

***Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989* edited by Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield**

Cecilia Aldarondo | University of Minnesota

Anke Birkenmaier and Esther Whitfield, eds. *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2011. \$89.95 cloth, \$24.95 paper.



In the first several decades following the Cuban revolution, the government displaced Havana as the center of Cuba, choosing instead to focus on developing and promoting the provinces. This deliberate strategy manifested itself both materially (in the redirection of financial resources and infrastructure from the capital to the countryside) and ideologically (in the promotion of the supposed virtues of rural life against the bourgeois decadence of the city). However, beginning in the 1990s, when the collapse of the USSR precipitated Cuba's euphemistically-titled "Special Period in Times of Peace"—an economic crisis of colossal proportions that led to drastic austerity measures, alongside the revolutionary government's unprecedented adoption of free market principles and the opening of its economy to foreign investment—Havana has re-appeared as Cuba's cultural, economic, and ideological epicenter. Birkenmaier and Whitfield's edited volume *Havana Beyond the Ruins: Cultural Mappings after 1989* explores the ways in which contemporary Havana encapsulates some of Cuba's most central concerns and contradictions. It is a city in transition, caught between several polarities: between socialism and the free market, ruin and renovation, splendor and decadence, stasis and change. The book is timely in that it situates itself precisely at this contemporary juncture, and is a useful—if uneven—compendium of texts from experts inside and outside Cuba working across a range of fields, including architecture, cultural studies, urban planning, sociology, and literary studies.

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As the title of the volume suggests, the recent transformations in Havana's built environment are symptomatic of a paradox of central importance. On the one hand, Cuba's economic liberalization has rescued the country from the brink of disaster, leading some experts, such as the late Nicolás Quintana, to view Cuba's total transition to free market capitalism to be both necessary and inevitable. Indeed, Quintana's entry, "A Vision for Reconstruction of Cuban Cities," reads like a blueprint for foreign developers primed for the post-Communist gold rush, analyzing the "extraordinary tourism possibilities" of Havana's bay and showcasing ideas for shopping centers and parking lots in the high-density urban center of Old Havana. According to Quintana, tourism and urban renewal promise great things for Cuba.

By contrast, the majority of the contributors to the collection—including Velia Celia Bobes, Joseph Scarpaci, Patricio del Real, Cecelia Lawless, Antonio José Ponte, and Sujatha Fernandes—argue that these same liberalizing policies have led to a worrisome and increasing economic and racial stratification in Cuba. Alongside the new hotels and influx of dollars, these authors witness the creeping gentrification of Old Havana and displacement of Cubans to peripheral communities, the upsurge in illegal migration¹ from the provinces to the capital, the growth of peripheral shantytowns, and the continued shortage of habitable space. According to Velia Cecilia Bobes, the nakedly opportunistic embrace of democracy and free market principles risks a return to the Havana of the 1950s, a place defined by its opulent touristic pleasures set against a backdrop of inequality.

Unfortunately, while one of the book's strengths is that it features such competing perspectives, the editors present its diverging entries in vaguely pluralist terms, as if such diverse viewpoints happily coexist rather than confront one another. The untrained reader may have a difficult time unpacking the contributors' varied political leanings or the stakes of their claims.

Nevertheless, the book's contributors do seem to agree on some aspects of the present Cuban condition—for example, there is consensus on the sense that the decline of the revolution has led to a gradual but pronounced separation of the interests of the Cuban state from those of the people. Another thread of consistency concerns the significance of Havana's pervasive and acute architectural ruination. Havana, the book's authors demonstrate, has a palimpsestic and schizophrenic relationship to time: Velia Cecilia Bobes, in her essay "Visits to a Non-Place: Havana and Its Representation(s)" describes it as a "memory-city" structured on the axis of "before and after;" Quintana and Emma Álvarez-Tabío Alvo argue that it is "frozen in time;" Rafael Rojas, in "The Illegible City: Havana after the Messiah" claims it features the superimposed layering of multiple times, resulting a sense of historical disorientation and chaos; Laura Reduello, in "Touring Havana in the Work of Ronaldo Menéndez," believes it is a "non-city" overtaken by disenchantment and barbarity; and Jose Quiroga, in his essay "Bitter Daiquiris: A Crystal Chronicle," proposes that any trip to Havana should begin with forgetting.

For Antonio José Ponte, Havana exists in a state of post-revolutionary paralysis, a claim he advances in the essay "La Habana: City and Archive," one of the book's most well-written

and compelling entries. Ponte is a Cuban writer and self-professed “ruinologist” who anchors Florian Borchemeyer’s 2006 documentary *La Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas* (*Havana: The New Art of Making Ruins*), and whose short stories are the subject of Cecelia Lawless’ own contribution to *Havana Beyond the Ruins*. In his essay, Ponte makes the controversial claim that Havana’s ruined state is due not solely to neglect, but is in fact part of a concerted effort by the revolutionary government to control its subjects. So long as Cubans are surrounded by ruin, Ponte believes, they will be unable to imagine change. By contrast, in their entry on “Barbacoas” (improvised living structures involving the internal subdivision of one floor into two) Scarpaci and del Real take issue with such “overly pessimistic” reasoning, arguing that it disenfranchises habaneros who have been engaged in continuous acts of architectural improvisation. Such tensions provoke a tantalizing question that *Havana Beyond the Ruins* raises but does not quite answer: is the Cuban revolution over?

Cecilia Aldarondo is a Ph.D. Candidate in Cultural Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Minnesota. Her work has been published in *Performance Research*, *Art Papers*, *Quodlibetica*, and other venues. She is currently revising her dissertation, “The Documentary Encounter: Memory, Materiality, Performance;” in her chapter “The Sky is Falling: Architectural Ruin and Daily Life in *Habana: arte nuevo de hacer ruinas*,” she analyzes a uniquely troubling aspect of Havana’s ruins—the fact that they are inhabited—and its effects on the tourist’s encounter with these ruined spaces.

Notes

¹For decades, the Cuban government has closely regulated migration from one Cuban city to another. Cubans wishing to relocate had to find someone willing to trade homes with them, a highly complicated process known as “la permuta.” Meanwhile, the country’s economic problems have driven Cubans looking for employment to move to Havana without permission. Though the government legalized the buying and selling of private property in 2011, it is unclear what effects this change will have on Cubans without the means to participate in the burgeoning real estate market.