

# Old Havana and the Impact of World Heritage in the Local Community: Gentrification, Inequality and Dissociation

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## *Abstract*

In the summer of 2016, the Havana's Historian Office and the Cultural Heritage Management research group of the Complutense University of Madrid carried out a field study and survey of the inhabitants of Old Havana. The objective was to identify the problems and necessities of the respected people, but in relation to their Cultural Heritage. Havana's heritage management plan has been a paradigm of community involvement and participation for decades. The locals living in the city are aware of the importance of their heritage, they value it and it is part of their lives. However, there is also a growing scepticism among World Heritage Status of the city, the increasing mass tourism and the priorities on the restoration of buildings. A survey was carried out among different neighbours in the city that faced different realities and paradigms when it came to the nature of their heritage and the management of it. The survey focused on the perception of the people on the situation, not only their opinion on how the heritage was being managed, but also on how it influenced their lives. The views on the World Heritage defined basically two very different realities: the proud Havana, the one where the development is bringing benefits (cultural, economic, aesthetical...) and the sceptic one, the ones that wonder how a mess such as Old Havana could be heritage of humankind, when it is not local heritage.

**Keywords:** Cultural Heritage, Gentrification, Tourism, Post-revolutionary Cuba.

## **Introduction**

In the summer of 2016 I had the chance to go back to Cuba for the second internship with the "Oficina del Historiador de La Habana" (Havana's Historian office) as a result of a collaboration between the Complutense University of Madrid and the Archaeology cabinet of Havana. The aim of this collaboration was to give the scholars of Havana the resources to manage their archaeological heritage, and I participated as an undergraduate archaeology student.

The work carried out there was framed into the research/development/innovation project "The archaeological dimension in World Heritage Cities: improvements in heritage management in Alcalá de Henares (Madrid), Puebla (Mexico) and Havana (Cuba)" (Castillo Mena et al., 2016). We conducted a survey on the inhabitants of the historical centre of the city, in order to have

a better understanding of their relationship with archaeology and materiality. Based on previous experiences in Spain, archaeologists in Havana asked the people in Madrid to carry out the survey in Havana, and compare the results with Spain. We had to take into account that the city of Old Havana was declared as a World Heritage site in 1982, and it can be considered as both heaven and hell by urban archaeologists. Havana, we could say, is a very archaeological city, despite the lack of prehispanic past (Castillo Mena and Menéndez Castro, 2015).

The bottom-up approach of the project has the aim to empower the local communities of these cities to take advantage of the situation and help monitoring their relationship with their heritage. World heritage cannot be understood without them, and has to be managed in order to let them benefit directly or indirectly from the declaration of any site.

The questions included in the survey were not only related to the knowledge of the archaeology of the city, but also to the social situation, the problems these people had and their perspective on the World Heritage declaration. To do this, a significant sample was calculated with a 95% confidence interval, a variability of  $p=0.5$  and a 5% preciseness. The population of Old Havana in 2014, according to ONEI, was 87772 people, and 66752 out of them lived in the historical area. Excluding the people under 15 years old (as they were at school during our working hours) and the people over 80, as most of them were in their houses or in a day-care all the time and they were difficult to find, we had to make the total of 1166 surveys, divided among the 3 biggest neighbourhoods of the old city - Catedral, Plaza Vieja and San Isidro. The reason of this division is that these neighbours are representatives of different situations and realities among the city, and the hypothesis was that the answers would be very different among the others. The necessities of the people living in these three different areas and the problems they have to deal with are very different, and that was reflected in the surveys. This difference in the answers led me to write this paper. There is a huge gap between the population of these 3 different districts due to economical, geographical, historical and social reasons that have caused a huge situation of inequality in the city. Thus, on one side, this is caused by the management of the heritage of the city, but it also affects it in a vicious circle.

There is a landmark that creates a very clear division on the situation of the city. The conservation and the structural issues of the city are also clearly related to the social problems related to cultural heritage. Obispo street is one of the busiest streets of the city, filled with cafeterias, restaurants, gift shops, etc.



