

Revolutionary Cuba and its Housing Paradox

This paper will primarily examine the problem of the current housing shortage in Havana, Cuba. In this study I investigate the fiscal and health consequences of this problem, as well as research the responses to this problem from the perspective of the Cuban government, Cuban civil society, and foreign public policy and public health experts. I will study the reality of Cuba's socialist government and society in today's world and how the Cuban Revolution has created a housing situation that is extremely unique given its socialist context. Consequently, I will examine how Cuban public policy solutions are endogenous even though financial, human, and academic capital often comes from abroad in the form of non-governmental organizations and academic institutions that collaborate with the Cuban government to solve, or at least to ameliorate, the effects of Havana's housing shortage. Based on this research, I seek to prove that a simple contradiction exists between the revolutionary goals of providing for everyone and the practical reality that the government cannot control every aspect of housing, both because of a lack of funds and because people will always seek to better their lot through their own means and initiatives. Furthermore, Cuba is an optimal field site for investigating public health initiatives. This is the case, although public policy is a constant negotiation between the government's desire to micromanage every aspect of public policy in order to maintain its socialist philosophy, emphasizing the common good over individual benefit while simultaneously appearing an attractive recipient for international aid, and the people's quotidian reliance on their own informal self-help networks.

The triumph of the Cuban Revolution on January 1, 1959, marked the beginning of the official reorganization of Cuban society so that the government's social policy favored (and continues to favor more than forty-five years later) collective social good over individual benefit. This policy, however, was not limited to the official political and socioeconomic realm; it expanded into a cultural construct indicative of the unique Cuban reality. The main (and rather ambitious) objective of post-Revolutionary social policy was to diminish the socioeconomic disparity that existed domestically, between the urban and rural areas within the country, as well as globally, between Cuba and First World countries. As a result, immediately following the Revolution the Cuban government concentrated most of its efforts on agricultural and industrial development, as well as on certain social services, with considerable emphasis on health care and education.

Unfortunately the successful implementation of these social and political goals impeded the possibility of any swift improvement in the quality of Cuban housing, especially urban housing. Fidel Castro himself made the claim that a developing country would have to sacrifice housing construction in order to emphasize economic development, due to the reality of a developing country's fiscal constraints: "In an underdeveloped country the accumulated needs are so great that, if the country dedicates itself to building houses it does not develop, and if it dedicates itself to development, it cannot build houses."¹ However, the priority awarded to Cuba's rural areas in policy matters that did not concern housing construction did not adversely impact housing in the capital for two main reasons. Many Havana dwellings were left behind in very good

¹ As quoted in De Azevedo, Sergio. 1987. "Housing Policies in Latin America: The Myths of Self-Help Constructions." *PS* 20(4): 895-901.

condition as a result of the class-based emigration that immediately followed the Revolution. Furthermore, the official government emphasis placed on improving rural life and lessening rural/urban disparity resulted in a decreased migration level into Havana from rural areas, which actually mitigated the housing shortage suffered in the capital.²

Even though the Cuban government recognized that housing quality would have to be put on hold in order to dedicate more time and expertise to other social endeavors, because housing was established by the Constitution as a social good, the cost of housing was resolved, or at least ameliorated, immediately. In March 1959 the *Ley de Alquileres* reduced rents by fifty percent, an act that directly benefited sixty percent of Cuban families.³ This law also eliminated the legality of eviction caused by a family's inability to pay rent. The *Ley de Reforma Urbana* of 1960 abolished the markets for housing, real estate, and land, for if housing was indeed a social good, rather than a commodity, it would be against socialist principles to sell a house for personal profit. Individuals were no longer able to sell houses to other citizens; instead, they could only sell them back to the government, who in turn resold them. When the owner of a dwelling died, family members had the option of keeping the house in the family. Unfortunately, this option resulted in the perpetuation of entrenched social inequalities based on inheritance, a reality the revolutionary government was actually working to assuage. Furthermore, it became illegal for a family to own more than one primary residence and one vacation

² "Cuba succeeded in reducing migration into Havana to such an extent that the population growth rate of the capital remained below the national average." (Mathey 1989: 67)

³ Mathey, Kosta. 1989. "Recent Trends in Cuban Housing Policies and the Revival of the Microbrigade Movement." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 8(1): 67-81.

home, for this would be considered ostentatious and thus not harmonious with revolutionary austerity.⁴ Consequently, the state absorbed old housing titles and re-dispersed them to new owners.⁵ This law also guaranteed that housing rents would never surpass ten percent of a family's income. The Cuban declaration of housing as a human right was revolutionary in that it preceded the United Nations' similar declaration by over thirty-five years.⁶ Nevertheless, the relentless process of deterioration of historic buildings, which had been in progress long before the triumph of the Revolution, continued: "Most housing problems are in Havana's pre-revolutionary colonial housing, which has been in decline since the 1930s."⁷

