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Guerrilla Tourism|The Anti-Resort in Cuba

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Guerrilla Tourism|The Anti-Resort in Cuba

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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Honors Capstone Project in Architecture

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Abstract

Guerrilla Tourism: Between the Resort and the Casa Particular

The justification for guerrilla tourism in Havana draws from the political experiences of the urban guerrilla movements of the 1970s which transplanted rural guerrilla strategies to the city. The same basic rules continued to apply: a working knowledge of the terrain and local communities, an ability to strike and retreat quickly and a network form of military-political power. The anti-resort is a collection of micro-hotels in the city that rely on public support programs and fit within communities instead of dominating them.

The current tourist infrastructure of Havana is socially unsustainable: foreign tourists have the choice of staying in high-rise hotels or invading Cubans’ spare rooms. Both options degrade the architectural/cultural life of the city, operating on inappropriate scales. The high-rise hotels turn their backs to the city and serve as a base for touristic exploitation.

The casas particulares are pragmatic surrender of the domestic sphere/private life to the tourist gaze. While both systems deliver some benefit to the Cuban nation and Cubans involved in the tourism sector, they do not deliver to the community, a basic building block of Cuban socialism. Although 8.5 million out of a population of 11 million are politically organized on a neighborhood level, tourism remains an essentially top-down institution or a DIY project for Cubans with relatively nice homes.

The urban guerrilla anti-resort mediates the problems of scale associated with each traditional model. Operating as a semi-formal network deployment, the anti-resort retains the efficiency of the high-rise hotel.

Consequently, the infrastructure required for the upkeep of the formal antiresort will aid in urban development on a neighborhood scale. Deployed in the community, as opposed to against the community, the anti-resort returns a sense of privacy to Cuban families while promoting economic development and keeping tourist revenues within the community. Guerrilla tourism attacks the expressions of global capital in the form of the high-rise hotel and liberates the living room from touristic exploitation.
Executive Summary

*Guerrilla Tourism | The Anti-Resort in Cuba* seeks to explore the conundrum of revolutionary Cuba’s shifting tourism industry through architecture. The project aimed to criticize existing Modernist paradigms, namely high-rise resort towers in downtown Havana, by proposing a new networked hotel in Centro Habana, one of the city’s poorest neighborhoods. The project developed out of the fruitful combination of academic research, personal narrative, travel and architectural design. I strove to integrate my skills as an architecture and English student and activist to produce a layered project that attempted to explore the large question of tourism redevelopment in Cuba in smaller ways. The final architectural proposal is not a “solution” but rather a series of architectural interventions that engage with the neighborhood’s history. They demonstrate that a tourism project can maintain acceptable levels of density (on par with Havana’s densest neighborhoods) without obstructing the historical architectural qualities of its surroundings.

Cuba turned to tourism as a lifeline following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991. This collapse led to an economic crisis known as the “Special Period in a Time of Peace” that witnessed a 80-90% drop in international trade and a roughly 30% contraction of the national economy. Cuba was forced to developed industries that attracted foreign capital and hard currency as the United States tightened its economic sanctions against the Cuban people. Tourism was one of the main industries that paradoxically allowed the Cuban revolution to survive.
I began my exploration of Cuba’s tourism industry with a look at the development of Cuban identity, *cubanidad*, through aesthetics. I focused my research on the ways in which the Cuban nation or subject had been represented over time through media such as painting, film and photography. *Soy Cuba*, a Cuban-Soviet coproduction during the 1960s, was specifically useful in understanding the ways in which Cuba’s national space had been degraded by the interference of the United States. I understood the history of Cuba as a series of “touristic” intrusions by Spain, the United States and the Soviet Union. Since the vast majority of the indigenous population of Cuba was decimated during the early phase of colonization, Cuban identity has always been shaped by “outsider” attitudes. My exploration of Cuban history included a breakdown of the country’s political system, which is oftentimes contradictory and more participatory than expected. I looked at ways in which the majority of Cubans engaged with the state, in mass organizations such as the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution (a block organization which I had the privilege of meeting). I also looked at ways in which the State directly intervened in the tourism industry, either through direct ownership or regulation. For me, this highlights one of the primary contradictions of the tourism industry in post-Soviet Cuba: a traditionally progressive, socialist government is administering the return of pre-revolutionary tourism models that often degrade the sense of national identity/dignity. In certain cases, this model would be identical to Cancun, excepting the Cuban State’s fifty percent share in most tourism corporations and its reinvestment in the country’s social services such as healthcare and education. My project sought to
preserve the flow of hard currency to the island without totally sacrificing its sense of dignity or national culture. Architecture engages in this process because the design of hotels is expressive of the industry’s attitude towards the city and the local population.

Presently, Havana’s tourism industry is dominated by two extremes: the Modernist high-rise hotel and the *casa particular*, private homes with rented rooms/apartments for foreigners. I consider both extremes as dangerous to the architectural character of the city. On the one hand, the high-rise hotel employs architectural devices such as raised platforms, anonymous, opaque glass surfaces and walls to shut themselves away from the city and Cubans. Havana is, in large part, still a 19th century Spanish colonial city in architectural terms. High-rise hotels ignore this context and dominate the skyline, promoting a stark class divide between tourists and locals. Conversely, *casas particulares* surrender private, domestic life for touristic consumption. I contend that tourism can operate between these extremes and foster social interaction between Cubans and tourists without avoiding context or forcibly intruding on the private lives of Cubans.

This research and final architectural proposal was significantly buttressed by my Honors-sponsored, ten-day trip to study the arts and architecture of Havana. The trip allowed me to extensively photography my site in Centro Habana, identify the significance of architectural patterns throughout the city and also situate my project in the larger urban context. It was vitally important for me to occupy the roles of tourist and student; to be an outsider with a certain kind of knowledge in the environment that I was study. I wholeheartedly thank the Renee
Crown University Honors Program, my family, Global Exchange and my two thesis advisers for making this trip possible. I do not believe that my project would have been possible without their support and my trip to Havana.

The “guerrilla anti-resort” operates between these extremes by respecting Cuban domesticity, facilitating infrastructural upgrades (specifically with renovated kitchen and bathroom units) in certain locations that become moments of exchange between Cubans and tourists, working at a scale that is appropriate to the neighborhood (3-5 storey buildings as opposed to high-rises) and oftentimes camouflaging the project so as to not obstruct the daily life of the neighborhood.

The project took five quintessential Cuban architectural forms as a point of departure. The project looked at the ideas of the Courtyard, Arcade, Balcony, Void and (free-standing) Façade to serve as the basis for the guerrilla anti-resort. I understand each idea as a fundamental element of Havana’s urbanism and an appropriate testing ground for a new kind of tourism. The program, or usage, of the project was dispersed throughout these five buildings. As a network, the project operates in a similar manner as a typical resort hotel. The project includes communal accommodations, private guest rooms for tourists or Cubans’ extended families, a swimming pool, rooftop bar, administrative offices, lobby and open market space. The Façade, Balcony and Courtyard projects are mixed use while the Void and Arcade projects are entirely public. Through the exaggeration of existing architectural tropes, the project critically deals with questions of artificiality and context. In certain instances, such as the Façade, the free-standing façade of the lot of extended through space and a “camouflaged” façade
wraps multiple buildings to create the impression of a single building. Another significant theme of my project was community development through renovation and integration with new tourism-related infrastructures. The rooftop bar of the Arcade was conceived of as a minimal framework for future development. The building included vertical circulation, a rooftop bar (how can one design a hotel without a rooftop bar?) and a plaster veneer. The space below and behind the bar are available for future local development. Similarly, boundary walls in the Courtyard scheme are removed and replaced with concrete bars that contain new bathroom and kitchen units: one bathroom faces the hotel and serves adjacent guest rooms and the other belongs to the residents of the adjacent apartments themselves. Encouraging more informal kinds of economic exchange, adjacent apartments receive upgraded kitchens and counter units that face the hotel. These spaces serve as potential restaurant counters and are activated by locals as they wish. In the Balcony project, the “guerrilla” aesthetic move is treating the façade as a transparent, enclosed balcony-hostel. The lot’s interior contains private apartments that interface with central, communal spaces in a similar way as the kitchen counters of the Courtyard project. The diversity of scales throughout the project attempts to distort the rigid traditional relationship between tourists and locals by encouraging interaction and the shared use of space.

The project was presented to four professors in the School of Architecture. The final presentation included ten renders, or hypothetical images, of the project set within photographs taken during my visit to Cuba. I also presented fourteen plans and sections of my project, which are horizontal or vertical “cuts” taken
from my proposed buildings to demonstrate the relationships between different spaces and how people use them. I also included research from the previous semester which included studies on Cuban politics, economics, the tourism industry and its architectural expressions.
Acknowledgements

I would once again like to reiterate my heartfelt gratitude to the Renee Crown University Honors Program, Global Exchange, Professor Brown, Professor Bedard and my family for making this project not only possible but an incredible learning experience.

I would also like to acknowledge all of the organizations in Cuba that made my trip amazing and informative (despite my limited Spanish). Although this is only a partial list, I would like to thank our patient bus drivers, the staff at Global Exchange, our hospitable CDR (Committee for the Defense of the Revolution) friends, our countless museum guides and our fantastic tour guides from ICAP: Jesus and Sarah Daisy.
GUERRILLA TOURISM
The Anti-Resort in Cuba

A Historical-Touristic Guide to the Cuban Nation

Michael Kowalchuk
Fall 2013
ARC 505
Professor Brown | Professor Bédard
Prologue: “The Heroic Guerrilla”

The image of Che Guevara drifts between idealization and reality. Of course, the iconic image that has been plastered on nearly everything, from mugs to t-shirts to bodies, has a specific history and trajectory. The original photograph of the “Heroic Guerrilla,” taken by Alberto Korda on March 5th, 1960, captured Che’s gaze at a funeral for the victims of a (possibly C.I.A.-orchestrated) ship explosion. The original image portrays Che flanked by another man and a plant. Turning the photograph into the image known throughout the world involved cropping and posterization. The image of the Heroic Guerrilla proliferated in the Cuban design community and around the world in multiple forms.

This is essentially a process of reduction. The idea of the Heroic Guerrilla is removed from the physical form of Che in the process of simplification. In terms of the body, the transformation decapitates Che and his head floats in space. Human qualities are reduced while political ideals are augmented. Naturally, the ease of transformability and reproduction has rendered these ideals fluid. The Marxist-Leninist hardliner is reduced to little more than a sexy representation of rebellion in whatever form.

This is not to say that the image is politically worthless for the powers that be. In 2000, Korda sued Smirnoff vodka promoters for utilizing the image in a sales campaign. Korda, who allows the image to be reproduced on all sorts of trinkets and clothing without receiving financial compensation, still polices the image’s use when he feels that it flagrantly abuses Che’s legacy. Clearly the image’s original author believes in the persistence of the image’s ability to carry a message.

