

GINET M. G. PORRAS / DOMINIK GLÜCK / PHILIPP MERBELER

# **PUBLIC SECTOR CONSTRUCTION**



Capitolio Nacional de La Habana / Source: pexels

# PUBLIC SECTOR CONSTRUCTION

## RESEARCH ON PUBLIC BUILDINGS IN CUBA

### 1. Definition of public buildings

To analyse public buildings in Cuba and around the world, we first need to define a common understanding of public architecture. The way public buildings were perceived changed over time. The perception of public architecture 100 years ago was very different than it is today. Nowadays, a public building is defined as any building open to the general use, participation, or enjoyment of the public and owned and operated by a city, county, state, or federal government, or by a public utility corporation. In a broader sense, a public building can be a hospital, a capitol building, a school or kindergarten, a college or university, a city hall, a church, a railway station, a library or a museum. The basic requirement for all public buildings is the public use of the exterior as well as the interior. Buildings need to be accessible - however not at all times of the day. When speaking of public architecture, parks, plazas, town squares, and even art installations can be defined as public.<sup>1,2</sup> In our research study, we want to focus on public buildings that are only designed and built for one specific public use. E.g. as universities are open to the public, they combine educational and public functions. Though, in this research we want to focus on architecture which only serves society for gathering, participation (e.g. in elections) and enjoyment. Its objectives are to bring together the

community around culture, education, administration and religion. As public architecture is intertwined with its construction, we need to define the specific characteristics and forces of the public construction. Public sector construction is the section of the built environment that consists of public services and public enterprises that are owned by the government. Usually, a public project is financed (or part-financed) by the public sector and is operated by the government. Typically, public projects are costly due to its size, from and representative architectural design language. Thus, several stakeholders contribute to the financing of public projects. State governments, federal governments, cities and sometimes even private firms invest in the construction of public buildings.<sup>3</sup>

There are several outstanding examples of public architecture from ancient to modern times. Typically, the buildings sit on a central site in the city or town and dominate



Sagrada Família, Barcelona, Spain / Source: unsplash

surrounding architecture by their size and architectural form. The Sagrada Família is one of the most famous examples for public architecture. With its construction started in 1882, the building will most likely be finished after 144 years and will serve as a place of worship in the centre of Barcelona, Spain. Recent examples of outstanding public architecture include the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture by Ghanaian-British architect David Adjaye. The museum explores the colonial past of the United States, a topic that is more relevant than ever not only in America, but also in Cuba and all around the world.<sup>4,5</sup>

## 2. Trends in public architecture

Typically, public buildings are located in dense, urban areas. With temperatures rising all around

the world due to climate change, public architecture needs to face the challenges of making communal spaces more eco-friendly and sustainable. Buildings need to adapt to create climate-positive interior and exterior spaces for the public. As public buildings have an outstanding importance, they need to set trends and define themselves as prime examples fighting climate change as well as social and racial injustice. Urban public buildings will more likely be made of wood, clay, stone and other traditional construction materials. With cuts in state-funded support, buildings will be low-tech, focusing on traditional details and construction methods. Communities will more likely be involved in the decision-making process of public architecture. Thus, public buildings will not be the realization of an individuals' vision, but the result of ongoing conversations



Community Center Anandaloy - made of mud and bamboo / Source: archdaily



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and consultations of the public. As Cuba's public architecture differs from public sector construction around the world, it is difficult to foresee trends on the island.<sup>6,7</sup> Though, we will describe in detail the trends, challenges and strategies for Cuban public architecture in chapter five.

### 3. History of public building construction in Cuba

The history of public architecture in Cuba dates back to long before the arrival of Spanish settlers in the early 16th century. Indigenous people such as Siboney Indians and Arawak Indians inhabited the Island for many years. The groups lived in three different types of makeshift housing, including Caney shelters, Barbacoa and Bohío huts. Typically, the architecture was dominated by local materials like palm trees, leaves and clay. Under the influence of the Spanish settlers, colonial architecture became the dominant style from the 16th century for almost 400 years. The colonial time was characterized by volatility. Due to the increasing demand for military architecture, fortresses (span. "castillo") were built for protection during unwanted attacks. Most notably, the Castillo San Salvador de la Punta and the large Fortaleza de San Carlos de la Cabaña ("La Cabaña") dominated the cityscape of Havana. Today, the fortresses are partially open to the public and are therefore a vital source of information



