

# The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana<sup>1</sup>

*Cultural identity is the fragrance of the Earth, the myths we live on, and the legends that sustain us...*

*Moonis Raza*

## Historical background

Cities are the highest expressions of both material and spiritual culture in any society. Thus, their survival is the ultimate and most meaningful goal not only for urban planners and architects, but also for all human beings.

Havana was initially founded in 1514 on the south coast and after relocating to a healthier place by the Almendares River to seek fresh water, it settled by its sheltering harbor in 1519. San Cristobal de La Habana is the Capital of Cuba and its most important city since 1607 and Saint Christopher, the guardian of travelers, is Havana's patron saint. Cuba's strategic location turned it into "The Key to the New World and Bulwark of the West Indies" after the port of Havana became the most important naval hub among Spain's colonies.

The city also boasted both the most comprehensive defensive system and the largest shipyard, The Royal Arsenal, in America in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century. Ever since, the protected port became the economic engine of Havana. Thanks to the transformation of the function of its harbor from a service port for navigation into the gateway to a rich region of slave plantations, the increased export of the products of its hinterland such as sugar, coffee, and tobacco were placed on the world market and confirmed it as the key transshipment hub in the region.

By the end of the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, Havana's urban structure was fully developed with a well-defined street network, compact urban blocks and a public space system that provided an excellent balance in terms of urban enclosure, spatial articulation, and social interaction. In 1776, the former Military Parade Ground became Havana's first civic center and the new heart of the city. The preeminence of this space, considered a masterpiece of urban design, acquired a new meaning with the construction of both late-Baroque palaces, the Captaincy General and the Royal Taxes and Post Office or Palace of the Second Lieutenant that were completed by 1791. This created a unique relationship between the buildings and their site, that crafted a delightful spatial sequence that related urbanism, architecture, and landscape.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, the existing colonial urbanism was overtaken in terms of urban expansion and continuity, as well as strategic needs and progressive institutions, such as the influential Patriotic Society, or the so-called *Sociedad Economica de Amigos del Pais* favored an ambience of openness to

science, technology and management that helped to insert Cuba into the world economy and allowed Havana to adapt to multiple changes. Culture reached broader sectors of society and fostered the gradual consolidation of a strong sense of identity.

The economic influx derived in great part by the free trade was also reflected in the continued growth of the population —that had started to occupy some areas off the walls— and the overall increased commercial relationship with the rest of the country thanks to the railroad, introduced to Cuba in 1837, even before than in Spain, thanks to the Patriotic Society.

The architectural repertoire diversified with new hotels and theaters, cafes and bars, offices and banks, music and painting academies, shops and even cigar factories located on urban blocks with lovely facades and internal courtyards since cigar making is a non-polluting industry.

The expansion of the city off the walls was carried out in an orderly manner following a regulating plan —*Plan de Ensanche*, the first of its kind in Havana and in Hispanic America—led by Colonel Engineer *Antonio María de la Torre y Cardenas* around 1819 to accommodate the growth of the population after a huge business expansion was experienced. This plan reshaped Havana by using the existing roads that connected the city with the hinterland. The plan defined the layout of the streets, the size of blocks and lots and even public space and the new arteries soon became commercial streets with front shops sheltered by porticoes. They were named *Calzadas*, and they became Havana's trademark.

The *Calzadas* meant the most distinctive feature of Havana's new streetscape since the long, continuous porches of *Reina, Monte, El Cerro, Galiano, Infanta*, and *Belascoain* streets, among others, lent the city a new urban image that was soon redefined again by Governor *Don Miguel Tacon* Public Works Plan (1834-1838).

Both, the Garden City of El Vedado (1859-60) and The Walls District by Juan Bautista Orduña (1865) meant the birth of modern planning in Cuba while the latter fostered the creation of a new civic center around the Parque Central. The Walls district's distinctive streetscape created by the spread of porticoes on streets and avenues enforced by the 1861 Ordinances gave Havana a distinct personality, provided sheltered walkways and allowed their public use. Retail enlivened street life and seemed to continue and extend the spirit of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century porches that surrounded the squares but reached a broader city scale in a linear way along the facades of buildings, sketching out what Cuban writer *Alejo Carpentier* (1904-1980) called "The City of Columns."

The 20<sup>th</sup> Century was most eventful in Cuba. The end of the Spanish domain thanks to the US intervention in the so-called Cuban Spanish American War (1898-1902) meant a new epoch. Since the

beginning of the century, Cuba experienced the birth of new civic institutions, an impressive infrastructure update and the openness to new international and local business opportunities that led to the country's new order and renovation.