**Figure 1.** District of Catedral, area of Santo Angel, one of the best preserved areas in Old Havana

On the North of Obispo street, there is the district of Catedral (Figure 1). It serves as an example of a very touristic district, but also as an area full of private businesses. As the name anticipates already, we can find here, among other touristic hotspots, Havana's cathedral, La Bodeguita del Medio and the Museum of the Revolution is right across the street once you leave the district to the West. On the geographical factor, the district is located in the North of Old Havana and it is surrounded by El Malecón, providing probably the best views of the bay and the ocean, which contributes to the embellishment of the area.

There are not so many hotels as, for example, in Plaza Vieja (Figure 2), but a lot of "private houses", Cuban boarding houses. The cafeterias and restaurants are also private, and the processes of neighbourhood revitalization come from private initiative too.

Traditional businesses have been substituted by privately owned and very lucrative businesses. These owners, as a consequence, have benefited from capitalism, getting away from the Cuban communist system. The inequality created by the existence of these incomes, compared to average Cuban wages, is turning into a social issue. Inhabitants of Catedral are witnessing a process of gentrification of their own neighbourhood, being the first beneficiaries and becoming owners and businesspeople. The implications of this process will be left for further investigation, but the social fabric of Old Havana is endangered.



**Figure 2.** Hotel Florida, Obispo Street in Plaza Vieja. Before restoration, it had been a residential building. It was turned into a hotel, and the inhabitants were displaced to other parts of the city

The district of Plaza Vieja benefited the most from tourism. It is full of hotels, restaurants, cafeterias, gift shops... and most of them belong to the government, they are public properties paid with public money, as tourism is probably the main source of income for the city nowadays, but it requires investing. People living in this area usually make a living out of tourism and they benefit from the restorations of the area. Because of that, the inhabitants are mostly proud to live in a World Heritage city, they are interested in their heritage, they like the way the heritage is being managed and they benefit from money investments.

On the other side of Obispo Street, figuratively and geographically, we have San Isidro (Figure 3). This district is one of the poorest ones in Havana, which translates to terrible structural problems, lack of purveyances and uncleanliness. These people have been abandoned by the system, nobody invest in them and they do not have enough resources to invest in themselves. The inequality that is being created here turns into a vicious cycle, the lack of investment and beautification of the area doesn't attract the tourists, there's no infrastructure to host them in hotels or restaurants, so they do not leave money there. If actions are not taken now, it will lead to an unavoidable process of gentrification carried out by entrepreneurs and investors, once they finish up gentrifying the north of Obispo street. This process will expel the inhabit-



**Figure 3.** Industrial cityscape of Havana's bay, view from San Isidro

ants to the area to allow pass to the same situation we have in the north of the old city. Locals should be the ones benefiting from their heritage.

San Isidro is not the only district located south to Obispo street that undergoes this situation. Districts such as Belén or Tallapiedra have similar problems and living conditions, but due to time and resource limitations, the research was not carried out there.

### **What led to the situation? The results of the survey**

The first factor we have to take into consideration is the geography. In order to generalise the above-mentioned, Old Havana is divided in two by Obispo Street, where there is the foundational place of the city. Generally speaking, the north area is richer than the southern area. Why? Again, tourism is the leading factor for the economic development of Old Havana. In the south, there are the remains of old industries, the views of contamination of new industries and the docks, materiality that leads to a desolated industrial landscape that helps nothing to bring tourists there. The area, in general, is in such terrible conditions that people are, as I was told multiple times while surveying the inhabitants, afraid that their houses would collapse after a downpour. There are no museums or touristic attractions, the heritage in this area does not have the optimal conditions to bring attention and tourists. In Old Havana, heritage is not just a source of wealth, but it is also a source of identity.

