

# SITELINES

Bimonthly Publication of The British Columbia Society of Landscape Architects



## OLD HAVANA

Clouds of Change • Smart Growth • Tree Canada • Light House • Landscape Urbanism

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The purpose of **Sitelines** is to provide an open forum for the exchange of ideas and information pertaining to the profession of Landscape Architecture. Individual opinions expressed are those of the writers and not necessarily of those of the BCSLA.

# Old Havana

BY PAWEŁ GRADOWSKI, MBCSLA

Havana used to be called the Paris of the Antilles. For close to 500 years, Havana has had some great moments of glory. The wonderful and unique character of its architecture has placed this city on a UNESCO list of World Heritage Sites. Today, Old Havana may be considered a symbol of fallen splendour and human despair. Some may say that it is beyond repair. Others are struggling to protect whatever is still standing. It is a race of time between the forces of nature and the desperate measures taken by some Cubans to preserve their city. Havana got caught in a nasty web of international politics and economics that led to its destruction within just few decades. Seeing all this, one may start pondering about the complexity of sustainability issues and how much of this sustainability depends upon world economics and how much upon human spirit.

The City of Havana was founded in 1515 and by mid Eighteenth Century it had grown to be the third largest city of the Americas, providing home for 70,000 people. Architects from all over the world were invited to Havana to design the city's buildings to be both aesthetically pleasing and to withstand the devastating forces of hurricanes in this part of the world. The city was well built with quarried stone blocks and clay shingle rooftops in

predominantly three or four storey structures. Buildings were constructed with great attention to details, with floor mosaics, sculpted stone ornaments, elaborate carpentry for doors and windows and absolutely exquisite ironwork for gates, and balustrades facing the streets. Many buildings also had well developed plumbing and storm water collection systems installed.

In the Nineteenth Century, Havana became a very fashionable and well developed city, where the rich and famous of the world enjoyed its hospitality and

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Stone sculpture in Old Havana, photo: Pawel Gradowski



Baseball among the ruins, photo: Pawel Gradowski

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## Old Havana

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ever growing popularity. It was believed that this city had a great future for many years to come. When the US took over Cuba at the end of the Nineteenth Century from Spanish colonialists, Havana became, in a short time, the world capitol of entertainment, full of casinos, hotels, and nightclubs. One may compare the popularity of Havana from the 1930's to the current reputation of Las Vegas in Nevada.

In the second half of the Twentieth Century, things went horribly wrong for the City. Since 1959, world politics have placed Cuba in a conflicting position with the United States; which has led to an economic embargo being imposed by Washington towards the communist government of Cuba. The collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1990's, which for many years supported the Cuban government, eventually led to a current lack of funding and the ill economy of this country. This consequently resulted in a total destruction of a significant portion of this wonderful city. In a relatively short time, a lack of proper maintenance has led to a gradual decay of Old Havana. Today, only a small fraction of the buildings are being maintained and the rest are falling apart at an accelerating speed. Several structures are already beyond repair. Free standing facades of buildings that have already lost their roofs and floors are slowly crumbling down, showing empty lots where children play baseball with a broomstick and a



*Weathered Doorway,  
photo: Pawel Gradowski*

bottle cap. Walking through the streets, I felt that Old Havana is held together only by a thin piece of wire that will rust through and let go at any moment.

What is amazing, in this place of unpredictable changes, is the human spirit that keeps people believing that the splendour of the past will come back, and that this is just a temporary stage of affairs. People hold on to the ruins, repair and maintain whatever they can, considering the lack of funding. All restored buildings are provided with new functions, such as: art galleries, museums of all sorts, schools, restaurants, hotels, etc. However, several of these civic functions are not providing sufficient income and they usually require more funding for maintenance than revenue can generate. This is not only a problem for Havana; but for nearly all heritage sites in the world, which have to rely on tourism or wealthy sponsors to supplement restoration and maintenance funds. Considering the politics of the world, the global economy, new changes in the environment threatening Cuba with longer and more devastating hurricane seasons, as well as construction practices of the past that did not foresee today's air pollution easily dissolving the coral rocks used as building material, Havana is facing an extremely difficult path to survival. Some

say that it is already too late; while others keep trying and do not want to give up. A majority of Cubans that I met while wandering through the streets proudly face the realities of everyday life and concentrate on their own survival. Many look for opportunities to supplement their income; but equally spend time with friends and family laughing, playing dominos, and sharing the goodness of their hearts with people all around.

One thing we can learn from Havana's history is that sustainability issues are far more complex than we can imagine. It is not only issues such as air pollution, climate change, or societal collapse that is destroying this city. I believe that probably the most significant factor causing today's fading away of Old Havana are the consequences of one philosopher's ideas for human equality, written over a hundred years ago, that resulted in today's divided world of politics and economics and which, for political reasons, is now causing a collapse of Cuba's cultural achievements renowned throughout the world. I hope that it is not too late to preserve what is left of this wonderful city and that one day we will be able to see the return of the splendours of Old Havana that Cubans still remember and strongly believe in.

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