Havana's urban landscape began to change since 1901 when the city was oriented to the sea for the first time in history with the construction of the first stretch of the Malecon, an iconic seaside boulevard that was started at the colonial fort of *La Punta* in Old Havana by US engineers Mead and Whitney.

Foreign investment from both Americans and Europeans led to both a great boom in real estate and construction businesses in Havana and to suburban sprawl since new subdivisions started to spread westwards. They began with the new district of *Miramar* in 1911 by Cuban architect *Leonardo Morales* and American William O'Malley, although not developed until between 1914 and 1918, and was followed by the Country Club Park in 1914 by Boston Landscape architect Sheffield A. Arnold around a golf course and an artificial lake and *La Playa de Marianao* Amusement Park and Residences conceived of by *Santiago Rodriguez* and *Eduardo Prats* in 1915. These new developments were financed by both American and Cuban capital and followed the influence of Frederick Law Olmstead's City Beautiful Movement from the United States and Ebenezer Howard's Garden City from Great Britain. Not only these suburbs emulated the fashionable American urban model based on the use of the automobile, but their main buildings reflected the influence of the prevailing Eclecticism.

Once again, the existing colonial urbanism was overtaken in terms of urban expansion thanks to the now generalized infrastructure upgrading, land speculation and a lack of comprehensive planning that caused the loss of Havana's tradition of mixed public and private use, its seamless urban fabric and social stratification.

By the late 1920s Havana exhibited a very well-defined urban structure with a strong European influence and a significant collection of beautiful civic spaces and public buildings that turned it into a cosmopolitan Caribbean city with a strong European influence by the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Not only did the two world wars not affect Cuba but even favored its economy with an immediate response in the form of construction booms; the peak price of sugar in the international markets boosted the Cuban economy and filled the country's ark and the tycoons' pockets. In addition to accomplish significant economic growth, the country perfected a long overdue legal framework with the 1940 Cuban Constitution which summoned up the people's aspiration, the civil society's role and succeeded to include clauses concerning urbanism and housing after the restless work of a group of professionals who advocated the need to address the problems that were affecting the contemporary city.

The skyline of Havana started to change with the appearance of moderate high-rise office and apartment buildings —after the 1952 Law of Horizontal Property passed— and cultural and commercial life boomed. Urban density and intensity were at their peak and added to Havana’s image, fame, and appeal. By the late 1950s Cuban architecture and construction achieved an unsurpassed level of excellence and a recognized world-class prestige. The *Calzadas* were packed with shops, bars, hotels, and sophisticated department stores that rivaled the most demanding and fashionable ones from New York or Europe and were sought after even by Hollywood actors and actresses and many celebrities who visited Havana.

The National Board of Planning was created in 1955 and integrated the elite of Cuban architects. The Board commissioned an urban plan to the US firm Town Planning Associates known as “The Pilot Plan for Havana” that was presented and approved in Havana in 1958 and heavily threatened the city’s integrity and image. Although scientifically approached, attempted against Havana’s urban heritage with its aggressive proposal for a financial district with high-rise buildings in Old Havana, an artificial island across the Malecon and a new Presidential Palace across the Bay. Had it been executed, it would have meant a major change in the character of the waterfront Havana and would have undergone terrible consequences in terms of the city’s urban fabric, architectural image, and cultural identity.

The triumph of a new government in 1959, prevented the plan to be executed. Free public health and free education were among the main goals and new country-wide programs involved the construction of hospitals, schools, recreational and sports facilities, new cultural centers, factories, parks, and social housing projects across Cuba.

The new government issued new laws and confiscated US properties and companies that provoked a strong reaction from the US Government and led to the breach of diplomatic relationships. Very soon and because of economic and professional instability and concerns, a first massive exodus took place, mostly but not only to the US, which continued both legally and illegally along the rest of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and through the first decades of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century with a peak figure between 2023-2024.

Although Havana experienced impressive growth during its first half, it was spared the damage of global urban renewal and overdevelopment of the second half. Even today, Havana keeps intact its traditional urban fabric, the only remaining one of its kind in Hispanic America. Its unique and appealing spirit stems not only from the well-known quality of its music and rhythms, its vibrant street life, and its friendly ambience, but also from its built environment. Notwithstanding, the city’s harmonious juxtaposition of different architectural styles, displayed by an impressive collection of buildings

authored by world famous local and international architects, is currently threatened by abandonment, and neglect.

