The Dynamics of Heritage Choice and Heritage Regimes in the “Making of Old Havana”

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1 Introduction

Today’s representations of tangible and intangible culture in the image of the city of Havana are part of a new politics of identity in Cuba which began in 1994 with first efforts at city-planning.¹ The representations are the products of a historical and political process, a program of selection, suppression and deliberate omission which expresses an “interpretational heritage choice” (Bhabha 2006: 9). I take up Homi Bhabha’s concept to analyze the new dynamics of valuation and devaluation in the framework of heritage productions in Havana since 1994, and consider what it means, in concrete terms, to “appropriate” or “alienate” (Bhabha 2006: 9) specific representations of cultures and societies according to dominant historical, social and scientific contexts.

To what extent are the sites and objects which UNESCO terms World Cultural Heritage products of a blend of science and politics, knowledge and power? To what extent do they represent remains of what was created by colonizing processes, or, in other words, to what extent has scholarship, in particular anthropology

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and history, informed what is pronounced worth preserving and presenting? To what extent can this chosen “cultural heritage” be attributed to scientific and cultural politics up to and including those of UNESCO itself (cf. Csáky 2005; Pichler and Kreff 2009)?

The strategies employed in the determination of cultural heritage are not autonomous. Rather they are themselves a product and part of a cultural heritage of strategies, and illustrate different heritage regimes at work.

From this vantage point, hegemony is revealed as an important and overlooked component in the production of cultural heritage. Hegemony is evident in the practices, strategies and knowledge that are immanent to the undertaking, and work as a third category of cultural heritage that is implicit, but neither material nor immaterial: A “tacit cultural heritage” which conveys the participation of hegemony in the process of cultural inheritance.

My contribution to this volume raises general considerations about hegemony in the making of heritage. Hegemony in the production of cultural heritage becomes visible, firstly, in the politics and form of government which goes hand-in-hand with, secondly, a set of rules and cultural, social and ethical norms that regulate the operation of its implementation in urban space, and its control, financing and interactions within society. This leads us to define the legal and administrative heritage regime, which in my usage of the term refers to a particular form of supervision. Rules, principles, norms, and procedures authorize social institutions or international financiers of the tourist industry and their local counterparts to carry out the decision-making process of “choosing” heritage.

I will first examine processes of urban renewal and the transformation of Habana Vieja (Old Havana) to a site of cultural tourism. The territory has held the title of National Monument since 1978, Cultural Patrimony since 1979, World Cultural Heritage since 1982, Priority Zone for Preservation since 1993, and Highly Significant Zone for Tourism since 1995. The territory has been protected by the Decree Law 143 of 1993 which serves to guide the different regulatory bodies in administering the Convention concerning the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage and also contains guidance on the protection of national patrimony. These laws gave the necessary backing to new processes of intervention in the Old Town of Havana starting in 1983, and have promoted a fundamental change in city life and in the perception of the city. The historical centre is no longer late-socialist in appearance and character, but rather a high-priced consumer zone for mass tourism. This is an observation, not a judgment, but the significance of this transformation is far-reaching and will be the subject of my paper.

The description of the process focuses on the implementation of heritage formats within legal and administrative heritage regimes. This process is demonstrated

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2 The territory covers 2.14 square kilometers and compasses 3,370 buildings. Many of them represent the value of architecture from the 18th to the 20th century. The territory spans different municipalities in Havana Center, Regla and East Havana.
by the example of the Plaza Vieja in Old Havana. Revitalization and the preservation and commercialization of heritage have transformed the entire Plaza over the last 20 years. My description and analysis focuses on different periods of the ongoing preservation process in which local legal administrative regimes have been at work implementing various heritage formats.

In the second section of this paper, I introduce the notion of choice into my analytical framework. Viewing heritage as a result of interpretational choices helps us to put the claims of cultural authenticity and historical genealogies into proper perspective, and addresses the vehicle of the undertaking from the outset. This allows me to look at aspects of tacit hegemony in the production of heritage. This is illustrated with three short case-studies.

The fourth and concluding section of the paper shows that the link between heritage choice and heritage regime is ethical (not only epistemological or symbolic). Heritage choices point to the ethics of cultural transmission and demand that respect for cultural diversity and human creativity need not necessarily come out of the continuity of tradition created by dominant elites. This section examines interstitial cultural practices which work against the dominant interpretation of late-Cuban socialist elites and will focus on individuals operating in the interstices of legal administrative regimes.

2 Legal Regimes, Changing Heritage Formats and the Development of New Agencies to Promote Tourism in Havana

At one point during my long-term field research in Havana, I lived in the Calle Mercaderes, once the most important business street of colonial Havana. It joins the Plaza Vieja to the Plaza de Armas (the two oldest squares in the city). In 1996, I was working in collaboration with the Office of the City Historian and had the opportunity to be present during their socio-demographic survey of the quarter’s inhabitants, accompanying a team of sociologists of the Taller San Isidro. The Talleres de Transformación Integral (workshops–neighborhood offices) link the planners and the inhabitants. Their job is to guarantee the integration of the residents’ participation in the development of the neighborhood (Oficina del Historiador 1995; Rodríguez Alomá 1996; Pichler 2004). Working with the specialists of this office, I had access to a broad variety of houses in the quarter, and got to know the neighborhood of San Isidro in the Old Town. I regularly visited residents of one of the ciudadeles (tenements) directly on the square.