Types of Cuban Housing

Post-Revolutionary Cuba has witnessed three main forms of housing production: state-sponsored construction, individual self-help construction, and collective self-help construction. State-sponsored constructions, under the auspices of the Ministry of Construction (MICONS), account for nearly half of the 1.3 million housing dwellings completed between 1959 and 1993: "This level of production eased much of the

⁴ Bull, Simon, Anderson, Isobel, and Jill Hamberg. 2004. "Rebuilding Cuba." *Environmental Health Journal* 150-152. <http://www.ehj-online.com/archive/2000/may2004/may4.html>

⁵ The old housing titles are a tacit reference to the homeowners that left the country immediately after the Revolution. The Cuban government seized these houses and dispersed them to families living in designated "slum clearance areas" that had proven their support of the Revolution. (Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda. 1999. "40 años de la vivienda en Cuba.", Mathey 1989: 67)

⁶ "El derecho a una vivienda decorosa no significa simplemente tener un techo sobre la cabeza; también entraña tener acceso a todos los sistemas considerados imprescindibles para la vida urbana saludable (ONU 1996b)" Comisión Económica Para América Latina, Instituto Nacional de Investigaciones Económicas, United Nations Development Programme. 2004. "La Vivienda en Cuba." *Política Social y Reformas Estructurales en Cuba a Principios del Siglo XXI, Parte 4* 209-228.

⁷ Stewart, Jill. 2006. "Housing and health in Havana, Cuba." *The Journal of The Royal Society for the Promotion of Health* 126(2): 69-71.

overcrowding as Cuban population only grew 57% while the housing stock grew 80%.” (Kapur & Smith 2002: 8) The state-sponsored dwellings were known for their uniform construction in terms of design, materials, and physical layout. These mega-projects, located on rigid superblocks, followed models imported from the Soviet Union; for this reason, state-sponsored constructions were criticized, even by Fidel Castro himself, for their “cultural incompatibility.” Unfortunately, these unattractive imported constructions led to the popular notion that socialist architecture had to be ugly by definition, for beauty was considered an unnecessary luxury incompatible with socialism; a luxury that could be overlooked in order to achieve fiscal efficiency.⁸

State-sponsored projects largely constructed new edifices, as opposed to renovating old ones. Those who lived in constructions that were indeed poor, but not poor enough to warrant new housing, compensated by informally improving their dwellings on their own. This is evidenced by data from the 1981 housing census, which revealed the discrepancy between the official construction of 164,000 homes and the total increase in housing, which amounted to 246,000 homes.⁹ Self-help housing is associated with overcoming the problem of urban slums and peasant liberation from thatch huts to durable houses built to “modern” standards. (Mathey 1989: 68) Such individual self-help constructions, characterized by their informality, unfortunately became infamous for their hazardous structural problems.

⁸ Cuban architects have since rejected this notion of the incompatibility of beauty and socialist construction: “Ultimately one is forced to conclude that quality and beauty are not abstract constructs but rather the natural state of things and that one cannot do without one to concentrate on the other any more than one can say, ‘I am going to concentrate on breathing and not focus on keeping my blood circulating.’ Coyula, Mario. 1996 “The Neighborhood as Workshop.” *Latin American Perspectives* 23(4): 90-103.

⁹ This data, presented at the National Architects Conference in 1984, represented the housing construction from 1976 to 1980. (Mathey 1989: 68)

From Housing Cooperative to Microbrigades

Collective self-help constructions, such as agricultural and housing cooperatives, were eventually formalized as “Microbrigades.” The idea of microbrigades was first made public by Fidel Castro in 1970 when he suggested that workers should be allowed to build new houses for themselves and their colleagues. (Mathey 1989: 69) The idea behind housing cooperatives was the collective advantage of pooling skills, labor and physical sites, for preference was given to multi-family units. Microbrigades were considered a superior form of self-help due to their acquisition of official political support. Microbrigadistas were released from their normal work duties and integrated into building brigades while receiving their regular salaries. The completed dwellings were then distributed among the fellow workers according to need and work merits; priority was not automatically given to the members of the building team. (Mathey 1989: 69) Complete satellite cities encircling Havana were constructed by microbrigades; most houses were four- or five-story walk-up apartments that followed a standard design. Previous cultural criticism of the Soviet-inspired dwellings, both for their aesthetics and their foreign nature, was also taken into account in order to produce housing that would be considered more culturally endogenous and in line with Cuba’s socialist principles:

To reduce monotony the facades were gaily painted or green areas cultivated between the blocks. However, what contributed more than anything to maintain a high social status and a considerable sense of pride in these settlements was the fact that their inhabitants were ‘honorable citizens’ selected on the basis of their outstanding work merits. (Mathey 1989: 70)