Housing, infrastructure, energy and water supply, garbage recollection and public transportation are critical issues that heavily impact the city's everyday functioning nowadays and, much worse, the life of the Cuban population. Besides, Cubans living in the island are threatened also by old and new diseases, while the building stock is critically affected by the frequent collapse of its dilapidated buildings.

In 1982, Old Havana and its chain of fortresses were designated a UNESCO World Heritage Site. Havana is a city with a spirit, or *Genius Loci*, that gives life to both people and place, a resilient city. It is still today a polycentric city with an extension of 727 Km<sup>2</sup> or (281 square miles), and a current population of about two million inhabitants. Thus, the safeguarding of Havana's cultural identity is of the essence and the rehabilitation of its derelict infrastructure, and the restoration of its built environment are crucial for its future. Havana is now ready for sensitive change and renovation according to sustainable principles and practices and needs to offer a new way of life to its citizens.



Havana's urban growth by the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century



Havana from across its Bay. Three layers of history, three layers of time

Architect and Urban Planner Julio Cesar Perez Hernandez drafted an Urban Master Plan based on a long-term holistic vision for Havana's future development aimed at the preservation of the city's urban and architectural heritage and at creating new economic opportunities. Although one of the main objectives is to revitalize the city's image and bring back its past splendour and glory, its goal is to bring progress for both the city and the people.

The plan stems from the awareness that Havana faces unprecedented challenges and needs change and renovation according to sustainable principles and practices. It is rooted in both the geography and the history of the city and supports the idiosyncrasy of the Cuban people and their traditions. It aspires to restore the undeniable beauty, magic, and poetry of Havana and its cosmopolitan character.

The Urban Master Plan constitutes a document that can safeguard Havana's urban structure, and protect it with a new law, while rehabilitating the urban spaces and buildings. It was registered in the US Library of Congress for Copyright in 2006.

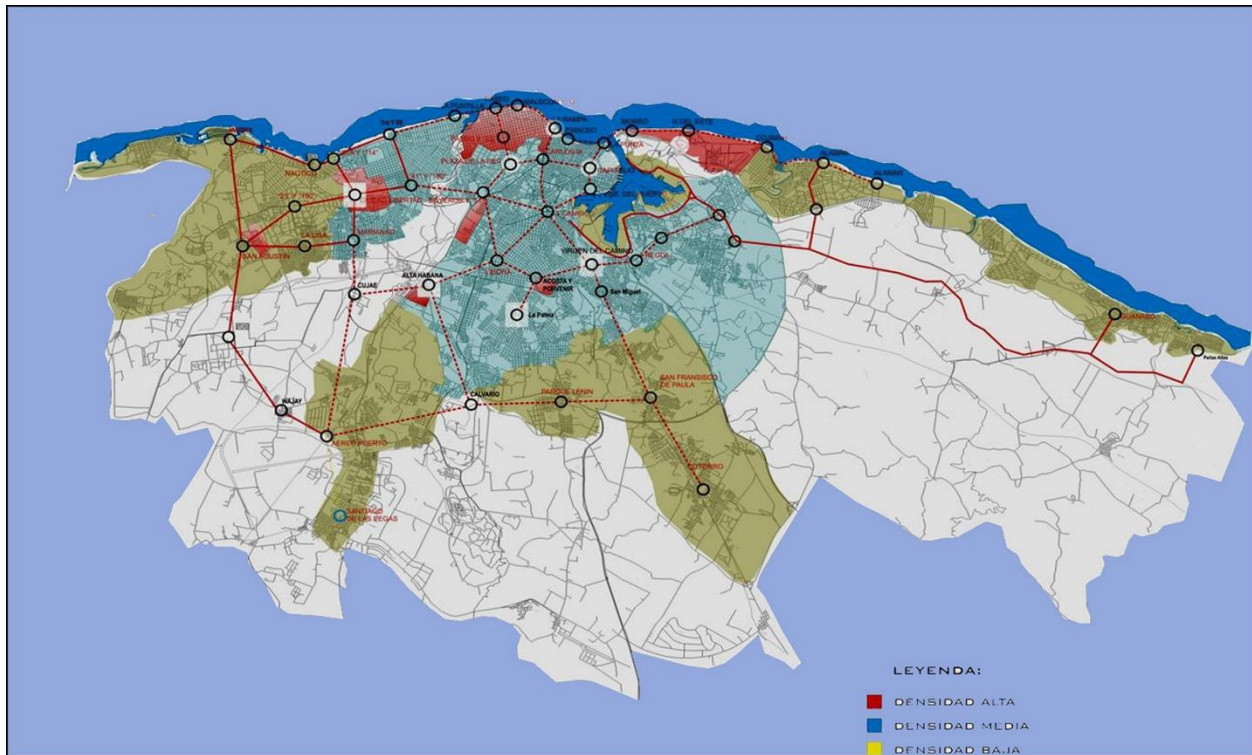
Havana is a city of many traditions. The plan emphasizes the importance of Havana's diverse urbanism and architecture while envisioning a new thriving Havana through new economic development that respects its historical legacy and satisfies the city and the people's needs and aspirations.

