CUBA, 2012

by *Daniela Peña Corvillon*

It was warm, very warm, and it was only 9:30 am. I had just arrived in Havana. The people welcomed me, and they appeared happy, yet unique and quite different from the way I had romanticized them from the mostly black and white setting I was used to, from the photos I had seen. Rather quickly, I picked up on the irregularity of the lifestyle and the spontaneity of habits, patterns and cultural norms, grown not out of a life of routine, schedules, or order, but from chaos, survival, and the rhythm of a heartbeat. After my successful attempt to flag a taxi, I found myself parked in the middle of a highway, with the driver, breaking for a juice. It was then that I realized I was in for an experience I did not anticipate, nor was I sufficiently prepared for the emotional ride I was to take over the next few months. The island of Cuba, one of the most disconnected from the rest of the world, opened my eyes in ways that only a new relationship does, with lust and passion and ultimately heartbreak and sorrow. I learned a lot and am grateful to have made your acquaintance.

I am a Chilean Architect, and I came to Cuba to study the relationship between the local culture and its impact on the natural environment. Specifically, my research focuses on the southeast of Cuba where the Haitian community has established residency along the borders of the Cauto River, the largest river on the island, where several processes of desertification and contamination are occurring. I was there to research options to reverse these trends.

I started my research in Havana, where I met professors from the Universidad de La Habana and professionals who work in internationals NGOs. The contrasts within this small country amazed me. Nothing was easy, and almost everything was difficult. I was impressed with the capacity of students to pursue their studies among such impoverished conditions. The libraries were run down, and Internet access was hard to come by. Despite these problems, the depth of conversations and the quality of the lectures were quite impressive. It felt as if in Cuba you were retreating to the past, perhaps 50 or 60 years ago. Progress and innovation have not yet arrived, and it’s as if it they have not occurred. In my mind, they are living in the past, yet when you talk with the people you can feel their desire to be in the present and in the future. The perspectives of the professors and the academic community suggest that they are well informed, and they seem to be actively involved in some way with global concerns and are clearly passionate about implementing local change. They are faced with institutional and governmental setbacks similar to those in other less-developed countries, and thus even those who are educated and resourceful enough to develop environmental and sustainable solutions are constrained to implement change as the pace of change is slow and the resources at their disposal are limited. In Cuba, time did not seem to move at the same pace. In fact, I found I had to place myself in their time zone. After my visit to the university, I understood that this sensation I felt was not merely a consequence of jet lag.

I visited a few projects in Havana that had been constructed with international support as well as the active participation of Cuban professionals and the Cuban foundation, Foundacíon Antonio Nuñez Jimenez de la Naturaleza y el Hombre. This is the foundation that is supporting my research and future projects in Cuba. They have been working in different areas, including education, scientifically research, and environmental and social projects. All of the projects were located in remote areas, developing new green areas and water treatment systems in locations that were former garbage dumps. In Cuba it felt strange and difficult to focus only on environmental issues when there are so many basic necessities that the population lacks. Given this reality, I felt even more compelled to focus on understanding the culture and the social interactions the people had with the environment. I knew I needed to get close to the communities that I had imagined being able to impact. Without this understanding, I couldn’t even begin to imagine providing any solutions to environmental degradation or suggestions for restoring the ecosystem. I thought it was interesting, among all the project sites I visited, there was always something broken or not working, and it always seemed to me that it was an issue that should have been taken care of by the municipality or the water district. This observation highlighted for me the importance of working directly with the people to ensure that my research and any future projects I propose include components and aspects that can be managed and sustained by the local community members.

I had known that it was impossible for me to pursue my academic research objectives without taking the time to listen to the people within the communities and neighborhoods and observe and understand the conditions in which they live. My first impressions were that the Cubans seem to have been working hard for decades, and yet they are still just trying to survive. It didn’t seem to matter who you are, basic survival is an issue, particularly the things we might be used to and consider essential. Simply eating, bathing (with soap), and ensuring that these are done with clean water was challenging. Basic resources are simply not easy to find. Housing is crowded. In most cases homes were full of people, with several generations and relatives occupying the same house. In spite of these challenges, I observed a strong sense of community and social networks that seemed to alleviate hardships and lift spirits. I also noticed that this social network was an essential key to leverage and unlock the potential to engage directly with the people and advocate for environmental education and solicit community responsibility in ensuring sustainable developments in the future.

This social network where the Cuban lives is very special and quite unique. It is the basis of the society and the source of communal stock. In the interior of the island, especially in the rural areas, the sense of community is even stronger. People from different cultures and backgrounds live together in the same poor conditions. The neighbors function like family members, and the social networks of support are the bonds that make survival possible. While the state may provide a few basics, these are insufficient. If someone has a job, they have multiple jobs, usually a government sponsored job and then most likely a black market type opportunity to really put some food on the table, mostly rice and beans, and for some reason, quite a lot of pork. Another astonishing aspect of the culture I observed was their deep and committed religious faith. I suspect that it is a balanced combination of faith and community that are enough to carry them through another day of struggle and negotiating a next meal. In Cuba most people are religious, and some are a mix of a variety of religious beliefs. It is easy to find a blend of modern Christian and traditional African customs in the same faith.

