

Reintroducing the City in Havana

Reintroducing the City in Havana
Reclaiming the power of meaning

a-u-r-a
Marisol Rivas
Christian Schmutz
FÜNDIC BV
Cesar Garcia
Paz Martin

161

Spectacle Cities

Havana

A key power in the production of today's cities is their transformation into places of visual consumption – their Spectacle-ization.¹ This efficient and complex system camouflages an uncontrolled economical offensive by producing, (re)inventing, and/or attaching artificial meaning to specific places.

This artificial meaning or MeanINC2 is a device that reconceptualizes the history of buildings or places through a process of amplification or elimination of the built environment. MeanInc has become the Trojan Horse of tourism. It suggests the fragile promise of recognition – the link between places that aspire to fame and a global world of political and corporate interests. It produces a stereotype, and with it an alienation that compresses the imaginary projections of the foreign and tourist initiatives with the everyday reality of the local, resulting in the city's 'ascension' into myth.

Several cities in the modern capitalist world, as well as in the remains of the socialist era, have undergone the process of Spectacle-ization, but none have done it like Havana, which in the space of six decades has gone from Spectacle-ization to De-Spectacle-ization to Re-Spectacle-ization while keeping the same building substance.

Batista: Spectacle-ization of Havana

During the 1950s, Havana – the 'little princess of the sea' – was loaded with the flashy vision of a bourgeois capital for the American tourists, a spectacle of excess. The vision gave birth to the Mean-INC architecture of hotels, casinos and

nightclubs. Josep Lluís Sert's Plan Piloto (1955-1958) summarizes the desires of this time: endless views to the sea and a monumental urban celebration dressed in a modern casual code.

Revolution: De-Spectacle as a Pragmatic Doctrine

In 1959, when revolution took over Havana, the contrast between the spectacular capital and the impoverished countryside became more evident. From this point on, greater efforts were devoted to the social and economic development of the countryside. Havana was no longer seen as the 'little princess', but as the 'biggest courtesan'. A strict migration policy controlling the distribution of the population on the island gave way to a relevant change: the city lost its importance, becoming equal to – if not less than – the rest of the country.

The revolution refused to create any physical manifestation of itself through architecture; self-construction and utopias were replaced by repetition and pre-fabrication. The buildings of excess were filled with practicality. It was in this process of amputating Mean-INC that the values of the city and architecture were extirpated as well.

Special Period:3 Re-Spectacle-ization of Havana

After the collapse of the Eastern bloc, tourism seemed the only viable option for alleviating the economic crisis that Cuba was facing. Under the guidance of Dr Eusebio Leal, and with full support of Fidel Castro, the City Historian's Office

introduced new urban policies making possible the (re)construction and restoration of the historical centre of Havana and other buildings and quarters.⁴

