

Architecture in Havana, Cuba and San Juan, Puerto Rico: Comparison of United States Impact Pre- and Post- 1959

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Abstract

Cuba and Puerto Rico each had a strong relationship with the United States in the first half of the twentieth century. Cuba, however, lost the support of the United States through the embargo implemented after the 1959 Cuban Revolution. In contrast, Puerto Rico continues to remain a United States commonwealth today. With this divergent influence from the United States, there should have been an observable effect on the architecture of Havana and San Juan. This research focuses on the impact of these diverging relationships with the United States had on the housing conditions and efforts of the people and governments in these two capital cities in the years leading up to and following the 1959 Cuban Revolution. After the Cuban government's official declaration of communism, United States influence on architecture in the Caribbean shifted from Havana to San Juan. Today, the greater role the United States has played in Puerto Rico in comparison to Cuba since the 1959 Revolution most clearly manifests itself in the contemporary residential architecture in San Juan. Whereas the built environment of Havana essentially froze in time in 1959 prior to local architects fully defining a modern Cuban architecture, designers in Puerto Rico continued to develop their modern architectural forms, albeit within the shadow of the United States.

Keywords: Architecture, Latin America, United States influence

1. Introduction

The relationship of Cuba and Puerto Rico to Spain and to the United States were similar until the mid-twentieth century. Cuba and Puerto Rico were established as Spanish territories by Christopher Columbus in 1492 and 1493 respectively, with Havana and San Juan serving as trade-port cities. In 1898, after the Spanish-American War, the Spanish rule of Cuba and Puerto Rico ended and they subsequently became governed by the United States military. Cuba gained independence in 1902, while Puerto Rico continued to be governed as a United States commonwealth. The first half of the twentieth century brought each country progress, growth, and a new identity through government aid, industrialization, and the developing tourism economies.¹

This paper analyzes the interaction of the United States with Cuba and Puerto Rico and its effect on housing from the beginning of the twentieth century through today. The threat of communism strengthened United States relations with countries in the Caribbean in their attempt to promote democracy, especially in Puerto Rico due to its role as a United States commonwealth. The contrasting relationships of Cuba and Puerto Rico with the United States have had obvious effects on present-day housing, evident in availability, safety, and overall conditions. Beachside apartments, suburban housing, and hotels are under constant construction in Puerto Rico, whereas today Cuba is struggling to maintain the nineteenth and twentieth century buildings that house a majority of its people.

2. Housing

2.1 Suburbanization: Following The American Influence

The size and population density of the urban centers of San Juan and Havana grew in the 1920s due to the availability of cars and public transportation. During this time, both countries experienced a tremendous production and financial growth in the sugar and tobacco industries that led to an increase in jobs, wages, and manufactured products. United States' companies at this time began selling their goods in Puerto Rico and Cuba, Americanizing these countries and infringing on the Spanish culture. Much of the architecture from the 1920s to the 1950s was designed by either United States' architects or Latin Americans trained in U.S. schools. New building materials were imported from the United States, including sheet metal and plastic for roofs, as well as paints and veneers. These building practices, common in the United States, were not appropriate for the city landscape of either Caribbean country. The contemporary architectural developments disturbed the existing skylines of Old Havana and Old San Juan as the new, taller buildings juxtaposed the shorter, colonial buildings of the old city.

In 1960 San Juan, the richer classes moved from the city center to the suburbs, relocating the poor to the inner city from city outskirts, which hosted a higher concentration of jobs and transportation options. Suburban areas became a place of escape for middle- and upper-class families. These areas obtained the typical attributes of United States cities, including “the upper class flight to the suburbs, the marginalization of old downtown areas, the concentration of capital resources and services in a financial district, and the residential segregation of the rich and poor.”² Tall edifices of glass and steel containing luxury apartments and offices erupted in the metropolitan area of San Juan while suburban dwellings replicated houses built in the United States. The inclusion of specifically-placed electrical outlets for refrigerators, TVs, and telephones in these houses reflected the expansion of the United States consumerism ideal formulating in Puerto Rico.³

Cuba was also experiencing an increase in suburbanization before the Revolution as the concept of the American dream became rooted in the society. Cuba was one of the most developed Latin American countries in the 1950s, having the highest income per person, which was comparable to the citizens of Italy.⁴ The Cuban middle class had the most TVs, radio stations, and telephones provided by United States companies in the Caribbean. Suburban sprawl encompassed Old Havana and early twentieth-century developments where much of this middle class lived. The suburban houses which typically comprised of concrete, brick, and metal, varied from the wooden and clay abodes of the middle class. Multi-room houses with garages and electricity were components of the “American Dream” strived for by the middle class.

