

Áreas urbanas históricas en Cuba, necesidad de su conservación

Historic urban areas in Cuba, the need for preservation

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Since the 1990s, theoretical, and methodological approaches for heritage conservation and management have evolved from an object-oriented towards a value, and, ultimately a person-oriented approach (Vandesande and Van Balen, 2016). This evolution is visible in the changeover from focusing on single monuments to the conservation and management of historic areas; and lately, to a holistic analysis of the broader dynamics implicit in the notion of the Historic Urban Landscape (HUL) (Veldpaus, Pereira Roders and Colenbrander, 2013; Rodwell, 2018).

This notion can be considered as the latest advance in the international discourse regarding the protection of built heritage since it claims for an all-encompassing understanding of the urban area as a result of the historic layering of cultural and natural values and attributes (Unesco, 2011). As a result, the focus of conservation has progressed from protecting exclusiveness to preserving representativeness, embracing a diversity expressed in “non-exceptional heritage elements but present in a coherent way with relative abundance” (Unesco, 2011, p. 54).

The vast extension of the HUL approach encompasses terms that were previously adopted in different international documents, such as “historic city” (Unesco, 1976), “historic urban area”,

“historic district” (Icomos, 1987), and “urban heritage” (EU research report No. 16, 2004). These concepts, embedded in the definition of the historic urban landscape are interconnected, and therefore, they overlap. Even though there is an undefined limit between them, the definition of historic urban area is the most appropriate to establish the scope, scale, and extents addressed in this paper since it refers to “large and small cities, towns and historic centres or quarters, together with their natural and human-made environments” (Unesco, 2011, p. 54).

In the Washington Charter (Icomos, 1987) it was already stated that qualities like urban patterns, the relationships between buildings and open spaces, the formal appearance of buildings (scale, size, style, construction, materials, colour and decoration), the relationship with the surrounding setting and the functions acquired over time, give the significance to historic urban areas as historical documents. This set of material and spiritual elements reflect the character of historic urban areas. In this regard, the definition of character-defining elements, which is used in the Standards and Guidelines for the Conservation of Historic Places in Canada (Historic Canada, 2010), serves to encompass several qualities that distinguish these areas (materials, forms, location, spatial configurations, uses and cultural associations or meanings).

Nowadays, the preservation of historic urban areas’ character-defining elements includes both tangible and intangible attributes. Tangible attributes comprise the form and design, materials and substance, and other internal factors; while intangible attributes include the use and function, traditions, techniques, spirit and feelings, languages and other forms of cultural manifestations (Unesco, 2011; Pereira Roders, 2013).

The development of this holistic preservation approach advocated in the 2011 HUL recommendation is aligned with the

understanding of cultural heritage as a resource that contributes to achieving the sustainable development goals (Araoz, 2011; Bandarin, Hosagrahar, and Albernaz, 2011; Unesco, 2013). Protecting and safeguarding cultural heritage should be actions that stimulate inclusiveness, safety, resilience, and sustainability in human settlements, as stated in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development recently adopted by the United Nations (2016). Furthermore, the role that heritage conservation plays in sustainable policies has also been endorsed in the principles for the New Urban Agenda, adopted in the United Nations Habitat III Conference (UN Habitat, 2016).

These advances seem to provide the principles to align the preservation of historic urban areas with integrated social, economic, and environmental policies. However, in practice, the challenges posed by the contemporary world lead to permanent concerns among institutions, scholars, practitioners, communities, owners and managers. The issues pointed out in the Periodic Reporting conducted by the World Heritage Committee (WHC) (Unesco WHC, 2018), or in international meetings reflect the challenging and diverse problems faced in conservation.

Over the 21st century, some of the significant threats to historic urban areas in developed countries are, for instance, the pressures of the market economy and industrialisation, which bring decontextualised, inappropriate or insensitive large scale-developments, new infrastructure typologies, together with excessive tourism and land use policies changes. While in developing countries, conflicting economic, social, and environmental policies, sustained by legal and institutional frameworks in a state of flux, produce detrimental effects on the historic fabric. Such phenomena reinforce disparities in valuation between the old and the new, leading to devastating consequences (GCI, 2009; UN Habitat, 2016).

In this regard, rather than the static notion of preserving heritage only as a testimonial of the past, conservation is currently identified with the practice of managing change in harmony with the safeguarding of that testimonial for the future (Pereira Roders and Hudson, 2011; CHCF Consortium, 2015). Therefore, the sustainable conservation of heritage is understood as the management of use and change in and around historic places, to respect and enhance their value to society (Worthing and Bond, 2008; Pereira Roders and Veldpaus, 2013).

Since 2011, the Cuban socio-political and economic context has been experiencing a process of consecutive changes, which are mainly visible in shifts within current economic strategies. The announcement of the Guidelines of the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution; the encouragement of the private sector; the opening of the real estate market; as well as the adoption of the new Foreign Investment Act are among the most critical arrangements over the last years. Even though the current sequence of events predicts economic and social benefits, they are also producing impacts on historic urban areas, which are the most fragile ecosystems within the broader urban environment.

In this regard, this paper addresses the conservation and management of historic urban areas in Cuba by revising the progress of practical actions, statutory frameworks, and theoretical advances, following a chronological reasoning that goes from 1900 to present time. The first sections provide an understanding of the evolution of the current institutional framework that was established for the conservation of built heritage, and discuss the distinction between the local notion of historic centre and other urban areas. This discussion leads to the final sections, which explore the most critical issues threatening urban areas beyond the notion of historic centre, and expose an

extended examination of the specific case of the Vista Alegre District in Santiago de Cuba.

