

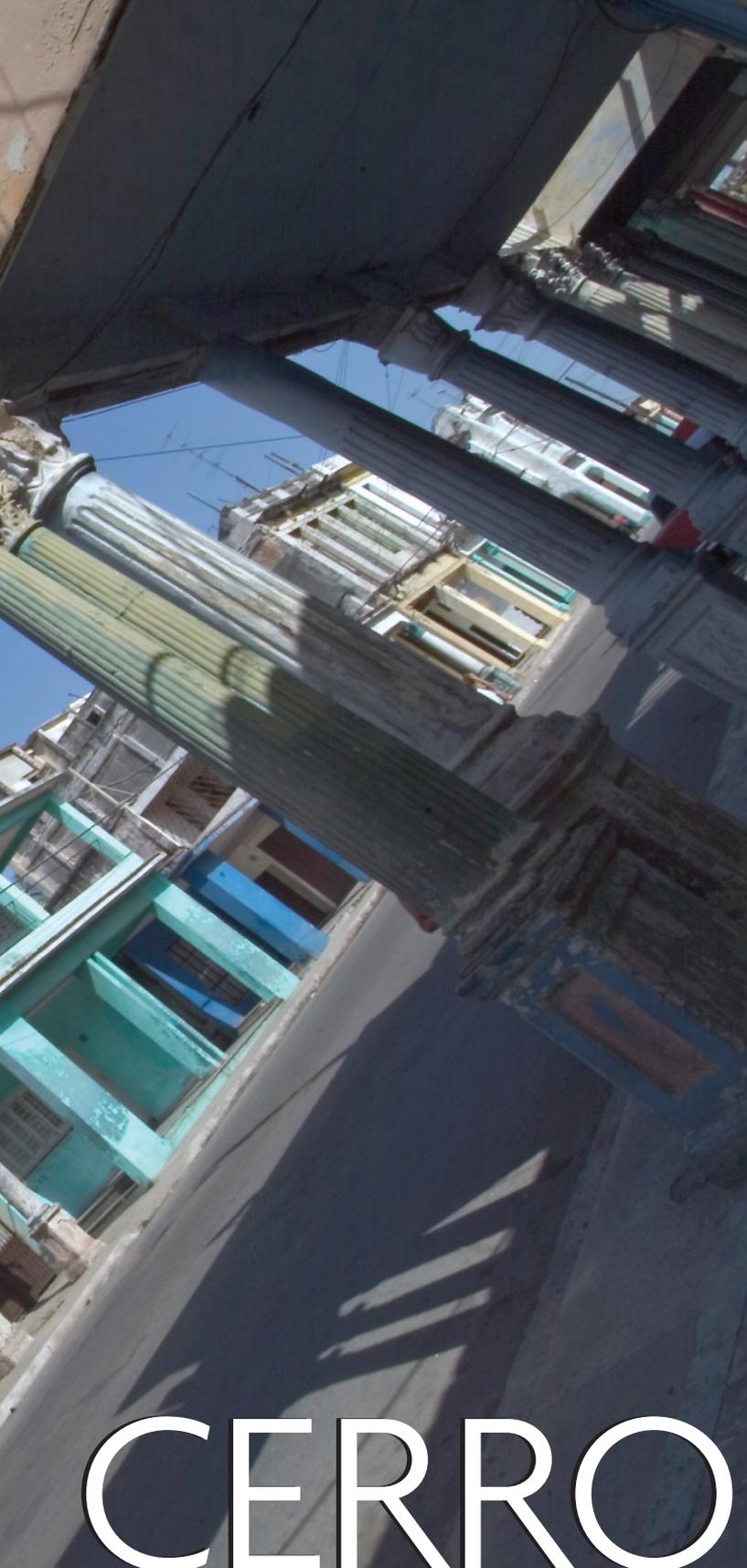


Along the CALZADA DEL

THE RISE AND FALL OF NEOCLASSICAL HAVANA

by MARIO COYULA AND ISABEL RIGOL

photographs by ANDREA BRIZZI



CERRO

CLASSICAL COLUMNS LINE
THE CALZADA DE PRIMELLES NEAR
ITS INTERSECTION WITH THE
CALZADA DEL CERRO.

It is a very handsome street, about three miles long, lined on each side with the beautiful and comfortable residences of the fashionable and the wealthy, for whom this with its surroundings, is the principal place of residence, particularly in the summer. ...[In El Cerro] the houses are modernized somewhat, having their stables and carriages in the rear, and in front, stone piazzas elevated some distance above the street. ...The whole being devoid of curtains, and exposed to the eye or curiosity of every passerby. The ceilings are uncommonly high, and the houses are, without exception, open on the interior side to the patio, or courtyard, which affords, even on the warmest days, a chance for some air. ...All of the rooms open onto [the patio], and where there is a second story; a gallery runs around the entire square, having either blinds or fancy colored awnings for protection from the sun's rays. ...This secures a free circulation of air, a shady place in which to sit or walk, and very often, when the patio is laid out with walks, flowers, fountains, and orange, pomegranate, or mignonette trees, a charming place in which to dream one's idle hours away, or flirt desperately with las bonitas señoras.