The microbrigade movement was strongest in Havana, since state sector construction in the capital had been minimal in order to let the historically underserved provinces and rural areas catch up. However, the predominantly artisan building

technology employed was not very efficient – both quality and productivity were eventually increased by relying on industrialized systems and a more skilled labor force. Microbrigades were also problematic in that the selective distribution mechanism of the microbrigade houses also excluded some of the people with the greatest housing need, namely those without regular employment. Due to these inefficiencies and inequalities, microbrigades were gradually replaced by more centrally planned mechanisms in the 1970s, reflecting the ongoing industrialization and restructuring of the national economy as a whole.¹⁰ Industrialization was considered to be ideologically compatible as the scientific and technical aspect of Cuba's socialist planning principles. (Kapur & Smith 2002: 9)

Unfortunately, this increased industrialization and emphasis on economic efficiency did not increase the number of houses built directly by the state. The overestimation of the gains possible through industrialization led to an increased popular disillusionment with industrialization, especially given its cultural incompatibility with Cuba's focus on the local, informal, and creative construction:

The urban renewal project for Cayo Hueso during the first half of the 1970s reflected an incipient lag at the theoretical level because of the absence of debate and the slavish copying of imported models from countries that were not exactly in the vanguard of the city-planning movement. This project, fortunately at a standstill – although not because of any recognition of its defects – was an example of an approach that might have been generalized if the confining logic of heavy prefabrication and standardized designs, so closely aligned with the huge apparatus of research design and construction, had not proven in practice to be inadequate from the broader point of view of the economic and social interests of the community and the nation. (Coyula 1996: 94-95)¹¹

¹⁰ “It was thus planned to fill the gap left by the dissolved microbrigades with more efficient state brigades. The latter often included previous microbrigadistas who preferred to remain in the building trade, although they were now paid directly by the Ministry of Construction.” (Mathey 1989: 70)

¹¹ I return to the Cayo Hueso neighborhood, its problems, and solutions, later in this paper under the “Housing as a Public Health Concept” heading.

The practical reasons for this failure are equally significant given the Cuban reality: state sector housing output began to drop as non-residential projects gained priority. Construction labor shortages also accounted for this decrease in housing construction, for construction was not an attractive occupation in terms of its labor intensity and relatively modest salary in comparison to other jobs. Meanwhile, the housing demand increased. Cuba experienced a population peak in the 1960s decade with a growth rate of two percent. While the population growth rate has been on the decline since then, the 1960s baby boomers reached marrying age in the 1980s amidst the continuing deterioration of urban dwellings.¹²

Cuba Formalizes the Informal in an Effort to Update & Preserve its Revolution

The Cuban government responded to the housing crisis and the subsequent political pressure by formally institutionalizing popular self-help and creative responses, recognizing that it was unrealistic to expect all dwellings needed to be provided by the state sector alone. Although all three forms of housing production, state, individual, and collective, had existed for many years, it was not until 1984 that they were granted a comprehensive and legal framework with the passing of the *Ley General de la Vivienda*. (Mathey 1989: 67, 70) This law transferred housing titles from the state to legitimate occupants, so that more than eighty-five percent of Cuban families are now homeowners. These homeowners now only have to pay for maintenance, repair, and utilities. The law also granted access to the new state-constructed homes through a subsidized payment program in which ten- or twenty-year mortgages have a maximum interest of three

¹² U.S. Census Bureau, International Data Base. 2005. “IDB Summary Demographic Data for Cuba.” <http://www.census.gov/cgi-bin/ipc/idbsum.pl?cty=CU>

percent, so that even those with the most humble salaries are able to afford their own homes.¹³ The law tacitly institutionalized its support of self-help housing by making it safer through official technical assistance and official outlets for standard quality building materials.

Paradoxically, the *Ley General de la Vivienda* increased the privatization of housing within the larger collectivist, socialist framework typical of Cuban social policy. Almost all the houses previously rented by the state were privatized, which affected about one fifth of the dwellings, and occupants were granted the right to sell their homes freely on the market. (Mathey 1989: 71) These modifications were indicative of the government's willingness to rectify previous errors; the legal changes were a microcosm for the overall Cuban process of reflection that began in the mid-1980s. They also represented a certain level of flexibility that translated into a relaxation of ideology in areas where it had become evident that a gap existed between the official dogma presented from above and quotidian reality experienced from below, coupled with the limited toleration of certain market mechanisms – as long as they did not contradict or put in danger the overall goals of political and social development still firmly entrenched in the socialist framework.

