

# **la habana vieja.**

by jordan haferbier



The question is: What is old Havana?  
 And I think to most Americans they see Fidel and cigars.  
 And for me, what old Havana is the people.  
 They are incredibly gifted, wonderful people.  
 Second of all, it is the chaotic visual of a city that's gone into decline



You can definitely see the change.  
 You can see the change in way the people are receiving information.  
 You can see the change in that they're starting to open businesses.  
 They're facing such severe problems, that they have to change.



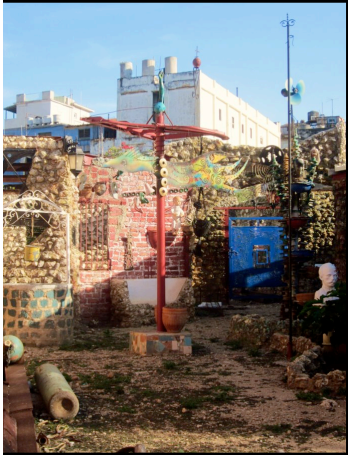
You can see it.  
 You can see it on the street.  
 I think the exciting thing is that the Cubans finally see in the last four years  
 That there's change coming.

I've got the say it took me a while for me to get my sea legs  
 To be able to understand what I was photographing  
 Because I wanted to portray it from the heart,  
 From my heart.



There is renewal in Old Havana.  
 They're bringing it back to what it was: the elegance.  
 And then there are places that are falling down that have no hope.

What I tried to capture was a sense of place that most people have never  
 seen;  
 Have no concept of.  
 What comes with that: the good, the bad and the ugly.



-Chip  
 Cooper

American Photographer in Cuba  
 Old Havana: Spirit of the Living City<sup>1</sup>



When framing my  
 experience in Cuba into a  
 thoughtful reflection, I  
 first looked through my

travel diary. There were entries on  
 daily activities, the aromas of food as  
 we passed by small cafeterias and  
 thoughts on the intersection of place

and identity. I wrote about the people we met, the lectures we had, and the foreign energy buzzing in the air. I had an entire notebook full of observations and introspections so why then had I been looking at a blank page for hours with only a cursor blinking back at me with a mocking aversion to movement? What is the best way to convey the sense of vitality that I felt when carelessly hopping into the back of a 60 year old Chevrolet taxi that needed a shove off the curb to start moving? How could I make the reader smell the Cuban food as vividly as I do in my memory? Finally, how does one explain the perceptive lens that travelling to Cuba gives an American?

In the undertaking of the task of grasping a place like Cuba one can only understand it within the context of a Genesis narrative. As United States citizens we have been placed in the role of Adam and Eve, living in a world of hegemonic power in which all living beings are subordinate. Cuba is the metaphorical forbidden fruit which we have always been shielded from. We have been told of Cuba's ills and the immoral nature of socialism-essentially being told not to touch the fruit. The forces that guide and educate the US citizens have worked hard to put physical barriers between the US and the forbidden fruit through the blockade. At first the US stopped providing nourishment to the fruit,

allowing it to shrivel and fall into the hands of others. After the fruit was nourished back to health, we attempted to cut off the hands of those who reached out to touch it. Through restrictive practices such as the Toricelli Act and Helms-Burton Act, Adam and Eve ensured that the "fruta madura" would fall only into their hands.<sup>2</sup> When the fruit began to miraculously repair and help itself, Adam and Eve grew tense. The fruit began to plump, growing supple and healthy. This forbidden fruit continued to regain its strength as an independent entity. Then the fruit which had been so sought after by Adam and Eve, did something surprising. It allowed Adam and Eve to run their fingers along the fruit and experience its softness. Though the fruit allows itself to be handled by mortals, it refuses to be picked from the tree.

This is the story of a mere moral crossing that divide.