The inequalities in this city are not just economical, they are also related to the perception of heritage itself. One of the questions we asked in the survey was “what are the advantages of living in Old Havana?” The answer, mostly, was *none*. No proud, no satisfaction, no feeling of belonging. These people do not feel attached to their city, as different factors lead them to be ignored by making efforts to make the city more suitable for the tourists, not for the locals. This area has been traditionally the poorest one due to being situated in the nearby of the industrial area; now the industry has been transferred to another areas, and nothing but ruins remained. That is why, geographically, this place was more suitable for placing the docks, and the industry came afterwards, as these activities do not differ. The workers are from the same social level, and it made sense that the ubication was close to where those people lived. In other places such as El Vedado, the industrial heritage has been transformed into cultural centres, restaurants and night clubs, accessible both for Cuban people and tourists. However, this was a private initiative, and nobody is investing in the poverty-stricken areas of Old Havana, perceived as it would be a waste of money. The contamination does not help either. It is not only one of the dirtiest parts of Havana, but it is still the closest to the industry. Even transferred, it is still not very far, and the conditions of the bay are terrible (Allemany Llovera, 2016).

On the other side of the city, there is the touristic area, benefited by a clearer atmosphere, open spaces, and a better view of the bay. In this area, the bay opens to the sea, giving the sensation of a more open space and a better view to the heritage sites on the other side of the bay, such as “El Cristo”, the “Castillo del Morro” or “San Carlos de la Cabaña”. Also, following the coast line, there is the “Malecon”, a touristic hotspot that we do not have on the other side of Old Havana, which has been rehabilitated and makes the bay looks better, even though it is not less contaminated. In addition to this, the proximity to the open sea slightly contributes to spread the contamination little by little. The industries are barely appreciable in the daylight, and the fact that the buildings are less agglomerated plus the open space help with a sensation of distress.

As a brief conclusion to this point, my opinion is that the location of the different areas has been a leading factor on the development of a duality and a paradigm of inequality. This also comes from a historical background, for which, for example, the differentiation of the district due to the different activities, and, at the same time, social class. In the North, there are the cathedral, the administrative buildings, the manors... now turned into tourist attractions, as there is a tradition of higher-class inhabitants, and it is more attractive to the rest of the world. Certainly, there is heritage on the other side of the city, but



the subsequent degradation of the area also led to a degradation of the heritage. There are still buildings from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century, but they are, as I have already said, in such a bad condition that they can collapse any time.

Another key factor is the education, also related to this geographical division of the city. In the surveys, we had a clear difference among the people from wealthy areas compared to the people of the impoverished areas. On the south side, people were more likely to have higher education than people living in the North side. Education, in general, is not a big struggle in Cuba. Analphabetism is almost inexistent, with most people having completed primary school. As heritage is a complicated social construct that comes from a very different society compared to the Cuban society, educated people ought to create an understanding among the materiality and different initiatives to manage the heritage. Living in such terrible conditions does not help to make the people interested in heritage and culture, they are just interested in survival and the improvement of their own living conditions. It is difficult to be solidary when you are poor, and it gets even more difficult when it comes to heritage. Heritage is a direct way to get economic and cultural profit, but there are better and easier ways to do it. Nobody would care about the intellectual poverty when their living conditions are terrible and they never had more education than primary school, and their intellectual resources are humble as well. If the government does not give them enough resources, then they will have to do it by themselves, and that is not easy when you are uneducated.

In a country with an educational system such as Cuba, why people are not interested in culture? That is why I think Heritage is so important - because it is the materialization of the culture. If people are not interested in education, they will not probably be in heritage either, if they are not interested in heritage they will not be interested in culture, and if they are not interested in culture, they probably will not be interested in heritage. It is a vicious circle. Heritage, again, is part of the daily life, the identity, the culture and the past of the people living with it, and in the case of Old Havana, it is also a necessary source of money. With the participation of the citizens, especially helping those who are less favoured, a new strategy of heritage management, fair and inclusive one, can be built.

However, it would not be fair to say that there is not participation of the citizens in Old Havana. We have a lot of examples of this, such as ArteCorte, an initiative of the barbers of Santo Angel, to put in value their job and the neighbourhood. This has been very successful, as the neighbourhood is completely restored, full of new small businesses, initiatives for the locals and quite clean. It is in the so called "rich area", so the existence of the initiatives come from

several reasons. Even though they have the government's support, they do have to cope with problems, but this initiative is not related to their need to survive, it comes from their need of culture and identity. People interviewed in this area were, in general, more likely to have higher education and/or an intellectual job. Certainly, there are people in this area with basic problems, but they are not the main part, so this does not lead to a problem.

