of mezzanines, "barbacoas," to take advantage of the high ceilings and supporting beams of the old buildings, and the construction of huts on flat roofs. These activities escalated in a continual process of internal densification that retained the basic urban structure and to a lesser degree the facades of the structures. However, in many cases these activities resulted in a visual jumble of blocked windows,

barred doors, and lofts jutting out into the public space.

These acts of do-it-yourself construction in the city center shared certain characteristics with outlying shantytowns. In the shantytowns the objective limitations of the construction methods and materials available influenced the resulting structures. Equally limiting was the capacity of the individual to handle materials without technology, and the cost of those materials. Some indications of common cultural patterns emerged in these efforts that were probably of rural origin, and not quite assimilated into the urban milieu. Self-construction is an area that deserves to be studied in itself, not only to control the negative effects, but also to better direct the positive aspects that might prove useful, and perhaps to incorporate them in some form into the repertory of the urban designers.

Public actions such as the above were not limited to housing currently in use or to old commercial sites. They were also directed at uninhabitable units that had become vacant because of extreme decay. The demolition that destroys the continuity of the compact urban scene was thus avoided. Demolition produces vacant spaces not easily converted to productive social use. These actions enabled interested individuals to obtain housing that was well-located, often preferable to a new apartment in a developing suburban area. Assignments to vacant dwellings are made by the city officials of Popular Power, who establish the technical requirements and the terms of rehabilitation, taking into consideration the needs of the applicants. Help and financial backing are available at the workplace.

Microbrigades

Around 1970 Fidel Castro initiated a plan for housing construction that would run parallel to the strictly state-sponsored measures. The Microbrigade Movement, as it is called, mobilized the workers in the centers of production, administration, and services. Individual workers organized themselves with the objective of constructing their own housing units, despite the fact that they were inexperienced in construction methods. Microbrigades received technical assistance, equipment and materials from the State. They were able to maintain their regular jobs with the help of pledged overtime on the part of their co-workers.

Housing constructed in this manner was put at the disposition of the workers collective that assigned it according to workers credits and need. Although the fact of having worked on the construction of one of these units carried weight at the time of distribution, it was not the only determining factor. Each worker had to wait his or her turn in the distribution. Along the same lines, the Microbrigades donated housing for the needy. This occurred in the case of the Chilean refugees fleeing the fascist coup that

brought down the government of the Unidad Popular. There were also Microbrigades that organized the construction of buildings to house the free social services in the newly constructed neighborhoods.

The Microbrigade Movement was successful from the beginning, a fact that could be verified by the rapid rise in the amount of housing constructed and by the number of Microbrigades formed (in 1975 they numbered 1150). In reality the formation of Microbrigades rapidly exceeded available material and technical resources. This limitation became part of another problem. By definition the movement was directed primarily at resolving the needs of city workers, ignoring the housing requirements of the people not connected to urban factories or those who lived in cities without Microbrigades. In addition, the regular State construction teams were first in line for the limited materials, thereby reducing the possibility of equipping new Microbrigades.

The area of greatest concentration of Microbrigades in Havana has been Alamar, located on the eastern shore. Intended for 120,000 inhabitants, it now has a population of 60,000. Together with the neighborhood of East Havana and a few small preexisting settlements, Alamar is part of the great east-west line that the General Plan proposes as a better alternative for the development of the city. The Alamar settlement creates a better balance with the old city center, and takes advantage of favorable ecological conditions and the extensive beaches (the principal recreational resource of the capital city). This settlement is geared to preserve agricultural lands of the Cordón, as well as the underground water source that supplies Havana.

The Alamar settlement requires the construction of large-scale engineering projects and the development of a mass transit system that joins proposed subway and suburban railway with the existing bus system which is currently the only means of public transportation in the city. Preliminary studies for the subway have begun and the first line is scheduled to go into operation in 1993.

In addition to these proposals directly related to the structural form of the city, it will be necessary to address urban design issues to improve the functional and visual qualities of the existing, outlying residential zones of Havana. Besides Alamar these areas include Altahavana to the south, Reparto Eléctrico to the southeast, and Ermita-San Augustín to the west. Plans, policies and the architectural typologies employed in these zones need to be revised to achieve greater variety, identity and ambiance.