The microbrigades were revitalized in the form of “social microbrigades” as an attempt to ameliorate the declining revolutionary idealism evident among the population by bringing back the enthusiasm and creativity that had characterized the first decade of the Revolution. The main difference between the new microbrigades and the old ones was that the new microbrigades focused on renovation and revitalization, as opposed to

¹³ Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda. 1999 “40 años de la vivienda en Cuba.”

the previous emphasis on entirely new constructions in outlying areas. The explicit goal of the new microbrigades was the radical transformation of the capital. The government recognized the need for urban renovation and conservation, particularly of historic neighborhoods that had been forgotten in the face of rural investment and new modern housing developments. The new microbrigades also carried an explicit social responsibility:

Only 50% of all the dwellings they [the microbrigades] produce go to the *brigadistas* and their colleagues in the unit's workplace, the remainder is offered to the local '*Poder Popular*' (local government) for distribution among those members of the community who need a house but are not connected with any microbrigade (their workplace may have too few employees, or the applicants may be old or disabled, and so on). In addition, the microbrigades simultaneously provide urgently needed buildings for community facilities....These developments suggest that the microbrigades are not just a one-off marginal extravagance of 'real socialism' on the periphery, but are likely to remain one of the main elements of Cuban housing and construction policy in years to come. (Mathey 1989: 72)

The literature on the revitalized microbrigades is rather contradictory. Mathey states that "The underlying assumption is that eventually the entire neighbourhood will be renovated house by house and the members of the Social Microbrigade will benefit from the works as much as the rest of their neighbours." (75) Coyula believes that microbrigades' new emphasis on restoration and renovation did not, however, imply a deviation from the top-down organization of urban planning, and that the new microbrigades still focused on large-scale construction projects, as opposed to individual rehabilitation. (92) Stewart, finally, contrasts microbrigades with the more traditional, large-scale state methods by emphasizing the ability of microbrigades to be flexible by recycling local materials and pooling various resources, which "keeps financial costs to a

minimum and encourages active participation and learning skills that benefit the community.” (70)

“The Special Period in Peacetime” and its Effects on Housing

The Special Period in Peacetime, as it was officially and euphemistically named by Fidel Castro on July 26th, 1993, the fiftieth anniversary of the guerrilla attack on the Moncada Barracks in Santiago de Cuba, was an extended period of economic crisis that began in 1991 after the collapse of the Soviet Union and, by extension, the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance (COMECON). The crisis was exacerbated by the United States economic blockade against Cuba, which had been in effect since 1962 but was officially codified into law with the 1992 Cuban Democracy Act (the “Torricelli Law”) and strengthened in 1996 with the Cuban Liberty and Democracy Solidarity Act (the “Helms-Burton Act”) to take advantage of Cuba’s economic vulnerability due to the crisis. The economic depression of the Special Period was at its most severe in the early-to-mid 1990s before gradually declining in severity towards the end of the decade. The Special Period marked a sixty percent decrease in Cuba’s gross domestic product, a fifty percent decrease in its available energy reserves, and a seventy-five percent decrease in its importation capacity. According to the Cuban government, the US embargo against Cuba has exacerbated the crisis of the Special Period, costing Cuba seventy billion dollars, which is five times the value of Cuba’s external debt. (Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda 1999: 10)

Between 1991 and 1993 housing construction only reached fifty-three percent of construction levels of the previous fifty years. Fifteen percent of Cuba’s housing stock is in poor condition. Since 1992 Cuba has introduced technical alternatives reducing cost

and dependency on scarce materials. The Special Period's effects are especially evident in the capital; One thousand homes collapsed in Havana in 1994 alone. Four thousand more Havana homes are in a precarious state today.¹⁴ The Special Period has forced Cuba to be even more fiscally conservative and technologically innovative by reducing its material consumption of energy-intensive construction methods and materials without sacrificing safety and quality.¹⁵

Cuba's approach to the crisis has been based on the dual policies of equity and priority for vulnerable groups. Cuba has slowly and reluctantly opened up its markets through tourism, dollarization, and foreign investment. In order to be appealing as a tourist site, the government concentrated its construction efforts on restoration, capitalizing on the historical appeal of its colonial architecture. (Coyula 1996: 95) Unfortunately, this emphasis, which both sustains and is sustained by tourist income, is achieved at the expense of Central Havana, a residential neighborhood largely ignored by tourists, where poor housing conditions and overcrowding predominate. Because Central Havana is not appealing to tourists, there is no financial impetus to improve the area. Almost seventy percent of Central Havana's buildings are in poor condition, while twenty to thirty percent are in such deterioration that they can not be regenerated, but only demolished and rebuilt, a process that is much more intensive in terms of both time and capital. (Bull et. al 2004: 152) This financial reality speaks to the ideological

¹⁴ Garfield, Richard. 1997 "The Impact of the Economic Crisis and the US Embargo on Health in Cuba." *American Journal of Public Health* 87(1): 15-20.