Ultimately, the visual representation of Che Guevara is marked by reduction and reproduction. The image offers a hyperbolized understanding of reality, relying on Manichean assumptions. Hero or monster, Che Guevara is set in stone due to his versatility. A further exploration of history and the man behind the mask reveals a richer story, closer to truth. As such, this exercise is a fitting prologue for an outsider’s take on the tourism industry in Cuba.
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Claim: To avoid the collapse of the social system while continuing to attract foreign currency, Cuba must reject the resort in favor of guerrilla tourism: a highly flexible tourism infrastructure that relies on the support of local communities to revive a sense of revolutionary optimism by generating spaces of utopia while preserving the idea(l) of cubanidad, Cuban-ness.
Context: Cuba turned to tourism to recover from the economic crisis resulting from the collapse of socialism in Eastern Europe. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba entered what is known as the Special Period in Time of Peace: over 80% of Cuba’s international trade ceased overnight and the economy was locked in a downward spiral that put the revolutionary project at risk. Modest economic reforms, continuing to this day, have been enacted to integrate the Cuban economy into the globalized capitalist market. Tourism is the primary mechanism in this process.

Consequently, the country’s economic development continues to be hindered by the U.S. blockade, which severely restricts the exchange of goods and services between Cuba and the world. Although Cuba avoided total social and economic collapse, the nation continues to face severe material deficiencies. Tourism and remittances from Cuban-Americans are lifelines for the Cuban economy. While tourism guarantees a steady supply of hard currency, it challenges the revolution’s stated values and has reintroduced noticeable levels of social inequality, sex work, drugs and crime to the island.
**Site:** Besides the tourist mecca of Varadero, Havana occupies a special place in Cuba’s tourism industry. Extensive renovation work has been carried out in Old Havana to restore the neighborhood to its “original splendor” for tourist consumption. Havana benefitted from an existing hotel stock dating back to the prerevolutionary Batista dictatorship of the 1930s-50s. During the Special Period, a series of Postmodern hotel blocks were constructed in East Havana, Vedado and Miramar, reflecting the industry’s renewed importance.

*Centro Habana*, in comparison, has been relatively neglected by the official tourism industry and lacks large-scale tourist infrastructure. Located between Old Havana and Vedado, *Centro Habana* is densely populated and receives little notice from the government in terms of architectural preservation and development. Residents face material and infrastructural deficiencies, especially in relation to the provision of water. By some estimates, Havana loses over 50% of its water supply to the city’s inadequate distribution system. The project will deploy a network of small-scale hotels and supporting infrastructure, the guerrilla anti-resort, to renew the urban significance of the neighborhood. The project seeks to divert the public space of the Malecón, the sea wall that runs along the northern edge of the city, to establish a new public promenade to champion Cuban identity and promote development.
Program: Recognizing the need to attract foreign tourists while respecting local communities, the project proposes to deploy an anti-resort, a network of small-scale hotels. The anti-resort will include accommodation facilities for tourists, water-related infrastructure for public use (expanding the capacities of Havana’s water system and creating urban tropical fantasies with public pools and baths) and support facilities such as Laundromats, cafeterias, gardens and workers’ spaces to conflate the domestic and international motivations of the project.
Chapter 1: Cuban-Global History
Cuba was subjected to Spanish rule from the island’s “discovery” by Columbus to its “liberation” by interventionist American forces. Cuba is distinct in that its stratified, monoculture-based economy and colonial system persisted for decades after most Latin American countries gained their independence. The export of sugar and tobacco defined the Cuban economy, which relied on the enslavement of hundreds of thousands of Africans and their descendents. Contemporary Cuba has not been able to fully escape the colonial paradigm, relying on international assistance to undo centuries enforced dependency.
After the overthrow of the Batista regime, Cuba found itself in a precarious international position. Any genuine national liberation project in Cuba had to contend with the country’s chronic underdevelopment and skewed social system, which ultimately meant a confrontation with foreign capital. After promoting land reform and limited nationalizations, the Cuban revolution was demonized by the United States and was pushed into the socialist camp. The Soviet Union provided economic and military assistance. Cuba achieved a level of geopolitical significance that it had rarely seen in the past due to its status as the only socialist nation in the western hemisphere, 80 miles from the United States.
The Special Period, 1991-

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, Cuba was practically alone and had to contend with an emboldened American blockade and international isolation. The Special Period of the 1990s was marked by a dramatic drop in the standard of living and the devaluation of the Cuban peso. These trends began to change when Cuba promoted foreign tourism and the political atmosphere of Latin America shifted to the left with the Bolivarian Revolution in Venezuela. The creation of A.L.B.A. (The Bolivarian Alliance for the Americas) reintegrated Cuba into certain Latin American markets on favorable terms. The exchange of doctors for oil filled the gap left by the former Soviet Union's subsidies.
Primer desembarco de Cristóbal Colón en América, by Dióscoro Puebla, 1862.

Discovery of the Caribbean, by Mario Carreño 1944.
The Discovery of Cuba in Retrospect

To gloss over issues of ethnic cleansing, the exploitation of land and labor, and historical inaccuracy, a fantasy has been promoted regarding the “discovery” of the Americas by Christopher Columbus. As the first painting makes evident, Columbus did not discover the Americas at all. North and South America were already populated by millions of people.

According to the settler-colonial racist paradigm, the narrative of discovery makes sense. In the 19th century painting by Puebla, the indigenous people of Cuba do not properly constitute people at all. The European explorers, after a daunting voyage at sea, reach the paradise of Cuba with God and country. The dark-skinned, barely-clothed, primeval native people are greeted by Western enlightenment. The island is literally illuminated by their presence.

By the 20th century, Columbus’ first voyage becomes further idealized. The Caribbean and its islands are represented by voluptuous sea nymphs, beckoning for European discovery. The painting relies on notions of Classical feminine beauty. In this historical moment, Caribbean cultural forces and their European counterparts frequently represented the Caribbean as feminine and sensual.

These representations of Caribbean-European relations, the narrative of discovery and the feminization of Cuba have lasting political impacts. These representations whitewash the trauma of the colonial conquest, situate Cuba and other Caribbean countries in an inferior position to Europe and glorify whiteness and masculinity. The process of idealization masks existing realities and legitimizes the colonial project retroactively. Even though the two images were produced a century apart, they both vindicate colonialism and applaud its “civilizing” effect.
Intervention and National Territory

Although Cuba achieved formal independence at the end of the 19th century with U.S. “help,” Cuba could not fully exercise national sovereignty until the mid-20th century. Pogolotti’s Cuban Landscape speaks to the idea that Cuba was a component of the U.S. industrial/financial machine and was little more than a giant sugarcane plantation.

The painting clearly makes the point that Cubans are excluded from their own country, which has been hijacked by the U.S. military and banking interests. Half of the Cubans watch idly while the other half harvests sugarcane for the United States. In the painting, Cuba is adjacent to the territory of the United States, with warships and cargo ships further diminishing the distance generated by the Caribbean.
Che and Fidel playing golf after the triumph of the revolution.

Fidel on the roof of the Havana Hilton (now the Hotel Habana Libre).
Image source: http://rolexblog.blogspot.com/2010/05/rolex-revolutionary-fidel-castro-no.html
Revolutionary Tourism, Literally

Although foreign tourism essentially ended after the triumph of the revolution in 1959, a cursory tourism can be located within the revolution itself. Fidel Castro, after a failed attempt to spark revolution, was imprisoned and eventually exiled to Mexico. During this excursion, Castro reorganized and trained a new rebel. The group traveled by yacht to Cuba’s southeastern shore. The yacht, Granma, retains its revolutionary importance and is on public display in Havana. The state-owned newspaper also bears the yacht’s name.

After being ambushed on shore, the dozen surviving rebels fled to the Sierra Maestra Mountains. This dense wilderness environment, foreign to the Cuban Army, nurtured the beleaguered rebels. After securing the region, Che Guevara embarked westward, seizing the central city of Santa Clara. This paved the way for the revolutionary procession to Havana.

Greeted as liberators, the revolutionary government constructed a provisional state in the capital city. Fidel Castro led the revolution from the Havana Hilton for over three months. Suite 2324 became Fidel’s personal office. Political meetings of national importance were held in the Havana Hilton, renamed the Hotel Habana Libre upon its nationalization in 1960.¹ Formerly the symbol of foreign domination and Batista’s brand of “national sovereignty” and “progress,” the hotel was reclaimed as a possession of the Cuban nation. Fidel and his colleagues dreamt of a new Cuba from a space previously reserved for rich foreign tourists and the local bourgeoisie.

Another episode in the early days of the revolution spelled the end for the domination of the bourgeoisie. Che and Fidel, in their typical olive green military fatigues, waltzed into Country Club Park in western Havana and played a round of golf. This spelled the end for the country club, which was replaced by the revolutionary National Arts Schools.²

Victorious revolutionaries on horseback.
Image source: http://reconstruction.eserver.org/081/gelburd.shtml

Fidel speaking in the Plaza de la Revolucion.
Image source: http://thecubanrevolution.wikispaces.com/Primary+Source+Documents
Revolutionary Romanticism | Realism

Photography implies a degree of authenticity. The medium presents itself as honest due to the fact that photographs are literally moments captured in time. The “truth” of photography, however, is subject to political debate and scrutiny. Photographs are not politically neutral and neither is their distribution. Certain images are privileged and celebrated over others. The Cuban revolutionary adventure produced a multitude of sensationalized, well-composed and didactic images. Beyond the famed image of Che Guevara, the revolutionary process was captured in film. The humility of the revolutionary fighters, the idea of selfless sacrifice, a connection to the land and the enthusiasm of the masses are common themes in Cuban revolutionary photography.

The first image constructs a pastoral revolutionary fantasy that speaks to the 19th century revolutionary war against Spain. Although horses were certainly used by revolutionary fighters, the collective mounted mass, in its nationalistic exuberance, ties the Cuban revolution to an alternative national culture/history. The photograph possesses a sense of motion, evocative of the early revolutionary optimism. The Cuban revolution is often referred to in terms of Don Quixote for its confrontational attitude towards real (and imagined) larger-than-life enemies.

The second photograph, which depicts Fidel Castro addressing the Cuban masses, is visual evidence of the revolution’s popularity. It locks the sense of revolutionary enthusiasm and Castro’s charisma in time, setting a visual precedent for future generations of revolutionaries. The photograph’s composition suggests a direct dialogue between leader and masses. The viewer does not see Castro’s face but only the indistinguishable faces of the Cuban people. A sense of scale is established by the figure of Castro, dwarfed by the crowd. Mass rallies of this caliber still play an important role in Cuban political life.