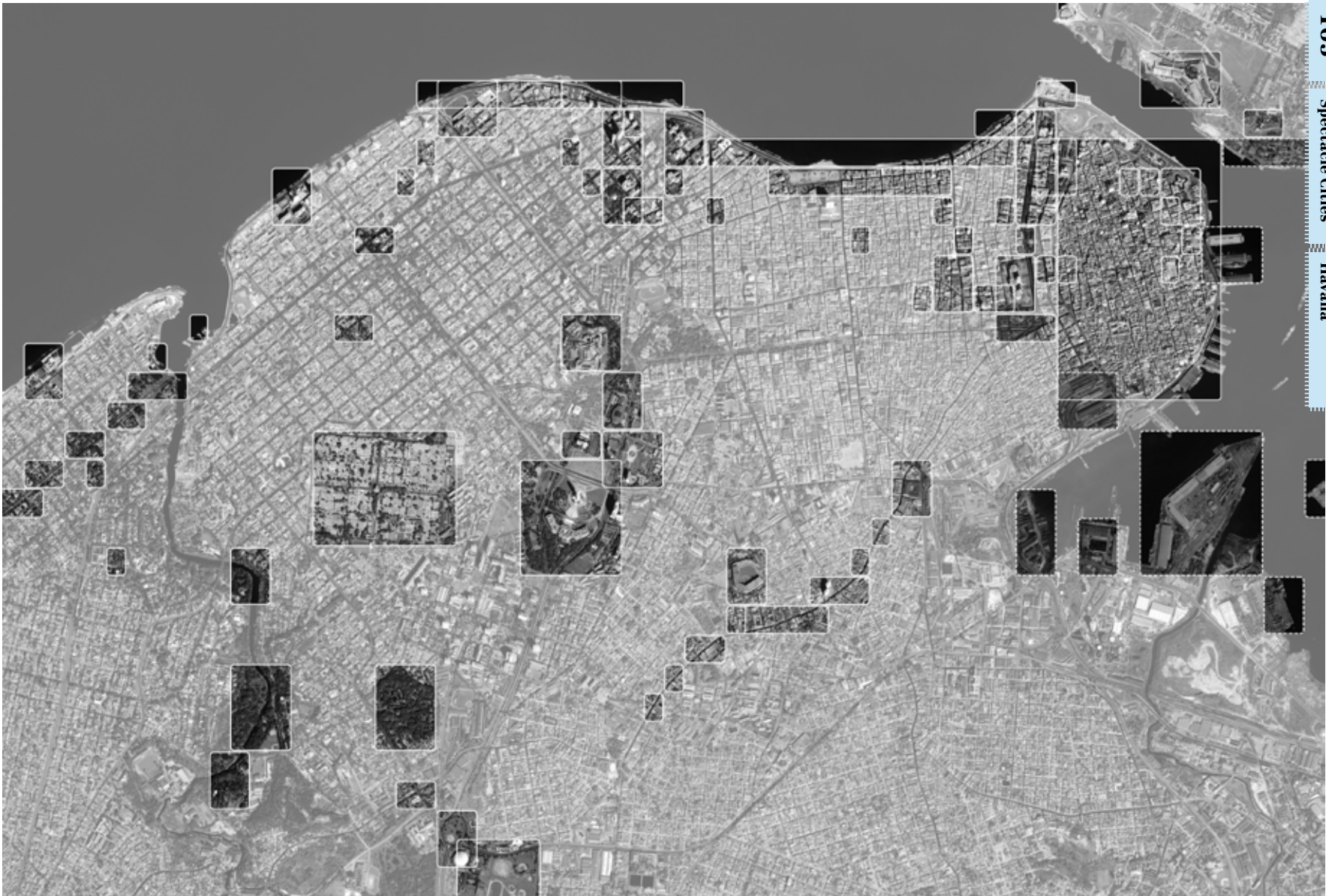
In 1982, with Old Havana’s designation as a World Heritage site, MeanInc was officially reintroduced into the inner texture of the city, and architecture became one of the most important elements in the reconstruction of this overpopulated and decadent city centre. The strategy used for the reconstruction of Old Havana is nothing new. What is striking is the implementation of a capitalistic model: Habaguanex,⁵ a very profitable company for tourism run by the City Historian’s Office, finances building reconstruction in cooperation with European governments, along with other socialist projects designed by internationally renowned architects.

The reintroduction of Spectacle has led Havana to a dualistic system: two currencies, two societies, a two-tiered economy. This system fosters a state of apartheid in a city where the Power of Spectacle (tourism) and Domestic Manoeuvres meet.

Spectacle-ization is opposed in Havana by the magic realism⁶ of the everyday. This everyday (hi)story is written by Domestic Manoeuvres, an informal but resolute power that builds the city on the by-products of Spectacle. Domestic Manoeuvres are pragmatic strategies executed by Havana citizens to increase their incomes and cope with building and ownership regulations. Practices like housing interchange, cuarterias (old subdivided houses) and barbacoas (informal mezzanines, etcetera) represent alternative ways to activate the urban structure while ignoring MeanInc. Although these manoeuvres are not direct responses to the Re-Spectacle-ization of Havana, their consequences seem to stir the local and international debate regarding potential areas for renovation in the city.

Tourism is simultaneously a cultural product and a producer of culture.⁷ It is complex and collective construction by tourists, entrepreneurs and planners. The following three interventions challenge the powers at play by constraining and canalizing their effects.

Primary location of Spectacle
The zoomed frames represent places where MeanINC is present, whereas the dotted frames are those where MeanINC will soon be introduced.



Billboard in the streets of Havana

Street in Old Havana, before restoration (2006) and after (2007)

El Club Nautico, 1957

Barbacoa at Plaza Vieja in Old Havana

Hall of Fame MeanINC from the Forestier master plan to a modernistic architecture and the Plan Sert



Spectacle-isation

In 1905 state building programs were restricted to Havana and other cities considered as potentials to draw tourist dollars widening the gap between capital and the rest of Cuba. By the end of the decade ¼ of the housing in Havana were rentals.

Forestier's 1926 master plan was presented as Pres. Machado's vision of a model city. The budget was \$50 million, to be raised by gas, real state, taxes and bonds.

Speculation & tourism were the two primary economical powers that shape prerevolutionary 20th century Havana.

Spanish Revival, Art Nouveau was not accepted by the Castilian Sector which had been the political center;

Tired by the influx of historicism Arch. Silvio Acosta declares in the Architects' Journal in 1921: "the past is not a rule, it is a date". Commission for Monuments, Buildings and History and Artistic Sites formed for Havana in 1940.