*We cannot see the future, but we can design for it!*

*Carl Steinitz*

The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana is based on ten concepts:

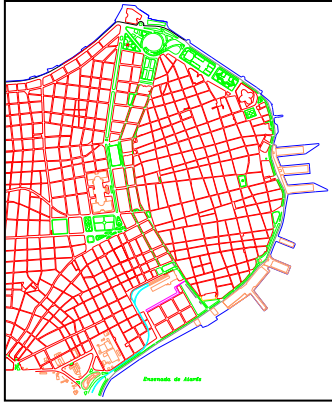
- A Long-Term Holistic Vision for Future Development
- A New Civic Landscape based on a New Legislation encompassing a new Law of Land Use
- Waterfront Revitalization. New Streetscapes and Buildings responding to the Waterfront
- Natural and Cultural Heritage Preservation
- Environmental, Economic and Cultural Sustainability
- Reinforcement of the Traditional Polycentric Structure. Completion of the Civic Center
- Infrastructure Upgrade/Public Transportation System
- Increase of Public Space and Green Areas. Buffer Zones versus Sea Level Rising
- Mixed-Use Infill Development with Emphasis on Housing
- Revitalization of historical “*Calzadas*” (commercial avenues)



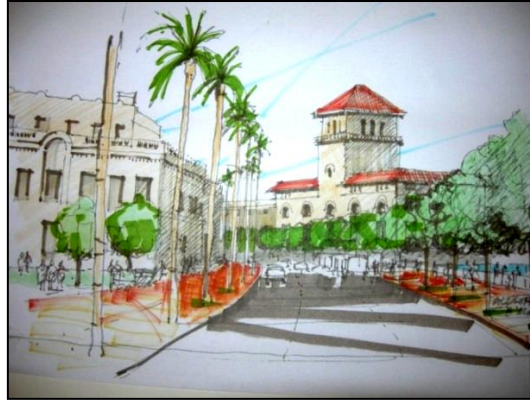
The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana is comprehensive and quite ambitious in its scope. A new legislation aimed at the reassessment of land values and land uses, and an appraisal of all zones within Havana is key to advance any future project in Cuba to grant rights to investors and stakeholders. It should advocate both foreign and local investment, while respecting the city's urban and architectural codes.

The Master Plan contains projects for the different districts of Havana and their waterfront and central areas. This means that there are projects for Old Havana, Casablanca, Regla, Atares and East Havana, as well as for Centro Habana, El Vedado, and Miramar.