Photography as a medium lends itself to revolutionary change. Popular, immediate and “real,” photography constitutes a fairly democratic way of expressing visual information and political ideas.
Salón de Mayo Año, Multiple artists, 1967.
Revolutionary Art, Revolutionary Form

Revolution is supposed to scrutinize all existing social practices and change anything that needs to be changed. In the realm of art, the Cuban revolutionary government cautiously challenged the conventions of the art world with a collaborative painting in Havana. The Salon de Mayo mural, painted in 1967, challenges the idea that the individual Artist should be celebrated at the expense of the collective. The mural’s spiraling form evokes the spirit of revolution.

Over 100 artists participated in the project. Each invited artist was allotted a portion of the spiral. Themes relevant to the Cuban revolution and Cuban culture were visually explored and the informal folk style of many of the pieces implies an appeal to populism. Formally speaking, the spiral suggests that the revolution is continually unfolding and involved in a permanent state of change. It is simultaneously dynamic and infinite.

While the center was reserved for internationally-renowned Cuban artist Wifredo Lam, Fidel Castro was assigned field 26 to commemorate his July 26th movement. The ideas of authorship and the individual were not totally abandoned. Despite this experiment’s success, the revolution inevitably gravitated towards traditional forms of art and employed censorship to prevent “counterrevolutionary” projects from emerging.

Chapter 2: Foreign Proximities
Habana Vieja, taken from:
http://mistugareslavoritosjbt.blogspot.com/2012/06/la-habana-vieja-la-ciudad-antigua.html
Foreign Proximities

“The world we want is one where many worlds fit.”
-EZLN (Zapatista Army of National Liberation), 4th Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle

The exploitative nature of tourism in Cuba and the scale of its deployment are not abstract issues: in many cases, they are clearly discernible when one adopts a “God’s eye view” of the country. The space of the hotel and the space of the crumbling residential block, while seemingly worlds away, are sometimes directly adjacent to one another. Crossing an unguarded bridge catapults an individual from generic Cuban semi-urbanism to the sprawling tourist island of Varadero.

This approach makes manifest that which was previously only implied. The satellite view can detect the extremity of social divisions between tourist and non-tourist spaces within the city. A similar method can be applied to questions of geopolitics or history. The irony of the Cuban revolutionary process is that it has been unfolding for over fifty years under the United States’ nose. Cuba is a mere 90 miles from Florida. The revolution is also awkwardly tied into the first anti-colonial independence wars fought at the end of the 19th century. Fidel Castro is (often literally in the Plaza de la Revolucion) framed by the legacy of José Martí. Martí, somewhat problematically, is absorbed by the Marxist-Leninist political project in Cuba.

Layered narratives, conflicting aesthetic traditions and spaces duel for hegemony in Cuba. In the context of Havana, the architectural dramas of the early revolutionary period are overshadowed by the proliferation of postmodern high-rise hotels and the “recreation” of an illusory colonial urban paradise.

Paradoxically, the Zapatista call for a world with many worlds has been fulfilled. The world of the globalized market penetrated Cuba with the expansion of the tourism industry. Foreigners can exploit Cuba as a playground while millions of Cubans go about their daily lives. The multiple realities present in Cuba are significantly informed by the assumptions and experiences of foreign tourists.
Varadero and Havana

A mere 80 kilometers away from Havana, Cuba has constructed a tourist metropolis in Varadero. Immediately north of Santa Marta, Varadero lacks the drama of Cold War divisions: lacking border guards and walls, the market fantasy and tropical distillation of cubanidad is accessible by a 60 meter long bridge from the mainland. The island is a collage of postmodernist high-rise hotels, casas particulares, all-inclusive resorts and white-sanded beaches.

Varadero, almost entirely devoted to tourism, practically spans the coastal length of downtown Havana. Imagine if the capital could afford to set aside its seaside real estate for a continuous chain of hotels. Varadero realizes the unfettered excess of the tourist experience without the undesirable burdens of Cuban reality. Varadero represents one of many potential trajectories for Cuba: an island completely handed over to vacationing foreigners, with Cubans occupying the role of an afterthought.
Varadero | Santa Marta “Border”
National Art Schools, Havana, 1961 -
Antonio Quintana, apartment tower, Havana, 1967
Photo by: Belmont Freeman
Hotels in Vedado
Centro Habana

1.5 km
Hotels in Miramar
Miramar

4 km
Fidel Castro
Chapter 3: Quantifying Cubanidad
Population, Tourists and Mass Orgs.

Prerevolutionary

Present Day

CDR: Committees for the Defense of the Revolution
UJC: Union of Young Communists
FMC: Federation of Cuban Women
CTC: National Workers’ Union
PCC: Cuban Communist Party

Population of Cuba

100,000

1,000,000

Tourists in Cuba

American Tourists

Cuban American Tourists
The first mistake made when comparing prerevolutionary tourism to contemporary tourism relates to scale. **With the nostalgic narratives of dazzling lights, glamorous cabarets and a ubiquitous Mafia presence, it is easy to assume that tourism was more important than now in relative terms.** While the Cuban population has grown from 7 million to 11 million since 1959, the influx of foreign tourists is proportionally higher than ever before. This is astounding when considering the fact that, before the 1990s, foreign tourists had practically been absent since the revolution’s victory. Although American influence and the trope of the American tourist in prerevolutionary Cuba dominate popular perceptions of the Batista era, tourism is far more important today.

A second misconception related to Cuban demographics is that Cubans do not actively participate in political life because they live in a “dictatorship.” **In actuality, millions of Cubans are members of mass organizations that hold political responsibilities and maintain a degree of independence from the government in many cases.** The Cuban Federation of Women, for example, fights for gender equality and provides services such as vaccinations and education campaigns on the local level. The organization managed to introduce legal mechanisms for gender equality, such as legally requiring men to share in housework and childcare responsibilities.\(^1\) Additionally, the Committees for the Defense of the Revolution have 8.5 million registered members out of a population of 11 million. This organization monitors counterrevolutionary activity on one level and politically organizes neighborhoods on another. The CDRs are a non-Party building block of local political power.

Oftentimes, when one hears of a one-party system in the West, it is summarily dismissed as undemocratic. However, communist parties are generally cadre-based organizations based on democratic centralism (internal democracy, public discipline). Party membership requires a degree of active commitment. **The fact that 10% of the Cuban population is in the Party means that 10% of Cubans are actively involved in governing the country and debating its future.** The Party does not officially campaign in Cuban elections, which avoid the financial excess and petty personal politics that mark Western “democratic” systems.

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Political Framework

Leader

Raul Castro (formerly Fidel Castro):
First Secretary of the PCC
President of the Council of State
President of the Council of Ministers
Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces

State

Central Committee
Politburo
Secretariat

Council of State
Council of Ministers

National Assembly of People’s Power
Municipal Assemblies
People’s Supreme Court
Superior Courts
Courts of First Instance
Courts of Peace

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution
-Grassroots neighborhood organization that also serves as an informal security body for the Ministry of the Interior

Mass Organizations

Communist Party of Cuba
-Comprised of:
Central Committee
Politburo
Secretariat

José Martí Pioneer Organization

Union of Young Communists
-Official youth wing of the PCC

Workers’ Central Union
-Main labor union in Cuba

Student Federation
Federation of University Students
National Association of Small Farmers

Federation of Cuban Women
-Promotes gender equality

Workers’ Central Union

Committees for the Defense of the Revolution
-Grassroots neighborhood organization that also serves as an informal security body for the Ministry of the Interior

Military

Revolutionary Armed Forces

Party

Communist Party of Cuba
-Comprised of:
Central Committee
Politburo
Secretariat

Ms. Matt's Market
Gardens

José Martí Pioneer Organization

Union of Young Communists
-Official youth wing of the PCC

Workers’ Central Union
-Main labor union in Cuba

Federation of Cuban Women
-Promotes gender equality

Source:
Organization of the Tourism Industry

Corporations

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<th>Transport</th>
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</table>

State Institutions

- Ministry of Tourism
- Gaviota
- Historical Office of Havana
- Campismo Popular (People’s Camping)

Foreign Investment

Sources:
3. Colantonio and Potter, 43.
Emigration is a common topic of discussion concerning all things Cuban from an American perspective. The Mariel Boatlift and the Elián González episode of the mid-1990s cemented the drama of Cuban emigration in the collective American memory.

Before making the assumption that every Cuban would like to leave the island, one should consider two things: U.S. policy towards Cuban emigrants and the regional scale of emigration. The U.S. “wet-foot, dry-foot” policy allows undocumented Cuban immigrants the right to remain in the United States if they reach American soil. Second, emigration is a regional trend. Many Latin Americans are forced to emigrate northward in search of economic opportunities that are lacking in their home countries, in part due to U.S. interference in the region.

Although Cuba experiences the “brain drain” of human capital to the United States, the percentage of emigrants with a university education is comparatively lower than much of the Caribbean and Latin America more generally.

Statistics Source: Google Public Data Explorer


53
Net Migration, 2013
% of Migrants with a Higher Education
Due to the Blockade and Cuba’s chronic underdevelopment, the general population experiences serious material deficiencies. While the state guarantees a minimally basic livelihood and provides subsidized food, energy, healthcare and education, many Cubans have no access to modern technologies that are ubiquitous even throughout the developing world. Cars, cell phones and Internet access are seriously lacking.

Like tourism, the Cuban government responded to these material deficiencies in a somewhat simplistic manner, outlawing them for most Cubans to preserve a level of social equality. The Cuban government lifted its ban on private cell phone ownership in 2008. While some internet cafes exist for public use, private Internet subscriptions are abysmally low: 25 per 100,000 citizens. This is totally insignificant when compared to the rest of the world.

Vintage 1950s cars are omnipresent in Cuba, a symptom of the U.S. blockade. Cuban mechanics have diligently preserved most of the country’s vehicle stock from the prerevolutionary period. There are only 20 cars per 1,000 Cubans. Only Nicaragua has a lower rate of cars/people in the region.

Statistics Source: Google Public Data Explorer

Cars per 1,000 Residents
Healthcare in Cuba

Cuba is a nation of stark contradictions. Despite growing social divisions, economic reforms and ever-changing global markets, Cuba has been able to guarantee healthcare to all of its citizens. The Cuban government refuses to compromise on this issue. **Thanks to the revolution, the country has achieved some of the most impressive health and education indicators in the world.** Ironically, Cuba has achieved these results despite its status as an underdeveloped, postcolonial nation and the U.S. trade embargo have undermined the healthcare system’s infrastructure. Even though Cuban doctors are world-renowned, many Cubans have to bring their own sheets to hospitals. The free, socialized medical system has its limits.