This process of district enrichment can help some people to have a better life, but not everybody can take advantage of that. In a city like Havana, the development comes with a price: gentrification. As the districts are not as homogeneous as I pictured in the first instance, the people that are not into these dynamics of economic and cultural development suddenly are living in a different neighbourhood. Tourists and rich people are more attracted to them, as the prices get higher and the traditional businesses have been replaced with tourism-orientated businesses. It has always been difficult to have access to the basic-needs products, and even more difficult now when the bakeries are turning into chic restaurants, butcher shops into cocktail bars and pharmacies into souvenir stores. People cannot afford to reconstruct their houses, so they have to leave Old Havana and the old buildings are "occupied" by the richer owners who reconstruct them and make profit after their investment. If Old Havana loses its traditional inhabitants, who have at least a bit of a sense of belonging, the city will lose part of its identity. The city may become richer, but it will be culturally poorer.

On the other side, government is also boosting another way of gentrification. As it has already been said, the government invest in different areas of the city, mainly to make it look better for tourists, to attract more of them and to create a bigger profit. The reconstruction of different buildings was promoted in order to create hotels, restaurants, museums and different services, despite the fact that sometimes there were people living in those buildings. Those people were relocated in the suburbs of the city. They got acceptable apartments, but in the middle of nowhere, sometimes more than an hour away by public transport from Old Havana. Some people may argue that going from living in a house on ruins to a new apartment is a big improvement, but the fact is that those people were forced to leave the place where they had the right to live in.

At the same time, the city is losing part of the identity to make way to a narrative that is not adjusted to the reality and struggles of the people that have to live in Old Havana. It is adjusted to what the tourists want and to the people that can take advantage of it. Heritage should have an actual commitment with the people from all social levels, especially with the least benefited of the heritage itself, since if the heritage ignores these people, and these people ignore the





heritage, as it is happening right now, we have a disengagement among social actors. Heritage cannot be managed without the people and the people have to take advantage of their own culture and materiality.

Moreover, this is very dangerous at the moment of political swift that Cuba is passing through now. As Cuba opens to the United States and Capitalism, it is very important that people's identities are strong enough to avoid a toxic cultural influence. The number of tourists from the United States is rising more and more, and the narrative should not change to be adapted neither to them nor to any other tourists. The narrative is already global by itself, and the people that visit Cuba must be educated to appreciate that. On the other hand, Cuban identity and the feeling of belonging have to be strong enough in order not to subverse under the sweeping influence of the culture of the United States, because that would create cultural poverty. Materiality, under my consideration, is the first way to create a deep feeling of identity, as Old Havana takes part of the daily life of the inhabitants. As it has been shown by the results of the surveys, Old Havana's inhabitants are mostly in favour and expectant to the future bilateral relationships between Cuba and the United States. Education over materiality, investments in social causes related to objects and the fomentation of the citizens' participation in heritage management are things that can empower the people to defend their own culture and think of it as it has the same value as North American culture, and also, to help these people make economical profit of this.

To do so, different agents should cooperate between them to create a fair and ethical heritage management framework. The first agent involved is the government and the public organisms implied in heritage management and culture. Also, there is a wide legal framework that allows multiple institutions to work with the heritage. Nevertheless, these institutions usually focus their efforts on creating or renovating hotels, museums and touristic attractions. Well, that is somehow necessary as it is a source of wealth, but new strategies should be considered to help people directly benefit from the investments, as for example, reconstructions of inhabited buildings, and not just turning them into touristic attractions.

Heritage managers and academic professionals should also have a bigger influence over the decisions made around the heritage, as they have the sensitivity to treat heritage as a cultural entity, not as a pretty old thing that people will pay to heritage managers, and the academics should give the tools to locals to manage their own heritage the way they want. Our perspective, in the quality of privileged foreigners, may be valid in a research way, but we cannot apply our mental frameworks and previous experiences to such a different reality. Local

academics and professional are the ones that have to manage their own heritage, with the help of our previous experiences, tools and resources. It has to be a bilateral relationship, as we also have a lot to learn from them, as their frameworks and experiences can enrich occidental heritage management.