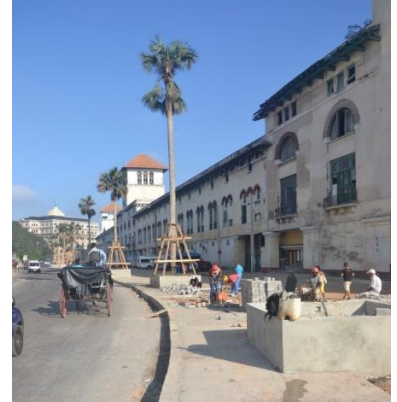




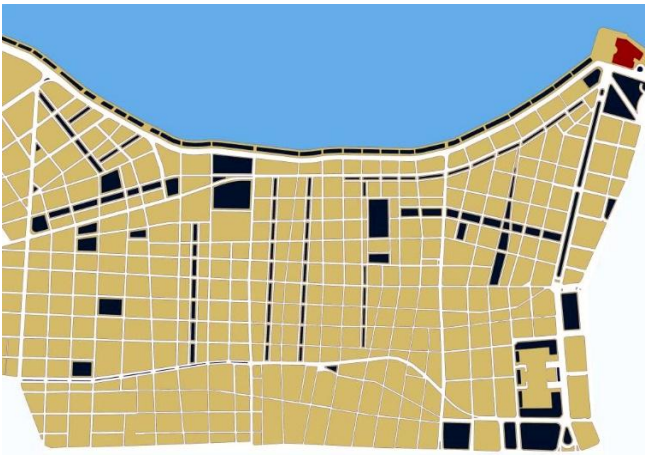
Old Havana



Proposal for the Avenue of the Harbor



Implementation



Proposal for Centro Habana

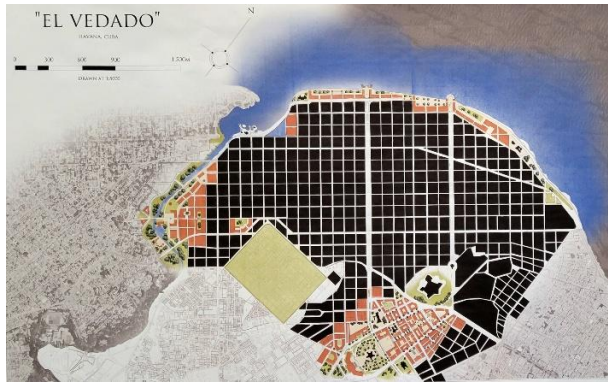


Proposal for Centro Habana Parque Maceo Area

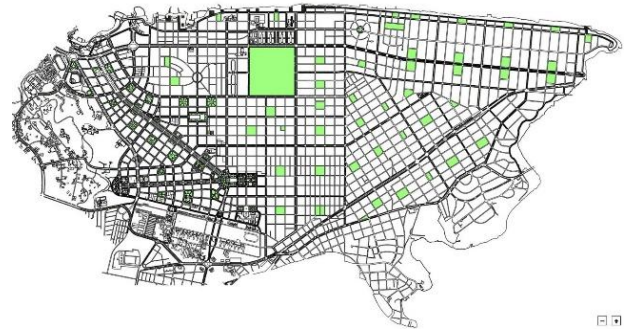


Aerial views of Parque Maceo and the Malecon in Centro Habana





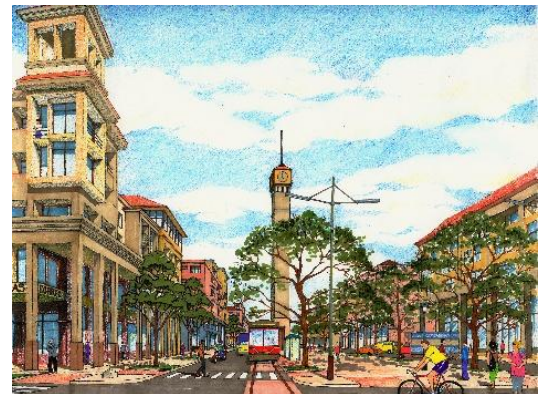
Proposal for El Vedado



Proposal for Miramar



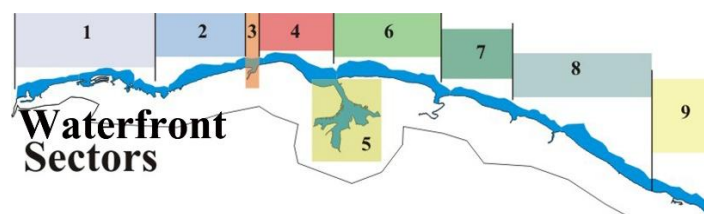
Proposal for Casablanca waterfront



Atares new image

The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana assessed the potential of Havana's waterfront as a key component to boost the economy by developing the waterfront with a new urban landscape supported by private and public finances. The proposal encompasses both urban spaces and buildings oriented to but protected from the sea that redefine the image of the city and involves the renovation of the obsolete infrastructure and the creation of a new public transportation system.

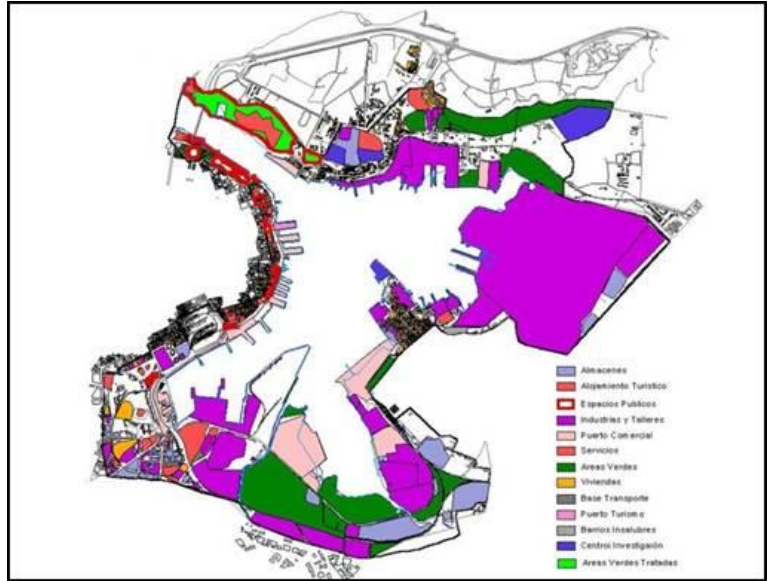
Havana's waterfront was divided into sectors for its comprehensive study and planning, work started with the harbor sector, the economic engine of Havana since colonial times, and spread westward until Miramar and Jaimanitas, and eastward until Cojimar and East Havana.







