

Book Reviews

Roberto Segre, Mario Coyula, and Joseph L. Scarpaci
Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis
Chichester: John Wiley & Sons, 1997
xiv + 399 pp., \$60.00

Every city has unique characteristics but Havana is unique in ways of quite special interest to devotees of political economy and urban studies. There are the consequences of the four centuries in which Havana was the commercial center of the Spanish empire in the Americas, most visibly the extraordinary architectural heritage of La Habana Vieja, the old city, the most extensive assemblage of European New World architecture in existence. And there are the consequences of the last hundred years, the first sixty with Havana as the metropolis of a Cuba nominally independent but nevertheless de facto an American colony, and of the last forty as the capital city of the only Communist country in the Western hemisphere.

Perhaps no three scholars are better qualified to describe and explain the reality of Havana to social scientists interested in urbanity than the authors of this extraordinary book. Segre arrived in Havana in 1961 from Buenos Aires where he, a refugee from Italian fascism, studied architecture. Currently Segre holds a professorial chair at the Instituto Superior PolitEconomico (ISPJAE) of Havana (as well as at the Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro in Brazil). Coyula, a veteran of the student struggles in the fifties against the Batista dictatorship, is also a professor at ISPJAI. The careers of Segre and Coyula coincide dramatically with the Revolution itself. Their voluminous publications over the last three decades constitute much of the most influential Cuban work on architecture, city planning, and their relation to revolutionary social change. Scarpaci is an Italian American and Professor of Urban Affairs and Planning at Virginia Tech. Such fruitful collaboration between Cuban and American scholars is rare, and in this case the results are rich.

The book begins with a chapter orienting the reader in the geography and history (to the end of the nineteenth century) of the city. There is no other work in English which introduces Havana to strangers so insightfully. The maps, charts, and photographs are incisively chosen. The main focus is on the built

environment, but the political economic context is competently developed as well.

The second and third chapters consider the development of Havana in the six decades after “[t]he U.S. Army that occupied Cuba in 1898 snatched victory from the Cuban patriots” (49). This is the period in which Havana multifariously achieved the manifest appearance of a modern metropolis, a metropolis transparently dominated by American capital, but nevertheless a distinctly Cuban entity, i.e., neither (beneath its surface) American nor (any longer) Spanish colonial. Of special interest to urban scholars is the developing and idiosyncratic polycentric geographical organization of the city. The description here is rich in details, among the most fascinating of which is a sketch of the unrealized (fortunately) delirious vision of the icon of modern architecture, José Luis Sert, to build an artificial island packed with hotels, casinos, and shopping centers just off the seaside Malecón. Even so, an amazing (and sometimes appalling) collection of modernist visions were realized in Havana in the fifties, but most, e.g., the archtypical Hotel Riviera, were built in the Vedado area, some distance from Old Havana. Whatever else the triumph of the Revolution in 1959 might claim in its favor, it did extinguish the horrifying threat that priceless architectural treasures would be leveled and replaced with garish casinos of concrete and glass.

With this historical background in place, the remaining two-thirds of the book treat Havana since the triumph of the Revolution on New Year’s Day 1959. Chapter four, “Socialist Havana: Planning, Dreams, and Reality,” provides the requisite overview situating developments in the city in the context of the tumultuous development of the Cuban nation. The brief political and economic history provided is serviceable, and at least this much familiarity with the successive stages of Cuban history over the last four decades is essential for understanding what was hoped for, what was attempted, and what was (or was not) accomplished in the development of the city of Havana. About a quarter of Cubans are Habaneros, but to focus narrowly on Havana ensures misunderstanding Cuba and Havana itself. In every way, but especially economically and, more narrowly, as it affected the built environment, the changes wrought since 1959 have been far more extensive in the vast remainder of Cuba. (Cuba is the size of England, not Jamaica.) Havana is now more like the rest of Cuba—though still very different, especially from Oriente, “the cradle of the Revolution.” But now different in a subtle but important relative respect; The rest of the country is in general much more developed than forty years ago. Even taking into account momentous setbacks in this decade, per capita income, health, and education indexes are enormously better now than forty years ago. This is far less true of Havana. In fact very visible parts of Havana’s built environment are in startlingly worse

condition now than in 1959. The bourgeoisie disappeared—much of it to Miami with ghastly consequences, by no means overcome, for U.S. politics—and the physical accouterments of bourgeois life which remained for the most part fell slowly into ruin.