Built heritage conservation in Cuba during the first half of the 20th century

In contributions made by scholars linked to the academics like Oliva (1963), Cárdenas (2008), Rigol (2012, 2015), Alfonso (2014), and Gómez (2015), as well as practitioners (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012), the conservation actions in Cuba are traced as far back as 1900. This consensus is probably given by the fact that in 1902 the Republic of Cuba was established after the end of the Colonial period in 1898. However, these authors mainly emphasise the case of Old Havana, for which most data is available. Likewise, the central focus is put on the actions developed after the 1959 Socialist Revolution, when conservation and management gradually gained importance and reached an institutional character.

According to the literature, some of the earliest heritage preservation actions took place in the foundational core of Havana during the 1920s and 1930s. Several interventions on specific buildings and public squares were undertaken driven by the interest of notable architects and urban planners to conserve the historical relevance in terms of aesthetic quality (e.g., Palacio del Segundo Cabo, Plaza de la Catedral, Plaza de Armas, and Palacio de los Capitanes Generales). In the same decades, the will of public institutions to preserve places of memory linked to the last period of the Independence War (1895-1898) resulted in the conservation of historic sites in the outskirts of Santiago de Cuba (e.g., Loma del Gato, Árbol de la Paz, and Loma de San Juan) (Rigol, 2012).

In addition to these actions, there was raising awareness of the importance of preserving important individual pieces of ar-

chitecture and sites of memory inherited from the Colonial period. The increasing consciousness is visible in the creation of organizations like the Committee for the Protection of Public Monuments of Santiago de Cuba (1912), the City Historian Office in Havana (1938), and the Commission of Historic and Artistic Monuments, Buildings and Places of Havana (1940) (Rigol, 2012; Alfonso González, 2014). However, except for the case of the City Historian Office in Havana, there is little information on the role played by these institutions, a topic that should be addressed in further research.

The first statutory framework explicitly enacted for the protection of monuments in Cuba is an act passed in 1928 by the country's central Government. The information known about this legislation is that it granted the President of the Republic the right to designate national and local monuments and to formulate regulations for their protection (Alfonso González, 2014). Accordingly, between 1934 and 1937 two towns (Mantua and Bayamo), one urban area (Plaza de la Catedral and surrounding buildings in Havana), and a set of funerary monuments (Santa Ifigenia Cemetery in Santiago de Cuba) were listed as National Monument (Oliva, 1963; Rigol, 2012). The diverse scales of these designations reflected that the meaning of monument at the national level widened.

In 1940, a new Constitution was adopted in Cuba, for the first time, the protection of cultural heritage was addressed in the body of the Nation's fundamental principles (Rigol, 2012; Alfonso González, 2014). The actions undertaken in specific buildings and sites, the likely influence of heritage-related organisations—mainly in Havana—, and the 1928 legislation should have created the proper context for the inclusion of the topic in some articles. Specifically, Article 58 stressed the authority of the Government to regulate and protect national monuments for their artistic or historical value (Convención Constituyente, 1940).

In summary, during the first decades of the 20th century, the activity of conservation focused on specific initiatives to preserve significant buildings. In this period, it is equally essential the early legislation for the protection of buildings and urban areas under the designation of National Monument and the creation of bodies to promote and direct the protection of monuments. These actions reflect initial intentions to set an institutional framework for the preservation of historic buildings and sites.

The institutional framework established after 1959, the notion of historic centre

Entering into the second half of the 20th century, the 1959 Socialist Revolution meant a radical shift in the economic and social policies. The interest of the Government for developing rural areas and new housing on the outskirts of cities and towns significantly reduced investments in central areas. Most investments were allocated to create residential districts based on social housing models developed in the former Soviet Union (Segre, Cárdenas, and Aruca, 1986; De Las Cuevas Toraya, 2001; González Couret, 2009; Tsenkova, 2009). Therefore, historic areas in cities remained intact despite a small number of new buildings. As a result, these areas were left unattended, leading to a gradual deterioration of primarily, the historic building stock.

Alternatively, initiatives promoted by scholars like Fernando Boytel and Francisco Prats Puig contributed to preserving relevant monuments in Havana and Santiago de Cuba with the support of local Governments (Castillo de la Fuerza, Hacienda La Isabelica, Castillo San Pedro de la Roca, and Museo de Ambiente Histórico Cubano) (Rigol, 2015). These actions were aligned with the contributions to the knowledge made by these intellectuals, who highlighted the historical and artistic significance of these pieces of architecture developed in different mo-

ments of the Colonial period. In addition, the studies about the Cuban Colonial Architecture developed by Joaquín Weiss (1978, 2002) evidenced the emergence of awareness on the importance of documenting and preserving built heritage.

Even though conservation actions focused on significant buildings and sites, some actions propitiated a gradual evolution to preliminary management strategies. Among these, the State policy towards cultural development evidenced the empowerment of the National Commission on Monuments with a new national statutory framework enacted explicitly for the preservation of cultural heritage.

In 1978, the Cuban National Assembly passed Act No. 1 *Protección al Patrimonio Cultural* (Protection of Cultural Heritage), and Act No. 2 *Monumentos Nacionales y Locales* (National and Local Monuments) (Unesco WHC, 2017). This statutory body appointed the Ministry of Culture with the stewardship of both public and private cultural assets listed in the National Registry of Cultural Goods. In particular, Act No. 2 provided the necessary definitions to conduct the designation of objects, individual buildings and sites as National or Local Monuments; besides, it reinforced the role of the National Commission on Monuments, ascribed to the Ministry of Culture.