Catedral de San Cristobal / Quelle: britannica



El Temple, Havana / Quelle: commons.wikimedia

for historians and tourists.<sup>8,9</sup>

Starting in the mid 17th century, public architecture in Cuba was influenced by a baroque style brought to the Caribbean by Italians. Though, the style was adapted to include "tropical" elements in decoration. "Rejas" - metal bars on windows for better air circulation - were introduced and a new baroque style developed: The "Spanish Baroque". The Catedral de San Cristobal (Havana Cathedral) from 1748 is the most famous public building in Cuba built during that

period. The marine decoration and floral elements are typical for the Spanish baroque style.

The increase of French immigrants in the 19th century lead to the influence of neoclassicism in public architecture. The style also shaped private and urban architecture and therefore, a neoclassical style can be seen in many parts of the country, especially in Trinidad, Camagüey, Cienfuegos and Havana. A notable example for public neoclassical architecture is the town council of San Cristóbal in Havana, called "El TempLETE". With its symmetrical layout and spacious front courtyard garden, the town council represents the public architecture of that time.

With the creation of the Republic of Cuba in 1902, the architectural style of public buildings was influenced by international trends like Art Deco and Art Nouveau. The booming economy and the influx of wealth lead to the construction of many iconic buildings still standing today. The Capitolio Nacional de La Habana (seen on page 2, also called „El Capitolio“) is the most remarkable building from that time. With construction starting in 1926, the public edifice was built by materials from Germany, France and the United States, representing the opening of the country towards the rest of the world.<sup>10,11</sup> In chapter 4 we will describe in detail the importance of the capitol building and its restoration strategy.

Due to the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the United States embargo caused many problems in the development of public buildings. Architectural projects were facing difficulties in terms of gaining resources and construction materials. Nonetheless, by the end of the 1950s, the development of 29 public schools mostly in poorer neighbourhoods proved the ambitious architectural vision of politicians and architects. The National Art Schools of Cuba (Escuelas Nacionales de Arte) from 1961 represented a new cultural and political optimism of the country. The five art schools - dance, plastic arts, music, ballet, dramatic arts - served as the primary incubator for Cuba's cultural future. Designed by the Italian-Cuban architect trio Ricardo Porro, Roberto Gottardi, and Vittorio Garatti and supported by Fidel Castro and Che Guevara, the school became one of the most ambitious projects at that time. Nevertheless, due to the "un-socialist" design and the incompatibility of the architectural style with the Cuban Revolution, the construction stopped in 1965, leaving a half-finished building.<sup>12</sup>

Though, the international recognition of the outstanding architecture of the school was leading to a recent trend in the architectural history of Cuba: reutilisation and restoration. As a consequence, the National Arts Schools were declared as UNESCO World Heritage in 2003 and as National and World Monument in

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The National Art Schools of Cuba / Source: archdaily



Vaults adapted from traditional Catalan architecture / Source: archdaily



2011 and 2016 respectively. Following its international awareness, parts of the schools are undergoing a long-lasting restoration starting in 2007 to preserve its iconic structures.<sup>13,14,15</sup>

Ever since, more historic sites such as the Old City of Havana and urban historical centres of Cienfuegos and Camaguey were added to the list of UNESCO world heritages in order to preserve its architectural and cultural value for future generations.<sup>16</sup> In chapter 5, strategies of how to preserve and restore historic public architecture are explained in detail.

#### **4. Different restoration approaches of national and international public architecture - a comparison**

##### **El Capitolio, Cuba and Palacio de La Moneda, Chile**

Cuba's moving history under the influence of colonial and revolutionary forces brought many iconic public buildings to life. The most important landmark of civic architecture on the island is the "Capitolio Nacional de La Habana", also known as „El Capitolio“. The construction started in 1926 under the President Mercados's administration. The structure was designed by famous Cuban architect Eugenio Rayneri Piedra and is located in the city centre of Havana. Three years after construction, the building became the seat of government. By 1933, the country faced a severe depression and several people were shot outside the building during protests against the government of Mercado. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959, the congress was abolished and dispaneded. The building lost its original function and authority. From then on, it was housing the Cuban



Town hall in Cienfuegos, Cuba / Source: wikimedia



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El Capitolio with scaffolding around the cupola, Havana / Source: unsplash

Academy of Sciences and the Science and Technology National Library. After roughly 60 years, the original use of the building was restored in 2016 when politician Esteban Lazo inaugurated the building with its new function as home of the National Assembly.