—SAMUEL HAZARD

Cuba with Pen and Pencil, 1871

During the late-eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, a booming plantation economy developed in western Cuba, spawning a dramatic increase in the country's population as well as prompting a consolidation of its land-owning Creole aristocracy within the capital city of Havana. In the span of only a few decades, Havana grew well beyond its colonial city walls, branching out along several urban axes, among the most important a road running to the southwest known as Calzada del Cerro. Over time, the three-kilometer-long Calzada became the virtual backbone of El Cerro, a newly established private enclave for Havana's burgeoning elite, whose fortunes were derived in large part from sugar harvested by slave labor.

Thanks to a bountiful supply of fresh water provided by the Zanja Real, or royal canal, built in 1592, and a host of more recent civic improvements—new roads and bridges—and the development of an urban transport system, El Cerro reached its apogee in the mid-nineteenth century. The allure of the district was further enhanced by a quest for potable water during a severe cholera epidemic in 1833. Those who could afford to leave Havana's fetid city center simply did.

The *casa quinta*, or country estate, was the archetypal house of the nineteenth-century Creole noble of El Cerro. It was during the district's golden age between 1830 and 1880 that the *casa quinta* came into its own, a blend of new flat roofs in the neoclassical style with traditional *alfarjes*—pitched and coffered wooden ceilings covered with Creole clay tiles.

The Calzada itself was greatly enhanced during this period by the addition of a colonnade that ran its entire length and linked many of the mansions' porches one to the next. Erected as part of the Building Ordinances of 1861, the colonnade presented the passerby with a dramatic rhythm of light and shade.

While neoclassicism appeared in other areas around Havana, it was in El Cerro—and particularly along the Calzada—that it found its greatest expression.

The most prominent houses were located either on the calzada itself or could be accessed from it via several roads. Some shared sidewalls; others were fully detached buildings, offering a visual counterpoint between private porches and public corridors. Among these were the mansions of the Counts of Villanueva, O'Reilly, Fernandina, Lombillo, Santovenia, and San Esteban de Cañongo; those of the Marquises of Pinar del Río, Almendares, Gratiud, Real Campiña, San Miguel de Bejucal, and Sandoval; as well as the residences of other distinguished families such as the Ajuria, Echarte,

PLANO DE LA HABANA

Sánchez Galarraga, and Zayas Bonet. The backs of some of the homes along the Calzada faced the Zanja Real. Many had separate bathrooms furnished with step-in pools.

From the outset, El Cerro had been home to industrial enterprises that partook of the waters of the Zanja Real. Yet the townscape of El Cerro was composed primarily of residential architecture.

Ironically, years later, it would be the pollution of the Zanja Real that would bring about El Cerro's decline, compounded by a forced relocation of peasants to the area in an attempt to quell their support for Cuban patriots fighting Spanish dominion. These events also coincided with the establishment of newer residential districts that offered cooling sea breezes—El Carmelo in 1859 and El Vedado in 1860—which attracted many of El Cerro's most prominent families. The last of El Cerro's stately mansions was built in the 1880s.

By the close of the nineteenth century, Cuba was also engulfed in political turmoil, suffering long-term repercussions from the crash of the U.S. Stock Exchange in September 1873, Cuba's abolition of slavery in 1886, and devastation and social upheaval caused by Cuba's ongoing struggle for independence, which it finally achieved in 1898.

Depleted of its well-heeled residents, the character of El Cerro underwent a dramatic change as, one by one, its old mansions were appropriated as multi-family housing units or became flophouses for the indigent. Some residential areas gave way to industrial installations—candy factories, soap factories, and a foundry that produced many of Havana's cast-iron structures. In time, these establishments would be joined by a brewery and several soda factories. El Cerro's decline would be exacerbated by political events that would later come to dominate the twentieth century.

Today, despite its squalid conditions, the once-exclusive preserve of Havana's elite retains an extraordinary collection of Cuban Neoclassical architecture. Some 40 percent of its Creole buildings are still standing. The community's original layout along the colonnade of joined porches remains, while the great estates of yesterday's aristocracy built off the Calzada comprise virtual islands in a sea of subsistence architecture, having endured events within Cuba as well as more than four decades of benign neglect, due in part to harsh economic conditions imposed by the United States in response to Cuba's alliance with the former Soviet Union.

The Calzada del Cerro bears a unique historical and architectural heritage, one worthy of preservation. Until recently, however, its chance of survival looked bleak at best.

On January 28, 2000, Cuba's National Landmarks Commission issued Resolution 161, declaring some 155 hectares of El Cerro of "Historical and Cultural Value." This area includes not only the Calzada del Cerro but the adjacent Palatino and Primelles streets on which many of the colonnaded houses were built. And, in 2003, WMF included the Calzada del Cerro on its 2004 list of the *100 Most Endangered Sites* in recognition of its international architectural merit.