The need to take great care in urban renovation and the lack of developmental conceptions for the city as a whole, led as early as 1988 to the founding of a group of experts for urban development (Grupo para el Desarrollo Integral de la Capital, 1988).
GDIC). They initiated the founding of the first neighborhood offices. They were headed by the Office of the City Historian (OHC). The OHC’s Master Plan Group was established in 1994 to address the needs of the UNESCO listed area, of central Havana and parts of the Malecon (seaside promenade). The 1994 Master Plan was prepared by a multidisciplinary team with the assistance of the Spanish Agency for International Cooperation (Joynt 2006: 34). The plan’s main aims are to preserve the historical patrimony of the city, address urban problems and promote responsible community and urban development, and to manage the social, economic and physical environment through participative planning. In 1995, a register of buildings was produced, including current state and future interventions with respect to all buildings in the historical core.

The Master Plan Group has also produced a Special Plan for the integrated development of the designated Priority Zone aiming at preservation and the creation of a Highly Significant Zone for Tourism. The plan has four main policies which address housing and the potential displacement of current residents, the creation of new employment opportunities for residents and the provision of infrastructure.

The collaboration (with sociologists, architects, archaeologists, artisans, and local informants from the neighborhood) and my own long-term observations have provided me with the opportunity to illustrate processes of symbolic, economic and political appropriation – or, more precisely, preemption – of the oldest square in Old Havana, the Plaza Vieja. Apart from this, I was able to observe the development of the main planning agency – the Office of the City Historian, headed by Eusebio Leal Spengeler – and the establishment of a far-reaching network of specialists, directories and enterprises.

2.1 Site of Study: La Plaza Vieja

Since its founding, the Plaza Vieja has been a site for the projections of the varied elite who wanted to give it a face. Its name has been changed several times in the past 400 years and, together with the name, its social and functional identity.

As Plaza Nueva (1559–1632), it served as a ceremonial square; bullfights are mentioned, as well as religious processions. Under the name Plaza Principal (1632-1772), it was the economic center of the city and its market square. A fountain was built in the middle of the square during this period, and decorative houses were erected around the park. The aristocratic owners of the houses completed the facades with representative balconies and arcades. Shops, warehouses and stables

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4 Sources used for reconstructing the history of the Plaza Vieja: Centro Nacional de Conservación Restauración y Museología, CENCREM. 1983; Núñez Jiménez–Venegas Fornías, 1986; Oficina del Historiador, 1995; Fornet Gil, 1998. The physical description of the palacios was communicated to me by the architectural historian Ada Valdes López, MSc.Arq.
were installed on the ground floor, while on the first floor, the six-meter-high rooms served as Beaux Étages for the most noble families of the city, with their loggias either external or above the inner courtyards. The lodgings for slaves were in low-roofed intermediate floors (entrepisos), hardly visible, while the high rooms of the wealthy owners continued above them.

Following the British invasion (1762), the city was enlarged and further market centers were developed, and the square increasingly lost its importance. In the 19th century, the square changed names several times (Plaza de Fernando VII and Plaza de la Constitución). In 1835, it received the name Plaza de Cristina. Its Persian windows (jalouises) and brightly painted window panes date from this time. When, in 1863, the city walls were gradually torn down and the urban aristocracy moved to other parts of the city outside the walls, the square received its name Plaza Vieja. This also marked a (spatial–temporal) division between the old and new cities.

At the beginning of the 20th century, the luxurious villas were abandoned to apartment speculators, so that the first multiple-family houses (ciudadeles) could appear on all sides of the square and in the surrounding neighborhoods. In the early-1940s, individual houses on the square were demolished and new ones built, for example, the Palacio Cueto, in art deco style, also an official building (Edificio de Correos). In the 1950s, two apartment houses and a movie theater were erected. The surface of the square was artificially raised and an underground garage was built beneath it. After the Revolution in 1959, new rental laws were introduced prohibiting small businesses. All the shops around the square were closed and the buildings used for residential purposes only. The buildings themselves belong to the state. All substandard houses were put at the disposal of anyone interested in living in them, without rental contracts. At the same time, there was further “wild building,” illegal modifications of the houses around the square. As a consequence, there was an over-population and the conditions in the square and its surrounding neighborhood turned more and more into a slum.