As we stepped off the plane in the José Martí airport the first thing I saw was the flight attendant's patterned black tights. These struck me as out of the ordinary and as a stark contrast to the attire American flight attendants wear. We quickly had our visas stamped and walked out into a mass of people waiting. I took note of this in my journal:

*"The crowds of people speaking Spanish overwhelmed my Anglophone ears. I grabbed Daniela's hand as she led me to the group, where I began to feel orientated enough to people-watch. There were children eating ice cream cones and speaking rapidly to one another. I noticed women in tight clothing and men in mesh shirts. Men in hats exchanged nods as their eyes followed the women walking by"*

As we walked to our bus the juxtaposition of two billboards caught my eye. The first was of Ché in his famous stoic pose and a quote that spoke of the innocence of both men and children. The billboard next to this one read “Authentica Cuba” and bore an image of three smiling white children playing in shallow waters of the Caribbean. This contrast, if not immediately evident to my mere mortal mind would over the course of the trip come to solidify the image of Cuba as a nation in transition.

As we piled onto the multi-colored school bus that would be our transportation in Cuba, one could only restrain the urge to call it the “magic school bus” for so long. We became acquainted with our lodgings and got an introduction to our translator and guide. Our first night was filled with music and dancing at the Casa de Musica. The music flowed over our bodies almost as a baptismal anointment, comforting me in the fact that yes, I could be in Cuba. In fact, I was welcomed. For a reason beyond my comprehension, Cubans want to engage Americans in conversation even if it involves discourse in broken form of either of our respective languages.

As I walked along the Malécon, through the streets of Old Havana or in the barrio near our center I would be stopped and asked if I was American? This question did not seem to be intrusive or malicious, but rather reaffirming. After an affirmative response most inquirers smiled and went away satisfied. This intrigued me. After years of colonialism and

oppression impressed upon Cuba by the US, I expected to experience some anti-American sentiment. I experienced none. This baffled me. As a very obvious foreigner, I was greeted with only excitement. The visual of this interaction symbolically became extremely important. An outsider was being greeted and made to feel comfortable by those her country oppresses, as she was surrounded by buildings in various states of disrepair. This duplicity struck me in ways that surfaced unexpectedly throughout the trip.

When purchasing souvenirs I became struck about my right as a foreigner to take from a country that has the limited ability to replenish the goods that I take home. In a book store, I debated whether owning this book as a souvenir would be of greater personal utility than if a Cuban person owned it. Was it morally agreeable to use the Cuban peso in any capacity? During my stay in Havana I became cognizant of my impact as a tourist on Cuban society.

During one meal in a beautiful private restaurant in Havana I had a realization. In four hours I had eaten half of a Cuban’s monthly wage.

Dinner was held at the home of a professional athlete who had turned his home into a restaurant after paladars were made legal in 2010. We had fruity drinks and a four course gourmet dinner for approximately the equivalent of \$15 USD. In the United States, this dinner would be a steal. In Havana, the difference in access to wealth and resources as compared to

the US became so obvious that I began to feel guilt for indulging in a dinner that so palpably separated me from the average Cuban. After my initial reaction, I began to critically think about the source of my discontent. I began to realize that I had been viewing Cuba through a critical Western lens. In order to understand wealth disparity and resource allocation in Cuba I had to look at a broader picture of society.

Cuba's economic system is radically socialist. Cuba's education and health care systems are state-run and funded. Cubans have access from the time of birth to the time of death to a health-care system that is highly personal and comprehensive. Cuba trains its physicians in the community model that can serve both rural and urban areas in the same way. The healthcare system has served to lessen the rural/urban divide through the training of all classes of people. Brouwer explains the healthcare system as a "weapon of solidarity" that draws its base from campesinos

*"To educate is to give man the keys to the world, which are independence and love, and to give him strength to journey on his own, light of step, a spontaneous and free being" –José Martí, 1965*