Havana's local authorities, cultural institutions, urban-planning agencies, and non-governmental organizations have engaged in a dialog with fellow organizations around the globe to begin developing plans for the revitalization of the area. Yet the magnitude of its problems is enormous, and resources are scarce.

The Calzada has great potential for redevelopment, yet it faces a host of challenges, both architectural and environmental. Over the years, unchecked industrial development has created air, water, and noise pollution, which has been compounded by airborne pollutants radiating from the bay. What remains of the Zanja Real is a health hazard. Green spaces are rare, and access to the area from Havana's coastal strip where both tourists and investment dollars are concentrated is presently limited; streetcar service along the Calzada was discontinued in the 1950s.

A revival of the enclave must begin with measures to simply arrest its decay through the consolidation of the colonnade and surviving façades, as well as the adoption of ways to reduce current pollution and clean up that of the past. Plans for the economic and social redevelopment of the Calzada must also be drafted if the area is to ever again be self-sustaining. In concert with these actions, some of the area's individual buildings will need to be restored. The recovery of selected landmarks would serve to educate the public and inspire further conservation work along the length of the entire road, and, eventually the historic core of El Cerro.

Noise and air pollution and heavy traffic along the Calzada could be substantially reduced through the completion of the Vía Este-Oeste (East-West Road), a project envisioned as part of Havana's 1963 masterplan, but abandoned several years ago. By finishing this road, heavy vehicle and commuter traffic would be diverted

FACING PAGE: CAST-IRON SWANS GRACE THE PORCH OF THE BOCOY RUM FACTORY, FORMER HOME OF THE COUNT OF SAN ESTEBAN DE CAÑONGO. THE CALZADA DEL CERRO MAKES A SHARP BEND WHERE IT MEETS CALZADA DE PALATINO. THE INTERSECTION IS STILL KNOWN AS THE MARAVILLAS CORNER, EVEN THOUGH THE THEATER FOR WHICH IT IS NAMED HAS LONG BEEN CLOSED. QUINTA DE LOS MONOS, TOP, WAS DESIGNED IN 1906 BY A FRENCH ARCHITECT FOR THE ECCENTRIC ROSALÍA ABRÉU AND HER COLLECTION OF APES. A GRAND STAIRCASE, ABOVE, IN AN 1845 CASA QUINTA AT CALZADA DEL CERRO #1257. WHITE MARBLE DOGS GUARD THE 1841 QUINTA OF THE SANTOVENIA COUNTS.





south of El Cerro. As it is currently difficult to reach the enclave, it is also worth looking into the possible reinstatement of the streetcar service to the area or other means of public transport. Bothersome and polluting industries will need to be moved and replaced by other production facilities that are more compatible with—and sympathetic to—the historical and residential nature of El Cerro, such as cultural institutions, artists' studios, cafes, and restaurants.

There is a great potential for the development of cultural tourism in the area, which would help to achieve economic sustainability. This will require the creation of a corporation for the development of El Cerro, with full authority to generate resources and administer them, combining economic interest with social and cultural development. Such redevelopment has already proven successful in the recovery of the walled quarter of Old Havana, a project carried out under the aegis of the Office of the Historian of Havana. Likewise, the Calzada del Cerro is an architectural treasure awaiting an intelligent rescue that might restore its dignity and offer it renewed life. ■

THE 1916 TÍVOLI BREWERY ON THE CALZADA DE PALATINO, ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT EXAMPLES OF INDUSTRIAL HERITAGE IN EL CERRO, ABOVE, EXHIBITS A MIXTURE OF ECLECTIC ARCHITECTURE WITH ART NOUVEAU ELEMENTS. A HOUSE AT CALZADA DEL CERRO AND PEÑÓN, RIGHT, DISPLAYS TYPICALLY EXUBERANT ECLECTIC DECORATION, THOUGH ITS SAND-CEMENT MORTAR ELEMENTS ARE DETERIORATING. THE ELDERLY WATCH PASSERS-BY FROM THE FRONT PORCH OF THE PINAR DEL RÍO MARQUIS' FORMER PALACE AT CALZADA DEL CERRO #1357.





Two elderly men sitting in the foreground on white plastic chairs. The man on the left is wearing a blue and white striped short-sleeved shirt and dark brown trousers. The man on the right is wearing a light blue short-sleeved shirt and dark brown trousers. They are both looking towards the camera.

A group of elderly people sitting in a row of white plastic chairs. From left to right: a woman in a light blue sleeveless top and grey trousers, a man in a light blue short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, a man in a white short-sleeved shirt and light blue trousers, a man in a white short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, and a man in a white short-sleeved shirt and light blue trousers. They are all looking towards the right.

A man sitting in a white plastic chair further down the walkway, wearing a white short-sleeved shirt and dark trousers, looking towards the right.