In Act No. 2 it is noteworthy the definition given to the term “historic centre”. Article 1 states that these urban areas entail the set of constructions, public and private spaces, streets, squares, and the geographical setting that at a specific historical moment, had a clear physical coherence as an expression of a community, individualised and organised. This notion reflects the influence of the 1976 Unesco Recommendation Concerning the Safeguarding and Contemporary Role of Historic Areas, which implicitly regarded the significance of historic areas together with their surroundings (Unesco, 1976).

Moreover, Act No. 2 made a particular distinction by defining as “sites” those places or areas with architectural homogeneity or a unique urban pattern. Even though the term “sites” overlaps with the description of historic centres, in practice, it has been applied for specific zones within urban areas. For instance, the same year these statutory was adopted, the notion of urban site served to inscribe small built environments like the University of Havana, the Hospital and Plaza San Juan de Dios in the historic centre of Camagüey, and the Parque Martí and its surroundings in the city of Cienfuegos (CNM, 1978). Therefore, the designation of an urban area as National Monument conceives historic centres and urban sites; the latter can be located either within the historic centre or in other areas. As a result, their scale, in addition to the different terminology used, can distinguish these categories.

As for the statement of cultural significance to substantiate the inscription, Article 2 (Act. No. 2) defines four typologies of values (National Assembly, 1977, art. 2). These include historic, artistic, environmental, and natural or social:

- The historical value is related to the relevance of the asset regarding the political, social, scientific, or cultural history.
- The artistic value is given by the aesthetic qualities visible in the style or decorative features of constructions, sculptures, or objects.
- The environmental value is linked to historic centres and constructions, which form and architectural features reflect the spirit of a past epoch or the characteristics of a region.
- The natural or social values pertain to sites with scientific or cultural characteristics in themselves, or sites with geological and physical features inhabited by flora and fauna of high value or under threat.¹

¹ Literal translation Spanish-English made by the author, 2018.

These definitions given in Act No. 2 of the “environmental” and the “natural-social” values may be subject to diverse and confusing interpretations since their meanings overlap. However, when it was adopted, the statutory gave an account of the institutional recognition of diverse cultural values beyond the traditional historic and artistic.

The interest of the State to preserve historic urban areas through this institutional framework is also noticeable in the adoption of the Unesco World Heritage Convention in 1981. Besides, public financing initiatives were undertaken, the State allocated a five-year term State funding plan for the rehabilitation of the historic centre of Havana City; namely, Old Havana (Unesco-OHCH, 2006). These actions endorsed the advances made concerning statutory frameworks and the raising awareness on the importance of safeguarding the foundational core of historic cities.

Conservation and management of historic centres

Notable achievements during the seventies and eighties were the inclusion of the so-called First Seven Villages² in the list of National Monuments (CNM, 1978). In addition, Old Havana and its Fortification System (1982), and the historic centre of Trinidad and the Valley of the Ingenios (1988) were inscribed in the World Heritage List (Unesco WHC, 2017b). Equally significant was the creation of the Centro Nacional de Conservación, Restauración y Museología (Cencrem, National Centre for Conservation, Restoration and Museology) supported by ICCROM under the umbrella of Unesco. This Centre fostered national and

² These include the foundational core of the cities founded by the Spanish during the early years of the Colonization (1511-1519). The First Seven Villages are: Baracoa, Bayamo, Camagüey, Trinidad, Remedios, Havana and Santiago de Cuba (García Santana and Larramendi, 2008).

regional capacity-building programs on different areas of conservation. It also served as the platform for the specialisation of practitioners who coursed training programs in European countries (Rigol, 2012).

Eventually, the experience accumulated over the years was extended to local academic programs that contributed to the dissemination of knowledge, which is visible in different written materials published during the 1980s (Cárdenas, 1984; Coyula, 1984; Gómez, 1986; López and Arafet, 1985; Mahtar M'Bow, 1984; Millán, 1987; Nacer and Fernández, 1985; Prieto, 1983; Taboada, 1988, 1984). Conservation-related courses were included within bachelor, and post-graduate programs, mainly in the Architecture and Urban Planning Programs developed in Havana, Camagüey, and Santiago de Cuba (Cárdenas, 1984; Soto Suárez, Muñoz Castillo, and Morcate Labrada, 2014). These outputs helped, in terms of theoretical and methodological approaches to build capacities and create research groups on the topic of built heritage. Some of these groups promoted studies, created heritage inventories and supported many of the conservation works in historic centres by providing technical advisory (Morcate Labrada, 2005).

The different actions undertaken during the 1980s in the conservation of historic centres, in particular, in Old Havana and Trinidad, reflected an evolution aligned with the international advances in terms of policy and guidelines (Unesco, 1976), which had already shifted from protecting exceptional monuments and sites to the importance of preserving historic urban areas.