The chosen model for the ongoing reconfiguration of the square was a copper engraving which the English traveler Durnford made in 1772 (cf. Juan 1980; Capablanca Rico 1993; Fornet Gil 1998; Delgado Acosta 2000). It shows an abundance of loggias, arcades, coaches, and merchants in self-important poses. Based upon the engraving, Plaza Vieja has been staged as Plaza Principal (cf. Juan 1980: 7). Many segments have been erased from its history. Similarly, what is striking about today’s guided tours are the countless empty spaces; the slave labor which was used to construct the monuments, for example, goes entirely unmentioned. The simulated square tells a nostalgic tale of a white, aristocratic past.

One of the other houses on the Plaza Vieja became known as La Ratona (House of the Rats). When I visited the house for the first time in 1996, I found a desolate picture. Like all the many other ciudadeles around the square, it was completely over-inhabited. Thirty-five families lived in the rear of the building. The tenements usually present a quite respectable appearance from the street, not unlike that of a middle-class private residence. The difference becomes evident only
when one passes the main entrance, looks down the long narrow lane of the interior, and sees a row of doors that face each other at ten- or twelve-foot intervals. Behind each door is a room of twelve square feet or more, accommodating a family. A woman friend led me to her room in the uppermost floor of the house. To get there, we had to climb broken stairs and, in the end, used a home-made ladder with broken rungs. From above, we could partially see into the niches below. One could speak of slum conditions with evident ethnic marginalization: Almost only black Cubans lived here. They shared a kitchen and a toilet in the courtyard and gathered their water from the fountain in the square; there were neither windows nor ventilation. There were 250 people lodged in this and the neighboring ciudadel on the Plaza. The residents paid no rent because of these substandard conditions.

When I visited the city again in 2000, my apartment in the Calle Mercaderes no longer existed and neither did La Ratona. There was now a bank in what had been the house of my former landlady. The ciudadel of my friend at the Plaza had been completely evacuated (as had the other one). The 35 families of the house described above had all been resettled in Alamar (a worker-constructed suburb eight kilometers from the center of Havana).

Some of them moved happily, relieved to find themselves with better living-conditions, but others were dissatisfied, as they had been waiting for years for construction materials promised to them which would have allowed them to remain where they were. It was not possible for the residents themselves to contribute anything toward the maintenance of the buildings. Now their zone was finally defined as a Priority Zone for Preservation (by Law 144 of 1993), but in the service of tourism.

The Old Town of Havana has been transformed over twenty years into a tourist attraction, unimaginable in 1959 and the 30 following years when tourism had been deliberately dethroned as the leading economic sector. Fidel Castro had often vowed that Cuba would not become an island of bourgeoisie-catering bartenders and chambermaids, as had other Caribbean nations (Burchardt 1999: 36). Accordingly, in 1975, only 25,000 non-military foreigners visited Cuba, while in 2000, the figure approached two million (Scarpaci 2000: 290).

Long-term Cuban resident of the Plaza Vieja reacted with some bitterness to the presence of ever increasing numbers of foreign tourists and business people in the city which resulted in the resettling of a high percentage of resettlement. The process started in 1978 when the former intramural Old Town was declared a National Monument. In 1982, the Historical Centre and its fortress system were listed as World Cultural Heritage by UNESCO. The Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage was ratified in March 1981 and came into force in the same year. However, it took until December 1982 before UNESCO acknowledged the status of World Cultural Heritage of the historic centre of the City of Havana.
The declaration of the historic centre of Havana and its systems of fortification as World Cultural Heritage and the fact that it is subject to the precepts of the Convention concerning the Protection of World Cultural and Natural Heritage has primarily implications for the State of Cuba. In addition to the commitment to protect, preserve, rehabilitate and transmit it to future generations, by its own means and to the utmost of its resources, the State of Cuba is also able to request international aid from the World Heritage Committee for the protection and preservation of this area. (Oficina del Historiador 2002: 259f)

Salvaging the Old Town represented a virtually unmanageable financial problem. The economic crisis of the Cuban state made the collaboration with UNESCO attractive. The Cuban government justified the financing with foreign participation by pointing out that the upgrading of the quarter through renovation would result in an enormous flow of capital to the benefit of the Cuban people. The actual financial participation of UNESCO was relatively small, but its patronage opened new avenues. The Cuban government agreed to adopt a general policy of UNESCO,

ascribing to the defined area a function in the collective life of the city, integrating its protection into planning programs, developing and stimulating scientific, technical and methodological studies. They also adopted appropriate juridical, scientific, technical, administrative and financial measures to protect, preserve, revalue and rehabilitate the area. (Oficina del Historiador 2002: 259)

The government appointed the institution headed by Eusebio Leal Spengler, the official Historian of Havana, to manage important budgets to undertake this work with a new urban perspective. In the midst of the crisis experienced in the country in the 1990s, the City Historian was thus allowed to transform his institutions into income-generating entities in order to implement an ambitious social, economic and cultural project for the Historical Center of Havana.