¹⁵ "La crisis económica de los años noventa afectó mucho al sector de la vivienda – con tecnologías e inversiones muy dependientes del suministro externo – y precipitó el cambio del modelo de desarrollo habitacional hacia otro que debía reunir los requisitos de sostenibilidad, participación y descentralización. Esto representaba un nuevo enfoque de soluciones encaminadas a lograr más y mejores resultados con menores recursos. Estas premisas resultan consecuentes con las estrategias sostenibles de viviendas de bajo costo promovidas por el Centro de las Naciones Unidas para los Asentamientos Humanos (CNUAH)." (CEPAL-INIE-PNUD 2004: 211)

conundrum in which Cuba finds itself; this discussion is alive and well among the government, social actors, and the public alike:

With a new emphasis on preservation and rehabilitation, the government intended to incorporate 400,000 new units into the housing stock between 1996-2000 (250,000 new and 150,000 by revitalization). This ambitious goal was not reached, but 141,000 units were added. In addition, 250,000 units were conserved, with half due to individual efforts. (Kapur & Smith 2002: 11)

As for those crumbling facades in Havana, there is an ongoing debate as to whether the old colonial buildings should be preserved, or whether priority should be given to providing new, affordable housing. Such concerns have led to an increasingly integrated approach to Havana's current regeneration policies. Strategies are now in place to regenerate pre-revolutionary housing stock in Habana Vieja, which has been declared a UNESCO world heritage site along with the adjoining area of Centro Habana (central Havana). (Bull, et. al. 2004: 151)

Housing as a Public Health Concept

Cuba's revolutionary infrastructures and capacities make the country an excellent site for health and housing intervention studies. Havana's housing in particular, due to its continued deterioration and disregard in favor of rural or institutional construction, has created a major health risk. Poor housing conditions lead to hazardous sanitary conditions, which are associated with tuberculosis, infectious and parasitic diseases. (Garfield 1997: 17) In spite of the increased health risk due to poor housing, the relatively low income disparity that exists in Cuba is less likely to confound the assessment of other health determinants than is the case in other countries. Because of Cuba's relative housing security, low-cost or free housing, and the restricted sale of housing, the typical relationship between poor housing and poor socioeconomic status in general does not apply.

Furthermore, meaningful community involvement is deemed crucial in public health interventions. Cuba is already extremely socially organized with a political and

cultural emphasis on the local and an interest in experimental, flexible, and innovative strategies.¹⁶ “In addition, health and welfare sector donors find that funds can go much further in Cuba than elsewhere because of lower overhead, transparency in the use of aid, and donor contributions often being smaller than the Cuban share.” (Spiegel et. al. 2004: 98) The Committees for the Defense of the Revolution, for example, operate as the local expression of power, with all tasks carried out for social benefit. Most importantly, health reforms are not implemented within the capitalist context that often comes at the sacrifice of the social good. The government, public health officials, and non-governmental organizations (NGOS) share the same goals: social justice and human rights.

The degree of community involvement and community-government partnership we found can be contrasted with that described in Lima, Peru, for example, where health service reforms – and specifically, the Local Committees for Health Administration (CLAS) – were implemented in an atmosphere of restraint owing to neoliberal economic policies that stressed financial deregulation and fiscal conservatism. The CLAS programme sought to promote community participation in health, in the face of health service decentralization, thus, as concluded by Iwami and Petchey, ‘lip service’ was paid to social participation and local democracy, yet community participation was subordinate to efficiency. Cuba, which is not a member of the International Monetary Fund or the World Bank, does not have its national priorities compromised by foreign debt pressures and is therefore in a more independent position to balance efficiency and equity concerns.” (Spiegel et. al 2004: 98)

A series of public health interventions were undertaken between 1995 and 1999 by a Canadian-Cuban collaboration between the Cuban Ministry of Health and National Institute for Hygiene, Epidemiology and Microbiology and the Canadian International Development Agency and Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada. The two parties originally met years earlier in meetings organized by the World Health

¹⁶ This is surprising to American researchers, given that innovation is normally associated with capitalism, not socialism.

Organization.¹⁷ The interventions aimed to improve the quality of life and human health in Cayo Hueso, Central Havana, an inner city neighborhood located in one of the oldest areas of the capital. Cayo Hueso, with its population of thirty-nine thousand inhabitants, has the highest population density in the country, as well as the highest density of an elderly population. Seventy percent of Cayo Hueso's housing was classified by the Municipal Department of Housing as poor, while thirty-eight percent was considered uninhabitable, and two hundred ten houses were classified as slums, with an overcrowding index of seven inhabitants per room.¹⁸ The Canadian-Cuban research collaboration's main objective was to build a national Cuban capacity for training environmental health professionals directly linked to the needs of policy makers and communities in the housing context. From extensive participatory research within the Cayo Hueso community, housing was found to be the largest perceived source of health risk, although the findings concerning the direct impact of housing improvements on health were suggestive, but not definitive.¹⁹

The public health researchers worked in conjunction with local officials in the Popular Council, the local arm of the legislative branch of government, as well as Cuban

¹⁷ Spiegel, Jerry, Maricel García, Mariano Bonet, and Annalee Yassi. 2006. "Learning Together: A Canada-Cuba Research Collaboration to Improve the Sustainable Management of Environmental Health Risks." *Canadian Journal of Public Health* 97(1): 50-55.