Art Decó, influenced by the strengthening of Cuban-US commercial ties, 1920-1930.

Law of Horizontal Property, 1952 investment encouraged apartment projects with long-term payments to amortize investment.

Law of Leasing (Ley de Fomento de Hipotecas, 1954), permitted developers to borrow on mortgages and made them economically feasible through building small single-family houses.

Batista organized the National Planning Board (1955). The group had to promote a tourist plan that positioned Havana in the Caribbean Triangle connecting it to Miami and the Yucatan Peninsula, targeting Vedado, Varadero, the Isle of Pines a.o.

50's Post-war rationalistic design, specially in Miramar.

First fortunes in real-estate speculation during the "dance of the millions". New residential areas in Vedado.

Second boom for the construction market. By the second half of the 50's more than ¼ of investment in construction in Cuba occurred in Havana. Dozens of new neighbourhoods were developed.

1958 Plan Piloto from Josep Luis Sert.

De-Spectacle-isation

With the triumph of the revolution tourism was considered as an imperialist decadence. Existing hotels were confiscated; some were retained for domestic travel while others were changed for non-travel-related uses.

Hall of Fame MeanINC after the Special Period and the reintroduction of tourism in Havana



De-Spectacle-isation

elimination of a "polyvalent" design & superficial symbolism that reflected class differences in favour of a search for an architecture with a social responsibility.

School of arts complex, a project aiming to present "revolution-romantic" aspects.

The State assumed the construction of housing, promoting in 1965 the construction of 100,000 new tenements per year.

First Microbrigades established in 1971.

Revolution means to build.

USSR donated a fabrication plan in order to produce prefab houses followed by the shortage of steel and wood.

Construction of hotels for Cuban workers.

Foreign tourism was re-introduced in the 70s through trading blocks of hotel rooms (Cuban off-season) to Eastern bloc countries, Spain & Canada in return for oil & machines.

Creation of travel companies to serve elites short visits to the island.

Old Havana as national monument 1978.

In 1990 the state declared the "Special period in Peacetime" inaugurating austerity measures.

Re-Spectacle-isation

Introduction of the CUC (Cuban Convertible Peso) in the early 90s that installed a parallel currency system to control foreign exchange in Cuba.

In 1984 Cuba attracted fewer than 200,000 foreign visitors; in ten years the average annual figure of the Batista years was tripled.

Old Havana and its surroundings is listed in 1982 as World heritage N°27 by UNESCO.

Best Practices 2000 awarded by UNESCO Habitat.

Mise en scene of Havana to tourists through a huge model of Old Havana.

Projects on track by OHCH: Chinese Quarter, Casa Verde and Art School Complex

Postcards of Havana reintroducing the "Colonial Style" as major heritage of Havana.

Controversial Fence surrounding the fountain in Plaza Vieja.

Habagua publications promoting the cultural heritage of Havana.



1. Archipelagos of Condensed MeanInc

– Mapping MeanInc in Havana

They already exist; several places and buildings where the city has been packaged for tourists. As others are added to the list, a catalogue of MeanInc architecture and places will be compiled. The archipelagos will function as attractors in order to develop other authentic and apparently unimportant areas, where Dr Leal's 'successful' formula could be implemented. These Archipelagos will radically fulfil tourists' expectations, as promised by the tourist industry.

2. Spectacle's Oasis – Little Miami

Downtown Island

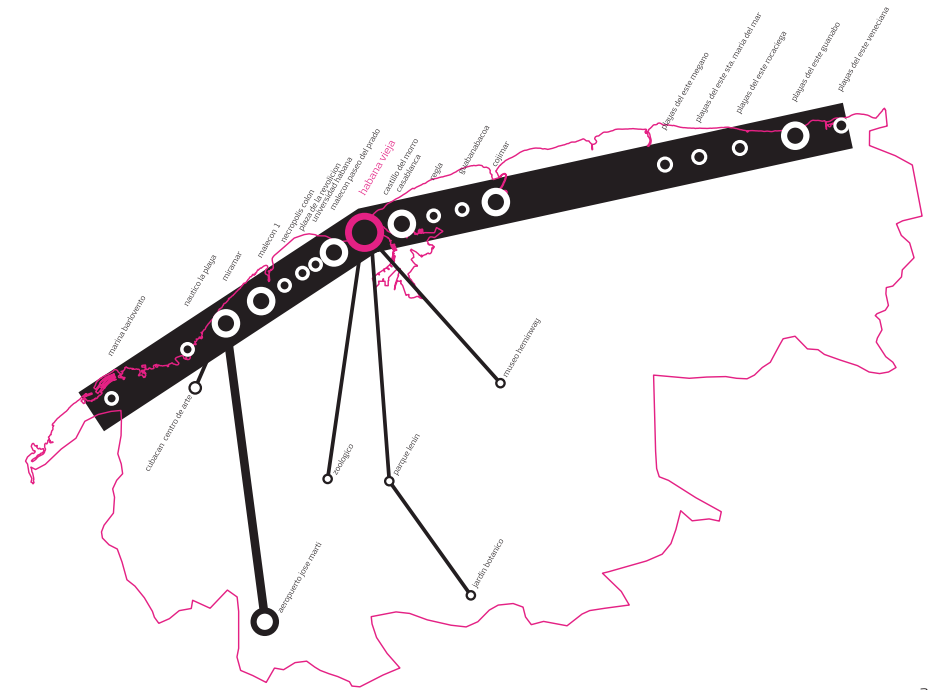
To relieve the growing pressure of tourism on the city, especially on the bay, a prototype island for tourists is created as a preventative measure. The island is a parallel system of social and building order located in the sea; it is detached from Havana, but visible from every point. At night, the lights of the Little Miami Island can be seen from the Malecón across the sea. This artificial environment will also function as a breakwater, protecting the authentic city from the sea.