The key challenges the city faces are to meet the needs of a fast growing destination for cultural tourism in the Caribbean and to use the economic benefits to promote urban restoration and social provision for residents, the revival of the economy, the welfare of the society, and cultural dignity, which are the main goals of the rehabilitation plan. The rehabilitation process taking place in Habana Vieja is a complex procedure: It is structured around the principal guidelines of economic, social and cultural development. These priorities have been part of the socio-political orientation since the collapse of the COMECON countries and the period of hardship that followed in Cuba, called the Período Especial. The first is an economic goal: The re-stabilization of the Cuban economy and to find an alternative to the sugar industry. Social goals are the welfare of the people and an increase in em-
ployment. The third goal is cultural: To raise the awareness of Cuban culture through institutions and events.

The privileged position of the Office of the City Historian in Habana Vieja – virtually a state within a state – with its unique status and international support, has made radical changes possible. The engine driving this massive transformation is tourism.

2.2 Special Administrative Regime for Housing

A series of legal administrative regimes were established to manage these plans, beginning with a special housing regime: The Territory of the Old Town of Havana was titled a Priority Zone for Preservation according to the Decree Law No. 148. This law extends the authority of the Office of the Historian of the City of Havana, making it directly responsible to the Council of State and strengthening its condition as a cultural institution with its own legal character and hierarchy. This is appropriate for obtaining the necessary financial resources for the restoration and preservation of the territory and for exercising the administrative powers related to development, town-planning and the management of taxes.

Decree Law No. 143 had far reaching implications:

That the occupation of the housing can only be realized by means of ownership or rent, reserving free usufruct for rooms only means establishing regulations with respect to the exchange of property with a residential function and other regulations with respect to granting authorization for work and the use of properties within the zone. (Oficina del Historador 2002: 263 ff.)

The system of control of state owned property situated in the zone allowed for the implementation of complementary norms to those already promulgated, those which emphasize even more the characteristics of the territory in relation to different aspects: renting, exchange, etcetera.

Furthermore, the Cuban interpretation of text of the convention specifies that:

if patrimony is not declared by the competent international organization as cultural heritage (as is the case with respect to some cuidadeles at the Plaza Vieja) and has been, as a result, included in one of the two lists of heritage held by this organization – while it does not in fact mean that the said heritage lacks exceptional universal value – by law it means it does have such “value” […] for different purposes from those in the registration in these lists. This then is the reason why the Convention for the Protection of the World, Cultural and Natural Heritage is not directly applicable. However, this latter is the situation in which a portion of the territorial object of this analysis finds itself, but which in the light of Cuban legislation constitutes
national heritage, although not protected by the Convention. (Oficina del Historiador 2002: 259; my translation)

This has consequences for the inhabitants of the square: What happens if residents claim ownership to National Heritage?

2.2.1. The Case Study of La Casa Conflictiva:

When I once again stayed for several months in Havana in 2005, there was only one house remaining on the square that had not yet been renovated. It was known as la casa conflictiva (the problematic house). A net had been hung over it, and from outside one saw only the two highest stories, with broken windows and roofing. It was impossible to overlook the need for renovation.

“We’re not leaving here. We will wait for the materials to come. We have been living here for generations,” Rita, a long-term resident, explained to me.

In the Cuban context, commercialization associated with revitalization and heritage preservation has produced conflicting claims concerning the ownership of a particular type of collective urban property known as “housing given in usufruct.” The latter consists of dilapidated tenement housing, dating in some cases from the 18th century, which, until recently, has been considered to possess little if any value. Claimants to this property consist of residents, on the one hand, who claim ownership based on length of residency, payments to the state and socialist guarantees of tenure. The state, in contrast, also claims ownership by its entrepreneurial proxy in the Historic Center, and on the grounds that the buildings in question are national and global patrimony. Legally, this means that residents can be expropriated if need be in the interest of the nation, which implies their adaptive reuse for tourism purposes.

At the time of my last visit in December 2010, the facade of this house had also been renovated, and none of the people I had interviewed in 2005 were still living there. A grill restaurant had been installed on the ground floor, and construction of apartments for long-term foreign visitors to Havana who would pay rent in hard currency was underway in the upper stories.

The case of la casa conflictiva demonstrates the ambivalent and unequal consequences inherent to heritage processes elaborated by regimes: We have to debate curatorial and ethical choices in a given political environment. In the case of la casa conflictiva: The contradictions involved in “recovering” property from residents who claim ownership to it, and the state which seeks to relocate them to Soviet-style replacement housing on the urban periphery still goes on. It is taking on a new dynamic which will have to be studied in the future.

The specialists’ aim is the preservation of houses and buildings of architectonic, historic and cultural value, all for finally commercial reasons. These buildings should be restored. Up to now, all the buildings around the Plaza Vieja have been exclusively used for commercial exploitation, as have many other buildings in the
City core. Zone One has historically valuable buildings and luxury hotels, shopping malls, tea parlors, art galleries, restaurants, and museums, where consumption must be paid for in hard currency only (earlier in US dollars, today in convertible pesos known as CUC).