The movement toward suburbanization was exemplified with the planning of a Levittown for San Juan in 1963. Levittown communities, as realized in New York and Pennsylvania, consisted of a series of similar prefabricated houses on equal sized lots of land that include a fenced-in backyard and a straight driveway that leads to a garage for the family car. The plan for Levittown in Puerto Rico was similar to its counterparts found in the United States. There were four models of houses available, including three or four bedrooms, one to three bathrooms, and different configurations of the kitchen, living, and dining room placements. The Levittown development represented progress in the sense that everyone could own a house with a lawn and a car—the epitome of the emerging American dream. Because of drugs and violence, some of the communities within these suburbs began separating themselves from the rest of San Juan by forming gated communities. The coordinators of these “closed urbanizations” promised schools, shops, and recreational areas within these gated areas. Many residents wanted to belong to a gated community that would allow for fewer trips into the “dangerous” city center of San Juan. The addition of gated communities continued through the 1980s, coinciding with the replacement and rehabilitation of facades and apartments in these communities. People in gated communities also attempted to renovate and beautify their closed neighborhoods by adding light fixtures, basketball courts, and local parks.⁵

2.2 Housing The Poor: Makeshift Communities & Government Intervention

Shantytowns, or communities of houses constructed from found materials, arose during the early twentieth century within the capital cities of San Juan and Havana due to the availability of low-skilled industrial jobs that attracted people from the countryside. Many of these makeshift communities were built by peasant farmers who could not afford more substantial housing. Shantytowns were typically located on land otherwise deemed useless by developers, such as marshy areas and steep precipices, where running water, electricity, or sewage systems did not exist. The presence of undesirable living conditions influenced higher-class residents and members of the government that these areas were filled with crime, prostitution, and drugs.⁶

The 1930s saw an influx of United States Government aid to Puerto Rico and Cuba through President Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal and the Platt Amendment in response to the Great Depression. The New Deal led to the implementation of the Puerto Rico Reconstruction Administration (PRRA). Its purpose was to eradicate slums and shantytowns, mirroring programs set in place by cities in the United States. The PRRA executed a large-scale structured public housing program in an attempt to improve the overall standard of living for Puerto Ricans, especially in the capital city of San Juan. All urbanization projects were built of reinforced concrete with different size units available based on the needs of individual families. These projects became the hallmark of social mobility in Puerto Rico.⁷ Cuba also received aid from the United States Government even though it was not a part of the United States. The aid was used to improve living conditions outlined in the Platt Amendment and the subsequent Treaty of Relations. Although new housing projects were constructed to eradicate slums, conditions of the inner-city slums became much worse as people continued to migrate from the country to the cities. The new housing projects, similar to those in Puerto Rico, were large concrete structures that did not meet environmental or the people's needs.

Unregulated expansion and neglect for low-income housing continued to occur in both San Juan and Havana through the 1940s. The population of San Juan reached 170,000 during this decade, even though the city and suburbs only had 35,000 housing units.⁸ The population within San Juan increased in 1948 with its arrival of companies from the United States through Operation Bootstrap, an act implemented by the United States Government that encouraged industrialization and urbanization of the island through tax concessions and wage improvements for U.S. investors in Puerto Rico. Puerto Nuevo was a housing development established through Operation Bootstrap that resulted from efforts of both the public and private sectors. The development included 7,000 single-family housing units for 50,000 residents of the working middle- and lower-classes. The apartments replaced much of these shantytown families. This relocation of families caused complications as many desired their own land and house. The large amount of apartments within the development forced quantity to govern quality, with units defined by a lack of ornamentation and cheap construction that quickly deteriorated.⁹

During the 1960s, communism was supported by those who led the Cuban Revolution. Equal housing opportunities became a priority in the communist dictum. The clearance of slums and the deliverance of equal quality housing within Havana was one of the first goals for the Revolution. The solution for the housing shortage was to build quickly, and soon quantity became more important than quality.¹⁰ Prefabricated structures were built as outlined by the Ministry of Construction (MICONS) who modeled the designs after those constructed in the Soviet Union. For speedy and simplified production like those being built in San Juan, the models had a certain number of pre-established floor and concrete panels, including facades void of any type of ornamentation. Even with the embargo and lack of supplies, Fidel Castro promised that Cuba would produce one hundred thousand housing units a year between 1960 and 1970.¹¹

Slum clearance only intensified in Puerto Rico, especially as the United States saw Cuba's turn to communism as a threat. Puerto Rico obtained more federal funds per capita for the construction of low-cost housing than any state in the United States.¹² The Federal funds from the United States allowed Puerto Rico to provide low-cost housing for those in shantytowns. The Urban Renewal Housing Corporation built over 33,500 public housing units, allowing for the relocation of 26,000 shantytown families.¹³ The new housing projects built in the early 1960s were placed on the previous site of the shantytowns, a location that the government knew suited their lifestyle.

