

URBAN RENEWAL PLANS FOR HAVANA: THE MODERNISATION OF A BOURGEOIS CITY (1898-1959)

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The 19th century was a period of splendour for Havana and fundamental in the evolution of the colony into a bourgeois city, with changes that largely stemmed from the liberalisation of the island's trade. The port of Havana developed into one of the busiest in the world and the U.S.A. became its main customer. This prosperity was reflected by the steep rise in the city's population during this century and by its physical growth. These changes happened at the same time as others that led to rapid social and urban modernisation that was not free of the resentment and tension that led to the 1895-1898 war of independence.

The city took on a dual personality. On the one hand, the permanent demand for land to satisfy the economic and social activities of the bourgeoisie led to the development of a high quality urban area. However, the successive waves of immigrants, day-labourers and workers also claimed their space in the dynamic city, leading to extensive growth of suburban and intra-urban areas with multiple shortcomings. The result was a complex, sprawling, discontinuous, heterogeneous and effervescent urban area whose population grew from 235,981 in 1899 to approximately 1,528,800 in 1960.

Conceived as the sum of private initiatives, the city of Havana did not enjoy the benefits of any all-embracing plan until the second half of the 20th century. The major growth periods of the 19th century were characterised by the most rudimentary geometric town planning criteria, with a succession of diverse, disconnected and dispersed geometric plans that were responsible for the first suburban dispersion of the 20th century.

Prior to the Suburb theory, the first expansions did not have the advantage of unified proposals endowed with the infrastructure and equipment of the time. In the early 20th century, for a city self-satisfied with its opulence and immersed in a process of socio-political transformation, the main concern was the image of the city. The first *republican* buildings to house the public functions of the new State clearly show a desire to embellish and equip the new capital with large symbolic buildings. In the same way, the edifices built by the different cultural, regional and professional associations showed their desire for ostentation. Private

citizens also built their houses driven by the desire to display their financial possibilities. The result was an accumulation of isolated buildings with no common references between them or with their context and built according to traditional criteria. The economic wealth of Havana was reflected in an architecture that wished to maintain formal order and use traditional formulas to express the historical tradition and solidity of the social structures. However, these ideas had no relevance whatsoever as regards urban planning.

The first half of the 20th century saw a series of reflections and proposals that, although they had significant influence on later plans, were forgotten at the time. Of these plans, special attention should be paid to those by Raúl Otero in 1905, the *Plan de Vías Maestras* (Major Routes Scheme) drafted by Camilo de Castro in 1912, and the *Plan Director de Urbanismo* (Master Town Planning Scheme) for Havana developed by Pedro Martínez Inclán in 1925. None of these projects were put into practice, but all shared a concern for planning the sprawling urban area, incorporating specific equipment for urban services and organising the fragmented parts of the city by means of a dense network of major complementary thoroughfares – both radial and ring roads. The first draft project for the *Plano Regulador* (Master Plan) for Havana was drawn up by Enrique Montoulieu in 1922. Its main contributions focused on improving the road network and creating a new functional centre, recreating a new centrality by building a large civic square in a monumental setting to act as a meeting place for citizens for a wide variety of celebrations. The symbolism of the setting was enhanced by the new buildings designed to house the new political and administrative functions of the newborn Republic. This geometric centre, equipped with functional centrality, was to be vital for the selective spatial distribution of urban functions in line with the new zoning theories, and had to bring together the activities typical of a commercial and business centre.

The city of the time had no apparent centre and adopted a clearly single-centre structure that was underlined by a radial road system. The idea, which came into being with Raúl Otero's proposals in 1905, was to become one of the constants of later plans until it became reality as the present Plaza de la Revolución. The influence of the Parisian boulevards and, in general of the *Ecole de Beaux Arts*, is obvious in the main roads planned in the style of the great boulevards and in the desire to insert gardens, fountains and sculptural groups —with a strong Cuban character— to foment the identity of the new Republic. Among the proposals that were implemented special mention should be made of the creation of a complex system of green areas, transforming these from neighbourhood scale into a major metropolitan woodland area, as well as the improvement of the city's communications with neighbouring municipalities, which facilitated the expansion of the suburbs and the shaping of the great metropolitan area of Havana.

During that period, the municipal architect Martínez Inclán made considerable officially-sponsored efforts to promote an active policy of state-subsidised dwellings. The solution, in line with the incipient social zoning policy, consisted of expelling the poor from the centre and settling them on the outskirts, ensuring that the labour force had rapid access to the productive apparatus. This philosophy characterises the philanthropic concerns of a bourgeoisie that wished to provide workers with a higher standard of living to ensure that they were more efficient and competitive.

Gerardo Machado was elected President of the Republic in 1924. He was soon to develop a comprehensive urban renewal project for Havana, inspired by social concepts of preserving

civic and moral order and consistent with the aesthetic demands of «*The Beautiful City*». In 1925, he passed the *Ley de Obras Públicas* (Public Works Law) to define the legal framework of a project that, more than for the personal glory and megalomania of Machado himself, was in fact the brainchild of the Cuban bourgeoisie and the North American interests to whose city model it was related.