The exclusively functional exploitation of the historical core of the city is partly justified by strategies for reinvestment in less favored zones of the Old Town (cf. Law 144 1993). The neighboring Barrio San Isidro is supposed to be shielded from the negative consequences of zoning. Here, the character of the neighborhoods and their milieus are to be, in many respects, preserved. The fragmentation introduced in this way to the Old Town (half-private and half-touristic) is impossible to overlook. Segregation defines space both for residents and for tourists.

2.3 Administrative Regime of Development

The Old Town became a zone given “highest priority,” and a wide variety of contracts were signed with foreign partners who participated to a great extent in the renovations. The projection of the Office if the City Historian with regard to international cooperation is integrated into the policy outlined by the Cuban state through the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation. The Office names strategic guidelines for international cooperation. The OHCH (Oficina del Historiador de la Cuidad de La Habana) creates its own fund to co-finance international cooperation.

Part of it, the collaboration between the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) and the Cuban Government for the period 1997-2001, is articulated in the declarations and conclusions of the Social Declaration of Copenhagen of March 1995. The cooperation agreement foresees the continuity of the strategy of sustainable human development in accordance with the mandate of the UNPD aimed at the prevention of poverty and the maintenance of fairness.\(^5\) It contributes to one of the projects that belong to the Strategy for International Cooperation promoted by UNDP and Italy through the Fiduciary Fund for sustainable Human Development, Peace, and the support to countries in special situations, founded by the PNUD in October 1995. UNPD values decentralized cooperation models between the local Italian and European Community at provincial levels.\(^6\) The governments of the countries and towns participating in the program cooperate

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\(^5\) The UNPD is part of the international cooperation initiative of control and follow-up established to assist in the implementation of the agreements subscribed to by more than 110 countries in the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development in 1995.

\(^6\) Eight cities in the regions of Toscana, Emilia Romagna, Umbria, Lazio Liguria, and Veneto in Italy formally participate in the program. In a joint Cuban-Italian project experts on social and economic matters try to initiate local development in the Cuban provinces of Granma, Pinar del Rio and the municipality of Havana by, for example, specific training in craftsmanship and construction.
through the United Nations. The program foresees the co-funding of projects, even duplicating the resources provided by the cooperating city. The international funding includes investment in workshops and education and training in handcraft skills and construction. Many of these skilled workers contribute to different sectors of the reconstruction process. The Office of the City Historian is also responsible for the rehabilitation of housing (it saved close to 4,000 dwellings in the first ten years). From a material point of view, the main benefit has been the recovery of about 33% of the territory of the Historical Centre; the undertaking as a whole has also provided a significant boost to the local, state-based economy through the large-scale creation of jobs: More than 11,000 new jobs have been created, among them 3,000 for trained employers (Oficina del Historiador 1995, 1999).

The development project for the maintenance of Old Havana legitimized the founding of new companies and organizations, and laws were passed which allowed investment by foreign firms (joint ventures) for construction work. According to Coyula (2002: 66), 80% of the construction work is in the service of tourism. These accords enabled rapid processes of decision-making and planning freed from the normal limitations imposed by the Cuban state bureaucracy. The company Habaguanex, for example, part of the OHC, assumed the legal right to operate restaurants, museums, gift shops, and hotels in Old Havana, just as other state agencies do elsewhere. As such, the firm (and OCH) is part builder-developer and part tourism promoter, a mediator between both sectors (Scarpaci 2000: 289 ff.).

2.3.1 Impact of the Company Habaguanex

By 2008, Habaguanex managed 25 hotels, including the four-star Santa Isabel and the Ambos Mundos (Hemingway’s old haunt), 13 restaurants, 13 cafeterias, 10 open-air bars, 22 shops, a bakery, 9 markets and a pastry shop. Among these are buildings on the Plaza de Armas, Plaza de la Catedral and the Lonja de Comercio (business market) on San Francisco Square, facing the new Italian-financed renovation of the ocean terminal at Sierra Maestra dock (UN Habitat La Habana 2007). As mentioned, the OHC has saved close to 4,000 dwellings in the first ten years of the operation (Scarpaci 2000: 289 ff.).

The disadvantages of the far-reaching renovation (resettlement and the conversion of apartments to other uses) were explained to the population as a sacrifice required to meet “social necessities,” in accordance with a social development model. Those who managed to stay would be compensated with building materials and improvements in the infrastructure. Today’s residents of the quarter pay a high price for the privilege: As a result of the renovation activities, they can be asked at any time to leave their apartments, as they are living in a Priority Zone with national and international value. This is, indeed, what happened to the residents of the so-called “Rat House” described above.
3 Heritage Choice, Social Control and Unplanned Dialogs

3.1 Social control and Exclusion

A friend repeatedly says that she always enjoys passing through Havana Vieja, because it makes her feel like a tourist in Cuba. This is what everyone enjoys, except that she then has to return to another reality, not Europe from where the real tourists come. “Cuba wouldn’t be so bad,” she says, “were it not a prison” (Interview Laura, 2011). In the first phase of its restoration (1996 to 2000), the paths of tourist groups crossed those of police patrols, who checked only Cuban passers-by. At night, “black berets” patrolled the tourist zone with dogs. Their mission was to protect wandering tourists from petty thieves. One consequence is a division which segregates tourist from residential districts. Entire neighborhoods have been fragmented into dollar and peso zones due to these measures, intensifying the dichotomy between tourists with US dollars–CUC and the peso population, and the creation of “no-go districts” with limited and controlled access for the population. The effect of these processes has been the rearrangement of the socio-cultural structure of the neighborhood, and the establishment of a completely new spatial order.