Medical tourism is a burgeoning hybrid industry in Cuba. **Taking advantage of comparatively cheaper costs for expensive procedures, thousands of people travel to Cuba every year as medical tourists.** The government took notice and operates a number of clinics that charge hard currency for foreigners only, such as the Cira Garcia Clinic. There are approximately 2,000 foreign patients in the clinic on any given day. Medical tourism continues to expand and hotels have begun to cater to this niche tourist market.¹

**The question is, if an “insignificant” nation such as Cuba can provide high standards of healthcare and education to its people for free, despite monumental challenges, why does this same system deploy tourism haphazardly with disastrous social results?** The country that taught thousands upon thousands to read through a grassroots literacy campaign, the country that sends tens of thousands of doctors around the world to treat the poorest of the poor, also allowed its “enemies” to build cookie cutter resorts in its front yard. Surely the Cubans (the government included) do not lack creative ingenuity when facing problems of development and survival…

Statistics Source: Google Public Data Explorer


Comparative Healthcare Systems

Life expectancy

# of doctors per 1,000 residents

Mortality rate under 5 per 1,000 children
Cuba during the “Special Period”

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, Fidel Castro declared that the country was entering a “special period in a time of peace.” The Cuban revolution was on the brink of disappearing. Dependence on the Soviet Union was twofold: the Soviets bought Cuban sugar at artificially high prices and sold oil to Cuba at a discount. The economy came to a near standstill due to the lack of fuel: blackouts were common, people were forced to commute to work by foot (following the near total collapse of public transportation) and tractors were idle in the fields.¹

The general population bore the brunt of the sacrifices required to preserve Cuban socialism. Agua con azucar (sugar water) was a treat during this period.² Having dealt with material deficiencies for decades, Cubans improvised solutions. Unused tracts of urban land were converted into organic farms. Wildly successful, the government recognized this system and institutionalized it to a degree, promoting neighborhood-level food production. The transition to organic agriculture was not by choice: Cuba barely received the fertilizer, pesticides or fuel necessary for large-scale, conventional food production. In one of the only Latin American societies that had effectively rid itself of malnutrition and starvation, millions of Cubans did not have enough food to eat.

The dire situation began to change as the Cuban government reintegrated the country into the global capitalist economy through regional support and a new reliance on tourism as a source of hard currency. Economic growth resumed in the late 1990s and by the 2000s, the Cuban economy grew steadily despite the global economic crisis of 2008 and major natural disasters. Much of this growth and stabilization was thanks to modest economic reforms, the legalization of elements of the black market and a dependence on tourism.

Statistics Source: Google Public Data Explorer

1. Rochelle Spencer, Development Tourism: Lessons from Cuba, (Great Britain: Ashgate, 2010), 83.
2. Spencer, 84.
Air Travel to/from Havana

Although Cuba occupied a special international role during the Cold War, travel to/from Cuba was mostly reserved for the country’s socialist allies. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Jose Marti International Airport modified its standard flight schedules to reflect global changes. Direct flights to/from Havana are primarily from Western Europe, Canada and Latin America. The schedules peripherally confirm the two post-Soviet lifelines for Cuba: tourism and regional reintegration. Reflecting the previous geopolitical situation, direct flights between Havana and Moscow still carry thousands of Russian tourists to the island.
Chapter 4: Mapping Cuba
PATRIA ES HUMANIDAD
PATRIA O MUERTE
The homeland is humanity.
Homeland or death.
Tourism and the Disintegration of the National Territory

The Cuban revolution constantly invokes patriotic sentiments to maintain public support. Fidel Castro situates himself in the legacy of the national hero, Jose Marti and Cubanidad is officially celebrated. National culture is promoted and Cuba maintains a sense of dignity through national identity despite chronic underdevelopment. The government historically invested heavily in the countryside, promoting even national development over the privileging of cosmopolitan centers. The introduction of the tourism industry during the 1990s initiated the disintegation of the neat idea of the nation.

Catalogue of Cubanidad
The Colony of Cuba, $\text{Florida}/$130,000,000 (in 1854 USD)$^1$

After the British occupation of Havana in the mid-1700s, Spain agreed to transfer Florida to British control in an exchange for the island colony.$^2$

In 1854 the U.S. government flirted with the idea of buying Cuba from Spain. The Cubans practically freed themselves but the United States militarily intervened to take credit for the island’s liberation. After independence, American interests controlled over half of the country’s productive land.$^3$

Guantanamo Bay, $\$4,085$/month

The United States pays rent to Cuba for its military base/prison camp on Guantanamo Bay. The Cuban government refuses to accept the bribe and demands the immediate return of the land.$^4$

2. Perez Jr., 45.
3. Perez Jr., 151.
Cuban Currency, $1.00 = 1.00 CUC (Cuban Convertible Peso) = 26.50 CUP (Cuban Peso)

In response to the total devaluation of its national currency during the Special Period, Cuba legalized the U.S. dollar and eventually established a dual currency system, with one currency tied to the value of American money.

While these measures were necessary, they created extreme social divisions based on access to foreign currency. State-employed Cubans are paid in Cuban pesos and the average Cuban makes the equivalent of $22/month.⁵ Cubans who work in the tourism industry are often tipped in American dollars and often make well above the average state salary in a single week.

La Libreta (the ration book), free for all Cubans, $1,000,000,000 for the Cuban government

A major element of Cuba’s social safety net (and a subject of heavy criticism and debate) is la libreta, the ration book that allows Cubans to purchase basic food items at heavily-subsidized prices (12% of market value). The book includes rice, chicken, sugar, milk, eggs, beans, spaghetti and cooking oil. Designed to avoid malnutrition and inequality in the face of the U.S. blockade, the ration book is expensive and somewhat unnecessary with the decentralization of agriculture and limited market reforms. The government is exploring the idea of abolishing the ration book and specifically subsidizing food costs for lower income Cubans.6

Cuban Cigars, $50.00

If you manage to travel to Cuba, these world-renowned cigars can be yours for only $50.00! Restrictions may apply.*

*U.S. citizens may not legally travel to Cuba without permission and the introduction of Cuban cigars to U.S. markets is strictly prohibited. Civil and criminal penalties may apply.

Cuban Rum (aged 7 years), $19.45/liter

Havana Club rum is available at the duty free shop in most international Cuban airports. Please drink responsibly.7

T-shirt, $22.00

Honor the memory of the late Che Guevara with this bold, unique t-shirt.

Sticker, $2.40

Frustrate left-wing American teens with this clever sticker that critiques the cult/commodity status of the deceased Communist icon.
According to Forbes magazine, Castro’s personal wealth is the total productive capacity of the Cuban economy, based on his political position.

Castro has been the target of hundreds of assassination plots, oftentimes hatched by the C.I.A.

Bobblehead, $22.00

Trivialize the anti-American Cuban dictator in your home, workplace or car with this festive bobblehead.
Flight to Cuba from Toronto with Air Canada, 12/12/13 | 12/19/13: $813.04

Serviced by Jose Marti International Airport, Havana is easily accessible from Canada, Mexico or Western Europe. The tens of thousands of Americans who make the trip illegally often fly through Canada or Mexico.

Tourist Taxi, CUC$1/km

Getting around Havana is easy for tourists and there are many options. Aside from officially-recognized taxis, tourists can barter for low rates in taxis designated for Cubans, collective taxis or on public transportation.  

Accomodations

Hotel Nacional de Cuba (single room, 1 night), CUC$124

Savor Havana in all of its “former glory” with a stay at the Hotel Nacional. Live out your Hemingway-inspired fantasies in this eclectic Art Deco and Neoclassical masterpiece.


All-inclusive Resort in Varadero (1 adult, 6 nights), $1,383.00

Enjoy Cuba’s natural beauty and luxury comforts without having to experience Cuba.

Mapping Cuba According to the Tourist Gaze

“Maps present only one version of the earth’s surface, an eidetic fiction constructed from factual observation. As both analogue and abstraction, then, the surface of the map functions like an operating table, a staging ground or a theatre of operations upon which the mapper collects, combines, connects, marks, masks, relates and generally explores.”

-James Corner, *The Agency of Mapping: Speculation, Critique and Invention*

Although Corner’s text focuses on the liberatory potential of mapping as explored by subaltern communities, the two maps above demonstrate ways in which neocolonialist agendas can be visually articulated through mapping. They are reductive in that communities (and the nation) are reduced to a series of logos that reinforce the mass touristic paradigm of sun|sand|sex.

The first map, taken from cubatravelmaps.com, is an interactive: tourist can explore the island by viewing maps and images of hot spot destinations such as Havana and Varadero. The map is shameless in its implication that Cuba is an island paradise full of palm trees, lighthouses, colonial churches, pelicans and natural beauty.

The second map, taken from casaincuba.com, reduces the geography of Cuba to a series of vacation destinations. The map’s detail lies in its elaboration of transportation networks (highways and airports) on the island. Far from being benign, the combination of the logos and transportation network allows tourists to understand the country as a series of interconnected holiday destinations.
Population Distribution

Stereotypical assumptions about Cuba would suggest that the country is a heavily agricultural, primarily rural society. On the contrary, the majority of the population live in cities.

Similarly, many outsiders assume that Havana is the only major city in Cuba. While over 2 million (out of 11 million) Cubans live in the capital, Santiago, Camaguey and Holguín are also major population centers.

Additionally, rural areas benefit from heavy state investment in schools, clinics and other public facilities.

Statistics Source: Cuban National Office of Statistics
Sociological Data Related to Tourism in Havana

Andrea Colantonio and Robert Potter collected data related to the tourism industry in Havana during the early 2000s. 100 residents in each of northern Havana’s major neighborhoods (excluding Centro Habana) were asked a series of questions relating to their experiences with tourism development. Questions ranged from residents’ perceptions of tourists to the provision of natural gas, electricity and water.

Certain trends are visible from the collected data. Many of the residents of Old Havana view the development of tourism favorably and are also consulted more often by planning bodies before developments are built. Residents of this neighborhood also received more financial benefits from tourists.

Generally speaking, most residents do not tie the provision of natural resources to the tourism industry. However, crime and price increases are thought to be related to the tourist influx across the board.

Tourism has created greater employment opportunities.

Tourism has contributed to the increased living standards in this area.

Local residents benefit from the revenue brought from tourists.
Tourism is responsible for increased crime in this area.

The quality of social life has improved because of tourists.

Tourism has a positive effect on the cultural life of this area.
The new tourism infrastructure have prompted physical regeneration.

Tourism development is increasing differences between city spaces.

The provision of water has worsened since the tourist development began.
Tourists do not greatly add to traffic problems in this area.

This area experiences more litter problems because of tourists.

The provision of gas has worsened since tourist development began.
The provision of electricity has worsened since tourist development began.

Local residents welcome the presence of tourism in the area.

