

Virtual Preservation in Cuba

Cuba has been the focus of world attention due to the visit of Pope John Paul II in January 1998. As Cuba enters its 39th year as a Marxist state, its splendid architectural patrimony is showing its age. With limited funding and resources, Cubans struggle to save architectural treasures. While attention has focused on colonial era locations such as Old Havana (Habana Vieja), there is also concern for areas such as Central Havana. There is growing interest in Cuban architecture and its preservation by people both within and without its borders. Designated a World Heritage Site in 1982, Havana is a mixture of architectural styles from Baroque to Art Nouveau.

Cuba poses complex planning and preservation problems in places such as Old Havana. Havana is home to many of the country's poorest residents, many of whom live in structures not intended for permanent housing. This situation poses a challenge to city planning and preservation



Remains of a collapsed building near the Malecon, Havana, Cuba. Photo by the author.

efforts to avoid massive displacement. For many people interested in these issues, travel to Cuba to experience its cultural landscape and help save its structures is almost impossible. However, the World Wide Web is opening new doors for those interested in viewing and saving Cuban architecture, and participating in dialogs about city planning and preservation issues within Cuba.

In the past year, numerous Web sites have gone online documenting the preservation problems facing Cuba. The Caribbean Architecture Restoration Project (CARP) is a non-political American group working to preserve Cuban archi-

ture; its Web site serves as a primary means of communicating its mission in a timely and cost-effective manner. Justin Oppmann, CARP's founder, notes, "The strength of the Web is that it allows people literally worldwide to learn about our conservation efforts, as well as our conference at virtually no cost." CARP has received responses from around the globe making their local efforts instantly international. Additionally, Oppmann says, "Use of the Web has generated offers from a video firm willing to donate services, journalists, photographers who travel to Cuba and wish to help out, and leaders of other architectural organizations who want to work with us." The one missing link in the virtual world of architectural preservation in Cuba is local access to the Web. Despite this problem, determined professionals and students visit Cuba to see, first-hand, the state of Cuban architectural treasures. This often adds to the worldwide af on how cultural resources in this island nation can best be preserved.

The many benefits that accumulate from Internet usage as a means to publicize preservation work are worth the small financial investment and effort to create a Web page. Many cultural resource management organizations are becoming international entities overnight just by uploading a Web page. The Web offers preservationists a new means to relay information, share strategies, and expand their support base. Preservation efforts in Cuba are a prime example of the power of the Web as an evolving preservation tool.

Noteworthy Web Sites:

- Caribbean Architecture Restoration Project (CARP): <members.aol.com/caribarch>
- Cuba in Transition—A Photo-essay in the Global Classroom by an urban policy and planning teacher at the John F. Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University: <www.ksg.harvard.edu/people/xbriggs/>
- LA HABANA*HAVANA—An Architectural tour of Havana and Trinidad, Cuba: <www.tomco.net/~larak/cuba/cuba.htm>

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