In the first period under construction, I also hardly recognized Plaza Vieja itself. It seemed placid, without the typical Cuban activity so well-known to me from earlier visits. It resembled a modern “no-go district”: A cement wall had been constructed around the fountain, and on top of that a ten-meter-high iron fence served as protection against vandalism and for the safety of children playing. The streets that meet at the square were interrupted by gigantic iron chains, and no cars could enter it. Huge metal spheres, each a meter across, had been laid in all four entrance ways to also impede transit for bicyclists. The square was fenced in and made inaccessible to its former dwellers.

Children were no longer allowed to play there and no one could gather water from the fountain, although there were no functioning water lines in the courtyards. There were no longer any domino players, no children playing baseball, no women sitting in front of the house entrances interacting with life in the streets. Instead, a newly-constructed police station extended directly into the square, and police controlled any remaining unhindered crossings.

Ten years later, the square is the centre stage of the performance of a dream of a city, offering, with its newly constructed and (re)historicized backdrop, its tourists and local spectators and actors, a new form of urban quality for late-socialist Havana: Entertainment, consumption, drinking, and esthetic pleasure in clean and safe surroundings. Various levels of the repertoire of cultural and social-cultural signs and symbols have been used to achieve this within only ten years. Architectural references have, for example, been stretched to their limits to represent historical epochs of the square and its significance as a monument of material cultural
heritage. The historical architectural legacy has been enriched with colorful “flower girls” in 19th century costumes and lively carnival groups, in addition to individual representatives of Afro-Cuban beliefs which decorate the scenery with immaterial images of Cuban colonial history.

3.2 Regimes of Entertainment, New Forms of Sociability

The square was a screened-off area, little animated and visibly sealed off in the first period following its renovation. However, in the years since then, new actors have set in motion a spatial appropriation and enlivenment. Artists, providers of religious services and tourists have collectively developed a life of their own which animates the square and expresses a new sociability: Local activities around a livelier square. Tourists are closer to what people do, and locals get used to tourists’ habits: Shopping, drinking, sharing time together, looking at people. It appears to be a process of accepting of a new reality.

Many tourists stroll around the square and, along with many Cubans, they fill its restaurants. Women dressed in gaudy “gypsy-style” clothing mingle among the tourists, offering their services as card readers. There are also men and women dressed fully in white, with white caps, who claim to be diviners in the West African Yoruba-derived tradition of Ifá. Sometimes one can hear the rhythm of batá drums echoing from a nearby corner, or see a rowdy, carnivalesque troop of acrobats making its way through the inner city, a welcome colorful and extravagant diversion for tourists, who follow the troupe from the Calle Mercedes to the Plaza de Armas.

The square is no longer monotonous or empty, and many Cubans participate in these activities. When I want to go out with Cuban friends, they usually suggest the square. When we are sitting together, downing overpriced beer and pigs’ knuckles, they say, “I wanted to come here, because the food is better than in the office canteen.” The square provides them with the feeling of taking a break from the drudgery of the Cuban routine. “This is the way it should always be, and I can only hope that someday I will be able to invite you here” (Interview Lázaro 2010). The bill for the drinks and food corresponds to about a month’s wages for my Cuban companions.

3.3 Regime of Cultural Representation and the Impacts of the Heritage Format “Diversity”

Beginning in 2003, the tourist industry, entertainment and consumption were linked with a heritage format of diversity and the promotion of intangible heritage in the public sphere. Afro-Cuban religious groups were allowed to enter the public scenery to represent “plurality and multi-vocal cultural heritage” (Prieto Abel, Minister of Culture in Cuba 2003) in late-socialist Cuba. One could observe new city
life, a vibrant Plaza Vieja, active neighborhoods with the participation of both winners and losers of the transformations, different actors making use of the new possibilities of dialogue: Immaterial cultural heritage had taken on a specific new form, namely religious heritage tourism. A market for Afro-Cuban religions as a new expression of cultural diversity, wrapped into the form of cultural heritage, so that practices which, before the 1990s, had been a cause for exclusion, became a foreground aspect of national identity. Specialized institutions, such as the Yoruba Association founded in 2003, in the wake of the amplification of UNESCO’s discourse on cultural diversity, have promoted African-derived cultural practices not only as reservoirs of national legacy, but also as merchandise in heritage tourism. The acceptance of long ostracized practices in public space is a particularly ambivalent counterweight to the “homogenization” and “simplification” of the Plaza.

