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Reseña de "Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis" de Joseph L Scarpaci, Roberto Segre and Mario Coyula
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búsqueda de nuevos lenguajes expresivos, aquellos que procuren la preservación y desarrollo de la danza tradicional, así como todos los amantes del baile, encontrarán en este libro una fascinante gama de experiencias e investigaciones, además de una poderosa fuente de aliento e inspiración. Esperamos que la publicación de este valioso libro sirva de punto de arranque para el desarrollo de nuevas investigaciones comparativas sobre la danza en la región, así como de intercambios culturales que nos ayuden a trascender las fronteras insulares tan perjudiciales a nuestras prácticas académicas y artísticas.

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Referencias


“Havana,” wrote Alejo Carpentier, “is a city of unfinished works.” This present volume, written by three specialists in architecture and urban planning with between them many years of familiarity with the Cuban capital, provides an in-depth biography of this city. Havana has captured the imagination of
many generations, and there is an already existing literature that deals with the formation and development of the city: from Roig de Leuchsenring’s (1963) extensive notes on Havana’s history, through Carpentier’s (1970) impressionistic accounts, to more recent books that have fed the world’s new-found interest (Álvarez-Tabío 2000; Barclay 1993). However, none can match Scarpaci, Segre and Coyula in their combining of a detailed and objective description of the city’s growth with the contemporary reality of Havana as an urban space. That Havana: Two Faces of the Antillean Metropolis should be re-released, in a revised edition, just five years after its first publication is testimony both to the timeliness and usefulness of such a volume, and the ongoing pace of change in Havana.

The book broadly falls into two main parts. The first traces, in four chapters, the historical development of Havana from its foundation in the sixteenth century, through the twentieth century and into the post-59 period. The way in which the physical space of the city, and the buildings that occupy it, have passed through successive expansions and reinventions is explored, giving the impression of layers partially covering earlier layers as new generations moulded Havana according to their needs. A possible criticism might be that there is a temporal imbalance in their approach, which squashes the first 350 years of the city’s history into a single chapter, the next fifty years into another, with the rest of the book ostensibly dealing with the period from the 1950s to the present. However, since the past continues to remain a feature of the present this is perhaps a positive feature of the book, in comparison with so many other texts about the city in which the present becomes buried under the privileging of the past.

This historical review serves as an extended prologue for the second part, in which five thematic chapters explore key aspects of contemporary urban policy: city government and administration; housing; economy; social functions; and the special case of Habana Vieja (Old Havana), with its gradual restoration as a UNESCO World Heritage site. These each provide a wealth of
recent historical detail, and current facts that together builds a complex picture of today's Havana, seen as the result of shifting political, economic and social priorities.

In their Preface, the authors warn against taking the book’s subtitle too literally (p. xx). Nevertheless, the characterisation of the city as having ‘two faces’ is something that reverberates, in different guises, throughout: whether of past and present, planned and improvised, or living and decaying. As anyone who has spent anytime in Havana knows, this is a city full of its own internal contradictions, and it is this that gives the city its remarkable vitality—a vitality that even the economic difficulties of recent years have not succeeded in dampening.

Throughout the book, the authors succeed in intertwining past and present together, such that even though the apparent structure of the volume would suggest that they are perpetuating the pre-59/post-59 dichotomy that dominates much literature on Cuba, they show how even in the revolutionary period the past remains ever present:

The city reaches out to pedestrians hurrying through its streets; they do not have to raise their head to see if the old companion of their dreams is stubbornly there—peeling, crumbling, distorted by salt and water yet incredibly alive and useful (p.195).

Although the authors’ grasp of the more general historical context is at times wanting, this can be forgiven because they are so successful in combining both the linear temporal progression of the history of the city itself, with the juxtaposition throughout of fresh attempts to reinvent the city grappling with the results of earlier attempts.

It is this tendency for the city, or its planners, to never succeed in entirely reinventing itself that runs throughout the book. The authors chronicle the intermittent attempts at devising and executing grand master plans for Havana. Political will succeeds in carrying these plans only so far, only for them to be subsequently abandoned incomplete, supplanted by new priorities or coming up against insurmountable difficulties. Thus even Havana’s planned...
face has a feeling of improvisation about it. On the other hand, the improvised way in which habaneros have themselves played a part in changing the fabric of their city (whether constructing their own houses, adapting existing ones through vertical or internal extensions, or making use of unused spaces for food production) has itself been regulated, so preventing the uncontrolled sprawl of urban poverty that can be found throughout Latin America.

However, for all that the book demonstrates the multiple faces of Havana as a built environment, the two million faces that inhabit it appear as little more than shadows. Though they succeed in describing, in great detail, the city as a space to be lived, worked and played in; those who do the living, working and playing never become the subject. This is a weakness of the book, and detracts from the evident love that the authors feel for Havana. In the earlier historical chapters, they draw very little on contemporary accounts from the different periods of the city’s history. Had they done so, this might have provided a more human feel for what the city was like in times gone by, and would have enabled a counterpoint to be established between Havana as a built and as a lived space.

The same is true of the later, more contemporary chapters. Thus, they present the hard facts of housing shortage and need, and detail the history of, for example, the microbrigade movement that was established to help solve this. But this story lacks the voices of those who did the building, and who needed the housing. Though the authors repeatedly refer to the need to empower the city’s residents, the book’s protagonists remain the town planners and architects: this is a book about them, and about the city they are responsible for. But there is something barren about a history of a city that is reduced to its constructions and its spatial arrangement, and the political choices that relate to this.

In writing about the renovation of Habana Vieja, the authors rightly criticise a tendency to forget about the inhabitants and their perceptions of what their city is and should be:

...the problem not only was one of color but also concerned issues of historical veracity given that such banal and pictur-
esque perfection never registered in the collective memory of habaneros (p.338).

This can be seen in recent times, with the attempt to clean up the historic centre, and remove from it something of the nocturnal rowdiness that has characterised the city since its foundation: as though the unruly, and thoroughly traditional, behaviour of its inhabitants were a distraction from the beauty of its architecture. Yet a city that lacks such vital signs is missing its reason to exist. It is this lack of a human face inhabiting its buildings and spaces that prevents this book from doing for Havana what Mike Davis (1990), for example, has succeeded in doing for Los Angeles.

Nevertheless, this should not detract from the great strengths of this book, which will deservedly become a much referred to source not just for all those studying Havana, but also for anyone who has been in any way touched by this remarkable city. This book is a testimony to Havana’s ability to endure. The city continues to breath and grow, with its crumbling past somehow surviving and merging into present improvisations and future plans. To echo the authors: “La Habana siempre, siempre nuestra Habana”.

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