The presence of tourism makes shopping less pleasant.
Local residents benefit from new tourism facilities in the area.

Tourists are not responsible for overcrowding in this area.

Local residents have better shopping opportunities because of tourism.
Tourism made more products available which can be purchased with pesos.

Tourism has contributed to the increase in prices.

Local residents are always audited directly or via delegates about tourist development plans.
Administrative Divisions

- East Havana
- Habana Vieja
- Centro Habana
- Plaza de la Revolucion (contains Vedado)
- Playa (contains Miramar)
Major Transportation Networks

Jose Marti International Airport
Old Havana

Colonial Walled City

“Walled” Tourist City

Museum of Colonial Art
Wifredo Lam Center
National Museum of the Castillo Real Fuerza
Catedral de la Habana
Templete
Museum of the City
Museum of Antique Cars
National Museum of Fine Arts
Casa de Africa
Casa del Benemérito de las Americas Benito Juárez
Museo Numismatico
Casa del Arabe
Museo Taller Guayasamin
Plaza de las Armas
Casa Particular
Hotel

National Museum of Music
Museo Taller Guayasamin
Casa de Obrapia
Oficina de Arqueología
Museo Nacional de Bellas Artes
Casa del Arabe
Casa de la Habana
Casa de la Catedral
Museo de la Ciudad
Museo de Autos Antiguos
National Museum of Music
Casa Particular
Hotel
Chapter 5: The Hotel and the Casa Particular
Hotel Habana Libre, 1958
Glazed Surfaces, Views

Elevated Procession

"Oasis"

Mural

Outdoor Enclosure

Ground
The Hotel Habana Libre, formerly the Havana Hilton Hotel, was opened in 1958. The hotel satisfied U.S. business needs while allowing Fulgencio Batista to speak in the name of progress and prosperity. After the revolution, the hotel served as the headquarters of the revolutionary government for 3 months.

Formally, the hotel tower rests on two plinths to reject the city. Tourists enjoy an elevated pool that is surrounded by a barrier wall, creating an isolated vision of urban paradise. The hotel’s ground floor façade is dominated by a large Modernist mural that showcases curvilinear Latin American forms. The hotel is opaque, exerting its presence over the city while maintaining privacy for its patrons.
Melia Cohiba Havana, 1994

Hotel with Immediate Context
The Melia Cohiba is a postmodern high-rise hotel located in Vedado. Similar to the Hotel Habana Libre, the Melia Cohiba shuts itself off from the city by elevating the hotel block. The pool is once again located on an enclosed, elevated plane and tourists enjoy total anonymity due to the entirely opaque windows.

Hotels built during the Modernist Batista period and today are similar in their excessive scale, hotel rooms that “float” above the cityscape through the use of a plinth and an oasis compound. Legal issues aside, the spatial organization of these hotels construct barriers that are only permeable for foreign tourists, leaving the Cuban people behind.
Hotel Meliá Habana

Hotel with Immediate Context
The Hotel Melia Habana is located in the less-dense Miramar neighborhood in western Havana. **Taking advantage of this semi-urban condition, the hotel is an oversized suburban home, complete with a yard and fence-like enclosure.** The strategy of separation from Havana urbanism is accomplished through a high compound wall which is hidden by a wall of vegetation on the interior to add a level of tropical charm for tourists.

The artificial paradise generated by this project is significantly more expansive than in previous examples. The sprawling pool and green wall create a more “authentic” effect. **Instead of relying on the “floating” tower, this hotel shuts itself away from the city by mimicking medieval fortresses.** A central tower, interior courtyard and austere concrete exterior keep non-tourists on the outside. The hotel room windows are recessed so the exterior appears as stacked concrete plates.
Casas particulares are unique to the Cuban tourist landscape: Cubans rent out spare rooms of their home to foreigners to earn hard currency. The Cuban government taxes these “small businesses” and sets occupancy limits.

Until recently, Cuban real estate was fairly stagnant due to restrictive laws that only allowed the exchange, not the sale, of real estate to limit speculation. Real estate often has a generational dimension and certain Cubans, basically by chance, have access to prime real estate that is suitable for tourists.

That being said, housing was an early priority of the revolution and homelessness was eradicated in Cuba.

Casas particulares are a pragmatic solution that sacrifices the domestic realm for increased tourism revenue that directly benefits (some) Cubans.
Guerrilla Tourism:
Between the Resort and the *Casa Particular*

The justification for guerrilla tourism in Havana draws from the political experiences of the urban guerrilla movements of the 1970s which transplanted rural guerrilla strategies to the city. **The same basic rules continued to apply: a working knowledge of the terrain and local communities, an ability to strike and retreat quickly and a network form of military-political power.** The anti-resort is a collection of micro-hotels in the city that rely on public support programs and fit within communities instead of dominating them.

The current tourist infrastructure of Havana is socially unsustainable: foreign tourists have the choice of staying in high-rise hotels or invading Cubans’ spare rooms. Both options degrade the architectural/cultural life of the city, operating on inappropriate scales. **The high-rise hotels turn their backs to the city and serve as a base for touristic exploitation. The casas particulares are pragmatic surrender of the domestic sphere/private life to the tourist gaze.** While both systems deliver some benefit to the Cuban nation and Cubans involved in the tourism sector, they do not deliver to the community, a basic building block of Cuban socialism. Although 8.5 million out of a population of 11 million are politically organized on a neighborhood level, tourism remains an essentially top-down institution or a DIY project for Cubans with relatively nice homes.

The urban guerrilla anti-resort mediates the problems of scale associated with each traditional model. **Operating as a semi-formal network deployment, the anti-resort retains the efficiency of the high-rise hotel.** Consequently, the infrastructure required for the upkeep of the formal anti-resort will aid in urban development on a neighborhood scale. **Deployed in the community, as opposed to against the community, the anti-resort returns a sense of privacy to Cuban families while promoting economic development and keeping tourist revenues within the community.**

**Guerrilla tourism attacks the expressions of global capital in the form of the high-rise hotel and liberates the living room from touristic exploitation.**
Chapter 6: Subjective Impressions
100 Truisms on (Tourism in/and) Cuba

1. The Cuban revolution has never had a moment of peace; it was born in a state of war and continues to develop in a state of war.

2. The stated goal of the Blockade is to starve the Cuban people into submission. Sanctions are warfare.

3. Fidel Castro is neither a god nor demon. He is an old man whose grip on power was officially abandoned years ago.

4. Tourism is, by some accounts, the third largest industry in the world. Cuba’s reliance on tourism is not a sin.

5. Cries of tourist apartheid mask larger disparities. Whether or not Cuban nationals can enter hotels does not change the fact that foreign mass tourists will return to their privileged global positions after the vacation is over.

6. Paradise is always in trouble. Its beauty beckons for exploitation.

7. The all-inclusive resort is only inclusive for those who can afford it.

8. Cuba is both an oppressed nation in the grand scheme of global politics and an inheritor of Western values. It is hard to view Cuba as either Western or non-Western.

9. Sometimes the revolution makes mistakes and fixes them. It is no longer counterrevolutionary to be gay or Christian in Cuba.
10. Dissidents in Cuba are sometimes imprisoned but almost always receive resources from the United States.

11. The Cuban government simultaneously promotes the idea that Cuba is a tropical paradise and a socialist paradise for foreign consumption.

12. Havana is not the only city in Cuba. Of over eleven million Cubans, only just over two million live in Havana.

13. Not every Cuban wants to leave Cuba. Not every emigrant finds happiness and prosperity abroad.

14. The Internet, televisions, telephones and cars can be found in Cuba.

15. The Blockade is not merely a Cuban-American affair. Foreign companies that wish to trade with Cuba cannot trade with the United States.

16. Not all sex workers are victims. In Cuba, the return of prostitution cannot be reduced to economic determinism.

17. The tourism industry commits two serious aesthetic crimes in the capital: It pretends that a historical fantasy is real and it argues that cold Postmodernist high-rises are appropriate for Havana.

18. The Blockade against Cuba is illegal according to international law. Only two countries in the United Nations believe it should continue.
19. When speaking of human rights abuses and underdevelopment in Cuba, regional context or comparisons are rarely discussed.

20. The Special Period is over but its trauma and influence remain.

21. Raul Castro was elected, not appointed, by Cuba’s national legislative body.

22. Foreign developers are once again allowed to build golf courses in Cuba.

23. Cuban Americans can legally travel to Cuba. Americans cannot legally travel to Cuba without special government permission.

24. Tourism attacks Cuban identity by commodifying it.

25. Sun, sand and sex are not merely forces of nature.

26. Christopher Columbus did not discover Cuba.

27. The Cuban revolution was not always a Communist revolution. For two years its ideology was up for grabs.

28. Sugarcane and tobacco did not originally take hold in colonial Cuba. The island was a military backwater for decades.

29. Cuba imported Soviet missiles only after the United States sent a band of mercenaries to the Bay of Pigs. The United States had nuclear weapons poised against the Soviets in Turkey; who was the aggressor?
30. Cuba sends tens of thousands of doctors around the world, free of charge, to communities in need.

31. Many new hotels in Havana rely on old techniques of exclusion: walls, elevated towers and an opaque impenetrability.

32. *Don Quixote* was the first book to be published by revolutionary Cuba; in a way it is an allegory for revolutionary Cuba.

33. Foreign tourism further entrenches racism. Darker skinned Cubans are less likely to work in the tourism sector and more likely to be openly discriminated against in public.

34. Cuba is extraordinary for surviving decades of imperialist aggression and the loss of its main allies. Cubans are extraordinary for surviving the everyday expressions of these crises.

35. The Family Code in Cuba requires that men share in the duties of housework and childrearing.

36. The Cuban revolution did not abolish tourism; foreign tourists stopped coming out of fear and domestic tourism was re-conceptualized around the working class’ need for relaxation and recreation.

37. The United States refused Cuban medical assistance in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina.

38. Cuba has always been so much more than sugar, tobacco and rum.

39. Rebuilding *Habana Vieja* will not magically solve the formal/economic crises of the capital.
40. Cuba is a poor, developing nation recovering from centuries of colonialism.

41. Besides tourism, sugarcane production, cigar manufacturing, nickel mining and biotechnological products remain important facets of the Cuban economy.

42. Medical care is free for all Cubans but one might need to bring bed sheets and supplies from home. High-quality healthcare is guaranteed to those who can pay (and tourist dollars are welcome).

43. **Tourism has not been a panacea but it has temporarily guaranteed the revolution’s survival.**

44. Cuba is a regional leader in LGBTQ rights, despite a history of repression and a culture of homophobia.

45. **With access to hard currency, hotel workers oftentimes make more money than doctors, teachers or lawyers.**

46. According to the World Wildlife Fund, Cuba is the only country in the world that is developing sustainably.

47. “Humanitarian aid,” “human rights organizations” and “NGOs” are never politically neutral.