The fall of the Socialist Bloc in Eastern Europe between 1989 and 1991 produced a dramatic economic crisis in Cuba during the nineties. At that time, the national economy was extensively based on commercial trading within the umbrella of the Council

for Mutual Economic Assistance (CMEA) that integrated a number of socialist countries, to which Cuba joined in 1972 (Bo-koff, 2010). Along with the trading limitations determined by the US Embargo to Cuba, the collapse of CMEA produced a substantial decrease in the national GDP rate growth, which dropped from 3,71% in 1988 to -14,9 in 1993 (WB, 2018). This situation might have produced sudden discontinuation in the progressive conservation of built heritage due to the significant reduction of investments, shortage of construction materials, and scarcities in general.

However, the successful results of the model implemented for the rehabilitation of Old Havana, aligning social, economic and cultural policies (Leal Spengler, 2006a; OHCH, 2002), led to enacting the Decree No. 143 in 1993. This statutory granted an unprecedented autonomy to the City Historian Office of Havana (OHCH), providing absolute decentralised power for decision-making by subordinating the consultation of decisions only to the Council of State. As a result, the OHCH created its system for administrating touristic and commercial activities, as well as for allocating investments (Unesco-OHCH, 2006).

In the same period, the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro adopted Agenda 21 for Sustainable Development (UN, 1992). The paradigm of social inclusion, economic growth, and environmental balance was positively adopted as part of the conservation strategy of Old Havana. Moreover, the notion of culture as a driving force of development was early promoted by the OHCH (Leal Spengler, 2006a, 2006b). This conceptual foundation, together with the proven self-efficiency and sustainability, consolidated the actions undertaken in Old Havana, which did not limit to conservation works.

The OHCH also fostered socio-cultural programs, the generation of new jobs, as well as the introduction of new economic opportunities like the tourism industry as an alternative to diversify the national economy. These outcomes are visible in the creation of attention centres for older adults, health care centres for different age groups, and educational institutions, along with the facilities required for supporting tourism activity (Unesco-OHCH, 2006). Consequently, the experience of Old Havana served as a reference for replication. Three more offices were created in the late 20th century, and in the last two decades, five of these bodies have been established to conserve, manage, and develop the cultural heritage of historic centres (Rodríguez, Fernet Gil, León Candelario, Zamora Rielo, 2012; Caballero, 2018; Hartman Matos, 2018).

Along with the National Commission on Monuments (CNM), the city historian/conservation offices complete the current institutional framework regarding the safeguarding of historic urban areas in Cuba; however, their functions and scope are different. The CNM is responsible for the stewardship, the listing process, and the inventories of heritage resources at the national level (National Assembly, 1977; CNPC, 2018). While historian/conservation offices direct management plans, conservation actions, heritage inventories, capacity building programs on traditional construction techniques, and compliance with urbanistic regulations (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012).

All city historian/conservation offices have the same scope, aims, and objectives; therefore, their management plans remain limited to the boundaries of historic centres. Alternatively, they direct specific conservation works on relevant buildings, as well as management strategies of National Monuments and World Heritage Sites, which are not located within the boundaries of historic centres (Rodríguez *et al.*, 2012). In summary, nowadays,

built heritage conservation in Cuba goes through a well-established institutional framework mainly visible in the management of the local notion of historic centres.

Relevant achievements under the current institutional framework

Together with the creation of bodies aimed at preserving and developing social, economic, and cultural programs in historic centres, the work conducted in academia has been equally significant. During the last decades, the studies, publications, research projects, bachelor and post-graduate programs, as well as conferences, have gained interest due to the actions of different scholars across the country (Rigol, 2005; Plan Maestro - OHCH, 2006, 2009; Soto Suárez et al., 2014). These activities demonstrate an interest in building capacities regarding theoretical and methodological approaches to support conservation actions by training practitioners and managers. Moreover, next to many publications addressing the identification and documentation of different types of built heritage, a set of studies has surfed on theoretical discussions contributing to advance towards more suitable and sustainable management strategies (Soto, 2006; Cárdenas *et al.*, 2008; Herrera, 2008; Rodríguez, 2009; Gómez and Niglio, 2015).

The joint efforts between the State, managers, practitioners, and scholars upheld the inscription of five sites in the World Heritage List (WHL) in the transition from the 20th to the 21st century. Among these, one is a fortress, two are cultural landscapes, and the rest are historic centres³. Likewise, more than 200 properties have

³ San Pedro de la Roca Castle, Santiago de Cuba (1997), Viñales Valley (1999), Archaeological Landscape of the First Coffee Plantations in the South-East of Cuba (2000), Urban Historic Centre of Cienfuegos (2005), Historic Centre of Camagüey (2008).

been listed thus far as National Monuments (figure 1). Regarding the built heritage, the focus is primarily put on individual buildings (79 properties), whereas historic urban areas include twelve historic centres and nine urban sites (CNPC, 2018b).



Figure 1. World Cultural Heritage properties in Cuba and National Monuments per province (in numbers)

Even though in the first stages of the conservation practice in Cuba, most of the actions were concentrated in Havana, there has been a noticeable shift in the last decades considering the creation of city/historian offices in different cities, and the number of assets listed as National Monument. For instance, the Eastern Region, which is defined by five provinces (Las Tunas, Holguín, Granma, Santiago de Cuba and Guantánamo), concentrates 47 % of National Monuments; also, it hosts two World Heritage Sites. This development demonstrates the importance given to the safeguarding of cultural heritage across the country.

Historic centres in today's circumstances (2011-present)

Since 2011, a sequence of changes has characterised the socio-economic dynamics in Cuba. That year, Cuba's Communist Party announced new social and economic policies, stated in the *Lineamientos de la Política Económica y Social del Partido y la Revolución* (Guidelines of the Economic and Social Policy of the Party and the Revolution) (PCC, 2010). The encourage-

ment of the private sector, the opening of the real estate market, as well as the approval of a new Act for Foreign Investment are among the substantial reforms (Cubadebate, 2011; Rodríguez, 2013).