Also, non-academic foreign organisms such as Caritas have been taking an important role on the management of cultural heritage and humanitarian work. They have invested in different building conditioning, with the aim of helping people from Havana as well as their heritage. Restorations such as Aguiar 68, have given to the people a historical building to live in, but this should be accompanied with education about the cultural importance of the item, to make these people have a deeper understanding of its historical and identity values, of why it is not the same to be in a new built house and in a 19<sup>th</sup> century building. Heritage is something that happens in the present, and because of that, we need to make people aware that they are creating heritage, especially by living in a historical building. Humanitarian organizations are doing a nice humanitarian job, but sometimes they might be empty on heritage background. In the case mentioned, inhabitants were very excited and ready to participate in the improvement of their life conditions, so this kind of initiatives are a good chance to introduce the heritage points of view.

And my last point is the direct participation of the citizens. The citizens may not have the economic resources to develop complex strategies of restoration and management, but they have the culture. Organizations such as the Sisterhood of Embroiders and weavers of Belén and the Congregation of silversmiths of San Eloy are bringing back traditional occupations (Pérez Cortés and Iglesias Pérez, 2014). ArteCorte, despite that it has a strong economic base, and it also brings back the traditional occupation of the barbers. Traditionally, Old Havana has been an example of community management, as they participated in the rehabilitation of San Isidro district, but the strong inclusion of capitalism has brought a swift in the paradigm, making people and the financial organisms more focused on tourism.

Taking everything in this paper into account, I believe that a bottom-up approach is needed when it comes to heritage management, but not only in the case of Old Havana. To build up a fair narrative, we do not just need to study the history from behind, but also include the people in this situation of inequality living nowadays in this place. Heritage professionals have to act as advisors and moderators between the local communities. Havana has always been an example of community management of the heritage, but all the different factors mentioned before create a very difficult to overcome situation by the least favoured community living on the site (Pérez Cortés and Iglesias



Pérez, 2014). Without external help and support from the community, these people have very little to do. Further efforts should be directed to them in order to overcome this situation of inequality, to protect them from future developments that can lead to gentrification. The World Heritage Status lacks the meaning and credibility if it is not able to support these communities, while they should be the first beneficiaries.

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### Havana veche și impactul patrimoniului mondial în comunitatea locală: înnobilare, inegalitate și disociere

#### Rezumat

În vara anului 2016, Biroul istoric al Havanei și grupul de cercetare pentru gestionarea patrimoniului cultural al Universității Complutense din Madrid au efectuat un studiu de teren și un sondaj al locuitorilor din vechea Havana. Obiectivul a fost identificarea problemelor și necesităților societății în raport cu patrimoniul ei cultural. Planul de gestionare a patrimoniului Havanei este o paradigmă a implicării și participării comunității de zeci de ani. Localnicii care locuiesc în oraș sunt conștienți de importanța patrimoniului lor, îl prețuiesc pentru că face parte din viața lor. Cu toate acestea, există, de asemenea, un scepticism în creștere privind statutul de patrimoniu mondial al orașului, creșterea turismului de masă și prioritățile privind restaurarea clădirilor. A fost realizat un sondaj în rândul diversilor locuitori din vecinătatea obiectivelor de patrimoniu care s-au confruntat cu realități și paradigme diferite atunci când s-a ajuns la natura patrimoniului lor și la gestionarea acestuia. Sondajul s-a concentrat asupra percepției oamenilor

asupra situației, nu numai asupra părerii lor despre modul în care a fost gestionat patrimoniul, ci și asupra modului în care acesta le-a influențat viața. Punctele de vedere asupra Patrimoniului Mondial au definit practic două realități foarte diferite: Havana simpatizată, cea în care dezvoltarea aduce beneficii (culturale, economice, estetice...) și atitudinea sceptică, cea care se întreabă cum ar putea o mizerie precum Old Havana să fie moștenire a omenirii, atunci când nu este moștenire locală.

**Cuvinte cheie:** moștenire culturală, înobilare, turism, Cuba postrevoluționară.

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