Aerial View of the Harbor of Havana. Existing



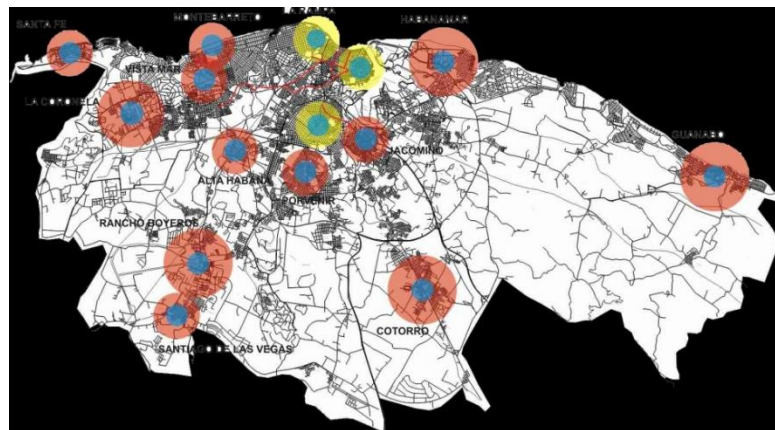
Land Use. Harbor Area



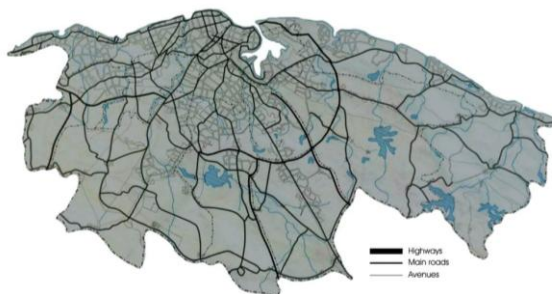
Master Plan for the Harbor of Havana & East Havana served by a new light rail transportation system

The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana aspires to recreate a pedestrian-friendly urban environment, that encourages outdoor living and social and cultural integration where people can meet, work, relax and enjoy freedom. It calls for preserving the authenticity of the city and its neighborhoods and tries to remain true to its history, its people, and its urban landscapes.

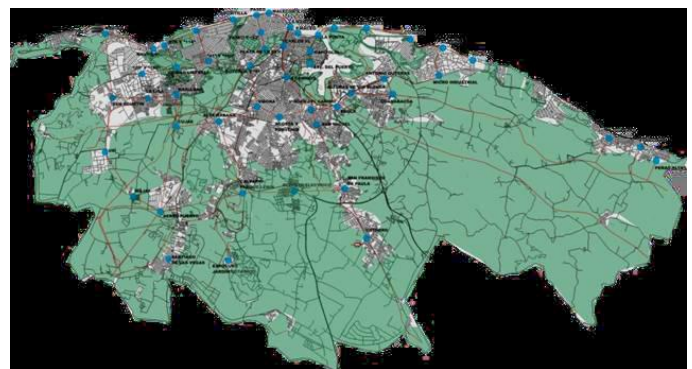
The Plan is conceived of for 2 million people, and it represents an ecological alternative to suburbanization by reinforcing the traditional polycentric character of Havana. Although it envisions the completion of Havana's thoroughfares to increase connectivity between its historical districts, it intends to keep the balance with the natural scenery by increasing the amount of green space within the city and its presence in open spaces.



Honoring Havana's polycentric character and building on it



The completion of Havana's thoroughfares



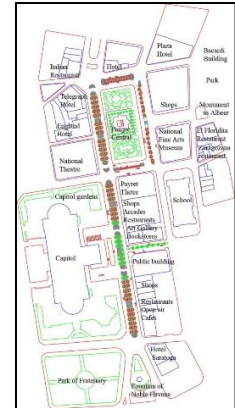
A Greener Havana

The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana addressed the reinforcement of the city's polycentric structure and its urban role. It focused on two proposals, one for the unfinished Civic Square, located in El Vedado district, and another one in the old city, consisting of extending the Paseo del Prado.