After the success of the revolution, one of the first major reforms proposed by Fidel Castro was the building of more schools and the training of more teachers. With statistics like 40% illiteracy in rural areas before the revolution, a change in the educational system was necessary. School through university level was made free and many more teachers were educated. When visiting the Fabricio

and children of impoverished, working-class and indigenous communities. He further characterizes these doctors as "running with unreserved enthusiasm to help their brothers". A doctor is given a community to live and work in, getting to know each of his patients intimately. This model has served Cuba well, as its life expectancy has increased while its infant mortality has decreased. In addition to accessing resources for health, Cuba has a comprehensive sexual resource center for education. CENESEX provides sexual health information, educational programs and services (including gender reassignment) for free. This comprehensive system of sexual education has brought about results in Cuba. Sexually transmitted infections are rare in Cuba, as is HIV-AIDS.

The fruit is healthy, bearing an almost impenetrable skin around its flesh.

Cuba's educational system is based on the ideology that:

Obeju Elementary School in Havana every teacher we met had been there for almost twenty years. Despite the school's lack of resources, each child was literate and most were vocal about their excitement about learning. One child stood up brash and tall and informed us of the symbolism behind each color in the flag. This system has brought about huge change in Cuba. Illiteracy rates post-revolution are

considerably lower. Most children stay in school for a mean of 10 years. This is a huge achievement for a developing Caribbean island.

The fruit is intuitive and adaptive.

It is also organic! After the collapse of the Soviet Bloc, ecological urban agriculture took hold in Cuba. The use of vacant lots for food production that has little to no carbon footprint in the transport from farm to plate has brought more diversity into Cuban diets. It has eliminated inorganic inputs such as pesticides and fertilizers. In addition to food production, it is a socially sustainable system. Larger production plots called organopónicos are usually run by cooperatives. The cooperatives share in the work and the profits. In addition, these operations serve as institutions of learning for community members, families and students. When visiting the Organopónico Vivero Alamar we worked side by side with exchange students from Colombia and Haiti. As we spoke to these students we learned that they came to Cuba to better understand the ways in which that cooperative-based organic urban agriculture can be used as a tool for social cohesion and growth. Sustainable urban agriculture has become so productive that 60% of Cuba's fresh produce is grown in an urban setting.

The fruit is fresh, new, and enjoyed by all.

Social sustainability, equitable food, comprehensive healthcare and free education are all benefits of a socialist system. In addition to this, Housing

Reforms following the Revolution give most Cubans the opportunity to own homes. Food rationing was also instilled after the revolution, insuring that no Cuban go hungry. Cubans are wealthy in a way that is not monetary. This seems strange to me, as a U.S. American. Wealth and money are interchangeable. In Cuba, this does not exist. Wealth lies in solidarity with your fellow man and your ability to provide for the community. While I am conscious of my idealization of Cuban society, in many ways it proves itself to be this way. I looked for evidence of dissent in Cuba but found none. Cuba is stable, but it is transitioning to an uncertain period. Free-market economies have worked their way into Cuba. Small private business ownership is on the rise. Cars and homes may now be sold on the free-market. Restrictions on travelling to Cuba are being lifted or becoming more relaxed. The Cuban Peso is devaluing rapidly as the Cuban Convertible Peso is used more. Wage disparities have begun and are intensifying.

The fruit feels tension at its stem as Adam tugs upon it with greater strength.

The new question becomes: What will become of Cuba? When delving more deeply into my thoughts at the restaurant I realized that perhaps I was drawing these connections between Cuba and the West because their influence grows greater daily. The impact of tourism is two-fold. While economically benefitting Cuba, it threatens the glue of solidarity. Income disparity is on the rise because of the influx of foreign dollars into the

tourism sector. Tourists utilize a disproportionate amount of resources during their stay in the country. Cubans bear the external costs of things such as: pollution, declines in air quality, the rise in imported goods because of the increase in the tourism sector. Consumerism and the want for more Westernized habits such as increased internet use are on the rise in

Cuba. How these changes impact a country with such a radical, idealized model of governance?

The fruit lays fallow in Adam's hand as an air of uncertainty blows in the breeze.

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