48. Central planning and public ownership are the guiding principles of the Cuban economy, even after recent “free market” reforms.

49. **The all-inclusive resort, in a way, is communism for the rich.**
50. Assata Shakur, victim of U.S. racism and police brutality, lives freely in Cuba.

51. Some of Castro’s close relatives, including a sister and a daughter, fled the Cuban revolution.

52. The Venceremos Brigade, a U.S.-based solidarity organization, has been illegally sending American volunteers to Cuba for over fifty years.

53. Although wages are pitifully low for the average Cuban worker employed by the state, expenses are also close to nothing.

54. **Tourists are sometimes asked to participate in the socialist system themselves when they are prompted to sign petitions related to the Blockade and the Cuban Five.**

55. Baseball, not soccer, is the national sport because American sailors imported the sport during U.S. occupation.

56. **There is such a thing as tipping “too much” when “exorbitant” tips exacerbate serious social divisions.**

57. Dissent is relatively easy in Cuba, so long as one supports the government.

58. Cuba, not the United States, was the first country in the western hemisphere to be graced by the presence of Nelson Mandela. While Cuban volunteers fought Apartheid forces in Angola, the United States considered Mandela a terrorist.
59. Cuba developed a network of urban organic farms out of desperation, not out of a deep-seated concern for the environment.

60. Over three hundred thousand Cuban Americans legally visit Cuba every year.

61. The Cuban government is in the process of abolishing its dual currency system, recognizing the improvement of the economy and the social divisions fostered by uneven currencies.

62. It is not ideal to rent out one’s spare room to total strangers. Casas particulares are oftentimes more necessity than choice.

63. Recent economic reforms do not spell the end for socialism but usher in a brave new world of privately owned barbershops, auto repair shops, small farms and family restaurants.

64. Following a series of legal reforms, Cubans no longer have to apply for an exit visa to legally leave their own country. However, passports and plane tickets cost well above the average Cuban’s salary.

65. After the collapse of socialism in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, Cuba is subject to the boom and bust cycle of the global capitalist market.

66. Havana is a city that was built for the 19th century bourgeoisie, retrofitted for the automobile and neglected by a government that faces more pressing issues. The foot and the bicycle dictate collective mobility, not the car.
67. Over eighty thousand Americans illegally vacation in Cuba every year.

68. An openly transgender woman was elected to public office last year. Sex change operations are recognized within Cuba’s socialized medical system and are paid for by the state.

69. Every year, the United States pays Cuba for the occupation of Guantanamo Bay. Every year, Cuba refuses this payment and denounces the neocolonialist use of its national territory.

70. The Club Tropicana remains open, catering to tourists’ desires for an exotic and sensual spectacle. Even with the absence of the Mafia, the club retains a degree of decadence and excess.

71. Up to 80% of the housing stock in Habana Vieja is inadequate. 90% of Cubans own their own homes; homelessness does not exist in Cuba.

72. Yoani Sanchez, a dissident blogger, has won international awards but generally cannot receive them, as she is not allowed to leave the country again.

73. Jose Marti, not Fidel Castro, is the official hero of the Cuban nation.

74. Fidel Castro apologized for Cuba’s historical persecution of the LGBTQ community.

75. Life expectancy in Cuba is 79, comparable to that of the United States and the rest of the developed world.
76. Four out of five Cuban antiterrorist agents remain in prison in the United States for defending their own country against future terrorist attacks launched from the United States. The Cuban 5 were not spying on U.S. government or military interests.

77. **Over two million foreign tourists visit Cuba every year.**

78. The Cuban government publicly organizes Pride parades every summer, under the enlightened guidance of Raul Castro’s daughter, Mariela.

79. Cuba is currently holding peace talks between the Colombian government and the FARC-EP (Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia – People’s Army), demonstrating solidarity with the Colombian people.

80. Remittances from relatives abroad are a mainstay for the Cuban people and the economy. This is primarily due to the fact that the U.S. dollar carries a privileged value in global markets.

81. Liaena Hernandez Martinez was the youngest member of the National Assembly of People’s Power at the age of 18.

82. Cuba has a strong African heritage that is publicly celebrated, neglected and/or offered up for consumption. Afro-Cuban culture is a fundamental element of Cuban culture, the revolution did not sweep away all subtle forms of discrimination and practices such as Santeria are huge hits among foreign tourists.

83. There have been over six hundred assassination attempts on Fidel Castro; many were orchestrated by the C.I.A.
84. Fidel Castro’s callous assertion that Cuba has the best-educated prostitutes in the world carries some truth; sex workers often are often required to be fluent in foreign languages to be safe and competitive.

85. The United States has supported dozens of terrorist attacks against Cuba that have cost thousands of lives.

86. The rights of women are a high priority for the Cuban government. Female participation in the national legislative body is among the highest in the world. Abortion is free on demand and Cuba has one of the lowest infant mortality rates in the world.

87. Fidel Castro no longer believes that armed struggle is an appropriate revolutionary strategy in Latin America.

88. The nostalgia for prerevolutionary Cuba, with its shiny Modernist high-rises, shimmering lights and laid back attitudes, are fantasies perpetuated by Cuban exiles and foreigners which ignore the extensive political repression and social underdevelopment of the Batista era.

89. Fidel Castro rationalized the restrictions against Cubans staying in hotels for foreigners by saying that only criminals and people who took advantage of the system would have enough American cash to stay in them in the first place.

90. Forbes claimed that Fidel Castro was one of the richest men in the world; they confused a publicly-owned economy with personal wealth.

91. Recently-built hotels in Havana have little care for context: they ignore scale, history or local wellbeing for the sake of profit.
92. As of 2008, Cubans are allowed to purchase cell phones and stay in hotels that were previously reserved exclusively for foreign tourists. These laws were in place to minimize the social divisions associated with the economic reforms of the 90s.

93. Tourists are incapable of seeing “the real Cuba.”

94. The Hotel Habana Libre, formerly the Habana Hilton, was Fidel Castro’s headquarters for three months after the revolution’s victory.

95. Luis Posada Carriles, a Cuban exile and terrorist, lives freely in the United States.

96. Freedom of religion is guaranteed in Cuba; religious organizations cannot promote counterrevolutionary ideologies. Faith is a private matter.

97. Cuban architecture is a mix of Moorish motifs, Spanish colonial architecture, vernacular building and the International Style. The various styles conform to (or don’t conform to) the conditions of a tropical island climate.

98. Cuba’s tourism industry mimics those of other Caribbean hotspots such as Cancun, Jamaica, Puerto Rico or the Bahamas.

99. No matter what system dominates Cuba in the post-Castro period, tourism will remain.

100. The Cuban revolution is imperfect and unfinished.
Fidel’s Stairway #2, Michael Eastman, taken from:
11/4/13
Pre-departure Travel Log #1:

I have been dreaming of visiting Cuba since I was 13 and enamored by Fidel Castro’s communist revolution. Dreaming is entirely appropriate in this context; I was (and am) an upper middle class white boy from the suburbs of New Hampshire with an affinity towards social justice, anti-imperialist politics and Karl Marx. Having no independent financial means that could illegally shuttle me to the island, I soaked up whatever kitsch the Mall of New Hampshire could furnish: the weathered Che Guevara t-shirt, more pink than red, came from this era of my youth.

In the subsequent decade, much has changed and much hasn’t. I came out as a queer man, joined a Communist party and am currently pursuing undergraduate degrees in architecture and English and textual studies. I’m (legally) travelling to Cuba with an American NGO to study the social system, the tourism industry and the city of Havana.

The artificiality and self-reflectivity of these “entries” are deliberate. I’ve never kept a diary before and these impressions will probably end up wedged between my thesis research. Awkward, clumsy and perhaps self-aggrandizing, the entries offer a glimpse at the mind behind the book object. After all, “the personal is political.” The entries also serve to ground my project in the rich traditions of criticism and self-criticism. They are, in a way, progress reports that measure the validity and accuracy of my research on the ground. I can’t think of a better way to assess the validity of my proposition.

If all goes according to plan, I will be somewhat of a guerrilla tourist: operating in a foreign landscape with predetermined goals outside of the aspirations of the mass tourist. To become one’s own protagonist is troublesome but it also guarantees a level of control. I will even attempt to transcend the planned itinerary by relying on my broken Spanish and an outsider’s (fairly nuanced) understanding of the Cuban political system. How easy is it to find/use the black market? What is it like to be queer in Cuba? How much do people actually like their revolution? What does tourism look like in a country that lacks ugly Americans?
A genuine man goes to the roots. To be radical is no more than that: to go to the roots.” Martí’s words restore a sense of clarity and perspective. My thesis project, my education and my life rely on a basic belief in progressive change through action informed by theory. In a way, my trip to Cuba is going to bring me to the roots of my academic work and my own political views.

11/29/13
Pre-departure Travel Log #2:

It is Thanksgiving Day and I just enjoyed a delicious meal with my loving immediately family. Our dog Bubba ate the scraps from the turkey which I did not take part in eating (I have been a vegetarian for 5 years). This holiday is always strange for me. It highlights many contradictions relating to my identity and outlook on life. While I hate the day for its blatantly colonialist narrative and whitewashing of history, I have nothing but positive memories about Thanksgiving, stretching all the way back to the age of 5. I colored pilgrim and Native American placeholders for the family table. I was a female Native American. Thanksgiving is a holiday that I hope not to celebrate once I’m in the infamous real world.

Another contradiction: while I revile heterosexism and believe in family structures that do not conform to the idea of the nuclear family, I find myself remarkably at ease in the family unit that I so detest. My parents are loving, supportive and intellectually engaging. Since I was young they have gone out of their way to make sure that my brother and I were safely able to explore the world. The degree of intellectual freedom I had growing up, paired with moderately anti-American sentiments and skepticism of religion, allowed me to become the person I am today.

It is within these series of contradictions that I find myself traveling to Cuba. For the past three months or so, Cuba has structured my life. While I’ve written winning essays on queer film in Cuba, sold newspapers that promote the Cuban revolution and have read countless books and articles about the island, this semester has forced/allowed me to plunge headfirst into researching the country from every angle. In this context, it’s easy to lose sight of the human factor. Textual research can only take one so far. Research through experience is another matter.
This trip might be the first time that I have to confront my preconceptions head-on and reconcile my background with my beliefs. While I’ve done my homework and I’m no “armchair revolutionary,” being politically involved locally and nationally, this will be one of the first times that my views are tested outside of the intellectual realm. I am leaving middle class comfort for (the hotel’s middle class comfort in) a postcolonial society that has been developing socialism for over five decades. Of course, socialism cannot overcome underdevelopment alone and poverty persists in Cuba. The opportunities that I have been given, being the child of two hard-working parents and being in a position of privilege (because of my race and gender), far surpass those given to an average Cuban child. I have a responsibility to acknowledge and scrutinize this discrepancy. Of course, it cannot be boiled down to simple distinctions between rich and poor, developed nations and backwards nations, white people and people of color, etc. Cuba is different in that, despite all of the odds, the revolution has produced a healthy, educated and dignified society.