A recent effort to reorganize the street nomenclature and the numbering of buildings in Alamar became so complex that it made clear the lack of structure and cohesiveness of Alamar's urban structure thus far -- a fact that mailmen have been aware of for some time. It is also a cause of concern that a settlement like Alamar with buildings of five or more floors has failed to take on

an urban character. This is to be contrasted with certain central zones of Havana which present a distinctly urban flavor, a richer, more stimulating flavor, even though the average height of buildings is less than two stories.

The census of 1981 listed Havana's population as 1,929,432 inhabitants. Of the 526,000 housing units in existence at the time, approximately one half were average or below average in quality. This statistic is particularly striking given the fact that 55,000 new units were constructed between 1959 and 1980. These new units were the result of a massive construction project initiated to respond to population increases. The demand for housing remained high despite the fact that the rate of growth slowed to .68% in the period between 1970 and 1981, a rate relatively small for a large Latin American city. Additional demand was created by the deterioration of existing stock, a condition exacerbated by over-utilization and lack of regular maintenance.

Toward the end of 1983 the "Technical and Economic Base" of the General Plan for Havana was completed, continuing an uninterrupted process of planning having its antecedent in the plans of 1963 and 1970. These technical and economic components of the General Plan were approved by the Provincial Assembly of Popular Power of the City of Havana and by the Council of Ministers. They contain an analysis of the current situation, a long-term forecast derived from the "Plan Unico" (National Plan) of Economic and Social Development, and a proposed strategy. To prepare the technical and economic basis of the Plan, a study was made of Havana's zone of influence, including neighboring provinces, with an amplified time frame of 50 years.

The technical and economic base was the starting point for the City's General Plan which represents a second stage of development and covers a shorter time span (1980-2000). In the General Plan of Havana, detailed planning strategies, plan phases and proposed investment levels for five-year investment plans are included. The General Plan complements a system of legal-administrative codes and policies which include the by-laws of the General Plan and Urban Regulations, these latter contain specific regulations by zone and the procedures for the approval of "micro-zones" and projects. This system of codes and policies integrates regulations of a national character with those emanating from the provinces. These provincial regulations include those of the departments of Physical Planning, Architectural Planning, and Urban Planning which are then subject to approval by the Provincial Assembly of Havana.

The precise allocation of investments is approved by the Executive Committee of the Provincial Assembly after securing the approval of the corresponding municipality and complying with the administrative directives that are applicable. People participate in this decision-making in different ways at different levels.

In the *Committees in Defense of the Revolution* [CDRs] at the local level, construction problems which require the support of the residents as well as issues that involve the regulation and hygiene of public areas are discussed. These committees implement projects such as cleanup, care of green areas, painting, and construction and repair of sidewalks and fences. CDRs, with the participation of Neighbors' Councils, also approve work on multi-family buildings. Many times it is the tenants themselves who do the painting and maintaining of the common areas. In these cases help from Popular Power is received in the form of materials, equipment and technical assistance. These actions amplify the limited potential of official plans for construction and maintenance. They also serve to reinforce the identification of the inhabitants with their physical surroundings. On the other hand, since control of the work becomes decentralized, regulations increase due to the difficulties of doing a task with a non-professional workforce, and the work schedule becomes erratic.

In special assemblies that take place twice a year, citizens receive information from their elected delegates regarding projects of local interest. There, they may discuss, formulate proposals or request information about these plans or about a particular problem. This can also take place during the weekly meetings with their People's Power delegate who periodically offers an accounting of his/her activities. Other information is communicated and commented upon by the news media or circulated in the form of pamphlets. Nevertheless, it is essential to find other, more effective ways, to present and discuss plans and projects of greater complexity and specialization within a broad social framework.

The Progressive Improvement of the Shantytowns

In spite of efforts begun in the early post-revolutionary years, including the total eradication of unsanitary ghettoes, there still exist in Havana neighborhoods of varying size that contain inadequate housing units. These areas are essentially different from the traditional ghettoes based on ethnic, economic or social criteria. There has been a sustained process of improvement to make them more habitable. This improvement has been accomplished by the combined efforts of the tenants in substituting more solid materials for the original flimsy ones, and state actions in providing utilities and social service infrastructure.

In a study of these settlements in Havana completed in 1983 the living conditions were analyzed, along with street networks, the condition and placement of housing, and residential infrastructure. These were evaluated according to the proposed outlines of the General Plan for these areas. This study concluded that 28 neighborhoods should be excluded from the list of unsanitary barrios since they had achieved a nearly average level of habitability,

thereby placing them within the urban mainstream. The study also concluded that 34 other neighborhoods that had been slated for partial demolition should be retained since these neighborhoods contained a large quantity of housing that had reached acceptable levels.