3.4 Cultural Administrative Regimes at Play

Another important element of the Law 143, 1993, is that it defines two scopes of action and authority for the OCH: One cultural, throughout the entire city of Havana, the other cultural and administrative.

A special tax regime established for the territory designated as Highly Significant for Tourism and Priority Zone for Preservation must be particularly mentioned, “which has the particularity of including a new tax within the national taxation system, with the very special characteristic of having only territorial scope” (Oficina del Historiador 2002: 261). This new tax regulation applies to all cultural performers in the territory who are obliged to pay taxes when they work with tourists. It is managed and collected by the OCH and constitutes ordinary income in the budget of the Office.

Hearn (2004) goes on to discuss problems in the San Isidro neighborhood which developed in a project which was designed to sponsor a weekly performance of Afro-Cuban folkloric music, linked to a local health-education campaign. It was soon contested by local hustlers more interested in attracting tourists who could pay in hard currency (CUC). The OHC had to step in to ensure that the original objectives of the project were restored (Hearn 2004: 78 ff.).

Every single performer (card readers, Ifá priests, “gipsy” photo models, even book sellers) are selected characters who receive an identity card (carné) specifying that they are member of the OHC.

All these cultural scenarios meant to attract the tourists combine social contact with mechanisms of control, oriented by a strategic “imagineering”, just as the

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7 In 2005, UNESCO passed the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Cultural Expressions.

8 The Ministry of Finance defines its current legal norms (in Resolution no. 38, 1997) by implementing a variable tax in the zone applied differently to income in the national currency. The tax must be paid in a freely convertible (hard) currency on legal entities that have premises located in the territory (Oficina del Historiador 2002: 261).
buildings are a corporate blend of “imagination” and “engineering”, whose standardized building blocks have been culled from the world of entertainment, the tourist industry and a specific idea of urban development (Baldauf 2008: 15 ff.; Kirshenblatt–Gimblett 2004). The newly invented square interlaces the rationalization and romanticizing of stage-managed urbanization.

3.5 Unplanned Dialogs – Interlocution of Resistance

As negative comments on the process are rarely published or studied, I will take the position of interpreting the ongoing manifestation of the “Cuban Ladies in White” (Damas de Blanco) as a specific contribution to the cultural heritage discourse in Cuban streets. The Ladies in White are an opposition movement consisting of wives and other female relatives of jailed dissidents. During the Spring of 2003 (later called Black Spring), the Cuban government arrested and summarily tried and sentenced 75 human rights defenders, independent journalists and independent librarians to terms of up to 28 years in prison. For its part, the Cuban government accused the 75 individuals of “acts against the independence or the territorial integrity of the state.” The Ladies in White group was formed two weeks after the arrests. Relatives of the prisoners began gathering weekly to protest against the imprisonments, attending mass each Sunday wearing white dresses and then silently walking through the streets (Damas de Blanco 2012). The white clothing the damas wear is reminiscent of the Argentine Madres de Plaza de Mayo, who used a similar strategy to demand information about their missing children from the 1970s military junta. The Cuban government has attached the Ladies in White as a subversive association. Cuban law limits freedom of expression, association, assembly, movement, and the press. These women take an ethical stance and express a historical understanding in their struggle to address the alienation and absence of free speech in their country.

They have used the openness to alternative voices and diverse communities in Havana since 2003 in their own interpretive way. Wearing white clothes to call attention to the suppression of free opinion in Cuba, they perform a living heritage of contemporary Cuba. White dresses are also worn by iyawós (lit. “spouses of the god”), the adherents of Afro-Cuban religions who are obliged to dress in white during the year following their initiation. The Damas confuse Cuban police, who at first cannot distinguish between a forbidden demonstration of Damas de Blanco or a group of iyawós.

In my interpretation, these women embody the “alienated” part of the dominant Cuban heritage discourse, constructing a heritage of global justice through a process of cultural transmission. Interlocution works profoundly toward the extension of cultural and human rights and the enhancement of cultural agency.
4 Conclusion

This late-socialist Cuban case-study demonstrates that an apparently rational approach to heritage exists which is enshrined in late-socialist ideology and in the administrative structures of the country. The socially empowered elites select and administer “cultural heritage.” Although this approach is publicly not accepted nor unquestioned, resistance is rare (but exists) as there is no civil society in contemporary Cuba.

There are generally uncontested “norms” of what elements of the past carry value, and consequently, the government puts structures in place to regulate and manage heritage. The products of this approach are a blend of commercial value and politics, knowledge and power as has been said at the beginning of this paper. What are the implications of these “selections” in terms of what is prioritized for display within a multi-ethnic and multicultural society? Why is it necessary to name it “heritage” and not simply substitute the term with “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm 1983)? It is difficult, of course, to imagine such guilelessness. The term “interpretational heritage choice” of Homi Bhabha (2006) defines the ongoing transformations and helps to identify how chosen heritage is attributed to scientific and cultural politics in a given political environment.

