



HAVANA: STRIVING FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Using Art as a Tool to Communicate

ABSTRACT

The beautiful and vibrant city of Havana, Cuba is surging with opportunity and chances to advance in sustainable development. While development is typically characterized by mass-production and the construction of high-rise buildings aimed at tourists, a community in the outskirts of Havana is creating a new initiative open to all people that benefits the community, creates a voice for the marginalized, and shows society that sustainable development can be a small step using the tool of art as a mechanism to promote unity and advancement.

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Background

When in Havana, Cuba, one will inevitably witness the two sides of this beautiful city: the new and the old. Havana is a contrast between striving to develop and join the international community, while also embracing the old, the historical components, and the presence of past battles. One of the most stunning scenes of the city is seeing how new architecture and buildings are specifically designed and dedicated to the principal industry of the nation: tourists. Hotel chains, such as the Meliã Hotels International, have impressive and modern buildings and resorts across the nation. This makes sense if we look at the scope and impact that tourism has on the Cuban economy: According to *Responsible Vacation*, tourism added about \$3 billion to the Cuban economy in 2016, making this sector the main source of revenue for the island. In a country where the average earning is \$30 a month, this is quite an influx of monetary value for their financial system. Tourism numbers also continue to increase each year, with 4.5 million people visiting the island in 2018 according to *Travel Weekly*. With this being said, it makes sense that foreign industries would want to come invest in fancy hotels and business. However, in a country where residence buildings are almost all government owned, there is a wide development gap between the Cuba that Cubans live in and the one that tourists experience.

Contrast in Architecture



In the pictures on the left, we see the distinct contrast between the Meliã Cohiba Hotel in Havana, Cuba, right in front of the Malecón, as opposed to a resident neighbor in Old Havana.

Cuban Culture & Society

Cubans have a lively and uplifting personality, and their kindness and joy radiates through them instantly upon meeting them. Music guides their feet as they make their way through paved, cobblestone streets going about their daily lives. Cubans are hard-working, dedicated individuals that despite the struggles they may be facing, will still embrace a positive character and depict their national pride. Havana is a city full of history, from the Spanish conquest in the Caribbean, to the rise of Fidel Castro, their beloved *comandante*, and even the presence of the American embargo on the island. While this last point may be a more modern political-economic issue, it is a challenge that has encompassed the Cuban culture for many years now and has a direct impact on the people. One of the negative aspects present in Cuban society is the lack of development, and the struggle to sustainably evolve and promote stability. As briefly mentioned before, property is almost all state-owned because under a communist regime this is one of the thriving principles. For this reason, many citizens are not able to update their homes or buildings, and funds is always a scarce resource as well. This has left many neighborhoods in and around Havana with a gloomy scene, where you can see the contrast between poverty and lack of means to better the state of their surroundings. Yet even with this



visible element, people are finding ways to promote development in unique ways and create a message of unity and advancement towards a new society that thrives on community work and work ethic. This specific element is the use of art.

Muraleando

One of the most eye-opening and thought-provoking places I saw in this trip was a community art center known as *Muraleando*, which greatly reminded me of a recent art initiative that took place in the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, where buildings were painted in several colors to reflect the beauty of these places that are often seen as shabby and overlooked by the rest of society. The narrow roads leading up to *Muraleando* reflected some of the poverty that is

present in Havana, as it was a neighborhood where buildings were crumbling, roads looked much older, and you didn't get a feeling of cumbia and spark that you could sense in the rest of the city. However, this community art center placed right at the heart of this neighborhood gave a complete opposite feeling to this- it gave hope and made you smile upon seeing its vibrant colors at the entrance. This was a place that was being built from the bottom up, and the surrounding streets also witnessed some of its message, as art, sculptures and vibrant murals could be seen painted on various walls. As the director of this initiative told us, this neighborhood used to be full of trash lining the streets and it was a sort of "forgotten area" in the society, because it had nothing to offer the rest of the city. However, Muraleando was established as an initiative to



clean up the streets, to create a voice for the people of this area, and get the community involved in a positive project that helps people and their neighborhood.



The Project: Art as Advancement

Interestingly, many of the art projects seen at this community center were created using



bits of "trash" that were found on the street when clean-up began. You can see pieces of old screws, bottles, and even typewriters used to create a magnificent work of art, symbolizing that sometimes what we consider trash can be a hidden treasure and used to depict that the old can be embraced in the new, a message very prevalent throughout the Cuban society and culture. A mural painted on a wall in the street

also exemplifies this message that the old can be embraced in the new, as an old painting is being painted once again yet using a more modern technique and more vibrant colors. It is the same picture yet is being brought to life in a new and distinct way. Aside from acting as an art hub, it also has more to offer for the community, including free classes for kids in art, dance, and music. This is a safe space for children to come and learn something new that can invigorate their lives in a positive manner, and parents don't need to worry about the financial aspect at all. Artists



also have a chance to sell their artwork, which is how this project stays afloat- a certain percentage of the proceeds from these sold pieces of art go towards funding the community center and costs of materials. Weddings and other special events are also able to be celebrated here, bringing the community together for festivities and music.

Sustainable Development in Art

Upon seeing this beautifully crafted center, I automatically began to question how this initiative could serve as a model of development for the nation, and countries around the world. This place offered a once torn down area a chance to strive through the use of art, an important tool that sends a message of unity and beauty in the smallest corners of the world. It is also important to consider the sustainability aspect in this project. Their definition of development is not introducing business into the area and building high-rise hotels with fancy rooms that cater only to tourists, which brings about pollution and trash on the streets, but rather they used art as an inclusive activity that would bring the community together to rebuild their neighborhood, clean up trash and recycle products that could be turned into a sign of moving forward. This center also offers children and adults the opportunity to learn and thus access education for free. People are able to participate in various types of classes, which thus promotes wellbeing and opportunities. They are also able to see their





neighborhood clean, full of life, and striving for a development that focuses on bringing art as a pedestal to move forward.

Another important aspect of development is bringing recognition to the more marginalized parts of society. In this case, Muraleando gives a voice to this community full of talented and generous people, and they are no longer on the periphery but on the radar. Groups of people just like us have the wonderful opportunity to visit this community, hear their stories and mission, and share with the rest of the world. In doing so, we are expanding their voice and listening to them which is key to bringing these communities

into the light. We sometimes think that development has to be done in a mass-production type of way, where tall buildings and business deals reign. However, taking smaller steps to clean up a marginalized community in the outskirts of a city is a path towards a sustainable development that not only offers the citizens a chance to get involved and access new forms of education, but it also creates a voice for them and thus they are able to be heard by the rest of society and the world. This place taught me that art can be used as a powerful tool in development, and that through passion and dedication a small difference can make a great change on the overall wellbeing of communities and areas.