Urban renewal projects in both countries experienced problems as families preferred life in squatter settlements instead of the new apartment buildings, despite the better living conditions.¹⁴ Living in squatter settlements allowed residents to lead to the formation of tight bonds with neighbors, which were often forcibly broken during the movement into urban renewal projects. Vandalism, theft, and drug addiction increased among the youth within the social housing projects. Buildings in these new developments began to deteriorate as residents did not take care of them and remained unrepaired. With the sense of ownership in shantytowns, residents had the motivation for residents to maintain their houses and living conditions. There were many restrictions placed on those who lived in these renewal projects, including the disallowance of applied decoration that so many desired. Some families even sold their apartments and moved back to the shanty towns.¹⁵ Because so few stayed in the projects, the United States began programs in Puerto Rico and Cuba whose goal was to improve the conditions in slums through the addition of accessible services. The improvement of the overall community inspired owners to renovate their own houses in the squatter settlements.¹⁶

In 1992, the Puerto Rican commonwealth government transferred housing projects into the hands of private corporations. Fortunately, these companies aided in the repair these urban renewal projects, along with supporting public beautification projects in hope of deterring the rise in crime and delinquency rates. San Juan and Havana continue to harbor slums, both the makeshift communities mentioned earlier and the urban renewal projects that were meant to replace them. These projects are typically seen as nests of crime, drugs, and overall social disorder, a complete contradiction of their original purpose. Old San Juan's La Perla and Havana's La Havana del Este are both

prevalent slum areas within the capital and are probably the most well-known slums, even to tourists visiting the two capitals. When looking at an urban renewal plan from 1963, La Perla was proposed as a park area complete with an amphitheater and a sculptural garden. Almost 50 years later, La Perla continues to be a squatter community to the north of the wall surrounding Old San Juan.¹⁷ Today, social conditions remain in decline, with many housing structures abandoned within the city and housing projects continue to be viewed as being filled with violence and criminal activities.¹⁸

2.3 Self-Help Housing: The Cuban Micro Brigades

Between the 1959 Revolution and 1970, the Cuban Government can only be credited with funding and constructing a quarter of the proposed houses in Havana, while the rest were built by individuals.¹⁹ The idea of self-built housing was endorsed by Fidel Castro through the formation of government-aided micro brigades, or coalition of workers, as a potential means to eradicate slums. These citizens built new apartments and houses, despite not being entirely knowledgeable of construction, working the same amount of hours with the same wage as trained professions. This practice slowly dwindled by the end of 1970 with the increasing pressure from the United States trade embargo, hampering the availability of building materials. However, between 1971 and 1979, more than 80,000 dwellings were built by micro brigades, housing 20 percent of the city population.²⁰

A 1986 speech by Fidel sparked another wave of micro brigades as more supplies were available via Soviet Union imports. Within four months of the speech, seventy-five micro brigades were formed, building 3,000 dwellings in two years and another 25,000 by the decade's end.²¹ Many social housing projects were similar to those built in Eastern Europe with the intrusive influence of the Soviet Union. Eventually, in the later 1980s, the increasing costs of construction materials resulted in the partial completion of many projects.²²

The micro brigades movement initiated by the Cuban Government during the 1970s and 1980s was fairly successful in the creation of inexpensive, quick-built housing. Today, many of the buildings are crumbling because durable building materials and experienced construction workers were not employed. Shells of units, often without sinks, toilets, and showers, continue to stand unfinished. Pipes stick out of the walls where these amenities should have been placed. Buildings rarely have working elevators, if any at all, posing problems for Cuba's aging population.²³ Residents have responded to the bland concrete exteriors by expressing their individuality by decorating the prefabricated concrete with multi-colored paint schemes, creating a pop-art effect on the facades of many of these high-rise buildings. The facades can clearly tell the story of the buildings history: rusted steel rebar peeks out of the concrete shell with visible layers of paint chipped away.

2.4 Old City Preservation

Cuba and Puerto Rico continue the struggle to preserve the colonial centers of Old Havana and Old San Juan. Each serves as a popular destination for tourists who enjoy the romanticism of the bright colored buildings and uneven cobble stone streets. However, the current functions of Old Havana and Old San Juan differ: the enduring bourgeois residences of Old Havana continue to accommodate roughly 100,000 people in an area of 1.5 square miles, compared to Old San Juan, which houses approximately 4,000 occupants within 3.5 square miles. Because Old Havana houses such a large number of residents, it has been difficult for the Cuban Government to maintain and repair the buildings where many families live. Instead of focusing on creating a contemporary Cuban architecture, an emphasis has been placed on saving what is already present. The oldest buildings receive aid for preservation first, while the "newer" buildings built in the early twentieth century gradually collapse over time.²⁴ Old San Juan, in contrast, has been much more successful in its preservation efforts. Previous Spanish styled houses have been transformed into souvenir shops, high-end boutiques, and eclectic restaurants that are now marketed to primarily tourists.