Master Plan for the Civic Square in El Vedado



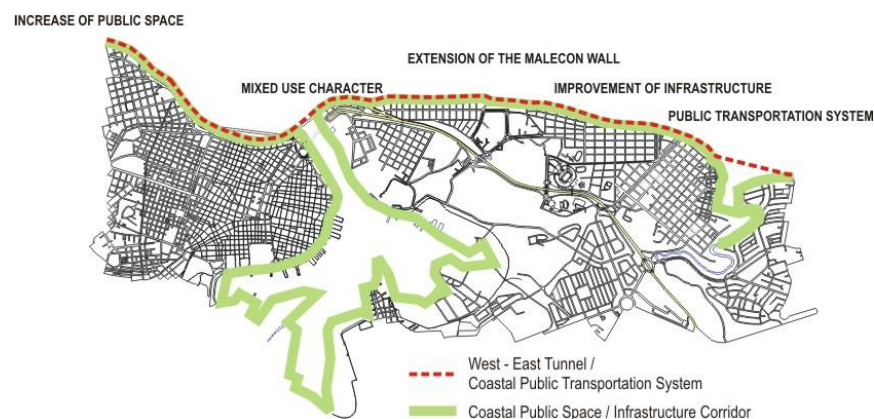
National Capitol Area

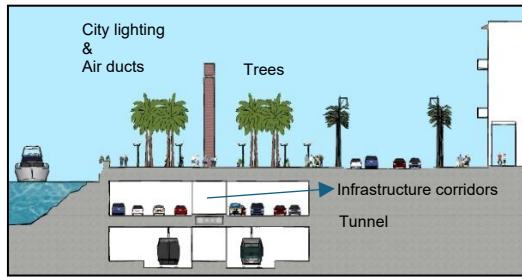
The Master Plan stresses a huge increase of public spaces along the waterfront, so the newly designed streetscape and landscape will create a new image of the city by increasing the variety of plazas, parks, and promenades.

For the Malecon stretch this is achieved by extending the Malecón wall beyond its current location and by taking advantage of the existing topography of the reef for allocating underground tunnels for public and private transportation. Efficient means of transport running along the tunnels such as hybrid and electric buses and trains will decongest the current East-West traffic and respond to massive public transportation needs.

The upper surface of the East-West tunnel anchored on the reef slope creates a buffer zone that protects the buildings along the public promenade by taking away the marine aerosol now blocked by a trees screen while resolving the current flooding issues with a new and efficient drainage system.

This solution also allows for the renovation of the much-needed urban infrastructure with the creation of infrastructure corridors allocated within the tunnels and for the expansion of the waterfront public space with squares, parks, and even beaches.





### Section of the Tunnel



### Partial aerial view of The Tunnel



An aerial view of Centro Habana showing increase of public space and new buildings that respect the urban code  
(Ordinances)

Another goal of the plan is the revitalization of the historical commercial arteries, called “*Calzadas*”, born with the Plan of Expansion laid out by Colonel Engineer Antonio María de la Torre y Cárdenas between 1817 and 1819 and made worldwide famous for the commercial density developed along them and their vibrant street life. Their porches became one of Havana’s trademarks and influenced the 1861 Ordinances by defining the character, the scale, the image, and the hierarchy of the thoroughfare. Calzada de la Reina, Cerro, Monte, Puentes Grandes, Marianao, Zanja, Jesús del Monte to name just a few.



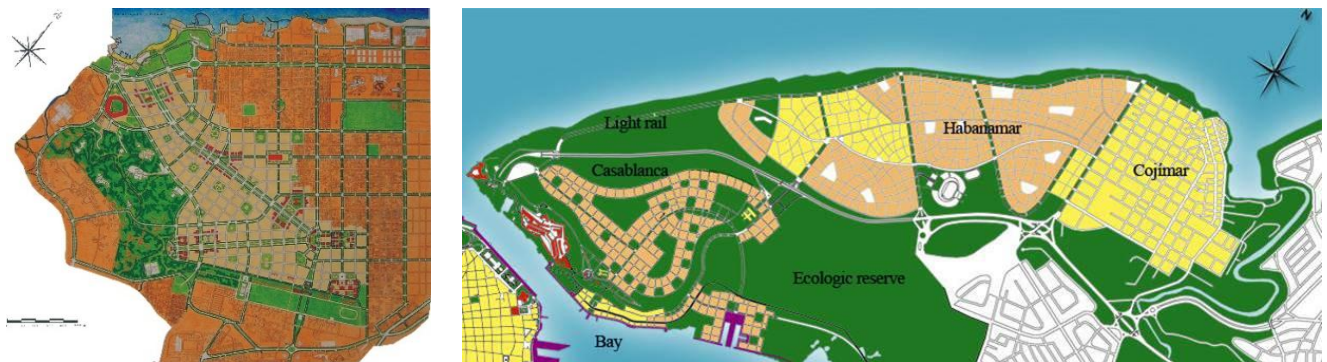
“Calzadas”