A preliminary analysis of this situation demonstrates the vast possibilities of individual effort with support from the state, assuming certain necessary conditions such as good location and an orderly placement of the units. This assures the permanence and the progressive consolidation of the settlement. In the case of a large city like Havana, solutions that permit greater density must be sought. Such solutions might include duplex row housing that would make possible future growth without occupying more land, and a gradual improvement in the quality of construction that would not adversely affect neighboring structures.

Self-Construction of Housing

In March of 1984 the eleventh National Congress of Housing and Urban Planning was dedicated to the issue of self-construction of housing. The delegates concurred in the importance of supporting and channeling self-construction. The reason for their support was based on a census of new housing units built between 1981-83 which showed that 3.7 times more housing had been built through self-help than by state brigades. This figure did not even include cooperatives, units built by additions to or the breaking up of existing units or by the adaptations of other sites. The census contrasted the numbers of state-built units (49,785) with self-built units (182,439) of which, it must be stressed, only 39.7% qualified as "good." The percentage gap has been increasing in recent years so that by 1983 almost seven times more self-constructed units as state units were built.

This situation is due to the fact that building materials have become more available to the public in recent years and to the growing participation of the local units of Popular Power. Nevertheless, the large quantity of poor-quality housing is proof of the insufficiency of urban monitoring methods and of technical resources outside Havana. These problems should begin to be resolved with the recently approved municipal offices of Architecture and Urban Planning throughout the country. The Union of Construction Architects and Engineers, formed in December of 1983, has proposed a number of projects and has offered specific advice which should also aid in the turnaround.

It is evident that self-construction will play a major part in the rural areas and in the small and medium-sized cities. This occurrence could diminish the contradictions of past years in which new rural settlements consisted of buildings of 4-5 stories while the major cities grew uncontrollably with one-story units,

thereby tripling the urban area while the population merely doubled.

It seems advisable that self-construction in the major cities should be concentrated on additions, construction on flat roofs, and fill-ins in suburban zones of isolated housing units. Following this policy, however, is anticipated to generate only 5% of the 224,000 units needed in Havana between 1980 and 2000. But, this prediction could turn out to be a conservative one if we take into account the range of possibilities that the new Housing Law No. 48 opens up and the fact that of the 16,000 units built in the capital city between 1981-1983, 37% were self-constructed and only 8% of these were substandard.

The General Housing Law

This law, put into effect in December of 1984, transfers ownership of housing units to their tenants, applying the rent itself as payment; the law provides for the construction, conservation, rehabilitation, and expansion of housing by self-construction methods. It regulates the management of grouped housing units, considering them as primary units under state law, and it permits the renting of rooms as a form of alleviating the housing shortage. If the lowering of rents and the Urban Reform Law of 1960 were carried out at the expense of the homeowners, this law is being carried out at the expense of State funds.

Individual and cooperative action will be the deciding factor in the conservation of existing housing stock, an effort that had been outstripped for many years by the investment in new state-built units. This situation has improved during the last few years. During 1984 the sale of construction materials to individuals in Havana topped twenty million dollars. When added to the $35 million spent by the projects of Popular Power on the maintenance of housing, this amount exceeds the $36 million invested in new state-built housing in the capital city.

Urban Restoration, Revival and Renovation

The need to increase density in Havana is recognized by the General Plan. This objective, combined with the critical evaluation of new construction and the need to revitalize the old central districts has taken on a three-pronged thrust: the restoration of monuments, the revival of the urban life, and renovation.

Restoration has until now been concentrated in the colonial core of Old Havana, "Patrimonio de la Humanidad," highest historical landmark status, in December of 1982. But the possibility of restoring other areas is now recognized. The efforts need to go beyond the original targeted nucleus of restoration to encompass large sections that are not quite as old and that contain fewer highly valued buildings. Areas must be included which possess

value intrinsic to the urban fabric. These secondary zones are those which not only help to explain the evolution of the city in its historic process of incorporating neighboring areas but also represent, by their very size and extension, vital areas in the functioning of the city that justifies, in economic terms, their conservation.