Old Havana is the biggest historic center in Latin America with more than 900 protected buildings; however, 80% are in poor structural condition.²⁵ The majority of the buildings in Old Havana that are used for housing were built before 1900. The lack of more recent residential construction is partially due to the 1984 Housing Law that granted possession of government-owned housing to its residents. Ultimately, this law placed the monumental burden of preserving the nineteenth and early twentieth century colonial mansions onto average Cubans many who are unable to afford to tackle such an overwhelming task. The city's aging infrastructure has proved dangerous for many residents, with regular floor, roof, and even complete structural collapses. Today, there is an average of 3.2 collapses a day, involving about 1,000 dwellings annually.²⁶

Many of these collapses are attributed to the addition of makeshift wooden floors and lofts in high-ceiling mansions and the construction of huts on the roof. The makeshift floors, known as *barbacoas*, initially helped to

solve the housing problem in Havana, as many colonial houses had high ceilings and could allow for another floor. These older colonial buildings that became rudimentary apartments are unsafe and dilapidated from their overuse and lack of maintenance.²⁷ Even with apparent structural problems of the once beautiful Spanish colonial buildings, the number of these makeshift apartments continues to increase. When collapses do occur, often from a storm or hurricane, residents are typically sent to shelters located in former schools or commercial buildings. Today, almost 110,000 Cubans live in these temporary shelters.²⁸ A majority have been waiting for more than ten years for the government to assign them a new residence.

In contrast, Old San Juan actually succumbed to partial demolition and destruction in the mid-twentieth century when buildings and plazas were destroyed to make way for parking lots and garages. The Planning Board of San Juan terminated this practice, implementing the Regulatory Plan in July 1958 inclusive of rules for future development. Such rules included the protection of small family businesses on traditional streets, height limits on new building outside of the financial district, an increase in the number of recreational and green spaces, and to “partially” preserve Old San Juan’s colonial character. Renovations of Old San Juan tend to be more historically accurate and uniform in appearance than Old Havana because of government intervention.

2.5 Modern Growth And Construction

Cuban leaders have recognized that housing is a primary issue in their society. However in the past, the government has publicly made empty promises about improving housing conditions. The Second Workshop of Housing Policy implemented new guidelines for construction in Havana from 1996 to 2000, to “improve quality, even at the expense of quantity; to raise the population density and give a higher priority to the conservation of the existing stock than to the construction of new dwellings... and to give more support to self-help programs.”²⁹ This was successful as an average of 50,000 residences were produced a year during this four-year period while improving the overall quality and preserving of older buildings.³⁰ After the housing policy expired in 2000, decay and poor quality housing reappeared. In 2012, the Cuban government began allowing the selling and buying of personal housing and properties that was yet to be allowed in Cuba.

The focus of the government, economy and overall architecture of San Juan has shifted toward the building of hotels, tourist attractions, and beachside apartments. Suburbs continue to grow in both organized and unorganized fashions, especially near the stops of the busy bus and train system. New apartment and housing designs are paying attention to what works best in a tropical climate instead of continuing to copy designs in the United States. Interior courtyards, a frontal portico, and additional vegetation are some concepts that are being reintroduced into the local architecture.

3. Conclusion

The impact of American influence on Cuba and Puerto Rico has been both advantageous and disadvantageous for the housing conditions in those countries. The Cuban Revolution and resulting embargo can be credited with saving Havana from a consumer society similar to the United States, one that is readily apparent in San Juan. The Revolution lessened the rate of urbanization in Havana, such as halting the implementation of a large highway system that would have divided neighborhoods, which occurred in San Juan.³¹ It also stopped the “Miamiization” of Havana’s waterfront and made both Cuba and Havana “a different America” than Cuba’s Caribbean counterparts.³² San Juan today is largely comparable to a Spanish neighborhood in a United States city. Small mom-and-pop restaurants are found within a block’s travel of a Subway, Wendy’s, Walgreens, and a Marshall’s outlet. In contrast, there are no United States chain stores in Cuba as the embargo prevented United States business within Havana.

Also, a difference in the overall structural conditions and attitude toward architecture in the housing sector is notable when comparing both capital cities. Old Havana remains in a state of disrepair, the focus remaining on the nineteenth-century buildings while the mid-twentieth century buildings are undertaking the same cycle of decline. Modern housing in Havana strives toward efficiency and cost effectiveness, lessening the possibility of Cuban architecture influences. San Juan continues to develop the movement towards defining a modern Puerto Rican architecture despite heavy American influences.

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