If global power dynamics were different and wealth was distributed more equitably, I probably wouldn’t need to consider many of these issues. The fact that $20/month can cover all basic needs demonstrates the degree to which global economic forces are skewed to the Global North.

At the end of the day, a few things are clear. I am so full from the delicious dinner provided by my parents. Had I abstained from eating or thrown chairs in defiance of this racist-colonialist holiday, nothing would change. The world would still be gripped by hunger, inequality, violence and oppression. In a month, I am heading to Cuba. This privileged pinko commie is headed to the Global South for the first time (discounting a family vacation to Cancun). To change the world we have to see it clearly for what it is, recognize what we can and can’t change through our actions and work from there. Challenging the subject matter of an architectural thesis and exploring architecture’s potentials in aiding popular movements is hopefully one modest way to do that.
Inevitably, there is a gulf between the lived experience of a trip and what one writes after. Some might blame me for not formalizing my thoughts sooner, while they were fresh in my head. I am not reproducing Che Guevara’s travel diaries; a scribbled account of a bohemian voyage across a continent. After plane delays, scheduling readjustments and a healthy dose of culture shock, I did not feel it appropriate to spend time writing in my hotel room while Havana was alive outside. I spent the majority of my trip learning, living and socializing. The degree to which I fell back into the routines of my comfortable lifestyle at home while internalizing lessons from my trip amazed me. Although I was with a tour group and stayed at a 4-star hotel (by Cuban standards), Cuba was the poorest country I have ever been to. I quickly adjusted and attempted to be conscious of my privilege, trying to keep an open mind, behave as a guest in a foreign country and accepting modifications to the schedule. Many of my travel companions had visited Cuba numerous times, were involved with the Cuban LGBTQ community, Cuba solidarity work, etc. Meeting U.S.-based progressives, with different ideas concerning social change, was truly inspiring. Our two chief guides offered a critical appraisal of the revolution, having been born soon after its victory. They had navigated the revolution’s shifting cultural/political attitudes, participated in mass organizations and the Party on varying levels and were fiercely proud of their country and their families. This was not a Stalinist show tour or a vacation. Additionally, two tour participants were my age and spoke Spanish proficiently or as a first language. We became fast friends and the informal encounters I was able to have, in small part thanks to my broken Spanish and in large part thanks to their energy and linguistic abilities, peeled away layers of distance.

Before I devolve into further critique or bouts of gushing nostalgia, I want to begin with my first impressions of the country. With my political background and historical reality, Cuba lends itself to romanticization. Seeing Havana lit up at night for the first time, after an eight hour flight delay, I thought to myself, “This is my first glimpse of a socialist society.” You can see a country’s territory but you can’t see its social system; I think this paradox makes the demonization campaign against Cuba facile. It’s easy to see the crumbling infrastructure, collapsed buildings and donated American clothing from the 90s but universal healthcare and education are invisible. Perspective is also
invisible: you can’t see prerevolutionary Cuba or the rest of the Third World at the same time. Context is limited on an island, physically speaking. There is the island, the sea and the rest of the world.

Compared to the miserable 8-hour delay in Miami, entering Cuba was a breeze. One tour companion remarked, “I thought they were going to have machine guns or something,” at the airport. Instead, there is a brief visa authentication process and a security scan. The airport is miniscule; the airport in Manchester, NH (my hometown) is at least three times as large. Outside the airport, hundreds of people waited outside to greet their Miami-based relatives, who came bearing gifts. It was interesting to witness the effect of recent travel reforms; travel between Miami and Havana is now relatively hassle-free for Cuban Americans. The “logic” of the Blockade is breaking down and Cold War dramas are hard to buy; recent polls have suggested that the majority of the Cuban American community support the full lifting of the Blockade. The Jose Marti International Airport was about a twenty minute bus ride from our hotel in Vedado, the more modern gridded neighborhood in the western part of downtown Havana. We drove past the suburban areas of Havana, some socialist billboards celebrating the 55th anniversary of the revolution’s victory and drove past an illuminated Jose Marti in the Plaza de la Revolucion. Contrary to popular belief, Jose Marti is the true hero of the Cuban nation, with Fidel actively occupying a backseat role in the grand scheme of Cuban history.

While my research and the bus ride should have made me realize how big Havana actually is, I was too tired and awed to make sense of urban scale.

Havana is gigantic. My first morning in the city, I opened the curtains of the hotel room and was blown away by a view of the sea and Vedado. I later learned that the architects of my hotel, the Habana Riviera, oriented the building to afford each room a view to the sea. I saw Anti-Imperialist Plaza, a familiar point of reference from my research, way off in the distance; its field of Cuban flags appeared as a fluttering blob of red, white and blue. It was bizarre how foreign, immediate and familiar the view was, all at the same time. I had poured over historical maps of the city, urban histories, vintage photographs and architecture articles so many times that some of the locations seemed more personally significant than many common landmarks in Boston or New York. Also outside my window was the gigantic Mehia Cohiba Hotel, a project that I studied as a “what not to do” for tourism redevelopment in Cuba. As I asserted in my research last semester, the hotel was imposing, cold and closed off from the neighborhood that prostrated itself to the illusive promise of the dollar. Lucky for
me, however, this hotel had a clinic where I received (exceedingly affordable) medication for bedbugs. A consultation and antibiotics cost me $5.00.

Due to the flight delay from the day before, our meeting with a local renowned architect/urban planner was postponed to the end of the trip. Instead, our first day began with lunch at a restaurant that overlooked the Bay of Havana, a polluted bluish-gray soup which might have contained life forms below. The meal was my first experience with Cuban (vegetarian) food and it was thankfully pleasant. Declaring oneself a vegetarian in Cuba took some getting used to. Waiters’ and waitresses’ facial expressions ranged from perplexity to concern. No, there hasn’t been a death in the family; I don’t eat meat or fish. Granted, this was the first time that I realized that being a vegetarian was a matter of privilege. No matter how much it makes sense from an ecological or economic point of view (it generally takes 7 lbs. of feed to yield 1 lb. of meat which is more often than not pumped full of antibiotics to survive long enough to be butchered), vegetarianism means that I can willingly choose to not eat food that was painstakingly prepared for me. I was in a country that had only recently recovered from an economic crisis whose effects made the theft of state-owned livestock and malnutrition daily realities. Sugar water became the fanciest delicacy and culinary coping mechanism of the day. However, instead of being constantly paralyzed by guilt and vegetarian privilege, I enjoyed a delicious salad and fresh-baked bread. I never tire of rice and beans. Most of my travel companions were all too happy to sit with me during meals because they got larger portions of non-vegetarian appetizers. Many of our meals were served family style.

After lunch we traveled to the Casa de Africa, where artifacts from numerous African countries were on display. The artifacts were mostly gifts from foreign heads of state to Fidel Castro, who remains a hero in the continent for Cuba’s disproportionate commitment to African liberation. Race relations in Cuba are assuming a new importance, especially now, since many call into question certain assumptions surrounding the revolution. While the Cuban government is officially colorblind, racial discrimination remains as a leftover of the colonial legacy and the revolution’s inability to critically engage the question of race on all levels. Unsurprisingly, racial discrimination is on the rise thanks to the influx of predominantly white, Western tourists. The tourism industry promotes some of the crudest depictions of Afro Cuban identity, ranging from racist caricatures to tokenizing folk art. Many darker-skinned Cubans are unofficially barred from working in the higher levels of the tourism industry. That being said, the government has recently shown interest in addressing these issues and
many black Cubans are able to publicly voice concerns about race. Before one makes the assumption that Cuba is a fundamentally racist society no different from the United States, I think it is important to emphasize a few points. The level of racial integration was remarkable. People spoke more frankly about race and there was not the level of severe social marginalization that is present in the United States. While black Cubans are overrepresented in the prison system and face higher levels of police discrimination, they do not suffer the same degree of widespread violence as in the United States. Ugly phenomena such as mass incarceration or police murder do not exist. The question of race is another opportunity for the United States to hypocritically slander the revolution even though Cuba’s record beats the United States’ on every major point. Furthermore, Afro Cubans do not face noticeable levels of discrimination in terms of employment (outside of tourism). Darker-skinned Cubans and women occupy important positions within the professional workforce. Esteban Morales, a black professor at the University of Havana, paradoxically remarked that the Cuban revolution had eliminated racism at the highest levels of the state and Communist Party but was unable to have total control over local state institutions. He argued that racist elements of the general population were allowed to assert their views with some degree of political weight in various state offices.

Our tour at the Casa de Africa culminated in a performance of Afro Cuban-inspired dance. There is a fine line between celebrating a cultural legacy and packaging an exoticized image of that legacy for a foreign audience. Every time I heard the phrase “We are celebrating our African roots,” I could not help but notice my surroundings. Street art tourist traps, dance performances with elaborate costumes, the works. Did the artists and performers celebrate their African roots in the same way with their families or when they weren’t performing for tourists? Were these costumes and rituals an important part of daily life or merely a show? Would these performances be different if the audience was Cuban? Who is the performance for? Is cultural preservation the same thing as re-presentation?

While concerns of commodifying the exotic abounded, something strange happened at the performance. One by one, us predominantly-white Americans were dragged on stage and forced into an impromptu conga line. Shifting eyes, uncomfortable smirks and flailing pale limbs were the source of much delight for our hosts. Outside the courtyard, beyond the gate to the city outside, I noticed a few Cubans snickering over our embarrassing dance moves. Cuba is funny like that: even though the country is being turned upside down for scores of rich tourists, one can’t help but think that sometimes it’s the Cubans who are getting the last laugh. In spite of rampant redevelopment, rigidly
conservative attitudes regarding historical preservation and the occasional Zara Store, Old Havana is largely residential. Instead of being locked in time, the neighborhood is actually full of life. Old Havana is not another international expression of Disney, for now. While barbarian hordes of tourists roam the streets and snap pictures of everything, consuming Communist kitsch from street vendors, it is comforting to know that behind the brightly-painted facades and old world charm there is still a community that guards Cuba. Hopefully the Office of the Historian of Havana will maintain its farsighted policies that retain the indigenous population. The alternative is Havana: lost city of the Caribbean, a painted corpse.

