

ETH STUDIO BASEL  
INSTITUT STADT DER GEGENWART  
CONTEMPORARY CITY INSTITUT

DIENER HERZOG MEILI DE MEURON

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Task type: P

Work in groups of two students in Basel and Havana

Introduction: Tuesday, 20.03.2007, 10.00, ETH Studio Basel, Spitalstrasse 8, 4056 Basel



*Cine Yara, La Rampa, Vedado, Havana, 2003.*

#### STUDIO BASEL

The Studio Basel focuses on urban research. After the urban portrait of Switzerland, published in 2005, we made a start with a series of portraits of different cities. Until now, such portraits have been produced of Naples, Hong Kong, Paris, Casablanca, the Canary Islands and Belgrade.

The red thread that links one group of cities we are interested in is that they are all on the border or an outpost of Western European influence. This enables us to observe the consequences of struggles between globalization, modernization and local traditions and interests. Another theme the Studio Basel is interested in is the relationship between planned, formal and informal developments. Students and staff together try to discover the mechanisms that provide cities with a specific character over time, to be able to maintain, enhance or change it with future interventions. Do cities in general become more generic or more specific?

#### HAVANA

During the summer semester of 2007, Studio Basel will run an urban research course on Havana. It is the capital city of Cuba, one of the last socialist states still remaining after the collapse of the Eastern Block (next to the increasingly liberal China and the dictatorship of the North Korea). The disappearance of socialism has brought Cuba into an exceptional, specific situation; its utopian character is further strengthened by its island position and hostile liaisons with the neighbouring United States. Today Cuba has close to 11 million inhabitants whose fate, since nearly half a century, is tightly linked with the stance of the revolutionary government under Fidel Castro.

However, the collapse of the Soviet Union and its allies meant not only the political isolation for Cuba: much more drastic were the economic consequences coming to the fore in the beginning of the 1990s when the essential trading partnerships of Cuba disintegrated, together with its economy based on the export of sugar. Over the period of ten subsequent years, Cuba has undergone a deep and wide-ranging crisis, referred to as the 'periodo especial'. The country was forced into a fundamental re-

orientation, a political and economic somersault of sorts, which entailed a partial opening and the shift of focus toward tourism. By means of joint ventures with various international companies, the island was opened for mass-tourism, today representing one of the primary sources of income for the country. The introduction of a second currency, the so called 'peso convertible' attached to the euro, was a policy that succeeded in bringing foreign capital to Cuba. The binary system with two currencies currently in operation generates far-reaching consequences: in the urban everyday life a reality was created which on different levels points to practices of segregation, an apartheid.

With near to 2.2 million inhabitants, Havana is to an extent the focus of these recent development processes. They overlay and transform the urban body of the city, which already experienced similar dramatic periods of growth and change several times since its colonial origins. While the city already enjoyed a hegemonic position in Central America and accumulated considerable wealth during the colonial era (still well readable in urban structure and architecture) due to its distinguished protected port and the location as a gate toward the Caribbean, from mid 19th century on it moved in the field of vision of rich American clientele, who begun to promote and develop Havana into a "Caribbean Vegas", attracted by its exotic flairs. This development resulted once again in a rich built heritage and a layer of urban extensions. With the Cuban revolution under Raoul and Fidel Castro, Che Guevara and Camilo Cienfuegos in 1959, the decadent expansion was abruptly ceased. Due to a decentralized development policy, building activity in Havana came practically to a stand still. Even the most necessary maintenance work was not carried out, leaving the city to progressively deteriorate. The permanent shortage of dwellings during these revolutionary decades led to the situation in which the increasing population re-appropriates the existing urban space and structure through varied and impressive improvisation techniques.

#### METHOD AND ORGANIZATION

The aim of the term is it to unfold and document the traces of the described developments as well as the present transformation processes. Therefore the research work on site is crucial. We will undertake a two-week's-journey to Havana (April 9-23, 2007) to depict the urban transformations in the city through observation, interviews and other forms of investigation. Throughout the semester we will be supported by a group of Cuban architecture students from the University of CUJAE, who will work in parallel on a similar set of issues. Specialists from scientific and urban planning fields will provide us with continuing support in approaching the urban reality of Havana, through lectures, podiums as well as city excursions. The work will be conducted in groups ('micro-brigades') each consisting of two students. Each group will examine a theme connected in part to a concrete location in the city.

After the field research in Havana, the results are processed together in the Studio Basel by means of maps, diagrams, texts and photographs into a series of 'Urban Portraits' in a form of a book. A target for each work is it to formulate a thesis regarding a particular research topic; to grasp and describe the specific issues related to a phenomenon in question. Together these theses will form a masterplan of sorts, reflecting the present reality of the city of Havana. This plan is at the same time a view on potentials for the further development of the city; Studio Basel therefore does not make a fundamental difference between research and design.

The studio work takes place weekly on Tuesdays and Wednesdays in the space of the Institute at Spitalstasse 8, Basel. The fieldwork is part of the activity of the course and therefore mandatory. The costs of the field trip to Havana will be CHF 1400.- per student. Financial issues should be no hindrance to the participation to this course and an access to a special fund can be provided in case of grave impediments. The knowledge of Spanish will be an advantage, especially during the field work, therefore we strongly encourage Spanish speaking students to participate in the Havana project. For the journey to Cuba a valid passport is necessary, with the expiry date at least 6 months beyond the travel date.