The building draws similarities in its architecture with the US Capitol Building in Washington D.C. and Rome's St. Peter's Basilica. The large cupola, a central portico with a massive staircase and the column-framed east and west wings are the main design elements of the structure. With its expressive appearance in decoration and size, the Capitol was the then largest and most expensive building in Cuba.<sup>17,18</sup>

In 2010, the structure underwent complex restorations. Due to the high quality of its original construction, the building was in good condition despite the fact it has barely seen any renovation works since 1959. Nonetheless, the leaking cupola and roof, corroded pipes, outdated wiring and damaged paintwork were slowly restored and replaced by the "Historian of Old Havana Office". According to the office, the Capitol is one of the most demanding restoration works due to the technical complexity given by the richness of its ornamental and decorative elements. Several international firms from Germany and Europe were supporting local builders with the complicated restoration work on the historic facade amongst



Ornamental interior of El Capitolio / Source: wikimedia

others. In 2016, renovated parts of the building were reopened for the National Assembly. Since March 2018, most parts of the monument are open to the public. Today, it is one of the most visited buildings in the country, being classified as one of the most relevant palaces in the world.<sup>19</sup>

The building stands for a recent trend of restoring historic important buildings in Cuba. The restoration strategy focuses on remodelling the structure to its original appearance. Later additions to the interior and exterior are supposed to be removed.

The goal is to restore all architectural elements to recreate the original building from 1929. The consultation of international experts for the restoration also sets another trend. Allowing German facade specialist to support local builders is an important step to increase the quality of the complex architecture. Opening its doors to international experts and establishing a dialogue with architects all around the world will influence the future of public landmarks in Cuba.

In comparison to the National Capitol Building, the “Palacio de La Moneda” (engl. La Moneda Palace) in Santiago, Chile underwent a very different restoration strategy. The building was opened in 1805 and houses the seat of the President of the Republic of Chile as well as offices of three cabinet ministers. The architectural design language is kept similar to the Capitol in Havana in a neoclassical style. In comparison, the palace underwent continuing restoration and modification starting from 1930. In 1973, a military attack by the Chilean army destroyed big parts of the fragile structure. Comprehensive restoration followed afterwards, but wasn’t finished until 1981. Instead of completely remodelling the palace to its original state, larger and minor details such as bullet holes were left visible to document the violent history. Similar to the capitol in Havana, in the early 2000s, parts of the building and park were opened to

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Renovated facade of the "Palacio de La Moneda" / Source: wikimedia



Underground "Centro Cultural Palacio de La Moneda" / Source: disenoarquitectura

the public. New construction on and underneath the building started in 2004. To bring more people into the building, the government decided to build a new public square, the Plaza de la Ciudadanía, and an underground cultural center, the Centro Cultural Palacio de La Moneda. These new structures meant a complete remodelling of the surrounding of the palace. Nonetheless, after the construction, the palace kept its old appearance and now allowed more visitors to enjoy the new and old architecture. Compared to the capitol in Havana, the architects and

engineers tried not only to refurbish the old palace, but also to add an extension to the old structure without destructing its historic appearance. Similar strategies might get adapted to the National Capitol building. To allow more public visitors and to make the history of the landmark more visible, an extension could get added to the historic structure. The tightrope walk to create an extension without disturbing the historic appearance might be a challenge Cuban architects might face in the future - not only at "El Capitolio", but also at all public landmarks in Cuba.<sup>20</sup>



## 5. Restoration: Challenges and strategies in public building construction in Cuba

Despite recent strategies to open up the country to foreign influence, Cuba is still dealing with a difficult economic situation, which has its roots in the communist policies of the past. Poverty and overall deterioration of the built environment force the country to focus on fulfilling its residents' basic needs for shelter. This is true especially in Central Havana, where societal reasons like neglect, abuse and overcrowding, as well as environmental factors like corrosion, humidity, leaks and termites have put the area in a very bad condition.<sup>21</sup> New public building projects have been rarely emerging since the beginning of the revolution, and public construction has virtually been paralysed since the

fall of the Soviet Union. The National Art Schools of Cuba are one of the last major public projects and given that their construction has been halted in 1965, it shows how long the issue has persisted. Naturally, this has directed efforts towards the existing historical public buildings, which are testimony to the country's architectural golden years.