Also, in 2018 the National Assembly of Cuba launched the project for a new Constitution (National Assembly, 2018), which final text was approved by referendum in 2019. Both the Guidelines and the new Constitution reflect the continuity of the interest on safeguarding cultural heritage by conceiving this activity within integrated scientific, technological, environmental and innovation policies (PCC, 2010, sec. 129). In particular, Articles 13h and 90k of the constitutional proposal claim for the duties of the State and citizens on the protection of cultural heritage.

To summarise, it is possible to state that heritage conservation in Cuba progressed from isolated intervention actions in significant historic buildings during the first half of the 20th century to the current institutionalised framework, which focuses on safeguarding historic centres. The facts exposed thus far lead to infer that this evolution is the result of different factors. Among which the support of the State is essential, reflected in cultural development policies, statutory frameworks, the creation of specific bodies for the conservation and management of historic centres, and the inscription of seven properties in the World Cultural Heritage List. Moreover, the development of research projects and academic programs at bachelor and postgraduate levels resulted in the specialisation of practitioners and managers, who have conducted conservation and management actions aligned with international policy and guidelines documents.

However, to some extent, these actions lag behind the current international discourse. Despite the advances made, conservation and management actions remain focused on the notion of historic centre, whereas the 2011 Unesco Recommendation on

the Historic Urban Landscape already advocated for a broader understanding of heritage beyond this notion (Unesco, 2011). Three facts can demonstrate this statement; firstly, the current statutory framework, specifically Act. No.2 on National and Local Monuments, indicates the listing of extensive urban areas under the category of historic centre. Accordingly, twelve historic centres have been listed as National Monuments thus far. Secondly, ten city/conservation offices have been established as bodies responsible for the conservation and management of historic centres. Thirdly, among the seven World Cultural Heritage Sites of the country, four are historic centres (Old Havana, Trinidad, Cienfuegos, and Camagüey).

In this regard, in Cuba, historic centres have been typically understood as the foundational core of cities, which were established during the Colonial Period, from the 16th to the 19th century. Nevertheless, the definition provided in Act No.2 does not specify a timeframe for this category nor a specific area within the city. Therefore, in accordance with Chateloin (2008), the notion of historic centre cannot be limited to the foundational core; instead, the city should be understood as a system of historic centres.

Historic urban areas beyond the notion of historic centres

Given that most of the efforts aimed at preserving historic urban areas in Cuba concentrate on historic centres, a distinction needs to be made between the latter and other urban areas, which are also containers of tangible and intangible heritage. For a better understanding, the term “historic district” will be used from now on to differentiate these areas from the local notion of historic centre. Accordingly, this section exposes the significance and the issues affecting the integrity of historic districts.

The review of the literature assisted in exploring to what extent historic districts have been addressed from the perspective

of heritage conservation. Local publications, including books, journal papers, monographs, and research reports, reflect that the attention to these areas increased from the early 21st century onwards. Authors have emphasized the significance of districts like El Cerro (Chateloin, 2003; Portero, 2004; Baroni and Ortega, 2005; Ortega, 2005), Centro Habana (Coyula, 2009; Rey *et al.*, 2009a), El Vedado (Colectivo de autores, 2006), and Miramar (Chateloin, 2004; Chateloin *et al.*, 2016), all in Havana. Likewise, within this group, Vista Alegre District in Santiago de Cuba has also been the focus of several studies (Lemus *et al.*, 2007; Morcate and Parrinello, 2008; Muñoz, 2005, 2007, 2008).

Studies about these districts have contributed to the identification, characterisation, and valorisation of their significance, and their potential as heritage assets in view of their –but not limited to– urban and architectural features. Scholars have also provided a thorough understanding of their evolution. The literature has stimulated to raising awareness of cultural values like historical, political, social, artistic, and environmental. Simultaneously, authors have claimed the need for action as increasing negative transformations dangerously threaten the preservation of, primarily, the quality of the urban pattern, and the diversity of valuable architectural pieces.

The following tables from 1 to 4 synthesise the main problems pertaining to historic districts as regularly stressed in the literature. This summary is based on the reflections made by authors, who expressed their concern regarding alterations and loss of character-defining elements because of different social, economic, and environmental phenomena. It is essential to realise that a clear distinction between problems and causes is somewhat difficult since they often overlap; that is to say, causes are likely to be problems and vice versa (tables 1-4).

Table 1. Cerro

Author	Issues affecting character-defining elements	Causes
Coyula and Rigol, (2005)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deterioration of buildings and infrastructure -Unharmonious colours and signs -Adverse transformations and decay of urban-scape -Slums -Lack of green and open public areas -The hostile urban environment for pedestrians, residents, and bicyclists -Low self-esteem of residents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deprived livelihood, poverty -Marginalisation -Introduction of industries, the influence of other industries -Over-densification of vehicular traffic -Lack of civic and urban culture -Contamination: air pollution, water, waste, noise -Deficient quality and quantity of public services -Devaluation of urban land
Chateloin (2003)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deterioration of buildings -Over-exploitation of buildings -Slums -Introduction of discordant decorative features 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Lack of maintenance -Economic scarcities -Unawareness of historical and artistic significance