My starting point was to ask for the tacit link between heritage production—consumption and the development of an entertainment city: The first implicit link is that we are dealing with heritage chosen for development according to economic criteria. UNESCO authorizes the choice and the local historians–cultural specialists interpret that heritage. The cultural specialist creates a narrative to assuage the public with respect to ongoing transformations, an “interpretational heritage choice.”

The label “heritage” stabilizes the ongoing process. From the outset of UNESCO’s declaration of Old Havana as World Heritage in 1982, Havana’s City Historian Eusebio Leal Spengler prioritized the development of a popular awareness concerning the cultural, urban and architectural values of the Old City. He presented multiple lecture cycles on both radio and television and implemented programs ranging from sensitization to the promotion of the values of heritage. This initiative led to the creation of the television program Andar la Habana – Strolls through Havana (División de la Prensa Latina y la Oficina del Historiador de la Cuidad 2000), broadcast weekly for over 20 years and personally conducted by Leal, as a centerpiece of his “pacifying” discourse. Leal does not omit explaining and justifying the negative consequences of interventions in urban construction, but, in order to palliate the downside of these intrusions, he invents “assuagement formulas,” attributing to these encroachments their own “beauty.” This is an attempt, through the esthetization of horror, to mitigate and sublimate it (Wilhelm 2002).

The symbolic and spatial ordering of the city of Havana has been driven by two impulses: An aggressive impulse, proceeding from the marketing by regimes,
and a pacific impulse, belonging to what I think of as a “prescribed” urban culture which wants to assuage the social divisions and discord which accompany economic development. Hand-in-hand with restoration, revitalization and symbolic renewal, there is a heritage discourse which serves to “pacify” the population. Following the process, teaches us to direct our view toward the double character of the city, which has taken on its form through discovery and foundation, destruction, construction, maintenance, and ongoing threats from enemies outside, or, as Max Weber expressed this, in the tension between peaceful trade and its political and military safeguarding (Weber 1976). With respect to present-day Cuba, one could sum up: Inner-city peacefulness is maintained on the basis of a calculated control of speech, a set of shalls and shall nots. A struggle within political circles as to who rules the control of speech is inherent to this socialization model.

It is, of course, not only the placating voice of the city-narrator Eusebio Leal Spengler which assures the peace in today’s Cuba, but rather this unfolds hand-in-hand with the intransigent declarations of the Máximo Líder Fidel Castro and the middle-of-the-road speeches of his brother and successor Raúl. The proximity of serenity to aggression in the discourses which accompany the transformation of urban space in the Old Town of Havana is permanently unsettling.

A further link between heritage choice and heritage regime is ethical (not only epistemological or symbolic). The Damas de Blanco take an ethical stance and express a historical understanding in their struggle to address the alienation and absence of free speech in their country. As choice is also a metaphor of dialogue, interrogation and interpretation, chosen heritage works to give voice to the “interstices” of cultural transmission. The process of cultural transmission – tangible or intangible – is, I believe, a critical practice of interlocution, a mode of conversation, dialogue and critical thinking. It has been shown that there is a tension between the choices made by cultural heritage regimes and those made by the inhabitants, and another between what is appropriated from cultural inheritance and what is alienated from it. The metaphor of choice addresses the tension between what we appropriate and what we alienate in the interest of our interrogations and revisions. There is a chance, in these debates, when we introduce choice into our analytical framework.

The Damas de Blanco’s claim for free speech is placed in opposition to the highly state-controlled heritage discourse. This calls attention to the ethics of cultural transmission and to the reality that respect for cultural diversity and human creativity does not necessarily follow from the continuity of tradition constantly created by communities in response to their environment (as the ICH Convention declares). As such heritage choice is a metaphor for dialogue and interpretation against the grain of tradition and dominant hegemonic discourses, it opens a way to critical and alternative thought and diversity.

The notion of heritage choice helps to sharpen our sight with respect to unrepresented aspects of diverse cultures that do not fit into the revered meta-narrative of Cuban culture, and that continue to haunt its present. Cultural polyphony (in
the sense of the ICH) undermines totalitarian co-option. In today’s Cuba, differing perspectives are set off against each other as opposing commentaries and reflections, making explicit ambiguities which would otherwise remain concealed.

Cultural respect requires confrontation and struggle with the ambivalent conditions and agonizing choices with which history and its heritage confront us. Interlocution, interpretation and dialogue always work profoundly toward the extension of cultural and human rights and the enhancement of cultural agency. Cultural respect for diversity and creativity means, above all, to refuse political respect for exclusion and suppression (Bhabha 2006: XX). From this perspective the expansion of the concept of cultural heritage to include the “intangible” gives even late-socialist Cuba a chance to come to terms with itself.

5 References