But much was attempted to better the lives of Cubans who experienced the continuing revolution, and much was accomplished. In an astonishingly short period Cuba developed the best educated (and healthiest) population in the developing world, and this transformed every aspect of social life and culture. The book focuses on the newly trained, revolutionarily inspired, young experts who worked explicitly on developing the economy, and especially on those who found themselves entrusted with planning and transforming the built environment of the city of Havana. From the first “Socialist Master Plan for Havana” of 1963–1964 to the present time in which important partners in planning are multinational corporations investing in practically the only economy in the world from which the United States is (self-) excluded, Havana has developed almost entirely not through the blind workings of market forces, but rather in accordance with comprehensive plans worked out by devoted collectives of talented people not driven directly or indirectly by a profit motive. As the authors of this book tell it, this is a fascinating story.

Chapter 5 focuses on the legal and administrative structure in which these changes were accomplished. Havana is certainly not the capital of a bourgeois democracy, nor is the governmental structure a simple transmission mechanism for party dictates. On the contrary, the level of popular participation in government—a very extensive category in Cuba—is much broader and deeper than often understood.

The sixth chapter is concerned with housing, a subject of enormous political economic importance in a society which has always had and continues to have a terrible shortage of adequate housing for its population, and a subject of special interest to urban planners. Cuba has been an *in situ* laboratory of experience—political, economic, and technical—in how to solve “the housing question,” and the authors tell this story well. Some will be surprised to learn that Cuban housing is overwhelmingly owner-occupied, including housing built socially.

Chapter 7 provides a fact-filled account of the transformations in the urban and regional economies since 1959. Especially useful is the treatment of the profound changes in production and employment in “The Special Period in Time of Peace” declared in 1990 with the collapse of the Soviet-led economic bloc in which Cuba was thoroughly enmeshed. In the last decade Cuba has been transformed from being probably the most satisfied economy in the world (excepting North Korea), to a complex interconnected system of qualitatively different “modes of production.” The bulk of agriculture has been transformed from state farms into

cooperatives (alongside the old and ever important private farmers); over ten percent of the non-agricultural work force is now legally (or illegally) self-employed, and a growing number of Cubans work for joint-venture enterprises managed by foreign capital. These new “non-socialist” modes of production are especially prominent in Havana.

The eighth chapter then takes up the provision of what are more or less public goods: education, health, culture, parks, and transportation. This is an explanatory account of what has been done best in Havana in the last four decades, and especially under the circumstances of the last decade in which the preservation of these “conquests of the Revolution” has been extremely difficult.

The ninth chapter could stand alone: a fine essay on La Habana Vieja, the old city, which is only one of the centers of Havana, but a thoroughly special entity historically, economically, and as a planning unit. As history-laden as any city in this hemisphere, recognized by UNESCO as an essential part of “The Heritage of Humanity,” Old Havana is inexhaustibly astonishing for visitors as well as for those who live there. The preservation and restoration of the old city poses difficult problems for a country recovering from severe economic depression. The problems and developing solutions are well explained here. Most significantly, Havana has not seen the solution as turning this treasure over to foreign capital. Disney got Times Square, but it is not getting La Habana Vieja.

The final chapter considers the future of Havana. The analysis is grounded in knowledge which no conceivable team of outside consultants could begin to match, and culminates in a detailed sectoral assessment of what can and should be done, which attests not only to the unmatched competence of the authors for this task but also to their undiminished optimistic socialist humanism (a sobriquet which perhaps none of them would particularly like).

Potential readers should know as well that the book includes an extensive and useful bibliography, and (less importantly) that the copy editing leaves something to be desired. The overall organization of the book occasionally seems idiosyncratic, if not awkward, no doubt reflecting the difficulties of melding the work of three strong talents with somewhat divergent interests into a single book. But it is a boon that this work exists, no less in English.

Frank Thompson
Department of Economics
University of Michigan
Ann Arbor, Michigan 48109
fthom@umich.edu