Table 2. Centro Habana

Author	Issues affecting character-defining elements	Causes
Peña, (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deterioration of buildings and infrastructure 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deprived livelihood -Low quality of life -Disregarded cultural and heritage values -The absence of effective maintenance actions -Lack of management strategies
Coyula (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deterioration of buildings and infrastructure -Alterations to buildings' traditional formal appearance -Unharmonious new constructions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Introduction of incompatible functions -Over-population, densification -Flooding (hurricanes/rise of sea level) -The decline of ethical and moral values -Deprived livelihood -Low quality of life -Failure to comply with urban regulations
Rey <i>et al.</i> (2009)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Deterioration of buildings and infrastructure -Adverse transformations of traditional urban-scape 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Over-population -Deprived livelihood -Low quality of life

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Table 3. El Vedado

Author	Issues affecting character-defining elements	Causes
Rey (2006)	-Alteration to buildings' formal appearance -Adverse transformations of traditional urban-scape	
Coyula (2006)	-Alterations to the traditional formal appearance of buildings -Alterations to the traditional urban pattern -Alterations to the relationship between buildings and green and open areas -The decay of the urban-scape -Unharmonious new informal constructions for services -Unharmonious new buildings -Unharmonious corporative colors and signs -Reduced green outdoor areas (gardens, patios)	-The decline of ethical and moral values; change in social values, customs, and behaviour patterns -Internal migration (rural-urban) -Emerging rural activities as part of urban dynamics -Marginality -Over-population -The absence of effective maintenance actions

Table 4. Miramar

Author	Issues affecting character-defining elements	Causes
Padura (2016)	-Alteration to traditional urban pattern Alterations to the traditional formal appearance of buildings -Reduced green outdoor areas (gardens, lateral corridors, patios) The decay of the urban-scape	-Introduction of new incompatible functions -Subdivisions of buildings and plots (abandoned houses were used to host more than one family) -Introduction of the tertiary industry on buildings originally conceived for housing -Unharmonious commercial signs
Lápidus (2016)	-Introduction of unharmonious designs, materials, and different sort of discordant elements within the urban-scape -The decay of the urban-scape -Low quality of new building's design -Low quality of interventions works' projects on historic buildings	-Unawareness on the significance of modern Districts
Coyula (2016)	-Alteration to the traditional urban pattern -Alterations to the traditional formal appearance of buildings -The decay of the urban-scape -Unharmonious new buildings Introduction of discordant informal constructions, signs, colours, designs, materials, and fences with unharmonious heights	-Private and State-owned buildings fail to comply with urban regulations -Lack of proper civic and urban culture

Some of the common issues referred by scholars that are affecting character-defining elements are the decay and adverse transformations of historic buildings, together with alterations to the traditional urban pattern. Moreover, the introduction of unharmonious new buildings, informal and unfitted constructions, materials, fences, colours, and signs are also problems threatening the integrity of historic districts.

Among the causes noted, scholars have focused the attention on the absence of effective maintenance actions, the lack of management strategies, the introduction of incompatible new functions, and the unawareness on heritage values. Besides, the lack of proper urban and civic culture leads to failures to comply with urban regulations, which is also influenced by phenomena like the deprived livelihood and low quality of life in some of the districts. Moreover, the decline of ethical and moral values leads to marginality and changes in customs and behaviour patterns, the latter resulting as well from massive internal migration waves from rural areas to cities (Coyula, 2006). Consequently, the over-densification produces the upsurge of slums.

Since the analyses were made from the perspective of heritage conservation, authors' most referred issue is the increasing decay of character-defining elements, particularly, urban and architectural features. The gradual deterioration, transformation and loss of traditional tangible features bring further adverse consequences to historic urban areas like the loss of valuable examples of local urban and architectural design, as well as traditional constructive typologies. Besides, the accumulation of alterations jeopardises local identities, and erodes the sense of place attachment and social memory; likewise, it may deprive an opportunity for the contemporary market, e.g., tourism.

The reasoning exposed by scholars indicates a straightforward cause-effect association, which explains that a social or eco-

conomic phenomenon directly rebounds on the historic district. Therefore, the transformation of meanings and the different perceptions of cultural values remain unnoticed as an underlying effect of socio-economic dynamics, which is also a concealed cause of decay. In this regard, authors have scarcely addressed the influence of socio-economic dynamics on cultural values over time, and the impact produced by this interrelationship on reshaping historic urban areas.

Actions towards safeguarding historic districts

In addition to the contributions made by academics, it is possible to trace the attention to historic districts in the actions undertaken by the National Commission on Monuments (NCM). In 1999, this body listed Quinta Avenida (Miramar) and its surrounding areas, and *La Rampa* (Vedado) and its influential area as protected zones (Rigol, 2012; Lápídis, 2016). Later on, one of the attempts of the NCM to move towards the integrated protection of these areas was the inscription of El Vedado and El Cerro (Havana) as Zona de Valor Histórico-Cultural (lit. zone of historical-cultural value) (Coyula and Rigol, 2005; Rey, 2006). Furthermore, the World Monuments Fund (WMF) included El Cerro as one of the endangered heritage sites in the 2004-2005 watch list (Portero, 2004).

