



The built environment of Old Havana during the Special Period: Two systems of building production in a historic district



Fig. 1: Men playing domino in the middle of the street, Old Havana

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Abstract: The progressive transformation of Old Havana into a prime destination for global tourism and consumption has resulted in a contested landscape produced out of two different building systems. On the one hand, a top-down program of renovation has upgraded the public space and created new hotels, bars, restaurants and boutiques. On the other hand, low-income residents living in *solares*, a form of micro slums, keep reshaping their built environment through their own efforts. While the authorities have committed to the preservation of the residential character of Old Havana, there is evidence of low-income residents' displacement. Using a qualitative approach, I document residential



satisfaction and the intervention of community architects (professional designers supporting self-help construction). The collected data are used to discuss housing dynamics in Old Havana. Attention is paid to: elements that explain the high degree of residents' attachment to the neighborhood, the struggle of residents to improve their housing units, and their perception of the neighborhood's trajectory. The results contribute to our understanding of the sense of belonging that low-income residents feel for their built environment. I conclude that low-income residents' struggles to upgrade the built environments are scattered and that, in the absence of collective action, a full range of supports to self-help building (i.e. assistance with design, construction, construction management and access to materials) is not been deployed.



Fig. 2: View of Old Havana. Picture by Plan Maestro.

Theory Problem	Despite the poor conditions of their housing units, low-income residents prefer to stay in Old Havana, as opposed to moving to other regions of the city where housing is better. My research looks at this dilemma by exploring how low-income residents develop a sense of belonging, which lead them to stay and engage in self-help construction.
Practical Problem	Research has found that official standards and urban regulation do not allow low-income residents to build homes they can afford. Cuba presumes to have a response to this dilemma. The community architects, professional designers that have as part of their mandate to mediate between self-builders and urban regulators appeared in the early 1990s. My research investigates the effectiveness of the Cuban approach in the context of the stringent urban regulations of Old Havana.



Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none">-To document the factors explaining residential satisfaction and sense of belonging in residents of Old Havana-To document the responses and approaches towards the reproduction of the built environment experimented in Cuba during the Special Period-To identify the factors explaining the successes and failures of the community architects in Old Havana
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Theoretical Background: My multi-dimensional study of Old Havana and its built environment looks at several theoretical debates such as: the determinants of residential satisfaction, the performance of projects designed by their end-users, the pertinence of support for self-help building, and the impact of globalization on the cities of the developing world. In general, the research explores the interaction between two systems reproducing the built environment in the same district. On the one hand, there is a top-down approach characteristic of Cuban institutions, which is being used to upgrade Old Havana. On the other hand, there are bottom-up practices of low-income residents that, through their own efforts interventions, keep doing what they can to upgrade their living environment. Low-income residents' efforts to stay in Old Havana are examined alongside their lack collective organization and their failure to defend their right to the city in the context of stringent enforcement of urban regulations.

Methodology: During the fieldwork, data regarding the rehabilitation of Old Havana, residential satisfaction, the intervention of community architects, and residents' practices towards the reproduction of the built environment were collected through in-depth interviews with both officials and residents of Old Havana. Interviewees included over thirty public officials including: the National Director of the Housing Institute; the founding director, regional coordinators and office leaders of the Community Architect Program, as well as senior and junior community architects; officials from the Office of the Historian of Old Havana, members of the team at Plan Maestro in Old Havana; and scholars working across Cuba. The data obtained through interviewing official was complemented with data coming from residents from Old Havana. I visited over sixty residents who agreed to an interview, I collected basic socio-demographic profiles, as well as data related to residential satisfaction, perception of neighbourhood trajectory, perception of the community architects, and the renovation of Old Havana.

Interviews with both residents and officials were arranged following a 'snowballing' technique, where at the end of each interview, I asked the interviewees to provide me with the names of more people that could be interviewed. I stopped scheduling new interviews when I stopped receiving suggestions of new individuals to interview; at the same time, I was not getting any new data anymore. Interviews with residents were arranged with the mediation of a cafeteria owner, a business woman who had a privileged contact with the community. In addition, I collected documentation such as census data, residential satisfaction studies and other documentation related to planning in Old Havana.



Results

-Old Havana is a hybrid urban environment where the forces of two different systems can be felt: that of the state and its top-down approach to urban rehabilitation and that of thousands of residents and their bottom-up practices of self-help construction.

-Poor housing conditions do not necessarily translate into a low-degree of residential satisfaction. In a central district such as Old Havana, satisfaction with the neighborhood is more relevant than satisfaction with the housing unit.

-The practice of the community architect, which was introduced during the 1990s, after the fall of the Soviet Union, in response to the housing crises of Cuba, represents a step forward in the context of participatory approaches to housing design.

-Participation-in-design on its own is not enough to provide a global response to the housing needs of the poor in developing countries. Low-income households require assistance with the design access to materials, construction and construction management.

Practical Implications

The case of Old Havana illustrates that low-income residents face significant barriers when engaging with architects in home-design-processes. This is particularly true in the context of the stringent urban regulations that govern the reproduction of the built environment in Old Havana. Despite their best efforts to mediate between the needs of the residents and the officers granting building permits, low-income residents perceive community architects as inspectors representing the government, as opposed to professional providing a service to the community.

Theoretical Implications

User control of the built environment comes hand in hand with aesthetic beauty, sustainability and functionality. When residents are empowered to make decisions over the configuration of their buildings, the phenomenon of life in the built environment arises. In developing countries where a large portion of the population build their homes through their own efforts, slums may mature into interesting neighborhoods, more pleasant and functional than the sterile modern, mass-produced low cost housing in which governments believe the poor must live. In order to succeed, low-income residents need to be empowered to claim assistance, but also, they need to remain in control of the housing development process.

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