3. Architecture as Infrastructure or

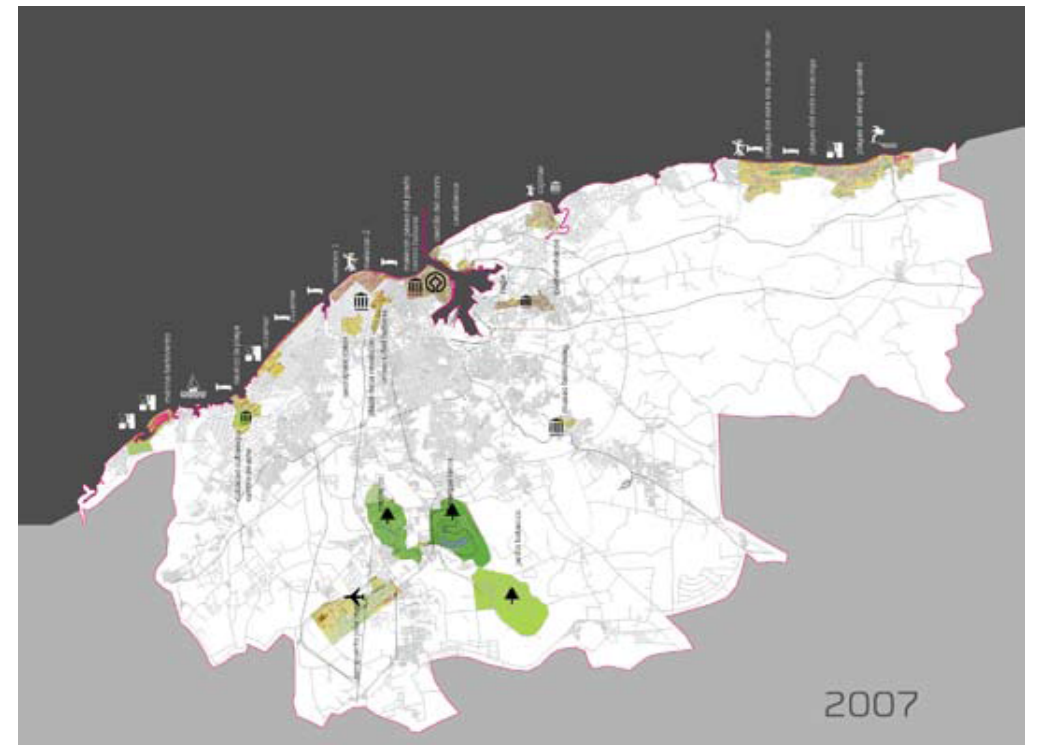
Reintroducing the City

Havana demands architecture of action that, like a sustainable infrastructure, is capable of delivering development free from imposed meaning without sacrificing beauty and the city itself. Between the archipelagos of MeanINC, buffer zones are created. The buffer area is the city itself; a space of urban consciousness, and, above all, a constructible and intelligible political form. These areas, MeanInc-free, deliver to inhabitants the opportunity to continue building their city, their environment, their identity and maybe their revolution.

The interventions are a critical reappraisal of the possibilities of the city as concept. Each one is an incursion into the powers that have, are and will be shaping Havana; an attempt to anticipate its future in the hope that as the city is further absorbed by the global tourist machine, it



2007



7 Brian McLaren and D. Medina Lasansky (eds.), *Arquitectura y Turismo* (Barcelona: Gustavo Gili, 2006).



2025



Plan of Havana 2025