Even though these actions reflected an increasing interest in preserving urban and architectural features, their designation as protected zones was not “strong” nor “influential” enough given that the most important category at the national level is National Monument. As pointed by Lápídis (2016), notwithstanding the advance into the 21st century, there is still a resistance to extend the notion of “historic” to cultural assets that will soon reach the centenary, perhaps because they are too familiar or because they are still part of our daily life. However, it is worth noting the efforts made to preserve exceptional buildings in some of these

historic districts. One acknowledged example is the restoration of the Casa de las Tejas Verdes in Miramar, commissioned to the City Historian Office of Havana. The building hosts a cultural centre to promote modern and contemporary architecture and urbanism; hence, it particularly serves to disseminate the significance of El Vedado and Miramar (Duarte, 2010; Padilla, 2010).

In sum, historic districts claim for integrated preservation actions due to accumulative adverse transformations resulting from past and present socio-economic dynamics. Even though most of the literature has addressed the significance of these areas, as well as the need for action, there are still topics to be explored. In particular, the thorough understanding of the time- and context-specific process of cultural values evolution, which is driven by political, socio-cultural, and economic changes, can assist in devising value-based management strategies.

The case of Vista Alegre District in Santiago de Cuba

Santiago de Cuba is the context where this research has been conducted. The city is the country's second-largest after Havana. Its broader territory holds two World Cultural Heritage Sites and 50 properties listed as National or Local Monuments. Because of their significance concerning –but not limited to– urban and architectural features, the historic centre and Vista Alegre District are areas that have been regularly addressed in the literature (figure 2).

Even though the literature has highlighted the relevance of the tangible and intangible heritage contained in both cases, their attention as historic urban areas is somewhat different. Whereas the City Conservation Office of Santiago de Cuba leads integrated preservation and development policies in the historic centre, few isolated interventions on relevant buildings and public spaces are visible in Vista Alegre District. Moreover, the historic centre as a whole is listed as National Monument; additionally, it holds 12

buildings with the same category, while the most significant achievement for Vista Alegre in this matter was the inscription of one building as Local Monument in 2009 (CNPC, 2018b). Years after, the building collapsed as a result of extensive deterioration.

Therefore, similar to the analysis exposed in the previous section related to the conservation of historic urban areas in Cuba, a



Figure 2: Historic urban areas in the city of Santiago de Cuba

distinction should be made since current conservation, and management strategies are limited to the historic centre. Because of the significance of the urban pattern, and the diversity and coherence of the historic building stock contained in the Vista Alegre District, the site has been subject to different studies (Soto, 2006; Cabrera, 2007; Muñoz, 2007; Morcate and Parrinello, 2008). Authors have noted issues and causes that are threatening the preservation of character-defining elements (table 5).

The issues found are similar to what most of the Cuban historic districts reflect. Together with physical processes, the deterioration of buildings increased during the extended period of shortcomings in the 1990s, and it aggravated as a consequence

Table 5. Vista Alegre District

Author	Issues affecting character-defining elements	Causes
Soto (2006)	-Deterioration of buildings -Alterations to the formal appearance of buildings, exterior, and interior	-Lack of legal protection of heritage buildings -Lack of maintenance strategies -Introduction of new functions, transformations
Muñoz (2007) Muñoz and Bello (2012) Bello <i>et al.</i> , (2017)	-Deterioration of buildings -Alterations to the formal appearance of buildings, exterior, and interior -Alteration to the traditional urban pattern -Decay of urban- scape -Loss of valuable buildings -Reduction of green outdoor areas (gardens, lateral corridors, patios) -Deficient and quantity of public services -Low quality of new building's design -Introduction of discordant informal constructions, signs, colours, designs, materials, and fences -Unharmonious new buildings	-Lack of legal protection -Lack of maintenance and management strategies -Introduction of incompatible functions -Outdated urban regulations -Lack of proper civic and urban culture -Unawareness on the significance of the District -Centralised decision-making policies.

of Hurricane Sandy, which devastated the city in 2012. Moreover, alterations to the traditional urban pattern emerged as a result of different social phenomena; for instance, the lack of housing and unpleasant living conditions. In response to this situation, this policy empowered people with the autonomy to build their own houses using their available resources. Own-means houses evidenced the specific needs and incomes of families, which, together with the lack of proper consultancy, led to noticeable differences in the quality of constructions and their aesthetic appearance. Also, the uncontrolled constructive actions

undertaken by private owners and State institutions resulted in many cases in alterations to the traditional urban landscape, producing severe irreversible alterations in some sectors within the District (Bello Caballero, Muñoz Castillo and Van Balen, 2017; Muñoz and Bello Caballero, 2012) (figure 3).



Figure 3. Contrast between the typical urban landscape of Vista Alegre District (left) and “own-means” houses (right). **Photographs:** Blanc, 2018

The deprived livelihood also produced substantial transformations to the historic building stock, which are visible in the proliferation of subdivisions, and the occupation of traditional outdoor and green areas that guarantee proper indoor ventilation, e.g., gardens, backyards and lateral corridors. Furthermore, the removal or substitution of wooden structures, clay tile roofs, balconies, porches, floor mosaics, decorative features, doors and windows, led to a gradual loss of character-defining elements, jeopardising the integrity and identity of some areas within the District (Muñoz, 2008; Bello Caballero, Muñoz Castillo and Van Balen, 2017).

Today’s changing socio-economic dynamics resulting from the 2011 State’s new policies have produced implications already visible at an incipient stage. On the one hand, the activation of alternative investments has contributed to revitalising the urban environment. On the other, increasing investments can also generate phenomena like gentrification since families are tending to sell their properties as a solution to economic scarcities. In this

sense, a dichotomy arises: whereas many locals cannot afford a major repair or regular maintenance, emerging private businesses recover deteriorated buildings at the expense of residents' displacement (Bello Caballero *et al.*, 2017).