Environmental sustainability is key in the plan which first and foremost emphasizes the importance of the sanitation of the Bay of Havana and the two existing rivers that pollute it, the Luyano River and the Martin Perez River, and their affluents. To achieve this, it is crucial to turn the current industrial character of the derelict and contaminated harbor into a clean one for sport fishing boats and recreational vessels. A buffer area was designed for the entire perimeter of the harbor, now allowing for the increase of public space and for the protection of existing heritage buildings and new mixed-use urban infill development.

Learning from the traditional city, the “Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana” stresses the importance of new mixed-use urban infill development to reduce sprawl and to achieve a rational land use while increasing the density in central areas where commerce plays a key role. This strategy will help to revitalize and redevelop the traditional districts while keeping their identity.

The seamless integration of two new neighborhoods, one to the West (Vistamar) and another one to the East (Habanamar) with the existing fabric will contribute to enhance connectivity and regional liaisons within the city while providing approximately half a million new dwellings to meet varying housing requirements. Their respective master plans based their layouts on a grid with a hierarchical street network, well-defined centers and edges, compact blocks, and abundant public space. New streetscapes will give a strong character to these zones according to their own geography, history, and culture.



Vistamar takes advantage of the dismantled Columbia airport Habanamar increases connectivity with new light rail system

Vistamar is located within Miramar and takes advantage of a dismantled military airfield, known as “*Campo Columbia*” (Camp Columbia), a military post constructed by the US Army during the Spanish-American War, and Cuba’s original and main airport until the 1930s. The existing runways were reutilized as primary roads flanked by trees. This project provides a seamless connection between the districts of Miramar and Marianao while integrating the Schools of Art as its artistic center. Habanamar

resolves the decades-long problem of the unfinished East Havana Housing project that dates to 1961, by seamlessly linking it with the fishermen town of Cojimar. It is oriented to the sea and uses a green buffer zone to mitigate the noise from the Monumental Road. Its layout expands the existing grids of both East Havana and Cojimar.

Between 2006 and 2020, the I.N.T.B.A.U. Cuban Chapter held annual urban design Charrettes in Havana led and organized by Julio Cesar Perez Hernandez to publicly assess the ideas of the Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana. Both foreign and local urbanists, architects, historians, geographers, and ordinary people were invited to take part in the first participatory planning process ever in Cuba.

The Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana aspires to a more beautiful, urban, and dignified Havana where all its inhabitants can live, work, and enjoy it: a contemporary city that respects and values tradition, order and urbanity and honor the culture of the cities.



Notes about “A Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana”

1. “A Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana” is a comprehensive urban project conceived and developed by Professor Julio Cesar Perez Hernández and his team. It is not an official plan, but a personal reflection on the city, its history and its urban evolution that represents a proposal for preserving its urban and architectural legacy, while creating new economic and urban opportunities for the future.

Professor Pérez Hernández conceived of it and worked on it during his time at the Harvard University Graduate School of Design (2001-2002) and continued to develop it afterwards. Later, around 2005, he enjoyed the collaboration of several former students from the School of Architecture of the University of Havana who asked him to join the project and participate in its development.

“A Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana” was not commissioned by anyone and it was done entirely Pro Bono; it is a work of love, a professional and human endeavor for the salvation of the city. The urban plan expresses the team’s vision for the future, not the Cuban government’s and neither any of the Cuban official planning agencies, and it is not compromised by any foreign institution or individual.

“A Master Plan for 21<sup>st</sup> Century Havana” was registered at the US Library of Congress in 2006. Professor Julio Cesar Perez Hernandez has lectured extensively across the US, Europe, and Canada about this plan.

2. I.N.T.B.A.U. (International Network for Traditional Building, Architecture, and Urbanism) is a global network with chapters and members in many countries