The first full night we were whisked away by a motorcade of 50s cars. Although most of the engines have been replaced, the cars themselves have been in operation for over fifty years. This speaks not only to Cuban innovation and resilience but also the scope of the Blockade. The cars are not relics of the past as much as they are a testament to the ongoing belligerence of Cuba’s neighbor to the north. Unsurprisingly, the air quality in Havana is terrible. The general lack of green space complements the pervasive stench of diesel fuel. El Malecon, the highway that hugs the Caribbean along the entire northern edge of the city, is a welcome respite from the city’s air. Besides the poor air quality, Havana at night exudes a strangely fluorescent atmosphere. The city is vibrantly dull under the illumination of fluorescent light as part of the country’s “energy revolution” which helped resolve the energy crisis at the tail end of the Special Period. This helped to dramatically reduce the country’s energy consumption but creates the bizarre effect of inhabiting the cross between a big box store and a Spanish colonial metropolis. Our ancient taxis dropped us off in western Havana, in a neighborhood I was totally unfamiliar with. We crossed a small river, which was apparently the largest in the country, and our guide related us stories of Santeria rituals that involved casting sacrificed birds and trinkets to the water below. We arrived at our final destination, an old theatre that was the home base of “Opera de la Calle,” a street opera company that was trained by one of Cuba’s most renowned opera singers. My expectations were high and they were completely exceeded. I was blown away. We were regaled by a troupe of around fifty singers and dancers, who performed a trilingual concert that was designed to capture the spirit of Cuba’s culture in the past fifty years. Their ability to conjure up emotion at the blink of an eye and seamlessly integrate a diverse set of songs was astounding. There were no stars and even the lead singers faded into the crowd after their song was through. We later learned that the performers were not academically trained and were local talent: the state invested
in the project and they practiced nonstop to produce a truly amazing effect. I wondered to myself if a similar cultural experience was possible in my own country: does the proper combination of state resources, local talent, political will, and appreciation for high and pop culture exist? It was inspiring to see what could be done when profit was not the sole motive in cultural production and the cult of the celebrity did not rein supreme.

The next day at lunch we ate at the top of the tallest building in Havana (that had a uniform floor plan: the tapered monument to Marti exceeded this building’s height). While the food was great, I was more interested in consuming the view. I don’t think that another Havana exists anywhere else in the world. One can read the city’s history, texture and atmosphere from the sky. The monument to Marti, the Habana Libre, el Capitolio, emerged above the rippling fabric of the Spanish colonial city. Architects shouldn’t be so quick to proclaim the rise of the Generic City: real individuality exists in this bustling metropolis of two million. While much of Havana has been sacrificed in the name of even national development, it is clear that the city has not lost its character. We constantly jumped from the macro to the micro during our stay in Cuba. Big questions were being asked concerning the nature of socialism in Cuba: the shaky credibility of capitalism in the United States, the prospects for a post-Blockade Cuba, doomsday scenarios involving a sea of American tourists complemented by millions of Cuban “refugees.” In contrast, we went off the beaten track to see children’s dance performances in the suburbs, tour organic farms and visit with a Committee for the Defense of the Revolution, the basic unit of neighborhood organization.

Many of the places we visited reflected the changing nature of Cuban socialism. A general trend was that when state institutions buckled under the economic crisis, local community groups would step in and the state would pick up the slack. We visited a mural project where the government had handed over an abandoned water standpipe to a group of mostly prisoners-turned-artists. They turned the concrete drum into a community arts center and treated the neighborhood as their canvas. Piles of trash were removed and replaced by mosaic benches and murals. Art depicting themes of international solidarity and the beauty of Cuba took on a personal significance: even the creator of Charlie Brown left his mark on some of the neighborhood’s concrete walls. This visit once again spoke to the creative genius of ordinary Cubans who can make the most out of a difficult situation.

Similarly, the organic farming revolution that was spurred by necessity during the Special Period was launched in a fairly impromptu manner. Most Cuban adults have experience working the
fields; they grew up in a political environment that promoted a love of country and a sense of wonder. Students spent months working in the fields outside of the city so they could see Cuba outside of Havana. Rather than this being a cryptic exercise in socialist slavery, the policy dates back to the humanist ideals of Jose Marti, who believed that physical labor and study created more complete human beings. To put the conspiracy theories to rest, the policy was on a whole unprofitable, with the energy costs relating to transporting the students who were not the best workers. One of our guides looked back fondly on those days. The policy unexpectedly paid off when thousands of Cubans were able to convert unused plots of land into DIY organic gardens. The state eventually caught on and institutionalized the gardens, allowing the farmers to regroup into private cooperatives. We visited one such garden in Eastern Havana, the site of “Soviet-style” housing blocks. Even though this was within the city limits, it was a totally exurban condition and the organic garden used industrialism-inspired techniques to spur production. Worm compost “factories” fueled acre upon acre of growth. We learned that we had enjoyed some of the farm’s mints in our mojitos at a local restaurant in Old Havana. Things might be changing quickly in Cuba, but this was yet another example of a creative solution that bended the socialist system. Instead of breaking, the system gets stronger.

Bourgeois publications such as The Economist and Forbes constantly boast about the eventual demise of socialism and a return to capitalism. We constantly hear about the “free market reforms” that make capitalism’s restoration inevitable. In reality, the reforms have been modest in scope but fundamentally important for the nation’s survival. Small business has been legalized to some degree, but only in sectors where the state does not need to or cannot effectively operate. I honestly don’t think that privately owned barbershops will bring about the revolution’s downfall. Furthermore, the previously-mentioned publications usually don’t focus on the managerial content of these new firms. We visited a new “private” transportation cooperative where every worker belongs to an assembly which had the ability to set wages and elect the board of directors. If this is capitalist restoration, I would like to see it restored in the United States! Cuban creativity and a welcome liberalization on the part of the state mark the current process of economic transformation. One downside, as explained by one of our guides (who was formerly a chef in an Old Havana restaurant) was that Cuban workers felt less a part of the overall nation as a result of the reforms. Instead of being employed by the state and sharing common interests with workers in a state-owned chain across the nation, public/private enterprises are promoting a bizarre socialist corporate culture. Previously, if one
link in the chain wasn’t performing well enough, the resources of the entire company would be at its disposal to get back on track. Now, more narrow-minded collective interests dominate the dispersed private cooperatives. It is too early to tell if this trend will develop into full-blown antagonisms. For the moment, the cooperative we visited is providing an affordable, necessary service that the state could not currently fulfill. The company headquarters, where the assembly met, proudly displayed the Cuban flag and portraits of Fidel and Raul.

While I did have a generally positive experience regarding the Cuban social system, it is clear that the revolution died in certain pockets of the country. I’m speaking mostly of Casa de la Musica, a local top 40 club and the resort island of Veradero. It was unreal to me how once could drive past a billboard proclaiming the gains of the revolution one minute and then sit on the same beach as a millionaire tourist in the next minute. A more heartbreaking juxtaposition was the public celebration of women (and the institutional/grassroots efforts that have created a society with a high degree of gender equality) and open prostitution on the part of young Cuban women. Equally stark was the brief time lapse between this episode and a neighborhood block gathering where young girls proclaimed that they wanted to be teachers, doctors and scientists like their mothers who stood before us. This is the cruel side of the distinction between socialism and communism. Under socialism, the contradictions of class society remain. The class struggle shifts shapes but is present all the same. It appears as if, since the demise of the Soviet Union, resilient Cuba is losing a few battles in its struggle to survive with a sense of dignity and social justice.

The trip necessarily lifted the veil of romanticization. I was surprised, however, by the questions that remained after the trip and beyond. I somehow (naively) expected that traveling to Cuba, seeing socialism in action for the first time would dramatically affirm or shatter my own political worldview. Instead, Cuba was just another country: an enchanting, lively complicated country, but still of this world. I gained a greater degree of respect for the challenges that ordinary Cubans have to face every day, either due to the inhuman Blockade or rigid attitudes from the top (though it is hard to underestimate the reach of the Blockade’s impact on the Cuban economy; most grievances were somehow to the Blockade). Despite the general poverty, I found that my superficial understandings of Cuban society confirmed the notion that Cuba is somehow different: people relate to each other better, generally don’t panic about money or worry about crime, even in the worst neighborhoods. The sense of hopelessness that pervades poor communities in the United States seemed absent from the faces of
the children playing in the streets of Centro Habana or the elderly people who soaked in the sunlight from their beautifully oversized doorways. This might be Marxist Orientalism with a Latin flare or evidence of the extensive social safety net. I came and went with the belief that a world organized around the fulfillment of human needs and a celebration of solidarity between people trumps private property. If Cuba did anything to me or my politics, it was to help me recognize the huge amount of resources I have at my disposal, thanks in part to the United States’ position of global hegemony and to my family’s support and encouragement and the university I have the privilege of attending. If Cubans can overcome their problems and be generally content at the end of the day, under extreme economic circumstances, then I have a responsibility to be engaged, militant, productive and happy in my own life.
Chapter 7: Thesis Documentation
Epilogue: The Guerrilla Tourist

Beyoncé, Jay-Z vacation seemingly stirs Cuba anti-travel bill in US House -NY Daily News
Jay-Z and Beyoncé's trip to Cuba isn't the problem, the embargo is -CNN
Jay-Z Beyoncé Bill Aims To Limit Travel To Cuba -News One
Jay-Z, Beyoncé's Cuba Trip Wasn't Approved By Obama -The Huffington Post

What was so surprising and controversial about Beyoncé and Jay-Z’s vacation to Cuba? Celebrities often travel to tropical locales. For all of the contradictions related to the development of tourism in Cuba, their trip revealed a basic truth: Cuba is a socialist nation that is constantly antagonized by the United States because it does not treat private property as the backbone of society. Their trip simultaneously indicates the growing irrelevance of Cold War rivalries and the United States' persistent tendency of policing the globe to protect capital. Beyoncé and Jay-Z complicated this process by being their glamorous selves in a socialist “backwater.” The pop culture icons were met by adoring crowds, smiling children and engaged art students. The trip was an affront to the assumptions that are so often promoted in the United States about the dangers of Communism in its backyard. Consequently, it revealed that the hordes of Cubans wishing to meet these American celebrities were capable of emulating individuals other than Fidel.

It is with this in mind that Beyoncé is presented in Che’s likeness. In travelling to Cuba, Beyoncé became the guerrilla tourist: BeyonChe. The same process that rendered Che Guevara’s legacy as a distortion of reality distills the essence of BeyonChe’s trip. The idealization of the outsider that dares to see Cuban society in more authentic ways is appropriate for the goals of this thesis. This exaggeration is in line with the excess associated with travel for pleasure. While the media frenzy and fabulous outfits were instrumental in constructing the character of the guerrilla tourist, architecture has the ability to formalize this process of cultural exchange and economic development. Architecture possesses a relative permanence that can formalize temporal experiences. In the context of tourism, the anti-resort can serve as the stage for the guerrilla tourist’s vacation.
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