¹⁸ Tate, Robert B., Niurys Fernandez, Annalee Yassi, Mayilee Canizares, Jerry Spiegel, and Mariano Bonet. 2003. "Change in health risk perception following community intervention in Central Havana, Cuba." *Health Promotion International* 18(4): 279-286.

¹⁹ Spiegel, Jerry, Carlos Barceló, Eric B. Loucks, Mariano Bonet, Alfredo Aldama, and Annalee Yassi. 2004. "What the Cuban context provides health researchers: the feasibility of a longitudinal multi-method study of the impact of housing improvements on health in Havana, Cuba." *Journal of Public Health* 26(1): 95-100.

sociologists, psychologists, epidemiologists, and clinical and biomedical experts. The intervention was five-fold in its goals:

1. Repair of housing facades and leaking roofs and provision of basic construction materials to residents at substantially reduced prices for them to repair interiors;
2. Repair of streets and replacement of water mains to improve water supply and eliminate sources of contamination;
3. Improvement of solid waste removal by contracting with a new waste management service to maintain higher standards;
4. Installation of improved lighting throughout the community; and
5. Improvement in the level of social and cultural activities in the neighborhood²⁰

Besides just offering assistance to houses that were considered by the government to be in a repairable state, the intervention also included a cultural element that promoted various types of dance, music, and community pride, with the themes of improving health and the environment. (Tate et. al 2003: 281) The community is currently preparing to use the results of the analyses to set new priorities and pursue longer-term ecosystem health interventions. The public health intervention and subsequent campaign prompted the rehabilitation of more than ten thousand homes, the initiation of similar rehabilitation programs in thirty-one neighborhoods in Havana, and the extension of similar programs in sixteen other cities and forty-one other municipalities. (Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda 1999: 16) The measurable achievements of this public health campaign were not the only significant outcome of the collaboration, for the intervention was also successful in its recognition of Cuba as an ideal public health site. Canadian researchers praised the receptiveness and local organization of the Cuban community: “We had

²⁰ Spiegel, Jerry M., Mariano Bonet, Annalee Yassi, Enrique Molina, Miriam Concepción, and Pedro Mas. 2001. “Developing Ecosystem Health Indicators in Centro Habana: A Community-based Approach.” *Ecosystem Health* 7(1): 15-26.

demonstrated highly impressive community involvement, as well as intricate partnerships amongst community and governmental organizations in the interventions of the Cayo Hueso Plan.”²¹

Cuban Non-Governmental Organizations

The expansion and development of Cuba’s economy following the Special Period, in the current political and economic context of globalization, has unfortunately engendered and exacerbated socioeconomic inequalities among the population.²² Ameliorating these social inequalities is one of the goals of Habitat-Cuba, a Cuban non-governmental organization (NGO) created to encourage technological and cultural innovation within urban planning. Founded in 1974, Habitat-Cuba works on issues of self-help housing, urbanity, the environment, and other problem associated with the habitat. Habitat Cuba seeks to serve as an intermediary that can articulate and draw together the traditional state approach to housing and residents’ self-help initiatives. Habitat-Cuba recognizes that an exclusively technological approach to housing is inappropriate environmentally and culturally because standardized production, largely imported from the Soviet Union, does not consider the endogenous context. (García Pleyán 2001: 332)

²¹ Cuba is also unique in that even it is a Third World country that receives foreign aid and public health interventions, its excellent health standards and expertise enable Cuba to contribute to its own public health campaigns, as exemplified by the interdisciplinary Cuban team assembled for the Cayo Hueso Plan (Spiegel et. al. 2004: 96)

²² “Cuba’s insertion into a neo-liberal form of globalization is now having a social, cultural, and economic impact. As was to be expected, the development of commercial relations has begun to generate inequalities in our cities, both at the human level, as well as in the physical and practical sense. We need to find effective ways to neutralize this process. García Pleyán, Carlos. 2001. “Innovations for sustainable development in cities of the South: The Habitat-Cuba approach.” *Development in Practice* 2(2, 3): 332-335.