One passionate man who has been dealing with the subject of restoration for almost as long as the revolution lasts is Eusebio Leal. Since the fall of the Soviet Union Leal has been managing Cuba's only for-profit entity, the Office of the Historian. Thanks to tourism and foreign investments dealt with by the unique company Habaguanex, which was exempt from returning its profits to the state, Leal was able to acquire much needed



Deteriorating paintwork, Havana / Source: unsplash



Restored and unrestored facade / Source: unsplash



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Restored Hotel "Ambos Mundos", where Ernest Hemingway resided in the 1930s / Source: wikimedia

funds. He would use those to restore parts of Old Havana, which was recently named one of the first UNESCO World Heritage Sites, bringing international attention to the rich historic urban fabric, as well as the dire state it was in by then. His innovative approach was not only due to the capitalist structure of the Office, but his ability to maintain community life and support social programs like old-age homes, centres for retirees and spaces for young artists. Buildings from all kinds of architectural styles were restored and transformed to housing or commercial use like restaurants, bars and hotels, which would in turn bring more profits. Soon, the scope of work expanded to other parts of the city like the Malecón in 2003 and

Chinatown in 2005. It was estimated in 2011 that the annual revenue of Habaguanex was 119 million dollars with 23 million in profits. The Office of the Historian employed about 3000 people and managed over 300 entities by 2016, including 20 boutique hotels and some museums. It became the de facto city architect, responsible for many of Havana's public buildings. One of Leal's most ambitious projects is the renovation of the Capitolio, which opened in 1929. Despite several scandals emerging in the 2010s, including corruption, bribery, embezzlement and drug sales, Eusebio Leal and his office have been regarded as the saviour of Old Havana, or even Havana itself.<sup>22</sup>

The actions of the Office of the Historian have also inspired other initiatives like the design group Habana Re-Generacion, with dreams of restoring modern parts of the city and transforming abandoned factories and warehouses along the harbour, a common phenomenon in other parts of the world. Their 2015 exhibition during the twelfth Havana Biennial addressed the possibilities of a century old, out of use energy plant Tallapiedra. In the future, it could supply the city with energy again: one that is artistic and cultural.<sup>23</sup> Grass-roots ventures have also come to life, many of which were still unimaginable in the 90s. One of them is Artecorte, a combined barber salon and art gallery.<sup>21</sup> Precisely in such ideas there seems to be a lot of potential for Havana: a certain level of commercialisation, of including

the private sector, but with adding value to the community of the city. By addressing both the locals and the tourists, social, cultural and economic development can go hand in hand. Due to limited construction since the revolution, Havana has skipped several decades of architectural mistakes, which have been made elsewhere in the world. The city can learn from other countries and focus on sustainable, mixed use typologies, which will further foster diverse communities for years to come.

## 6. Conclusion

The main problem is still acquiring funds, investments and materials. The trade embargo imposed by the United States on Cuba is still in place and poses one of the main hurdles



El Capitolio with partially finished restauration / Source: unsplash

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to the latter country's development. Cuba has managed to establish trade relations with other countries like China, France or Canada, but due to its governing system, it still allows for very little foreign investment and collaboration.

Opening up the country, recognizing private practices including the profession of the architect, could increase local and foreign interest and expertise, as well as keep Cuba's skilled and educated workers from migrating elsewhere to pursue their careers. To ensure qualitative architecture, there might be a need for greater dialogue as well, between the state, the community, the investors and the local architects themselves. Competitions for choosing the best projects would engage the now largely retired architects and encourage the

previously mentioned debate.

Meanwhile, it might be important to focus on the public infrastructure, which has been deteriorating together with the city fabric. "When you have a flashlight but no batteries" commented Mario Coyula, then there is a need for practical, sustainable, long-lasting measures. Perhaps a short-term focus on small scale architecture would be beneficial. Smartly designed and planned bus stops, small town squares and urban furniture could be the beginning of a new public space revival using fewer, less technically sophisticated means. Culturally embedded in Cuba, reinterpreted low-tech structures could also prove to be valuable for fostering community and building a local architectural identity. For a new beginning, perhaps less indeed is more.<sup>21</sup>



Gran Teatro de La Habana after restoration in 2015 / Source: unsplash

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