Havana 500: Past, Present, Future

By Adriana Threlkeld
Dual Realities of Havana

• From our first night in Cuba, myself and the other MIIS students took advantage of every opportunity to gain the dual perspective of both tourist and local. We visited the main street where people of all ages gather at night, enjoying the familiar sight of teenagers dancing, kids playing, and musicians playing for passersby. Over the course of the trip, it became more and more clear to us that most people travelling to Cuba, especially those by cruise ship, filter their experiences to meet their own expectations of Havana and its people, never venturing to see such commonplace local activities. The following photo essay is a presentation of these two realities as I saw it.
L: Residence on Paseo St.
M: View from the Paseo Hotel
R: Residence on Paseo St. #2
Local Architecture

- The first lecture we attended was with Cuban architect Miguel Coyula, who explained Havana’s political history and how it contributed to the country’s present urban planning challenges. Residential and commercial infrastructure is government owned and is without any form of maintenance from the government. These buildings that once stood as a symbol of the country’s wealth in the early to mid-20th century now are in a permanent state of disrepair. As a result, an average of three buildings collapse each day in Havana. These three pictures contrast how this urban development problem can be viewed. The middle picture shows the view from the Paseo Hotel, where an empty lot separates the two places of residence, symbolizing the ruins they may become. The picture on the left and right some of these residencies reminiscent of Cuba's “Golden Age”. Painted with bright colors and covered in foliage, they demonstrate the “exotically romantic” perspective that many tourists hold of the country that appears trapped in time. As we learned in the lecture with Mr. Coyula, these bright colors are representative of the remittances coming into the country, a demonstration of wealth earned by family members that have left the country and have given money to those family members still living in Havana.
Transportation

• Transportation in Havana is almost exclusively tailored to tourists. The stereotypical older American car models are painted in bright colors kept-up well with auto parts from Russia or China, and are made to look pristine, inviting, and entertaining, shown in an image to the left. By contrast, most taxi drivers have cars that appear as old as they are, and even so, they mainly cater to tourists that have the financial means to pay well above the cost for a ride. As we visited Old Havana and walked through the residential area amongst the art vendors, tabaco shops, and fine dining restaurants, we observed locals getting around using rickshaws, walking, the bus, or the occasional family piling into their car driving through the narrow streets. The image to the right depicts the motorized taxi rickshaws in the shadow of a double decker tour bus in downtown Havana, displaying the contrast between the most luxurious form of transportation with the most commonplace.
Cognitive Dissonance Abroad

• The constant duality in Havana led me to maintain a state of cognitive dissonance throughout the trip. I questioned every financial transaction, wondering if I was making any difference in the local economy or a waiter’s daily pay, if my actions reflected any American stereotypes, or if my presence alone contributed to the rampant disparities between US/Cuban standards of living. What helped me sift through these questions were all of my interactions with the locals. Every individual I spoke with was very kind, and eager to share their thoughts on “el bloqueo” (the embargo), their lifestyle, financial hardships, food shortages, and their desire to ever leave the country. One person I spoke with told me that the country itself is built around tourists, and spoke of their dream to one day leave the country as a musician. Despite the endless challenges that they face on a daily basis, Cubans were very kind towards everyone in the group, and I began to see some of their values that I admire very much.
Cuban Values

• Throughout the week, I began to see the utmost value that Cubans place on the pursuit of knowledge and contribution. These became clearer to me as we learned about the education system, the history of the literacy campaign during the revolution, and the medical field which produces more doctors than the island needs. Higher education is free, meaning that Cuba is abundant with doctors, lawyers, etc. However, due to the insufficient pay they receive from the government, it is not uncommon to hear of doctors with other side gigs to make ends meet. I found this fascinating, as the financial incentives motivating people to become medical practitioners in the US were absent, leaving pursuit of knowledge and working for the common good as more central incentives for Cubans. This led me to feel at ease with myself about my personal impact in showing my extreme privilege by walking around Havana as a student/tourist. In conversation with a bookstore owner, he described his disdain for American students that display an “allergy to culture” to really absorbing all information possible about the realities experienced by the locals, not by the filtered lenses of tourists. As a student, I rationalized that if the trip contributed to my own personal and professional development, it would be considered an educational success, and this is exactly what I gained from the trip overall.
Moving Forward

• While I enjoyed all that I learned from this trip, I know that I must continue to learn about Cuban culture and its people, share the stories, pictures, and lessons I have gained, and possibly travel back to Havana to see how I have changed.