Habitat-Cuba takes a very critical approach to accepting foreign cooperation and aid. Habitat-Cuba requires any proposal to be jointly designed by those offering and those receiving assistance so that the local context is considered and emphasized in any project. It also requires certain questions to be addressed:

What are we willing to give up, not so much in the material sense but in terms of culture? To what extent are we really helping others, or in fact helping ourselves? How should we approach the enormous economic and financial imbalances between the two sides of such a partnership? How can we avoid reading the South with dictionaries and grammars of the North and vice versa? How, for instance, can a population that is not itself protected go about protecting the natural environment? Do we want just to transfer experiences or resources, or are we looking for mutual exchange? Cooperation with the South: sustainable for whom? (García Pleyán 2001: 335)

These questions, which should ideally be addressed by any developing country receiving foreign aid, are especially pertinent in the Cuban context considering Cuba's revolutionary goals of rectifying global inequality between the First and Third World while maintaining its socialist principles. Despite the fact that Cuban socialist ideology has traditionally placed blame on free-market capitalism for causing such inequalities, Habitat-Cuba takes an equally critical approach of supposed idealistic, philanthropic endeavors as well as questionable techniques already employed by the Cuban government.²³

²³ “The situation involving Habitat-Cuba is quite different. From the beginning, it questioned traditional models and technical solutions. The quality of state-built subsidized housing is bad, and one may have doubts as to its longevity. Self-help housing is no solution either, since it has to make use of haphazard materials and incompetent workmen. These two negative arguments have led Habitat-Cuba to develop a technology that is adapted to the situation, focusing on the acquisition of relevant know-how by the population concerned, and allowing for cost reduction. This approach also calls for architects trained in a novel manner, enabling them to provide technical assistance to the self-builders in order to endow the habitat of the poorest with an architectural and urban dimension, and redefine the urban space in more social terms.” Bolay, Jean-Claude, Yves Pedrazzini, Adriana Rabinovich, Andrea Catenazzi, and Carlos García Plenán. 2003. “Innovations in the urban environment and social disparities in Latin America: The shift from technical to social issues as the true challenge of change.” Paper presented at the Network-Association of European Researchers on Urbanization in the South Annual Seminar: Beyond the Neoliberal Consensus on Urban Development: Other Voices from Europe and the South, Université de Paris 7, Paris, France.

The Group for the Integral Development of the Capital, an interdisciplinary cohort of Cuban professionals engaged in urban sustainability, neighborhood planning and development projects, is another example of Cuba's uniquely endogenous solutions to its housing problem. The Group, which was founded as an official NGO in 1988, has forged new social relations between neighborhood organizations and political actors, as well as among government agencies, through a decentralized approach to sustainable community planning and development. The Group is composed of architects, sociologist, economists, and social workers, and works in conjunction with microbrigades, the Committees in the Defense of the Revolution (CDRs), and the Popular Councils. The Group's main goal is a "sustainable model of urban development that is deeply rooted in the local and the national context and therefore less vulnerable to dependency on foreign financing, energy, technology, politics, and culture."²⁴

The Group acknowledges the external reality in which Cuba is placed; Cuban planners have had to completely reconceptualize urban development due to the lack of both construction materials and energy since the Special Period began. Emphasis is again placed on technological alternatives and innovative, creative, and sustainable strategies, while simultaneously eliminating previous inefficiencies caused by poor coordination across different government, academic, and social agencies. The Group also underscores bottom-up grassroots community development, as opposed to top-down planning unfortunately characteristic of the state.

²⁴ Coyula, Mario. 1996. "The Neighborhood as Workshop." *Latin American Perspectives* 23(4): 90 -- 103.

The Uniquely Cuban Reality

Havana's housing situation, like all subjects having to do with Cuba, suffers the much anticipated fate of being characterized as an anomaly when considered in an academic context. Havana is the exception to the rule of global mega-city capitals in that its housing policy "is recognized as having spared the city the fate of so many other metropolitan areas of the Third World at the not insignificant price of decades of progressive deterioration in the preservation of the physical and technical infrastructure."²⁵ (Coyula 1996: 93) While Cuba is known for its severe deficit of habitable dwellings, the Cuban situation is considered to be less critical than the housing shortages suffered by its Latin American counterparts. (Mathey 1989: 67) A significant reason for this, according to Jill Hamburg, is that "Cuba has been almost uniquely successful among developing nations in channeling most internal migration away from the capital and toward provincial capitals and other cities and towns, a feat accomplished *without* direct administrative measures to control internal migration."²⁵

Cuba is also singled out for its uniqueness in that its microbrigades, while so important within the Cuban context, are not largely utilized in other countries mostly because of their emphasis on the collective and their disregard for market ideology so prevalent in other parts of both the First and Third World:

The difference may be that in Cuba this extra work invested by the *Microbrigadistas* is not transformed into 'surplus value' to be appropriated by a capitalist class, instead the output takes the form of a physical product which can be experienced, directly or indirectly, by everybody. Time, of course, is an important factor when it comes to fostering confidence in the solidarity of the collective. (Mathey 1989: 77)

²⁵ As quoted in Kapur & Smith 2002: 21. However, since the Special Period, legal measures have been enacted to restrict migration into the capital.