The people live very close to the spiritual world, and they attribute any good fortune to their faith. In eastern Cuba where I conducted most of my research, there are strong African and Haitian cultural roots, particularly in the city of Palma Soriano. There were large migrations of colonies of African cultures from Haiti, running away from even poorer conditions or slavery. The Haitian communities have struggled to adapt and have held strong to their Voodoo beliefs. The Voodoo serves as a source of protection against adversity for the Afro-Haitian communities. They strongly believe that Voodoo divinities reside in the forest, rivers, creeks, trees, and vegetation. This belief and their strongly held spiritual relationship with landscape may have contributed to their lack of a sustainable relationship with the environment. The reason for the decline is hard to trace; it seems that the cause and effect are spinning in a destructive cycle. An interesting example of a community that is working to disrupt that cycle and integrate their faith positively with the environment is the Environmental-Art Collective, Ennegro. They have been working for over 15 years to integrate artistic expression and protection of the environment. Ennegro is one of the only collectives of visual artists in the Caribbean that are focused on developing ideas of planning and protection of the environment. Interestingly, the government of Cuba has given them 70 acres of land, known as Ennegro’s Finca, and it is the place where they are developing a sacred forest and organic agriculture.

I find it pretty amazing how in the middle of the chaos of Cuba, in between political strife and the battle for basic necessities, this primarily Haitian community has developed this agenda and is able to maintain their spiritual culture and use it to foster and build a sustainable interaction and balance within their environment. Their commitment to work the land after they toil in their other “jobs” to sustain themselves was quite impressive to witness. They are working to integrate and redevelop the sacred place and build a viable agricultural system on a plot of land given to them by the Cuban government. It is quite rare that a collective such as this one would receive property from the government. Clearly, this community has demonstrated to the government their potential and strength of values.

Ennegro’s Finca is planned as a protected area in order to reestablish their spiritual connection with the land. These connections are drawn from their past, the Afro cultures lost when they were taken out of Africa and brought to America as slaves. They are creating an opportunity to restore, not only cultural links to the landscape, but also the endangered ecosystem. I am very interested in working with them to develop a master project that will include the urban areas of Palma de Soriano and that will address the current water issues of the Cauto River, working toward sustaining the ecosystem and restoring a clean river.

The cycle continues, and finding the balance between sustaining and disrupting it will have to be a collaborative effort. The urban settlements around the Cauto River don’t have an adequate sewer system and the backwater is going directly into the river, negatively impacting the environment and the surrounding communities. The river serves multiple functions within the communities, and therefore any solutions must address the utilitarian uses of this valuable water resource. Designing a solution must include the needs of the community and without that, any hope of bringing an ecological agenda of restoration closer to the heart and soul of the social network will not succeed. The Ennegro Collective is the social fabric that can weave together the infrastructure to achieve this goal. If they are to be successful, they will need to build a water treatment system to ensure a clean water supply to serve to meet both the basic needs of the community and the currently depleted natural ecosystem where they reside.

Currently, in order to maintain potable drinking water, the water must be heated, which requires firewood, depleting the forest. The focus of my project will be on designing a water treatment project that will both improve water quality, and restore and reforest the area while incorporating and maintaining the spiritual values and symbolism of the Haitian community into the design of any structures in the landscape. The project will cover the configuration of access to the river and the organization of the public space around it. I am in the process of securing funding for this project and hope to make a real contribution in this area. I am working in this with UC Berkeley professor Mathias Kondolf, with the Ennegro Community, and with NGO International Watershed Partners.

It is my belief that this project is a case study of restoring the integrity of the environment and the culture. I am particularly drawn to this project because of its potential to sustain African cultural heritage in a society that is marginally connected to the rest of the world. In a country that exemplifies the past, this project could bring them forward and truly bring out the colors and light to a seemingly black and white landscape. I am familiar with the problem of clean water supply and sewer systems in rural areas from my work in Latin America, and the solutions are not typically the conventional technologies applicable in First World countries. Given the unique advantage these communities have, drawn from their strong communal networks the possibilities for alternative solutions to integrate green infrastructure into community development make this project particularly exciting to me.

I am grateful to the Center of Latin American Studies and the Tinker Summer Field Research Grant for the opportunity to make this research project possible. The experience and new perspective that these few months in Cuba have given me has had a tremendous impact on my initial thinking and focus of the project, as well as on my life, and the insights I gained getting to know the surrounding communities of Palma de Soriano. I think this experience has given me new directions and a clearer perspective on how essentially the solution needs to be delivered from within and not by an outsider. Figuring out how to simultaneously address the educational and economic components of this project are next on my agenda. I know that the focus of a sustainable solution must come from the interests of the people, and they must see a solution as their own responsibility for this project to succeed. I also know that it will take committed professionals working at multiple levels of the society for projects such as these to evolve. I am confident that Cuba is moving, perhaps slowly, yet still moving into the future, and I am excited to contribute to this evolution.

Finally, I think this experience has given me clarity on a number of projects I have been considering developing in South America. Cuba was an interesting mirror. My thinking has definitely been transformed, and I have the beautiful island of Cuba to thank. The people, the buildings, the landscape, the rhythm and the culture moved me in ways I didn’t expect. It definitely made me stop in my tracks and think, enjoy the freedom and progress I have available to me, as well as to reflect on and envy the unique sense of community and humanitarian networks I found among the Cuban people. I could see more clearly the importance of building from the ground up and drawing the nutrients from the roots of the culture, before racing towards the future at the speed of light. Cuba made me rethink how to be in the present, how to bring together both the past and the future in new ways, and how to remain conscious of what is important as technological innovations may not be the only solutions to the ecological, economic and social problems at hand. I am drawn to the smaller, stronger communities that have managed to maintain their values, bringing with them their historical and cultural baggage, as I think we have so much to learn from them. At the pace with which technology is racing through the world, I am afraid of what we might be losing along the way. I think I can now appreciate that taxi driver on my first day and respect that he stopped for a juice in order to talk with the people there.