In this ideological context, it was logical that the first official town planning project was awarded to a landscape architect, fruit of changes made to the order of priorities intended to satisfy the needs of the largest metropolis in the country, a metropolis with major deficiencies in all areas. In 1918, Forestier was commissioned to draw up a project to beautify the Old Havana seafront, so as to offer the best possible image to illustrious local and foreign visitors. Although his proposals were not initially implemented, many of them would become reality years later, when President Machado once more commissioned him to manage a vast public works programme, under the auspices of the *Ley de Obras Públicas* (Public Works Law) of 1925, financed by loans from the *Chase Bank* and a major money laundering operation for shady North American funds.

This led to the first *Plan de Embellecimiento y Ampliación de La Habana* (Plan for the Beautification and Enlargement of Havana), that required the management of a renowned town planner such as Forestier, the author of works of «major aesthetic qualification and low social profile». Its most outstanding formal features were: the vision of the city as a unified whole, with painstaking design of the most important areas of the city, the comprehensive road network linking the most dynamic foci of the city, the definition of an iconic image of Havana with great beauty and technical excellence, due to the system of green areas and the new landscape improvement proposals. It also highlighted the monumental hubs, with specific proposals for the improvement and conservation of the historic city centre as a resource that was both heritage and a unique urban landscape. Commissioned to beautify Havana and ease social discontent, his proposals achieved the success expected of them. However, as regards town planning, the plan's weaknesses are evident through the absence of valid proposals to resolve the workers' housing problem and through the lack of mechanisms for public control of land management and promotion.

The city of Havana lived through the mid-20th century without a real town planning project. This happened precisely at a time of major demographic growth that gradually aggravated its problems and highlighted its deficiencies. This led to an intellectual debate on the need for public control of growth processes and the Town Hall took over responsibility for creating a series of commissions designed to prepare an Expansion and Improvement Plan, to draw up a draft *Ley General de Urbanismo* (General Town Planning Law), to study the problem of scarcity of housing and, finally to modify the *Ley Orgánica de Municipios* (White Paper on Municipalities) aimed at giving Town Halls greater powers to promote land for town planning purposes.

All this effort was rewarded with the *Plan Regulador de La Habana* (Havana City Regulation Plan) of 1944, whose main goal was to lay out a comprehensive network of highways to solve the serious congestion problems suffered by a city that was expanding thanks to the mobility offered by the increased use of the private car. Very much influenced by the Modern Movement, the *Plan Regulador de La Habana* (Havana City Regulation Plan) proposed «zoning the city with scientific criteria» to create commercial, industrial,

residential, leisure and recreation areas for each social class, all equipped with the facilities necessary and linked by a comprehensive network of fast communication routes. Problems associated with misappropriation of funds, limited resources, deviation from the goals, the critical economic situation of the country, political instability and social unrest all encroached on the ambitious goals of a good public works (not town planning) scheme that was limited to a mere public works employment programme and private enterprise initiatives during the Batista regime.

The dynamics of the land and property development markets were regarded as normal and accepted without question in a city that continued its relentless growth on the basis of individual impulses allied with speculative town planning and conditioned by a suburban expansion made possible for one social group by the generalised use of the car as the means of transport and for another by the spread of collective transport. The access to these means of transport defined social segregation in the general terms we have already seen: worker's neighbourhoods inland from the industrial heartland on the bay, elite housing developments along the coast and the middle-class areas between the two extremes. Tourism also grew and gradually focused on tourism with the clients held «captive» in casinos.

In this «modern» intellectual atmosphere and in an economic context that saw tourism as a source of income and foreign currency to complement sugar exports, 1955 saw the Batista dictatorship pass the *Ley de Planificación Nacional* (National Planning Law) that created the *Junta Nacional de Planificación* (National Planning Commission). The same year saw the appointment of the *Town Planning Associates*, a North American group that included Paul Lester Wiener, José Luis Sert, Paul Schulz and Mario Románach, to draft several town planning schemes to boost tourism in Varadero, Trinidad, Isla de Pinos and Eastern Havana, as well as drawing up the new *Plan Director de La Habana* (Havana Master Plan) for a city whose population was then 1,400,000. The plan laid down guidelines to cope with future growth of up to 4 million inhabitants, in line with the high rates of growth at that time. This meant that the land available to the city was insufficient and made it necessary to extend the planning framework to the whole province, in line with regional planning theory.

In order to satisfy a need inherited from the early 20th century, the new plan proposed the creation of new scenarios for the inhabitants, thus raising the rank of Havana to that of the capital of a new State that was fully integrated with the international economic system. The new morphology was also designed to boost the emerging tourist industry, in line with the trends of the time and the main focus of Havana on casino tourism, although this was to be complemented with the «sun, sea and sand tourism» offered by the development of the Eastern Beaches and Varadero, all part of the regional metropolitan plan. This meant that the whole city centre was planned with the precise aims of, on the one hand, recovering the social, economic and symbolic central nature of Havana (aspects that had been diluted by the enormous suburban growth of the city) and, on the other hand, to recuperating colonial scenarios and placing them at the service of tourism.

However, the Batista dictatorship was not the right setting for the development of the social programmes associated with modern thinking, nor for rolling out the programme for facilities and services contained in the plan. Neither was the situation that arose after the Revolution, which identified the proposed model as an ideological paradigm of the capitalist system and, more exactly, North American penetration of social, cultural and, obviously, economic values. All this meant that the modern plans were never put into practice.