Furthermore, even though housing has suffered from the Special Period, the Cuban government is quick to point out that even in suffering neighborhoods social marginality does not exist, for these houses are occupied by a population that enjoys equal access to the country's economic and social life, a fact not necessarily shared by populations living in similarly poor urban housing conditions in other countries. (Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda 1999: 14) This difference, however, makes the possibility of transplanting Cuban solutions, such as microbrigades, rather unlikely, for the housing projects would probably only achieve short term improvements unless other basic needs such as health, food, and education that are already universally guaranteed in Cuba are addressed. (Mathey 1989: 78)

Finally, Cuba is distinctive in that its Revolution married popular culture and official ideology to such an extent that it is difficult to tease out where culture ends and policy begins. In other words, the Cuban Revolution and its aftermath have become a holistic experience, not just a mere static historical phenomenon. The aesthetic interpretation of the Cuban Revolution, with its themes of innovation, spontaneity, and individuality in the larger context of the collective benefit and social justice, is apparent even in its urban landscape:

In essence, a new image of the street is emerging with the creation of a ‘popular aesthetic’ based on the actual needs of the residents and initiated by them. In most cases, the improvements are characterized by spontaneity and individuality and they are carried out without official control or technical assistance. The visual effect constitutes a departure from the original image of the neighborhood, showing popular creativity and ingenuity as residents seek ways to solve their problems. These activities may be indicative of the great potential for active cooperation between the people, professionals and technical specialists, in addition to state support, in the formulation and implementation of neighborhood renovation programs.²⁶

²⁶ Harms, Hans. 1997. “To live in the city centre: housing and tenants in central neighborhoods of Latin American cities.” *Environment and Urbanization* 9(2): 191-212.

A Paradox Revisited

Housing in Havana is a socialist paradox because adequate housing, while recognized as a social good, has still not been successfully implemented more than forty-five years after the triumph of the Revolution. While housing has remained a priority of the Revolution, as exemplified by the laws of 1959 and 1960, actual physical improvement has been extremely slow due to a lack of finance and materials. More houses were constructed from 1930-1959 than in the post-Revolutionary period; these dwellings are now quite antiquated and are in bad technical state, requiring renovation. However, in spite of the slow pace and emphasis on rural construction, Cuba has improved its urban housing quantitatively speaking: in 1958 thirteen percent of urban housing was considered good, forty percent was considered regular, and forty-seven percent was considered poor. In 1998, sixty percent of urban housing was considered good, while twenty-seven percent was considered regular and thirteen percent was considered poor. These data are from the Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda, which determines the criteria for each category. The change in both rural and urban housing conditions can be examined in further detail in the chart below:

Change in the Condition of Dwellings (% of stock in given condition)

	Urban	Rural
	Good / Fair / Poor	Good / Fair / Poor
1958	13 / 40 / 47	3 / 22 / 75
1998	60 / 27 / 13	32 / 36 / 32

(Instituto Nacional de la Vivienda 1999: 13)

Despite various mitigation efforts on the part of the government, demand for housing has always outpaced supply on the national scale. Since housing is recognized as a human right, rather than a personal luxury, the government has always been under

extreme pressure to provide it, even under impossible circumstances: From 1971 to 1985, the need for housing grew from 754,000 units to 888,000. In the early 1970s, the government received 150,000 applications for only 7,000 vacant confiscated units, making fair choice absolutely unfeasible. Uncertain how to reconcile the gap between supply and demand, the government called upon trade unions to distribute housing to their own members based on need. However, housing need still outpaced dwelling supply; during the 1970s, the government began to consider merit such as job performance and general positive social behavior in addition to need alone. Between 1971 and 1985, forty percent of all state constructions were distributed this way. (Kapur & Smith 2002: 18) Since 1960, the Cuban population growth rate has been declining, from 2 percent in 1960, to 1.2 percent in 1970, to 0.9 percent in 1980, to 0.5 percent in 1990. (U.S. Census Bureau: International Data Base) This decline could help alleviate the housing shortage in years to come, but the current aging of the population creates further social consequences, especially in terms of social security distribution.

Cuba's economic crisis of the 1990s forced the government to open up to foreign investment. Even though this liberalization of Cuban markets has taken its toll on socioeconomic equality, it has also been beneficial in that Cuba is now able to take advantage of global public health initiatives and additional sources of funding in order to supplement its shortages and shortcomings in the housing field (as well as in other areas of social investment). From the public health perspective, globalization has mostly been beneficial to Cuba's housing situation because Cuba has been able to benefit from outside expertise and increased funding without having to sacrifice its official revolutionary goals of communal social good over individual personal benefit.

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