Moreover, the opening of the real estate market and the promotion of the private sector resulted in a phenomenon that can be called the “self-efficiency house.” In other words, families invest in their own houses and adapt them to open small businesses linked to services like lodging, bars, restaurants, beauty salons, or even car wash and all types of repairing workshops. A change in the family economy meant a change in housing and as such displays an outstanding example of an alternative to centralised State services. In the best-case scenario, new owners recover buildings from adverse conditions, while in the worst, severe alterations are caused due to irreversible adverse transformations (figure 4).

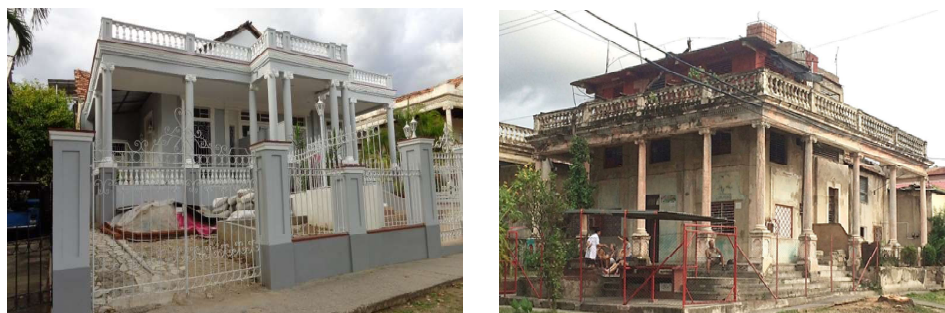


Figure 4: Private initiative to recover a former house to host a bar (left). Example of all issues referred to in one building (right), i.e., deterioration and adverse transformations due to several subdivisions and occupation of front garden for an informal cafeteria. **Photographs:** Blanc, 2018; Vilorio, 2017

Because of the accumulation of adverse impacts that endanger the permanence of character-defining elements, the concern among scholars has led to promote studies in order to raise awareness on the importance of safeguarding the District. Current ac-

tions are supported on previous contributions (Soto, 2006; Cabrera, 2007; Muñoz, 2007; Morcate and Parrinello, 2008) to continue developing the knowledge about tangible and intangible features. These actions have recently been conducted under the umbrella of the International University Cooperation Program between the Council of Flemish Universities and the Universidad de Oriente (VLIR IUC-UO Program)⁴. Within this program, the results are part of the objectives of Project 4 “The Social Sciences, Architecture, and Law facing the challenges of local development. Enhancing heritage preservation”. Moreover, the establishment of the VLIR North-South-South Project “Latin American Axe on Preventive Conservation of Built Heritage”⁵ has also supported research actions. As a result of this collaboration, this study is positioned within the network of the PRECOM³OS Unesco Chair through the support of the Raymond Lemaire International Centre for Conservation, ascribed to the *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* in Belgium.

In summary, the Vista Alegre District is a historic urban area, which integrity is threatened by accumulative adverse transformations resulting from past and present socio-economic dynamics. Most of the literature about the area has addressed the significance and the need to preserve urban and architectural features. For that reason, research projects supported on international collaboration are being conducted to develop theoretical, methodological and practical approaches that can contribute to its preservation and management.

The National Commission on Monuments and mainly, the city historian/conservation offices are bodies supported on legal frameworks to direct the stewardship, listing process, creation

⁴ <https://www.vliruos.be/en/projects/project/22?pid=2614>

⁵ <https://www.vliruos.be/en/projects/project/22?pid=3265>

of inventories, management plans and conservation actions of historic urban areas. However, this institutional framework focus on conservation and management on the local notion of historic centre, which typically refers to the foundational core of the city established in the Colonial Period [16th to 19th century].

Other significant historic urban areas, termed as historic districts in the context of this research, embody tangible and intangible heritage that lack the well-established strategies devised for historic centres. Common issues affecting their character-defining elements are the decay and adverse transformations to historic buildings, as well as alterations to the traditional urban pattern. Among the causes, scholars have referred to the absence of effective maintenance actions, the introduction of incompatible new functions, unawareness of heritage values, failures to comply with urban regulations, deprived livelihood and low quality of life. These phenomena jeopardise local identities, erode the sense of place attachment, and deprive an opportunity for the contemporary market.

One of these cases is the Vista Alegre District in Santiago de Cuba. Even though its significance is reflected in urban and architectural features as referred to in the literature, its integrity is threatened by accumulative adverse transformations resulting from past and present socio-economic dynamics. As a result, research projects are being conducted to develop theoretical, methodological and practical approaches that can contribute to the preservation and management of the District.

Historic districts in Cuba, including the Vista Alegre, claim for integrated preservation actions due to the adverse impacts produced by changing socio-economic dynamics over time. Accordingly, authors have explained the extent to which social and economic phenomena directly affect their tangible heritage, indicating a straightforward cause-effect association. However,

no research has addressed the influence of socio-economic dynamics on cultural values and the impact produced by this interrelationship on reshaping historic urban areas. Therefore, the transformation of meanings and the different perceptions of cultural values attributed to historic urban areas remain unnoticed as an underlying effect of socio-economic dynamics.

These reasons endorse the pertinence of continuing research in the local context, in order to understand the impacts produced by time- and context-specific political, socio-cultural, and economic factors.

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