This urban revitalization is a definite step in the conservation-renewal dialectic, a process which seeks a qualitative, rapid change in the urban scene, with limited resources. The targeted areas are those central areas which suffer most from physical deterioration, from the interruption and over-utilization of services, and from changes of use. Revitalization is also needed in areas which were originally ill-defined and which are now part of the city core due to urban growth. This project was begun in Havana in 1974 by the Provincial Office of Architecture and Planning which completed a comprehensive study of the city in 1984. The study identified 68 existing or potential areas for revitalization, which would subsequently act as nodes of activity at various points along the principal connecting routes.

In order to achieve a rapid and inexpensive change in the urban landscape, the work has been directed at emphasizing the potential value of a site, to correct the defacement that has occurred, and to improve the declining urban services. The aim is to rejuvenate buildings in the targeted area, especially the exteriors and above all the elements with the most visual impact on the public. Work is done on design and decoration as well as on the open areas, urban fixtures and signage.

Urban renovation implies more profound changes, possible alterations of basic urban structure and the replacement of certain buildings or parts of buildings. Of the 224,000 housing units to be produced by the year 2000, some 45,000 will be created through urban renewal.

In 1973 work began on the first phase of the urban renovation of Cayo Hueso, a barrio in the municipality of Central Havana. The initial study included 746 hectares. The intention was to replace the buildings in bad condition and to retain those in decent and good condition, while maintaining or increasing the existing population. Planners attempted to accomplish these ends while minimizing the effect on circulation and infrastructure, increasing the open areas to eight square meters per person and providing the services lacking. The plan for the first five blocks was based on freestanding buildings of five, twelve, and twenty floors.

In 1983 a revision in the plan allowed for an increase in the number of existing buildings eligible for preservation. More new construction was incorporated, some of which was unusual in design, taking better advantage of the land through in-filling without encroaching on usable open space. These attempts,

together with an integrated study of the facades, has reduced the usual visual rupture that such isolated blocks of housing have created in the traditional tightly woven urban fabric. The target population of these five blocks, which also contain a supermarket, a school, and other services, is 3,000. The urban renovation of the whole barrio will continue, aided by collaborative studies begun in 1984 between Havana and East Berlin.

From the experience gained in the five-block experiment in Cayo Hueso, we can formulate a more profound revision of the planning of this and similar projects. In previous plans the solution of isolated blocks of housing not only created a disparity with the surrounding space but achieved, despite greater height of structure, a density no greater than that of pre-planned stages. In this new phase, buildings of three, four or five floors can accommodate an equal or greater density while utilizing distinctive planning and architectural elements, thereby reproducing many of the desirable elements of the traditional city.

Conclusions

From our experiences with Popular Power Assemblies, especially in working on state and individual control over construction and on the preservation of monuments and the building stock, we have formed a reevaluation of the issues. Allow me to summarize:

- In the area of housing, direct participation of the interested parties in construction, renovation and maintenance constitutes a force which should be directed and supported to an equal degree as state action. The new Housing Law establishes various means for accomplishing these ends which, in the case of Havana, should correspond with the characteristics and regulations of each zone.
- A new, less rigid interpretation of historical value has led to the extension of the boundaries of historical preservation beyond the original nucleus of the city. Each area is valued according to the cultural periods to which they belong, to their building typologies, and to their social and economic conditions.
- This revised conception exceeds what is specifically artistic or historic. It incorporates models of urban building, functional and techno-constructive solutions, lifestyles, scale and character that have demonstrated their flexibility and consequent validity over the years.
- The preservation of large sections of the city unites cultural with utilitarian interests, prolonging the life-span of housing stock that is more plentiful and better-situated than newly constructed housing. By avoiding demolitions the coherence of the dense urban fabric is protected. Energy and materials are conserved. These preservation efforts are not limited strictly to symbolic structures, but rather encompass, with differing levels of depth and rigor, all stock that could conceivably meet practical needs.

- Methods used in self-construction, such as the creation of lofts, additions, and huts on roofs, should be adequately controlled. At the same time they should be studied and their positive aspects, such as the creative use of space, materials and available technology, should be retained. The potential in this type of construction could thus be channeled and the aspects applicable to new design could be extracted.
- In summary, we must define, conserve and stimulate the valid aspects, in substance as well as in ideas, that we inherit from the past. At the same time new forms, freely emerging among the people, unconventional as they may seem, should also be given the same consideration.

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